



LARP DESIGN

CREATING ROLE-PLAY
EXPERIENCES

*Edited by
Johanna Koljonen, Jaakko Stenros, Anne Serup Grove,
Aina D. Skjønsvell, and Elin Nilsen*

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Larp Design: Creating Role-Play Experiences is a non profit project, and so to a great extent is Nordic larp itself. While the contributions of individual designers and theorists are invaluable, their knowledge grows out of their local and international play communities.

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Larp Design - Creating Role-Play Experiences

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Editors: Johanna Koljonen, Jaakko Stenros, Anne Serup Grove, Aina D. Skjønshjell, and Elin Nilsen.

Graphic design: Anne Serup Grove.

Authors: Jesper Heebøll Arbjørn, Troels Barkholt-Spangsbo, Marco Bielli, Maury Elizabeth Brown, Simon Brind, Stefan Deutsch, Anders Lyng Ebbenhøj, Søren Ebbenhøj, Karin Edman, Alma Elofsson, Alessandro Giovannucci, Andrea Giovannucci, Anne Serup Grove, Tuomas Hakkarainen, Kasper Friis Hansen, Karijn van der Heij, Signe Løndahl Hertel, Kateřina Holendová, Mo Holkar, Anders Hultman, Frederikke Sofie Bech Høyer, Kat Jones, Merli Juustila, Simo Järvelä, Kaisa Kangas, Jonaya Kemper, Johanna Koljonen, Laura Kröger, Katri Lassila, J Li, Frida Lindegren, Tina Leipoldt, James Lórien MacDonald, Irrette Melakoski, Markus Montola, Susan Mutsaers, Martin Nielsen, Elin Nilsen, Oliver Nøglebæk, Klaus Meier Olsen, Bjarke Pedersen, Juhana Pettersson, Joanna Piancastelli, Eleanor Saitta, Ericka Paige Skirpan, Aina D. Skjønshjell, Lizzie Stark, Jaakko Stenros, Grethe Sofie Bulterud Strand, Edin Janković Šumar, Martine Svanevik, Sebastian F. K. Svegaard, Simon Lindman Svensson, Chiara Tirabasso, Anni Tolvanen, Evan Torner, Henry Towsner, Jonas Trier-Knudsen, Iva Vávrová, Annika Waern, Josefin Westborg, Anna Westerling, Danny Wilson, Laura Wood, and Kerstin Örtberg.

Cover: Anne Serup Grove.

Proofreading: Alexander Bakkensen, Laura Boylan, Monica Gribouski, Mo Holkar, Jason Cox, Bruno Munk Kristensen, Kerry Lambeth, Lise Rasmussen, and Julian Schauf.

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IN MEMORY OF

Elge Larsson
(1944–2016)

FOREWORD

// Johanna Koljonen
// Jaakko Stenros
// Anne Serup Grove
// Aina D. Skjønsvjell
// Elin K. Nilsen

Today, there is a thriving international network of larp designers who are interested in creating collaborative, ambitious, and meaningful co-creative experiences. From Denmark to Palestine and from Finland to Spain, and beyond, larp designers are working to explore themes like desire, community, and post-human subjects. They are attempting to create spaces for political reflection and wild enjoyment. They wish to translate a favourite television series or a book into a collective first person experience.

These people are working at the forefront of a form of expression, larp, and pushing boundaries. New ideas, terms, theories, and innovations travel in the network, but no-one can know everything that is going on.

Co-creating and experiencing the works are larger groups of people, players, who follow the designer's careers and participate in their works, sometimes travelling long distances to take part. The designers, of course, also play in each other's larps, and many players in turn take the step to become designers.

This book is primarily aimed at all of these larp designers, and people who want to design larps, from beginners to pros. In this book, we have attempted to capture a sliver of the knowledge that is found in this tradition. This is a practical book on larp design. Secondly, the book is for all larpers who wish to better understand how larp design functions. Finally, this book will be useful for experience designers working in other fields and academics attempting to make sense of this world.

This book has been a long time coming. It reflects the collective expertise of a design tradition and a larp community engaged in systematic design work and documentation for more than two decades. Larp design has historically been very focused on what

will happen during runtime – the time when characters are being played, worlds explored, and stories told by the participants. Designers have concerned themselves with how best to craft a vivid storyworld, plausible characters and dynamic character relationships, an interesting setting represented in a suggestive physical set, a resonant culture, and mechanics that facilitate play and drive the narrative forward.

All of these skills are indeed central to larpmaking, and in the design community centred around the Knutepunkt conferences, the decades of work to identify underlying principles for them has paid off in a big way. While individual designers or projects can still fail at any one of these disciplines, and often do, collectively the code has broadly speaking been cracked. How to design the runtime is no longer a mystery, and great parts of this book represent an attempt to document and share these basics in a coherent manner.

The seeds of this tradition were planted in the late 1990s. The Nordic Knutepunkt convention has from its very start in 1997 been a meeting place of designers from many different contexts; today, it is an international event, and the style of “Nordic larp” it is most known for its interacting with many other similar movements with other names. (The name has never been a great fit – the community and conversation got quite international fast – and has over the years grown only more inaccurate; yet it endures).

English was established as the lingua franca of the event as it was the only language most participants could speak (while the Scandinavian languages are quite similar, Finnish is very different). This meant that the event was accessible also for non-Nordics, and as word travelled, larp designers and larppers started to travel to Knutepunkt from further away. Slowly a common, stable enough vocabulary started to emerge, and after the turn of the Millennium, as the publication of the Knutebooks commenced, this turned into a written tradition. The English language books (of which this is the 26th) have acted as advertisements for the high brow discourse at the convention, especially after they were released for free on the internet.

Probably because it was clear from the very beginning that quite different ways of making larps could produce interesting and meaningful results, the Knutepunkt tradition of Nordic larp is not aesthetically normative.

This book sets out to document, in a practical and instantly useful manner, the current state of larp design in the international collaborative design tradition that originates in the Nordic countries and centers on Knutepunkt. This tradition is alive and well, and it is expressed in the larps that are designed, but also in the discourse around them. Surprisingly, although the Knutepunkt tradition has been quite textual for a long time, publishing documentation, discussion, analysis, and theory, book-length treatises on design are rare. A rich tradition of thinking on larp notwithstanding, for examples the analytic works of designers such as Eirik Fatland, Martine Svanevik, J. Tuomas Harviainen, Andie Nordgren, Juhana Pettersson, Nina Runa Essendrop, and Johanna Koljonen, this is the first comprehensive take on the whole process of creating a larp from this design tradition.

Even so, this book is obviously not the first book to touch on larp design coming from the Nordics. The most important book-length treatises on the topic are the two early ones from 1998, Hanne Grasmø's *Levende rollespill, Laiv* (Eng. *Live Role-Playing, Larp*) in Norwegian and Henrik Summanen and Tomas Walch's *Saga mot verklighet* in Swedish (Eng. *Fairytale versus Reality*). Other books have come out over the years as well, but larp design has not been addressed in a holistic and practical manner for some time – and the Nordic tradition has never been fully explored in English.

The most important holistic thinking about larp design produced in the Nordic context, *The Mixing Desk of Larp*, hails from the Larpwriter Summer School (LWSS), organised in Lithuania annually from 2012 to 2017 by Norwegian organization *Fantasiforbundet* and Belarusian Education Center POST. This week-long annual crash course on larp design featured a few dozen teachers and approximately 50 students from, in total, 20 countries. *The Mixing Desk* systematised the approach of larp design as design choices instead of reliance on traditional aesthetic assumptions. *The Mixing Desk* visualises how larp design can be broken down into specific design choices, which are represented as faders. Anything and everything affecting player behaviour and participant agency in a larp is seen as a designable surface, and *The Mixing Desk* visualises this by presenting thirteen faders. *The Mixing Desk* is well-documented online and the lectures from LWSS can be found on YouTube.

While the Knutepunkt discourse provides the foundation for the Nordic discussion on larp design, the Larpwriter Summer School helped facilitate its fast development in recent years. LWSS also underlined the need for a central resource, a book, where the current state of the art is clearly documented.

This book is meant to be practical and useful. The book follows the design process of creating a larp from the idea to the execution to the decompression. While this book certainly can be read in order from cover to cover, it is broken down into short chapters on specific topics to enable jumping around and finding the relevant piece as needed. In addition to the practical chapters on how to design the different aspects of a larp, the book also features numerous short anecdotes from past larps. These snippets document successes (Nailed it!) and failures (Failed it!) designers have made that hopefully inspire and guide the reader.

There is a chapter of Basic Concepts in Larp design at the beginning, and a Glossary at the end. Editorial comments in brackets will point you towards other chapters; you can find page numbers in the Table of Contents at the beginning of the book. The orientations to the book's different sections are written by Johanna Koljonen.

All the larps mentioned in this book, as well as explanations of most of the terminology and profiles of the designers, can be found on the Nordic Larp Wiki on nordiclarp.org.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF LARP DESIGN

Larp design is concerned with practical things. Likewise, this book concentrates on the practice of design. Yet nothing is as practical as good theory; a good map is easier and faster to understand than the terrain it models. This section covers briefly and in an accessible manner some foundations and starting points of larp design. It will give you conceptual tools, things to think with, to help you hone your vision.

Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola cover some of the most basic concepts – technical terms that you will need as you engage with this book. Simo Järvelä addresses the question of how real a larp is, and discusses the distinction between what it feels like to embody a fictional character, and what is actually happening in the players' brains when they do.

In her chapter, Johanna Koljonen discusses one of the fundamental tenets of bespoke larp design: That everything is a designable surface – and the opportunities and responsibilities that implies. Jaakko Stenros places serious larp in the context of the seriousness of all play. In the section's final chapter, Bjarke Pedersen gives advice on how to pick an idea. The concluding example describes practical experiences of learning longform larp design through running existing larps.

BASIC CONCEPTS IN LARP DESIGN

// Jaakko Stenros
// Markus Montola

At the outset of this book we need to establish some basic terminology. Some of these terms may appear self-explanatory, but their specific meaning may vary between different larp design traditions, while other terms are more technical, having emerged as part of the discourse around Nordic style larps.

WHAT IS A LARP

What, in practice, is a larp? The question is surprisingly complicated, depending on if it is viewed from the point of view of the player, the designer, or the community.

First, there are the *larp designers*, sometimes called *larpwrights*, who create the framework for playing. They decide on the creative content of the larp: what it is about and how it should be executed. To do this, they craft necessary background material for the world, sketch social networks of characters, put together rules and mechanics, design the character creation, plots, schedules, interiors, props, scenography, workshops, and debriefs. Of course, they also do many things that are less obviously about the content, but still affect the larp directly: they advertise the event, correspond with the players, negotiate characters, facilitate workshops before playing starts, and decide what participants will eat and where they should sleep.

Players can participate in this creation as well, but even the most egalitarian co-creation process needs to be coordinated by someone. However, what the designers create is only the starting-point – the score – for play. All the written material needed to stage and play a larp is called a *larp script*. This is the first meaning of larp.

The second meaning of larp is the *runtime* of playing. Once play begins, the players embody the characters and enact the world into being – sometimes in ways that are surprising to the designers. The players create the experience of play, and to certain extent the actual piece, in (and sometimes against) the framework the designers created. The larpwrights can still guide play during runtime, but they cannot remove the influence of the players. The people who run the larp are called (*runtime*) *gamemasters*. This is the larp as played, and it is ephemeral, lost the moment the larp ends. The same larp (as written) can be re-staged and played again, but the different runs will be different.

A larp is usually followed by structured activities – *debrief*, *deroling*, and *decompression*. Here players and organizers come together for an out-of-character cooling-off period, when everyone bids farewell to the fiction. Participants discuss what happened during the larp, and in this discussion a shared and communal meaning of the experience starts to emerge. This is the third larp: the larp as remembered, interpreted, and documented. Later, as the larp is remembered, debated, discussed and critiqued, its meanings continue to shift.

While we can simplify this and say that a larp is created by the designers, brought to life and interpreted by the player, and negotiated and narrativized by the participant community, the designer is present in every stage. A poorly designed larp can be elevated by virtuoso runtime gamemasters. The work of a designer does not end when the game has run its course: Just as well-designed workshops contribute toward a play experience, designing the debrief also offers possibilities to reframe and enhance the overall experience. Some designers also write reports about their larps or share other documentation, in part to try to control the narrative about their larp in their community.

In common parlance “larp” usually only refers to the runtime, when characters are being played. This book will follow the emerging nomenclature where the “larp” includes all on-site activities, such as the *workshops* preceding the runtime, where players acquaint themselves with other players, their characters, and rehearse larp mechanics. The cooldown period after runtime, where the players bid farewell to the fiction, is also included. “Larp design” refers to the design of all aspects of the participant’s interactions with the work, not just the parts that occur on location.

Larp has an uneasy relationship with storytelling, and the terminology connected to it. In this book we follow Simon Brind’s example – see his chapter later in the book – and use *plot* in the sense of plotting (the pre-planned parts of the larp and backstory created by the designers), *story* in the sense of storytelling (what happens moment to moment in the larp), and *narrative* as an account (the narrativized tale told afterwards of the sequence of events that happened in the larp). These reflect the larp as written, the larp as played, and the larp as remembered.

There are a number of terms that help differentiate between things that happen within the runtime of the larp, and things that happen outside it. The term for the boundary between larp and everyday life is *magic circle*. This is a metaphor for the separate nature of play. Larping, and play in general, are a step apart from quotidian life. Meaning is transformed on the boundary (a foam sword becomes a real sword, a player becomes a character) and repercussion also change.

Who we are outside of larp should not impact on how we are interpreted in larp, and the characters we play should not reflect on our everyday selves. Indeed, this is the social contract known as the *role-play agreement*. In practice, however, the line between the everyday life and the larp is porous. Character feelings always *bleed* into the player, and vice versa. Yet, to be able to play, we need to pretend that

the larp is clearly separate from the quotidian, as that gives us *alibi* to act in ways that would be strange or even unthinkable for us outside larp.

The most common terms for things that are happening within the larp is *ingame*, while things that are not part of the larp are *offgame*. The terms *in character* and *out of character* are sometimes used to differentiate specifically between character and player actions. A more specific term in this area is *diegetic*, which refers to things that are true within the fiction of the larp. The opposite of this is *non-diegetic*. To put it simply, music in the play area is diegetic if characters can hear it, and not if they cannot.

PLAYING TOGETHER

Larps are constructed through various implicit and explicit agreements about how to play together. Most fundamentally, there are *rules*; implicit and explicit agreements of what is being done and how. Some rules are explicit (“the larp ends when the bell rings”) and others are implicit in the culture (“team members walking in the play space in their modern clothes are not present in the medieval fiction”). Various *mechanics* are often used to focus the narrative or to represent acts that would be impossible, dangerous, or excessively intimate, such as magic, violence, or sex.

Rules called *metatechniques*, typical for many Nordic larps, are gestures and other representations that break the boundary between the character and the player, allowing players to communicate past the mask of the character during runtime. For instance, a metatechnique might be used to indicate that a player is breaking the fourth wall and speaking her character’s thoughts to the other players in a way that the other characters cannot diegetically hear.

The runtime of larp is a joint effort for the runtime gamemasters and players. They create the larp together, using the rules, mechanics, and metatechniques. This provides an environment for *inter-immersion*, where everyone is playing not just their own characters, but supporting everyone else’s play: you cannot play a king unless others play your subjects. Because of how social reality is collectively constructed, the players can be said to be “immersed” in not just their own character, but every character. This is the magic trick that makes the fiction come alive: when everyone pretends that it is real, it starts to feel real.

While on the one hand larp is communal and shared, and cannot really work if a player is fully alone, it is on the other hand personal and subjective. Each and every player sees a different part of the larp: the player literally only sees what their character sees. They are both the players on stage and the audience for the playing. This is called *first-person audience*. Furthermore, there is hidden *internal play* that may not be visible to any other participant, but that colours the player’s experience. Any fear, desire, surprise, anxiety, or joy a character feels is part of the show enjoyed by the first-person audience. The designer cannot see the larp as the players see it, it is only available to the experiencer.

Consent is an essential concept and an important practice for this playful co-creation. As one can never know in advance exactly what the ensemble of players and organisers will do during a larp, it is not possible to give *informed carte blanche consent*. Therefore it must be possible to renegotiate and withdraw consent at any time. Numerous rules and mechanics exist for negotiating different limits; it is one thing to negotiate consent for physical boundaries of players, another to negotiate *story consent*, i.e. what one character can do to another.

Consent mechanics and metatechniques are two examples of how designers negotiate the fact that larp is both real and fictional at the same time. There are numerous concepts for understanding the transformation of meaning that happens on the edge of the magic circle. For example, players can *steer* their characters to act in various ways to generate interesting play or to experience interesting things (“I want to be at the garden at midnights since there is going to be a cool scene there, so I need to rationalize why my character should go there”).

Some larps are designed to be intentionally *transparent*, letting all the participants know roughly what is going to happen, to allow steering towards interesting story outcomes or situations. Furthermore, transparency need not be full in the sense that players know the plot, but it can have a *transparency of starting point*, for example of character motivation. Allowing all players to read each other’s character descriptions means they will be able to understand why another character would do something, and play it up for drama, even if their characters do not.

FORMS OF LARP

Larp takes many, many forms. This book concentrates broadly on a specific tradition of Nordic larp, or Nordic style larp. It is *collaborative*, which means the participants are not each other’s adversaries even though characters might be – they are playing to create something together, not against each other to win. It approaches larpmaking through *bespoke design*: instead of aiming to design one rules system or story world to enable the telling of all stories a player base might be interested in, it designs the system anew for each event as needed to enable the most suitable themes and actions for that piece. This means Nordic larp tends to be, by international standards, *rules-light* – a player will not be asked to memorise tens or hundreds of pages of mechanics.

Larps in this tradition can be broken down into further categories, although the boundaries between (and the terms for) each keep shifting. Larps that last a full day or several days, possibly with *act breaks* between different parts, with full scenography and players in full costumes, do not really have an established term. These have been the default setting and thus no single word exists for them. In this book these larps are called *longform larps*. Longform larps are cumbersome to set up, and most of them are only played once, although re-runs and desig-

ning for multiple runs from the get-go are increasingly common. A larp played only once by a relatively small amount of people can still have an impact on the discourse, as the wide range of longform larps referenced in this book exemplifies.

Blockbuster larp is a specific form of longform larp; often a larp targeting an international audience, featuring an expensive venue, high participation fee, and a high concept idea. Blockbuster larps are often based on existing intellectual property, and tend to get hyped in the community – before and after the run.

Larps that have a wide, unclear, or even unlimited play area are called *pervasive larps*. These events take place on the street of a city, amongst unsuspecting bystanders. Pervasive larps in urban environments are also called *city larps*.

Shorter larps, with their length measured in hours instead of days, are called *chamber larps*. These often also take place in a smaller venue and with fewer players. The demands on scenography and costuming are sometimes lower. Chamber larps are easier to package and restage.

Larps that are played in a minimalistic set, with precise control over light, sound, and props, are called *blackbox larps*. The term comes from theatre black boxes which are one place where staging blackbox larps is handy. This is very much an aestheticized form, where clarity and elegance are often design goals and everything that is incidental is removed.

Finally, there are *freeform scenarios*. In the Nordic countries, these used to be considered halfway between *tabletop role-playing* and larps, while in for instance the US they were considered a kind of chamber larp. In the international discourse around Nordic larp in the last decade, freeform became lumped in with longform; at the same time a fruitful exchange of design practices took place between the two disciplines, bringing them closer together. In this book we conform to the international standard of using larp as the top category, even though some of the referenced freeform scenarios would have just as natural a place in a book about tabletop role-playing. Freeform scenarios, so called because they have no standard form, are for this same reason difficult to precisely describe. They typically last a few hours, are usually played without costumes, props, or special lighting in whatever space is available, often feature heavy use of inventive bespoke mechanics and metatechniques, and are sometimes heavily gamemastered.

ON TERMINOLOGY

The terminology presented here has evolved over the years. Many of them are metaphoric and at least seemingly self-explanatory (transparency, runtime), although they have specific meaning. Some of the language has been adapted from other fields (diegetic comes from film theory), some come from academic study of larp (such as pervasive larp), while others have grown within the international larp design community (blockbuster, bleed).

Many terms have migrated from tabletop role-playing games and continue to be used even if they seem nonsensical. *Non-player character* (NPC) is such a term: Non-player characters obviously have players in larps – they are just usually coordinated by runtime gamemasters and they have less agency.

New terms also appear regularly and a useful term can spread like wildfire. This means that it is not always clear who came up with a term. Often the terms are attributed to the community or the tradition, but each term was coined by someone. For example, a few years ago the term *herd competence* spread throughout the community. It puts into words the idea that running a larp for a group of participants where at least some have prior experience of larping is much easier than running a larp for a group with only beginners. If there is enough herd competence – if there is enough experience in the room – beginners can easily pick up how to larp by following the example of the others. This was quickly followed by *herd costuming*: when everyone puts a little effort in their costumes in a great environment, everyone will look fabulous. Few people know that “herd competence” was coined by larp designer Teresa Axner, and in this book there are numerous terms that have similarly become seemingly orphan.

The meaning of terms can also shift over time. The term blockbuster larp was originally used critically of larps targeting the biggest possible audiences with high production values (and, implicitly, perhaps a weaker game design). Since then it has been embraced by the creators of many big-budget larps, and no implications about quality remain attached to the term.

Only terms that are useful survive in design practice. Concepts described as terms are mental tools, things to think with. If they do not make the design practice smoother, new tools are needed and will emerge

FURTHER READING:

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HOW REAL IS LARP?

// Simo Järvelä

Designing a larp is about constructing an artificial situation that is completely real. The players treat it as fictional – which it is – but it is also something fully embodied by the players. The larp designer needs to grasp this fundamental duality.

Larp takes place in a specific social situation, within a social frame, that has social rules of its own within it. It is often called the *magic circle*. Besides game-like rules, it also applies to social rules – players can do many things in larp that would be frowned upon outside it. However, all the feelings, perceptions, actions etc. that take place during a larp are fully real. They have different *meaning* within the magic circle of the social frame of play, and consequently we can, for example, lie and cheat or be aggressive during a larp – that is, act in a manner that would have heavy social consequences outside it. In our larp communities we build that *alibi* through different larp design features, and through a selection of agreements and excuses that enable the non-standard behaviour. Of these the most classic is probably “it isn’t me but my character”; “the feelings aren’t real” and “it’s only fiction” are also in common use. This is a convenient shorthand to negotiate the consequences of actions within the frame of the fiction, but taken too literally, it creates a whole lot of confusion.

The social framing and the alibi are tied to the concept of *immersion*, the subjective feeling of becoming one’s character and temporarily forgetting oneself. After larp ends, when the player still feel parts of “what their character felt” during the game, it is called *bleed*, and talked about it as though some feelings bleed from the character to the player, or vice versa.

In the original research paper describing the bleed dynamic it was never meant to be psychologically accurate, but more like a metaphor, a description of what bleed subjectively feels like. More strictly speaking, there is no autonomous character; a larp character is a conceptual structure in the player’s (and co-players, etc.) minds. So, while bleed and immersion certainly are real in the sense that something clearly happens that gives us those experiences and you and the players can build your art around them, they are not real in the sense that there would be a process of literally becoming the character and the players’ identities changing to that of a fictive person, or that the character would really have feelings or thoughts, or that they would bleed into the player. All the feelings, thoughts, and actions are the players’.

Cognitively, immersion is primarily an attention process where the player strongly focuses on the fictive conceptual frame, its social rules and dynamics, and importantly, the character concept. Attention is a cognitive function that selects what the person's current focus is. Focusing on something allocates more processing power to it in the brain and selective attention inhibits other influences from interfering. Attention also modulates what reaches consciousness and what fills it; that is, attention can bring content to a person's consciousness that they would otherwise be unaware of, and completely block out other elements not relevant to their current interests.

That selective quality is essential when a player focuses on the fictive frame and tries to ignore everything else, typically elements not consistent with the fictive frame, such as the green emergency exit lights in medieval castles or the challenging work meeting next week. Consequently, deep immersion takes place when the player is focused strongly enough on the larp so that it fills their consciousness, and everything around them that is not part of the fictive frame is blocked from their consciousness by attention processes. However, all that which they are not focusing on – including their everyday selves – does not disappear anywhere, it is there, even when the player is not momentarily aware of it. That creates the illusion of immersion. Different players seem to be immersing themselves in slightly different aspects of the fictive frame – from character immersion to narrative immersion – but even when the target varies, it is fundamentally the same attention-based brain process that cognitively explains the phenomenon.

Entering and returning from the social frame of larp is not necessarily easy or automatic, nor is it a foolproof system; things are often messy around the edges. However, this is true for all social frames, not just larps. That's why after the larp participants need to process their experiences and the emotions they felt during the larp, in a different social frame and meaning structures: "it was all real, it was me, it was you, and we did and felt all those things". All of that just does not *mean* the same thing as they would in everyday life. This is what debriefs are for, and a common practice is to first switch frames and separate the character from the player.

Indeed, how to strengthen the temporary social frame of larp, how to enter it efficiently, how to uphold it during the larp, and how to return from it and leave it behind in a purposeful manner, are at the core of larp design. These transitions are fundamental to larp as an art form. Designing them is essential, and there already are a selection of tools, such as different techniques for workshoping, debriefing and decompressing that help in creating, upholding, entering, and returning from the social frame. Viewing larp as a temporary social frame – while rather a theoretical approach – will help you to tie all these different techniques into a single framework, and supports your decision-making on what tools to use to achieve the desired outcome. Also, larp design is not only for designers; players utilize similar thinking when they for instance are preparing for a larp, or post-processing their experiences. For players, understanding the nature of tem-

porary social frames and what happens when they fail, provides valuable insight into why they are feeling in a certain way and supports self-care and empathy towards fellow players.

In conclusion, while it is essential to uphold and strengthen the social frame that fundamentally enables us to larp at all, and perhaps can be necessary to keep using excuses like “it wasn’t me, but my character” to uphold character alibi, it is counterproductive and confusing to take those too literally when processing them afterwards, or when designing a larp. Heavy experiences, life altering transformative experiences, confusing bloody experiences, or unsuccessful experiences that leave us feeling like an outcast, all crave validation and to be handled as real – which they are. As a designer, you need efficient conceptual frameworks to support your thinking, and while metaphoric thinking can be incredibly powerful, it can also lead you astray. So, let’s support the frame by design, and acknowledge when it benefits from talking about characters as autonomous identities and larps as alternate realities, and when such metaphoric talk is just confusing and counterproductive.

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AN INTRODUCTION TO BESPOKE LARP DESIGN

// Johanna Koljonen

Larp design in the Nordic tradition is centred on *collaborative play* and on larp as a design discipline. It is interested in new work, which means that even though *larp campaigns* (series of larps with many sequels) do figure in the discourse, its focus is on *one-shots* – larps that are standalone works. In this tradition, for reasons relating to its production contexts, one-shot larps are rarely designed with pre-existing rule systems. By definition then, the Knutepunkt tradition of Nordic-style larp has become focused on bespoke design.

Bespoke design means that every time you make a larp, you will approach it as a new work and design it from scratch. You will decide what you wish to achieve, for instance what your larp is about and what you would like your participants to experience or feel. Then think through what your design parameters and available resources are; for instance, how much time you have, what participants are willing to pay, and how their cultural assumptions about play operate. Within this frame, you will make among the available design choices – those that best serve your design goals. A handbook in bespoke larp design, then, will include very few answers and quite a lot of questions, together with explanations of the design principles that should guide you when you make your choices.

Another aspect that separates this type of larp design from others is its analysis of how the runtime experience is shaped by the whole participant process, the surrounding culture, and even events and discussions taking place long after the larp has been played.

DESIGNING THE TOTAL LARP

Over the years, larp designers would occasionally bump into problems whose solution did not seem to lie entirely within the field of game design. A Nordic example from way back in the 1990s was the so-called *fishwife problem*. Solving it took a long time – arguably it is still not fully achieved. The process can illustrate how most of the conceptual tools of Nordic larp developed over the years: not because the designers felt a burning need to write theory, but because a more nuanced understanding and more specific language was required to solve practical design problems.

The fishwife problem was the complaint of female players in fantasy larps that the female characters often had limited *agency*, in a way that made the larps less playable for them. Stereotypically, while the male characters were having adventures, the female characters were expected to be sitting around. On reflection, the reasons were obvious: the then teenagers writing these characters were relying heavily on dated fantasy tropes and medievalisms based on misunderstandings of the historical evidence. The pop cultural norms of the time about what female characters could do, say, or participate in, had also been internalised by writers and players alike. As a result, even if the people designing these larps would of course have said quite earnestly that they considered each and every character to be equally important, many female characters were often disconnected, by design, from the main narratives of the larps.

The immediate solution was relatively simple. A better analysis of how character agency was connected to narrative structures, and a greater awareness of the centrality of playable actions for all characters, pushed the community's understanding of character writing forward, solving much of the problem.

Still, the laser focus on designing the runtime meant that the parts of the fishwife problem that fell outside the scope of character design were not at the time addressed on the design level. It simply did not occur to anyone back then that if players, for instance, bring unacknowledged cultural norms with them into play, that too is something that larp designers can work with.

Today, a Nordic fantasy larp would likely show characters of all genders in all types of roles in their promotional images, and design the gender system of the storyworld in an intentional way – whether to look like what is now believed to be historically correct of earlier times, or whether to be just as fantastical as everything else in the fiction. If the fictional system is very alien to the everyday norms of the player group, additional design support for embodying the larp's storyworld might be provided in workshop exercises performed on site, or subtly built into the way the team distributes and wields out-of-character authority on.

That gender inclusivity is now on the radar of most designers is an effect of shifting values in the surrounding society. But in what way the related design goals are specifically achieved reflects changes in the understanding of what larp design encompasses.

EVERYTHING IS A DESIGNABLE SURFACE

Today we know that everything that affects the participants' behaviour or experience is part of your larp. The larp experience begins the first time your participants hear about the project. Your tone in communications, the coherence of how you communicate the vision of your larp, how you establish the play culture you wish for and the storyworld you have created, as well as how reliably you deliver on promises and logistics, all shape and frame the participants' expectations

of the larp. What happens on location before play begins also has an enormous and direct effect not just on runtime events, but also on whether participants will be able to meaningfully play at all. [*All of this will be discussed in more detail in Part 2 of this book. –Eds*].

The memory of the larp – the participant’s understanding of their player experience and their character’s journey – is not shaped until after the runtime has ended, and how that happens is affected by your onsite design, your post-larp communications, the culture of your ensemble and those of their respective play communities. [*For more on this, see Part 5. –Eds*]. The full duration of your larp is forever, or at least until the last person who remembers it has died.

Nordic-style larp provides powerful experiences not just because a collective of players is empowered to create beautiful stories together inside a well-written storyworld, facilitated by an elegant set of rules and mechanics. Sometimes all those elements will be present, and the larp will still fail, because of circumstances outside larp design’s historical focus on only the runtime. Or perhaps the larp comes out pretty decent, but is fast forgotten, making less of a dent in the world than its quality and the efforts of your team and players had deserved. What took Nordic larp to the next level was a single and (in retrospect) blindingly obvious insight: that if the mechanisms that cause them can be identified, those problems too can be addressed, since *everything is a designable surface*.

You cannot be expected to personally control the norms of the societies that you or your participants live in – but when they affect your larp, which is always, they are suddenly your problem, and dealing with these effects or preventing them entirely is now your responsibility. All cultures, societies, norms and rules are created by humans, and can therefore be redesigned by humans if they are not serving their intended purpose. In fact they constantly are; that is how they change. Human life involves a continuous shifting between different social contexts, where slightly – or enormously – differing agency is offered to people depending on their social role and relationships in that context. Just like you design everything inside the *magic circle* of the fiction with intention, you can design everything you create outside it with intention – effectively creating a series of nested magic circles where, in the service of the larp, the behaviours and relationships are different than in the everyday world. Players will respond to this automatically, because they are human and therefore on average experts in adjusting to new social situations.

Perhaps inside your fiction, everyone is evil and does horrible things to each other. This requires the players to trust that they will not be actually hurt or accidentally hurt each other, and that they will not be judged in the real world for their character’s atrocities or humiliation. How deeply the players can allow themselves to engage with a story like this is not, it turns out, an effect of how compelling your prose describing the monsters and their conflicts is, or even of whether your built environment, the temperature, and soundscape encourage the behaviours you are hoping for. What kinds of behaviours participants can

engage with within the magic circle depends on how strong their *alibi* to default from their normal behaviour is. The magic circle of the fiction provides alibi, as does the character – but the strongest alibi in this situation would be provided by a participant culture where the players *trust* each other to be nice, generous and caring humans regardless of what the characters are doing.

Just like everything about runtime can be engaged with through design, so can everything about participant cultures and behaviour. If you want strangers to trust each other faster, you can ask them to solve practical problems together – like carrying chairs or setting up a tent. You can have them do workshop exercises involving handshakes and eye contact, or depending on your cultural context, even hugging.

If a participant is having a bad day, you can calm them and cheer them up by how the on-site experience is designed, and nudge them to leave their out-of-character worries far behind by a clearly demarcated ritual limit to the magic circle. If societal beauty norms are standing in the way of players' character portrayals, you can temporarily adjust their way of viewing themselves and looking at each other through exercises in your on-site workshop. *Everything* is a designable surface. If this makes you feel like you are manipulating your participants, do not worry: you can be quite transparent about what you're doing. It will still work, but only if the the players want it to.

WITH GREAT POWER

This can all sound quite overwhelming, and the rest of this book is likely to make that feeling stronger. There is no detail too tiny not to have been adjusted with intent in a larp design process at some time, and as you will read again and again, the interplay of all design elements on a systems level can make the function of any of them change when you tweak just one thing somewhere else. Don't panic.

First, remember that design is about making choices, and thankfully not all choices are available to you. You have your goal and that original set of design parameters: they will automatically exclude millions of possible design choices from your scope. As you design, test, and gradually commit to choices – and as time progresses – the range of what you actually have the resources to affect will shrink, hour by hour. This will, on the whole, make it clearer what to do.

If you struggle to prioritise, especially as you get close to the runtime, ask yourself about each choice: which option will best support your theme and the play experience of the participants at the lowest cost to the health and sanity of yourself and your design team? Rank the possible tasks emerging from this process in order of impact on play experience, and start with the biggest one. As you work your way down the list, you will find that some have become irrelevant or that a few new ones have appeared because of unexpected effects of your previous choices. This is normal, and you are doing well.

Second, you might as well embrace that larps – especially longform larps – are complex and chaotic. You probably enjoy a bit of unpredictability and chaos, otherwise you would not be a larp designer (or indeed a larper). There is an exhilarating joy in seeing something enormously messy and difficult cohere into a collective artwork.

How much control you have over that process is in part an effect of your design choices, in part of the skill of both you and your players: there is a difference between conducting a work you have composed for a symphony orchestra and being the bandleader of a jazz band. If your design has space for improvisation, it will be easier for the skilled players (which larpers often are) to save you and the larp if you falter. Indeed, many larps are more jams than compositions, and while the artistic quality is then unpredictable, jams are usually a very satisfying experience for everyone involved. In other words, perhaps you have not yet mastered all the instruments available to the larp designer, and that is fine. You can start with smaller compositions, or rely on the skill of others – especially the players, who are really invested in having a great time.

Third, larps usually pretty much work, even when they are poorly designed and terribly executed. Even rather mediocre larps can enable incredibly powerful experiences in the players. When the first generation of larp designers started out, there were literally no good larps, because the whole grammar of the form was still being invented. The orchestra was, figuratively speaking, drifting aimlessly in a forest clearing, blowing into pine cones and rubbing sticks against each other in hope of making music for concert halls and cathedrals.

The power of embodied role-playing is so strong, and the ability of players to fix design problems on the fly so enormous, that even those early larpers could glimpse what was possible, and kept at it. Practice the small skills, test and iterate, but also: aim high. If what you make today turns out not to be so great, you have still learned something, in the exact same way everyone else did.

There is, however, one responsibility you cannot abdicate: when you gather people together, and you are in a position to set rules and norms, then how your participants treat each other, how the experience of the larp changes them, and how their collective actions impact the world is, to some degree, on you. That can be pretty scary. As a larp designer you may be working with more nuanced conceptual tools, but the responsibility itself is not very different from what you would have as a teacher, a business leader, or the host of a children's birthday party. Remember who you are and what you stand for, and surround yourself with people with similar values and dreams. Then go change the world.

LARP AND SERIOUSNESS

// Jaakko Stenros

Many people view play and larp as something lesser, as “just” larp or “merely” play. Furthermore, playing with serious topics in larp is sometimes seen as trivializing. This is based on the idea that larp and play are trivial, and anything they touch will be marred by this association. The secret of the Nordic larp design tradition is that it takes larp seriously. This is neither a particularly well-kept secret, nor a particularly novel one, since the secret of play is also that it is taken seriously.

Dutch historian Johan Huizinga famously described all play as “a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious’, but at the same time absorbing the players intensely and utterly.” While play may be frivolous, spontaneous, and silly, the player must take the activity for what it is. They must be devoted to it, otherwise they will be too self-conscious or ashamed to continue with the flight of fancy – or they will continue it ironically, holding it at a distance.

This applies to larp as well. When we pretend together that we have stepped into another world, when we enact fictional characters and treat each other’s performances as real, a transformation happens: it all starts to feel *real enough*. The rules, mechanics, and metatechniques the designers have created and curated are key; by playing together with shared understanding of the rules, we produce an orderly and coherent world. In this world we can certainly be serious, but also frolic freely while being impulsive and exuberant, as long as underneath it all we need to accept the rules seriously and without irony. In order to play “as if” we need to treat the play “as it is”.

Even when play ends, the Nordic larp tradition continues to treat larp seriously. Larp is treated as a valid form of expression, and a worthwhile pursuit. It is debated, documented, and studied. Numerous designers are pushing themselves to better understand the larp experience and its creation in a holistic and nuanced manner – in order to become better designers. This book is certainly part of that project. Designers analyse each other’s larps and fine-tune their own works. They take pride in their work and are recognized for it. No topic or theme is out of bounds. Increasingly, they are treated as artists. However, when a designer expects that their work is taken seriously, they can also be expected to take criticism seriously. As long as larps are “merely” larps, critics are easy to dismiss, but with respectability comes accountability.

Notice that this does not mean that larp should *be* serious. The larp form can be and should be used for comedy and tragedy, wisdom and folly. However, the act of creation, both for the designer and the player, should not be half-hearted, haphazard, or slipshod. Play requires commitment.

HOW TO PICK YOUR LARP IDEA

// Bjarke Pedersen

Not all ideas are created equal. When deciding on what new larp to make, there can be many starting points: an artistic vision, a cool location, a genre that you love, etc. Yet the single most important thing is the main *idea* of the larp. This is the core of your work: what every decision should be measured against to make sure the result is coherent, understandable and focused. The great idea is what will set your larp apart from the rest, and attract participants. Choosing the right great idea is serious business. It takes time and often many iterations before it is ready.

You should be able to explain your idea in a few sentences so people can understand the core of your larp. Here are a few examples. The idea of the Vampire larp *End of the Line* (2016, Finland) is “an illegal nightclub in the World of Darkness where everybody – not just the vampires – are both hunter and hunted”. For *Lotka-Volterra* (2018, Sweden) it was “a ‘naturalistic’ science fiction larp about the survival of humanity after an overwhelming alien invasion, with focus on friendship, trauma, relationships, and actual meaningful work.” And for the larp *Lindängens Riksinternat* (2013, Sweden), the idea is: “a larp set at a boarding school that is about bullying, peer pressure, status, power struggle, relationships and fear, and about people conforming to – and being hurt by – a system that was there long before they were, and will be there long after they are gone.”

But what is a great idea? And how do you stay true to it during production? This chapter explores questions that will help you choose the right idea, expand it and make it multi-layered. Often you realise too late in the process that the idea is not as strong as you believed at first. The following questions should hopefully help you speed up the process so you can reject those early and move on to better ideas fast.

HAS YOUR IDEA BEEN DONE BEFORE?

The first thing you should do when you have an idea is to research if it has been done before. If it has, you have to decide whether to reuse the idea or adjust it to be something else. If you really want to go ahead with your idea – do it. But you then need to be able to describe how your version is different from the previous

larp. A great thing about having a similar idea to a previous larp is that you can get access to people with experience of making and executing that idea. Find out as much as you can about their implementation. Always seek out experience that can help you become better. This will save you time and save you from a lot of pitfalls and mistakes.

If the idea has been done before, the follow-up question is: can you do it better? Larp theory and practice move fast and if you are up to date with the latest trends and methods the idea will be executed in a new and fresh way. You still have to be able to explain in detail why your version of the idea will be better. If you cannot, your idea is not clear enough.

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT YOUR IDEA?

If you want your idea to be relevant, especially in an artistic context, your idea will need something fresh that contributes to the conversation in the design communities you belong to. You need to be able to articulate which elements of your idea are unique and why. This is super hard, as there are thousands of larp made before yours that you know nothing about. (This is also the reason you should be very cautious of saying that your larp is doing something “for the first time ever”. It is probably not).

WHAT THEMES AND ACTIONS ARE EMBEDDED IN YOUR IDEA?

Strong themes will make your larp better. From writing and design to production and communication, they will guide all of your decisions: whenever you need to make a design choice, you should pick one that supports your themes without weighing down the overall design. The focus that a theme gives your idea is invaluable in extracting what actions are available for your participants. Meaningful actions – that speak to the participants and directly connect the characters to the core themes – are what creates a good larp. The more time you spend locking down your themes, the easier the rest of the design process will be.

The genre of the larp is not the same as its themes. For example, *Star Wars* and *Blade Runner* are both sci-fi, but very different in their major themes. *Star Wars* fits the subgenre of space opera and among its main themes are resistance and overcoming tyranny. *Blade Runner* can be positioned in the subgenre of future-noir, and its theme is the question of what is it to be human. The difference in themes radically affect what stories you can tell and what actions are available to the characters.

A good example of a clear set of themes can be found in the larp *Just a Little Lovin'* (Norway, 2011). The three main themes of the larp are love, desire and fear of death. From these themes, and the setting of gay America at the beginning of the AIDS epidemic in the early 80s, all the actions that the characters engage with

were extrapolated. Sexuality, intimacy, vulnerability, friendship and death would frame almost all actions through the larp.

HOW MANY LAYERS DOES YOUR IDEA HAVE?

For an idea to have wide appeal, it should be layered with many levels. If you only have one layer to your idea, your larp may come out as shallow and there will not be enough for your participants to explore. As you fine-tune and iterate your idea, try to expand it by adding layers that adhere to the themes of the larp. Try to make all the layers move in the same direction and intersect with each other fluidly in order to avoid interference and confusion.

An example of several layers working in unison is from the larp *Inside Hamlet* (Denmark, 2015) based on the play by Shakespeare. One of the main themes is indecision: Prince Hamlet cannot make up his mind about whether he should kill King Claudius or not. Because of this indecision he and his family are destroyed. All characters in the larp have the same inherent tension. In the written text of each character, there are suggestions for what actions to perform during the larp. There are some positive actions (“to be”) and some negative actions (“not to be”), and participants are recommended to steer back and forth between these suggestions, enacting indecision in their play.

Another level is that all noble families are based on other works of fiction that are in turn based on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. House Belar is based on the TV series *Sons of Anarchy*, House Cornelius on Michael Moorcock’s book *The Eternal Champion* and House Voltemand on House Harkonnen from Frank Herbert’s novel *Dune*. These are only some of the levels that intertwine and give the participants the possibility to approach the larp from a multitude of angles.

WHO DO YOU EXCLUDE WITH YOUR IDEA?

There is no way around it – all ideas will in some way exclude someone from participating. You need to know who you are excluding and be able to explain why that is the case, and why you have chosen to exclude them. Because you have. You should always own your design choices.

Exclusion could happen because of many factors. If your larp idea is a post-apocalyptic larp where everybody drives cars, you will exclude people who cannot drive. If the participants have to bring their own tricked-out cars, you will exclude people who do not have the funds or skillset to make a car look like something out of *Mad Max: Fury Road*. As excluding people is inevitable, it is not necessarily a problem, but if you do not actively think about who you are excluding, you are likely to keep excluding the same groups every time – or excluding some simply out of laziness.

If your idea has elements that explore for example racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism or fat-phobia, you will also need to be able to

explain in what manner these themes are handled and why their presence is important for your idea. Even if you succeed in creating a respectful treatment that no one has objections to on principle (which is very hard to achieve), you should expect that some participants whose lives are affected by these structures will still not be able to participate, and will therefore be effectively excluded. This can happen even if you yourself belong to the same group.

This is not to say you should not make the aforementioned larp. You can make larps about anything, including the above themes, as long as you are able to stand by your work and explain why it is important to do so.

CAN YOU MAKE YOUR IDEA UNDERSTANDABLE TO YOUR PEERS?

When your idea has gone through several iterations, it is time to subject it to a sanity check. This means showing your idea to experienced larp designers and a few potential participants to see if they understand your vision and if they can imagine it working as a fully developed larp. The participants and designers you consult can have different artistic preferences and practices, and you should be able to explain to them why your approach to the specific idea is better for what you want to achieve.

If your peers do not understand your idea, you need to go back and iterate some more to sharpen it. Every time you pitch your idea, you will understand it better and see where the weak points are.

DOES YOUR EGO GET IN THE WAY OF THE POTENTIAL OF YOUR IDEA?

Finally, you need take a critical look at your idea and remove all the elements that are in there only to stroke your own ego. Many potentially great larps have been ruined by unchecked egos. You need to remove, for example, any part of your idea where the top reason to include it would be that you think it is cool, badass, or edgy for the sake of being edgy.

If one of your design goals is to make the best larp ever so that others will know you have, you should rethink. Especially if you are not getting paid for your work, being rewarded in fame can seem very appealing. Your ego will distort the focus of your larp and dilute the end result for your participants. Separating yourself from your work will make the end result better.

LEARN DESIGN BY RERUNNING LARPS

// Oliver Skjødt Nøglebæk

Let me make two guesses: you wish you had the skills to make big larps? And you wish more people could experience that really cool one you went to?

I can tell you how to get started on both: why not rerun that larp you loved as a method to bootstrap your own learning? There are a ton of benefits. First, you know the larp will be awesome, you'll probably get to work with the experienced designers who made it in the first place, and you get to see what makes a great larp tick. Most larprawrights are flattered and excited to have their larps run again and usually want to be involved in the reruns. Second, you don't have to worry about impostor syndrome or the larp actually working, but will know it is a solid product from day one. And you can tap into the brand value of the original larp and not have to rely on your own charisma to lure players in.

Mads Havshøj, Mads Delholm Holst and I started out wanting more people to have the intense experience we had had at the Norwegian run of *Brudpris* (Sweden, 2013, Eng. Bridal Price), a Swedish multi-day larp about a patriarchal village society. We assembled ourselves into an organizing group, decided on our core principles for the production – openness, atten-

tion to players, and a spacious schedule and budget – and laid out a plan. Then we nervously asked for permission from the designers, and thankfully got a yes.

For our first run of *Brudpris* in Denmark in 2016 our focus was on learning player communication and practical production. We had a style of combining collective decision making with individual assignments that worked well with the different skill sets we brought in. Most decisions were made during bi-weekly conference calls, where we brought up the relevant tasks and made sure one of us was responsible for doing each job. From the original designers we got a lot of knowledge and design improvement ideas, but also leeway to take the larp in our own direction. In the end we kept the final product close to what we had tried as players. The result was a lot of happy players and a couple of mistakes to learn from. We studied the feedback emails we requested from the players and compared them to what we saw fail during runtime. From that we found solutions to rectify the issues, and realized we needed to run another big larp in order to implement our fixes and see if they were viable. We chose to do a rerun again, but to try a different larp.

For our second rerun we picked up *Lindängens Riksinternat* (2013, Sweden, Eng. State Boarding School of Lindängen), later run by the same teams as *Lindängen International Boarding School*, which we would bring to Denmark in 2017. Location factors required us to add 50% more characters, and having gotten practical matters down to a routine gave us the time we needed to learn how to actually design and write the characters. The original designers were skilled character writers, and we learned a lot when we asked them to collaborate with us on writing the new characters and integrating them into the existing cast.

We were still not entirely satisfied that we had learned all we wanted, and chose to go back to *Brudpris*. For *Brudpris – a few years later* (2018, Denmark, Eng. *Bridal Price – a Few Years Later*) we only kept the story framework, wrote up a whole new cast of characters and tweaked the setting a bit. We added a fourth team member, Liv Lykke Schubert, and rebuilt the workshop and debrief from the ground up, to try a novel approach. It worked out pretty close to perfectly, and the only reasonable step from here would be doing a completely original larp.

We learned a lot through this process, grew and honed our personal skill sets. While we may not individually have learned each and every skill of a larpwright, we now know enough to collaborate with or lead others in doing the things we haven't done ourselves. We've made all the beginner's mistakes at a pace that gave us time enough to solve them right, rather than being forced to move on.

When picking a larp to rerun, make sure that you can transfer the core of the design to your own local conditions and team without losing the parts that makes playing it special. The design should be solid enough that the few beginner's mistakes you're likely to make won't derail it. You should also pick a larp that most of your team members have actually played, so you have concrete elements to redesign, rather than vague ideas.

How you structure your organizing group is a very individual choice. We suggest a flat collective structure where choices are discussed and everyone will have a chance to bring ideas and learn from each other. Make sure everyone feels okay with handing off assignments if they grow too big to handle or life gets in the way. Increase the challenge from larp to larp, start with the practical basis of logistics and player-facing interactions before opening up to core design elements.

We also found it well worth our time and money to pay people for doing the jobs we didn't want to do. We covered transport for all our kitchen helpers, paid a musician, a photographer and the cleaners. All of it well worth it for not burning out the team. Make sure to identify the places where you can make the process easier on yourself – the players will appreciate a smooth production and calm staff more than a little discount. We also made a very conservative budget, so we could afford to solve last minute problems easily and fast.

Interacting with players was a constant, laborious task. We set out with principles about openness and hone-

sty, which turned out to be quite the challenge to uphold. Especially having to tell people they couldn't come to our larp was hard, as were cancellations. We learned quickly that at least a third of the people who accept characters the first time around will drop out before runtime, so we made sure late reserves got cheaper or free tickets. It is also vitally important to make sure communication is centralized. If every organizer tries to answer all the emails or Facebook posts, you'll end up with a confused mess. And think ahead about how you'll handle player problems and drama. For us, the player safety work starts the moment the players see our teasers.

We got everything we wanted out

of our process and then some, and made great larps live a new life or two. On a personal level it's been an absolute pleasure being able to give the designers of great larps a chance to come to our reruns to play their own works. We all write larps we want to play. It feels good to give other designers the experience in return.

FURTHER READING:

nordiclarp.org/wiki/Brudpris

nordiclarp.org/wiki/Brudpris_A_Few_Years_Later

nordiclarp.org/wiki/Lindängens_Riks-internet

NAILED IT!

HOW TO DESIGN THE PRE-LARP PROCESS

Most of what happens during the runtime of your larp is shaped or determined by the decisions, choices, and experiences of your participants before it starts – often even before they arrive at the venue. From the moment you announce, a two-way process of player selection begins, in which you try to attract the players who would be the best fit for your larp, and the players are weighing their interest in the promised experience and your ability to actually deliver it.

Many larps require participants to read, memorise, plan, co-create story (often with strangers), understand your aesthetics and prepare a costume, and stay on top of large amounts of logistical, play-related, and diegetic information. You are asking a lot, and their work is mission critical for your larp: the storyworld can only come alive if it already lives in the minds of the players. Showing respect for the participants' investment of time, effort, and creativity will help you earn their respect in turn.

All interactions with your project at this stage will affect not only the trust the participants have in you, but also the mindset with which they approach playing with each other. Design your participant culture with intention. If you encourage a warm, curious, and respectful tone, even participants who do not know

each other are likelier to, for instance, help each other solve practical problems related to costuming or travel. It will nudge everyone towards already feeling responsible for each other. They will arrive on site assuming that the others are friendly, lowering the threshold for playing together.

For all of these reasons, every interaction between your project and its potential and actual participants needs to be designed with the same care as the in-character interactions between the players. In the following chapter, Martine Svanevik and Johanna Koljonen discuss how to approach designing this pre-larp process. Karin Edman provides a thorough checklist for thinking through, on a practical level, what participants will need to know about the production realities and playstyle of your larp to decide whether they are able to take part. Henry Towsner and J Li delve deeper into how to communicate the content of your larp. Finally, Anne Serup Grove and Kerstin Örtberg discuss the design choice of offering costumes for your participants instead of asking them to provide their own.

Humans, it turns out, are as varied in their bodies as they are in their interests and abilities. No larp is for everyone, but many larps can be for a wider range of participants than you – or they – might immediately expect. The more you think ahead, the less work the player-facing pre-larp process will require, freeing up time for other aspects of production and design.

DESIGNING THE PRE-LARP PROCESS

// Martine Helene Svanevik
// Johanna Koljonen

While you can't guarantee your larp will be a success until it is over, there are quite a lot of ways for it to fail before the players even arrive on location. The player experience begins the first time a potential participant hears about your project.

The pre-larp period needs to be designed just as carefully as the on-site experience and the runtime, to ensure that at least the following necessary functions are fulfilled: *player selection* (attracting and selecting the kind of player your larp is for), *player communication* (making sure they know everything they need to play your larp as designed, and that you know everything you need to know about them) and establishing your *play culture* (both the unwritten social norms and rules and the explicit rules for how everyone will play together).

The pre-larp process can be very time-consuming. For this reason, it should be designed in advance so that you can plan and schedule every part of it. First of all, make sure you know the answers to the following questions:

1. Who is this larp for?
2. What is your vision for this larp?
3. What do the players need to do and know to be able to play the larp as designed?
4. How much of that can they do or learn before they reach the venue?
5. What do the players need you to know, and how can you make sure you will?

Then think about what resources you have available – mainly time, but also things like your budget, graphic design and web design skills, proofreaders, sanity checkers, and ambassadors within your target audiences. Create a timeline for what needs to happen when. Be realistic about what you need to achieve.

Set some limits for how much and at what hours you can be available to potential players. Remind participants in your communication that buying a larp ticket is not like buying a product or an experience – it's buying the right to be part of co-creating an experience. Every scrap of communication between you and your prospective participants is *expectation management*.

This may sound trivial, but think about it: *disappointment is always a function of expectation*. If the players are disappointed with the larp, they will be so because they expected something you were not able to deliver, or perhaps never promised or intended to imply. In other words, the disappointment is created by the expectation. This means that you need to manage their expectations both of what your event is, but also of what they are expected to do and which parts of the larp they will be able to affect.

You also have the right to expect things from them: in a co-creative process, all parties have responsibilities. This can be as simple as the players playing the character, or from them bringing their own costumes, to making their own characters and relations, to writing part of the setting, to bringing props and building the set with you.

By answering the five questions above, making a timeline about which parts of the design you wish to have ready when, and setting clear expectations to your potential players about the type of experience you are creating, you will set yourself up for attracting the right players for your larp. And attracting the right players will save you time and effort when it comes to building the play culture later on.

PLAYER SELECTION

Player selection is game design. You want to attract the participants who will share your vision, the ones who want to play the game you are making. Not all larpers have the same skills, interests, play styles, or understanding of what larp is. Attracting enough people is not sufficient; they need to be the right kind of people, or it's not going to work.

The right player for an experimental blackbox larp played without dialogue might not be the same as the right player for an outdoor boffer larp. In order to define the right player for your larp, think about what the themes of the larp are, and what players will be doing.

The wider your definition of what “the right player” is, the more effort you will need to do in establishing commonalities, building culture and tone, creating a shared sense of trust and excitement, and guiding expectations before they get on site. If you are clear in your communication you might get a narrower selection of players to sign up, but you will create a more cohesive group that already has an idea of how to play together.

Remember that player selection is not the same as *casting* (deciding which character each player will play). If you provide characters for your players, you will need to assess whether casting parameters should affect how the marketing of your project or the signup process are designed.

HYPE

Hype is when excitement attaches itself to your project. This is good for the part of you that is selling tickets, but bad for the part of you that needs a specific kind of player, with the right expectations, to show up to your larp. The upside of hype is that the participants will invest a lot of positive energy in their preparation and play. The downside is that they might arrive with a very different idea of what larp they want and, in essence, play what they have designed in their minds instead of the larp you made. Inflated expectations will be a problem in particular if you making something quite experimental and cannot yet know how well it will work: then you would want players to come in curious and cautiously positive, not expecting the best thing ever.

The other reason player expectations go awry is misunderstandings. These misunderstandings are particularly common when participants from other larp cultures, or who are entirely new to the hobby, have different underlying assumptions than you about what larping is, how larps are made, or what kinds of design choices are possible. Remember that someone may well have decades of larp experience and never have come across a larp where players sleep in character, or where there are no plots to unravel or mysteries to solve, or where they will be given a new set of predetermined scenes every day to play out at specific times.

Larps are more varied than most designers and players know, and this makes explaining them very difficult. The fact that different larp cultures use the same words for different concepts makes it even more challenging. If you are new to making larps for diverse audiences, reach out to players who have played internationally. Have them ask you questions about your larp and tell you about misunderstandings and disappointments they themselves have experienced. This will give you some idea of potential problems.

WHEN TO ANNOUNCE

Per the end of 2018, dates for big or international larps and larp festivals are announced up to 15 months in advance – often as soon as the venues are booked. This can create pressure to lock down your project very early, but remember that even big collaborative-style larps are rarely over 300 participants, and they are all competing for an active player pool of tens of thousands.

If you do feel forced to announce very early, you may not have finalised many aspects of your design; nor might you want to, as drawing the creative process out over many months or years may burn out your team. To be able to communicate coherently and effectively, and to set up the correct expectations, you will need a realistic time plan, with safety margins for team members dropping out or illness in your family. You might also want to wait with writing characters until you know how many people are coming, or to lock down details about the fictional culture until you have a clear understanding of what is physically possible to do at the location.

On the other hand, if your team is very small, you might want to get the heavy lifting out of the way before you announce. Communicating with players is time consuming, and if that time comes out of your design and writing hours, the whole project will suffer.

PLAYER COMMUNICATION

You need to tell your players what your larp is going to be about, and how to play it. Players need to know what they need to bring and how they should prepare for your larp, and you need to know certain things about your players as well. Communicating when and how you want that information ensures that you have what you need to make your larp a success.

The amount of player preparation will be vastly different depending on the style of larp you are making. For a larp that requires no knowledge of the storyworld, little costume prep and pre-written characters that players will get on site, you might get away with a limited pre-larp process.

For a larp that requires a lot of knowledge of meta-techniques and rules, set in a bespoke world, on the other hand, you might need to put quite a lot of thought into your communication. And if you are going to want the players to do more than just turn up and play, then you need to design both the things that you want them to do, and a communication plan to support it.

Konstantinopel (Norway, 2006) – a collective larp set in the Firefly universe – was made without a dedicated design team at all. The participants worked together on the worldbuilding, their characters, the community and society. Some people planned the building of the set, others the food and drinks. Because they were all invested in most aspects of the larp creation, they had learned the fiction and the design organically and gradually shaped their expectations of how to play together as a collective.

Avalon (Poland, 2018), on the other hand, was a larp with a very diverse, international group of players. This made communication more important and more difficult. The designers therefore chose to make videos about the most important meta-techniques and rules for the larp. They decided that each video should be less than 5 minutes long and only have one topic. In addition to these short videos, the full communication plan for *Avalon* and the information given before the larp contained blog posts, shortened and full design documents, a website, and social media posts.

The Quota (UK, 2018) was a larp about refugees and economic migrants created in collaboration with a charitable organization and covered by the mainstream media. Because it allowed participants to explore difficult and challenging themes, it was important to the team to make participants feel safe and welcome and get the tone of the communication around the larp right from the start. It was important to the overall design to make initial interaction with the larp gentle and professional.

This meant keeping response times to any email or social media messages swift, and the tone supportive and positive. Participants needed to know they could always reach the team and that their concerns were taken seriously. In addition to putting in place plans and procedure to enable this level of communication, the team kept an internal back channel open to make sure responses to any difficult questions could be signed off rapidly by all five designers. This also helped ensure that the charity partner could be kept in the loop about any potential difficulties.

GUIDING PLAYER PREPARATION

One of the most important parts of designing the pre-larp, is communicating clearly to players what they need to prepare and what their role is in co-creating the experience. Which parts of the larp can they affect, and which parts can't they? How should they read the materials you write? What do they need to bring? How should they prioritise their time? If you write the characters, how are they supposed to play them? Are they allowed to change or adjust their roles? What do they do if they are unhappy with the character? And what should they not stress about?

It can be difficult to come up with all the questions a player might have about your larp. You are writing from a specific cultural background, with a set of expectations to what larp is and how it is played, and the idea and design of the larp might be so clear in your head that it's challenging to see which parts need careful communication. Sharing the website and materials for the larp with a few trusted members of other larp communities or non-larpers first, can be a useful litmus test to see if the larp you are selling is the same one you are actually making.

COMMUNICATING THE VISION AND PLAY EXPERIENCE

There are several factors that will make it easier or harder for players to understand your larp. If they have all played together before, if they come from a similar larp culture, and if this larp is close to others they have played, it will be easier to communicate your vision. If, on the other hand, they have never played together before, they come from different play cultures, or they are new to larp, it will be more challenging. This is partly about *herd competence*: if a significant part of your player base knows the genre of larp and play style, they can shape the flow of the larp more efficiently and (from your perspective) predictably. If, on the other hand, your players are from different communities with diverging play styles, you should expect clashes. Identifying early who your player base is will help shape your communication.

The front page of the *Inside Hamlet* (Denmark, 2015) website tells you what the larp is, the aesthetics and the theme of the event. "You are the rot in the state of Denmark" it proclaims, with a background image in an easily recognizable art nouveau style. A few clear lines of practical information – where, when – also contains the briefest possible explanation of what the larp entails: "Live and Die

at the Court of Claudius.” Taken together, the front page shows you not only that corruption is a central theme of the larp, and that you will be playing towards death and madness, but also that this adaptation is not set in the same era as the original play.

The website goes on to elaborate on the experience and play style, including a basic explanation of what larp is. The subpage “Is this larp for me” discusses content, playstyle, and principles of playstyle calibration, as well as questions of access and ability. *Inside Hamlet* has been run six times at the time of this writing, but the communication is still being iterated. The production attracts many non-larpers (academics, Shakespeare super fans, performance professionals, immersive theatre enthusiasts) whose varying backgrounds and expectations all need to be responded to.

At the same time, as more players have experienced the larp, the more its reputation in established larp communities changes, and communication needs to adapt in response to this as well. Since *Inside Hamlet* is based on a well-known play, its themes are easier to communicate clearly and swiftly than it might be for an event set in an original universe. Each time the same larp runs, the more players can be ambassadors and tell new potential players what to expect. Even so, teaching players how it is actually played still requires careful communication and on-site workshoping.

Remember that you start curating the experience from the moment you announce the larp. Everything on your website, your teaser posts, and your communication with players should pull in the same direction.

Larps with a high price point and ambitious production values are currently made by a few professional companies, a rapidly growing number of semi-professional organisations, and a few non-profits. This means that if the website looks very professional and the price is high, participants are likely to have expectations on delivery, consistency, and professionalism that the organisation then needs to meet, regardless of whether anyone is getting paid. By creating a professional-looking website and booking a spectacular venue, you will signal to your potential player base that this is a semi-professional or even professional production. If the price point is high as well, your players will have a quite reasonable claim not just on production value, but also on your attention, since larp is participatory and they are co-creators of your event.

For more detailed discussions on how to communicate what the actual experience of your larp will be like, see the chapters by Edman and Li & Townsner in this volume.

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO KNOW FROM THE PLAYER

Larps are physical, embodied experiences, invariably shaped by the players you bring to the event. Their expectations, their interpretations and their actions are

what drives the event once it's running. Knowing who they are, what they need, and what they are after, will help you manage expectations (and solve production challenges early, which it is usually easier and cheaper than reacting to problems during runtime).

In order to design the best experiences for the players you have, you will need to know a few things about them. First off, think about the practical information you need. At minimum, you are likely to collect participant names and contact info. Be mindful to only ask for information you need. Do you need legal names for insurance reasons? Or do you only need it to be able to recognise who's coming? Not everyone uses their legal names online, and might not be comfortable with you holding or sharing their legal name.

Accessibility issues might impact the layout of the play space or the design of meals, spaces or events, so you will need to discuss with your players both what they require and what it is possible for you to resolve (which will not be everything for everyone). If you are serving food during the larp, you need to know players' allergies and dietary requirements. You might need contact information of next of kin in case of emergencies.

You need to know when they can be on site and how long they can stay, and you might need to know how much they can contribute and what they can bring. For international larps, you might have to advise them on travel, or even arrange it for them.

You might also need to know a bit about what kind of play experience the participant is after. Do they wish to play their out of character gender? Are they willing to play on themes of for instance romance? Although your larp will have a theme and a direction, you will sometimes want players to tailor their experience to their preferences. It would also be good for you to know about the play culture they are from and what that implies for their limits and expectations.

Think through all the practical info you need to know about your players and make sure you ask for it as efficiently as possible, ideally in one form only. The more times you ask people for information, the more todo tasks you stress your participants with, and the more of an administrative mess you will create for yourself. If you use a web form, make sure to make all the relevant fields in the form mandatory, to avoid having to chase people who've filled out nearly everything.

PLAY CULTURE DESIGN

Designing a culture of play – the collective norms, values and default behaviours of your participant group – is challenging, but important. Player groups are diverse and come with different sets of expectations, and you are unlikely to run a game for the same group of people twice. If you do not spend the time deciding what kind of play culture you want at your larp, the loudest group of players will end up designing it for you.

Many different things influence player culture. The different communities your players are from, the style they are used to, the style you are used to, and the genre of larp you are making will influence what kind of play culture people expect from your larp.

For instance, Nordic larp traditionally has had a collaborative play style, but this style is designed and grown through the community: it is not naturally inherent in larp as an artform. There are many collaborative-style larps made outside the Nordic countries that adhere to some but not all of the assumptions around play style and participant culture that are normative at the Nordic end of international larping. If you design collaborative larps, you may assume they're much the same everywhere, but this is not the case and you do need to teach players how it works. [See *Brown & Skirpan* for one example of what that can look like. —Eds]

People come with a set of expectations. You influence these expectations directly, through both tone, subtle cues, and explicit instruction. The more diverse your audience, the clearer you need to be in your communication of play style.

The upcoming larp *Tale of the North Wind* (2019, Sweden) does this with a dedicated list of Dos and Don'ts. "Our larp is a place for collaborative storytelling. Rather than trying to best our co-players, we aim to engage in mutually fulfilling play" the website reads. "Do: ask before you touch someone. Do: state your boundaries. Don't: steal other people's belongings." The explicit language leaves little room for interpretation, which should make the play style more homogenous.

Your style of communication will influence the players too. You can teach some of the social rules of your larp through online communication before the larp. Another effective and engaging way to build player culture is through facilitated pre-play.

PRE-PLAY AS A DESIGN CHOICE

For some larps, where players are going to co-create the plot or a part of the story of the larp, it might be worth considering to invite players to try out their characters before the runtime of the larp. *Pre-play* is in-character interactions before arriving on location, typically in writing using text based role-play in for instance shared documents, Facebook groups or even handwritten letters. You might even provide an in-character social platform online, like for instance in the larps *Avalon*, *Bunker 101* (Italy, 2018) and *College of Wizardry* (Poland, 2014).

This form of pre-play allows players to prototype their characters and create a shared backstory before the larp begins. It creates a shared understanding of the setting and the themes of the larp, and creates relations that can feel more real due to the collaborative way they have been built between the players. It puts more of the story creation in the hands of the people who are going to play it, and all of this allows players to start the larp at a sprint rather than a slow trot.

Pre-play can provide a really powerful experience. It allows participants to try

out behaviours and relations before the larp begins. It courts bleed – emotional spillover between characters and players – in an interesting way. But pre-play is labour intensive for players and, if you monitor it, for you as well. It requires hours online, which puts both social and economic pressures on participants.

Although facilitated pre-play lets you seed plot before the larp begins, it is a lot of work that may only benefit a subset of your player group; those who can afford the time and have the language skills to be a part of it. This will tend to skew towards younger players, or those who are not working full time or parenting, and who are comfortable writing the language your larp is in.

That leads us to the next problem: as usually only a part of the player group will engage with pre-play, any larp that opens up for pre-play tends to have a two-tiered larp experience. Some will engage with the pre-play and build really intense relations and plots. Others won't touch it at all and will feel like they are less connected to the larp. This inherent power difference between those who pre-play and those who don't might leave a significant part of your player base feeling short-changed.

Pre-play can also allow experienced or particularly committed players to bring enough content to obscure problems with your core design. If enough participants participate, in essence writing their own larp to play, they will tell you afterwards your larp was great – because to them it was. This might drown out the voices of participants who believed you when you said the pre-play was optional, and then did not end up having much meaningful play.

If you plan to use pre-play as part of your larp, be transparent about it during sign-up. That way, the players who sign up for your larp are aware that they will need to set aside time and spend effort building their character relations and playing out scenes in the months leading up to the event. Pre-play will work best for larps where you are handing over control of the story to players (such as sandbox larps, larps without set plots, or collectively organised larps where the participants build the whole experience together). In larps where the designers have a clear sense of where the story is headed and what will happen during runtime it might be counterproductive, as players will either play the storylines they have built together, rather than the one you designed, or be frustrated that their preparation was wasted.

For campaigns, you will need to decide whether or not to permit role-playing between the larps. Narrative inequality problems based on which of the participants have time to play continuously will accumulate over time, potentially shutting some participants out of long-running plotlines. This alone is sufficient reason for many campaigns to discourage or outright ban online play between sessions. In addition, continuous play may – depending on your design – set you up for enormously time consuming additional gamemastering or arbitration.

If your participants do not know each other out of character, play between sessions can also weaken the *magic circle* and thereby the *character alibi*. Encouraging participants to interact as themselves instead will create trust and a clear

separation between the real relationship and the runtime interactions, and helps keep oppressive or hurtful social dynamics inside the fiction as they are clearly demarcated from real life.

MANDATORY CO-CREATION

It is of course a valid design choice to make pre-play mandatory, just like you might choose to make other kinds of co-creation mandatory. Many larp designs rely on players to prepare not just a costume but parts of their character background or even the storyworld together before arriving on location. [*For cool examples of facilitated co-creation, check out Piancastelli and Giovannucci in this volume. –Eds.*]

In such designs, you will probably need to set deadlines for the co-creative work, and communicate clearly in advance how much time the participants should set aside in the weeks or months before the larp. However, requiring participants to do something on a deadline doesn't solve the participants' life logistics. The more time consuming the preparation is, the more it will exclude some participants from a good play experience, or indeed from the whole larp.

Even highly motivated players who fully intend at signup to do the work promptly will sometimes find life getting in the way. This means you need time to chase them down, a system in place either to exclude them from the larp (at great social cost to yourself), or to produce the content in some other way (at some cost of emotional investment from the participants in question, and of time for your team).

You will probably find that different participants find different parts of any mandatory preparation difficult. Text heavy collaborative work is especially labour intensive for players who are not playing in their first language. Chat or video calls at specific times are complicated to plan across time zones and a burden on participants with long hours and families. If your design requires people to create relationships or interesting shared backstories for their character it can easily begin to feel like a popularity contest, marginalising players who do not know the others or who might just be shy.

Any design decision you make will have consequences not just on the larp, but on the players – who are always the co-creators of your larp. Keep in mind as you plan the journey through your larp that their work on the project starts at signup. Be respectful of their time and remember that information that may be very clear in your mind cannot be accessed telepathically.

BEFORE YOU LAUNCH

Before you launch your larp, you should usually have at least the following:

- Have your team set up, with clear roles and responsibilities.
- Core larp design, including any unusual mechanics or tools for playstyle calibration, as needed – players need to know what kind of thing they are signing up for, and this means you need to have decided it in advance.
- A clear process for character creation, relation building, or any other part of your larp design that players will need to interact with before the runtime.
- Enough detailed information about your venue to be able to make and communicate design decisions based on actual playability on site. This will also help you give clear information about accessibility of the venue and your design.
- A plan for your outgoing communications. Ideally this is a spreadsheet scheduling any teasers or marketing, any project updates, and how all the materials required to understand and play the larp will be shared with the people who actually sign up.
- A plan for your incoming data. Collect as much as you can already at signup. If you ask for it later, schedule reminders so people actually fill it out. Plan for and communicate what will happen if people do not (for instance, that you cannot then provide food for special diets).
- A preliminary plan for how the logistics will work: setup, takedown, runtime. Use this to produce a preliminary schedule for the participants' onsite experience.
- Event safety plan – as with any event, you need to show you have a rational plan in place for handling emergencies or problems. If the specifics of your larp require additional support structures for your players, this too should be in place as you launch.

FURTHER READING:

Charlotte Ashby: "Playing Around the Event", in Svanevik et. al (eds): *Once Upon a Nordic Larp... Twenty Years of Playing Stories*. (2017)

Alma Elofsson & Mimmi Lundkvist, "Pre-larp communication", in Svanevik et. al (eds): *Once Upon a Nordic Larp... Twenty Years of Playing Stories*. (2017)

Johanna Koljonen: "What I Think About When I Think About Larp Design, Part I: The Total Larp", in *Safety in Larps*, participationsafety.com (19.5. 2016)

Martine Svanevik and Simon Brind, "Pre-Bleed is Totally a Thing", in Särkijärvi, Lopenen Kangas (eds): *Larp Realia. Analysis, Design, and Discussions of Nordic Larp* (2016)

DESIGNING AHEAD OF PARTICIPANT NEEDS

// Karin Edman

A systematic approach for pre-larp communication on accessibility can make your larp smoother for participants with chronic or temporary pain, exhaustion and/or mobility issues. If you follow these four steps you will probably find that it benefits all your participants.

Remember that not all needs can be met, no matter how well your design and adapt. Some needs are in conflict with each other, and you will sometimes have to make hard decisions. Finding the best solutions will be about building a relationship of trust. If the participant believes you are working to understand them and invested in enabling them to play, they will be more inclined to ask you for help.

- Make an inventory of your larp design and venue
- Inform about design and venue limitations
- Map individual player needs
- Revisit the design if possible and desired

MAKING AN INVENTORY - LARP DESIGN AND VENUE

The participants will need relevant information before the larp to be able to make the needed decisions about their participation. The only way to make that information available is if you yourself know the answers first.

The questions below will divide this into two main groups: *basic needs* and *playability needs*. Basic needs are those of the physical body, for it to interfere as little as possible with participating in the larp. The playability needs, on the other hand, could be categorized as ‘wants’, but as you are likely to want all participants to enjoy and explore the larp, you should think of these wants as needs as well.

You cannot be an expert on all physical variations and conditions, nor can you predict all needs. The only reasonable strategy is assuming participants know

their own body the best, and to tell them what the experience will be like – not deciding for them whether or not they can participate.

That said, participants are only human and do not know everything about their own bodies. New issues might arise just prior to a larp, or during. A symptom that “should not manifest” can do so quite suddenly. That does not mean that the participant is not the expert on their own limits. If you have provided them with good information in advance, it will also help them understand how to deal with an unexpected situation during the larp. If they trust you have taken their needs seriously from the start, they will also be more understanding if additional accommodations during runtime are not possible.

BASIC NEEDS

Sleep

- Is the event so long the participants will have to sleep away from home?
- Will the larp put them on another sleeping schedule than they are used to?
- Will they share their sleeping quarters with others?
- Is any of the sleeping done in character and does it mean different kinds of bedding than they are used to?
- If the sleeping is done in character, can some participants still sleep in an out-of-character area, or is there a dedicated space that allows for out-of-character medication and devices being switched out/taken off applied?
- Do you encourage participants to negotiate what rules will apply to their dorm/tent/bedroom with the people they co-sleep with, for instance whether or not the sleeping area will be out of character?

Food and Water

- Is the food at the larp different from what participants regularly eat? The things that might be different include be taste, smell, texture, food culture of origin and/or unusual spices. (If you have international participants, the answer is usually yes)
- Does the larp’s design include a loss of control over food intake? Does the larp restrict energy intake in some way? (Vegan, no caffeine, no alcohol, bland food, mostly carbs/ mostly protein/ very high fat foods). Will players be able to bring, store and prepare their own food?
- What kind of liquids are available for hydration, what alternatives are available?
- Has the inclusion or exclusion of alcohol been considered and communicated? Even if it is a non-alcoholic event, think about what might be used as a replacement for in-game alcohol?
- Are there situations where food or drink might be tampered with by other

participants for diegetic reasons (for instance the resistance stealing the food of the occupants), or situations where a participant might be tricked into ingesting something unknowingly (for instance to simulate a poisoning)? If so, are these risks limited to certain substances? List them—participants can have intolerances or allergies you did not know exist.

Shelter from the Elements

- Does the larp drastically change how the participants normally dress, do the clothes feel, look or work differently? Are the clothes hard to get in or out of? Will some need assistance to get dressed?
- Will everyone be able to dress according to the climate? What are the seasonal extremes of the local climate? If the larp is indoors, will there be a need to go or stay outside during play?
- Nudity – are there in-game moments where some characters might be naked? This nakedness can both affect participants sensitive to cold but also those who have reason to not wish to make their body visible to others. Reasons can include that the character body and player body do not match (modern devices, genitals, prosthetics, scars, tattoos).
- What will the weather be like? Will it be extreme weather? Will it be hot or cold? Do you have resources to warm or cool people? Some have difficulty regulating their own core temperature and this can become a problem.

Hygiene and Medication

- Will it be challenging for the participants to uphold their usual level of hygiene?
- Will it be easy to take medication on a schedule? Can medicine be both stored cold and flexibly accessed?
- How have you designed sanitation? Having quick and easy access to a toilet makes every event more pleasant for everyone.
- Are participants expected to take care of their hygiene in character? If so, what are the standards? What is the level of privacy? Are there any alternatives? There is gain in not having to lose precious character play time even when your hygiene routine takes a while, but it can also be more relaxing to take care of yourself in a way more similar to your regular life (especially if your setting requires complex hair styling, makeup or prosthetics).

You might not menstruate, but about half of players do. Some of them will use menstrual cups and expect to be able to wash these with running water in some privacy. Remember that not everyone who menstruates has full mobility or presents female. That said, all of your players will use toilets, and good hand hygiene

is essential for everyone. Hand sanitizer is not a functional replacement for soap and water.

Talking about bathrooms, another aspect arises: Allergies and scent sensitivity. If participants can be made to avoid perfumed products this will benefit players with allergies, asthma, scent sensitive migraines, etc.

- Will bathrooms be in- or offgame?
- Does it take a while to get to the bathrooms from the larp area?
- Is there running water? Is there hot water?
- Are the bathrooms physically accessible? How is the lighting?
- Is it easy for participants to know what time it is?
- Are the bathrooms accommodating to non-binary participants?

If the participants' basic needs are met, they can exist at the larp without too high a cost to themselves physically or mentally. If you have a good grasp of potential needs, and what the consequences can be of whether or not they are being met, your plan will be easier to communicate to the participants. As a result, participants will feel safer.

Access

- Is your venue physically accessible? Pay special attention to stairs, ramps, bathrooms, door widths. Consider whether there are conditions (poor lighting, constant background noise) that may affect for instance the partially sighted or the hard of hearing?
- Is your written information accessible? Is your website legible to screen readers? If you are posting pdf files, will optical character recognition (OCR) work?

Surprisingly many participants who might be able to play your larp have trouble reading or parsing big amounts of written information, for reasons ranging from dyslexia to being partially sighted or blind. If your players are international, not everyone's first alphabet is necessarily the same as yours, which is an extra burden on the dyslexic. These players might be using tools such as screen readers; make sure your website is structured so that it is legible to those.

PLAYABILITY NEEDS

What will it take to really interact with play and enjoy your larp?

Exercise and mobility

What kind of demands does the larp make on the physical fitness of the individual participant?

- Does the larp make the participants move around. If yes, to what extent?
- Does the larp make participants carry items? What weight and to what extent?
- Will they have to move over difficult terrain? Would the terrain be accessible for anyone who needs a mobility device?
- Does a staircase create a divide between areas accessible to a wheelchair user?
- Does the larp include a combat mechanic that utilises physical impact?
- Do planned activities assume that participants have all limbs and full mobility?

PRIMAL REACTIONS: FEAR AND STRESS

Many people have a need to plan how much stress they can subject themselves to. This can be due to trauma, depression, burn out, everyday pressures or other neuroatypical reasons. Stressful design elements that can be positive or exciting for most participants will take a higher toll on others, or place them at risk of forgetting to care for their physical health, unless they can mentally prepare for it.

- Does the larp promote participants going outside their comfort zone or to take risks they might usually be intimidated by?
- Will participants be encouraged and able to find out-of-character support in case of negative reactions to ingame events?
- Does the larp design involve the experience of real fear? Will it use common phobias like heights, darkness, snakes, fire or other?
- Does the larp make participants do things in public that are usually considered private? Semi-public or public displays can also result in internal stress and an adrenaline rush.
- Will the design use time constraints, with participants having to perform difficult tasks as their characters? These can have the same effect.
- Will the larp involve some extreme sensations, for instance simulated torture that uses physical representation? Examples can be: head held underwater, the sensation of falling, cold showers, stress positions, unbearable noise, sleep deprivation and/or real movement restrictions.

INTIMACY AND TOUCH

- Is intimacy a theme at the larp? Is it a central theme? Is the mechanic for in-character intimacy touch based?
- Using the recommended mechanic, what parts of the body are involved?
- Can the theme and mechanics be triggering to anyone with related trauma or body issues? Try to imagine how it could trigger a trauma.
- Are the mechanics playable for participants with restricted ability or

- chronic pain?
- Similar questions can be asked of activities such as hugging, kissing, dancing close or other mostly positive kinds of physical touch.
- Are there any physical examinations taking place that are reminiscent of real-life medical examinations?

DESIGN AND VENUE LIMITATIONS

The above questions provide you with a clear image of the demands and limitations placed on potential participants by the venue and your game design. Now you can inform them as extensively as possible (and still refrain from spoilers). Usually this is done on a website, on social media, or later in the process by email. As much information as possible should be easily available and systematically presented in an accessible format. The better informed people are at signup, the better they can access whether they want to attend your larp in spite of their difficulties and the better prepared they will be for your larp.

You can make an *ingredient list* for the larp, or work the information into an easily printable participant's guide, or work through them in a rules document. Some websites put them under *practical information*. [See the previous and next chapters for more about these. –Eds.] Not everyone will have read exactly everything in a specific order. If you for instance ask for dietary information in the signup, you should link from the form to information about what special diets you can accommodate.

MAPPING INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

Mapping is done once the signup process has started, when you now have a known group of participants. To gauge how much work might be needed to care for these participants you need to find out about their needs. No matter how you go about asking them remember this: you can not adapt to what you do not know, but on the other hand this is medical information and you don't have a right to know everything. Have GDPR in mind when you store personal information you receive: you might not need to know what diagnosis a participant has. But you do need to know how the participant thinks it might affect them, and possibly others, at the larp.

First look at group level: How able bodied is the average participant? Now look for the outliers: These are the people who might need your extra resources. Only have one warm dorm with real beds? Find the participants with pain issues, sleep issues etc, and place them here. Sometimes the people with the most severe issues are those who ask for the least. Those with temporary issues will commonly ask for more than those who have grown used to their challen-

ges, even though these might be more severe. This is where the trust in the larp makers will make a difference in how forward people are with their needs.

DESIGN REVISIONS

Sometimes you need to change things to accommodate a participant. The meal plan gets an update; the whole participants group needs to be informed about a severe allergy. One dorm room needs to be extra dark and quiet. One bathroom is reserved for out-of-character use. People have different solutions; sometimes their need can be resolved by making a rather small change.

Sometimes you will discover very late that you can not fix what you promised. Inform the afflicted participant as soon as you know so they can re-evaluate. Remember to always clearly communicate what needs can be met, and what needs can not be met. Let go of your ego and do not overextend yourself.

Just as it is important to help people participate, to whichever degree is possible for your design team, it is also important to identify the players who cannot play the larp or who would not enjoy it if they did. They might be disappointed and expect that you accommodate them anyway. Do take the time to have an individual conversation with these participants. Maybe they have a plan of their own to make it work; they might also have misunderstood something about the larp that might affect their feelings or ability to participate. Or maybe the outcome is that this larp will not be a good fit.

Taking time to have a respectful conversation does not mean you should overextend team resources to accommodate each potential player. You should not promise to fix everything, but it is always worthwhile to educate yourself about the challenges of your players; perhaps in your next project, you will make other design choices allowing another selection of participants to play.

If you run larps, you are likely at some point to run into a participant who acts very entitled and makes unreasonable demands. You should know they are very rare, and that you are allowed to say no to them. Do not let the existence of a few over-demanding players obscure the presence of a much more important category – participants who are so uncomfortable asking for things for themselves that they will not tell you about even trivial problems, only do so during an event (when helping them might not be possible) or even after, when there is nothing anyone can do.

When you design for accessibility, what you are really doing is designing for trust. You want all participants to feel allowed to ask for help and know they will be treated with respect, whether or not it is possible to accommodate them.

DESCRIBING WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS DURING THE LARP

// Henry Piers Towsner
// J Li

Before they decide to participate in a larp, players want to know what the actual experience will be like.

Designers often try to convey this indirectly, talking about components like atmosphere, setting, genre, background, mechanics, and plot. From a designer's perspective, it is easy to forget how much implicit knowledge it takes to decipher this information into a concrete picture of what players will be doing moment to moment.

Because so many different activities and experiences are called “larp”, directly addressing what the activity *is* helps players figure out the expectations and assumptions in a new larp. Spelling out the things that may seem “obvious” can make your own implicit design and play culture assumptions visible and actionable.

It makes it significantly easier for potential new participants to join, by creating a path to engagement for those who are new to larp or whose experience comes from other larp cultures and styles. Even when the expected audience is local players with shared experience, it is a valuable practice to ensure you are able to communicate this information.

This is particularly important for neurodiverse players. Neurodivergent participants may have unconventional limitations in what activities they can participate in, may need to plan in advance to have cognitive resources of the right type in order to successfully engage, or may simply need more explicit explanations of unspoken guidelines in order to participate at all.

This chapter lists some specific questions to consider when writing a description of the literal activities which take place in your larp, with examples of how others have communicated the answers to those questions.

What happens most of the time? What might occasionally happen in a climactic moment?

Our intention is that the drama should appear in the form of subtexts... Rather than violent outbursts, we want to see meaningful glances across the dinner table; quiet but intense play in the privacy of the home; crying into pillows and secretive rendezvous behind the woodshed. If and when the emotions run hot, it will be met with shock and terror from everyone watching.

Brudpris - A Few Years Later
(Denmark, 2018, Eng. Bridal Price - a few years later)

Here's some actions you can make in the larp: *Social Actions*: start a secret relationship with someone from a different lobbying organization, betray the trust of your friends by gossiping all their secrets, [and several more examples]. *Professional Actions*: try to discreetly hustle yourself a better position in a rival lobbying organization, leak all your secrets to your professional enemies by accident, [and several more examples]. *Supernatural Actions*: fall in love with a vampire, fall out of love with all vampires forever, [and several more examples].

Parliament of Shadows (Belgium, 2017)

DO: Play on superstitious beliefs. Play on Catholic Christian values. Go into the woods and engage with the creatures. Play on in-game power structures (historical gender roles etc.) Tell each other tales.

Tale of the North Wind (Sweden, 2019)

Where does the fun live? What types of verbs should you enjoy to enjoy this larp?

We also want a playing style where the little things matter, where the surreptitious glance or a quick touch of a hand is the most exciting thing ever.

Fortune & Felicity (Sweden, 2017)

The larp focuses on strong emotions, including the feelings around death and personal loss, and is often experienced as quite celebratory, emphasizing the urge to cherish precious moments with loved ones in the face of tragedy.

Just A Little Lovin', (Norway, 2011; text from US 2017 run))

For this larp to be fun you should want to take part in portraying a peaceful village life, filled with gossip and drama. You should enjoy playing on the fear

of creatures that lurk in the forest and having an impact on how the story of the game unfolds.

Tale of the North Wind (Sweden, 2019)

What we want from the game is to create strong stories together and for each other in a setting simulating Siberia and the civil war. We want to give the players interesting and powerful experiences and a feeling of “having been there”, as well as some food for thought. It is not possible to win the game, but it is also not the goal to just create as many cool scenes as possible regardless of character integrity.

Legie: Sibírský příběh (Czech Republic, 2014, Eng. Legion - Siberian Story)

Do you like relationship play? Social dynamics between the characters are in a central role in the larp. While characters can be on the opposing sides of an issue, they also know each other very well. Everyone has enemies, friends, lovers and exes, and playing on those relationships is key to making the larp interesting.

Parliament of Shadows (Belgium, 2017)

What themes are inherent (every player should expect to interact with them) or frequent (it is possible to opt out)?

This is sometimes called an *ingredients list*. Although there can be overlap between a description of what playing a game is like and a *content warning*, there is a difference in focus: a content warning attempts to warn potential players about the boundaries of what *might* happen, while a description of play attempts to convey what is *likely* or *typical*. The two complement each other, but serve slightly different goals. Standards for what belongs in a content warning are still evolving, and the discussion here does not attempt to address the scope of an appropriate content warning.

What is the larp about? Interment for no crime other than what you were born as. How human rights are compromised in times of war or crisis. Obedience to unreasonable demands. Queer relationships. Bullying. [and more examples]

Häxorna på Ästad gård (Sweden, 2015, Eng. Witches of Ästad Farm)

These are themes and actions that might happen at the larp, they are all opt-out but expect others to engage with these themes... Possession, which means non-consensual character actions. The participant always has control over their actions. Sensual and sexual play cross genders. Alcohol. [and more examples]

BAPHOMET (Denmark, 2015).

What dynamics might happen that may not be obvious and that players should be okay with? What expectations should players not have?

Answers to these questions might overlap or be combined with an ingredients list, but include more abstract ideas like pacing, stylistic elements, and “anti-ingredients” - things definitely not included - that might not be included in a typical ingredients list.

You can expect a slow start, with a story that slowly builds pace and clues to follow and unravel. *Mare Incognitum* is not a straight up railroad larp, but will be guided at times, try to roll with it.

Mare Incognitum (Sweden, 2014)

Are you interested in EU policy? The characters in the larp will discuss EU policy on the level of actual, real issues. As a player you don't have to be a politician or a lawyer, and we will do our best to make the issues approachable. However, you will end up reading EU policy documents and debating how they affect the interests of your masters.

Parliament of Shadows (Belgium, 2017)

Keep your eyes peeled and interact with as many people as possible, do not wait for ‘monsters’ to attack or for your named NPC to arrive. If you do this you will be disappointed.

Tenement 67 (UK, 2017, ongoing)

What types of creativity should players have easily, constantly, or spontaneously? More generally, what types of effort are involved?

When the playing has started and we are inside the fiction, you will be portraying a character at all times. You will move, speak, act and often feel like your character would... When you choose your playing style, keep in mind that the experience is very long... Perhaps your character is unerringly polite. Perhaps they always need to tell someone else how they are feeling. Just one quality like that can help you perform the character consistently... Your character's inner journey might be reflected in how they act.

Inside Hamlet (Denmark, 2015)

Players must be up for full, continuous emotional immersion and continuity. It will not ‘break’ if you spend your entire time subtly emoting with other people. But it will ‘break’ if you repeatedly break emotional immersion to be too goal-oriented.

Mermaid (USA, 2018)

It will be a successful experience if you flow with what happens to your character and lift the play of your coplayers. There are no objectives that will cause you to win or lose. The only thing we ask of you is to be in your character's shoes, to connect with what they feel, to think the way they would think, and behave in the way they would behave, all the while allowing your character to make their own decisions. That's what we call 'flow' or 'letting go.'

Conscience (Spain, 2018)

Some players perform 'meta songs' during the larp. These are songs selected by the players, that reflect the character's dramatic dilemma. Players can recruit friends to join into these scenes to create small musical numbers. All roles can be played with or without performing a meta-number.

Cabaret (Sweden, 2017)

Players should be comfortable performing their character and improvising dialogue in front of other participants. [hypothetical example]

If players feel disconnected, what are actions they can engage in to get involved again?

If you feel like nothing has changed for a while, it can often be because you have spent a long time in the same version of reality. Reveal a major conflicting fact about your past or another character's, or pull one from the options on the wall.

Fires of Emsi (USA, 2017)

If you're worried about your character becoming socially isolated, tell your closest co-players before play starts. This will give them the opportunity to include you in their plans even if your character is not always demanding their attention.

Inside Hamlet (Denmark, 2015)

We will have two so called "consulting" organizers: NPC-like characters marching together with the players... go to them... when you want to do a major decision or take a step very different from what you have in your diary and you are perhaps unsure about the impacts on other players or timing; when you feel that another player has been ignoring you or underplaying you; when you feel bored and don't know what to do; when you feel down about your game.

Legie: Sibírský příběh (Czech Republic, 2014, Eng. Legion - Siberian Story)

You are encouraged to lash out in thoughtless action, physical or social, as acts of self-expression. Be spontaneous, don't worry about consequences...

Mermaid (USA, 2018)

What actions can players take to enrich the game for others?

All characters are unhappy, and all characters are complicit in each other's pain, usually because of the way that they handle their unhappiness... You are not here to make friends. Act from your own wounds, and be casually mean to others. Create problematic circumstances freely: this will in turn create plot for others and allow them to pass on their own unhappiness.

Mermaid (USA, 2018)

Each player actively reacts to the other players' characters in the way they want their characters to be portrayed. For example, if I want to play an intimidating and mysterious Seer, the characters of the other players will "lift my play" in their interactions with me, being fearful and respectful towards my character and believing in her prophecies.

(Gouliou, Elina. *Playing to Lift: Making Characters Shine*. 2018: Pelgrane Press)

Instead of barging around, blindly pursuing your own story, always take an interest in what journeys your co-players seem to be on. Their characters might invite yours in, making the experience richer for you both.

Inside Hamlet (Denmark, 2015)

Help run the party while playing your character. For example, you might perform in a talent show, snap photographs of guests, lead a workshop, etc.

Just A Little Lovin', (USA, 2011)

More broadly, a good way to go about thinking of the answers is by asking yourself, "What type of players would *not* enjoy my game? What types of actions might players attempt that would bring them *away* from the heart of the experience?"

For example, the informational materials for *Parliament of Shadows* (Belgium, 2017) cited above provide an especially broad and clear description of what the concrete experience of gameplay is likely to be. Larp designer Juhana Pettersson, the creator of these materials, describes his thinking as follows:

We knew that we were making an unusual larp in a setting that already had a rich larp tradition... We knew that our [*Vampire: The Masquerade*] larp would be different. It would be set in the same world and feature many of the same

themes but a player who expected a familiar experience would be disappointed... We decided that we must be extremely clear in terms of what kind of activities happen in the larp, who you play, what kind of themes are prevalent, etc. We had an international player base so it would have been a bad idea to assume that people automatically understood something, since common assumptions about larp vary so much between different larp scenes.

Retrospectively, I think all the worrying we did about being correctly understood made us do a pitch to participants that was clearer than in any other larp I've ever done. I think I also need to take a lesson from it!"

How can you help players select themselves into or out of a given gameplay style?

Designers sometimes shy away from giving clear descriptions about what's common in gameplay, for fear that the audience will take example options as mandate and thereby cut off possibilities. However, by telling players what activities the larp best supports, you empower new participants to join on a more level playing field and to consent in advance to the activities most commonly necessary to be fully included. When you communicate what's easiest, and what activities are the focus of the design, you are also telling people what to fall back on when they're lost, unsure, or just tired.

COSTUMES FOR REAL BODIES

// Kerstin Örtberg
// Anne Serup Grove

It is common in larp to let the participants prepare their own costumes according to guidelines provided by the design team. But in some larps, it makes more sense for you to provide costumes or certain costume items for your participants, whether to maintain a specific aesthetic standard or because you need costumes to be visually consistent – for example to make sure soldier characters are in matching uniforms.

Some high production-value larps provide large numbers of individually designed and sized costumes, like you would for a theatrical production. This requires professional staff who are likely to already know how to best organise their work. In the following we will discuss how to approach the more common option: purchasing costuming for your participants to use.

To you, the designer, costuming is a practical matter; to the participant an emotional one. Realising this difference will help you make your costume vision a reality while keeping your larp open for players of all shapes and sizes.

If you happen to fit a standard size, you might never have realized there are many players who will never sign up for a larp that promises to provide costumes for players; or who will sign up only with trepidation. A few players who upon arriving on location cannot find anything reasonable to wear will also not be top of mind for you when your larp is starting, but for those players it might quite practically make the larp a terrible or even unplayable experience. This is why you need to think ahead.

Particularly anxiety-provoking aspects before signup include *having to take measurements*, maybe with the help from someone else; *being confronted with the numbers* and seeing what letter is assigned to it; and *sharing* those results with others. Anything that makes these things easier will be helpful to your players.

PARTICIPANT CENTRED ASPECTS

Size standardisations in the 1940s and 50s created new norms around the most common body types. At the same time a space outside of these was indirectly delineated as “not normal”. As living standards grew so did our bodies, but the standard sizes did not. Instead, as manufacturers understood the emotional di-

stress it is created for their customers to be placed outside the norm, they started adjusting sizing independently. This phenomenon is called *vanity sizing* (size inflation) and each manufacturer did this differently. This process, in combination with the fact that standard sizes in different countries were different to begin with, left us with a confusing marketplace where the same sizing can mean very different things. In addition, anything touching on the topic of size and measurements is emotionally fraught for many people.

WHEN WE TALK ABOUT BODIES

The words you use have an impact on your participants. When discussing bodies, you should aim to be neutral in your language and stick to the facts. In terms of size you should use measurements instead of standard sizes whenever you can. Common pitfalls, to be avoided, are terms such as *normal*, *typical*, *big*, *bigger*, *large*, *small*. These are relative to the standardised scales and indirectly draw attention to what is considered flaws. In the attempt to be inclusive some production teams attempt to transfer terminology from other areas, but a useful term in other contexts may not necessarily be useful here. An example of this is *able bodied*; in the context of body size all sizes are able.

HOW TO BUILD TRUST

It will be calming for potential participants to understand not only that you will provide the costumes, but that you are aware of what this might mean to them. It will be beneficial to you both if you are also able to make visible your full plan for the costuming process. Should you not have had the time to gather all the information you need at the outset, be honest about where you are. If there are information gaps, it's reassuring to know that they will be filled in later.

Information to cover:

- Vision for the costumes
- Design choices and consequences
- Your intentions to be inclusive and the knowledge of your limitations
- What you will provide and what the participant should take care of
- Measurements lists (don't give sizes)
- How you will guide the participant to find the right fit
- Your plan to deal with non standard sizes
- How and when the participant should contact you with questions

When the participants start contacting you, remember they are not trying to frustrate you. Answer as truthfully as you can about your process, your plans and how you will help them. Update the information on your website to reflect questions you have received. This will save you emails from others and help participants who might be too embarrassed to even ask whether their size can be accommodated.

PRACTICAL ASPECTS TO CONSIDER

If at all possible you should order samples of the sizes in advance to sanity check the provider's size charts and whether the materials and quality live up to what is promised. You don't want to spend the nights in the week before the larp reattaching buttons. This will also give you a sense of whether the provider is reliable and easy to communicate with. Once you have the costume samples, you can also use them for promotional photos for your larp.

When it comes to standard sizing you might encounter these issues:

- *Male fit* is fixed on two points (chest, hip). Common issues with the fit in men's sizes include length of arms, torso and legs, size of neck, shoulders and stomach.
- *Female fit* is fixed to three point (chest, waist, hip) resulting in more variations. In addition to all of those mentioned for male sizes you might encounter issues regarding ratios between chest, waist and hip. Some women might also be pregnant, adding to the waist measurement.
- *Unisex fit* is usually almost if not completely like male fit, with for instance wider shoulders. A body with wider hips and a narrow waist (many female bodies) will not fit in typical male/unisex pants even if the waist measurement is correct.
- *Will I look different*: Even if you promise to cater to all sizes, participants outside the S-M-L scale can worry that their costumes will look different than those within. And indeed this tends to happen if you have to buy their costumes in a different place: those garments might be in other shades and have other details. Treat this worry with respect. Consider whether it is possible to add some visual variation to the standard sizes to make the outliers less apparent.

MEASUREMENTS LISTS

A size may differ in measurements depending on what brand, gender, country and garment type it refers to. You can for instance expect a French size to be two sizes smaller than the German size of the same letter. For this reason alone, getting a sizing chart based on measurements is vital.

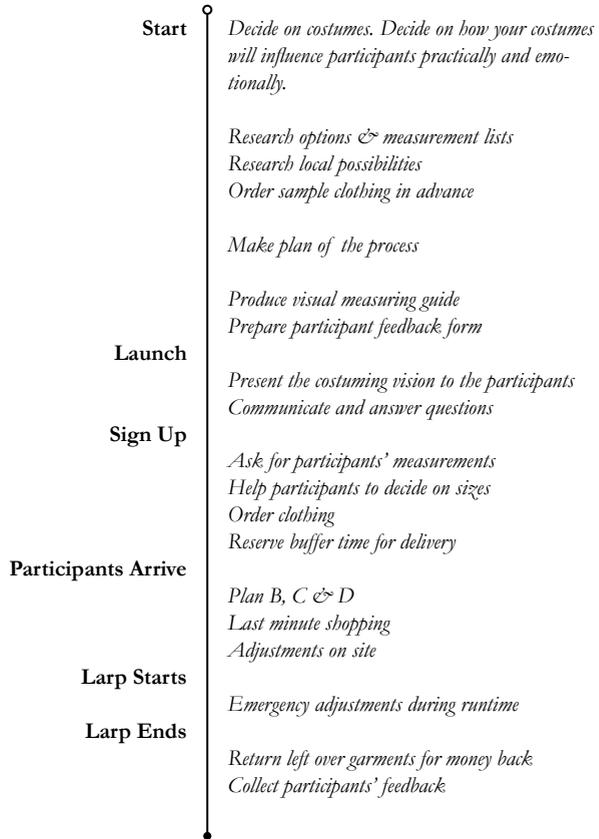
There are two types of measurement charts. The two types are *body* (measurements taken on the body) and *garment* (measurements of the finished garment). Be vigilant to note what type of chart you are looking at when doing research. The first is most common and will be easiest to understand.

If you are buying clothes online, find a brand that has a wide set of sizes and caters for both male and female fit. Provide your participants with the measure-

ment charts directly. Make sure the sizes available range from thin to fat and short to tall. Can you help the participants with adjustments on location to cater for height and fit differences? Tell them so in advance.

When asking the participants to measure themselves you need to be very specific about HOW and WHERE. Should they measure on top of their clothes or underwear? On the bare skin? Show the specific places to measure with both pictures, not just words. Most people will for example place the waist not at natural waist, but much lower. Is it possible to make (or find online) a short video tutorial on measuring the body? Can you use a diversity of body types for your "how to" measurement photos? If participants are between sizes you need to help them choose. If bust size is one size and waist another, ask them to pick the larger size.

COSTUME DESIGN PROCESS



ORDER ONLINE

When ordering clothing for participants online make sure you know the delivery times and add a few weeks as a buffer. Where does it ship from? Can it be stuck in customs? Will there be extra surprise VAT if ordered from abroad? Is it worth paying for express delivery? If something is delayed or wrong: contact the supplier and tell them to fix it or ask for economic compensation. Don't be shy about making demands when you place a large order.

PLAN B (AND C, AND D)

Things will go wrong. Prepare. Participants may have given you wrong sizing, or misjudged measurements, or months have passed and their size has changed. Do you have enough clothes to be able to switch sizes around? A good rule is to order 5-10 % extra garments of each size. That way you have space for adjustments. It is better to provide participants with slightly too large clothes than too small, so consider whether you should order slightly more in the larger sizes. Extra unused clothes can sometimes be returned after the larp and give money back. Make space in your budget for panic shopping at the last minute and research the area around the larp location for suitable shops so you know where to go for supplies and additions. Will you have the possibility for clothing adjustment on site? Consider bringing a sewing machine and/or serger (and a responsible person) to the site for small adjustments during the pre-larp time.

If you realise all your plans are failing, ask your players for help. Perhaps they are willing and able to bring backup items if you approach them with humility and respect. If you cannot deliver what you have promised, offer them a partial refund because they are helping you solve a problem, or as a last resort a full refund if they'd rather not play. Remember that while your problem might be with a pair of trousers, they might have taken out vacation time and paid for non-refundable airfare. Be worthy of that trust, and work together to find a solution that respects their investment and does not hurt their feelings.

SECTION 2:2

DESIGNING WHAT HAPPENS ON SITE BEFORE THE RUNTIME

To be able to create another reality together, the participants need to know when and where its borders are. Since larps always involve physical embodiment and human interaction, they tend to take place at a location – some kind of venue or area. They also tend to have a temporal limit – an agreed-upon beginning and end to the runtime, the period when characters are being played.

If the time is not specific, the area will usually be even more clearly defined (“at any time this month in the backroom of this restaurant”). If the area is not specific, for instance because the larp is pervasive and played wherever the participants are located, the time limit will be very specific (“from 19:00 precisely, until 01:00 precisely”). These are edge cases – typically you will have

players gathering in a space. This means you are not only a larp designer, you are also a host.

Like any guests in an unfamiliar environment, participants cannot be expected to know where to go, what is expected of them, or how to interact with strangers. The same social mechanisms that make it awkward to visit a party where you know no one can make it particularly hard to arrive at a larp where everyone else seem to be old friends, spouting strange jargon and moving around with purpose.

Just as you would if you were hosting a party, it should be your goal to make everyone feel welcome, comfortable, and that they are equally valued participants in the social situation. This is not just about being nice: it is larp design just as much as creating mechanics is. Participants who are confused, uncomfortable, or feel unwelcome will not be able to process new information or keep schedules, let alone role-play.

As a larp designer, your two most precious resources are participant time on site and participant bandwidth – how much instruction, inspiration, and suggestion you will be able to cram into their brains before the runtime starts. In the following chapter, Alma Elofsson discusses how best to utilise these resources.

Bespoke larps are, by definition, always new to the participants. Even if you are working in a clearly defined and locally familiar tradition, you will hopefully have new participants on location. It is always your job to ensure your players know how to play your specific larp. Hopefully your pre-larp process has prepared them well, but the best time to make sure they are all on the same page is when they have gathered together. In her chapter, Lizzie Stark discusses how to design a workshop, while Markus Montola describes how to run one efficiently.

HOW TO SCHEDULE THE PARTICIPANTS' TIME ON SITE

// Alma Elofsson

Once your players show up, they will likely expect there to be some kind of check-in. This is your opportunity to make sure all your players have actually arrived. Depending on what your larp location looks like, what time of day it is, and how long of an arrival window your participants have, it might be easier to set it up so that you catch everyone the minute they arrive. Otherwise, you need to get a bit more creative. Make sure you've told your participants beforehand from what time they are welcome on site and when is the absolute latest time they may arrive and still be allowed to play. This window of time shouldn't be too short, preferably at least one or two hours, since it can be very tricky to arrive exactly at a specific time unless everyone lives very close by.

If you already know most of your participants will show up at the same time – if you've collected them from a nearby town/airport by bus, or if there's only one possible train to take that day to the location – consider how to make sure they don't have to stand in line for too long. This could be things like having parallel check-in desks, handling as much of the information as possible on the bus, having a team member moving down the queue handling some of the check-in tasks in advance of the desk, or dividing people up into groups and telling them when their group may check in.

Humans like to feel welcomed and seen. To show that they are important to you and the larp it may be worth having a greeting point where you (or a team member) welcome your participants even if your larp does not require a proper check-in. This is also an excellent opportunity to answer quick questions, give your players a handout, parking info, or other practical instructions they might need to know immediately or be reminded of, for example, when the workshop, briefing, or larp will start. Outsource the check-in to your staff or volunteers if you think you'll have other things you need to do during that time – which is very likely – but do it yourself if you can: seeing you calm and focused will let the players know that all the preparations are finished.

You might want to make something out of the welcome itself. At *Fairweather Manor* (Poland, 2015) players arriving by bus were greeted in costume at the steps of the castle by those players and staff who were already on site. At *Avalon* (Po-

land, 2018) the buses were met by team members carrying the banners of the different groups.

HANDLING IMPORTANT INFORMATION

Before the larp, you will have communicated with your participants in some way, often on several platforms like a webpage, a Facebook group, or emails. Up until then it is up to your participants to make sure they have read what you have sent them and know everything they need to know (e.g., whether it is mandatory to bring something in particular and when they need to be on site).

Once they've shown up, that responsibility shifts to you. This is complicated by the fact that they probably don't know, or don't remember, everything you've previously told them. You will need to have identified the most important pieces of information your players need, that you think they might have missed or that are so vital to the larp that everyone needs a reminder.

Figure out the best time to repeat the important information. If you have time for a pre-larp briefing for your players, or even a full work-shop, this is a good time. Immediately before the larp starts is generally not, since your players will have a lot of other things running through their minds and will probably be unable to register new information. If you do not have a pre-larp workshop, try to give your participants some time between your briefing session and the larp's start for this very reason.

You should not, and will not be able to, recap the entirety of the information you've previously given your participants, even if you feel it is all important. Your participants will stop listening to you if you do. Try to narrow it down to the most vital pieces. If you suspect some people need a refresher on information about the fiction, and know that many do not, find a way to do it that respects the time of those who have already done their reading. An easy way is to have printed copies of everything important available, for instance in an offgame rest space or hung on the walls in the bathrooms.

PLANNING YOUR ONSITE ACTIVITIES

If you have a pre-larp workshop, make sure you know why. Would it suffice with a shorter briefing, where you give the participants information and they can ask questions, or does it need to be a workshop session, where the participants interact with each other and practice for the larp? If you don't need a workshop, having one is a waste of your participants' time – and they will notice.

If you decide to go for a workshop, make sure everything you will be doing during the workshop hours is *important to your larp*. Will you need a full day, an afternoon, or is two hours enough? Do not include things that everyone else is doing in their pre-larp workshops just because it seems cool.

If the game is fairly easy to understand or most of your participants have played similar larps before, maybe a workshop isn't necessary at all and you could

stick to a shorter briefing. If the larp is relationship heavy, maybe they need relationship workshops. If it is about battles, maybe they need to try to fight each other. If the larp demands a high level of trust between participants, a longer workshop (at least half a day) is recommended to let your participants get to know each other a little before the larp starts.

Sometimes it might be preferable to split your participant group into smaller groups, for example if they are to learn something you want to be able to give them input on, like a sex simulation mechanic or a dance. A group of 15-20 players is much easier to keep track of than a group of 60 or 200. Consider, however, that moving people around takes time and the bigger the group, the longer it takes.

You also need to consider your workshop space. If you are outdoors or if there's a slight echo in the room, players in the back might not hear you, and you might need to amplify your voice or provide information in smaller groups. If you are out of doors, check in advance when it will become dark to not be caught unawares. If you only have access to several smaller rooms, you might need to split the player group and have more team members run the workshops in parallel.

If you decide to split the briefing or workshop into groups, make sure to have one person in charge of the same content for all the groups, unless the content cannot be understood differently no matter how it is relayed – like dance workshop, for example. For a metatechnique workshop, however, it is very important that all participants understand the instructions in the same way. If it is not feasible to have the same person brief many groups, make sure they are working from a script (see below).

Any person running workshops or briefings for you must understand your design well enough to understand not only what they are saying, but also *why* the design is implemented in the way you've chosen. If they don't understand the vision or design of the larp, they are likely to answer participant questions in a way which is in conflict with the fiction, other mechanics, or even the overall design of the larp. It is your responsibility as a designer to make sure your staff or volunteers can do their job properly, which means either briefing them thoroughly or, if you don't have time to do this, only letting members of the design team run workshops.

PLANNING WHAT TO SAY

From the moment the larp was released, in all your communication with your participants, you have already been setting the tone for your larp. Your briefing or workshop is one of your last chances to support the work you've already done (or ruin it). Make sure you've planned in detail what to say during your workshop – and preferably rehearsed it too.

This is especially important if there are several of you running the workshop,

since you don't want to forget stuff. You don't want to have assumed someone else will say something really important only to realise no one planned for it or remembered, and you do not want to interrupt each other, because it looks unprofessional. Rehearsing what to say also allows you to fix things like the order of the information or find natural ways to lead from one topic or exercise into another. It is not common to test a workshop or briefing on actual humans, but if you are communicating something complex, it is a good idea.

While you're briefing or running a workshop your players will get confused and want to ask questions on every topic imaginable. This is not a failure on your part, it is just something that happens. Decide beforehand how to handle the questions. Can anyone ask questions at any time? Will you take questions at certain times or at the end of the workshop only? Will you direct all questions to specific team members during the breaks? If your participants all have access to the internet and charged devices, you can direct any workshop-time questions to, for instance, a specific thread on your larp's Facebook page. (Remember to schedule a time for all participants to review the answers, in case something very important comes up).

Most questions participants have during the workshop will likely be answered by what you have planned to say later during the workshop; for this reason letting the players interrupt at any time is not recommended. As you plan your briefing or workshop schedule, consider how the amount of questions is connected to your amount of participants. More people could mean more questions, but also possibly a higher threshold for asking certain types of questions. Consider whether some information could be handled in smaller groups instead.

Try to anticipate your participants' needs before they become questions. At the beginning of your briefing or workshop, if not earlier, you should tell them how long will they be workshoping, when they will get to eat, when they should change into their larp clothes, when will they have time to move their cars or move their stuff to their rooms or tents, and when to fix their hair and makeup. Imagine what you would want to know as a participant.

WORKSHOP PRACTICALITIES

The next chapter will discuss how to plan the content of your workshop. Regardless of activities, some things are generally true for every participant group.

THEY WILL NEED TO EAT

Unless the workshop is very short, taking breaks for food (or even snacks!) is important. Your participants' brains are digesting huge amounts of information, and they will get hungry. If you provide the food for everyone, an hour's break to eat might be enough, unless you have a huge amount of players, in which case they will need longer. If you let your players out of the play area to buy their own food, one and a half hours is the absolute minimum of time you can give them, assuming there are multiple restaurants and shops nearby. A single restaurant

kitchen can be completely overwhelmed by even as few as 15 customers arriving at the same time. If your break is too short, some of your participants will not have been able to eat on time and will be late and cranky.

If you have an international player base, communicate details about food and schedule very clearly in advance (this also applies to food at the larp itself). To Finns and Swedes, “lunch” is a hot meal; to Danes and Norwegians it’s sandwiches. Most Northern Europeans cannot function on sweets for breakfast, and think a 9pm dinner is hours too late. Communicating your local norms in advance allows them to take care of themselves by bringing extra snacks and so on. Some things it makes more sense for you to solve for them. If you have participants from the Nordic countries, you should plan for them needing coffee every three or four hours (this is not a joke!).

THEY WILL NEED TO MOVE AROUND

Your participants not being able to focus for more than about 30 minutes just standing or sitting still and listening. The participants will also have very different learning styles and ways in which they are able to take in information. A heavy emphasis on lecture style briefings isn’t recommended, even if it might be tempting and feel like less work for you and your team. Alternate between activities. If you need to talk for a while, make sure the next part will let your participants use their bodies, at least a little. This could be things like doing status line exercises, trying out the fighting mechanics, or taking a walk through your play area to show it to the players.

THEY WILL NEED TO PEE

Or smoke. Or eat a quick snack. If some of your activities are loosely structured and players understand they can move around when they’re done, you might not need to schedule planned breaks for this, but they will need a bio break at least once every two hours. Plan for at least ten minutes if there are plenty of toilets and the smoking area is nearby. If there are few toilets, a lot of participants, or a bit of a walk to the smoking area, the break needs to be longer.

THEY WILL NEED TO SLEEP

Past their normal bedtime, most people will not be able to focus as well on what you’re saying or what they’re doing. If people travel to your larp, many of them will have gotten up early, and probably stayed up late the previous evening. You should not brief or workshop later than 10pm or so, and probably not more than eight active and focused hours in a full day.

FURTHER READING:

Simon James Pettitt: “Waiting Before the Beginning”. Nordiclarp.org (26.2.2018)

HOW TO DESIGN A WORKSHOP

// Lizzie Stark

There exists no foolproof method or procedure one can follow to generate a flawless workshop because a good workshop is tailored to both its larp and the participant group for that run. Most designers develop a feel for workshop design in the same way they develop a feel for larp design – by trying, failing, iterating, playing, and asking fellow designers for help and advice.

Broadly speaking, the overarching goal of a workshop is to prepare participants for the larp or, to put it another way, to make the participants better participants of your particular larp. In order to achieve this goal, you have to think through (a) what skills and knowledge your larp requires and (b) what skills and knowledge your participants have. Then you design exercises that address the gap between (a) and (b). For example, if your larp prominently features basket weaving and your participants are experienced larpers with poor hand-eye coordination, you will have to spend a large swath of time teaching them how to weave baskets. On the other hand, if you are running your larp for a local basket weaving guild who are new to role-playing, you won't need to teach them to weave baskets. But you might need to teach them how to use weaving baskets as a mode of character expression, and you will definitely need to teach them how to small-talk in character, a skill most new larpers struggle with.

Of course, most groups of larp participants aren't uniform. In this age of international travel, your participants will likely include some new larpers, some experienced larpers, and some larpers who are experienced but steeped in a completely different tradition. This requires you to design your workshop for several different audiences simultaneously. You can't assume that everyone knows how to weave baskets; you equally can't assume everyone knows how to talk in character, so it's best to practice both.

No matter what you're running, it's wise to start by covering the basics of how you want the participants to larp. This helps nervous new larpers while also providing an opportunity to make your desired norms of play explicit for larpers from other traditions, as well as anyone – local or otherwise – who struggles to understand unspoken social norms. These opening pitches to the players often include tips such as the following:

- “Say ‘yes and’ to build the fiction together”
- “You don’t have to be eloquent. When in doubt, be obvious. Your obviousness is different from mine and therefore it is inherently interesting.”
- “Sometimes it’s your moment in the spotlight; sometimes it’s your moment to reflect the light back onto other participants.”

Depending on your play tradition, your opening pitch on how to larp might be different.

Identifying the gap between the participants’ skills and what skills the larp requires takes practice. It’s also easier to identify gaps if you marshal your community resources: ask your community for help as a fresh set of eyes on your workshop content. If you know someone who has run a game with similar design or content, reach out and see whether they are willing to share their experiences.

The aim of a workshop is to equip participants with the skills they need to have a good experience in the larp, but that doesn’t mean you will train them equally. Rather, it’s okay to rely on herd competence (p. TK). If most of the group has the required skill, they can carry those who don’t or who learn more slowly. You should aim for playability, not perfection – you needn’t drill the group in basket weaving until they can produce a professional product – something vaguely basket-shaped is likely serviceable enough for most experiences.

Larp groups handle mixed levels of participant competence differently. For example, some US campaign boffer games simply separate the new participants out from the herd and give them special “new participant” training. The trend in multi-day one-shots is to keep all parties together, since no one has special knowledge of a brand-new experience, and workshopping everyone together can help break up pre-existing social structures.

Upping pre-existing social structures can benefit play for everyone at the larp. If a clique of friends only talks to one another during the larp, then the rest of the participants might feel excluded; by the same token, the clique would miss out on the unique ideas and experiences offered by the rest of the participant base.

WHAT A WORKSHOP DOES

Designers can use workshops to accomplish many useful goals. For instance, a workshop may:

- Get participants comfortable with one another
- Generate alibi for participants to play and create without fear of being judged
- Teach and practice game mechanics or other tools
- Teach and practice safety rules and calibration mechanics

- Generate fiction or reinforce mood/tone
- Create characters, relationships, or factions
- Elaborate on pre-written characters, factions, and relationships
- Teach and practice a skill needed in the larp
- Communicate information about the larp, site, etc. in a straightforward way

That's a list of goals that differs pretty widely. So do the means of accomplishing them. Just getting participants comfortable with one another might involve everything from social icebreakers, to name games, to sharing personal stories or even hugging workshops. The list of specific activities that larp designers have used in workshops would produce a near infinite scroll.

A good workshop does not usually accomplish all of the above goals. Rather, designers have to be tactical about which functions are most vital in preparing participants for this larp. Perhaps, in the perfect world, you'd be able to hone each and every participant skill required for your larp, but in the actual world you will run up against two major constraints: time and the limits of human cognition. The workshop – and thus the design of your larp – must take these into account.

Let's take time first. Larp experiences, from workshop to debrief, have a specific duration. Maybe it's a five-hour slot at a convention, or the timespan of your site rental. Let's say that you've reserved the basket-weaving factory for two and a half days. Teaching your participants complex basket weaving requires two days, leaving only a half day for play. As a designer, you have to decide whether that is the best ratio. Perhaps you adjust the design for the larp to require only simple basket weaving that can be taught in half a day to extend the play time.

Due to time limits, you must also prioritise the information the workshop conveys. Some information is more important. Communicating the themes and play style of the larp is more vital than teaching participants to remember the names of obscure trading posts in Middle Earth, and your informational design should reflect that. Top priority should go to anything that is directly necessary for the participants' interaction with the fiction, for instance what their family members look like.

You can, of course, save time by conveying information in writing to participants before the event begins. Whether this works will depend heavily on your participants' skill at reading and remembering written information. Similarly, there are hard limits on how much participants can learn and retain on the day of your larp just through listening.

When you design your workshop, divide the information you're communicating into "must know," "should know," and "nice to know." Try to figure out the minimum viable information that participants require to enjoy the larp. You should highlight and repeat the most important information. Focus on it first, when participant minds are fresh, and remind them of it verbally at the end of

the workshop or just before play begins.

Remember: you're designing a workshop for humans and humans have cognitive limits. Your workshop is only as successful as the skills and information your participants retain, so prioritising what you want to convey is vital. Likewise, if it's possible to shoehorn meaningful information into the practical exercises, do it! Participants that practice using information in an embodied fashion often retain it better, and doing so can help cater to differing cognitive capacities and learning styles among participants. In any case, if the players are only passively listening, it's not a workshop, but a briefing.

- Groups have an easier time remembering stuff they did, rather than the stuff they heard or read. Plus, it's less work for you!
- All workshops include some amount of talking, but try to break up speeches with activities to keep people awake and the information snackable.
- Include unstructured breaks, not just for obvious reasons of human biology, but also so the participants can speak to each other before the game. As Norwegian designer Trine Lise Lindahl put it, "make sure they feel like that is their time to do what they need to do to be able to play the larp in an hour, half a day, or however long there is left."
- Start with simpler tasks and escalate to more complex ones. Simpler tasks build participant confidence and emotional buy-in. For example, you might like your participants to get comfortable with physical contact. Have them do a low-stakes task like shaking hands before asking them to negotiate a hugging mechanic.
- Always look for opportunities to make one exercise do double or triple duty. If you want participants to practice a particular technique, have them do it as their characters during a scene that builds backstory. The participants get to practice the technique *in situ*, and you're building backstory at the same time.

WORKSHOP CONSIDERED AS REHEARSAL

Upon learning about larp workshops, a professor of theater once exclaimed, "Ah! You mean a rehearsal. You rehearse before the final performance". In some sense, she's right. A workshop is a rehearsal, where the actors (participants) practice what they will do during the larp.

Consider Nina Rune Essendrop's blackbox larp *Utskyld* (Denmark, 2014, Eng. Innocence), a nonverbal experience for 15 participants about naïve creatures called clowns who are waiting for the circus to return. In this larp, the clowns communicate with clown noises, move jerkily, wear red noses, tie string to each other to make relationships, take periodic naps to lullaby music, sell aspects of their personality to a salesman, and have the opportunity to regain those aspects

in turn. Every experience of the larp – even the participants’ experience of their own body language – is different from out of game life; participants can’t assume any knowledge of the fictional world. The gap between participant knowledge and what the larp requires is large.

Essendrop’s rehearsal-oriented workshop design is ingenious. During the two hour workshop, the participants practice each element – many of them with lighting and sound cues – roughly in the order they will encounter them in the larp. After the workshop during one run, a participant exclaimed, “I feel like I just played the whole larp”. She felt quite prepared and delighted to play it now, for real – the rehearsal had given her a foretaste of the feast to come.

Even if you don’t take it as far as Essendrop, considering the workshop through the lens of rehearsal can help focus on which actions and activities require practice, and on methods for delivering that practice that mimic the real-time play conditions.

A WORD ON CO-CREATION

Some larp runners use workshop time to help participants create elements of the fiction, including characters, relationships, cultures, factions, and more. Larp is, by its nature, a co-creative art form. Using workshops to co-create large swaths of fiction has benefits and drawbacks. Participants buy into the larp because they’ve put creative sweat equity into it. It’s also easier to remember the three people a participant has interacted with during the workshop than it is to remember a few pages of pre-written relationships. On the flip side, co-creation requires time, and often in significant amounts. Larp designers cannot control co-creation as tightly as they can, say, written materials, and they have to be comfortable with that. And co-creation doesn’t necessarily save designers all that much time. Even if you aren’t writing, say, characters or culture, you still have to design the process by which participants will arrive those elements.

Designing the process of co-creation is vital if you want to avoid some common pitfalls. On an out-of-game level, designing co-creation is designing social interactions that foster creativity. That is complicated! You should figure out how to get people into and out of groups quickly, and in such a way that all participants feel included. Otherwise, you risk some nastier forms of social Darwinism, with folks who know each other clumping together and leaving newer folks out. Likewise, if your design requires large groups of participants speaking to one another, you may wish to introduce some conversational mechanics to ensure that the process remains one of co-creation, and not of a single person dominating the conversation. If the participants will design through physicality, put some ground rules for physical contact on the table first.

On the level of the fiction, you must design the blank spaces in which the participants will insert their own vision – let’s call those “buckets.” The larger a bucket is, the more challenging it is to design – a blank page is harder to fill than a sentence with a few key words missing. Small specific buckets are easier for players to fill, and you also have more control over them. That control is impor-

tant, because participants carry their own cultural narratives with them into play. Inventing things on the spot is hard, and the easiest way to fill a bucket is with low-hanging fruit – stereotypes and common tropes. This might work for some larps, but it can easily go awry, especially when dealing with material related to marginalisation. It's very easy for all the 1950s housewives to end up as passive damsels, or the gay men as light-in-the-loafers stereotypes (or worse!). Giving participants structured choices (“Are you a nuclear physicist, radical feminist, or smart woman trapped in a dumb marriage?”) can help them reach beyond and subvert the most common narratives.

Providing structure is also important because these participants have not yet played your larp. It will not be obvious to them what kinds of stories will be meaningfully playable – especially if they have not yet seen the play area – and they may not have the design skills to spontaneously invent, for instance, cultural traditions that resonate meaningfully with the theme of larp. You need to tell them what the metaphorical buckets will be used for so they can know what story elements and social dynamics to carry with them into the larp.

You may also need a mechanism to limit the introduction of certain types of content, or to calibrate story during and after co-creation. You might, for instance, decide that incest or sexual violence cannot be introduced into character backstories. Perhaps it will be dissonant with the larp's themes; perhaps such content is likely to become the emotional focus for the characters' journeys, blocking the players from experiencing other kinds of stories, stories that they do not yet know the larp can offer. In addition, being accidentally confronted with such content in a larp where it was not communicated in advance might be very triggering for other participants. For all of these reasons, carefully design the frame you are asking participants to co-create within.

Remember: if all you want to do is make participants feel like they have some skin in the game, even a small amount of choice or co-creation can go a long way.

A WORD ON REALTIME ADAPTATIONS

Expert workshop designers frequently tweak their workshops on the fly. Many create a detailed bulleted list of activities, along with approximate times for each one, but can adjust to individual groups of participants spontaneously. If this group already knows each other really well, maybe you can cut an introductory game. If participants seem tired, perhaps you move up the break a little bit. If participants figure out how to create inter-family conflict more quickly than you anticipated, perhaps you cut an activity and spend more time on moving as your character. Calibrating as you go is normal, and it helps you tailor your workshop to this particular audience.

FURTHER READING:

Lizzie Stark: “How to Plan a basic Pre-larp Workshop”, Leavingmundania.com

The Workshop Handbook <https://workshophandbook.wordpress.com/>

HOW TO RUN YOUR WORKSHOP

// Markus Montola

In order to promote great play, your workshop has to be *focused* and *safe*. This requires the people facilitating the workshop to be focused, relaxed, in control, and demonstrating good, safe, and egalitarian community leadership.

- Have a solid plan, with backup plans for inevitable scheduling errors. If organisers have to negotiate in front of the workshop audience, they will fail to maintain focus. Workshop time is a very scarce and precious resource for a larp organiser.
- Start by rehearsing the following technique: when the workshop organiser raises their hand up all the way, everyone needs look at them, raise their hand, and stop talking. It is much easier to maintain focus if participants shut up voluntarily, compared to a situation where the organiser needs to raise their voice to proceed with the workshop.
- Running a workshop is a performance, and in all performances you should muster all the charisma you can. Many larp teams invite a person specifically to run their workshops to ensure ideal results. This is particularly useful if core team members are likely to be busy with last minute production tasks as the larp is beginning. (If you are not very experienced, you should probably expect this to be the case).
- Prioritise the needs of the workshop over the needs of an individual. If you have unhappy or confused individuals in your workshop, make sure they understand that you will attend to their needs after the workshop. If you can, assign a person to be present in the room to attend to their needs as the overall workshop progresses.
- Workshops are often *more uncomfortable* than the larp itself. Make sure you acknowledge this to the participants: “In this workshop we are doing less comfortable things now in order to feel comfortable when we larp.” You can literally say “If this feels awkward, you are doing it right.”
- Make sure all your participants understand that they can opt out of any exercise without needing to justify the decision. Player comfort is more important to your larp than any individual workshop exercise.

SECTION 3:1

HOW TO MAKE LARPS WHERE STORIES HAPPEN

Larp designer Mike Pohjola once observed that larps should not do story. “Larp is not a storytelling medium. A story requires a storyteller and an audience. A larp has neither, and that’s what sets it apart.” It is not that Pohjola, who is a successful screenwriter and novelist as well, is opposed to storytelling for audiences. He is making a technical observation. Larp has what is called a first-person audience: the story is told, experienced and witnessed from within the position of the participant body.

This section discusses narrative design, that is, the practice of creating larps where meaningful, interesting stories can be told by participants within the frame permitted by the design. On a structural level, such a frame can be very loose indeed (as in sandbox larps) or quite strict, as in larps where the major turning points of each character’s journey are scripted (e.g. Czech content larps). The players’ satisfaction in their own storymaking agency is only partly connected to the hard limits offered by the

larp's frame. Emotional choices made during a fully linear experience can feel as powerful as choices about direction and outcome made in a more flexible narrative structure.

There are many good ways to inspire, prepare, and structure the participants' stories. The one thing you can never do is to dictate their experience. In the end, two participants playing the same character under identical conditions will construct their internal narrative differently. Good narrative design is making sure that any story the participants are able and willing to tell will be a meaningful part of the whole.

The following chapters will provide practical perspectives on narrative design. Kaisa Kangas discusses the larp's overall structure. Evan Torner writes about transparency – the distribution of information in the larp. Simon Brind, Troels Barkholt-Spangsbo & Jesper Heebøll Arbjørn, and Mo Holkar approach strategies for structuring stories and actions. And Kaisa Kangas returns with how to begin and end the larp. Examples illuminate why not to lie to participants about which genre your larp is in, and how to create secrets even the designers don't know.

HOW TO STRUCTURE A LARP

// Kaisa Kangas

A larp happens during a certain period of time: it has a beginning and an end, and something occurs in between. As a designer, you control what kind of time period it is and how it is structured. You decide things like *how long* the larp will be, what kind of *tempo* and *pacing* it will have, and what the overall structure will look like.

OVERALL STRUCTURE

Larp design is not a form of storytelling in the traditional sense. As a designer, you do not get to decide the exact course of events. Instead, events, emotions and stories arise as a result of free interactions between players. When designing a larp, it is often better to think about *possibilities* rather than a fixed story. You need to give players space to take the larp in their own direction.

Nevertheless, you need something to hold the larp together. It could be a unifying *situation*, *theme* or *plotline*, or the larp could be structured around a common *schedule* or an overarching process. A schedule might arise naturally from the setting. In a school larp, like the Harry Potter inspired *College of Wizardry* (Poland, 2014), it makes sense to have a schedule with classes. A larp can also be set at an event that has a programme. For example, *Just a Little Lovin'* (Norway, 2011), a larp about the spread of HIV in the New York gay scene in the 1980's, consists of three Fourth of July parties during different years; each of them has for instance a drag show and a dance party.

Many larps explore a structuring *situation*. There are, for instance, a great number of larps about people stuck in elevators; first dates; high school proms; wakes; hostage crises; or couples shopping at IKEA. These types of frames are common because they have a built-in narrative structure, clear social roles, and the social scripts are familiar, making it easy even for participants with no role-playing experience to understand what to do.

Some larps are structured around a *process*. For example, *Jotta vahva ei sortaisi heikkoja* (Finland, 2018, Eng. So That the Strong Should Not Harm the Weak) was

a larp about the Hammurabi Code and the judicial system in ancient Mesopotamia. During the larp, there were court hearings where characters could accuse each other of crimes or bring up disputes for the judges to solve. The court proceedings gave the larp its backbone and paced it; all players attended them, and in between they played personal storylines that were often – but not always – connected to the trials.

You can also structure a larp around a unifying *plotline*. A larp plotline can be either *linear* or *open-ended*. A linear story advances through a straightforward path from its beginning to a predetermined end. The main events that happen in between are scripted and initiated by the designers. *Pelageya: Laika* (Finland, 2005) had a linear plotline. It was a science fiction larp set on an undersea research crawler on a distant planet. A disastrous accident happened, the life-support functions stopped working, and eventually the crawler ran out of air.

In contrast, to compose an open-ended plotline, the designers only create an initial setting that usually has potential for drama and conflict built in. The players can then take it to whatever direction they like. *Tinderbox* (Finland, 1996) was a cyberpunk larp about two street gangs on the brink of war. It was likely but not certain that the situation would escalate (it eventually did), and one could not know beforehand which gang would win or which characters would survive.

Some larps aim for a uniform *dramatic arc* with a beginning, an end, and one or more turning points. Scripted events are one way to create turning points. In *Mad About the Boy* (Norway, 2010), the characters are women, and every man they ever knew has died of an inexplicable disease. However, one man has survived, and when he appears, the course of the larp changes. In *Halat hisar* (Finland, 2013, Eng. State of Siege), set at a university campus in an alternative reality where Finland is under similar occupation as real-world Palestine, the tone becomes dark when occupation soldiers kill a student (secretly an NPC planted among the players) at a demonstration.

You can also divide a larp into *acts* that have different themes or moods. This encourages players to time their play so that personal turning points take place during the same period of time. *Inside Hamlet* (Denmark, 2015), a larp based on Shakespeare's famous play, is set in alternative 1930's, in an aristocratic Denmark on the verge of revolution. The participants play members of the decadent court of King Claudius that will soon face its end. The larp consists of three acts, themed *decadence*, *deception*, and *death*. Characters will seduce each other in the first act, deceive each other in the second, and kill each other in the last.

To support the dramatic arc, different parts of the larp might have different rules. In many larps, characters are not allowed to kill (or sometimes even not to harm) each other before a predestined time period. In *Inside Hamlet*, vinegar simulates poison. In the first act, it is an aphrodisiac, in the second act a truth serum, and in the third act, deadly venom.

PACING AND TEMPO

Some larps last only a couple of hours and others can go on for a week. People's sense of time depends on their expectations, and players adjust themselves – sometimes unconsciously – to the expected length of the experience and pace their play accordingly. Many design choices about the temporal structure depend on the length. One of them is the tempo. A one-day larp can be full of continuous action, but players cannot maintain such a pace for a week. In a long larp, players need downtime.

Tools for pacing a larp include *schedules*, *scripted events*, *fate play*, and *plot triggers*. A *schedule* is a good way to build structure in settings that feature ordinary life. In *1942: Noen å stole på* (Norway, 2000, Engl. 1942: Someone to Trust), players experienced five days in a Norwegian village under German occupation in 1942. In the 2017 reruns, each character had a personal schedule with work shifts and leisure activities, like hiking club, choir, and sewing circle. Moreover, there was a cultural *matinée*, a dance, and a church ceremony. A schedule can also contain scripted events, and it can be strict or flexible.

Players can be informed of *scripted events* beforehand, or they can come as surprises. You can introduce them through NPCs, runtime gamemasters, or technological systems (e.g. a spaceship computer). Another approach is to give your players *fates*, i.e. instructions that they are obliged to follow. *A Nice Evening With the Family* (Sweden, 2007) is based on famous Nordic plays, and the plot of Thomas Vinterberg's film *Festen* (Denmark, 1998, Eng. *Celebration*) works as a frame for the larp. During the birthday dinner of a businessman, his son Christian publicly accuses him of sexually abusing him and his sister. In the larp, Christian's player has to give pre-written speeches at predetermined times.

A *plot trigger* is a mechanism that ensures players cannot initiate a given event before they have finished something else. For example, they might need to obtain a magical item before they can summon a demon. Plot triggers are sometimes used to prevent game-changing events from happening right in the beginning, but as a timing method, they are imprecise.

BUILDING STRUCTURE

There are basically two ways to design content for a larp: you can either design schedules and script events or bring about structure through character actions. Most larps combine both approaches. The latter can include e.g. building functioning systems and environments with lots to explore, designing *conflicts*, and writing *plans*, *goals*, and *motivations* into the characters.

A *conflict* can happen between groups or individuals or it can be an internal conflict in one person's mind. In *Tinderbox*, there was a conflict between two

gangs, and inside the gangs, there was a conflict between the more aggressive characters and those who wanted peace. Moreover, some characters experienced internal conflict when they had to decide whether to flee dishonourably or risk their lives in the fight.

The Mesopotamia larp *Jotta vabva ei sortaisi heikkoo* had many character-based design elements. An adopted son wanted to find a clay tablet where his deceased father had declared him his heir (*goal*). He was in love with a slave and had a *plan* to buy her freedom and marry her once he would get the inheritance. Moreover, one of the judges wanted to investigate his cases in greater detail than was usual in ancient Mesopotamia (*motivation*).

The larp also had scripted events and fates. For example, one character was scripted to accuse his wife of adultery; she was scripted to confess; and the judges were instructed not to pardon her. The adulterous wife and her lover were sentenced to death. After the last court hearing, there was a scripted scene where they were drowned in the river.

You can even include past events in the schedule. After the student dies in *Halat hisar*, the runtime gamemaster takes her friends to the blackbox to play flashback scenes. A larp does not have to proceed in chronological order.

Delirium (Denmark, 2010) was set in a mental institution. The idea was to make the players experience aspects of what insanity might feel like, instead of asking them to pretend to be insane. Since the characters had disjointed perceptions of time, the larp was played achronologically. For example, the patients might have dinner after having slept, the same dinner again at the next meal and breakfast at night; or they had to clean up the mess after the psychologist's birthday party before the party had been played. To keep things on track, the players were told the very broadest strokes of the larp's plot in advance (but not what would happen at the scene level), and the runtime team followed a production timeline scheduled in 15 minute increments to ensure the right props, NPCs, food and mess were in the right space at the right time.

FOCUS

A key function of structure is to avoid aimlessness and boredom by bringing *focus*. People tend to have a sense of purpose if they have a clear plan or goal and the means to move forward (“I want to find the clay tablet and get my share of the inheritance”) or if they are acting within a timeframe (“There is about an hour before the drag show starts”). A rule of thumb is that the less goals and conflicts the characters have, the more the larp needs a schedule.

In *KoiKoi* (Norway, 2014), players spent five days at a hunter-gatherer festival. The character texts consisted of nothing but a couple of attributes (e.g. “good at drumming”, “accidentally scares the animals away when hunting”), and no

conflicts were built into the setting. The focus was on the community, not the individual. If the larp had not been carefully structured with rituals, players would probably have got bored. However, various rites of passage paced the play and made for interesting content.

Having a fuller schedule and/or more scripted events gives the designer more control over the larp and makes it easier to manage. However, if you base the design too heavily on scripted events, there is a danger that the larp will feel like a rollercoaster ride where players have no say in what will happen. Most people find it more interesting to play a larp where their actions and choices have consequences.

Scripted events are not the only tool to control a larp. In fact, it is easier to affect the players and their mood during a *break*. Many larps have *calibration breaks* to discuss whether play is going to a direction that players and/or gamemasters find meaningful. In larps with an act structure, there is often a break between acts. It makes sense especially in larps with significant time jumps between the acts.

Whether you base your design on scripted events or player actions, you need to balance between having too little and too much content. You do not want the players to get bored, but if they have too many things to do, there might not be enough room to express the character's personality through play on their relationships, personal business or emergent stories. Estimating the right amount of activities can be difficult, and you will develop a "feeling" for it with experience.

It is also largely a matter of taste. Some players want to have clear goals and packed schedules, others prefer a more relaxed larp where they can create content for themselves – and luckily different characters can have varying paces. Where your larp will lie on this continuum is a design choice, which you have to communicate to your potential players.

TRANSPARENCY IN LARP

// Evan Torner

Information distribution both *about* a larp and *in* a larp are critical design considerations. As a designer, you must consider what players know, what characters “know,” and how that knowledge filters into the larp. To complicate matters, character knowledge does not match player knowledge. Sometimes a player will know more than a character, but will pretend to not know that information. Other times, a character will know more than a player, and the latter must be brought up to speed with the former. In their *Mixing Desk of Larp* model, Martin Andresen and Martin Nielsen dedicate an entire fader to “Openness.” This juxtaposes *transparency* – or making known as much information about the experience, the characters, and the world as possible – with *secrecy*, or the concealment of said information.

There is much contention over the role of revealing and concealing player and character information in larp design. Hidden information, according to Greg Costikyan, “fosters a desire for exploration ... and experimentation” in games. Yet over a decade ago, the creators of jeepform and others rejected the prevalent larp design practice of dispersing secrets among the gathered players. Jeepform designer Tobias Wrigstad’s recommendation was as follows: “Start out with the game being completely transparent, and only hide things if you think it will be an improvement.”

Both transparency and secrecy, write the authors of the *Mixing Desk* paper, “require trust. Transparency requires that the larp designers trust the players to not abuse the power given to them over the overall design. ... Secrecy requires that the players trust the larp designers’ judgment that they do not do anything too drastic or ill fitting by surprise.”

A PRIMER ON TRANSPARENCY AND SECRETS

Most larps are multi-layered databases of interlaced content, thick with presumptions of player knowledge. How much diegetic and non-diegetic information should you make known, and at what times? Choosing which information to give to players and which to leave out affects not only the basic design but the very *genre* of the larp. Your mystery larp contains many secrets and requires players to spend time fact-gathering and corroborating basic details about everyone; it will likely mean players will have very little diegetic information at the start of the

larp. Your collaborative sandbox larp, on the contrary, may emphasise emergent plotlines rather than pre-planned trails of clues, and you will likely try to give out as much information to the players as possible so they can act immediately on what they already know and steer towards the results and challenges they want to experience.

Limiting player information lets players get into a larp quickly and effectively, but secrets also restrict what a player can expect to accomplish. Some secrets are never revealed in a larp. If a satisfying resolution to the plot of the larp requires all secrets to have entered play, you will need to design multiple ways for players to find and reveal them, since players will never do exactly what you, the designer, expects. Granting players open access to information gives them control over how that information affects their characters' arcs – but large amounts of data can also be overwhelming or boring, making it entirely unpredictable which information will actually enter play.

Larps that have little character, plot, and rules information presented up front are, due to the light cognitive load, often accessible to beginning players. On the other hand, they run the risk of springing experiences on players for which they are not prepared. Players may be confronted with themes to which they have not consented, or not have enough cues to play the larp according to designer expectation. In this model, veteran players frequently resort to their culturally established ways of dealing with information scarcity, and the herd competence tends to carry novice players along. For example, if you give players their characters and stick them in a room full of objects with little oversight, players will follow the veterans who begin searching through drawers, taking down paintings, etc.

To ensure a satisfying narrative arc for all players, you will need to ensure that the progression of play and runtime events are paced to reveal information at a steady rate. If finding out information is at the heart of the larp experience, you will also need to make sure all character groups are able to engage with this process.

Larps that have a lot of information presented, in static materials on the website and dynamic materials in the workshops, can be overwhelming unless the players are given tools to sort this information – prioritising based on their understanding of how the information will be used in play. It may help you to think of it as two broad categories:

1. diegetic knowledge that the characters would know but the players might not have the bandwidth for (e.g., all of the ingredients and preparations for your herbalist's healing remedy; the ancient and deadly Seven Horrors sword technique that only your warrior knows, etc.)
2. meta-level knowledge that players would want or need to know, but the characters would not (e.g., a dark secret held dearly by another character; the time until an act break occurs, etc.)

Your larp design implicitly directs players toward various forms of these two kinds of information.

Being totally transparent and giving players every bit of information possible means that the designer expects pro-active players to generate interesting storylines, relying on the participants' sense of meta-level knowledge to make sure that what the player knows enhances what the character knows, but does not compromise it. Keep in mind that making all information available does not necessarily mean players will be less confused; sometimes having too much overall knowledge about the larp and the storyworld may prompt even veteran players to ask your team even more questions, as every line of the larp is potentially important but can also be subject to ambiguity and interpretation.

In low-transparency larps, players sometimes end up *reacting*, more than acting; a “surprise and shock” design promotes this feeling. High-transparency larps presume pro-active players, and also make it possible to steer towards a greater range of emotions, assuming players know how to use their meta-level knowledge to drive their in-character experiences. But if a player already knows what is coming up ahead, their narrative expectations can greatly diminish. In the tabletop role-playing community, this is called the Czege Principle: “Creating your own adversity and its resolution is boring.”

Subdividing between *transparency of expectations* and *transparency of information* is useful in at least calibrating one's larp design with respect to player culture.

TRANSPARENCY OF EXPECTATIONS

Transparency of expectations about a larp is clear framing of what can and cannot be introduced into play. It is the horizon of expectations of a larp, leaning heavily on everyone's collective knowledge of a specific genre. Structuring this well will require a certain meta-level reflection about the range of activities one can expect within a larp [*See Li and Tomser! –Eds*], as well as the *kind* of hidden information that might be expected as well. Players will be able to perform well in your larp if they feel safe and understand where the larp is heading, which often relies on shared understandings of a given genre.

Fantasy larps will often contain some sort of opposing supernatural threat that is defeatable. If it is not defeatable, then the larp is, in fact, likely a horror larp. If players know in advance that the threat is not defeatable, they can choose storylines that grapple with death and fate. If they do not know, they will likely opt for storylines around heroism or ambition, and may be disappointed that their character's plans could not pan out.

Science-fiction larps set on a “frontier” planet likely involve exploration and environmental storytelling, or inferring plot from suggestive bits of scenery, props, and/or lighting. Science-fiction larps set in a dystopian city are more likely to involve political intrigue or social justice questions. Characters on the “fron-

tier” planet will seek secrets in the spaces around them; characters in the dystopian city from the city’s other denizens around them. If the former group found a room caked in blood, they would infer violence caused by a planetary inhabitant that may do them further harm. If the latter group found the same room, they would infer violence caused by some powerful lone actor or group, and would ask around to see who knows more.

Period historical dramas promise social relations that resemble representations of the time period that players are accustomed to consuming. Players will expect the revelation of secrets and plotlines akin to the novels and dramas set in the period with which they are familiar. If you include a cyborg alien among the possible characters, the larp’s genre dissolves. Of course designers can and do experiment with this horizon of expectations regarding genre, but only thanks to their players’ generosity and patience. Players naturally want to play the larp well, and random cyborg aliens might very well upend their efforts.

Transparency of expectation modulates *transparency of information*. The entire information economy of a larp depends on hitting the basics of the genre and the players’ understandings thereof. Clearly delineating what the larp will and won’t be means that players can already begin to imagine the character arcs they might experience, and thus the fiction they’ll be collaboratively telling.

TRANSPARENCY OF INFORMATION

Transparency of information in a larp is the level to which actual diegetic plot and character information is available to players. It is the “facts” of the scenario, preferably written somewhere in materials that eventually reach certain players. Structuring this well means confronting the predicted emergence of a larp: what secrets will come out in which order? Which facts will dramatically alter the character experiences of other players? The so-called *Secrets & Powers* style of larp has made an artform out of this, with Nat Budin arguing that “secrets are typically the coin of the realm in such a larp. Most characters’ goals are un-achievable without information the character does not start the larp knowing, so working within the information economy to trade secrets is a major part of [such larps.]”

When one creates any diegetic secret that a specific player or gamemaster must conceal, one is creating a kind of *currency*. A secret has value if (A) the larp is still in session and (B) those who would be most damaged by its revelation (including the player themselves) have not yet heard about it and/or have not yet felt the consequences of it being released. Affirmational secrets, such as the fact that a character has a rich uncle who left them a fortune, etc., are possible but rare. Negative secrets, such as the fact a character has had an affair with the wrong nymph, etc., are much more common.

You control transparency of information by dividing between player knowledge (extra-diegetic or meta-level knowledge) and character knowledge (diege-

tic knowledge). Then the whole experience of the larp from beginning to end should be considered with respect to varying levels of player information. Ideally, a player will receive only the necessary information they need to feel agency over the larp, but will feel by the end like they've learned new diegetic facts and have watched their character's arc shift in various thematically appropriate, yet unexpected ways.

One effective model of designing for secrets in a larp is to create a three-layered diegesis. The first layer is the knowledge that the players receive about their character and the other characters and/or world at the beginning of the larp. The second layer is the knowledge that the players will uncover over the course of the larp, some of it confusing and/or misleading. The final layer is the "true" story underlying all of that information, put in as simple terms as possible. This tripartite structure allows larpwrights to establish certain "truths" for player-characters at the start of a larp, complicate that picture over the course of the larp, and nevertheless lead them to a comprehensible plotline they can take with them at the end of the larp.

Leaving certain layers open allows players to have increased agency over story content and deviate from an overarching designer conception of the larp. On the other hand, the designer keeping initial knowledge vague will lead the players to be cautious about their decisions. Caution and vagueness mean that the players may or may not ever arrive at the final layer, the hidden "true" story of a larp. If the larp experience is centred on engaging with your imposed plotlines, this is unfortunate. But if the heart of the expected play involves engaging more with thematic questions posed by the larp – such as "Are your passions or your life more important?" or "How are you responsible for all of the evil of the world?" – it could be a good thing.

That said, for misinformation or confusion to be playable and enjoyable, players like to know that some diegetic way existed for the characters to find out what was real – whether they have chosen to pursue those answers or not. Most importantly, you need to know what is true, even when you choose not to give the players that information. [*More on this under "Metaphysics" in Brind. –Eds*]

PUT IT ALL TOGETHER

If one considers transparency of expectation and transparency of information as two poles of a graph, then one might find something like this:

A larp *high on both transparency of expectation and information* is "collaborative emergence". Players have almost absolute knowledge over the plotline of the game and the other characters, which means that they can steer their play and story quite consciously from very early in the larp. "Surprises" in emergent play come primarily from the collision of each of these players' consciously steered larps. You set characters on their consciously chosen trajectories, and trust

	High (transparency of expectation)
<i>Standard Secrets & Powers or Theatre-Style</i>	<i>Collaborative Emergence</i>
Low (transparency of information)	High (transparency of information)
<i>Genre Plot Twist</i>	<i>Experimental Surrealism</i>
	Low (transparency of expectation)

that the players will surprise themselves with what they come up with. If you are designing for conflict, you will be setting multiple characters and groups on paths in which one or more parties will not reach their goals. This means designing for ways for players to gracefully play to lose and to be encouraged to steer toward the negative (but narratively and emotionally interesting) consequences of certain information coming to light or certain events coming to pass. Narrative arcs come from the collision of characters’ goals with the difficulties and consequences that come with those goals.

A larp *low on transparency of information but high on transparency of expectation* is considered in the American context *Standard Secrets & Powers or Theatre-Style*. Budin describes this in his article “Decoding the Default” as prioritising “character goals and inter-character relationships” without giving too much away on either front, so as to give the players something to *discover* over the course of the larp. This is probably the most common form of larp design around the world. You clearly broadcast the kind of larp you will offer, but you also do not give away all of the plot and character information in advance. The designer retains the tightest control over the players’ agency and what might come out of the play session. Nevertheless, the players also know the kind of story arcs they can expect from the genre, and will likely play with all of the twists as they come.

A larp *low on transparency of expectation but high on transparency of information* equates with basic improv theater: silly, in-the-moment, and surreal. In this case, the players would have a lot of information about the plot and characters, but little about what to expect of the experience. The most prominent manifestation of this form of transparency is Matthijs Holter and Emily Care Boss’ *Play With Intent* framework, a meta-level design toolkit that conceals little while also not being entirely clear as to where the experience is likely to head. *Improv* is usually the outcome of such design.

A larp *low on transparency of expectation and information* is a *Genre Plot Twist* larp, or one in which not only character truths but also player expectations will likely be upended during play. These are the larps that start off as *films noirs* but are *actually* set on a spaceship (see the film *Dark City*), the summer tourist larp that is *actually*

about occult possession, or the vampire politicking larp that is *actually* about late 19th-Century troop placement. Players not only have little information about other characters or the plotline, but also information as revealed will completely change their play experience and what they can further expect from the rest of the larp. Failing to design a competent genre switch can create major breaches of trust. You must tread lightly with this form of transparency. [See *Ebbehøj & Friis Hansen for how this can fail.* –Eds.]

FINAL THOUGHTS

Pre-written or player-generated secrets are a wonderful way to encourage players to engage with the information economy of a larp – the who-knows-what-about-whom-at-which-times. Many larpwrights consider this the most fundamental part of a given larp’s design. Indeed, even video game designers frequently interpret the word “design” to mean hiding various things at various intervals.

Consider instead *why* certain information is withheld. If transparency of information is not dominant, then how much do players know? If transparency of expectation is not dominant, then how can players steer their play correctly? What happens to the flow of any given larp if a secret comes out too early, or never comes out at all? All of these basics must be considered.

As of the time of this writing, many Nordic larps such as *Inside Hamlet* (Denmark, 2015) or *Just a Little Lovin’* (Norway, 2011) give the players the choice of reading all of the character descriptions, but few players read more than their own and those of their closest contacts. *College of Wizardry* (Poland, 2014) or *Demeter* (Germany, 2015) by contrast conceal much of the overall player-character information so that participants – beginning and experienced – can be delightfully surprised by the asymmetrical revelation of various bits of information throughout the larp. It is assumed that no one will ever know the “full story” of what happened in those larps, and expectations are set around that.

No unified design philosophy around *transparency of information* is to be found, because the design philosophy around *transparency of expectations* in the Nordic larp community is so absolute. Nordic larp design must be intentional, explicit, insightful, and a little ambitious. You must broadcast this ethos in player-facing materials, from websites to logistics briefings to character sheets. Not broadcasting it risks not eliciting the best play from your players, or even driving some away. Designing larps well means harnessing the power of the *secret*, on the one hand, while being wary of what behaviors it might create. Just giving away information to your players, on the other hand, can harness other unexpected forces.

Surprise yourself.

FURTHER READING

Emily Care Boss and Matthijs Holter. "Play with Intent." (2015)

Nat Budin: "Decoding the Default: Secrets and Powers Larp." Bowman (ed): 2015 Wyrd ConCompanion Book. (2015)

Greg Costikyan: Uncertainty in Games (2013).

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BOLVAERK: SURPRISE HORROR

// Søren Ebbehøj
// Kasper Friis Hansen

We told them they would experience the horrors of war. We just left out some fairly significant details.

Bolvaerk (Denmark, 2008, Eng. Bulwark) was a horror larp set in an impossibly dark and bloody version of the early Scandinavian Middle Ages. The larp was supposed to be grim and dark, and revolve around faceless horror in which the protagonists are utterly helpless on the path towards their inevitable doom.

While preparing the great surprise and terrifying special effects, we purposefully left out the part about the war being against faceless supernatural horrors creeping just outside the edge of the torchlight. We did it to see what would happen – and because we thought it just might rock the players’ worlds.

THE INTENTION

The premise of the larp was that the horror element was a plot twist unknown to the players. We wanted to give the players the real horror experience – the surprise of suddenly being surrounded by faceless abominations. And for that to work, the surprise needed to be real.

To facilitate this, and to set the stage for terror and hopelessness, we built a cover story. We led the players to be-

lieve they would be playing frightened peasants called to a war they did not understand against a faceless enemy in the middle of a dark forest. We jokingly called this a form of “medieval social realism”.

During the first half of the larp, the players would experience increasingly bizarre encounters with the enemy, who seemed to be growing madder by the hour. Roughly halfway through the larp, they would reach the besieged fortress they were there to relieve, only to find it empty and filled with the bloody remains of the enemy. From there on, there were monsters, madness and real intestines in the treetops.

The larp wasn’t well received by most players.

We fully expected a good part of the players to be annoyed with us for lying to them about the larp’s genre and not quite getting what they bargained for. That was a deliberate gamble. We thought it would pay off once we rocked their worlds with the larp of the year. Unfortunately, we did not realise that we made the larp very difficult to play.

THE RESULT

At that time, there was a wave of immersionist/narrativist larps in Den-

mark, and clear instructions on playing style and expected story arcs were the norm. Honouring this, the players were incredibly well prepared and loyal to our instructions on playing frightened peasants in a social realist fashion. Thus, facing the menace of the forest, they hid in their fortress and stopped quarrelling amongst themselves in an attempt to survive. Just like any reasonable scared peasant would do.

In a horror larp, however, the peasants have to disregard their survival instincts and do something stupid to move the story along. Their preparation and loyalty made the players unable to make the leap to a completely different mindset that was required by the actual larp. And very understandably so.

In an article from 2010, Gabriel Widing calls this *de-contextualising the players*. He points out that where plot twists work great in media, where the author is in control of the characters' actions, this does not work well in most larps. For our players, the plot twist meant that their assumptions regarding the expected playing style and genre conventions – indeed all of their mental preparation for the larp – expired. This sent them searching for new meaning in the larp, which was hard to find. Firstly because the horror elements were deliberately without meaning, secondly because our clear instructions on playing style had stopped making sense. They found no ways

of connecting the events of the larp to their expectations or our instructions, and had no means of re-calibrating their playing style to fit the new theme of the larp. Most importantly, they couldn't figure out what we expected from them. Needless to say, causing all your players to lose sight of how to participate in the larp is a dubious design choice.

One interesting thing that happened was that the more immersionist players seemed to like the plot twist. They were fully satisfied with sticking to the social realism in the face of the grotesque. To us, this points to two ways that the plot twist could have worked: either we could have told the players about it beforehand, providing a context for the experiences of their character and for their interactions with the larp, or we could have chosen a cover story implying the same playing style that was needed for the horror larp. Either way, breaking down the context left the players without agency for the remainder of the larp. And no amount of intestines in the treetops could change that.

FURTHER READING:

Gabriel Widing: "Six Common Mistakes", in Larsson (ed): *Playing Reality*. (2010)

nordiclarp.org/wiki/Bolvaerk

Project website: www.bolvaerk.dk

FAILED IT!

CREATING SHARED RECOLLECTIONS IN A BLACKBOX

// Marco Bielli
// Chiara Tirabasso

(2007)

Il Teorema di Bayes (Italy, 2016) was a psychological thriller inspired by David Lynch's films and movies like *Shutter Island* and *Memento*. The larp was about groups of people returning to an abandoned mental hospital, four years after a horrific murder nearby. We wanted to enable the players to gradually unlock their characters' repressed memories about that dreadful day during play. We also wanted them to be co-creators of these memories.

We wanted to stay true to the source material and give our players a proper "descent into madness", in which no one was safe from or aware of the incoming plot twists. Not only could anyone of the characters be a murderer, but the more they struggled to find the truth, uncovering new items, the more they discovered hidden horrors about their past. We also wanted to create a proper investigation, in which players were able to find a great deal of clues, evidence and ingame materials.

The whole plot was focused upon the player characters, with a very limited number of NPCs, and we did not want the players to know in advance

who of them were the killers. This meant we could not pre-record any video "evidence" of the homicide or other key moments in the backstory. By splitting up the timeline of play instead, we were able to create all the evidence we needed as the larp unfolded.

The memory scenes were played in a series of blackboxes, which were rooms isolated from the larp's main locations. Players could enter the blackboxes only after finding specific objects marked with a special symbol and a number. The player who found one of these was instructed to enter a blackbox accompanied by the same number of random characters as the number painted on the object. Once inside the room, the players were prompted by a staff member to play a specific scene; some of them could also be asked to perform a specific action. Everything that happened inside the blackboxes was recorded, creating audio and video materials – ingame evidence – that could be later on found by other players.

The four different blackboxes were each designed to represent a specific location: a hospital chamber, a psychiatrist's office, a spooky bathroom and

a more abstract space used to portray childhood memories. All these rooms were accessible from a single corridor, where a staff member was always present to lead the players to the room matching their item and give them general context about the upcoming scene. For some scenes, a player was tasked to perform a very specific action, like murdering an NPC, while all other details were improvised freely. Other scenes were completely open and intended as a tool for players to create or expand shared experiences of their past.

For instance, when a group of players finally found the murder weapon, an old stained knife, they were forced to enter the blackbox to relive the crime, and discovered that they were the killers. Afterwards, other players were able to acquire proof of what happened and solve the mystery through finding security camera footage of the homicide.

FURTHER READING:

nordiclarp.org/wiki/II_Teorema_di_Bayes

FAILED IT!

NARRATIVE DESIGN

//Simon Brind

Narrative design in a larp means a number of different things. It refers here to the plan for an overall arc describing the events that will take place during the course of the larp. It also encompasses some of the decisions you make when designing the larp: the genre, setting, and storyworld. In addition, it includes how and where you plan to enable stories to emerge – the degree to which player agency affects the narrative outcomes of the larp. This chapter is about how to think about the design of a dramatic space, a space which will enable well structured stories to emerge either from the players, the non-player characters (NPCs), or from the characters and plot that you write.

Within the narrative system, plot, story, and narrative mean three subtly different things:

Plot in the sense of plotting. These are the pre-planned parts of the larp; the worldbuilding, backstory and any events of the larp that you as a designer (or in some cases as a player) plan or write in advance of the larp and expect to happen.

Story in the sense of storytelling. This is what happens during the larp. Story is created in real time from the moment the larp begins until the players are done playing. (Some players choose to bring their stories to a conclusion after the larp has formally ended as a part of their landing process.)

Narrative as an account. Narrative is what you are left with after the larp is done, when participants look back on the plot, the story and the character actions and try to answer the question “what happened in this larp”. So while the process of *Narrative Design* happens in advance, you are designing a *narrative system* to produce an outcome that will not be visible until the larp is finished. Many aspects of larp design are narrative (the adjective), but the larp’s narrative (the noun) does not exist until the story is done.

Your larp might not need all of the following narrative design steps, but they are all worth thinking about. It is okay to discount something a superfluous as long as you know why you are making that choice.

DECIDE WHAT YOUR LARP IS ABOUT DOES IT HAVE A GENRE?

In order to describe what your larp is about, first consider the theme or themes you want the players to explore; for example, for *Analon* (Poland, 2018), the

theme was “death and rebirth.” Next, consider how you could give a one or two sentence description of the larp you want to run; this could be a high concept – *Avalon’s* was “*Lord of the Flies*, with wands” – or a more detailed description from the original design document, akin to the blurb on the back of a novel.

Avalon is a larp about a magical seat of learning, where young Witchards go to study basic magic. It’s also an almost two thousand years old institution with all the trappings of a druidic training camp; it is a bleak and harsh place, rife with dangers, traditions, rivalries, and secrets. As a place of learning, Avalon is designed to forge great Witchards by breaking and rebuilding them in its own image. It is a place where the students, and not the teachers, enforce the rules. What is certain is that none who enter Avalon remain the same.

Deciding on a genre is essential, as it will inform a lot of the larpmaking process, help with marketing, and make communicating your vision easier. Consider for example “a larp about working in a health and safety department” versus “a cyberpunk larp about working in a health and safety department”. The difference in genre suggests very different kinds of activities and stories.

WHERE DOES THE LARP TAKE PLACE? WHAT IS THE STORYWORLD?

Most larps have a setting, a diegetic location where the in-character action will take place and the social and cultural framing (the situation) that comes with it. For example, Primrose Park, the setting in *Fortune and Felicity* (Sweden, 2017), was diegetically a fashionable country village somewhere in Jane Austen’s fictional England, where the well-to-do would come to see and be seen and try to make a suitable match for their offspring.

The blackbox larp *Winson Green Prison* (Denmark, 2016) takes place in a holding cell for Suffragettes, and a room for menfolk to sit and talk in while they wait for their women to be released. In the blackbox space, these were represented by tables and chairs, but participants understood that “here” was Winson Green Prison.

As a narrative designer you need to have a clear understanding of the diegetic place – the storyworld – and then work out how to describe it to your players. This is easier with a historical setting, for example the Norway of 1942 – *Noen å stole på* (Norway, 2000, Eng. 1942 – Someone to Trust), or one that is already well-defined, like the early *College of Wizardry* larps (Poland, 2014) that still took place in the Harry Potter universe.. Communicating your storyworld will be more complex if you create it from scratch.

WORLDBUILDING

In Nina Essendrop's *No Island Is an Island* (Denmark, 2017), the storyworld only exists inside the heads of the individual players. They create soundscapes together and then explore them – blindfolded – using touch and hearing only. At no point do they discuss or agree on a single interpretation of the storyworld. The players know the characters are a part of a tribe travelling to different islands, and they know that being alone and out of physical contact with others is frightening: everything else in the story is their individual reality. This is enough to build a shared space in which stories can unfold.

Most larps provide much more detail. A rich and complex history can add a great deal to a campaign setting, and some players seem to love to read and assimilate vast swathes of information. However, it should be presented like a pyramid. Only the topmost layer of information should be required for the storyworld to be understood; otherwise you risk privileging players who are able and willing to assimilate the details, and by extension making your larp less accessible to those who cannot. A pyramid approach means providing the necessary detail first, at the top of the pyramid. Players can stop reading at any point, and still have the information they need to play the larp. Those who want the extra levels of detail can then continue reading.

For example in *Tenement 67* (UK, 2017, ongoing), designer Rob Williams adopted a “sketch-based-design” approach, with the descriptions of the world released via a serial of very short fictional snippets. This approach means that players do not have to remember all the details of a world, but are introduced to the shape of it in manageable chunks and can extrapolate the rest. There is just enough backstory for the world to be defined, and the result is an immediately accessible fiction in which to play.

With any of these approaches, you need to ensure that the kinds of improvisations players are likely to need do not create incoherence or irresolvable diegetic conflicts. You will need a high resolution of detail in the areas where characters will be performing actions that have consequences for other characters. In a non-verbal larp, players cannot establish detailed and conflicting histories, and it does not matter in play that their takes on the world are different. In a larp about political strategy, it is helpful if everyone broadly agrees on how the economy of the nation is structured.

BACKSTORY

Backstory bridges the gap between the storyworld and the characters in it. For many larps it takes the form of pieces of shared history that help the player understand their character's starting situation and direction in the larp. It can also be used as a means of seeding plot events. In a novel, backstory tends to be for the purpose of exposition, or because the author wishes to do interesting things with

time. Backstory in larp performs much the same function, but it should come with an inherent offer of action, or resolution. Otherwise it will not enter play, or have meaning only for atmospheric reasons.

METAPHYSICS

The metaphysics is the inherent logic of the storyworld created by the larp designers. Metaphysics are the diegetic rules of the storyworld; they can encompass vast philosophical concepts like being, knowing, identity, time, and magic. The key difference between worldbuilding and metaphysics is visibility.

For example, *Avalon* was a larp formally set in the *College of Wizardry* universe, a traditionally sandbox space where nothing is canon, as the larp rejects a coherent world design in favour of letting players tell their own stories. This is an extreme example, and arguably it ends up causing more conflicts that it solves. But the narrative design specifically for *Avalon* defined what magic actually was, how it worked, and what the constraints and limits of that magic were. This was necessary for the writers of the larp to understand the true nature of the storyworld. The information was never published to players, but was used by the gamemasters to inform and constrain their activity during the larp.

In a novel, the metaphysics inform and constrain the author; in larp it has a similarly direct effect upon what can happen in the story, but it constrains players, NPCs, and gamemasters equally. In an online conversation in 2017, larp designer Juhana Pettersson argued that “using larp as a storytelling tool privileges the position of the organiser in terms of the participant, to the detriment of the actual larp experience.” One solution to this challenge is to ensure that organisers play by the same rules as participants. Coherent metaphysics enables this.

Your narrative design should always strive for diegetic consistency. Your NPCs (if you use them) should operate within the same constraints as everyone else, and your plots should avoid *Deus ex machina* solutions (where a plot problem is resolved by an unexpected external occurrence). If you chose to include NPCs, active runtime gamemasters, or organiser intervention, do this in a way that privileges co-creation with the players; you do not own the story.

SITUATION

This is where you frame the larp and describe what has gone before in order to prelude what is to come, and to give the players a starting point for the story. Whether you share the situation with the players in advance, develop it collectively in workshops, or read an introduction before an act begins, is up to you.

TO WHAT EXTENT IS PLOT A PART OF THE LARP?
WHAT STRUCTURE WILL IT HAVE?
HOW MUCH AGENCY WILL THE PLAYERS HAVE?

There is a problem with having one central “big plot,” particularly at larps that run at scale; building a larp around access to a single plot risks excluding the players who do not have that access. Some designers try to get around this by running many plots in parallel, but this approach can lead to confusion as players sometimes try to tie multiple unrelated plots together into a coherent whole. If there is plot which appears to be on rails, players may find this frustrating: *railroading* is often seen as a pejorative term, rather than a structural insistence that the larp arrives at its destination; no one is going to complain if a murder mystery larp ends up with a big reveal. The solution here is to make it clear to the players that their characters’ fates are pre-determined.

Plot Structure. If you do want to have a balance between plot and agency, the design challenge is to produce plot that is coherent, affectable, and accessible, whilst designing a narrative space where players are still free to tell their character’s story.

Linear Plot. Many early larps were based on tabletop RPGs. An adventure party would progress through a ‘dungeon’ and have a number of ‘encounters.’ This structure – a portal-quest fantasy – involved a journey through a strange and perilous world. This is what Ben Mars calls a “sequential plotline.”

Linear plot also encompasses larps which rely heavily on fate-play or instructed play, and those with a pre-determined ending. For example, certain aspects of the plot of *Inside Hamlet* (Denmark, 2015) are on rails; most of the characters are going to die, and some of the characters from the original play are fated to do so at specific points during the larp. Whilst the players are aware of the restricted nature of their agency, from the character’s perspective, however, there is an illusion of hope. Linear plot should not be taken to imply a lack of complexity or finesse. The stories of the characters in the larp – within that linear structure – are tremendously powerful and complex. But when the larp has a sequential structure, and where there is no agency for the players to affect the story of the larp (nor a requirement for the organisers to intervene except to keep it on the rails), then it is linear.

Branching Plot. Branching plot design has much in common with the choose-your-own adventure stories. It acknowledges some agency on the part of the players to select a direction for the story to take at specific nodal points during the larp. These may be set piece encounters, significant conflicts, political decisions, or points at which the players’ resolution of plot events turns the story in a specific direction. An example of this is *Black Friday* (Italy, 2014), in which the players took on the roles of miners, scientists, law enforcement officers, and special forces soldiers during the outbreak of a virulent plague. The epilogue of

the larp depended on the outcome of a handful of key events and led to one of three different predetermined endings.

Responsive Plot. A larp with a responsive plot is a system of opportunities and events which may or may not happen depending entirely upon player action and inaction. This approach to plot design – thinking of it as a system rather than a series – builds player agency into the design as the writers have no intention as to how the story will unfold. Responsive plot is risky – players might ruin everything – and tends to be resource heavy, either requiring NPCs or runtime gamemastering. *Avalon* was a responsive larp. Whilst a few specific events were predetermined and had restricted player agency, in most cases the story that emerged was created in direct reaction to player action. The larp contained two separate NPC factions who the players were able to meet and interact with. These factions had their own cultures, objectives, and characters. When they were in play, they were player characters, as the design team relinquished extradiegetic control over NPC storylines.

Sandbox and playground larps also fit into this category to a degree. They typically mitigate the risk of player agency having unforeseen and far-reaching impacts by designing away the possibility and/or severity of such consequences.

In his 2018 article in *The Peckforton Papers*, Harry Harold asks what levers a player must pull so that their decision has consequences. For both branching and responsive plots, these levers could be points of interaction or moments of decision. Understanding what these levers are, and deciding how to make them available to the players, are key parts of the narrative design process. Do not assume that your players know how to pull these levers, make it clear in the design document and in the workshops.

TEMPORAL DESIGN

One approach to the structural design of plot is to make a timeline. You can decide that a specific event will take place at a specific time, particularly if it is an event over which the characters have no plausible influence, or which requires a significant logistical effort from your side. But remember that these time specific plans are prone to failure, particularly at scale. A timeline that makes sense on paper before a larp can quickly fall apart during runtime as the players make choices, or perform actions, that mean your planned plot events make no narrative sense. Design with approximation and redundancy in mind, with a flexibility that allows plot events to be triggered at the most appropriate time. This could be a wounded messenger stumbling into camp (*Washing of Three Tides*, UK, 2001) or phone calls coming in to a besieged castle (*Inside Hamlet*).

You also need to consider how the passage of time will work in your larp. Will it be 1:1 (real time) or will you manipulate it during the larp so that it passes differently? Moving time during act breaks is an elegant way to absolve the players of having to react to setbacks, and provides plausible workarounds for the

effects of any calibrations decided in the break. If your plot is linear, an act break can also allow for refocusing plot towards one of your predetermined outcomes. By taking them as an opportunity to railroad the plot if you need to, it removes some of the friction where players feel their agency has been suppressed by the gamemaster. What you should do with narrative design during an act break is rather dependent on the amount of time that has passed. If you want to make a change to interpersonal relationships, big changes can happen in three hours or three days as the narrative consequences are immediate. For political consequences or any kind of systems change or power over anything not immediately present, a longer time scale allows for the ultimate consequences to unfold in play.

EVENTS, NPCs, AND ITEMS

These are the things that the narrative designer writes that either will happen, or might happen, during the course of the larp, or which are characters or objects that are a part of the plot (literally things that exist). These could be events that happen during the runtime of the larp, like the arrival of an NPC, an assassination attempt, or the delivery of a letter. Or they could be events that happen outside of the runtime – for example during act breaks where time has moved forwards, and you tell the players that “the harvest this year has failed and everyone is starving.” Some plot-heavy larps will have a lot of events. This is particularly common where the narrative design uses NPCs as the primary antagonists. (In collaborative-style larps, where having fun does not require your character to win, it is more common to design for conflict between player characters, and for interesting situations between them to arise organically in play).

Remember, NPCs are characters too, and whilst their function may be more limited than that of a player’s character, they are of equal importance when it comes to their plot. For example, the NPC character of the younger sibling who dies in the snow in the opening act of a larp is designed to have an impact on the rest of the plot. You may also want to think about any specific items that form a part of the plot, for example statuette of the Maltese Falcon in a noir larp based on the film. If your plot hinges on a specific item, consider how the players will acquire it, what will happen if they do not, or what will happen if it is not used, stolen, or traded away. If an NPC or an item has a plotted purpose, give them a backstory, a history, and plot hooks into the characters so that they do not arrive as a clumsy surprise.

Consider also the final event of the larp, the conclusion. Think about possible closing scenes and decide how the larp will end, and how the ending will be communicated to the players.

EXPOSITION

Exposition is giving a reader (or a player) information about the plot. How will your players find out about plot events during the larp? With larp participants increasingly hailing from different countries and play cultures, a homogenous playstyle can never be assumed. Some larpers are taught to keep secrets, others to ensure that they come to light in the most dramatic way. The same is true for other information pertaining to the larp's plot; some play cultures reward people who hoard information. Unless your design discourages this behaviour, important exposition may end up in the possession of only a few players.

How to ensure that key ingame information reaches the players is a design question that can be resolved on different levels of your larp, from specifically instructing players not to hoard information, to making gossip a diegetic social currency, or making sure important plot information only has value if it reaches specific stakeholders inside the fiction. However you resolve it, your design should involve a certain amount of redundancy: never provide exposition via a single channel if the information it contains is important.

WHO ARE THE CHARACTERS IN THE LARP? WHAT WILL THEY BE DOING? WHY?

Character writing is covered at length in the section of this book called “How to Write Playable Characters,” but you need to understand who the characters are, what they are doing, and why they are doing it. After all, larpers tell their stories through the embodied actions of their characters.

Who	Who is this character and where do they come from?
Function	What is the purpose of the character within the plot and story of the larp?
Desire	What or who does the character desire? A character who does not want anything is malformed.
Action/Activity	What will the character do during the larp?
Lack	What does the character lack? This is not necessarily the same as a desire; a lack may be something they are unaware of, or something external.
Trajectory	What is the plot trajectory for the character at the start of the larp? A character who does not change, or who is not offered the opportunity to be changed by the events of a larp, is a de facto NPC.

When troubleshooting plot, you should be looking for issues with the interaction dynamics between characters, for example whether the characters who are written to be antagonists have so much in common that it seems possible peace may break out between them. You should also check that characters are written in a way so that they have an interest in (some of) the plots, and access to them – a plot involving letters sent between barons is not accessible to an illiterate servant in a feudal household.

The designer also needs to consider whether there are opportunities to connect characters in such a way as to seed a story. Are there events from the character's backstory that can be made a part of the larp that is to be played? You should consider Chekhov's gun – if in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired – if there is a significant event in a character's backstory, it should enter play during the larp to have meaning.

You also need to think about the story that would emerge from your plot if the players were not involved – as if you were writing it as a television show or novel. This forms the baseline. This baseline story should be satisfying. This is a subjective measure, but if the baseline is confusing, or not interesting, then your plot needs work. Depending on your design for agency (see below), the outcome of the story will be either slightly different or entirely different from this baseline. The baseline is useful when you come to test the narrative design, because it enables you to identify how player action can influence the story.

AGENCY: HOW MUCH WILL THERE BE?

You need to decide how much control, if any, you want to give to players to determine the story outcomes of the larp. Are you planning a sandbox where they can do whatever they like, but in the end can only impact their own stories? Or something where the actions of the players will have an impact on the story? For plot driven larps, with lots of events, player agency to affect these events is important. For larps that revolve more around the interactions between player characters, the players probably need agency to affect these relationships. As with all of these design questions, it is also okay to restrict the player agency, as long as you know why you are restricting it.

Furthermore, if you choose to have NPCs, one of the design decisions you need to make is how much agency you want to give them. Do you want to include them as useful cannon fodder, as just antagonists or monsters, or allow them the same privilege to contribute to the story as player characters have.

HOW TO TEST YOUR WORK

In practice, a larp has a lot of moving pieces, and inevitably things will happen that will have an impact on the design. These four tests will help to identify structural weaknesses in the narrative design. It will not identify all of them, and in some cases those weaknesses will enable drama and

create story, and can be left alone. Striving for perfection here is problematic, because you are not the author of the story that will be told.

Agency test. For larps where your design privileges player agency, consider what choices the players can make. Are they able to affect the plot you have written and thus change course of the story in a meaningful way, or is their agency focussed solely on their character's internal choices?

NPC test. For any plot interaction that involves more than one NPC, check to make sure that you have not accidentally written a *cut scene*: two or more NPCs talking to each other is a play, not a larp. If you come across an event that fails this test, consider redesigning it to allow players back into the scene.

Playstyle tests. As larping becomes more international and intercultural, it becomes more important to consider a range of different play styles and how they might affect your design. Different categorisations of player types may be useful in this thought experiment. A familiar example is GNS, which suggests that there are three player goals in role-playing games. These correspond to the player's primary motivation, and are gamism, narrativism, and simulation. For example, if you consider how a play-to-win (gamist) player might interact with your plot, you may find structural weaknesses that would not be there if you were designing for players who are less interested in coming out on top.

Dark Lord test. This is a favorite playstyle test from UK larp design discourse. The behaviour of larpers is difficult to predict. There is a type of player who will always test the limits of your narrative design. This is a playful act rather than a malicious one, but it can have catastrophic implications for narrative design. For example, in the UK campaign larp *Odyssey* (UK, 2010-2016), an NPC who was designed to be present throughout all of the events over seven years was killed when a player's character wrote his name into the Book of the Dead in the Underworld. This meant a great deal of plot involving that NPC was suddenly made obsolete. A solution to this could have been to diegetically limit access to the Book of the Dead. No such restriction was in place. The NPC died.

The Dark Lord test would be this: for every available plot interaction, consider what a fictional super-villain would do? The purpose of the test is to consider the edge cases and to understand what kind of story your plots will generate when they encounter extreme behaviour from the characters and players within the larp.

WHAT TO DO WHEN IT GOES WRONG?

There is a truism that says "a plot never survives first contact with the players," but nor should it, because once the plot of a larp meets the players, it transforms into story. This is the point at which your players will do something unexpected. Your plans will lie in ruins, and the carefully scheduled events that you had lined

up and ready to go will be obsolete. There is sometimes a temptation to ‘retcon’ (from the term retrospective continuity), which in larp is telling players that actions they have played ‘did not happen.’ This breaks the implicit contract between gamemaster and players when it comes to agency, and should be avoided at all costs.

It is relatively easy as an organiser to diegetically nudge the story back onto the rails, and it may be that the best thing you can do for the larp is to gently find a way to do that. Ideally, you should not need to; a well designed narrative system accepts damage as diegetic and can assimilate it. Story tends to adhere to known cultural structures – players will create coherent alternatives to what you may have envisioned. In most cases you can get away with rolling with the events and letting the larp deal with them. If you do feel you need to get involved, remember that runtime gamemastering is a form of authorial intervention, but as you are bound by the same metaphysical and story making rules as the players, it is also a way for you as the designer to play the larp. Trust your design, react diegetically, and let the story that wants to be told, get told. It will be fine.

FURTHER READING:

Ron Edwards: “GNS and Other Matters of Role-playing Theory” (2001)

Eirik Fatland: “Incentives as Tools of Larp Dramaturgy” in Fedoseev, Harviainen & Vorobyeva: Nordic-Russian Larp Dialog (2015)

Harry Harrold: “Immersive, interactive, in-character: larp edges into the mainstream”, in Brind et al (eds): The Peckforton Papers – Essays from four decades of live action roleplaying in the UK (2018)

Ben Mars, 2017, “Don’t let the vampire get away – designing linear games and mistakes I’ve made when doing so”. In Brind et al (eds) The Peckforton Papers – Essays from four decades of live action roleplaying in the UK

EMERGENT STORIES AND DIRECTED NARRATIVES

// Troels Barkholt-Spangsbo
// Jesper Heebøll Arbjørn

Many stories happen simultaneously within a larp when characters interact with each other and the fictional world. Stories emerge from the interactions and are only experienced by the involved players – both through their characters and as players. Every player is the first-person audience of their character’s journey.

The larger and more decentralised the larp is, the more the experiences of the players can differ from each other’s. But if they portray characters that exist in the same fictional world, they still relate to each other and influence each other’s experiences. Larps are told collectively, but experienced individually.

Traditional storytelling in books and film is based on the narrative arc, where there is a beginning, middle, and an end: a familiar progression from exposition, to conflict, to rising action, and to the climax, followed by falling action and, finally, a resolution. Almost all events in the story are causal and relevant for the further development of the story. In larp, players will often use, deliberately or unconsciously, this culturally familiar narrative structure as a guideline – and so might you in your design.

This can easily lead to a collision of several climaxes, and dissatisfied players, as the climax of their character’s storyline is suddenly sidetracked by the climax of other storylines. Imagine a long-planned wedding interrupted by a horde of invading demons.

Stories are experienced as satisfying when they seem coherent, causal, and the characters’ actions stay within the expected framework and genres. The story of a romantic comedy stops feeling satisfying if one of the competing romantic interests suddenly murders the other in cold blood. You need to consider how you design your larp to let players experience *coherent* stories and enable the players to *collectively* tell the same stories.

Narrative can be viewed through different lenses, and what they enable us to focus on depends on how the topic is approached. The bulk of this chapter concentrates on two particular approaches, seeing stories as emergent and approaching narratives as directed.

VIEWS ON NARRATIVES IN LARPS

Different larp cultures have differing views on how stories should be created and by whom. Some larpers hold the opinion that when you play a larp, you should be given the freedom to play your character as true to its personality and traits as possible. Others hold the view that a story is created collaboratively, and that there are certain expectations to be met from other players, the designers, and the chosen genre. Furthermore, in some play cultures everything a player does during a larp should emerge from the player's wishes, and subtle hints and nudging from gamemasters is seen as encroaching on player autonomy or compromising the basis of role-playing. In other play cultures, any major choices a player makes need to be checked with a gamemaster in advance. In some cultures, players plan a lot of events before the larp, sometimes without telling the designers, while in other places every turn of events is planned by the organisers and players need to follow scripted playbooks.

This is one of the most central design tensions at the heart of not just narrative design, but larp in general. Jaakko Stenros, Martin Andresen and Martin Nielsen have expressed this in a concise manner when discussing the Mixing Desk of Larp:

Foremost for the larpwright, player creativity is the negative space of larp design. Everything else is put in by the designer, yet without that negative space, there is nothing to see. Larp, as a form, is co-creative. The larpwright can do much with design, but in the end, the players must have agency over their experience. Finding the right balance between control and freedom, collaboration and leadership, design and improvisation is challenging in every larp. Indeed, this division of labour is at the heart of larp design.

Whatever choice you end up making, you need to communicate very precisely how your larp will handle narratives. Optimally, you should test how different players understand your description and instructions to avoid misunderstandings or unspoken expectations.

The possible design space available for you can be characterised with a series of opposing scales, similar to the faders used in the Mixing Desk of Larp. These choices are not meant to be mutually exclusive. They are more akin to lenses you can apply when analysing or describing how you do your narrative design.

Narrative vs. Theme. Do you describe your larp as focused on a sequence of events and characters' actions? A larp about the death of a regent and the battle over succession between the three heirs is probably going for a narrative. If, on the other hand, you look at the same larp through the lens of a theme, you might focus on betrayal or competition and how that echoes through all the characters' relations.

A larp based on events and the narrative they produce is easy to communi-

cate to the potential players. However, the bigger the larp, the bigger the chance that some players will have a more clear ownership of or engagement with the central story than others. Not everyone can be one of the three heirs. A larp based on a theme can be harder to communicate to the players – at least regarding what they are expected to do at the larp – but a theme can be accessible for all. There is a risk of making the theme so diffuse that it no longer helps in focusing the players expectations in any meaningful way. However, a clear theme can work as a strong framing device for the players' experience, to help them relate their characters' stories to the overall larp.

Central narrative vs. Central situation. Another way to frame the issue is to look at the plot structure. If some characters in your larp dominate the defining plots, you are probably working towards a central narrative. Designing for a central narrative can help focus your players' attention on a shared experience, but then it must be clear how they can affect it. Larps set in hierarchical organizations, like military or feudal societies, with a clear leadership structure, tend to fall into this category, whether the designer intends them to or not. If players try to adhere to the hierarchy, decision making power and the agency to affect the central events gravitate towards the authority figures, and their actions become important to the rest of the characters in the larp.

An alternative to this is to start with a central situation or dynamic that allows for different stories to emerge during play. Instead of focusing on the military or feudal hierarchy, a larp can focus on the cultural encounters and personal relations taking place in a situation with a power balance that is heavily skewed towards one group of characters. Designing for central situations can lead to players prioritising more personal stories in play, while still feeling connected to the rest of the larp.

Collective narratives vs. Personal narratives. Does your larp revolve around the group dynamics of various factions, or is it focused on the perspective of individual characters? For instance, is it a collective larp about the survival of a group of people after a zombie apocalypse and the struggles and sacrifices necessary for the good of the group? Or is it a larp about the tragedies and losses of the individual characters? The two approaches can co-exist, but they cannot both be prioritised at the same time.

Narrative transparency vs. Narrative secrecy. Do you tell your players everything about the plot before the larp starts, or would you rather surprise them during runtime? Both ends of the scale have merit, but decision between transparency or secrecy will frame many of the other choices you make about your narrative design – and players can have strong preferences towards one or the other. Make a very conscious decision and communicate it clearly to your potential players, so they understand how their characters are supposed to react to and spread information

during play. Transparency allows players to construct some plans for the stories they want to play, while secrecy keeps the narrative power more firmly in the designer's hands. [For a detailed discussion of these choices, see *Torner on Transparency*—Eds.] Also remember that even with full secrecy, surprises should be logical; they need to follow from what has gone on before. This technique is called foreshadowing, and it consists simply of hinting at future events through previous events.

However, the most relevant tension is between *emergent stories* and *directed narratives*; in creating a sandbox where interesting sequences of events to be narrativised can emerge in improvisation, or in scripting a more pre-planned sequence.

EMERGENT STORIES

The first approach, which we have named emergent stories, can be characterised as nudging players into specific mindsets, controlling and actively designing the possible actions they can take, and offering specific ways for the players to communicate with each other, all so that the desired stories will emerge seemingly on their own. Events that are interpreted as a coherent story emerge from systems, characters, and setting in player improvisation within set limits. The events are not designed directly, but the framework in which they come about is a product of numerous important design choices. A few of those are reviewed below.

RULES AS A STORYTELLING TOOL

Larp rules can be thought of as storytelling tools created by designers for the players. Rules specifically state what it is possible to do during the larp.

When designing larps, we often use *replacement mechanics* to simulate actions that we do not want the players to enact themselves; common examples are violence and sex. Replacement mechanics are rules. For example, “when you are hit with a latex sword you lose one hit point, and you die when you run out of hit points” also implies the rule “a latex sword is a representation of a steel sword and shall be treated as such”. This rule allows for the character actions of fighting and killing each other with swords to be part of the stories being acted out by the players. If the designer does not spell out specific rules for how to do a specific thing, for instance casting spells, it is a strong signal that casting spells is not possible within the larp. Rules as storytelling tools are important, because they are a strong method for calibrating player expectations. However, genre and design tradition may complicate matters; even if rules for how to handle violent conflicts are missing, it may not be obvious to your players whether fighting is possible or suitable within the larp. [For a discussion of the design choices involved, see *Wilson*.—Eds.]

Metatechniques are a specific subset of rules. They are defined as actions where players communicate in a way that is not diegetic for the characters. Metatechniques allow the portrayal of situations that would not otherwise be possible.

They create access to other players' experiences during runtime in a way that shapes the meaning of the larp and strengthens the shared and collective aspect of the larping. For example, in *Just a Little Lovin'* (Norway, 2011) a character's post-coital thoughts were revealed through the metatechnique of an inner monologue spoken out loud. This allowed for detailed, nuanced, and awkward stories about relationships and sex. [For more examples, see *Westerling & Hultman. –Eds.*]

MANAGING PLAYER EXPECTATIONS

Managing player expectation is a key tool for fostering emergent stories for larp designers. This type of coaxing is done through worldbuilding, setting, theme, genre, and characters. If you describe a culture in a fictional world as feudal and chivalric, you have already nudged your players to focus more on duels than assassinations. If you have framed your larp as being within the genre of *noir*, your players will expect convoluted stories about double crossing and characters tempted to be unfaithful to their partners.

All genres, settings, and themes have ingrained expectations. Even if you do not deliberately consider them, they will still affect the larp. This can pose a challenge when you design a larp within an existing fictional world, and do not have creative liberty to change or control which parts of it can be included in your larp: you will struggle with controlling the expectations of your players.

If you design the characters of the larp, or design the process through which they are created, you can also establish specific story seeds or setups as starting points for the action. For example, giving characters specific goals, establishing different narrative setups like a love triangle, or suggesting specific actions to achieve a character's goals.

DESIGNING THROUGH SCENOGRAPHY AND PROPS

Controlling which props and what kind of scenography are available is important in directing the possible actions players can take, and thereby which stories can play out. Chekhov's gun is a dramatic principle that states that every element in a story must be necessary for the telling of the story; if you show a gun in the first act of a play, it must be fired before the end. Translated to the context of larp design, it might be more relevant to state that any element present will be used by players to tell a story. If you do not want any murders in your larp, then you should not give weapons to the characters.

CALIBRATION DURING RUNTIME

Who has ownership of how stories develop during the larp? If you aim for emergent stories, ownership is probably shared between the players. It is not just the designers that can run over the players with their plots; players can also feel bulldozed by other players when they lose a sense of ownership over the stories their character participates in. This is less likely to happen if the players *calibrate* their play, i.e. coordinate, cooperate, and generally play in sync with one another.

Calibration can be done autonomously by players (even when only communicating in-character through reading body language); however, a good larp design helps by facilitating calibration.

We can differentiate between three levels of calibration: physical consent negotiation [*see for instance Mutsaers in this volume. – Eds*], playstyle calibration (planning possible future events, signalling between players during runtime, shared understanding of generic conventions), and story consent negotiation (negotiating what one character can do to another). The different levels of negotiation overlap and affect each other and which stories play out during a larp in different ways.

Calibration is beneficial for emergent narratives in two ways. First, by giving players tools, scripts, and structures for negotiating with each other during runtime, the designer supports coherent and communal co-creation. It is less likely that players give each other bad experiences or unwanted surprises during play. This is particularly important if you expect your larp to have players from different larp cultures whose expectations you may not have succeeded in aligning.

Second, introducing specific calibration methods can empower players to perform specific actions. In *Just a Little Lovin'*, a player can give a feather to another as an (easily declined) invitation to a simulated sexual interaction. This metatechnique allows for calibration in an aesthetically pleasing way, and does not slow down the larp with out-of-character talk. The ease of this scripted negotiation can make the players more comfortable in initiating scenes with sexual content, as the communication around them is clear and transparent.

Thematic and narrative calibration can also be done through instructions in advance. A particularly powerful method is the use of act structures. A larp can be broken down into acts used to pace the action and to ensure a synchronised progression in theme and conflict level. *Inside Hamlet* (Denmark, 2015) uses acts to both dictate changing themes (decadence, deception and death) and to escalate the intensity of violent conflicts between characters. No one can die in the first act; in the second act hidden conflicts and violence are possible. In the final section of the larp, every conflict will escalate until at least one of the involved characters is dead. This choice was made in service to the central narrative, to ensure that the stories progress towards the intended resolution, which is death for almost all of the characters.

DIRECTED NARRATIVES

The alternative to player-driven emergent stories is for the designers to take a more hands-on approach during runtime and to go for directed narratives. Directed narratives rest on plots you plan in advance of the larp, instructed to your players in some meaningful way, and then played out by them following your specifications – with the level of narrative freedom you have chosen as best fitting your design.

The purpose of directed narratives is to provide intense, coherent stories that fit together causally and often have traditional, dramatic story arcs. Sometimes, the purpose is also to provide a structured progression to a larp otherwise mostly focused on simulation or character immersion. And sometimes it is used when players cannot be trusted to drive the narrative themselves, for example because they are children.

Another reason for tight narrative control is found in very large scale larp: a designer might need to approve key player actions before the players enact them just to keep track of what is happening between different character groups.

As always, making your design choices visible and legible is a good idea. Your players need to know that a larp will feature directed narratives. In some larp cultures the concept of directed narratives is quite normal, and in others it is not, and to some players a heavy use of directed narratives may even seem outside the scope of what they would consider to be role-playing.

INTRUSIVENESS LEVELS OF DIRECTED NARRATIVES

Directed narratives can be designed and run in many ways and with various degrees of impact on the larp as a whole. For some larps you only need to direct some key players, while other can require ubiquitous instructions and serious micromanaging. In Nordic Larp parlance, subtle interventions would be called *discreet* and more obviously directed ones *intrusive*.

At the discreet end of the scale is the concept of themed acts, discussed at the end of the previous section. In *Inside Hamlet*, players were nudged to engage with the theme in each act, even though in practice they were free to do whatever their characters wanted.

Larps with an organiser-directed main plot and an NPC team to carry it out also tend to have relatively lightly directed narratives. Even though the main plot can be a massive construct with dozens of events and branching plotlines, it is commonly created on a macroscopic level for the larp as a whole. It is a classic situation that such a plot does not generate story for every character in the larp.

It is common to pre-design runtime *events* with the intention of setting certain plot developments in motion. With careful timing, an ostensibly minor occurrence can lead up to the summoning of a demon, the invasion of a foreign state, or something equally epic.

Somewhere towards the middle of the intrusiveness scale are large programmed events, such as the Grand Ball that closes the *College of Wizardry* larps (Poland, 2014). Especially if the events are mandatory and require players to carry out specific actions – such as engaging with diegetic traditions of inviting a partner to the ball – they may be experienced as intrusive. Passive events, or those of a more opt-in nature, would feel more discreet.

An example of a more complex directed narrative system is *fateplay*. A *fate* in this context is a short instruction for an action that the character shall carry out at a specific time or within a limited time frame. Compared to character goals, fates describe specific actions that must be taken. Typically, they are linked together in complicated fate webs, where one player's action triggers another's fate.

A parallel to the instructions used in fateplay is gamemaster instruction during runtime. A player may receive suggestions, or even commands, from a *director*, NPC, or instructed player. The words “you should go and show the letter to your sister” may unlock complicated and rewarding drama that would not emerge if the instruction is not followed. Depending on local aesthetic norms, and in particular how embedded the instruction is in the diegesis, such outright instructions can be experienced by the players as very intrusive.

Another method for heavily directed narratives is actual directed plots on the character level. The core of this method is simply that plotlines for some or all characters have been planned before the larp, and usually organised into a set of scripted scenes or required story beats that the players must perform during the larp. This method has been applied in larps in many different ways.

In *Agerlund* (Denmark, 2009), the players were instructed at a pre-larp workshop to concoct a story inspired from American folklore with at least five scenes that they would then play out during the larp. In *En stilla middag med familjen* (Sweden, 2007, Eng. A Nice Evening with the Family), the players were required to play out the plots of well known Nordic stage plays about bourgeois families falling apart. The players had to hit specific, predetermined turning points, but around them they were free to interpret the stories and play them out as they chose. In *Hell on Wheels* (Czech Republic, 2015), the players were given booklets with instructions for scripted scenes and goals to follow in each act.

COMBINING FORCES

Both of these approaches, emergent stories and directed narratives, can be used to create coherent and collective stories within a larp. Neither of the approaches should feel particularly alien to an experienced larper. The two approaches can be combined and, indeed, most larps use both.

For some larps you will want to focus most on the emergent stories; in other larps you need them to be more directed. For some larps you want your players to not think about stories at all, even while they themselves are making interesting things happen. For other larps you want to pull your players straight through a gut-wrenching story, with them having no choice in the matter. All are viable design choices, and making that choice informed is what makes it design.

At the end of the day, whether the story potential emerges organically during runtime from within a carefully designed sandbox, or from a web of plots painstakingly woven by the design team months in advance, the stories will be

made by the players. How do you as a designer get the players to be the drivers of narratives?

The answer is by giving them ownership and trust. When you have finally designed the narrative system of your larp and are ready to present it all to your players, whatever form it takes, you must accept that you will lose some – or even all – control over your work. If you want your players to drive the narrative, they must be given ownership of their stories – within the parameters of your design.

FURTHER READING:

Eirik Fatland: "Incentives as tools of larp dramaturgy", in Bøckman & Hutchison (eds): *Dissecting Larp* (2005)

Eirik Fatland: "Interaction Codes – Understanding and Establishing Patterns in Player Improvisation" in Fritzon & Wrigstad (eds): *Role, Play, Art. Collected Experiences of Role-Playing* (2006)

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Jesper Heebøll Arbjørn: "The Narrative Experience", in Waern & Axner (eds): *Shuffling the Deck* (2018)

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HOW TO MAKE YOUR SANDBOX A PLAYGROUND

//Mo Holkar

Many larps are described by their organizers as having a sandbox design. Although this is an imprecise term which can be interpreted in a number of different ways, the concept generally involves a playspace in which players are free to create their own stories, rather than having plot imposed upon them by the larp design. There will usually still be some events provided to take part in or witness, optional activities to undertake, people to interact with; but the general pattern is that the designers and organizers provide a world, and the players make story within it.

This does not always provide a satisfying experience for players. They may become bored; they may fall back on playing with people whom they already know; they may spend much of the time effectively out of character; they may feel unsupported, as though too much of the burden of story-creation has been placed upon them. Perhaps they feel they have to prepare large chunks of story in advance to bring into the larp and enact. As the sandbox offers a lot of freedom, it also requires a lot of player initiative, familiarity with this type of larp, and skill.

A rather more structured take on the sandbox is the *playground*. Where a sandbox provides raw materials for players to create story with, a playground provides interactive tools that they can use directly to explore and build on story as they go. It can allow players to develop rich and deep storylines during play, over which they can feel they have ownership. Designing-in story-creation tools, suited to the larp's structure, theme, and setting – whether diegetic or not – gives your players explicit permission to take control of large or small aspects of their story, without fear from either side that it will 'break' the larp.

This is not an exhaustive list, but a help to categorise the tools discussed.

Storymaking	Diegetic	Large-scale
		Small-scale
	Non-diegetic	Self
		Other players
		Gamemasters
	Activities	Tasks
Flexible		
‘Things to do’		Solo
		In groups

Figure 1 Types of playground equipment

STORYMAKING AND STEERING

The concept of ‘steering’ refers to “the process in which a player influences the behavior of her character for non-diegetic reasons”, for instance to maximize their fun or to be able to interact with specific players. The article in which the term was originally introduced discussed design for steering in a ‘macro’ sense such as players whose characters have many in-fiction responsibilities being expected to steer so as to provide play for their juniors.

Storymaking in play is when players use their out-of-character ideas, preferences, and understanding of narrative structure to influence their in-character decisions; it can be seen as another goal which players navigate towards using steering. If having players actively steer in this particular way is desirable in your larp, how can it be designed so as to encourage and facilitate this?

In the playground metaphor, this would be about designing playground equipment and toys. The designer can provide play elements empowering players to take control of and shape their characters’ stories as they go, and so to co-create the overall shape and story of the larp without having to step out of character.

When a player decides to steer, the actual decision necessarily takes place outside the frame of the fiction. But the act that the player performs in order to steer can be either diegetic or not, as preferred by the design.

Gamemasters are commonly used as a non-diegetic steering aid. For example, in *A Nice Evening with the Family* (Sweden, 2007), each group of players has an out-of-character runtime gamemaster or *director* [See Hultman and Westerling on

directors. –Eds]. This gamemaster is deeply familiar with the details of those characters and available on demand for offgame discussion and help. This can include advice about steering, pacing, and other aspects of the character’s story arc.

At its simplest and most abstract, a *meta room* – a blackbox inserted into another type of larp – is a non-diegetic storymaking tool. In *A Nice Evening with the Family*, players can at any point drop out of the diegesis and go to the meta room: to first discuss out of character, then play a scene from a character’s past or in a potential future. These new story elements will then inform and shape their further play when they return to the diegesis. For example, suppose a player is seeking motivation for their character’s dangerous risk-taking behaviour. They might use the meta room to play out a flashback to childhood, in which it becomes apparent that the behaviour pattern arose in response to stifling parenting. They can then take this new understanding back into the larp and direct their character’s story accordingly.

A Nice Evening with the Family also has a *meta hour*, in recent runs called *Hour of Scenes*; it is a calibration break between acts during which players check in with their groups and play meta scenes with their dedicated gamemaster as needed. In *On Location* (UK, 2017) the halfway act break includes a *steering workshop* – after the first half is complete, players can consult with a specialist gamemaster and with each other, over how to shape the direction of their play during the remainder of the larp. At *Inside Hamlet* (Denmark, 2015), such consultancy is available throughout the larp, in the out-of-character room.

Fellow-players can organize their own act-break calibration as well. Players may get together to decide how to move forward with a particular plot thread that concerns their characters together; or simply to help each other with ideas and advice. And they don’t have to wait for an act break: at *Brudpris* (Sweden, 2013, Eng. Bridal Price), for example, players can at any point during the larp ask to calibrate using the code phrase “a walk in the woods”, and briefly move away from the others, step out of character, and discuss the direction of the story (and, as needed, the intensity of play).

The converse solution is a design element that can be used while staying in character, with the steering taking place invisibly. An example is the “green drink” in *Just a Little Lovin’* (Norway, 2011). This is an unspecified drug which is brewed up nightly by some of the characters. Any character can drink it, and that player decides the effects: it might intensify an existing feeling; or it might reverse it; or it might have no effect. So, for example, a player might decide to use the green drink to have their character suddenly fall out of love with their partner; or to devote themselves fanatically to their creative work; or to renounce capitalism and become an activist. It’s an unquestioned opportunity to reshape the character’s story, without having to drop out of character to do so.

A similar tool is the Waters Divine, in *La Sirena Varada* (Spain, 2015, Eng. The Stranded Mermaid). A character can at any time choose to immerse themselves in the water of the Arabic hammam, with or without the help of other

players, ritual, etc. This is a diegetic act of ‘rebirth’ – the impact and details of which can be interpreted and enacted as the player wishes. The rebirth might give clarity of purpose; it might give a distinct change in personality or direction; in the extreme, it might be replacing the character altogether with a completely new one.

Smaller-scale story tools can also be effective. In *On Location*, set in Europe in 1932, players had the opportunity during play to step out of character to create news events from the world outside the larp setting, which were then released into the gamespace by the gamemasters. So, for example, the player of a Jewish character might create an article about persecutions occurring in their home area. When this article appears in the ingame newspaper, the other characters – their friends and enemies – can react accordingly, and take one part of the story in a new direction. Similarly in *Wing and a Prayer* (UK, 2018), set during the WWII Blitz, players could invent for example details of friends or relatives killed in air-raids during the course of play, to add an extra dimension of pathos or poignancy to their stories.

ACTIVITIES

Another important type of playground equipment that designers can provide is the opportunity for players to participate in activities. These can be broken down into two types.

TASKS

These might be formally scheduled, and implemented by gamemasters or NPCs (“You will go to a Necromancy lesson at 1100 on Saturday”), or left more loose (“The characters are expected to write and rehearse a play, which they can perform on Friday evening if they wish”).

Planned task activities are a great opportunity for co-creation, in two different ways:

1. Play can emerge spontaneously from the activity itself: perhaps some characters turn out to be the naughty pupils, and bond together; perhaps a social incident will be triggered by someone shooting a clay-pigeon that was intended for someone else; perhaps a theatrical performance that the characters create might include an exposé causing a scandal when performed; and so on.
2. The designer can include active triggers for further story. For instance, the teacher might instruct pupils to find and bring back certain ingredients for the next class: if obtaining them is not straightforward, players may have to team up and invent plans, which will have knock-on effects. Or there

might be a dance, which means that people have to find partners: players can build a new romance thread off such a requirement. Note that just including ‘tasks’ like this won’t necessarily encourage co-creation. The designer has to think about what the players might actually be able to do while carrying out the task; i.e. what are the affordances of the physical setting, the larp’s overall schedule, the dominant play culture, and the characters inside the fiction?

‘THINGS TO DO’

When a larp is set in an inhabited space, designers don’t always remember that such spaces in real life usually have a fairly wide selection of ‘things to do’ – items or tasks with which the occupants can occupy themselves, individually or in groups, whenever they might wish to. For example, an 18th-century European house might include musical instruments, books, sewing materials, gardening equipment, children’s toys, playing-cards, scientific curiosities, and any amount of other bits and pieces. Even if the core interaction between the characters is designed to be “conversation”, just sitting around talking to each other can feel stilted and quickly become boring. Over a task, talk will flow more naturally, and the experience of solving problems, playing games, or making something together will develop the character relationships in subtle ways.

These potential diversions give further opportunities for players to create material separately or together, in the same sort of way that they can from planned activities; but with the extra control that players can choose to engage with them when it fits their larp. So for example, any time they wish to introduce a new story element into their play, one character might invite another to a game of croquet, or to hunt goblins together, or to cook a meal, or to research summoning spells in the secret library. The activity may then allow creation of new story directions together in a spontaneous way, without the need for steering towards an out-of-character goal or for pausing the diegesis.

With thanks to Simon James Pettitt

FURTHER READING:

Markus Montola, Jaakko Stenros & Eleanor Saitta: “The Art of Steering – Bringing the Player and the Character Back Together” in Nielsen & Raasted (Eds): *The Knudepunkt Companion Book* (2015)

AMUSEMENT PARK DESIGN

// Johanna Koljonen

At the opposite extreme of the *sandbox* is the *amusement park design*, where most story elements of the larp are organised as units – metaphorically ‘rides’ – for the players to experience. So called *mods* (story modules run by NPCs in US boffer larps) would be examples of such rides.

In amusement park designs, moments between such adventure units would often be considered downtime, and the downtime interactions between player characters viewed as having lesser narrative importance than the interactions between player characters and the world. In most Nordic style larps, with their focus on character emotions and relationships, that time for organic character interactions is instead considered the heart of the experience. In fact, Nordic players will often complain that an excess of plot or story events is getting in the way of their role-play. Given a choice only between the sandbox and the amusement park, they would generally choose the sandbox.

THE BEGINNING AND THE END

//Kaisa Kangas

The beginning and the end of a larp deserve specific attention. Some larps use a ritualistic process for entering and leaving the reality of the larp, to emphasise that the players are stepping in and out of the *magic circle*. This reinforces the alibi provided by the fiction and the characters, and clarifies the structure of the larp.

Such a meta ritual is part of the overall design of the opening and closing of the larp. This is easier if the larp has a collective beginning and ending. Sometimes they come naturally as part of the setup. *KoiKoi* (Norway, 2014), a five-day larp about a biannual hunter-gatherer festival, started with an ingame opening ritual and finished with different tribes parting ways in a farewell ritual.

However, collective endings and beginnings do not suit every larp. If the design is open-ended, you might not know where the players take the larp, and it could make sense to let each player stop playing when they feel they have finished. This is easy if the characters are free to leave the larp location when there is nothing left to do (e.g. if it is set in a tavern, at a party or market place, etc.). In a conflict-oriented larp, a player might end the larp when their character dies. This happened to many players in the third run of *Monitor Celestra* (Sweden, 2013), a science fiction larp set on a spaceship in the *Battlestar Galactica* universe.

Some larps begin or end with a transition phase when players slowly move in or out of character. In *End of the Line* (Finland, 2015), a World of Darkness larp set in an illegal rave that vampires frequented, the players spent the first and last fifteen minutes of the larp on the dance floor, raving themselves in and out of the larp. *Vihan itkevirsi* (Finland, 2018, Eng. Requiem for Hatred) told the story of prison camps established after the Finnish civil war of 1918. The characters were prisoners at one such camp. The two last runs, in November 2018, introduced a design where the guards walked the players one by one through a dark corridor into the play area at the start of the larp. Each player was encouraged to use this transition period to reflect on their character's past and the events that led to imprisonment.

One way to mark the edge of the magic circle is to play a *theme song* as the players enter or leave play. When they listen to the music, they have a few minutes to adjust themselves. E.g. *Mad About the Boy* (Norway, 2010), an all female larp where almost all men had died of an inexplicable disease, and *Just a Little Lovin'* (Norway, 2011), a larp about the spread of HIV in the New York gay scene in

the 1980s, employed this technique, using the titular soul classics as their theme songs. The 2018 run of *Häxorna på Ästad gård* (Sweden, 2016, Eng. Witches of Ästad Farm) and *Inside Hamlet* (Denmark, 2015) are examples of larps that have used specially commissioned music for this purpose; *Forbidden History* (Poland, 2018) had commissioned a song that was used at the end. Choose the music to support the themes and tone of your larp.

GETTING THE PLAYERS STARTED

Players often feel awkward at the beginning of a larp, as the new social reality has yet to start to feel real. A way to avoid this is to place the characters in a situation with a social script that is familiar to the players (e.g. being a guest at a wedding). This way, they can use familiar social cues as shortcuts into being their characters.

You can also give your players something to *react to* (e.g. suggest a conversation topic at the workshop, or kickstart the larp with a scripted event). It is best to use something that does not turn everything upside down – unless that is what your design requires; *Ground Zero* (Finland, 1998), a larp about an alternative history where the Cuban Missile Crisis led to full-scale nuclear war, started with the blare of air-raid sirens. Players need time to establish the normal state of affairs and get acquainted with their characters.

Halat bisar (Finland, 2013, Eng. State of Siege), set at a university in an alternative reality where Finland is under similar occupation as real-world Palestine, began with a meta scene where players queued at a checkpoint to enter the campus and the larp. To most of the players, this was a new social situation, but it had familiar elements they could relate to: standing in a line, being late for work or school, interacting with bureaucracy. At the same time, it established what was normal in the fiction.

When a player reached the checkpoint, a soldier replaced their ID card with a new one that had religious affiliation on it. There were mistakes on some cards (spelling errors, wrong religion). It gave the characters a topic to talk about and created low-level conflict when they complained to the soldiers.

CLOSING IT UP

Some larps are set to end at a predetermined time. In others, runtime game-masters circle the play area trying to “feel” when the larp has run its course. The former suits larps with a linear design, such as *Pelageya: Laika* (Finland 2005), a science fiction larp about a disastrous accident that led to the destruction of an undersea research crawler and the deaths of most of its crew. The latter fits open-ended larps where storylines emerge from character actions. *Tinderbox* (Finland, 1996) was a cyberpunk larp about two street gangs on the brink of war, and it would not have made sense to end it before the gangs had either fought or agreed on peace.

A larp can end with a bang or allow players time to tie up loose ends. In the second run of *Monitor Celestra*, the ship happened to be destroyed in a battle against the cylons, and everybody died. *Viban itkuvirsi*, the prison camp larp described above, ended with a symbolic scene where prisoners were placed in a line and executed to illustrate the high mortality rate of the camp. The players got to decide how their characters “really” died; e.g. starvation or disease.

The abrupt ending of one of the *Monitor Celestra* runs was a result of player actions (other runs of the same larp ended differently), but you can also *design* a dramatic ending on purpose, like in *Viban itkuvirsi*. Ending with a bang can suit larps with a strong collective story arc. In contrast, if the larp is more about individual storylines, it can be good to give players time to complete their personal stories. One possibility is to give them cues that the larp will end soon (e.g. change the lights of the play area), so they can time their play.

Sometimes, clever design allows you to combine different approaches. *Just a Little Lovin’* is about the individual stories of people who faced the AIDS crisis. The design is quite open-ended. You don’t know beforehand who will become a couple, who will contract HIV, and who will die. However, it has a collective ending within a fixed time frame.

The three acts are set at Fourth of July parties in different years, and have the same structure: at night, the characters party, the next morning they have breakfast. After that, two meta scenes follow. First, a lottery weighted by the players to reflect their character actions determines who will contract HIV or die during the coming year. Then there is a collective funeral scene to mourn the dead. The players know the structure beforehand, and they have the whole night to finish their personal business for that year. In the morning, the time frame is stricter, and the funeral scene provides collective closure.

Before deciding on how to begin and end your larp, it is usually best to decide on main themes and subject matter and think about focus and general structure. After you have these thought out, it is easier to see what kind of beginning and ending fits the whole. Sometimes ideas arise naturally from the other design choices.

FURTHER READING:

nordiclarp.org/wiki/Flying_Start

nordiclarp.org/wiki/Slow_take-off

Books Schwartz: “The Big Finish”. Wayfinderstoryboard.tumblr.com

On Youtube: Designer’s Hour: Endings | Knutpunkt 2018 <https://youtu.be/gMe-aP7kBLMO>

SECTION 3:2

HOW TO DESIGN A PLAYABLE FICTION

A fundamental tenet of bespoke larp design is that individual design choices are not in themselves good or bad – they are better or worse at supporting your design goals as part of your overall design in your cultural context. An individual choice like using latex swords says nothing about the quality of the work, because larp design is evaluated on the systems level.

Elegant larps solve as many problems as possible with as few solutions as possible. In a good larp your choices dance together instead of chafing awkwardly until your players break it on purpose or the larp self-destructs. Individual elements like your writing or the setting can be interesting or beautiful, but a larp that is not functional as a whole is not good. In larp, functionality is first and foremost measured in playability – the ease with which players act in character, make stories, or explore the themes of your work.

Whenever a player approaches a larp, a certain amount of mental translation is always required. However you communicate your design, storyworld, situation, characters, and plot, the participant needs to understand how to express it all as actions in the larp. In a good design, the participant will know intuitively,

or be told explicitly, what they can actually do during play, and find once the runtime starts that all of these actions are meaningful and possible. You might think that any action suggested by a larp's designers and writers would always be possible in play, but if the total design is not coherent, players will often experience that they are actively blocked by the space, the props, the schedule, a fictional norm, or a plot event, from playing the larp as intended. Forced to find something else to do, they might still end up having a great experience, but you should know that is then in spite of your design, not thanks to it.

Kaisa Kangas starts this section off with a chapter thinking very practically about what functionality means in larp. Martin Nielsen and Grethe Sofie Bulterud Strand share a well-tested method for developing or calibrating a culture for your fiction together with the players. The examples that follow illustrate how culture design can serve different purposes without compromising on playability.

What actions are possible and playable varies from player to player. For some groups the process of translating your design into play comes at a higher cost than for others. In their chapter, Kat Jones, Jonaya Kemper, and Mo Holkar discuss what to consider when designing for intersectional identities. Eleanor Saitta and Sebastian Svegaard continue the argument with a specific focus on queer and trans players.

Finally, Merli Juustila discusses how to make larps playable for children.

FUNCTIONAL DESIGN

// Kaisa Kangas

A functional larp design is one where the players have meaningful things to do during the larp, and where those things serve a purpose in the larp as a whole. Generally speaking, this means the actions must be connected to the larp's main themes or plots. They are not there as filler content, and they are not just a pastime to avoid boredom (although regulating boredom is certainly one important aspect of functional design). In a functional larp, the things players choose to do are *of consequence*.

If your players spend hours in the forest trying to find a treasure that is not there, they will feel disappointed because their actions did not have a purpose. If the larp is about first contact with aliens, players probably do not want to spend hours in a laboratory unless their research can produce some crucial information about the alien species. Otherwise, they might feel the lab work was just filler content – that they were there to serve as a charmingly realistic backdrop for the other players, or to pass the time before the real content began.

To feel meaningful, most of the things players do during the larp also need to be actually *doable*. It is usually boring to pretend to be doing things, but there certainly are larp systems where pretend activity is the norm. In such systems, doing things – magic rituals, scientific research, machine repairs – often takes a fixed amount of time, and players have to use that period of time either waiting or pretending to do the work. The purpose of such rules is often to strike a balance: to ensure it was not too easy to do something that had a big effect. For example, if you want to cast a really powerful spell, e.g. summon a demon, you perhaps have to spend two hours on a ritual.

In rules systems such as these, time operates as a currency, and the sacrifice of time is only meaningful if the fun of the larp is assumed to reside in other types of action. Even so, there are numerous design solutions that do not require that players spend their runtime grinding boring tasks. Indeed, doing labour or performing rituals in character can be its own reward, assuming the actions performed by the players are meaningful and fit the overall design.

DOING IT FOR REAL

The most obvious approach in creating meaningfully playable action is to make players do things for real, or to design simulation methods that give them an idea of how it *feels* to do those things. The key here is to think about how the processes the characters are involved in work, and how something similar could be designed for the players. To make a magic ritual feel meaningful, you need to have an idea about how magic in your storyworld works, either as a social or a metaphysical process.

KoiKoi (Norway, 2014), a five-day larp about a hunter-gatherer festival, had rituals that lasted for several hours, and players did not find them dull. One of the reasons was that the designers had done research on magical practices in various cultures and developed a coherent system on which the hunter-gatherers believed magic was based. For example, masks were an important element, and it was believed that a mask contains a spirit that will possess whoever wears it.

Moreover, a ritual was always a communal process in which many people took part. Sometimes it could provide alibis for interactions that might not have been otherwise possible within the societal framework – things a character did while wearing a mask were not viewed culturally as their actions, but as those of the spirit who inhabited the mask. Rough outlines of the main rituals had been given to the players beforehand, and they could use props like drums, masks, and body paint. Larger rituals had leaders, carefully cast with players who knew how to inspire others.

There are many examples of larps where players do things for real. *Mr & Mrs Unscripted* (Sweden, 2018) was a multi-day larp about producing a reality TV show where couples compete for a mansion and a dream wedding. In the larp, the production team was actually filming the contestants with real camera equipment. In the *College of Wizardry* larps (Poland, 2014), inspired by the Harry Potter universe, teachers prepare real classes that students attend. In the 2017 reruns of *1942 – Noen å stole på* (Norway, 2000, Eng. 1942 – Someone to Trust), a larp set in Norway under German occupation, players ran a whole functioning village that had e.g. a school, a church, and phone lines that were operated through a switchboard.

In many of these cases, players were doing things that required some skill. This issue can be addressed in either casting or workshops. When you are choosing a player for a teacher, it is a good idea to pick someone who feels comfortable planning and giving a lecture (and can pull it off). Another alternative is to teach your players the skills they need. In *Mr & Mrs Unscripted*, the players of the production team arrived to the site a day earlier to learn how to use cameras and other equipment.

SIMULATION

Larp characters often do things that players cannot do for real, either for safety reasons or because they do not have the skills needed. However, you can design mechanics or processes to simulate those actions. The key questions are how you want the simulation to feel, and what function it will have in the larp. Once you have those answers, you can start thinking about how it will actually work.

Krusadis: Punainen Aurinko (Finland, 2018, Eng. *Krusadis: Red Sun*) was a space opera larp about an encounter between two cultures. The players were playing the crews of two starships that would eventually meet. A software called *Artemis Spaceship Bridge Simulator* was used to operate them. The system resembles the bridge from *Star Trek*: there is a captain, a weapons officer, a science officer, a communication officer, a sensor operator, destroyer pilots, and an engine room. The players could pick a destination on a stellar map and navigate their ship towards it. Before they arrived, the runtime game masters would build the planet inside a large meta room. The place could become a friendly space station with a bar, a bazaar and an embassy, or a planet where the characters would face an enemy ambush.

Perhaps the most interesting part is how engineering and repairs were simulated. In the engine room, there was a screen with the Artemis engineering simulator. However, each control had a physical counterpart that the players had to adjust before they were allowed to touch the Artemis controls. There were levers you had to physically pull, cords that you needed to connect, and a container where you poured “liquid coolant”. Sometimes you would have to crawl into a maintenance tunnel to do repairs by changing worn-out glow sticks into fresh ones. According to players, this created pressure in space battles, since you needed to react fast and at the same time keep maintenance operations going on.

The players on the bridge could directly adjust relevant Artemis controls, since that resembled what their characters were doing. The function of the bridge was to make decisions (where to go, how to react to sensor data, what to do in battle, etc.) and give orders. Their play was focused on the responsibility you carry when you are part of a military command. They got a feeling of what it is like to make decisions that could have dire consequences for the whole ship and its crew.

On the other hand, the function of engineering was to keep the ship operational at all times, and the work was hands on. Since it did not suffice to adjust controls on a computer, but you needed to do manual tasks, maintenance and repairs took some time. As player performance determined how long, it created a feeling of pressure. Moreover, the players got an idea of how it physically feels for a mechanic to perform maintenance operations.

A simpler example of a simulation that captures a physical feeling can be

found from *Työbaastattelu* (Finland, 2004, Eng. Job Interview). It was a larp about petty criminals, and the characters were hired to clean up an apartment where a drug dealer had been murdered. They were given a tight timeframe since the police was going to check the place. The cleaning included sawing the body into small pieces and carrying it out in plastic bags. Obviously, the players could not do this to the person who was lying in a puddle of fake blood and pretending to be a corpse. To simulate the process, the designers had placed some logs in the apartment. The players sawed the logs and carried the pieces out in the bags to get a physical feeling of what the characters were doing.

When you are making a larp, one factor to decide is the *level of detail* on which different activities will be played. A related question is how much *information* should be available on a given subject. A good rule of thumb is that the more central something is for the themes of the larp, the more detailed treatment it requires. If a character happens to be a stock market dealer in a larp about family drama, the player can probably bypass professional issues with improvisation. However, if the larp is set on Wall Street, some finance simulation mechanics will be needed.

Sometimes functionality requires detail. *Proteus: Sotakarjujen synty* (Finland, 2018, Eng. Proteus: Origin of the Warhogs) was a political satire about a top-secret project to create human-pig hybrids for military purposes. The setting was a military base where bioengineers and brain scientists worked on the hybrids while PR consultants brainstormed how to market the project to the voting population. During the larp, a military-political delegation came to visit the base in order to make a decision about whether to purchase the hybrids for the army. There was an elaborate process for the acquisition, and the politicians needed reports from various committees that met during the larp. The Ministry of Defence kept tabs on the budget, and there were detailed prices for different kinds of hybrids and their equipment.

Many board games and computer games are designed to simulate something, and sometimes it can be useful to look at those mechanics for inspiration. For example, in resource management games, you often need to balance between useful attributes that you cannot maximise at the same time (e.g. speed vs. strength). A similar idea was used in *Proteus* when the bio-scientists were trying to adjust the hormonal balance of the hybrids.

The scientists had three scales on which they could operate: cautiousness vs. curiosity, aggression vs. playfulness, and reaction speed vs. impulse control. First, they would choose a number between one and ten for each scale and feed it into a computer. They would then have to mix a serum that would match a colour given by the program. Finally, the serum would be “injected” into a hybrid (these were NPCs), and its player would take the new hormonal calibration into account while playing. The scales concretised the technical choices of the characters, and mixing the serum gave a feeling of the precise endeavour of lab work.

FUNCTIONING AND CONSISTENT WORLDS

Many of the examples discussed so far are related to the idea of creating an illusion of a functional world around the larp, a wider context for the players to interact with and explore. In *Krusadis*, they could travel within a given sector in space, and in *1942*, the village was a kind of miniature world in itself. If you simulate a functioning world, the larp will feel more *real* to the players. In settings where the characters are trapped inside a confined area, the possibility to interact with an outside world can create a contrast that makes them feel even more isolated.

Inside Hamlet (Denmark, 2015), a larp adaptation of Shakespeare's play, is set in an aristocratic 1930s Denmark on the verge of revolution, and the participants play the court of King Claudius that is trapped inside a castle surrounded by red rebels. The players can use phones to instruct their troops in the fight against the revolutionaries or to talk to their contacts outside the castle; the outside world will call back to report on consequences of the characters' actions.

Halat bisar (Finland, 2013) was set in an alternate reality where Finland was under similar occupation as real-world Palestine. The characters were students and staff at a university campus that was placed under curfew by the occupation authorities. If the characters wanted to reach the outside world, players could call a runtime gamemaster on the phone. During the larp, they phoned e.g. newspapers, embassies, family members, political contacts, and for an ambulance.

Moreover, the outside world reacted to their actions and contacted them; reporters wanted interviews, and political decision makers put pressure on university administrators. A notice board placed centrally in the play area provided a media simulation, with organisers and players writing news headlines, blog posts and tweets (very rapidly and simply, with pen and paper, but to great in-fiction effect).

If you want your storyworld to appear consistent, you might need to make decisions about what is happening behind the scenes and invent fictional events that will not be directly visible to the players. In *Halat bisar*, the occupation soldiers interrogated some of the characters, since in the larp's backstory, a soldier had recently been killed. Some characters had been selected for interrogation already before the larp, but often the decisions on who would be next or what the soldiers would do were based on diegetic events, such as what other characters had said as they were interrogated, or how much international attention player character actions had generated in the media simulation. The runtime gamemasters were also attempting to read the flow of the larp and balance the action so that the outcome would create play that was interesting at a given moment. But even when decisions were made based on extradiegetic factors, the NPC players needed to know why the military command would make a given decision inside the fiction.

After the larp, the NPC player who had been the leader of the interrogations was able to give players detailed explanations on what happened behind the scenes and why. Sometimes discussions like this lead to endless philosophical debates about what is “real” in a larp. One viewpoint is that in a larp the whole world is fictional, and each player’s interpretation of the “truth” has an equal value. Many people also think that only things that players witness happening during the larp are part of its reality. In this thinking, e.g. a backstory or explanations given by designers are not “real” in the same sense as player actions. A larp like *College of Wizardry* (Poland, 2014) from its fourth run redesign onwards has taken this viewpoint to its logical extreme, with player storymaking able to overrule storyworld background.

At most larps, however, players automatically expect the present of the fiction to be a coherent consequence of its past, and the non-player parts of the storyworld to operate in accordance with some internal logic. In reality, the present contains many traces from the past, hints about what might have been going on. If you are creating a world, why not design those traces also? In this case, functionality means that players can use physical items and character or NPC actions as logical clues to find out what happened in the past. It is probably impossible to create those traces without first generating a coherent backstory.

It is (usually) not a good idea to give players a treasure map if there is no actual treasure. The same goes for lab science, spaceship maintenance, or detective work. If the characters are investigating a missing person, *you* need to know what happened to her (unless she went missing during the larp). There has to be something to find out. It might be tempting to just scatter random “clues” around and trust that the players will come up with a coherent story to explain them. However, if you have not thought it out, your clues will become like a map to an inexistent treasure.

In *Ghost Express* (Finland, 2001-2002), an occult-themed city larp campaign inspired by the role-playing game *Kult* (Sweden, 1991), players once explored the scene of a recent murder. The victim’s apartment was decorated to reflect her personality. As she had been associating with vampires, her bedside table was equipped with jars of iron supplements to indicate that she suffered from iron deficiency caused by blood loss. But it was also important that she had not been killed by a vampire. As this information needed to be available for the investigators, her wounds were of a kind a vampire would have been unlikely to cause.

A practical way to study the past in character was created for *Jotta vahva ei sortaisi heikkoja* (Finland, 2018, Eng. So That the Strong Should Not Harm the Weak). This was a larp about the judicial system in ancient Mesopotamia. In that culture, contracts and verdicts were finalised by writing them on clay tablets. In the larp, the temple had archives of all the tablets written in the town, and players could go there to gather information about various deals that had been made in

the past. At one point, judges were solving an inheritance case and wanted to know whether the deceased had officially adopted a certain character as his son. When the organisers realised there was no tablet about the adoption in the archive, they went the extra mile and produced one during runtime – to maintain both the coherence of the fiction, and the functionality of its design.

IS IT PLAYABLE?

Actions that are doable and have meaningful narrative consequences are still not automatically well-designed. Many players value character interactions and relationship play, and in many larps those things are where the fun lies, or the engine that drives the story forward. Even if you've designed a cool and functional process, it does not necessarily enable interesting play.

Writing a program code feels pretty much the same whether you do it ingame or offgame – unless your character is much worse at coding than you are, and then it might be just boring. Moreover, it is usually something that you do alone. Soldiers in trenches typically stood guard too far apart to be able to talk to each other. There are good reasons for this, but it does pose a playability challenge. For most players, larp is a social activity, and it is the *interactions* that make a larp. Playing a psychologist, a spaceship commander, or mechanic who gets to chat with colleagues in the engine room, can provide more interesting play around realistic work than playing a computer programmer will.

In *Proteus*, laboratory technicians worked hard at adjusting the hormonal balance of human-pig hybrids. The hybrids would be presented to the military-political delegation, and the scientists needed to decide how to optimise the hormones for the demonstration. This is an example of meaningful work: there was a wider social context for the process, it was connected to the main themes of the larp, and there were clear deliverables with immediate consequences for the outcome of the plot. To ensure playability, the most complicated work processes were not only described in written text provided before the game and rehearsed in the workshops, but also printed out as diegetic checklists and process diagrams available in the play area.

As you weigh playability against plausibility, remember that your design goal is probably not to teach how something is done in the real world, but to create a thematically relevant feeling or experience. Perhaps your technical process can require constant collaboration between small groups of characters. Perhaps soldiers can be stood two and two to allow them to express in play how homesick, terrified and bored they are.

You can design a coherent, functional narrative system where actions have meaning for the larp's plot, themes and outcomes. Whether players will then find these actions meaningful to do ultimately depends on their personal preferen-

ces. Some people will be very happy tinkering with code, others would rather play a romance. One player appreciates coherence and plausibility, while to another, high drama is more important. Some people prefer comfort and others want to test their limits in extreme physical conditions. It is your responsibility as a designer to make choices and to communicate them clearly to your players. What kinds of functionality your larp needs depends on your design choices as a whole.

FURTHER READING

Katherine C. Jones, Sanna Koulu, and Evan Torner: "Playing at Work" in Kangas, Loponen & Särkijärvi: Larp Politics (2016)

CREATING OR CONVEYING CULTURES

// Martin Nielsen
// Grethe Sofie Bulterud Strand

It's the beginning of a larp, but the player doesn't really know how to behave. And it's not about their character, it's about the norms and behaviors surrounding them. "Oh, this doesn't feel right, I'm doing it all wrong. How was I supposed to greet my character's neighbour again?"

The beginning of a larp can be nerve wracking in itself. Navigating a fictional culture in which one's character is supposed to have a lifetime of experience doesn't make it any easier. Especially if it's a culture that the player only knows from reading about it.

Cultures are complex systems that guide the ideas, customs and behaviour of a people or group: what they believe, what they value, how they construct identities individually and in groups – all expressed through how they go about their lives. In a larp, there are often one or several diegetic cultures that are important for how the characters interact. Poor communication of these cultures can lead to misunderstandings, less bold play and unintended reproduction of real-world cultures and/or stereotypes. This chapter looks at how larpmakers can convey the culture they have designed to the players, or help the players develop the diegetic culture themselves.

COMMUNICATING CULTURE

How do you choose which medium to use when communicating your vision to the players? For a long time, written text was the communication channel of choice for most larpmakers. But in the past decade or so, using workshops before a larp to convey information to the players has become increasingly common. Different media are differently suited to communicate culture, depending on their capacities for *participation* (how much the players are involved), and *resolution* (the detail and quality in the communication about the diegetic culture).

Written text can pinpoint details precisely, but is still a very low-resolution way of describing something. All readers of the same book will draw up different ideas and images. This is a beautiful characteristic of written fiction, but not so

convenient when you want several people to understand a complex system and how they have lived in it for a long time.

Writing is a good way of conveying abstract ideas, for instance communicating a culture's dominant ideologies. It is less efficient at communicating for instance the nuances in interpretations of such ideologies, or concrete actions, like a choreography, or the subtle ways in which people in a hierarchy convey status with their bodies.

In less top-down designs with more player involvement, many larpmakers ask the players to co-creatively design parts of their play experience. This can involve meeting up in person to talk, but increasingly often players resort to online planning, either in writing or at meetings using video link.

While players designing their culture together allows for player participation, it shares some of the resolution problems with pre-written text. People will have different interpretations of chat conversations, and even more so the outcome of a chaotic Skype meeting with too many participants. There will also often be an imbalance regarding how much time a player can devote to this kind of planning, which in turn might lead to information gaps between players in the same groups. Furthermore, unless the larpmakers are present, it can be hard to ensure that the innovations of such meetings support the overall vision of the larp – although providing the players with instructions for pre-larp meetings may be helpful in this regard. Even so, informal meetups or online planning in a player group is better than no interaction at all. It is a good addition to written materials, especially for small groups of participants who need to check that their interpretations are similar.

Using a more complex medium such as video to communicate comes with its own costs and benefits. While video is much better at conveying high-resolution information like body postures and gestures, it's typically one-way and top-down. It can be effectively used for inspiration or to lock down one or two core cultural concepts, and then combined with co-creative methods for player involvement. Used on its own, video will mostly communicate how the sought after behaviour is supposed to look.

CULTURE CREATION LARP IN WORKSHOPS

To achieve both a high resolution and a level of co-creation, larpmakers have an obvious tool at their disposal: larp. Role-playing exercises as part of a pre-larp workshop will allow high-resolution communication, and for the players to take ownership over the process, both of which will help retention of information and support its use in actual play. While rehearsal is an obvious part of the preparation for most kinds of performance, it is still not that common as part of larp preparations. *Rehearsal larping* allows players to get a coherent understanding of a culture and to calibrate their understanding of it through play.

Rehearsal larping is playing scenes just as one would in the larp, then stepping back to observe and discuss them. Using this method to create or calibrate a diegetic culture, the larpmaker gives away some control, but in return will have a player group with a more coherent and higher resolution understanding of the world they will play in.

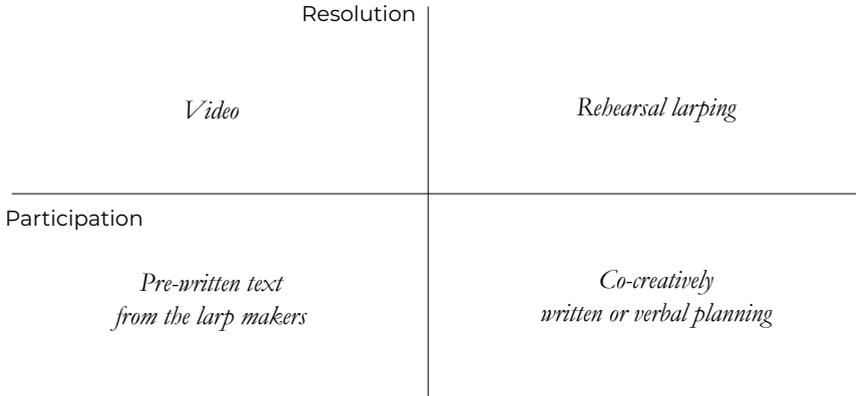


Fig 1. Different approaches for how the larpmakers can convey the diegetic culture to the players.

The player knows it in theory. They've read the material, a while ago. But they have never practiced it, and culture is complex. They spend the first part of the larp being acquainted with it, and only after several hours of playing do they have a sense of the cultural dynamics. By then, the mistakes they've made have already affected their character's position in the fiction.

By implementing an iterative process – playing, observing and evaluating – you can get better, more playable larps, just like rehearsal is part of bringing a written play alive for the stageplays. You can let the players create the diegetic culture from scratch, or based on a predetermined framework of values and behaviors that fit the theme and location of the larp. Or you can pre-determine quite a lot and use the method to let the players calibrate their understanding of what you have created, and how to translate it into playable actions. The basic structure of all rehearsal larping is the same in both cases: let the players try test scenes, step out of play and describe what happened in the scene, and finally evaluate whether the scene is a good representation of how you would like the culture to be when playing the actual larp. Then repeat the cycle if necessary.

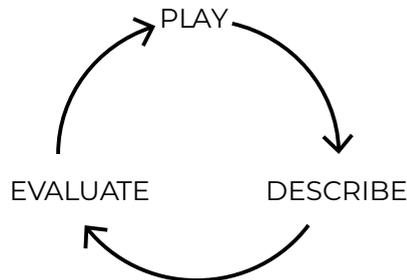


Fig 2. The iterative process of rehearsal larping

REHEARSAL LARPING FOR CULTURE CREATION

Goal: To flesh out the culture

Method: Group discussions, test scene, description and evaluation

This exercise has five parts:

- Dividing into groups
- Deciding on the scene
- Playing the scene
- Describing the scene
- Evaluating the scene

Divide into groups and decide topic

Bring together the players that will belong to a particular culture, for example the culture of a tribe in the fiction. Divide these players into smaller groups. Each group gets a topic to discuss and plans a test scene revolving around it. Topics can for instance be conflict solving, decision-making, how they have meals together, intimacy and relationships, religion, ceremonies, rituals, dealing with grief, or interactions between different generations: children, adults and the elderly.

Setting the scene

Alternative 1: The players are asked to close their eyes and visualise what could be in a scene about the topic they have been given. This gives everyone a chance to process on their own first. It can generate a broader scope of ideas and can prevent the most dominant players from taking up too much space. Let everyone present their ideas, then have a small discussion and decide on a scene to explore. Alternative 2: Let one person start with a sentence describing the scene, then do rounds where everyone can add a sentence until there is enough “flesh” to play out the scene.

Play and describe

Each group takes turns to play their scene in front of the others. The other participants observe what is happening in the scene. After the scene, the facilitator asks the observers what they observed. If possible, note down what is being said on a blackboard or poster. The facilitator should make sure the participants only describe at this point – evaluation is the next step.

The facilitator should remind the participants to not only take notice of exotic behaviour (anything that is different from cultures the players already know), but also familiar behaviour. For example, if the scene portrays a culture where people greet each other by tapping each other’s forehead, it will most likely be mentioned by the observers. But if people greet each other with a handshake, that should also be noted.

By encouraging players to also take notice of the familiar, they might not only become more aware of elements from their own culture that are reproduced, but also traits that enter into the larp's fictional culture out of habit (or even laziness) – that, at worst, could reproduce real world prejudice and stereotypes. Intentionally reproducing parts of a real world culture, including stereotypes, can sometimes be useful. If you want to draw attention to gender roles, one way of doing it can be to replicate or even exaggerate existing cultural norms or stereotypes. But in a feelgood hobbit larp with no ambition to discuss gender issues, there is no reason the female hobbits should do all the dishes.

It is okay if different people have observed contradicting norms. In that case, note down both perspectives. When the observers have nothing more to say, the facilitator asks the people playing the scene if they have anything to add.

Evaluate

With the descriptions of the culture noted down, it is time for the players to discuss what has been noted. Usually it is possible to quickly find out whether the group would like to keep or throw out parts of the culture that has been demonstrated. It can be a good idea if the larp designers also have a word in this discussion, preferably by another person than the facilitator participating in the conversation.

Criteria for assessing an observed norm can be:

- Is it in line with the vision for this larp?
- Is it playable (for all)?
- Is it sustainable (over time)?
- Is it possible to carry out (safely)?

In line with the vision measures whether the culture created supports the overall objectives of the larp. If the purpose of the larp is to shed light on bullying, and the participants have created a culture where the most important value is taking care of others and bullying is strongly discouraged, then it does not support the vision.

Whether the culture is *playable* depends on whether it provides all players with interesting things to do. For example, a culture where some people can only speak when spoken to places heavy restrictions on some of the characters, and therefore also the players. It can still be interesting and playable, but probably only if this is a well thought-through design choice and those whose speech is restricted have more agency to engage in play in other areas of their character's lives. It is important that all players feel they have power to meaningfully shape their stories through actions in the larp.

Whether or not the culture is *sustainable* depends on whether the actions expected in the culture are possible to perform with reasonable effort. If you

have to bow for two minutes every time you meet a character who is older than you, that might be fun the first two or three times it happens, but not in a weekend larp where you meet a handful of older characters every hour.

Finally, it's necessary to make sure the culture is *possible* to realise in a safe way. A culture where everyone is dancing a particular dance is only possible if everyone knows the dance. A culture where everyone is swallowing swords is most likely not possible, at least not in a safe way, unless you happen to have a player base of only people who are trained sword swallows. A culture where some characters are forced to do intimate actions with others is not safe unless the larp has solid mechanics for the players to opt-in/opt-out.

If there is no clear consensus in the conversation, it's possible to vote among the participants, especially if the designer does not view the disagreement as important enough to weigh in and persuade the players to go for a particular choice because it would support the larp's core design better.

If needed, the scene can be played again, with added input from the evaluation, then described and evaluated again.

REHEARSAL LARPING FOR CALIBRATION OF CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

Goal: Shared understanding of a culture previously designed

Method: Test-scene, evaluate

The above section discussed how to make cultural elements in a co-creative workshop. Many larp-makers will of course choose to design the culture in more detail in order to support the vision of their larp. In these cases, the workshop should focus on calibrating the understanding of the culture. Similarly, even when the culture is created from scratch using the method described above, a calibration exercise will be useful to take a closer look at the culture and fine tune the understanding of it.

By the time the players show up for the workshop, they will have learned about the diegetic culture through reading, video, larp-makers talking about it, etc. At this time, players will have a rough idea of what the culture is, but their understanding is yet to be calibrated. Their different interpretations of how the culture is actually supposed to be played can deteriorate narrative cohesion. Without calibration it will not be clear whether a cultural norm is broken on purpose by a character in order to create a scene, or if the breach is just a result of differences in player interpretations of the ascribed culture.

For calibrating the understanding of the culture, it can be useful to play out scenes in the following categories:

- Everyday scenes

- Rites
- Taboos

It can be left to the players to set the scenes, but for a more time efficient approach, the larpmakers can do this for them. The scenes should focus on going deeper into the nuances of the culture and try higher resolution play, with nuance and subtle interactions. The facilitator can divide the players into different groups and give each a scene to prepare for a couple of minutes.

Everyday scenes are scenes that are likely to take place many times during the larp. For example how to greet each other or how to say thank you. Even everyday behaviours that are not culturally defined in your culture might be in others; for example, people can be expected to walk with a particular posture or avoid stepping on certain objects. How to behave in specific situations can be connected to the status of the people interacting. Some actions can be somewhere in between rites and everyday scenes, for example how meals are conducted. It's not important exactly how you categorise them, as long as the players know how to play them.

Rites are actions with a ceremonial element. For example how a wedding or funeral takes place, a particular action you can do as an apology, or how this society views transitioning from child to adult.

Taboos are things that should not be done, and includes the sanctions for breaking them. These can be about both how the culture responds to anyone breaking the norms of the everyday scenes or rites, or how the culture responds to actions that in this culture you should never perform. Keep in mind that breaking both exotic and familiar cultural traits can be taboo. This can range from a culture where it is unacceptable to not eat all the food on your plate to more familiar norms, such as killing another human being unacceptable.

When the groups have prepared their scenes, they play them, one at a time. The observers, and after them, those who took part in the scene, describe and then evaluate, before moving on to the next scene, as described above. The facilitator should start with the everyday scenes, then do the rites and finally the taboos. If necessary, some or all scenes can be replayed to recalibrate after the evaluation.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Rehearsal larping in pre-larp workshops is a time consuming but powerful tool. Like always, there is a trade-off against other elements a larpmaker wants time for. For some larps, doing this in smaller groups, with different criteria or even using different role-playing methods (e.g. tabletop role-play) can be useful.

It is naïve to scrap workshop time in favour of more playing time on the

assumption that players can calibrate cultural understanding during the first part of the larp. It is the combination of rehearsal larping and analysis that gives the benefits of a calibrated cultural understanding, less unintended stereotyping, and bolder play in higher resolution.

FURTHER READING

Martin Nielsen: "Culture Calibration in Pre-Larp Workshops". Nordiclarp.org (23.4. 2014)

Andie Nordgren: "High Resolution Larping: Enabling Subtlety at Totem and Beyond", in Montola and Stenros: Playground Worlds (2008)

BUILDING A LAYERED COMMUNITY

// Alessandro Giovannucci
// Andrea Giovannucci

1630 (Italy, 2016) was a larp by Chaos League set during the plague epidemic that swept over Europe in the 17th century. The story centred on a village whose inhabitants tried to escape the disease by closing their gates to the outside world, avoiding all contact with the rest of civilization. To the people of the village, the outside might as well not exist: everything is produced, consumed, contested and resolved within the walls of the community.

The mechanics presented in the following were designed to be light, efficient and inclusive. The challenge was to create larp elements that could be understood with little effort, and be useful from the very beginning of the larp. Our twin goals were to engage the players' creativity and co-creation skills while still making sure their preparations for the larp would not be too time consuming. None of the techniques in the cluster we chose were totally new, but the mix of them resulted in a compact, efficient tool.

CO-CREATING SHARED KNOWLEDGE

The larp's setting was communicated on an online platform we had created with information about the storyworld as well as forum and chat functionalities to allow participants to co-create content. Short descriptions of elements in the setting and backstory were published at regular intervals. In addition, we periodically published rumors about past events, called *Voices from the Village*. Every *Voices from the Village* post consisted of a brief third person description of an event and some questions, to which the players were encouraged to find an answer by discussion in the comments. For instance, after a short prose description about the time a violent brawl broke out in the Copeland family's tavern:

What caused the conflict?
Who was the first to throw a punch?
What were the gravest consequences?
What is still unresolved?

The players were responsible for agreeing on the answers. Possibilities were discussed collectively and democratically through the platform, until a fi-

nal version of the event emerged and could be included in the official backstory. What emerged was an element of memory play, where the players continually revisited and added to their characters' recollections, until they became background knowledge in the players' mind.

Social structures and cues

Five big families coexisted in the larp, each with their own way of being and acting, and each traditionally tied to a trade, which established their wealth and social status. To make the social hierarchy immediately recognizable, we made use of their initials: Axton, Beckwith, Copeland, Digby, Elfer. The Axton family was the wealthiest and most influential in the village, and the others followed, their status decreasing in alphabetical order. Each family was also marked by a trait representing what other villagers knew about their life – the social archetype through which they would be approached. This trait could be more or less present in every character, but it was always present. For example, everyone knows that a Beckwith does not face dangers head on, or that when a Copeland makes a commitment, he will do whatever it takes to honour it.

Each family had a dominant color, and all family members were required to wear something of that color. Costumes were used as engines to highlight social hierarchies, both underlying differences in status between the families, and creating unity within them.

This system of surnames, colors and family traits allowed everyone to place other characters on the social

pyramid at a glance and to know what to expect of their behavior. This made it easy to prepare for confrontations with other characters, creating believable and nuanced interactions.

Trades, societies, circles

The *trade* of each character represented a foundational part of the game experience, both for the character itself and for its player. To the player, it was an activity to attend to for a few hours each day, with all the physical and psychological implications in terms of immersion. To the character, it was a profession, their contribution to society and to daily life in the village, as well as a financial and social marker. Each trade came with different tasks, e.g. “sharpen at least a few blades a day”. Organisers provided all materials needed, and specific tutorials were sent out before the larp to allow the player to get an idea of the work they would be doing. They also had the opportunity to try it out before the start of the game.

Societies represented a philosophy or a cause the character stood for, making their view of the world playable. A society was a group of like-minded people (rationalist, fervent catholics, and so on), and each came with activities and specific duties that enriched the psychology of the character. e.g. “the Servant of Christ: pray for the end of plague, fight the devil in every form and stay away from vanities and sins.”

Circles were groups of people who gathered outside work hours, family time and Society meetings. These were somewhat akin to hobbies to which

a character devoted their time in the company of others, e.g. "Circle of the Chess Players: organise a match and teach someone the game."

Since the larp was strongly focused on family life and family rivalry, the trades, societies and circles allowed people to interact with other player groups. The use of these sub-systems created an opening for daily interactions with characters from different families, which increased the complexity and stratification of the community.

RESULTS

The outcome of these choices turned out to be very positive. We reached our goal of minimizing the players' pre-larp workload, creating a stratified community as well as deep but comprehensible relationships in a short timespan. Player feedback was very

positive, above all for the sense of community that emerged both inside and outside the fiction, since players felt on the same level even before entering. Pre-larp elements like the on-line platform and runtime mechanics like colours, traits and trades interacted fluidly and benefited from each other.

Where this method shines is in larps centred on interpersonal relationships, shared memories, strong social hierarchies and a collective playstyle. This set of techniques is less applicable to larps where community is not front and center, or where players will not be co-creating cultural content.

FURTHER READING:

nordiclarp.org/wiki/1630

Project homepage: 1630larp.com

NAILED IT!

THIS IS NOT AN EDULARP!

// Tina Leipoldt

In early 2015, together with Martina Ryssel, David Hughes and Lucille Haesters, we started sketching out a mystery horror larp set in the late Dark Ages. We wanted to combine the kinds of larp we used to frequent with some “Nordic elements”. When we were scouting locations, it turned out that all the usual locations we once would have booked were full for the next months, because they now served as temporary shelters for the newly arrived refugees in Europe. This encounter pushed us to move past nostalgia and attempt to deal with our own present. This was our design challenge: how to marry contemporary politics to historical horror larp?

The re-sketching process started and we found an available location, castle Veldenz in the Mosel valley, which happened to have some war and refugee history itself.

We did not want the larp to be too confrontational or preachy, nor did we want a primarily educational larp for people who already were politically aware. Instead, we wanted to capitalize on learning experiences rather than educational objectives. We decided not to communicate any educational objectives towards potential participants

when advertising the larp.

We advertised *Die weiße Doble – Flucht und Verrat* (2017, Germany, Eng. The White Jackdaw – Flight and Betrayal) as a “mystery-horror larp with Nordic elements set in the Thirty Years’ War.” (Finally the Germans could blame the Swedes for all their misery!) We designed a scenario where the power positions were obvious and set at first glance, but could be constantly re-negotiated during the larp. We wanted to create a more realistic scenario, without a typical dichotomy of power and powerlessness. Each individual had different statuses, some being obvious and dominant, others being more secretive or fluid. The relation of castle inhabitants (the host community) to refugees was 1/3 to 2/3; the relation of illiterates to literates was 3/4 to 1/4; and the relation of Protestants to Catholics was 1/6 to 5/6. We made these choices to make the superficial subdivision into “us vs. them” more subtle and complex.

Interestingly, most participants did not spontaneously make the connection between their two days of larping and the radicalization, xenophobia, and distrust that is currently happening between refugees and receiving

communities in Europe. Current politics were neither taken into account or reflected, nor normatively leading the action. The story elements with contemporary relevance were accepted as part of the setting without any negative connotations or stigma. A normative assessment and evaluation only happened during the debriefing.

The players enjoyed the larp, and afterwards drew interesting parallels to the present day. The player who portrayed the lady of the castle noted: “When I came into the Great Hall, and I saw how the people had rearranged the chairs, holding their feet to the fire as if everything belonged to them, I suddenly felt like a stranger in my own

castle.” The player of the castle priest noted “I tried to welcome ‘the new ones’ all the time and integrate them, but when the situation began to escalate and we couldn’t do anything, I was really glad when the first witch burnt – finally something was happening!”

Die weiße Dohle was not advertised as an edularp, but the participants learned on a personal level about the dynamics that lead to xenophobia, radicalisation, and distrust.

FURTHER READING:

nordiclarp.org/wiki/Die_weiße_Dohle_-_Flucht_und_Verrat

NAILED IT!

DESIGNING FOR EQUALITY

// Frederikke Sofie Bech Høyer

At our campaign *Fladlandssagaen* (Denmark, 2006, Eng. The Flatland Saga), we discovered that some of our participants felt they had to abide by the classic stereotypical gender roles and experienced limited agency over their story. Some outspoken participants also felt they had the right to comment on other players' roles, characters and story choices. This, of course, made the situation uncomfortable for some participants and created a tense atmosphere in our community.

When we confronted the participants who exhibited bad behaviour, their excuse was often “but back in the Middle Ages, they...”. We found this a problematic, invalid excuse, since we played in a fictional fantasy world that was inspired by the Middle Ages, but not intended as a carbon copy of the actual historical period. We had not mentioned character or role restrictions based on out-of-character traits in our materials – because there were no such restrictions. What happened was that some outspoken participants' off-game views on for example gender restrictions ended up being a factor, even though their opinion was contradictory to the campaign's materials. As many of our participants were quite young, with an age range from 10 to

25 years, we felt it was particularly important to get this right.

BUT HOW?

We agreed on a vision – to start designing for equality. We were inspired by a statement from one of our head larp-makers and a question posed to them by a participant at the Knudepunkt convention in 2013:

“Of course we can design for equality.”
“So, why don't you?”

We chose to make equality the status quo in our setting. If someone argued against equality in the fiction, for example by questioning whether a woman could be a knight or how two men could get married, they would have broken the premise of the fiction and would be corrected with “we don't do that here.”

To create this change, we used a number of practical strategies:

- We read through all of our materials and changed our wording to support our vision. For example, we used deity instead of God or Goddess and names/neutral pronouns instead of the gender specific ones. We only

use gendered language and pronouns when describing specific characters by name.

- We rewrote some of the background characters in order to create a more diverse setting with representation across the board.
- To change the language culture we encouraged other types of insults than those based on gender, sexuality, ethnicity, etc. Instead of expressions like “*you fight like a girl!*” and “*we don’t serve homos,*” we encourage phrases like “*you’re a wildling*” and “*you’re honorless*”.
- We cast strong, competent and diverse people in key roles; e.g. the most recognised knight should be a woman.
- We spoke with our participants and their parents about our design choices and asked them to help us explore the new possibilities.

FOCUS ON PARTICIPANT CULTURE

It took about a year to implement our initiative. At the beginning, we experienced resistance from some of the participants, who neither liked nor understood the reason for the changes. When we introduced our choice for First Knight, a highly skilled woman, the resistance manifested itself in some of our participants questioning the choice openly: “But it is a girl?” It did not take long, however, before our First Knight had proven her competence so thoroughly that the questions ceased. She became a role model for our youngsters and showed that wo-

men can play strong leading roles.

Some participants and parents became frustrated if they heard words and expressions they connected to the debate about feminism. After careful consideration, we decided to prioritise results over the debate. We chose to avoid terminology they would find most provocative, such as “feminism”, “hen” (a gender neutral pronoun), “mansplaining” and “the patriarchy”. In our experience, mention of these politically loaded expressions would derail communication into a loud argument about the meaning of the words and whether they were good or bad to use. If we avoided those specific expressions, our participants and their parents were far more open to changing their behaviour and opinions in the desired direction.

TODAY

Our participants slowly began to support the idea and even helped each other to become better at this. Today, participants will correct each other both inside and outside the larp when it comes to inequality. As a campaign, our player base is ever-changing, so we need to keep up work on maintaining this culture – work still remains to be done among our players and in our community.

I have no doubt that our efforts are paying off. The amount of women participating has increased. We have heard participants voice the wish that reality would have the same equality and safety as our storyworld. The boys have shown similar signs of feeling safe. Some of our young boys have started to take a stand when other par-

ticipants try to convince them to go to battle, and devoted themselves to non-combatant roles, like healers. Conversely, young girls who were previously timid will go into battle and even fight older players. The vision also keeps the team motivated and inspired. It gives us the feeling that we can help change the world by giving our participants a taste of what the world could be like if we set each other free.

FURTHER READING:

nordiclarp.org/wiki/Fladlandssagaen

Aja Hammerly: 'We Don't Do that Here', thagomizer.com

NAILED IT!

DESIGNING FOR INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES

// Kat Jones
// Mo Holkar
// Jonaya Kemper

Choices made in larps can reinforce stereotypes and harmful societal norms. The concept of identity as intersectional includes a person's gender, race, class, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, and age. It is important to take into account intersectional identities of both player and character. People of colour, queer folx, and people with disabilities all have varied experiences and identities. This variety should be reflected in the identities of your characters. Personal and societal prejudices should be examined when making design choices and casting decisions.

Internalised oppression and internalised dominance are frequently passed off as cultural differences, historical accuracy, and personal preferences, when in actuality they are forms of socialization that can stop players from having a full and interesting experience, and can keep designers from designing games that are truly inclusive.

THE FUN TAX

The *fun tax*, in a role-playing context, is described by Curt Thompson as a situation where participants who depart from the mythical norm may not find it fun to play characters who are like themselves, because the ingame society may reflect oppressions they face in real life. *The mythical norm* refers to an idealised human who is viewed as the only true normal, even when we as people do not fit this ideal. Audre Lord wrote “*In america this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure. It is within this norm that the trappings of power reside in this society.*”

As designers, you may get so caught up in your larp ideas that you forget how they may impact the players playing it. You may ask, “Why can't we just have fun?” Well, the answer is simple: we can have fun, just not at the expense of marginalised identities. When you refuse to negotiate the fun tax of a larp, you are showing that you are afraid of losing your social dominance. Often we design and play from the purview of the mythical norm, sometimes even without realizing it. Settings, themes, tones, and characters we create can amplify the mythical norm in various ways, leading us to uphold this fantasy even when it does not in

any way represent the majority of us.

Here are some ways in which you may accidentally uphold the mythical norm, and pass the fun tax on to players:

- Blaming players for being *too sensitive* even when they are asking for rational changes.
- Putting profits or the larp over players and their experience and safety.
- Pushing an aesthetic ideal that is not achievable for many players.
- Designing seemingly neutral characters and situations that can only be viewed from the lens of the mythical norm, e.g. “a completely non-political romanticised larp about the Haitian Revolution”.
- Failing to include marginalised designers in projects at the idea stage, or bringing them in to “fix” the larp due to social pressure rather than genuine desire to learn and change.
- Casting players and documenting participants (in runtime photography, etc.) based on internalised preferences based on the mythical norm.
- Continuing to focus only on a few types of larps rather than normalising the entire culture, e.g. creating only blockbuster cinematic larps rather than smaller scenarios which are more affordable and accessible to players with less resources.

We can lessen the impact of the mythical norm by being aware of its existence, along with our own internalised oppressions and dominance. More concretely, we can explore how we play on oppression and interact with genre, adapt characters for marginalised players, and create inclusiveness statements for our games.

EXPRESSING, ERASING, AND EXPLORING PREJUDICE

Expressing prejudice is taking a ‘realistic’ approach. Characters are designed to experience the same ranges and levels of prejudice as would be expected in a real-world society. This is where fun tax is at its most noticeable.

Erasing prejudice is portraying a world in which a particular prejudice does not exist. Characters do not feel or experience the prejudice, and there is often the intent to remove the fun tax using this method. [*But also note that erasing prejudice can become problematic in the case of certain identities, as discussed by Saitta & Svegaard in the next chapter. –Eds*]

Exploring prejudice uses larp to examine the prejudice indirectly via a parallel. This might be because if portrayed directly, it would have too high a fun tax, or because the designer wishes participants to approach the subject afresh, from a different angle.

- How can you decide what approach to prejudice is going to be most appropriate for your project? One approach could be to answer questions like these:
- Is the larp about prejudice – is this *a*, or *the*, major theme? – or is it just an incidental aspect of the society being portrayed?
- Are there multiple prejudices, which may conflict, or stack on top of each other?
- Are some or all of the target participants people who may experience prejudice in real life?
- Are there emotional safety concerns around expressing the prejudice in play?
- Is the depiction of the in-larp society striving for historical accuracy, and if so, have you researched the actual history of the prejudice?
- Does your larp community have a strong culture around participant safety and playstyle calibration? Is it a space in which participants feel comfortable exploring potentially painful themes and subjects?

HISTORY AND GENRE

Historical and genre settings have the advantage that participants will be able to plug straight in, without having to try and absorb a freshly-invented setting. But this familiarity can be a trap. Often, what we think we know of history may not actually be the case. Designers and players can end up misrepresenting people of the past, and unwittingly supporting a version of history that has been written by those in power, where dominant narratives erase those of marginalised identities. For instance, people of colour being erased in medieval European settings despite the fact there is historical evidence towards the contrary. In the case of genre, following the narratives of genre originators may serve to reinforce their prejudices. Providing space where *all* players can feel safe being playful should be more important than historical accuracy, genre convention, or artistic vision.

If your understanding of a historical period comes from some combination of what you learnt at school mixed with popular media, it is likely a misrepresentation. Question assumptions about ‘knowledge’. Do research and ask whose voices have been excluded. Otherwise you run the risk of perpetuating narrative injustices, inadvertently reinforcing oppression.

Another approach is to aim for historical “authenticity” rather than total historical accuracy. Part of this authenticity is creating a community that has tensions, differences, and sub-groups, just like real communities do. These tensions and differences provide drama, conflict, and emotions for characters and their players to explore. Differences should provide interesting and productive play and enhance the core themes of the game.

Just like any understanding of history is a product of its time, genre ficti-

on emerges from the values and characteristics of the society that produces it. Middle-earth is the product of a conservative upper-middle-class Englishman of the early 20th century: the beliefs and assumptions of that background are embedded in it.

Why are the villainous races dark-skinned? Why are there villainous races at all? Why is everyone heterosexual? Why are all the commanders men? Designers of fantasy larps need to ask these questions of their inspirational material, and to be critical of it rather than sticking to genre conventions. To avoid this task is to potentially harm people who should be fully included in larp.

PRACTICAL TOOLS FOR CHARACTER CREATION

Players experience their various identities in different ways, which means each player will want to play on them in different ways. Where one player may enjoy playing with their oppression, another will seek to not engage in this in any way. Below are practical tools to help guide writers in creating characters that deal with identity in different ways.

- Give options for players from marginalised groups to play or not play characters with their real-world marginalised identities ingame.
- Leave options for marginalised players on *how* to play on these identities during the game – these can be written into the character backstory, or something actively explored during play.
- Are all characters open to all players? Make this clear to potential players and have thoughtful responses for why you make certain casting decisions. While 360° immersion as a design goal does not purposely seek to exclude players, casting for this may lead to excluding players based on age, ethnicity, size, and gender, and may add to the exclusion of marginalised players or to their continued marginalization within the larp.
- If you decide to make categories of identity a visible aspect of characters, make sure this applies to *all* characters. Don't single out marginalised identities or mark them while leaving dominant identities unmarked. For example, if race is an aspect of some characters' identities, it should be an aspect of all characters' identities.

TAKING CARE OF PLAYERS

Another way to include players who bear the brunt of the fun tax is to include inclusivity statements from the get-go in your player guides and websites, and to reinforce this policy throughout the larp. These statements need to be done in earnest, as they can impact player experience and your overall player base in the

larp. Especially in games that have darker themes, these statements signal that there will be no out-of-character tolerance of real-world oppression, and signal to marginalised players that they are actively welcomed at your game. It is also a way to let players judge for themselves whether your larp is for them. It is encouraged for design teams to look to those with experience in crafting inclusivity statements, even if this means seeking outside help.

For their recent larp *Avalon* (Poland, 2018), Avalon Larp Studios wrote a comprehensive inclusion statement after outside consultation. This statement included the reasons why the organisers were not playing on outside societal oppressions within the fiction and within the larp. Due to the thoroughness of the statement, it provided a tone for the larp that was backed up by the larpmakers and reinforced by players, contributing to a great reduction of the fun tax on players. It also allowed players of marginalised identities to retain those identities if they saw fit, even if they were not a central theme of the larp. Below are some excerpts:

We believe Avalon will be a better experience without sexism, without homophobia or transphobia, without ableism, and without racism. We ask our participants to respect this decision and to avoid language or behaviours that could be interpreted as breaking this rule.

Some characters may identify as non-binary, be gender fluid, or without gender. In this larp, no character will bat an eye if two men or women show a romantic interest in each other. Students in a poly relationship are not worth remarking about. Your character can be straight, bi, gay, lesbian, queer or whatever you choose.

Likewise, race is not a point of tension in the Witchard world. No matter which country your character is from or which background they have, they will not suffer structural oppression because of it.

We acknowledge that all these issues do affect people in the real world. We have taken the decision to exclude them from the larp because of...

Notice, this statement acknowledges that these issues do affect people in the real world but explains that they are excluded from the larp for reasons the designers then go on to explain. The designers of *Avalon* recognised that play on themes of real-world oppression might cause players from marginalised groups to feel further marginalised and unsafe; furthermore, it did not enhance the story or the meaningfulness that they wanted their players to experience at the larp. They also recognised that these issues are complex and demanding to portray carefully, and decided to focus on what they could effectively handle within the parameters of the larp. This means it was possible to play someone of your own identity

without it being the central focus of a player's experience, and allowed their characters to be informed by their identity and encouraged them to integrate it with the theme.

The Forbidden History (Poland, 2018) had the more realistic setting of a 1986 elite boarding school filled with secret societies, which meant the design team had to carefully navigate recent history, politics, and oppression. The design team chose to allow players to include their real-world nationality, gender expression, ethnicity, and sexual orientation in the character preference sign up in order to lessen the fun tax and create characters who felt three-dimensional. Since people would be playing so close to their own identity, it was paramount that an inclusivity statement was placed in the Player's Guide and the Play Style documents.

We all have internalized biases that can stop us from playing well with others as well as hold us back from engaging in play we might like to try. Sometimes we stop ourselves from playing with co-players due to internalized biases like ageism, transphobia, racism, and sexism. While not done maliciously, it still negatively impacts others' game, and it limits your own game play by denying you the ability to play with gifted larpers.

The statement was backed up in several places along with it being made clear that support would be given at the larp. This made the difficult themes of the larp, and marginalization of the characters, part of the larp but opt-in.

ALLOWING PLAYERS TO BE PLAYFUL

For members of marginalised groups, negotiating prejudice is not voluntary. As María Lugones has discussed, in many spaces and places, people from marginalised groups are not able to be playful, because it is not safe for them. These players have the added burden of encountering the fun tax when they attempt to play characters like themselves.

Larps should create spaces where all players are equally able to be playful. This means including elements in our design that help players from marginal groups feel "at ease": taking steps to minimise the fun tax, being thoughtful about how we include prejudice, genre, and historical settings, and providing marginalised players (and their characters) with support and agency within the larp.

FURTHER READING

Mo Holkar: "Larp and Prejudice: Expressing, Erasing, Exploring, and the Fun Tax" in Särkijärvi, Lopenen, Kangas (eds): *Larp Realia – Analysis, Design, and Discussions of Nordic Larp* (2016)

Curt Thompson: "On The Fun Tax", Google+. (3.1. 2014)

Audre Lorde: *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press, 2015.

Kimberle Crenshaw: "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989)

María Lugones: "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception". *Hypatia* (1987)

Robin DiAngelo: *What Does It Mean to Be White?: Developing White Racial Literacy – Revised Edition* (2016)

ACCESSIBILITY AS PLAYABILITY

// Eleanor Saitta
// Sebastian F. K. Svegaard

Often, we think about physical accessibility in our larps – are there stairs on the site, will we be able to provide food for vegetarians, how much sleep will player be able to get, etc. This is the *accessibility of the production*, not the *larp*.

At another level, we ask, “Is the typeface on handouts or the website readable? How much material needs to be read? How much material will only be available in workshops, without references?” This is the *accessibility of the larp material*.

Next, we hopefully ask, “How do we expect players to use their bodies during this *larp*? What kind of movement is required? What kinds of violent or erotic energy are part of play?” This is the *accessibility of the performance of the larp*.

Finally, we should ask, “What aspects of identity are important to our players? Which of those elements exist in the relationships between their characters and others? What elements in character relationships are not part of our players’ lives?” This is the *accessibility of the fiction*.

A player needs to be able to access all four of these elements – the production, the *larp material*, the performance, and the fiction – for them to be able to access the *larp*. All players do some work to interact with all of these elements, and the total amount of effort they have for a *larp* is often fixed. Extra effort in one area requires them to compensate in other areas, or can exceed the effort they have for the *larp*.

DESIGNING FOR QUEER AND TRANS PLAYERS

// Eleanor Saitta
// Sebastian F. K. Svegaard

This chapter presents challenges and practices around writing for queer and trans players – not as ultimate solutions, but as food for thought from the communities in question, who are still learning, too.

There are queer and trans players in our communities, and there are some larps written about queer themes, but most larps include them only by happenstance. There are larps examining gender, but few of these provide room for trans experience. In an ideal world, everyone should be able to play most larps. Accessibility for queer and trans players is, like physical accessibility, something that allows more people to play (not to imply that these barriers are equal). Queer existence doesn't just create an accessibility requirement, though: diversity in and out of larp also enhances play in and of itself. When you design for diversity, you design a larp that reflects the world we live in. Fantasy worlds where everyone has the same white, heteronormative background and roughly the same social class with a dusting of crowns or rags on top are boring.

While abuse and violence that recreate real-world oppression are often thought of first in this context, romantic or erotic play is also of specific concern. It only occurs in relation to another player, and requires vulnerability from both players. When players can't find others to play with, or when there's an imbalance in the amount of vulnerability in the situation, play becomes less accessible. This happens for players who aren't conventionally pretty, for older women, and for minorities. Queer and trans players in particular often find themselves in a separate, disconnected larp, where they struggle to understand who is interested in play. It matters less for a straight player whether they have a character with access to romantic plots in a specific larp, because they can have it in other larps. For a queer player, it's yet another larp where they are cut out, often because the designers didn't think to include them.

HOW HISTORY AND OPPRESSION CREATE IDENTITY

Minority history is often discussed in terms of “accuracy”. But history shapes us, and the history we learn is skewed by who we are and when and where we’re taught. Any depiction of a historical event is partially interpretation. Just as there are many identities, there are many histories.

Queer and trans people live in a heteronormative world structured around binaries and oppositions. Queerness as a lived identity exists in opposition to these norms and a continuing history of oppression, erasure, and othering, on top of our particular cultural backgrounds. These dynamics shape who we are and how we think about ourselves both individually and collectively. Regardless of when or where a larp is set – even in another world – players enter with all their historical understanding in their mental backpack. For oppressed groups among your players, history is particularly poignant because it’s the site of struggles that have led to the struggles they live with now.

It can be meaningful for an oppressed group to step into its past and experience this history. Queerness has always existed as an undercurrent, in the margins for some, hiding in plain view for others, and there is beauty in that too. Consider highlighting minority histories and centering different conceptions of the world. Queer history has many unique, historically-specific social dynamics that are now well-documented and recreatable.

Editing history is a trick that powers much larp design, making relatable worlds with enough difference to create fiction. If we can consider the cascading implications of steampunk, we can also consider a world where Stonewall didn’t happen (or happened differently or later or earlier). Always consider whether your editing of history is worth it or if the impact can be mitigated inside the fiction. While it can be simpler to say “yes, it’s the 30s, but everyone understands what non-binary means”, be aware that imposing modern identities on a historical period is a form of editing history.

Even small changes can have a big impact. For instance, *Forbidden History* (Poland, 2018) wanted a modern setting without Internet or cell phones, so they picked the 1980s. The larp was intended to explore coming-of-age dynamics in a genre of sexualised psychodrama, with custom-written characters prioritising good representation. Due to miscommunication during the writing process, many gay characters were written for the dynamics of the gay scene in ‘81, but the larp was set in ‘86. Not a big difference for straight characters, but life-shattering for gay characters in a way that would make much intended play inaccessible. The solution, due to production constraints, was to edit history to delay the AIDS crisis, allowing characters to proceed as planned. Doing this was reasonable under the circumstances, but required queer players to do more work than straight players to access a fiction that now modified an important part of their history.

History can be a straightjacket for all types of players. Break with history when it doesn't do what you need, but always do so with intention, and be wary of unexpected consequences.

HOW TO MAKE ROOM

When a designer says “This game won't feature homophobia or transphobia,” we understand they want to include us. Functionally, however, they've removed the structures that created our identities. Queerness comes with its own affordances for recognising itself and navigating and reacting to the world. If those affordances are removed without replacement, we are erased, not freed. How can you make room for players and characters to have queer and trans identities without subjecting players to unwanted homophobia and transphobia?

To begin with, if your queer or trans players, or those playing those roles, want to recreate historical oppression in a larp where you hadn't planned on this (and this wasn't an active design choice) you should consider just letting them. If this isn't your history, this may feel like a thematic departure to you, but this is about room to breathe, and you'll get a richer fiction as a result. If you have a lesbian couple playing an early-20th century comedy of manners, assume that they probably know what they're taking on and have thought about how their history fits into your game and vision. Offer support where you can. Your players may need you to talk to others on their behalf, or may need you to give them room to set up relationships and to talk to other players to carve out their parallel existence.

If introducing oppression narratives is too challenging for your larp, diegetic homophobia and transphobia can exist in character backstories without being represented in actual play. This is one way to allow players to opt in and out of playing on oppression, as not everyone wants it. However, despite best intentions, this strategy does run the risk of de-facto erasure. Only surfacing oppression in a character backstory can create a false hope of representation, as normative players may end up ignoring it – and all other aspects of queerness too – without realising the impact of their story choices.

Having a small character group represent prejudice via their views and actions in the larp is another tactic, but it's tough on those players and may be too much for some queer players. If you do this you need well-designed, workshoped metatechniques for escalation, de-escalation, and opt-out. This can have the advantage of letting the safer characters form a majority to protect the queer characters and players, creating useful social signaling.

Alternately you can create a new context for queer and trans identities – erase modern identities, but replace them with well-rounded and functional alternatives. You will need to consider things like in-group traditions, how peop-

le discover their difference, coming out narratives (including family reactions), models for romantic relationships and sexuality, the identity group's history, and in-group relations with elders. When creating trans identities, you also need to speak to the medicalisation of bodies (or lack thereof), and history and narrative around physical changes. You should think about how new identities do or don't map to real-world identities. Do not, for instance, just lift First Nations two-spirit identities into your European fiction.

If you want to create a utopian post-gender or post-orientation experience, check with those most impacted early in your design process to make sure that it actually feels utopian. And if your larp doesn't have a hetero-cis character default, remember that players of all identities will need guidance to bring them from how they live their real lives into the larp's new set of norms.

You can blend these new identities with historical environments and let the larp take place in a bubble within a historical world. But instead of just saying "at the Faerie Court, all identities are accepted", provide social scripts and context for characters who move in and out of that bubble.

ISSUES WITH GENDER NEUTRAL CASTING

Non-gendered writing and gender-neutral casting are a pair of related choices, common for at least some characters in re-runnable larps like *Inside Hamlet* (Denmark, 2015). Non-gendered writing is when gender is left unspecified in an otherwise fleshed-out character description. This can permit players to define their character's gender, sometimes with more nuance than a writer might. It can allow players to do so without outing themselves, and can help writers avoid gender stereotypes when they aren't the larp's focus.

Gender-neutral casting, often used with non-gendered writing, is when characters are assigned without regard to what gender the player expresses or selects for their character. It can give players freedom to take on a wider range of roles and make it easier for the producers to fill a larp. Some larps using gender-neutral casting also have pre-written romantic relationships, which allows the writers to use these tools while still creating a dense relationship web. This places characters in relationships with arbitrary combinations of diegetic genders and assumes all players will be comfortable playing any orientation.

These tools can cause a number of problems. While on paper players are provided with agency to determine their identity, and often to renegotiate romantic relationships they aren't comfortable playing, many implementations of these techniques provide little or no support in doing so. This can push a player into portraying relationships they don't want to because it's important to the fabric of the larp, or provide them with an illusion of freedom in portraying a non-normative identity when their choices will actually end up unsupported by fellow players or irrelevant in runtime. These failures predominately hurt queer

and trans players, as heteronormative players will (unconsciously) lean on social privilege to support them in opting out – and even here we see a gender difference, with a greater proportion of straight women than straight men noting themselves as comfortable in bisexual roles, relative to player identity. Queer players may not feel they have the agency to refuse straight relationships without social consequences, forcing them to participate in their own erasure.

When players with no queer experience play queer relationships with no design support, the outcome flattens difference. Queer relationships are rarely played with recognizable interior lives and emotional depth. Straight male players in particular are socially rewarded for the ‘brave’ decision to play their character as written, regardless of their failed portrayals. Straight social privilege creates a space where actually queer players must censor passion and desire they might infuse into relationship portrayals, so as to not freak out straight players. When everyone might be in a gay relationship, as long as it does not feel too real, there is no room for actually-gay relationships.

It is possible for straight people to portray queer relationships well, but doing it reliably requires active opt-in and significant diegetic and design support, as was done in *Just a Little Lovin’* (Norway, 2011).

This isn’t just a queer problem – the same thing happens around gender roles, where non-gendered character writing removes gender dynamics from as-written character interactions. The muted, muddy portrayals that can result are sometimes rescuable by player effort, but still lose the benefit of design support. The fact that all identity choices must be made by the player removes character alibi, leaving players open to feeling like they’re ‘forcing their sexuality [or identity] into a larp where it doesn’t belong’, something queer and trans larpers have had thrown at them for decades. Not having identity in character documents results in communication failures, encouraging normative players to treat personally critical choices as irrelevant background and making it harder for players of queer characters to understand who their character should consider attractive.

Gender-blind design choices are typically made because they reduce designer and writer effort, because they’re seen as liberatory, and because designers from normative backgrounds are often unaware of their hidden costs. Custom-written characters are time-consuming, but as compromise, you can use a second round of post-casting writing for your gender neutral larp, where gender and sexuality (and ethnicity, which has similar challenges) can be addressed. You can use shallower pre-casting template characters focused on themes and power dynamics, allowing the exact natures of character relationships to be specified later. Actively support player identity choices and make them legible to all players.

Alternately, give players explicit agency to determine their character’s identity and relationships. Support is still needed for players to portray non-normative relationships. If romantic or erotic play is an important component of your larp, consider allowing players to visually show contextually relevant character sexuality, for instance on a name tag or through a discreet pin. Whether or not the

character is out, gaydar can be hard to replicate, and especially if you are already using pronoun pins or name tags, this isn't visually intrusive.

TRANS BODIES VS. CIS PERCEPTIONS

Trans bodies often do not look like cis bodies, especially naked. A trans body carries history with it; it is a body created by conscious acts (whether internal or external). For many trans people, their life experience also includes trauma around rejection, transphobia, and judgement from cis people. They may have different comfort levels with their body, ranging from avoiding touch, nudity, and mirrors, to being comfortable naked and even publicly sexual if they don't need to worry about people's reactions.

Most cis players have never seen a trans body before. (While we say cis players, internalised transphobia and negative reactions may also come from other trans players; we use this as shorthand in this section for clarity.) Even cis players ideologically inclined towards inclusion are not aware of how they will react to those bodies, nor disciplined in presenting their desired reaction. Should the cis players have the relevant experience, conveying that to a trans player during play in a manner that the trans player can trust can be impossible.

Reactions to trans bodies are often subtle. For many trans players, the ability to read how cis people react to their body is literally a life and death skill, and they may have been socialised to assume negativity because it is safer. Cis players are often unaware of the reactions trans players read. It doesn't take a pronounced disgust reaction when attempting to play an intimate moment to drop someone out of play, possibly for good.

The reaction of other players are often the limiting factor for how trans people are comfortable using their bodies in larps. If play moves in a direction where they need to predict the reactions of other players – the elder gods are leading everyone towards the water and it's clear something possibly including undressing is about to happen – they are spending time on predicting the situation instead of engaging with play, while also performing double consciousness about how they see their own body. This work is done by trans players, because the cis players around them can't be trusted to react in diegetic, respectful, or at worst even physically safe ways. To the limited extent blame is relevant, it is important to stress this is not the trans player "causing" the problem. This is a real-world dynamic bleeding into your larp.

The question of player reaction is complicated because the body of a trans player may not look like the body of their character. Creating a new history for a player's trans body within the fiction, often one that would carry its own violence, is both hard work and often painful. Because designers can rarely help here, many trans players choose to play cis characters.

Metatechniques alone may not provide sufficient buffer to prevent problematic normative reactions. Trans players often experience cis players steering

play away from certain topics in ways that are more transparent than the cis player thinks. Even intimate activity represented via metatechnique may result in real-but-limited arousal from players (often intentionally in larps involving desire), which may cause the same problems. Some things that are not considered intimate, like lake swimming in a Swedish fantasy larp, are unlikely to be represented via metatechniques and may force trans players to steer or stop their play.

While it can't make creating the character easier, you can try to instead manage reactions by fixing the cis players. This will almost certainly fail. It's rarely an option to require all players to have, for instance, been intimate with trans people in their real lives. However, casting players in groups where the trans player has a high level of comfort with everyone can be relatively simple, as is ensuring that activities that may run into normative reactions are limited to that group.

The most important tool for making larps accessible to trans players is ensuring they have agency around potentially intimate or problematic interactions between their body and other players. This isn't just agency to walk away from scenes, though that's needed and good practice regardless, but the agency to stay in play without doing additional work or being implicitly singled out by their non-participation. Sometimes this may mean casting trans players in roles with the diegetic status to direct those scenes. Diegetic solutions are ideal as they explicitly keep the player in character. If minority players agree, and it's handled tactfully, it can be useful to tell all players this is an intentional design choice.

On the other hand, trans players may not always want diegetic agency, especially not if the larp specifically explores power dynamics or limited control. One option, then, is to create limits to interaction norms between all players that trans players will find comfortable. These norms will differ between trans people and are situational; they need to be handled flexibly and individually. This may not be possible, and a relatively abstract interaction level may also eliminate content central to the larp.

If designers know they haven't solved trans concerns in their larp, they have a responsibility to make this explicit to players before signup, just as they are expected to be clear when a site isn't wheelchair accessible. In both cases they are otherwise placing an unstated hard requirement on player bodies. Just as with any accessibility information, this should be communicated through describing the parameters, design choices or production realities of the larp, not through framing the player body as a problem.

“BUT I DON'T HAVE TIME”

Every time you tell a story, you focus on details resonating with themes you want to explore. No larp can represent all facets of life; you always have limited time and effort. This is fine. Most larps aren't about queer and trans identity. This is fine too. You don't have to focus on queer and trans identity to make room for them.

This said, if you want equal representation, you need to draw minority identities at a higher level of detail than you draw the rest of the fiction. By doing this, you create affordances that lower the level of effort for players of that background to access your larp. A just outcome isn't that everyone can walk up to the larp in the same way and then the chips may fall where they may; it's one where everyone can access an equally rich experience.

As heterosexuality and cisgender identity are defaults as in almost all larps, players will fill in details of what those mean and how they're represented throughout the cloth of your fiction. Your queer players will do this too, because they haven't had a choice about understanding straight culture. Most players will not have a nuanced understanding of queer or trans experience, so you'll need to weave those experiences in more explicitly to help them.

COLLABORATION

This is a lot to think about, and it's still only one corner of any larp. However, you don't have to do it alone. If you want realistic, nuanced trans and queer characters in your larp and this isn't your background, have trans and queer writers write them, and listen to them about what they need from the core fiction. If players are bringing their own characters, provide them with tools to make the relevant aspects of their identity clear, whether that's diegetic narratives for queer identity or logistical access to reaching out to other queer and trans players during character creation.

Writing the other is a skill that takes work and practice, and we support designers doing it. However, bringing in writers with a lived experience to collaborate will pay dividends especially for larps pushing player boundaries on intimate content. If you can't, bring in sensitivity readers from groups you're writing for and take their critique seriously. Don't do this at the last minute when it is too late to adjust the core fiction or production assets like images.

When you write queer characters into your larps, queer players will take them up and bring them to life. This may be a shock: if you as a designer don't share that identity, what your players do with those characters won't be what you expected. In a collaborative medium, it's important for designers from normative identities to accept what their players do and to adapt to it, instead of trying to put it back in the box.

Trust that your players will play the larp you wrote. If it's a regency ball, writing queer characters into it will not get you a dance floor orgy; it will create scenes where a whole second set of coded language and behavior creates secret meaning among players who do (or can't) dance together. Queer and trans players have the same integrity every player has, and even if the content they play on is new to you, they will do so in ways that make sense to them in context of the larp you share. By writing queer and trans players into your larp, you are offering us an invitation to dance; trust that we'll all dance together.

OTHER COMMON DESIGN PITFALLS

// Eleanor Saitta
// Sebastian F. K. Svegaard

QUEER IDENTITIES AS SPICE

Reliance on stereotype is too common in the design of queer characters. While archetypes can be useful for creating characters, minority identity stereotypes are often just tools of oppression. Be careful when deploying them, and ensure these characters are three-dimensional. “Lisping queen” and “angry lesbian” are not characters. “Guard #17, but gay” also isn’t a character. Do not use queer or trans identities as spice for boring characters. Players who don’t hold those identities will find no guidance in the character description and fall back on stereotypes, often badly; to players who do, they are not interesting, and they will effectively just be playing Guard #17.

QUEERNESS AS THE STORY

Another pitfall is writing queerness as a story in and of itself, instead of stories about queers. If your larp is a coming-of-age story, then yes, for many queer characters it’s a coming out story. But if your larp is gritty space opera about elite marines, it’s more interesting and relevant for the lieutenant to have a long-term relationship with the ship’s engineer than to suddenly discover his sexuality after a decade onboard. Be even more careful when using HIV (or any chronic disease) as a storyline. The character is a human to whom this thing is happening; they are not their disease.

QUEER NARRATIVES IN PERSONAL HISTORY

In the same way that every straight, cis character has history, your queer and trans characters will too. Giving them history that matches their identity is a key part of writing a three-dimensional character that gives the player permission to play on identity. There are common stories among queer folks, including family rejection. Every trans character in a society where their identity is medicalised will have a story about their interaction with the medical system. These are both critical parts of their history and not their whole history. Look to real biographies to see the ways common queer narratives interplay with everything else in people’s lives, and aim for complexity and balance.

TRAGIC QUEERS

Tread carefully writing tragic queers. Queer designers, this goes for you too – it’s easy for internalised homophobia to lead us into fictions where we never get to happily ever after. Building a better future means changing the stories we tell. If you need to put someone in your backstory in a refrigerator, make them a straight white guy.

DESIGNING LARP FOR CHILDREN

// Merli Juustila

There are larps aimed at exclusively at children and larps that should not include children at all. This chapter is about family larps, which are designed for all age groups. With some modifications, most larps can include children as well, and there is a growing need for such larps. The player community is at a point where a second generation of larpers has been introduced to the hobby by parents, aunts and uncles.

CHILD DEVELOPMENT & ROLE-PLAY

To children, larp is play with friends. In a young mind, reality and fantasy can mix, and this is one of the reasons why children can delve into a character more easily than many adults. Play, and specifically role-play, represents an important part of child development: children engaged in (role-) play develop social skills through reflecting on what happened. Larp as a medium is to do just this and a further reason why children love it – it is a way to get adults to play along.

YOUNG CHILDREN, 0-2 YEARS

This is the “living prop” stage. A child of this age cannot tell the difference between larp and reality. Mom means mom, dad means dad. A child does not pay attention to strange clothes and will not understand that a costume change might mean change of character. A child can react to other players’ strong reactions by getting scared, but it’s more like a reflex; they cannot follow the reactions. The child plays mostly with objects and likes to participate in simple tasks.

PLAYING AGE, 3-5 YEARS

At this stage the child will get attached to stories and worlds. They experience these stories as facts, will start feeling empathy, and can easily get upset if someone is crying, yelling or visibly displaying emotional states of mind. The child can not be expected to understand the cultural difference between right and wrong, and will struggle to understand the difference between ingame and offgame. At this stage, the parent of the child should be their guardian. Parents

should talk to their child in a similar way to that they do at home, as this will reassure the child. Some children react strongly to behavioural changes in their parents, so the parents should be aware how much they can push their own immersion. Naturally, this depends a lot on the child's age and personality.

CHILDREN AGE 6 AND UP

The child is now old enough to tell the difference between reality and make-believe. They want their parents or guardians to be in-character, so remember to act accordingly. The child understands people are behind the characters. They know they are part of a game and can make character performance fierce and exciting. In the larp, the child will strive to win and to solve every problem. They might need a reminder once a while to include others. Rules and guidelines are important, and the child has to learn a few cultural rules. At this stage, the child believes good always triumphs over evil. This is not always the case in larps, which can be scary.

Three stages in a child's social development in larps

Age	What a child understands of larp	What adults can do to support the child
0–2	<i>Observing stage. A child mostly observes their parent and their reactions to the larp.</i>	<i>Be calm and show the child that everything is fine in a strange environment.</i>
3–5	<i>Living the story stage. A child will believe the stories and act as though they are real. They reflect the world from their parents.</i>	<i>Avoid scenes with yelling or crying since the child will think something is wrong and it can ruin their game.</i>
6+	<i>Larp stage. A child understands the concept of larp and that it is not real. They want to participate fully in a larp.</i>	<i>Tell them about the people behind the characters. Give lots of tasks and activities.</i>

CHARACTERS THE CHILD

Characters for the child should be light and fit their age. Children love tasks and light plots. You can include some specific tasks for each child to make them feel extra special. They should have character relations to the other children and also a couple of others, but not too many. Their characters should be written along with the guardian's, so that the guardian knows all the child's plots and can support them.

THE GUARDIAN

Characters for guardians should be made as supporting characters. Their role is to support the child's game and should only have lighter plots with additional plots to seek out should the child be doing great. Because the role as guardian will limit the player's movement, the character should be someone other players come to for information or aid. If there are more children, the guardian's relations should include some of the other guardians, creating agency for the children to interact.

BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER THE LARP

BEFORE THE LARP

Talk to the guardians and the child, preferably a long time ahead. The best way is to meet with them in person; this way the parents will know you and it will help the child feel safe. If that is not practical, set up a video call instead.

When you meet the child for the first time, sit down or concentrate on a simple task you can do together. Do not use baby talk or demeaning speech, just treat them as any other player. They want to make the larp work and have fun just as much as any of the adult players. You can ask them to introduce themselves and talk about what they expect and what they are going to do at the larp. You can tell them what you are planning to do and if there are things you can do together.

If there is something in the larp the child might find scary, such as orcs, trolls or loud fights during the game, make sure to talk to the child on location before you put on a mask. You can show them some of your props and tell them you are not really a troll. You and the child now share the secret that you are not scary or going to really hurt anyone.

Briefing

Guardian and children might have to skip some of the briefings and workshops before the larp. An hour of listening to an organiser talking is a long time to sit still for a child. If possible, give the guardian access to the briefing material beforehand. They can then go through them with the child ahead of time, and be free to attend only the most necessary briefings. You can organise other activities like games for the children while the guardian is away. These are good to plan ahead of the larp, so the child will know the adults will attend something while it plays. You can use this opportunity to teach the children a game they might also be playing in character in the larp.

DURING THE LARP

Ingame

Younger children are motivated to do tasks and quests more than talk to each other. The larp should support this and give them specific quests designed just for children, with adults in supporting roles. These can be very simple in structure:

- Treasure hunt: Find map pieces and find the treasure.
- Something has broken, find out how to repair it.
- Deliver a message to someone, get something in return.
- Follow this specific person and report back where they went.

By lowering your voice as you tell them about it, you show the child how important this specific mission is and how important it is that just that child be part of it. This creates a feeling of a real adventure.

Breaks

Children need breaks and a place to relax; there should be an offgame space available, like an out of character room. It should have light snacks like raisins, carrots, apples, cookies and bread available. You can also encourage parents to bring the child's favorite snacks. This space should also offer familiar activities such as favorite toys, colouring books, or the possibility of watching cartoons. A child's stress levels (incl. positive) drops instantly when they have something familiar to do.

A younger child needs more breaks, whereas an older child can handle more time ingame. You know it is time for a break when the child starts going out of character, for instance by making comments that reference the real world. It is important not to punish the child for this; they are just getting tired and are in need of a break.

AFTER THE LARP

While adults debrief, children will have time to blow off steam. They have gotten new friends, and it is good to put on everyday clothes and let them play freely. It is good to have at least one guardian to watch them, but do encourage the guardians to take turns, so everyone gets to debrief.

If there have been scary characters like trolls, those players should talk with the children and perhaps play with them for a bit while still in costume. It is also important for the children to see their ingame relations remove their props and masks and turn back into normal people.

Finally, don't forget to debrief with the children. Ask them what their favorite part was and tell them you had fun playing with them. You may have given them an experience they will remember for the rest of their lives.

Jonna Kangas (Ed.D. Finland), early childhood researcher, consulted on theoretical background on children and role-play for this chapter.

FURTHER READING:

nordiclarp.org/wiki/100.000_swords_can't_be_silenced

nordiclarp.org/wiki/Keskikesän_tarinoita

Ben Schwartz: "Live Action Role Playing To Support Healthy Teen Development". ithrivegames.org. (12.12. 2018)

SECTION 3:3

HOW TO DESIGN PLAYABLE CHARACTERS

The character is the interface between the player and the larp. The characters embodied by the players can range from the thin to the very complex. The thinnest possible character is an otherwise identical version of the player that believes the fictional situation to be true. A complex character can be completely differentiated from the player in its biography, values, goals, psychology, culture, gender, sex, or indeed species.

It is useful to keep in mind that the term role-play conflates the concepts of role (social roles, such as “sibling” or “customer”) and character (as in a separate personality shaped by its own experiences). When participants portray thin characters, they are playing with placing themselves in hypothetical situations. When they portray complex characters, they are playing with what it would be like to be other people, living completely different lives. This goal is theoretical. During play, participants can sometimes reach momentary flow states in which the character portrayal feels natural and automatic, but they will still inevitably rely on their own life experience and cognitive capacity in portraying the other person. Arguably, a big part of the enjoyment of role-playing comes from living and acting “as though” another, safe in the knowledge that the character is just a mask.

Each fictional character in a larp has multiple roles, just like real people do. How a character behaves in their role as president might be very different from how they behave in their role as spouse. Exploring different facets and loyalties of the character is a narrative engine in larp and intimately connected to its playability.

Character design is part of the overall design of the larp. Depending on what the engine of your larp is, and on what kinds of activities your participants will be doing, you will be able to determine what kinds of elements a playable character needs in the context of your specific piece. In this section, Juhana Pettersson writes about the basics of character design.

After the character design comes the character creation, when the bare bones structure is fleshed out into individual characters. Often, this is called character writing, because someone is writing about the fictional person and their relationships within the frame set by design. In other larps, character creation can involve researching historical individuals, doing improv exercises together in workshop, or making things up in conversation with other future players of the larp.

In her chapter, Karijn van der Heij discusses how to make the choice of who will be responsible for character creation - the design team or the participants. Mo Holkar writes about methods for giving the players a great deal of control; Evan Torner about how to best communicate the character if it is created by the designer. The illustrating examples delve deeper into practical methods.

BASICS OF CHARACTER DESIGN

// Juhana Pettersson

The character is the main interface between the player and the larp. In a typical larp, the character performs this function in a variety of ways: the character situates the player in the larp's social landscape by assigning them to some groups and excluding them from others. The character provides motivation and reasons for action. The character provides questions and dilemmas that enrich internal play. Like all larp design, character design proceeds from the needs of a particular larp. There are no universal attributes that need to be present in all larp characters. This means pretty much every guideline and suggestion in this article can be broken, as long as you know why.

If the larp's concept is quirky enough, even basics such as a name can be discarded. This is why an analysis of the needs of each particular larp is so essential to create characters that fulfil their core function of allowing the player to access the content of the larp as fully as possible. You must consider what the participants need to be able to participate fully in your larp. Often, but not always, the simple answer to this question is: a fictional persona that is interesting to inhabit and provides agency.

STARTING THE PROCESS

Common character features are a name, personality, motivations, background, relationships, and group affiliations. Yet despite the fact that characters in so many larps share common features, design must always start with an analysis of the basic requirements of the larp. Often, these requirements point in the direction of common best practices.

A common method is to communicate a pre-written character to the players as text. For example, character descriptions for *Forbidden History* (Poland, 2018) consisted of a text outlining the character, describing personality, relationships, background and quirks, as well as the chief groups the character belonged to. This kind of method, where the character is communicated through a cluster of text files, is common as it makes it easier to structure information.

It's good to remember this is not the only way to present a character. Some-

times the entire character creation process is done during workshops together with the players. Or maybe the character is just a series of questions the player answers, thus creating a character. Short larps often have shorter character descriptions and long, involved larps longer ones, although this too has too many exceptions to count. Here are a couple simple principles to keep in mind when thinking about your character design.

Short is better than long – as long as all necessary information is included. A rambling character description is harder to remember, grasp and use. A character description is a tool, not a literary work (unless your specific larp design really requires it to be one!)

Human beings can only remember a limited number of details. Details are things like names, numbers and plot points. You can include personal details about twenty other characters in your text, but human memory will not retain that level of detail. Stick to a small number of key points that you want the players to remember.

Players will customize the character. Whether you want it or not, players will focus on the aspects they like. They will misremember. They will change stuff, sometimes unconsciously. Because of this, you should design characters so that they can be played in many different ways without breaking the larp.

ANALYSIS OF THE LARP

Before designing characters (or a character creation process for your participants) you need to analyse your larp to figure out what kind of characters it needs. The purpose of this initial analysis is to determine what elements are important for character design so they can shape the design process.

The themes of the larp *Tubannen viillon kuolema* (Finland, 2018, Eng. Death By a Thousand Cuts) were class conflict and climate change. The character creation system gave every character a class position of poor, middle class, or rich. Most characters also had a personal relationship to climate change, but it was the lesser of the two themes and didn't need to reach all characters. Because the larp was about class conflict, for the players to access the game's content all characters needed to have a role in the class system of modern society.

Here's a more involved example: you're making a melodramatic, farcical larp about a dysfunctional upper class family who's secrets all come tumbling out during a gathering of the extended family. What does a player need to access this larp's themes and content? The character design must position each player within the family's social map. Who's the newly married grandfather, why is the daughter intent on humiliating her parents? In a family-based game, the social map is very important, and can be drawn quite precisely. If the larp is about secrets tumbling out, that means each and every character needs to have some kind of a hidden revelation they can spring on the others. Note that these don't have to be individual: two or more characters can share the same secret, for example a forbidden

relationship. To keep the melodrama going, the characters need strong, unreasonable opinions about each other. They love and hate in grand style. They also need backstory to provide context for all the revelations. Perhaps the family is a pillar of society, a respectable institution of wealth and taste. This way, all the sordid filth which comes out stands in contrast to a facade that everybody has been trying to maintain.

The key thing about an analysis like this is that each and every character must feature the elements necessary to access the larp. In this example, a spouse who's only recently married into the family and doesn't have secrets would be a bad character, because their only role would be to marvel at the corruption around them. They would be unable to participate fully because they lack agency. Note also that many larp ideas provide more than one possible experience. In *College of Wizardry* (Poland, 2014) the experience provided by a student character is very different than that provided by a teaching character. In this case, a single larp provides a selection of complementary experiences that each can allow full access to the game's potential in their own way.

A good rule of thumb in character design is to include everything the larp's design and concept requires, and forget the rest. For example, in the example of the family drama, the work lives or hobbies of the characters are unimportant. Therefore they don't need to be part of the characters.

You should pay attention to the expectations of your specific player base. Perhaps all of your players are used to receiving full characters written by the design team, or to only ever making characters together in a workshop. Perhaps they expect characters to be very short; or very long. Maybe they like numerical values, or detest any sort of a visible game mechanic. Sometimes it pays to buck the trend and introduce a totally new character creation method – but it can also be a good idea to include something your players will find familiar even if it doesn't serve a vital design purpose. This character feature could even be largely cosmetic. The *Vampire: the Masquerade* larp *End of the Line* (Finland, 2016) gave each character three personality traits, expressed as dot values from one to five. This choice was made as an aesthetic callback to the character sheet of the *Vampire: the Masquerade* tabletop role-playing game.

STRUCTURE AND STYLE

The end result of an analysis is a set of requirements. Use those requirements to create a character template – a basic blueprint of a character that will be used for every character in the larp. For example, you might decide that all characters will have the following structure:

- Name
- Short description, one paragraph long

- Personality, two paragraphs
- History, maximum half a page
- Three group affiliations
- Three personal relationships

Crucial requirements revealed by the analysis can be baked straight into the structure. For example, if every character needs a reason to be at the party, you can just make a new subheader: "Reason to be at the party". This way, you won't forget to provide everyone a reason.

Character names are one area where functionality and aesthetics can come into conflict. Practicality demands simple names that are easy to remember and pronounce, even if the fiction of the larp would call for something more elaborate or interesting. Designing the larp *Halat hisar* (Finland, 2013) the larp designers decided to give Finnish characters simple names like Kari Korpi because longer Finnish names such as Hannele Niittykumpu would have been too difficult for non-Finns to remember or pronounce. As a result, the Finnish names had a simple, cartoony quality, but the tradeoff between playability and plausibility was worth it.

While creating the character template, take a moment to consider the overall aesthetics of your larp. For example, *The Monitor Celestra* (Sweden, 2013) laid all character material out in the graphic style of the TV series *Battlestar Galactica*, on which the larp was based. Thus, the journey into the larp's fiction started with looking at the character description.

CALIBRATION FOR SPECIFIC PARTICIPANTS

In big larps that are meant to be replayed over and over again it might not be possible to calibrate each individual character to the exact wishes of the player. However, with many larps this is indeed possible, and the character writer might even have the answers to a player survey available as they work. (In larps where pre-produced characters cannot be customised for participants, the brunt of the work matching players with content will happen either during player selection or casting).

It is good to bear in mind that individual players, groups of players, or the player collectives of different runs of the same larp, might approach the same content very differently. You will find strong opinions come up especially with design choices that have a political element to them. Depending on your design aspirations, the flexibility of your design, and how much time you have, you may want to make some adjustments for the benefit of the players you actually have.

The 2013 run of the Palestinian-Finnish larp *Halat hisar* is one example of this. Gender-based oppression was explicitly deemed to be out of the scope of the larp. This choice was made because female players overwhelmingly wanted to

play characters who could experience the full range of difficult and specific political realities depicted in the larp, instead of characters whose lives were defined and circumscribed by gender-based oppression. Thus, in the occupied Finland of the larp's setting, male and female characters could be found in any role from armed resistance leader to university professor.

The preferences of the larp's queer players went in the opposite direction. They specifically requested to play on how homophobia and conservative sexual mores take root in communities under severe external oppression. Because of this, the design team made the choice to make homophobia a playable reality in occupied Finland. In this example, misogyny and homophobia were treated in the opposite ways, not because of any worldbuilding principle, but to provide a good play experience for the specific individuals who signed up for the larp.

CHARACTER ELEMENTS

CONCEPTS

To design characters, you need to come up with character concepts. The basic idea of the larp is often a good springboard for this. A good question to ask when creating character concepts is whether they can “do their thing” in the larp or not? Can a fighter pilot actually fly a fighter plane in the larp?

If the larp is about a certain social milieu you can list all the people who would naturally be present. Then you can analyze the list in terms of whether each character concept would be meaningful as a playable character. If yes, that character goes to a player. If no, it's a supporting character, and should either be cut, represented in play only in some limited way (perhaps in backstory or over the phone), or become an NPC.

Another good method for inventing character concepts is to start on the group level. This way, each idea is not a single character, but a number of characters, often from three to eight. Let's say you're making a crime-themed larp. You can make a professional killer, but you can also create a society of professional killers. This method has the added bonus of creating social ties between characters. Indeed, creating characters in groups is so useful, it's almost always the right choice.

In his classic lecture on playable characters, larp theorist Eirik Fatland uses Strider from *Lord of the Rings* as an example of a bad larp character. In a larp set at the Prancing Pony, Strider would be alone, silent, unconnected to anyone, with nothing to do except wait for hobbits. It is far better to play a character at any of the other tables, part of a group drinking together. You might think Strider is interesting character concept on the individual level, because he is secretly the heir to the throne of Gondor, but this is an honour he does not want, and with which he can do absolutely nothing in an inn in Bree.

If a concept can be fully realized in terms of action during the larp, you're good to go. A cop who can do cop things is fine. A burglar who can burgle and a society lady who can host a dinner party also work. However, if your larp features a concept whose actions are blocked for some reason, you must pay extra attention to make sure the character is playable. If the fighter pilot has no plane to fly, they can feel extraneous and pointless unless they have other qualities that allow for action. If those qualities distribute evenly, the larp works. If not, it doesn't.

A special category of difficult characters are those who primarily remove play from others. A character like this might have a design function but they're generally depressing to play. For example, the larp is about starting a revolution. Most characters are all for it, but a few conservative characters voice their opposition. These conservative voices have a function in the larp's social dynamics as they make it possible to have a discussion about the need for revolution, but playing them means essentially trying to keep other players from realizing the potential of the larp. From the viewpoint of an individual player, this can be tedious. A common manifestation of this character type is a "good character in a bad world". The larp is about degenerate monsters doing terrible things to each other. For the sake of contrast, there's a few good people thrown in. In a scenario like this, consider carefully what kind of an experience these characters will provide for the players. Otherwise, there's a danger they'll fail the basic functionality test of a larp character: *to provide access to the content of the larp.*

PERSONALITY TRAITS

You can give characters any sort of personality traits you wish, but they don't all work the same when it comes to actual play. Larp scholar and designer Markus Montola divides personality traits into two categories:

Enabling traits allow the character to act. Examples of such traits are hotheaded, generous, curious, brave, helpful, talkative, vindictive, prone to falling in love, careless and ambitious. These traits make the character into a dynamic force and create the basis for doing things even in the absence of any greater motivation. If the character likes to meddle in other people's business, they can get caught up in events that don't really have anything to do with them.

Disabling traits block action. Examples are shy, methodical, cowardly, private, quiet, meek, embarrassed, emotionless, solitary, careful and mild. Characteristics of this type are common in real life and in the world of literature and film but become difficult when given to a character somebody is supposed to play in a larp. They suggest a picture of an unplayable larp character who would be a shy, cowardly individual who rarely rushes to judgement.

This is not to say that you can't use disabling characteristics. They can be an important part of a larp character. Rather, the object of this analysis is to pay attention to the balance of enabling and disabling. If the character has nothing but

enabling characteristics, it will work fine. If most of its traits are disabling, it can be boring to play. The play culture of the larp also affects the impact of disabling characteristics. Disabling features are less limiting if the play culture allows the participant to ask their fellow players for help to include their characters in social interactions and plotlines; considerate players will compensate.

When thinking about the concept and personality of the character, it's good to consider what kind of play your player enjoy or you want to encourage. If the players are expected to wallow in introspection, the character design has different demands than if you're going for explosive melodrama.

One approach is to base characters on clear, identifiable archetypes. An example would be a fire-and-brimstone priest or a noble knight. These kinds of roles are easy to grasp and provide a solid base for action. The player knows how the cliché works so they can focus on thinking how it functions in the wider context of the larp. The dynamics occur between characters as the different archetypes interact with each other. This kind of character design works best in action-oriented, melodramatic larps where there is no time for reflection. They present the social map of the larp as a caricature that is easy to grasp and remember. An example of a larp designed like this is *Inside Hamlet* (Denmark, 2015) where the monsters of the court of King Claudius are all larger-than-life travesties of humanity.

On the other hand, maybe internal reflection is part of the experience of the larp. If this is the case, the characters require complexity and contradictions to create the tensions the players can then explore during the larp. Although a character can be designed with a much more nuanced level of complexity, the quick-fix method for making these types of characters is to embrace paradox. Give the characters traits which directly contradict each other. Thus, you'll have a miserly philanthropist, a cowardly hero and a sentimental executioner. Ideally, the player can use the contradictions to provide a number of options for actions in any given situation thus creating steering agency for the player. The character's actions are not obviously coherent, but create the impression of richness and internal life. This kind of complexity can also be created by giving the character contradictory loyalties and motivations. Perhaps the character is a patriot but also a traitor who has sold out their country to help their family. Maybe they want to be loved, yet sabotage all their relationships because they get bored.

Complex character personalities promote a more nuanced, less dramatic playstyle.

MOTIVATIONS

All characters need meaningful things they can do in the larp and reasons for doing them. Motivation and action are tied together in the character's design. Sometimes this can be very simple. For example, the character is a cop, who can arrest people in the larp. Their motivation to do so is professional. Ideally, especial-

ly in longer larps, the character has a set of motivations directing them towards different kinds of action. This way, the larp experience has variety. Perhaps the cop has a secret lover who's the spouse of an important politician. Maybe the cop is also a member of a revolutionary cell plotting to overthrow the government. Suddenly there's three motivations, all pointing to different kinds of action.

Generally speaking, motivations that don't allow for action within the scope of the larp are pointless. If the character dreams of becoming a carpenter but nothing in the larp helps with this, the motivation is just useless padding of the character text. This doesn't mean that the character can't have broad motivations. If the character wants world peace, the motivation can still be actionable if there's something in the larp to further this goal.

A simple rule in designing motivations is to make the characters want to do the things they need to do for the larp to work. If the larp is about defending a village from the orcs, design the characters so they want to defend the village and the orcs so they want to attack. Motivations are a great way to harness player energy and creativity because once the player has internalized the motivation, their improvised, spontaneous actions are in line with the broad design of the larp. Because of this, take care to avoid motivations that direct characters against the concept of the larp.

GROUPS

Designing characters in groups makes the creative work easier, but it also provides each character with a set of relations and a social milieu. Eirik Fatland has written about the *Three Affiliations model of group design* originally invented for the larp *1942 – Noen å stole på* (Norway, 2000, Eng. 1942 – Someone to Trust). In this model, each character belongs to three groups: work, friends, and family. *1942* is about life in a small fishing village under Nazi occupation so these three groups are a natural part of the life of each character. Having three groups means that the character immediately has a relationship with a large number of others. If each group has five members, that's fifteen connections. The groups also suggest scenes and social situations that can come up in the larp. The family can eat dinner together, the friends can meet to play cards, the workers can work together.

Indeed, ideally each group has actions they can perform in the larp, whether social or something else.

If your larp is not set in a Norwegian fishing village, you can still use the Three Affiliations model. You just need to reconfigure the groups so they make sense in the context of your fiction. However, it's a good idea to take the broad thrust of *1942's* design and make the groups distinct and different in terms of the social functions they have. Instead of making the character part of three different friend groups, embrace variety in terms of why the characters are associated together. In designing groups, it's usually good to give them cohesion, to make the characters want to associate with each other. A family in which each

member hates the others so much they can't even be in the same room can provide motivation and action but it doesn't give its members a social milieu they can spend time in.

RELATIONSHIPS

Characters are defined by their social connections. In a sense, no character exists on their own. They need others to bounce off of, to validate who they are: a king with no subjects is not a king.

A common method to give the characters social connections and substance is simply to list three or four individual relationships. "Sven is your husband. You have a difficult marriage with a lot of conflict stemming from mutual uncertainty. Secretly you want to cheat on him to see how he'd react." A good personal connection is substantial enough to help define your character and involves a clear motivation for action in the larp. The challenge of pre-written personal connections is that they are a very labor-intensive form of character design, especially if they're created by the larp designers as part of the character description.

Pre-planned relations also make the larp fragile. If a player cancels too late to be replaced, game content depending on that character's presence is lost. Group-based connections and motivations are faster to create and you can ask players to come up with individual connections on their own. If you do this, remember they do not know the larp's design and will need support to understand what kinds of relationships will be meaningful, appropriate and playable. It's good practice to provide a list of what everyone should have, for example one family member, one enemy and one friend.

If you decide to craft the individual connections for the characters, make sure to only have actionable, meaningful ones. This is an example of a bad character connection: "Mathilda is a member of your choir group. You like her even though you don't often talk." The connection is mild, contains no potential for action and could be improvised by the player based on group affiliation with no loss of nuance.

Having at least three connections is important because of their high failure rate. Personal, individual connections most typically fail to become real and relevant in play either because the players just don't hit it off, or because they are never in the same room. Player chemistry is especially difficult to compensate for: you cannot force people who don't find each other interesting or whose play styles don't click to play together (although you might be able to support everyone in connecting by making them do workshop exercises together).

The logistical challenges are easier to account for, but often are not factored in because character writers tend to be disconnected from the rest of the design team and may not have a clear understanding of the playability implications of the venue and the overall design. Which characters can meaningfully interact is not just a question of back story and the setting's social norms, but also of the

temporal and spatial design of your larp.

Will the characters, or some character groups like “the servants” or “the government” perform a lot of scheduled labor from which they are unable to step away? Is the play area a castle with tens or hundreds of rooms in play? Do the characters live, sleep and work in different shifts on your submarine or space station? Are there literally any times and spaces in the larp where it is feasible for these two characters to randomly meet? If the answer is no, they might not be a playable connection, or you will need to provide them with some means of interaction, like writing each other letters. This will also give them the opportunity of coordinating their schedules. (Also remember that if your players make their individual character connections themselves, they will need the same playability information your character writers would have).

Unless you invest significant effort into countering their effects, you can assume that between player chemistry, larp chaos and last minute cancellations, at least one out of three character connections will fail.

BACKGROUND

It is very important to remember that character background is meant to be useful for the player in service of the character’s general function of being a tool used to access the content of the larp. It’s not a story, or a literary work, but raw material for the imagination of the player. Despite this caveat, stylistic flourishes can be functional: when correctly used they make it easier for the player to grasp what the character is and how it works. Character background can be a written text provided by the larp designers but it can also be created by the player based on loose guidelines or improvised together in a workshop. It’s a paradoxical element of larp design because you can put practically infinite effort into it, yet larp design often demands very few specific background details from any individual character. Structurally, it usually doesn’t matter if the character’s father was a taxi driver or a CEO, even if it can have immense meaning for the journey of the player of that character.

When designing backstory, focus on two things:

Essential events for the character’s identity and persona. For example, if the character is defined by an upper class upbringing, you can provide a few details about this. If the character is a former soldier and that is central to the character’s identity, include information about their time in the military. This kind of material can be used by the player as something to talk about and establish their character in the minds of other players.

Directly relevant details that are important during the larp. Directly relevant background material means things that concretely come up during the larp.

For example, the character spent their youth as a servant in the Haywood house. Now, after a significant climb in social class, they find themselves invited to a party at Haywood manor. In this situation, everything about the character's Haywood experiences can be meaningful as they interact with the larp.

Remember that the importance of backstory details varies enormously depending on the design of your larp. If the engine of your larp lies in the specific web of tensions, grudges, secrets and relationships of the characters, these need to be focused very clearly, and the players need to be told these should all be brought into play without significant alterations. If your larp is driven by the setting or the situation, the function of the individual backstory is perhaps primarily to provide atmosphere, a connection to the larp's theme and a psychologically appealing persona to create and experience the story through. In that kind of design, a player who does not connect with a character trait can probably change it, and there is less pressure to memorise precise background facts to employ in play.

It is not enough that you yourself understand what kind of larp you're making: you also need to tell the players how to interact with the materials you provide. Players from a larp culture where another design norm dominates will unwittingly ruin their own experience – and at worst that of many others – if you do not tell them how your specific larp is supposed to be played.

FINISHING TOUCHES

The character is a tool used by the player. If the player can't use it, the fault lies in the character design, not the player. Functionality is key. Because of this, make sure to include only information relevant to the larp. Motivations, social roles, background that don't manifest in any way during the runtime are worse than useless: they distract from the material the player actually needs to focus on.

This is why efficiency of communication always trumps style. The character description needs to be understood by the player and the sad truth is that stylistic flourishes and beauty sometimes get in the way. This does not mean you can't be ambitious in your character writing, but on balance you should err on the side of utility. At least this is what you must do if you want to make sure your design works as intended. As always, there's plenty of experimental territory out there if you're willing to take the risk – just make sure to test your design innovations before rolling them out in a complex production.

There's a lot of creative space beyond the model of character design presented above. A final look at a few edge cases should serve to illustrate that what a character needs to be is always defined by the individual larp.

Brody Condon's larp *The Zeigarnik Effect* (Norway, 2015) was based on the methods of gestalt therapy. Participants were only allowed to speak in pre-

sent-tense statements about directly observable things. Because of the way the participants speak and think in this larp, there's no history, no future and very little personal identity. So what is the character? In practice, the characters developed in the workshop and during the game were extremely simple, often just the idea that you're someone who wants to be here participating in this group and who has an affliction of some sort they want to examine and work on. The extreme limitations placed on the player's behavior would have made anything more than that superfluous, possibly even damaging to the larp.

In the larp *Momentum* (Sweden, 2007), the characters were based on a *possession model*. The larp lasted for five weeks and was designed to run alongside the everyday life of each participant. The character was conceptualized as the ghost of a dead revolutionary who took over the player's life at key moments. Thus, the player could exist in the fiction of the larp even when not playing the character. *Momentum* was made during the fashion for *Alternate Reality Games* (ARGs) and was heavily influenced by them. According to the then-dominant ARG aesthetic, the game must be seamless with reality, with no obvious lines of demarcation between ingame and offgame. A larp character is a very obvious line of demarcation, so it was refashioned into the diegetic ghost to preserve the all-encompassing nature of the fiction.

While the model presented in this chapter will give you fine, workable characters, you should always remember that many wonderful larp designers have made completely different choices and succeeded.

WHO CREATES THE CHARACTERS

// Karijn van der Heij

One of the most important design choices to be made when creating a larp is to decide who will create the characters for the larp: the design team, the participants, or a collaboration of the two. Most larp traditions have a strong predisposition towards a specific way of distributing the responsibility for character creation. Often that is not an active choice but a side effect of the community's production realities, of how narrative is organised in the design, and of what has traditionally been the interaction engine of that style of larp. Occasionally the traditional way will suit the goals of the designers best, but in the end every larp will benefit from a making an intentional design decision instead of relying on tradition.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS WHEN CHOOSING THE METHOD

Creating, cross-checking, and calibrating characters always requires a lot of time and effort, yet this work translates into communicating the vision for the larp and control over the event. There are pros and cons to the different methods.

TIME

The task of character creation, whether doing it yourself or managing a team of writers, will easily be the most time-consuming one in a larp design process. All written characters should be checked and edited, or the lead designer must accept that character consistency and quality may vary.

Handing character creation over to the participants will give the larpmakers extra time to work on other narrative tasks like worldbuilding. How much time is gained by this choice will depend on the type of larp, the local larp tradition, and how used the player base is to the larp type. In some cases adjusting ill-fitting characters created by players can be almost as much effort as writing the characters in the first place. Part of this can be avoided through very clear communication and providing a design framework for the participants to work within, for example by having a great design document or website and a structured character creation process.

When a larp is expected to have several runs, writing characters may become the best choice, because the calibrations and checks that are needed for play-

er-written characters are a recurring task, whereas characters written by the team are reusable. You can of course still choose to gather input from players on the playability of characters and character groups and update the writing as needed.

NARRATIVE CONTROL

If you of your team write the characters you can ensure that each individual character relates to the story, plot, and themes in a meaningful way, and is equally embedded in the larp's web of relationships. It also gives you control of how many characters of a specific type there are, and that characters are not too similar, ensuring more control over the feel of the larp and of its stories. You might for instance want to make sure that there are more servants than nobles, but not too many rebellious servants, or that the Governor's husband is unhappy about their marriage.

With participants creating their own characters ensuring the same result requires either some kind of system communicating design limitations, or an extensive calibration and editing system after character creation – and both of these take time. When creating their own character, fear of not having enough to do at the larp, or just a poor sense of what is playable or appropriate, can cause players to make 'special snowflake' characters. (In, say, a larp about a deeply Christian, isolated village inhabited by people afraid to go into the forest, this could be a character that is an experienced hunter, the only person who knows how to use firearms, an atheist, secretly a unicorn and also the King's brother). It then takes a lot of back-and-forth time, and possibly creates conflict, to get them back into line with the narrative. This is especially a risk when a larp is new to the local scene in approach or genre, or players are unsure what to expect and what is expected of them.

COMFORT ZONES AND CHALLENGES

When participants create their own characters, they can foster the type of play they want to experience. They are unlikely to end up with an option that they do not like, and that will save you a lot of energy. It also means people are unlikely to have to engage with content they would rather avoid.

People creating their own characters will have a tendency to cast themselves within a comfort zone, but it also provides the opportunity to deliberately challenge themselves. In general, characters assigned by the design team are more likely to pose unexpected play challenges for the participants, especially if the people doing the casting have no preconceived impressions of the players.

Having to come up with a character will put the time constraint on the players instead of the designers. If you need to set deadlines for them before the start of the larp you should probably expect not all of them will deliver on time. Many players appreciate or even depend on the fact that someone else will do the mental labour of coming up with something and adjusting it to the larp; some players will not sign up to a larp that requires them to do this type of work.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND CASTING

If you write the characters you will need to assign them to players, i.e. design a casting process of some kind. Casting based on sign-up questionnaires and previous known larping history has some common pitfalls. For example, the most visible or desired characters tend to go to players who know what they want and how to express it, or to players with abundant social capital. *Blind casting*, for example through a character lottery, will give newcomers and established players an equal shot at central figures such as leadership roles (which is particularly important since players with less social capital are usually also less likely to write central roles for themselves in larps where that would be possible). Casting based on the player's out of character skills or even larp experience can be needed, and that can be a valid design choice. In that case it is still good to keep in mind that your casting choices may have the effect or the appearance of strengthening out of character social dynamics.

Characters written by the design team can greatly benefit players with less social capital, since they will always have a place in the collective narrative. This is especially important to new players whose steering skills may not be as strong and might otherwise feel left out. Designer-written characters will also allow all players a larger amount of alibi, especially if they do not have much influence over the casting. This will be important if the larp needs social roles and story functions that players might be shy about taking on themselves, such as obvious oppressor characters or other norm-breaking personae.

If the designers allow the players to make their own (additional) character relationships, the players can easily seek out the people they want to play with. That can be comforting, especially as a backup in case pre-assigned relationships do not work out. However, it can again result in play veering towards the well-known players with high social capital, creating an imbalance detrimental to marginalized or newer players.

HOW TO DIVIDE THE CHARACTER CREATION WORK

PLAYERS CREATE THE CHARACTERS

Generally, if the larp is more plot- or action-oriented, then *what* happens is more important than *who* exactly it is happening to. The task of creating or fleshing out characters can be left to the players. In such cases the larp can facilitate different kinds of characters and still work. Players can be given full narrative control of the characters and allowed to create their entire character background and relationships. Your contribution can be limited to checking the characters for inconsistencies and providing a platform for relationship building. This is usually also the default method for very large larps where the workload would simply be too big and adjusting the plot to the characters is easier than the other way

around. Players made the characters in larps such as *Nuova Atlantide* (Italy, 2014, New Atlantis) and large fest games like *Drachenfest* (Germany, in its current form since 2001).

DESIGNERS CREATE THE CHARACTERS

This is the norm for larps where the story is important or complex, and all characters should play a more or less equal part in it, where the play centers around relationships, or where the setting is important and will suffer from ill-fitting characters. Here the larpmakers retain full narrative control through designing and writing complete characters, including background, character goals and relations. Examples are abundant, and include larps such as *Just a Little Lovin'* (Norway, 2011), *Conscience* (Spain, 2018) and *The Forbidden History* (Poland, 2018). In the latter, characters were written for individual players based on their wishes.

DESIGNERS CREATE ROLES AND CAST PLAYERS. PLAYERS CREATE CHARACTERS

In this approach you have a spread of roles – characters described as their functions – that you will assign, and then leave to the players to actually flesh out as characters. This is well suited for narrative or action heavy larps, where the spread of roles is more important than the exact characteristics of the actors. It will ensure that there are not too many people playing the same sort of character. An action-packed spaceship larp may need a gunnery sergeant, but whether that gunnery sergeant is brooding and heroic or struggling through a divorce is less important to the design.

In larps with clear opposing groups or factions the participants can rather easily be assigned to groups and left to sort out between them the roles (and characters) within it. Remember that leaving the negotiation to the participants may again cause the more obviously confident players to end up at the forefront. A solution for this is to also cast the roles within the group (leader, trusted advisor, most loyal soldier) and then let the participants flesh those out in collaboration. The character creation at *Dead Fox Junction* (Netherlands, 2010) and *Returned* (UK, 2018) was done by only distributing roles.

PLAYERS CREATE BACKGROUND, WHILE DESIGNERS SPECIFY RELATIONSHIPS

Often the fact that two characters are former best friends who had a huge falling-out has more impact on the rest of the larp than those character's occupations or life story. You might choose to design just these relationships and leave the rest up to the participants themselves. The players craft a background for their characters and decide what to play, and based on that the design team gives them a list of relationships that make sense for the character. This ensures that all players have an equal amount of meaningful relationships, and makes sense when play between characters as part of a web of people is the most important

part of the larp.

Participants may be given the opportunity to add extra relationships to increase story options in play, but this will weaken your control over the relationship network as a whole.

Cirque Noir (The Netherlands, 2017) is an example of a larp made in this manner.

DESIGNERS CREATE BACKGROUNDS, PLAYERS SPECIFY RELATIONSHIPS

This approach is less common than the previous set up, but will work for larps where it is mostly important where the character is placed in the story ('you are the rookie in the police force and were present at the day of the president's assassination') than how exactly they relate to the other characters. Here the designers of the larp write backgrounds – either complete ones or shorter ideas that players then have to extend themselves – and leave it up to the players to decide who they know and what their relationship to those characters is. Variants of this approach where some core relationships are pre-determined and the full relationship web is built by the participants are very common. In either case you would probably provide a way for the players to connect and form their own relationships, either before the larp on social media, or on site, for example during the workshops.

Examples of larps where the players build the character relationships themselves are early iterations of *College of Wizardry* (Poland, 2014) and *Skull & Crossbones* (Germany/Denmark, 2017).

PLAYERS CREATE CHARACTERS WITH SPECIFIC INPUT

Here the participants do most of the character creation work, but there is a specific list of things they have to integrate in the character, such as certain questions that must be answered, or certain themes or secrets that must be embedded. This is a good fit when these secrets or themes are central to the larp experience, so it is important that they play an equally big role in all characters, but where having a specific sort of character is not central to the larp experience. This method was used in *Exit: de Bunker* (The Netherlands, 2014, Eng. *Exit: the Bunker*) and *The Quota* (UK, 2018).

PLAYERS CONSTRUCT A CHARACTER BASED ON PRE-DESIGNED ELEMENTS

Sometimes designers create alternatives for character personality, history, core values, group affiliations, function and the like, but let players mix and match these. This is an interesting compromise between designer control and player agency, as all the relevant parts are created by designers, but players get to choose between them in a first come first served method. On this skeleton the players can then construct their fully fleshed character. The downside is that unless the game design allows some redundancy in all the categories, the players go through the

process last will have fewer options to choose from. This method has been implemented in database driven online character creation systems, such as the proprietary Larpweaver, which was used in larps like *Enlightenment in Blood* (Germany, 2016) and *Tuhannen viillon kuolema* (Finland, 2018, Eng. *Death by a Thousand Cuts*).

BACK AND FORTH CO-CREATION

The most time-intensive way to create characters is a back-and-forth between player and designer, where the player gives input and the designer makes a character based on that input. In several iterations the participant can add content and request changes. This means that the writer still has to write the character *and* on top of that monitor the whole process.

This is best suited for larps where the designers' vision and the character's compatibility with the plot and themes are very important, but where it is also vital that participants are fully comfortable with a character, for example in larps with particularly heavy themes. This method was used at *Moresnet 1888* (Netherlands, 2018), and *Rötmånad* (Sweden, 2018, Eng. Month of the Rot). At *Dawnstone* (UK, 2017) the co-creation was mostly between players. Back-and-forth co-creation between players or between players and organizers can also be used for games in which the characters are entirely or almost entirely made during the pre-larp workshops, such as in the larp *Zusammen/Sami/Sudetenland* (Czech Republic, 2017).

CO-CREATIVE DESIGN WITH PLAYERS

// Mo Holkar

The Mixing Desk of Larp slider ‘Character Creation Responsibility’ models a continuum, from characters designed fully by the larpwright to characters designed fully by the player. *Skeleton characters* are somewhere in the middle of the slider: the designer has provided enough of a structure to the character to be sure that it will play its part within the context of the whole-larp design; but everything else has been left to the player, to develop and personalize those ‘bones’ in the way that they wish.

This is a common practice in both chamber and longform larp – each player chooses or is assigned one of these skeletons, and then goes about the task of fleshing them out into fully-formed characters ready for the start of the larp.

This chapter looks at practical workshop techniques that can be used to help players through this fleshing process, and that will empower them to quickly and effectively develop the designer’s archetypes into their own individual characters.

STRENGTHS AND DRAWBACKS

The skeleton approach provides some of the strengths of fully-pre-designed characters, and some of the strengths of player-created characters: it can be the best of both worlds, for players and designers. The underlying presence of the skeletons means that the overall balance of the larp will accord to the design, with the characters’ motivations and functions being in harmony or tension as the designer requires; but the players will have had enough input to be able to feel that the character belongs to them, and to be comfortable playing it.

There are also drawbacks. From the designer’s point of view, have they given the player too much freedom and space? Might the player’s additions ‘break’ the larp in some way? Might players not bother putting in the necessary work, or lack the creativity, to turn the skeletons into interesting and playable characters? Might a player’s end-result character fail to be coherent with those of other players? Drawbacks exist also for the player. Are the skeletons too dry or too thin to engage with creatively? Is the scope of fleshing clear – what they are expected to do, and what they are expected not to do? Is it ever really going to feel like their

own character? With the right preparation and the right choice of techniques, these drawbacks can be addressed and ameliorated.

In chamber larp, the fleshing out of a character will usually take place in a workshop immediately before the start of play. In longform larp there is the option to work over a longer period during the pre-larp phase. This can allow for a series of rounds of feedback between player and organizers, discussing and approving the player's ideas; and can allow players to share ideas with each other, and build elements of common backstory, more easily and perhaps more deeply than is practical under the time pressure of a pre-larp workshop. However, an extended process like this will be vulnerable to players who drop out and need to be replaced part way through, and to players who are too busy to actually carry out the tasks.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

The key task for the designer is to get the player to think about and define specific aspects of the character that are going to be important in play. By bringing their own personal creativity to this fleshing process, the players make their character different from how anyone else would have built it, despite being based upon a predesigned skeleton.

This can start from the simplest place: allowing the player to choose the character's name. In many larps, biographical details do not need to be specified by the designer. What is this person's background? How do they occupy their time? Where do they live? What is their gender, their sexuality? Giving players the authority to choose them themselves is giving them a powerful voice in the construction of the character's ways of being.

In *Real Men* (UK, 2015) the characters are young men who are meeting each other for the first time. Here is the skeleton of one of the characters:

T_____ [choose name]

The Showman [character concept]

Your secret fear (unknown even to yourself): "I'm worthless".

This compels you to perform and prove yourself constantly.

Your fantasy is fame, success and adulation.

The impossible dream is that your ordinariness will be accepted.

And the basic questions:

- What's your name?
- Where are you from? (A specific place e.g. Ealing, or a general description of the type of place eg. a small East Midlands town.)
- How do you spend your time (working, training, studying, unemployed, etc)?

- What do you want to achieve with that?
- Are you in a relationship at the moment?
- How do you feel about that?
- Do you believe in something larger and more mysterious than yourself?
(Be it a religion or something else.)

For each specific larp, there will be things that you can ask the players to invent which will be of particular importance in this theme and setting. For example, if the larp is going to involve characters who are a close family unit, then it could be useful to ask players to think about how their character views the idea of family, and how they feel about their position within the existing family. This way, the player will already be developing emotional material to bring into the larp.

One way of providing a certain amount of creative freedom to players, without opening the whole universe of possibility to them, is to offer a set of options rather than a free choice. When asking players to choose an occupation for the character, the designer could give them a list of occupations to select from, as was done in *Delta Sector Helter Skelter* (UK, 2017). In this larp, set on a starship, 16 different occupations (e.g. alien dignitary, android servant, bartender, counsellor, red-shirted security officer, xenobiologist) are available to characters. Each is printed on a card; the organizer spreads the cards out on a table, and each player must choose one. Defining occupations in advance like this means that players right away get a feel for what sort of story is being told in this larp. It looks like *Star Trek* rather than *Star Wars*; it will be about personal interactions as well as mission and duty; there are intelligent aliens, with whom humans interact; it will be corny and full of familiar tropes.

CLOSE TO HOME

It is important to realize that letting players choose character details is not just about exercising their creativity. It also allows them to set their own comfort levels. Perhaps a player wishes to stretch themselves in one way but not in others: for example, they might want to try playing someone of a different sexuality, but they prefer to stay within their own gender, rather than changing too many things at once.

In a pre-designed character, what seems an unremarkable detail to the designer may be challenging for a player. And players may not have the confidence to ask for such details to be changed: they do not know what is important to the design, and what is not. But when the design is instead a skeleton, then it is evident that all of the bones presented are necessary as they are, while everything else is up to the player to set as they prefer.

When the fleshing out of the character is not sufficiently structured and the choices available are not clear, the players easily end up defaulting to what they

already know – like familiar tropes. Lack of time can also lead the players to create characters that are to an extent similar to themselves. When you have twelve different questions to answer in a limited space of time, and not much to work from, the chances are that several of the answers are going to be quite similar to your own life and experience.

When players are knowingly playing characters very similar to themselves it is called playing *close to home*. This can have tremendous psychological exploratory value, in a way that playing far away does not. If the larp design is one that sets out to encourage players to explore themselves within the alibi of their character, then the more that players are allowed to design their own characters – and the less that character detail is given to them from the designer’s own mind – the greater the scope for producing a play experience which will have a strong personal resonance. If the players just end up playing themselves because no other structure was given by the skeleton, then the personal exploration is not part of the design.

PROMPTS TO GIVE

Each task related to fleshing can be used to prompt the player to start, during this workshop, thoughts and feelings that are going to feed in to the themes of the larp itself. For example, *Life Lessons* (UK, 2018) is a larp about drawing as both a tool and a metaphor for exploring and presenting the self. As a workshop exercise, players are asked, when they create their characters, to sketch something that represents an aspect of who the character is, or of how the world sees them. This prompt gives the player a start on what they will be doing during the larp itself – using drawing to open up elements of the character’s self, and presenting themselves to the others in the drawing class. The sketch produced is not of use in itself; it is a tool to get the player’s mind and creativity pointed in the right direction.

Prompts can also be physical. “Walk around the room as your character would walk” is a familiar embodiment exercise, often with variations such as “Now walk as they would when they are sad/excited/angry”. Even if the character is not actually going to be walking during the larp, it allows the player to feel out the physicality of this other person, the character – to experiment with how they hold and shape their body, and how it responds to them – to flesh them out in the most literal sense. This will feed back into insights about the character’s moods, feelings, and responses.

COLLABORATION AND RELATIONSHIPS

It may be important to the design of the larp that players work together in fleshing out their characters – or at least share with one another while doing so.

This might be because the characters need to be a tightly-knit ensemble if play is to work as planned (perhaps players have to sign up in pairs or groups); or it might be more for calibration purposes, to make sure that everyone is on the same conceptual page and no player has invented a detail that does not fit with the others. Alternatively, the players may be tasked to create the connections and interrelationships between the characters.

Remember that social dynamics among the individuals may come into play. It is possible that one player might tend to dominate group decisions, or might even start taking decisions on behalf of other players. This potential tendency can be resisted by providing rules of interaction (such as, players must contribute strictly in turn, may not interrupt each other, decisions must be voted upon), or by close organizer supervision and intervention.

CONCLUSION

It is natural for designers who come from a fully designer-controlled larp tradition to perhaps feel a little insecurity, when handing control of character details over to players in this way. If you have not specified aspects of who the character is, how they are motivated, and what they are trying to achieve, can you be confident that the larp will not become ‘broken’ in play?

The task is then to identify the minimum amount that you need to specify to ensure that play will match your intentions – and to do no more than that. That way, you are giving players the maximum opportunity to shape their play experience to their personal wants or needs. By using suitable workshop questions and prompts, you can be sure that participants with characters that they’ve themselves fleshed around your skeletons will get the best possible experience from your larp design.

FURTHER READING

Brief introduction to the Mixing Desk https://nordiclarp.org/wiki/The_Mixing_Desk_of_Larp

Detailed discussion of the Mixing Desk of Larp <http://analoggamestudies.org/2016/11/the-mixing-desk-of-larp-history-and-current-state-of-a-design-theory/>

About the design of Real Men <https://nordiclarp.org/2016/11/30/real-men-defining-gender-identities/>

DESIGNING A CHARACTER DESCRIPTION

// Evan Torner

Character descriptions, sometimes called character sheets, serve all role-playing games. Players rely on them to provide cues for how to role-play as well as to inform players about what their characters' ingame capabilities and connections are. As previously discussed, there are no formal requirements for how to design or communicate a character; indeed there are larps where nothing about the character is written down. Most often, however, the essence of the character will be communicated in some kind of document that aligns with the structure of your character design. The sheet can be a formal structure for documenting the character creation work you've asked your participants to do, or it could be the medium through which you communicate a character written by you to them.

This chapter is focused on the latter and details how you make a character sheet impactful, useful, concise, and aesthetically pleasing. Larp is a young medium, so we are still working on the Holy Grail of all character sheets. Nevertheless, some useful design principles present themselves.

WHAT TO INCLUDE

Character description should present the information the players need to successfully play the larp. They can be an index card worth of information, or pages and pages of text. They serve as references for gamemasters and players alike, both of whom will need to access specific facts about a given character.

Typically, there is a website or design document that contains references to any invented or obscure terminology on the sheet, so it is not uncommon for the character description to already constitute a deep-dive into the diegesis of the larp. A *College of Wizardry* (Poland, 2014) sheet, for example, might state "House: Durentius" without an explanation of what that means. One often assumes an active reader who cross-references the document with other information sources, rather than someone waiting for instructions on what to do.

Some of the most common facts contained in a character sheet are: *character name*, *basic identity markers* (character's gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, age, profession, nationality), *diegetic identity markers* (additional fictional data about the chara-

cter relevant in the storyworld), backstory (a character's personal biography that allows the player to interpret a character for play), specific ingame abilities (the "verbs" of the larp; what characters are capable of doing), secrets (both those that do not affect much and those that count as ingame currency), character relationships (an individual character's limited, ambiguous impressions of a network of other characters), and interpretative cues (artwork, poetry, music suggestions that help players better assimilate the core themes of the game).

Interpretative cues are perhaps the one major item that often gets lost in the shuffle. Your larp always exists in a context of other forms of narrative and human expression. These can be mobilized productively to give players guidance both before and during the larp: to get into character and to inform how a character will act in a given circumstance. If a character's signature song happens to be *Imagine* by John Lennon, for example, they will perhaps act as a peacemaker or seek to idealistically end conflict around them. If the painting at the top of a character's sheet is Caravaggio's *The Beheading of St. John the Baptist* (1608), then perhaps the character will present the cold face of human cruelty at some point during the larp.

IMPACTFUL AND USEFUL

How does one make a character description have a strong impression on a player while also delivering the necessary information? According to Jason Morningstar, the character sheets need to "function efficiently while serving as objects of inspiration that [communicate] theme and [hint] at possibilities for exciting play."

The first concern is whether or not the character sheet is being used as a *state tracker*. Will a player have to keep track of information *on* the character sheet over the course of the larp? If so, checkboxes, blank space, wide margins, and clear prompts will help one's players do it.

The second concern is *accessibility*. Is the text easy to read? Is it written in plain language with genre-appropriate flourishes? If your larp is in a dark room but still requires players to consult their character sheets, is it still legible? Do players need to be online in order to access their character data? If it is a PDF file, does it have optical character recognition (OCR), which converts scanned text into machine-intelligible text so vision-impaired players can have it read aloud? All of these affect the usefulness of the character sheet.

The third concern is *theme*. Do the themes of the game stand out or are somehow implied? How are the themes of the *larp* woven into those themes that belong to a *character*? This is a tricky one because it can tempt us into making more artsy – and perhaps less accessible – character sheets. On the other hand, it can have a wondrous impact on play.

Inside Hamlet (Denmark, 2015) character sheets openly state the thematic content as related to the overarching themes of the larp as well as the specific

thematic tension of the character itself. The 2015 sheet for Lady High Marshall Cornelia Guiderius literally bore the text: “Cordelia is a horrible person for the same reasons she is an excellent officer.” This indicates that a player should emphasize the double-edged quality of military training in play.

For Banana Chan’s *The Other Place* (USA, 2015), theme remains unstated but is summarized with evocative water colors and the comment that the larp was “inspired by the work of Henry Darger.” Anyone who googles “Henry Darger” will immediately be confronted by creepy paintings of doll-like girls who seem somehow involuntarily trapped inside, but doing so is not necessary to play. The mood of the larp is communicated by Chan’s equally creepy watercolors.

Good character sheets describe characters in concise language, imagery, and game mechanics. Good character description enables players to quickly align their understanding of their character and their play with both the priorities of the designer and the overall genre aesthetics of the larp.

CONCISE AND AESTHETICALLY PLEASING

With many given larps, larpwrights often find that there is so much to include and describe to the players that it is difficult to trim a character description down to a reasonable length. In many cases, this is just fine. Some larp communities consider 10-20 pages worth of text and images reasonable. It is easy to get lost in the elaborate writing of character creation, as characters deeply loved and delicately crafted by the creators can sometimes be more fun to play. A larpwright who writes a long character sheet is not necessarily doing it wrong; however, they *are* demanding that their players perform literary analysis and interpret the content provided into their own summarized form. Usually people can only keep track of 4-6 things in working memory, and thus much larpwriting will fall to the cutting room floor due to sheer mental load.

Keeping character descriptions between 2-3 pages, or even reaching the aesthetic milestone of 1 single A4 page or small card per character, has the effect of stating the creators have pared down the information to that which is relevant to the player. The name (or name options) should be large and easily findable at the top, so that the sheet itself can be quickly found. The clan, family, or other diegetic identity markers should also be clearly indicated somewhere for sorting purposes. Secrets should be located somewhere innocuous or can be hidden.

Character relationships should be kept brief and evocative: “You killed Dr. Ninja’s sister by accident, and don’t feel too bad about it.” Do not try and respond to every aspect of that character with every aspect of the other character. Open or close the sheet with your interpretative cues. Images related to the larp should be device- and printer-friendly. For the latter, that means no or few saturated colors, which will end up as blacks on a given printout. Choose images to which you have the rights and the interpretation of which yield some clue as to

how to play the larp well.

Create the character description that not only draws on best practices from the larp community to make it useful and accessible, but also captures the aesthetic most suitable to your larp.

FURTHER READING:

Morningstar, Jason. 2014. "Visual Design as Metaphor: the Evolution of a Character Sheet." *Analog Game Studies* 1.

Torner, Evan. 2017. "Literary and Performative Imaginaries – Where Characters Come From." NordicLarp.org.

EFFICIENT CHARACTER WRITING FOR BIG TEAMS

// Edin Janković Šumar

How can one organize the writing of characters for blockbuster larp in an efficient manner, while making sure that quality does not suffer as a result? Specifically, how to set up the structure of the whole writing project in a way that will lead to better results down the line? At Dziobak Larp Studios, where I worked as Lead World Writer and Character Coordinator, we originally organised character writing in a way that was familiar from many local larp cultures. A great number of writers did the writing with a high level of independence and passion, but a low degree of central coordination or practical insight into the core design of the larp.

Working like this, the writing of characters, relations, and groups will quickly run into some recurring issues. Here are some problems that surfaced in *Fairweather Manor* (Poland, 2015). Characters were sometimes *defined entirely by their relations to other characters*. For example, a servant character could be defined almost exclusively by having had a child out of wedlock with a non-servant character. Some characters can have *an abundance of relations*, while others having *very few or no relations*. For example, the leader of a group

had a connection to every member of said group and all the leaders of other groups, while a member of their group had only a relation to said leader and one or two members of their own group. Some characters had connections with far-away people, but *no defined relationship with their own siblings or parents*.

Furthermore, sometimes different character descriptions had *conflicting information* about the same thing. For example, a romance between two characters was mentioned in only one of the character's briefs, and a family was being described as rich in one character's brief, while as middling income or even poor in another character's description of same family's background. Finally, less critically, there was an issue of *redundancy of information*, restating the same information again and again in different texts. For example, having to make sure every single character in one particular group has a description of that group in their personal brief.

BUILDING A BETTER CHARACTER CREATION PROCESS

These issues were addressed for the second run of *Fairweather Manor* (Poland, 2016), and I developed a plan for how

to fix such problems through design of the character writing process in and of itself. For *Convention of Thorns* (Poland, 2016) I prototyped this system with the help of a team of 20 international writers.

- Split each character into groups of 5-10 based on their diegetic social proximity. For *FM* this could be families or work-related groups such as ‘the French family’ or ‘the low-status servants’, for *CoT* this was the geographical area the characters are from. These groups are *relations groups* and function as a useful way to distinguish which characters should have relations with each other.
- Write an overarching description of the group as a whole, such as a brief on ‘the French family’ as a unit, optionally with a short summation of each member. Be sure to include all the information needed by every member of the group, and others who want to know about the group. Write the text with full transparency.
- Write each character as a stand-alone. Do not add relations yet at this stage, as each character should ideally be fully realised characters even with no relations.
- Add relationships so that each character in a group has a connection to every other character in that group. Write these relations in third person and with full transparency. If you need to make adjustments to the text, you

need to adjust just one text rather than two. Usually we construct the relations in a separate document, just like the overarching description of the group – or we put the relations in that shared document.

- Write “blurbs” that are true enough for specific kinds of characters. So if someone is a Gangrel, just refer to the one Gangrel text instead of having to write it into each individual character that has that keyword.

This approach will not work for everyone or for every larp, but it served us extremely well for *Convention of Thorns* and has continued to serve us well for other larps. Another benefit of thinking in terms of groups is that splitting the characters up into clearly defined groups makes it easier to assign writers to clusters of characters. Splitting 130 characters into groups of 5-10 leaves between 13 and 26 groups, allowing you to assign a number of groups to a number of writers in an easy manner instead of having to assign every individual character, and it creates a sense of *coherence of vision* in that each character in the group shares a writer.

FURTHER READING:

https://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Fairweather_Manor

https://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Convention_of_Thorns

NAILED IT!

HOMework AS PLAYER PREPARATION

// Laura Kröger

Pyhävuoren perilliset (Eng. The Heirs of Pyhävuori) is a larp designed by Laura Kröger and Helinä Nurmonen, originally played in Finland May 2014 and rerun six times. In our larp we had pre-written characters with a huge amount of plots and contacts written in. We realized that participating in the larp would require some commitment from the players and that just reading the character description might not be enough to memorise the information. We wanted to help the players prepare, to get more involved in their character's story, and to feel more connected and emotionally attached.

We decided to give our player *homework* designed to help them to pinpoint the character aspects they enjoyed most, as well as to help them memorize their characters, think a little deeper about their character motives, fears, and hopes, and to familiarise them with their contacts. Homework was partly a solo mission and partly designed to be done in cooperation with the contacts. We included questions like:

- Who are the most important people to your character and what kind of event could put that relationship into jeopardy?

- Is your character happy? If not, what would make them happy, or are they even capable of being happy?
- Where does your character see themselves in five or ten years? What is their long term goal or ambition?
- How does your character act in conflicts? Are they aggressive or defensive? Do they fight fairly or try to stab in the back?

These questions challenged the player to consider certain themes beforehand so they were primed to react to surprises during the larp. They also allowed the players to choose a focus and to get familiar with the character past just reading the character description. We regularly reminded the players of these assignments, asked them to write down their answers, and to share their homework with the team since their visions and ideas also would give us inspiration and boost our enthusiasm. None of this was required, but we encouraged them to at least give some thought to the subjects if they did not feel comfortable writing them down.

The most impactful assignment turned out to be asking the players to create a few memories for their character. We asked the player to write one *defining memory*, something that described

why the character is who they are. Additionally, we instructed the players to write a *happy memory* for each meaningful relationship, past and present, they had with another characters in the larp – romantic relationships, relationships between parent and a child as well as amongst siblings.

These memories allowed the players to feel more connected to the character and understand their life choices better. It also encouraged players to discuss with their contacts, giving many of the relationships much more impact than they otherwise would have. These memories were particularly useful in complicated and stormy relationships. Because players had also spent time reflecting on the good times, the contrast allowed them to get much more emotionally invested in the plots and relationships, resulting in truly heart-breaking breakups, fights, and reunions.

Our list of questions the players could use while talking with their contacts were different for romantic contacts, friends, family and community. There was questions like:

- How did your characters meet?
- Why did they break up?
- How would you describe the relationship? Stormy, warm, loving, unhealthy, etc.
- How close the characters are to each other? What sort of secrets would they share?
- What is the hierarchy in the community?

- What roles do you have within the community? Who helps, who argues, who questions, who rebels, etc?
- What are the routines in your community, how you act in times of crisis?

The homework was not mandatory, nor were there deadlines, but there was a correlation between time invested by players invested in the homework and the quality of their experience. We ran the larp seven times and received feedback from 56% of the players. 88% of those who gave feedback said they had at least thought about the questions beforehand. In most cases players who had done the homework also had the best experience; the relationships players had spent time preparing shared memories with worked better in the larp.

There are a few concerns regarding this technique. Homework requires time and effort from the players, and it is not always an easy task to motivate them. We clearly stated in all the materials that this kind of extra preparation would be provided and players were encouraged to participate. Still, it was a surprise to some players how much effort it required. I think it is very important to inform players early on what is expected of them, and why, especially if it is more than they are used to.

I would say this technique is very useful in larps where it is beneficial to challenge the players to reflect on some aspects beforehand, or if the larp aims for intense and emotional experience. It is easier to get there if the players are more invested in their characters

and in the story. Another concern to consider is that the homework puts the players in a slightly uneven position; not everyone will do the assigned homework, which slightly directs those players who can and choose to spend time preparing to make their relationships with each other more meaningful and deeper. This might result in those who have not prepared being left with less attention also during the larp itself.

FURTHER READING:

nordiclarp.org/wiki/Pyhävuoren_perilliset

NAILED IT!

COLLABORATIVE CHARACTER CREATION

// Joanna Piancastelli

The lifeblood of larp, for me, is the delicious friction created by characters colliding with one another in extraordinary situations. Getting to that collision point requires setup in order for characters to develop hooks to dig into one another's stories. That can happen over time during the event, but for *Dawnstone* (UK, 2017), with a runtime of only six hours, I wanted everything prepared in advance. This was a 16-player larp about the last night before the final climactic battle in a fantasy setting. How could I ensure everyone had enough connections to and investment in each other's characters to create impactful play right from the start of the larp?

Rather than writing all of the characters myself and plotting an intricate relationship map to tie them all together, I wanted the players to design their own characters so they could choose the sort of person and story they were keen to play. Likewise, I wanted them to build the relationships for themselves to make sure they were able to use them to explore the themes and scenes they wanted to engage with during the larp. But I didn't want to just say, "Create characters. Great, now make relationships," and

leave the outcome to chance, as aside from a little bit of setting history and a few workshops, the characters were the only structural elements driving the action.

The solution I arrived at was an iterative and collaborative character creation process, where each player set down the core of who their character would be. Other players then contributed further details, creating links between their characters and building on the initial sketch. This produced sixteen characters who were tightly interwoven, and sixteen players who knew exactly how to leverage them to create dramatic play with very little warm up.

Character creation started with giving each player a templated Google Document that asked them to outline their concept, including free text descriptions of what they wanted to play and the themes they wanted to embrace and avoid. The document also contained some "fill in the blanks" statements to establish the investment each character had personally in the events of the larp, the goals and motivations they were carrying into it, and how each player felt other characters would see theirs. It ended with a question

from that player to another, explicitly inviting someone else to come up with a key detail of their character's history.

I gathered all of these sheets and checked them against the fiction to see if anyone had written anything incompatible, since the players were essentially free to shape the larp world as much as they liked, but everything they had come up with was both consistent and beautiful.

Next I drew lines of connection between the characters, linking those who had the seeds of fruitful interaction and avoiding putting people together with others they were less keen to play close to. Doing this took the better part of six hours and was the primary area of the larp where I brought in another person to bounce ideas off of and help hold the complex interactions between characters in our heads. We focussed on linking people who had indicated that they wanted to play on similar themes, or who had obvious points of connection in their backstories. But we didn't worry too much about making some less obvious connections when the numbers didn't match up perfectly, as we knew the players would find ways to link unlikely characters too, and that that would generate unexpected and exciting play.

All of this information was put into a Google Sheet that, to a greater or lesser extent, foreshadowed everything that would happen at the larp. I used it as a guide to distribute the character sheets back out by email, this time giving each player two that they hadn't written, and asking them to create connections between those characters and their own. One relationship

was to be stable, the kind of long-term friendship or rivalry that you can come back to again and again during a larp. The other relationship was to be unstable, a situation where something had changed very recently between the two characters that could not remain unaddressed for long once they found themselves in the same room at the start of the larp.

With the relationships written, I gathered the sheets and sent them out again twice more, each time to someone who hadn't written for that character previously. This time the players described things that would bring each character hope and despair, wrote a short prose vignette of their defining moment, and finally answered the question that had been posed by the character's player, completing the circle of co-creation. All of the players were respectful of the original character concepts and no one veered too far from that core idea, but everyone ended up playing on something just a little bit unexpected or different from what they would have come up with on their own.

Each writing period was two weeks long and was followed by a week for players to edit anything that had appeared on their sheets that they weren't happy with. In practice this mostly ended up being time for me to find substitute writers for sheets that hadn't been filled in – usually three or four sheets per round, although I insisted that everyone write the relationships they were assigned since those would be the primary drivers of the action at the larp. At the end of the process everyone had contributed to six other

players' character sheets, and had six people write on theirs.

The outcome was that every player had read and written for more than a third of the characters at the larp and, crucially, had already invested thought into how to make their experience better. All of the players used their out-of-character knowledge to drive each other towards the kind of interaction they most wanted, resulting in really satisfying play for everyone. The mix of stable and unstable relationships paced the action beautifully, with upheaval at the beginning giving way to more gradual, unexpected change as the larp continued and the pressure of the situation rose.

It was exciting to put together a larp where the creative definition primarily came from the players, even though it meant that my role as a design-

er was far more logistical than creative during this phase, with plenty of emails and Facebook messages spent chasing up players to do their next round of writing. At sixteen players it was manageable, but to scale it up, I would group the players and assign each group a different coordinator to make both the communication and the initial relationship mapping simpler. I would also consider cutting the round robin down to just two rounds of writing to avoid having to engage so many people for so long during the preplay. This is something other UK designers who played *Dawnstone* have started to do in some of their larps.

FURTHER READING:

nordiclarp.org/wiki/Dawnstone

NAILED IT!

WRITING REALISTIC, NON-EXPLOITATIVE CHARACTERS

// Laura Wood

I wrote *Inside* (UK, 2017) after I had spent a few months teaching English in a women's prison. I wanted to convey the situation for the women as I saw it in a non-sensationalist way. I knew that the cornerstone of the larp had to be creating characters which mirrored the real situation of the women in prison. The larp would only achieve what I wanted it to and give participants more information about how the UK prison system worked for women if the characters had backgrounds that were realistically based on people in that situation.

This was around the time *Orange is the New Black*, a TV show that examined prison in a dramatic way, was popular on Netflix. I wanted to show what life might actually look like for a woman (or someone the system identified as a woman) who was in prison for committing a crime. I was aware of the day to day experiences of the inmates. They often spoke about being deliberately kept awake, about being bullied, about being a bully, about boredom and about mental illness. They would speak about situations that made gaining the qualifications that they needed to find work on the outside difficult.

They asked me what the point was, if anyone would really want to employ them when they came out anyway.

I wanted to demonstrate these feelings of loss and isolation, while not romanticising the lives of these women. My aim was to write a larp that conveyed the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness being in prison caused, but was also honest about the reasons that the women ended up in prison, the crimes that they had committed, and the methods that they used to survive while inside.

The larp itself involves playing through the duration of an English class, similar to one that would regularly run in the prison. There is no drama and any conflict that occurs beyond the point of what would be acceptable in the class is shut down.

BUILDING A PERSON

I did not want to hand people the character descriptions with the literal backgrounds of the women I worked with. Firstly, I felt it would be exploitative to try to create the story of a specific person's life, which wasn't mine to tell. Secondly, I wanted to convey the truth of the situation as best I could, and I felt that simply having character

sheets wouldn't achieve this. I know from experience that it can be easy to 'know' the right thing to do in a situation and forget that the character you're playing doesn't have the same knowledge, resources or privileges as you. I wanted to create characters that could strip away this automatic behaviour and leave participants with a sense of powerlessness.

The character creation process consists of two parts, both taking place in a workshop at the start of the larp. In anticipation of the workshop, I began with building up the backgrounds of the women that the participants would play in five stages based on different periods in the character's life. I took incidents I had heard about from the backgrounds of the women I worked with and wrote a selection of texts for each section.

First I looked at childhood, which was roughly up to the age of 16, although varied depending on the experiences of the individual. I had character snippets that referred to:

- What the character's parents were like
- Growing up in a foster home
- Mental health issues
- Abuse
- A relatively functional childhood

My rule was that I would not exaggerate or underplay experiences, although I mixed different accounts so that even here I wasn't referring to one person.

"You don't remember going to school. Your mother moved often and no one noticed that you weren't attending. You were raised by a single mother who was often drunk and

emotionally abusive. You internalised a lot of what you were told, believing that what your mother said was the truth about you. This led to bouts of anxiety and inability to make decisions as you started growing older. The house rarely had enough food and you and your siblings started shoplifting from an early age in order to eat."

The second text was the character's adulthood. This was what the woman grew into.

Participants could choose from texts that included:

- Having children and being prepared or unprepared to cope with the reality of that
- Working or being unemployed
- Mental health issues and/or substance abuse and its effect
- Destructive coping strategies

The third text was "currently inside for". This was the reason that the character had been sentenced on this occasion and what the sentence was.

The fourth is what prison is like for the character. The character texts here talk about popularity or being bullied, the effects of being around people constantly, drug withdrawal, missing those you've left behind and mental health issues.

Finally, I looked at the character's attitude to education, which ranged from resigned, to hopeful, to really not wanting to be there. Some of the key factors about education in the prison, which I tried to bring up in the larp

were:

- Quite often there was a choice between going to class or spending the morning locked in their cell
- Inmates who had below a certain level of English had to attend classes
- Certificates would get lost during prison transfers, so someone with a University level education could be forced to attend a beginner English class
- Once you had begun to attend a class there were sanctions for missing classes

CREATING A CHARACTER

Giving the participants an option to create their character in this way, based on my prior work, achieved the two goals that I had set for this larp. It kept characters realistic but anonymous and it created empathy and understanding in a way that I believe handing participants a character sheet wouldn't. As participants worked through their character's life and selected what happened next they had to think as that person. What was a possible conclusion of having to fight to prove your status in a foster home? Or of slipping through the gaps of the education system because no one in your life ensured that you went to school? It meant players needed to create the understanding of the resources the character had, and what it could lead to.

After the character creation workshop I used a meditation exercise to

help the participants put together the life of their character and picture them growing up. I then used a walking exercise to bring the character together as a person, asking players to imagine how their body language evolved and changed over the years as their thoughts did.

It is difficult to generalise this character creation process to create characters for other marginalised groups. I was fortunate in that I had regular contact with the women and was able to understand some aspects of their situation, although I of course cannot guarantee that I got everything right. The area where I do think generalisation is possible is in creating a method that lets go of the participant's knowledge and privilege.

It may be obvious to someone who hasn't had certain experiences and lack of opportunities what the next step or choice in one's life is supposed to be, but this isn't the case for many of these women. Building the character from childhood enabled the participants to understand some of the limitations of the characters' world.

OVERALL

I was fortunate in that many women who trusted me with their stories also wanted their stories told. I explained to the women that I was using aspects of their experiences, which would be anonymised as part of a drama exercise to demonstrate the reasons why women can end up in prison. Although we did not explore larp in the lessons I was teaching we did explore how drama can lead to empowerment and give an

insight into other people's lives.

Overall, players in every run have read the tone of the larp without prompting. The characters are realistic. The larp is not played for fun or drama. Obviously I will never fully achieve a true depiction of the lives of these women, but I hope that *Inside* has at least created some understanding of the UK prison system and how some of the women end up in it.

FURTHER READING:

nordiclarp.org/wiki/Inside

NAILED IT!

HOW TO DESIGN MECHANICS AND RULES

In larp design, all aspects of the total design affect the functioning of the larp, as well as the experience of the participants. Because these different aspects always interact, changing one designable surface – for instance the theme, the music, the venue, the player selection process, or a conflict resolution mechanic – will have systemic effects on everything else. A mechanical system or design element that has worked very well for one larp might be in conflict with the goals and content of another. One distinction between bespoke larp design and the design of larp systems is their approaches to this problem.

The term “larp system” can refer only to the rules of a larp, or to the rules, storyworld, and character creation system in combination. In either case, a larp system is intended to become the standardised basis of many larps. In other words, the larp system needs to be able to facilitate all interactions and narratives that players might choose to explore within it. But if you choose to always use the same rules and mechanics, any other aspects of your design will be limited to what fits around those rules. Bumping up against these limitations, designers typically choose to expand their rules system to allow more and more types of actions

and stories. Over time this will make them increasingly complex and difficult for the players to learn and use.

Another solution is to design everything from scratch every time. In play cultures where larps are typically one-shots (self-contained events rather than campaigns, larps with a series of sequels) this tends to happen organically: every larp becomes a bespoke larp. In bespoke design, you can still use mechanics familiar from other larps, but you will combine them based on the specific goals of your event and how they interact with other design parameters. The players will learn new rules for every event, but since bespoke design allows the mechanics to be very focused, this will not be insurmountable, and the tradeoff is usually worth it.

Note that the choice between bespoke design or recurring standardised systems does not automatically follow the line between collaborative and competitive larp design. Competitive mechanics can be bespoke (as is the case with most board games) and there are collaborative larp campaigns that are played with the same rules every time. It is true, however, that a larp that is both collaborative and bespoke is likely to be rules-light – the mechanics will rarely be overly complicated, since they do not need to be.

This section begins with Johanna Koljonen's discussion of mechanics for safety, opt-out, and playstyle calibration. Whether or not you choose to use them, the decision should be actively made for any larp you are designing. Danny Wilson charts the process of choosing what mechanics you will need, while Anna Westerling and Anders Hultman dive deeper into metatechniques – mechanics for player to player communication during runtime.

In her chapter, Frida Lindegren discusses how to portray sexual content in larps where that is relevant; Susan Mutsaers presents a practical method for teaching participants physical consent negotiations. Martine Svanevik discusses portrayals and simulation of violence in larp. Throughout this section, examples illustrate the whole gamut of bespoke mechanics, from simulating acid trips to expressing character actions through blues dance.

OPT-OUT AND PLAYSTYLE CALIBRATION MECHANICS

// Johanna Koljonen

Your larp is likely to need some mechanics for *safety*, *opting out*, and *playstyle calibration*. Safety mechanics are mechanics used to prevent or react to dangerous situations; opt-out and calibration mechanics give the participant control of their experience, what content to engage with, and in what way.

The most common safety mechanic is a stop word used to immediately halt play in the event of a real emergency or injury. This should be intuitive for your participants to use; “stop the larp” will work in most contexts, as will usually “offgame” if your participants are larpers. Everyone within earshot should stop play until the emergency is averted or resolved.

Your participants also need a way to signal that they are pausing play to communicate out of character. This is a practical requirement if your design encourages out of character negotiation, but will also make the larp safer, as players can warn each other about potential threats even when their characters would not, or inform each other about limitations, like mentioning before a combat scene that they have a bad back. Many larp cultures use a hand gesture to signal that a player is out of character, for instance making a fist and lifting the hand above their head, or making a T with their hands (for time out). Having a code word as an alternative is still useful – it can be very simple, like “offgame” – since hands may be busy or tied, and not all participants can physically perform all gestures. Generally, gestures that can be performed with one hand are more accessible and practical than those that require two.

During play, situations can emerge where participants need to opt out – to choose not to participate even when their character might or definitely would. This can be for reasons unrelated to the content (exhaustion, a call from a babysitter, needing the bathroom) or because something in the scene itself is not playable for the participant at that time. To be able to opt out of a scene, participants need to be *physically*, *socially*, and *diegetically* able to leave. If your larp uses physical restrictions, like being tied down or doors being locked, players need to be prepared to let each other go directly, should they need to. Depending on the

larp, you might not want to allow real physical restrictions anyway; primarily for fire safety reasons.

Leaving should have no social cost for the participant or the character. For instance, most people will find it difficult to pause a group scene to say out of character that they will need to step away. For this reason a hand gesture, such as the *lookdown* (a flat hand in the air in front of the eyes, looking down), is more convenient. It can signal to other players that the person who is leaving does so for out-of-character reasons and should not be stopped or questioned. In-fiction, the person's absence will usually be entirely uncommented on, just like it would be if the fictional character had left to visit the bathroom. If the absence is notable, the players can usually glance it over: "they've been held up", "they needed to step outside, we will speak to them later".

Fixing small narrative inconsistencies on the fly is part of all role-playing, and players are very adept at this. In collaborative larps, these kinds of story negotiations create a problem so rarely that a player from such traditions might find it difficult even to imagine how it could happen. In competitive larps, that involve winning or losing, a character stepping away in the middle of, for instance, a conflict can be perceived as unfair to the other players. For such a larp, you might want to provide a mechanical solution that allows the outcome of the scene to be resolved without being played out. To lower the social cost of using such a mechanic, you can design the player culture around your competitive larp to fundamentally be collaborative, relying on principles such as "players are more important than larp." Making these values explicit will remind your players to treat each other as humans first and adversaries only within the fiction.

However, there are collaborative larps where the specifics of the fictional situation means that players will sometimes benefit from a narrative workaround to keep their stories coherent. In a prison larp, for instance, you could decide that a player can at any time leave a cell because their character has been "called to speak to the warden". In some larps you might even be able to entirely prevent the social cost and narrative strain of opting out on the level of the fiction, for instance by designing a culture so that leaving is always socially acceptable. Most elegant is to integrate the opt-out metatechnique with the narrative explanation. In the *Westworld*-inspired *Conscience* (Spain, 2018), players of the android hosts could always state a need to leave using the code words "battery low".

Finally, you might need mechanics for playstyle calibration which allow players to fluidly keep a scene in line with everyone's personal boundaries while telling very nuanced stories together, even on difficult topics. An extended out-of-character negotiation for story consent and playstyle intensity will be the most nuanced and specific, but also the most *intrusive* in the sense that it pauses the action inside the diegesis. At the opposite end of the scale you would find metatechniques that are *discreet* – often invisible to anyone who is not in the situation.

Inside Hamlet (Denmark, 2015) adopted the *tap-out*, two quick taps on the

co-player's arm or, if they are not within reach, one's own chest. The tap-out is both an opt-out mechanic and a calibration mechanic. When a player taps out, the other person or persons let go and step back physically, allowing the player to leave if they should wish, no questions asked. If the person stays, it means that play can continue, but at a slightly lower level of intensity. In addition, the larp has verbal mechanics for escalation (inviting an escalation of playstyle or conflict intensity) and de-escalation (an instruction to the co-player to dial it down). In this case, the escalation mechanics, too, are discreet: the words "rotten" or "pure" slipped into a sentence. By contrast, *BAPHOMET* (Denmark, 2015) employs no verbal escalation mechanics, but combines the tap-out with an escalation gesture – scratching the co-player's arm or calf. This choice makes sense in a larp where many interactions can be non-verbal and players will interact in close physical proximity.

With almost any mechanic or other design element your design needs, you will face the choice between making them intrusive, discreet, or somewhere in between. Usually you will make this choice on aesthetic grounds. When it comes to safety, opt-out, and playstyle calibration, which are central to your participants being able to avoid dangers and play under stress, you need to be very practical. The most discreet mechanics work poorly in hectic or high-adrenaline environments, or with players who are not very attentive to each other. If you are in the least doubtful, make the mechanics slightly or significantly more intrusive, and always test them in context before your larp.

Always workshop your safety mechanics together before the runtime; otherwise, they are unlikely to be used. That would be worse than no mechanic at all, since it will make participants feel safer than they are. The same goes for opt-out and calibration mechanics. For these, the potential consequences are generally less dire; most people will be fine even if they experience a scene in a fiction that they rather would not have. However, participants do rely on these tools for instance to ensure that they will not need to engage with themes or situations that might trigger trauma or phobias. On this individual level, opt-out and calibration mechanics can be conceptualised as safety mechanics as well (and indeed, "safety mechanics" is often how all of them are collectively referred to). For this reason, you must pay particular attention to designing, communicating, and practicing them, and ensure that your other mechanics, design choices, or play culture do not undermine their use.

FURTHER READING:

Johanna Koljonen: Safety in Larp. www.participationsafety.com

DESIGNING THE MECHANICS YOU NEED

// Danny Wilson

The art of designing good mechanics usually boils down to two things: being clear about what you want to achieve with your larp, and choosing mechanics that fit that purpose. Good mechanics, like any elegant design, solve as many problems as possible with as few tools as possible. They are easy to master and coherent with the overall aesthetic and theme of the larp. When the mechanics work well, they amplify all of the other elements of the larp, making play flow smoothly, and drawing out the themes even more strongly.

When choosing the right mechanics for your larp, start with the overall picture. In good larp design, the different elements of the larp are tightly integrated and work toward a coherent whole. Therefore, you should be clear about the overall direction the mechanics need to take, before going into the specifics.

To achieve this clarity, it is helpful to answer these three overarching questions:

- What kind of player experience is the larp trying to create?
- What kind of story content and themes should the mechanics support?
- What mechanics does the larp need to function?

WHICH EXPERIENCE

DO YOU WANT THE LARP TO GIVE THE PLAYERS?

What the players feel during the larp is central to their experience. You might want to make them feel empowered and awesome during the larp. For this, mechanics that give a strong degree of influence over the narrative outcomes usually work well. If the game is supposed to feel claustrophobic and tense, on the other hand, you might want to create mechanics that force the players into tight spaces or direct and limit their agency. If a larp is meant to be lighthearted and fun, the mechanics should match.

In the freeform scenario *Slaaraphenland* (Denmark, 2009, Eng. Cockaaig-nesh), the characters are given the option to submit to a chaos god to get their wish. Whenever the character gives in to temptation, the player has to eat a piece

of cake – something which very appropriately starts out very sweet, but becomes rather disgusting after a while.

WHAT KIND OF STORY CONTENT AND THEMES SHOULD THE MECHANICS SUPPORT?

Whenever you create a mechanic, you do it to support the overall narrative and flavour of the game. If you are building on a specific genre, you want the mechanics to add to the themes of this genre. For example, while a series of hand signals might work for a Western duel in terms of getting the job done, having gun props simply gives it more flavour – as seen in the freeform scenario *De hævngerige* (Denmark, 2017, Eng. Out for Vengeance).

Thematic appropriateness doesn't have to be 1:1 with a specific visual aesthetic. If you don't want gun props, for instance because they are not safe in all cultural contexts, the Western genre suggests other thematically appropriate ways to resolve disagreements. The freeform scenario *Salvation* (Denmark, 2010), for instance, used playing cards.

WHAT MECHANICS DOES THE LARP NEED IN ORDER TO FUNCTION?

Mechanics solve problems inherent in making the larp run, and support play. To choose correctly you will need to know which areas of the game will need mechanics and what they are supposed to achieve. The following list of questions covers most areas where mechanics are commonly used, and is a good starting point for getting deeper into what the larp will need.

1. Do you need mechanics for safety or for calibrating the playstyle between the players?
2. Do you need mechanics for negotiating or calibrating the direction of the story between the players?
3. Do you need rules for clearly communicating story elements between the players?
4. Do you want to help your players make conscious decisions about what direction to take their character?
5. Do you want to give your players the ability to control or direct the other players?
6. Do your players need tools to play out scenes they otherwise wouldn't be able to?
7. Do your players need to be able to resolve conflicts without having to act them out?
8. Do you need to more directly control how the players larp with each other?

After getting an overview, choose the mechanics that match those needs. Good mechanics get the job done. This isn't always a question of whether a mechanic is

good or bad, but also how well it fits its context. Good mechanics often become great, when there is a tight integration between what the mechanic does and the overall larp. The reverse of this is that individually great mechanics don't work well in all larps. The most common mistake is to inelegantly stack too many mechanics on top of each other, creating redundancy and making the rules difficult for the players to remember.

SAFETY, OPT-OUT, AND CALIBRATION MECHANICS

Do you need mechanics for safety or calibrating the playstyle between the players?

In most larps you will need to think at least fleetingly about player safety and make sure that players know how to talk, pause or stop play if they need to. If the themes, content, or physicality of the larp are very demanding, you might also need to design to enable players to opt out of specific scenes, and calibration mechanics that allow them to flexibly negotiate playstyle intensity. [For more on this, see the the previous chapter. –Eds].

An important point to notice is that these kinds of mechanics – often collectively called “safety mechanics” – in and of themselves don't make a game safe or the content suitable for all players in all situations. Equally important parts of your safety design are player selection (you choosing the right players and enabling the right players to choose your larp); expectation management outside the larp; the design of your play culture; and the calibration that participants do together as they prepare for the experience, in advance or in workshop. If these elements are not in place, throwing in some mechanics as an afterthought will not make your design sound.

In the context of a good safety design, good mechanics will make your larp a safer experience where the participants know they will be able to care for themselves, manage their boundaries, and not accidentally transgress against those of others. Without a good overall design, safety mechanics can still make the larp feel safer, and your participants behave more bravely: but you might actually be creating a false sense of security that makes it harder for participants to make good choices.

Calibration mechanics often take the shape of a *consent negotiation* following a scripted structure to discuss, for instance, story direction or physical boundaries in advance of a scene; or *escalation and de-escalation mechanics* to trim the intensity of a scene as it is unfolding.

When designing calibration mechanics that you expect will be used a lot, it is often a good idea to make them as unobtrusive to the game flow as possible. This will make players use them more. In the larp *Inside Hamlet* (Denmark, 2015) the word “rotten” used in a sentence is an invitation to escalate play – the recipient is welcome not to heed it – whereas the word “pure” entered into a sentence is a

non-negotiable instruction to de-escalate the intensity of a scene.

Remember you can also establish rules around outlawing certain types of topics or play entirely, or to say certain kinds of scenes will be glossed over and not played out, or requiring the players to for instance take an out-of-character walk together before playing certain scenes.

STORY CONSENT

Do you need mechanics for negotiating or calibrating the direction of story between the players?

Central to any good larp is an adequate amount of calibration of player intent and tone. When two players are well calibrated, they can take deliberate actions to support each other's story directions: when they are not, they risk unintentionally sabotaging each other's play. If one player wants to experience intense drama, and the other wants to be left alone, a bad encounter is likely to follow.

A lot of calibration of story content will take place through player communication up to the beginning of runtime. This can happen in a structured way, for instance through workshops; as well as more organically online before the larp, or in conversations during workshop breaks. In Nordic larp these conversations are often framed as discussion of the kinds of experiences players are looking for; some larp designs and player communities also specifically encourage pre-planning plot direction, or even specific scenes.

Giving players specific tools to communicate intent during play allows them to explicitly steer their play in a specific direction. In the larp *Just a Little Lovin'* (Norway, 2011) every player has a few feathers on them. Offering a pink feather is used to ask for a sex scene, and a black feather is used to ask for a scene in the larp's blackbox (a meta room where scenes occurring beyond the linear time of the runtime or the space represented in the physical setting can be explored). These tools allow the players to unobtrusively opt in and out of intense or time-consuming play choices.

Metatechniques for story consent are also especially important if there is a difference between what is logical for the characters and what might be best for the participant's experience. For example, in a larp where young people are being forced by their families to marry people they don't want, you might want to give the players a mechanic to allow them to opt out of a marriage that might place a shy participant with another group of players for the rest of the larp. The metatechnique could then trigger a coherent diegetic action, for instance the matriarch vetoing the match so as to keep the child home for another year.

TELEGRAPHING

Do you need rules for clearly communicating story elements between the players?

Given the pretend nature of a larp, certain things that might be perfectly clear

in the world outside the larp fiction, might not be so within the fiction. Frictions can happen when player intent within the story becomes unclear. A young player might not play a young person within a larp, and a person playing a world-renowned artist might need the other players to love his paintings, even though he hasn't touched a pencil in his life.

Often, these discrepancies are solved using rules that allow the participants to communicate unobtrusively between the players rather than the characters. In the *Downton Abbey*-inspired *Fairweather Manor* (Poland, 2015), players wearing a grey ribbon are considered part of the older generation within the fiction, allowing people to play different generations regardless of their age.

Telegraphing can also take the form of coded words, to communicate story intent. In the larp *Skoro Rassvet* (Czech Republic, 2015, Eng. Breaking Dawn) using the word “deer” whenever saying a poem, indicates to the other players offgame that it is a terrible poem, while not using the word indicates good poetry. This allows the players of the larp to recite poetry ingame, even if they themselves are terrible poets; and actively lets the player invite criticism from other characters.

Taken a step further, telegraphing can also be used to allow access to story elements that wouldn't usually be accessible in real life. In the freeform *Kongemord* (Denmark, 2006, Eng. Regicide) participants can use inner monologues, where they hold a speech as their character to an imaginary audience, spilling their innermost thoughts. This speech can be heard by the other players, but not their characters; allowing for dramatic play based around themes the other players otherwise wouldn't know about.

STEERING MECHANICS

Do you want to help your players make conscious decisions about what direction to take their character?

During runtime, story is often like a sprawling octopus with the potential to go in many directions. Sometimes reacting to situations as they occur is a good thing; at other times you want the players to make conscious decisions on the direction of their play. Just as calibration occurs between the players, a player also needs to calibrate with their character. As Hilda Levin has discussed, the act of role-playing involves constantly shifting between the fictional frame and a metareflexive frame. To provide tools for steering is to design for metareflexion to support narrative goals.

Players always make conscious decisions as to which direction to take their character. Where this runs into problems is when the direction the player prefers isn't consistent with “what the character would do.” This creates trouble establishing an internal narrative continuity for the larp.

The player can choose (or can be trained by their local larp culture) to prioritize a consistent character psychology over personal preference or an interesting character arc. At best, this leads to an experience that is functional, but neither enjoyable nor satisfying; at worst, they can end up blocking the agency of other players. A classic example is for strong, armed or authoritative characters to physically isolate characters perceived as weaker – often women – to “protect them” when violence erupts: taking away those players’ choice of whether to cower in fear, participate in heroics, or go looking for an interesting death scene.

The player may also choose to break character consistency. In some larp traditions this will make them feel guilty for “bad role-playing”; in others it can for instance shatter a carefully designed social dynamic within a character group, or enable a story direction which that character was designed to block.

It is obviously very important to communicate to your players to what degree your design allows, or even encourages, them to depart from or riff on the character description. In addition to this general advice you can make some of these choices functionally explicit by mechanizing them. When creating mechanics that explicitly allow the player to steer in their storymaking, you will often want to create alibi for the character to behave in ways that are consistent with the direction you and the the players want to take the larp. [For more on this, see *Holkear on how to make your sandbox a playground*. –Eds.]

Numerous Nordic larps use the meta room (sometimes called a blackbox) to allow players to add complexity to their character or calibrate their path. A space in the play area is designated for the players to play scenes that occur outside the main timeline of the larp. For instance in *En stilla middag med familjen* (Sweden, 2007, A Nice Evening With the Family), which is about families breaking apart, a player might want to play a flashback scene to explore the time before their character hated their mother. This experience can then allow them to give the relationship a more nuanced or complex direction.

A similar technique was used in *Morgenrøde* (Denmark, 2014, Eng. Red Dawn), a larp exploring the life of hippies in the 1970s. In the “drugbox” characters could go on acid trips together, and the design prescribed that a trip would always change their relationship in some way. [Read more about playable acid trips in *Barkholt-Spangsbo et al.* –Eds]

A disadvantage of the meta room is that stepping away can sometimes affect the flow of the game. A way of designing around this is to integrate steering mechanics smoothly into the fiction. In *Just a Little Lovin’*, the characters are offered a special drink towards the end of each act. When they do, the player is allowed to refocus the direction of their character, ostensibly under the influence of the drink. Narratively this creates the effect of a party going over the top; but to the players it offers support in pacing, and a choice to let the character end the act in a new direction.

CONTROL MECHANICS

Do you want to give your players the ability to control or direct the other players?

In some larps, you want to give the players the ability to not only control aspects of their own characters, but also *aspects of other player characters*. Sometimes this might be because the story calls for it – there might be a soothsayer who has the ability to always make other people tell the truth. Other times, it might be because control, or lack thereof, is a theme of the game.

Mechanics for controlling the fiction are usually quite similar in form to meta-techniques: control mechanics usually also consist of rules that give certain actions a special meaning. The main difference is that instead of communicating outside the fictional universe, they grant a special control over the fictional universe.

Most larps operate on the assumption that each player is in control of all aspects of their own character. If you think in terms of a story pie, in this model the pie is divided in a way where every slice is a character, and the slices are allocated to the different players. But the pie doesn't have to be divided like this. You could have two players taking turns controlling the same character; you might have one player controlling multiple characters, or two players portraying aspects of the same character; or you might have a player controlling everything about their character, except who they fall in love with. Every time you make a choice in terms of who controls a part of the story, it strongly affects the player's experience of the game. If you take away the character's ability to choose who they fall in love with, the player's experience will reflect the sense of having lost control of one's feelings.

A simple version of this might be that ingesting a certain potion puts a character under the effect of a love potion. A more complex example is from the freeform scenario *Cirkus uden grænser* (Denmark 2013, Eng. Violation Circus), about a toxic love relationship. Here, the player is only allowed to speak for themselves, while their body is controlled by the other players, representing a complete loss of control.

REPLACEMENT MECHANICS

Do your players need tools to play out scenes they otherwise wouldn't be able to?

Replacement mechanics are rules that allow something to be acted out during play that would otherwise be impossible, impractical, or dangerous. In its simplest form a replacement involves representing certain actions or objects with others, often in a way that is either visually or gesturally similar to the thing you want to represent.

Just like shootouts with real guns are a bad idea, there might be areas of play you want the players to explore, but at the same time it might be inconvenient.

Most players usually want to keep at least some of their clothes on and might not want to kiss each other for real, but you might still want to be able to play a story where characters kiss or undress. The more realistic the physical environment and actions of the larp are, the more you will (paradoxically) need to think about designing replacements.

On the *Mixing Desk of Larp*, these questions fall under the Playability–Plausibility fader, which challenges you to think about the balance between realism and playable actions. Elegant replacement mechanics create actions in play that matches the story you want to tell, and the experience you want to create. Fighting with boffer swords to represent sword-fighting is a good example of this. It allows role-playing of sword-fighting situations, in a way that can resemble a real sword fight, without any the severed limbs that this usually entails. [See *Svanevik on violence for more about this*. –Eds]. Another example is the pink phallic objects used to symbolically replace genital interactions in sex scenes in *Just a little Lovin'*. [See *Lindegren for more on representing sex in larps*. –Eds]

Another strategy for designing replacement techniques is to go with something very different from what is being represented. Prioritizing playability over plausibility does not have to compromise the aesthetics of your larp. In *KoiKoi* (Norway, 2014), involving a meeting of stone age tribes, sex was represented through a dance between the two participants. This worked for this specific larp, because tribal dancing fit the themes of the larp very closely.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Do your players need to be able to resolve character conflicts?

A thing to remember about conflict resolution mechanics (and mechanics in general) is that not all larps require them. Big rules systems designed to be able to handle any kind of content might make sense for campaigns without clear themes, but for a bespoke one-shot, you can intentionally limit what is playable to actions that are thematically relevant. If you don't want your characters to conduct duels to the death, you should probably not give players a mechanic that allows them to do so. If you don't want sword-fighting in your game, you are much better off not having rules for sword-fighting.

You need mechanics for conflict resolution whenever the larp involves conflicts that you for one reason or another don't want to play out realistically. For obvious reasons you might not want to play out a duel with real guns, but for the story to work you might still need a way to conduct duels.

Some larps do resolve story outcomes in conflict situations collectively through attentive and generous role-playing, with everyone subtly steering towards the most satisfying story outcome. But that is not always possible or interesting. The less transparent the larp is, and the bigger the number of characters, the less likely

it is that all players will understand the fictional situation with enough nuance to create a cool story for everyone. In addition you might want your players to get surprised or disappointed by outcomes of conflicts, or their agency to be limited in meaningful ways by their characters' diegetic power. In any of these situations you will need a set of rules for who wins a conflict.

In collaborative-style larp, where the players don't think of each others as adversaries even when characters do, you can often manage with simple conflict resolution mechanics that don't interfere too much with the rest of the larp. While some players enjoy games about winning, and mastering complex rules systems, this kind of play is almost always inappropriate for the kind of collaborative larps this book is focused on. Playing to win prioritizes strategy over character immersion and over the creation of collaborative narratives, which are the engines of many Nordic-style larps. Conflict resolution mechanics in this style of larp often include a narrative element, where the player needs to consider what makes sense for their own story and often that of other characters as well.

Consensus-based conflict resolution is a mechanic where after a subtle or explicit negotiation one player agrees to lose and the other player agrees to win. For example, in an arm wrestling match, both players might pretend to arm wrestle – or actually arm wrestle – until one player subtly signals their character is about to lose, giving the other player a chance to win, or to fail faster if that is a more meaningful outcome. This approach usually works well with more narratively-minded players, who are good at reading each other's cues and who have similar ideas about which outcome creates the most interesting story. A downside of this method is that it produces fewer surprise outcomes.

In Nordic larp, consensus-based conflict resolution is often combined with very visual and often physical role-playing. Players might first discreetly negotiate the broad course of outcome of a conflict – “I can lose in the end, but is it okay if I really manage to beat you up first?” “Okay, and can we make your losing somehow a bit comical or humiliating?” “Okay” – and then fill that outline with detail in play. What makes the conflict interesting play in this type of larp is not finding out the outcome, but embodying the conflict physically and emotionally.

Losers' Choice is a variant of the consensusbased method, where a conflict will continue until someone decides to lose. For example, in the freeform game *Duel* (Denmark, 2015) two players take turn at describing samurais duking it out. Whenever one of the players say “I die”, the duel ends. A more common variant of this, allowing for more dynamic storytelling, is *Target Decides*. In the magic system of *College of Wizardry* (Poland, 2014), the player performing a spell is responsible for communicating its intended effect, while the target decides whether and how well it succeeded.

Skill-based conflict resolution involves an element of player skill or ability in de-

cing the outcome of a conflict. In many Nordic boffer larps, the player with better fighting skills usually wins, and character statistics only affect the outcome of one-to-one combat to a limited degree. In a situation based on endurance or physical force, the physically stronger player might simply win out. A disadvantage of this approach is that it limits the type of characters a player can play, based on physical ability and skill.

When it comes to non-physical conflict, in particular verbal altercations of different kinds, Nordic larp also relies very heavily on the player's skills in rhetoric and persuasion. Mechanics affecting outcomes of conversations or negotiations are rare but can be very powerful.

Chance-based conflict resolution involves an element of randomness: often the roll of a die, or something as simple as rock-paper-scissors. The advantage of this approach is that it can take the story in new and unexpected directions; but on the same note the random outcome might not create the most interesting story

Character-based conflict resolution usually involves making some kind of comparison between the characters, and not the players. It is like skill-based conflict resolution, but using the characters as basis instead of the players. In *Skoro Rassvet*, conflicts are resolved using a secret duelling number that each character receives at the start of the larp. If the story calls for a duel, the participants reveal their numbers at the start of the duel, and the person with the lowest number plays out how they die.

You can combine these principles in the design of your mechanics. In *Enlightenment in Blood* (Germany, 2016) characters had a brawling stat from 1 to 5, and the higher number would win; in addition werewolves would always win over vampires. The stat could be displayed as a discreet hand sign at the beginning of the fight, which was then played in a physical theatre fighting style. If the combatants were evenly matched, they would revert to consensus based resolution based on the most meaningful narrative outcome.

PLAYER INTERACTION RULES

Do you need to more directly control how the players larp with each other?

Just like most other aspects of our lives, the interaction between two or more human beings is a designable surface. Whenever you design rules or mechanics, you are directly influencing the interactions between the players; in a larp, in fact, all of your design, including that of the characters and story, has as its goal to push, nudge, or inspire certain player interactions, and limit others. Sometimes, though, you will still need to design specific kinds of interactions more directly through the use of rules or guidelines.

Player interaction rules involve explicit rules, directions, or guidelines for

how the players may interact during the larp. This set of rules allows you to create a very specific feel, and will often pervade the entire larp experience.

An example of a simple interaction guideline is the *play to lose* (sometimes *play to lift*) rule, where the players are asked to drive scenes towards the most interesting story, rather than success for their character. Another is the instruction that players are not allowed to speak: while most role-playing games are played to a great degree with language, there are many blackbox larps that participants play entirely non-verbally. In the classic Mind's Eye Theatre rules, "No touching" is established at the start of the book; driving the portrayal of physically powerful vampires towards role-played, real-time politicking, but abstracted, mathematical conflict resolution negotiated mostly out of character.

A more complex example would be strict rules that fundamentally change how players interact with each other and the piece. In the blackbox larp *Hvid dod* (Denmark, 2012, Eng. White Death) each character is defined by individual limitations in how they are allowed to move, which creates a very distinct physical feeling as well as a visual aesthetic as the larp is played.

If you are going for a very specific feel for the game, the most elegant solution is to have very few, but very clear rules. In the freeform scenario *Cirkeus uden grænser* every scene is played with the active players physically frozen in position, while players not participating in the scene move them around.

Interaction rules can also be used to create pacing or a narrative arc progressively. *Inside Hamlet* is divided into three acts, with subtly different rules about character conflicts to make story events cohere with the structure of the overall larp. In the first act, guns may not be drawn and violence will not happen in public; in the second you can draw a gun but not fire it, and may fight – but no one can be killed, and the target decides the extent of the injury. In the final part of the larp any conflict will lead to at least one of the parties getting killed (but the target still decides whether that death is drawn-out or immediate). This structure forces participants to pace their character conflicts, and to get at each other through indirect means, often through other characters; escalating tensions without allowing resolution until the very end.

Creating explicit rules and guidelines can be very important if you want to encourage or control specific play interactions during the larp. Anything you have not designed and communicated, the players will assume or improvise. If they are from a play culture different from yours, they will revert to their local assumptions whether or not these are functional with your design. If they are from play cultures too different from yours, the larp might break down entirely.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Once you have an overview of which kinds of mechanics you need, you need them to fit well together as a system. You generally want to go for the smallest number of mechanics that will do the work well for the larp you are creating. They need to be simple, intuitive to use, and easy to explain.

Once the larp begins, human beings will be wielding your mechanics; and if it gets too confusing and complicated, they won't be used. In the worst case, the players will be frustrated, spend time out of character against their will, or miss out on content that is now unplayable to them.

Every time a person has to do something they are not used to, it uses up a lot of cognitive resources – until the action becomes so practised that it can occur automatically. People's capacity to memorize and learn varies, but a good rule of thumb is that you should be able to present all of the mechanics you are going to be using in your larp on a single page, or workshop them well in less than an hour; otherwise they are probably too complex. If you need a more complicated system, you will need to make sure the participants study it in advance, and have a lot of workshop time on site to practise.

Whenever you create or adopt mechanics that are new to you, you should playtest them to get a general feel for how they work, and to know how they might need to be adjusted for your purposes. Even if it isn't possible to try out the mechanics at scale, it is often possible to invite a few friends over and try them out. Even if you are using established mechanics that are tried and true, you should always think carefully about how they interact with each other and with the overall system of your design.

FURTHER READING:

Helène Henry: "Ludo-Narrative Dissonance and Harmony in Larps". Nordiclarp.org (27.2. 2017)

nordiclarp.org/wiki/The_Mixing_Desk_of_Larp

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mind's_Eye_Theatre

Johanna Koljonen: Safety in Larp, Participationsafety.com

Many of the mentioned freeform scenarios can be found in English in the Alexandria.dk database

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: HOUSE OF CRAVING

// Danny Wilson

House of Craving was designed for the Danish Fastaval convention in 2017 by Norwegian larp designer Tor-Kjetil Edland and myself. It was a freeform scenario about a family that moves into a sentient House, which slowly starts taking over their lives and using them to live out its own perverted desires. The feel of the larp was one of psychological horror, with elements of tacky, over-the-top emotionality often found in erotica novels and Japanese hentai. An unusual feature of the piece is that one of the five participants plays the perverted House.

The story and themes were a mix between dark psychological horror and corny erotic novels. We designed the experience to be intense and intrusive, and wanted it to have a distinct physical feel. Just like being inside a house: the house can feel you, and your body feels the surfaces of the house.

OPT-OUT AND PLAYER CALIBRATION MECHANICS

Since we were going for a dark, physical, and intense larp, to be run in freeform convention environments, making the participants able to opt in and opt out actively was a major concern from the start. We went for a very explicit and “in your face” presentation of the larp in the convention schedule. This was deliberately to telegraph very clearly to players who would not enjoy this type of content that they should choose something else to play.

Since this was a freeform scenario, players would be moving in and out of character depending on whether they were active players in the scene. We therefore didn't see a need for specific mechanics to calibrate play intensity on the scene level. The word “cut” was used to signal that a player wished to pause an ongoing scene to talk about it.

STORY CONSENT

The larp, taking up approximately 4 hours, used the first 1.5 hours for a rather comprehensive workshop, where all of the game mechanics were practised out of character, allowing for a strong degree of playstyle calibration before runtime. The workshop was designed to in some ways be nastier than the game itself – a deliberate tactic to make people stop and think about how they wanted to play, or whether they wanted to play at all. This is important, as during runtime the characters move through a series of predetermined scenes. As the plot is linear, players cannot fully control what happens on the scene level.

Since all characters interact with the horrors of the House, and the freeform play situation is intimate, the experience is very much that the whole player group experiences the story together. This creates a stronger alibi to play on dark themes; it is not perceived as an individual choice or as being put on the spot. On the other

hand, this type of design comes with a fair amount of social pressure to go through with scenes once the larp has begun. You should strive to create a play culture where it is always okay to opt out of playing a specific scene even though it might narratively need to happen.

TELEGRAPHING

Being a traditional freeform larp, the game uses a gamemaster to instruct the players about information needed to play out the different scenes. Also, if the gamemaster notices story discrepancies or confusion, they will use a narrating voice on top of the larp, explaining parts of the story.

STEERING MECHANICS

The larp is a tightly-structured linear narrative, centred on set scenes. As such, it didn't require the players to make a lot of active decisions about where to take their play. Rather, the larp decided the direction of play for them.

CONTROL MECHANICS

For the story we wanted a mechanic that emphasized loss of control to the House and one's emotions. We decided that whenever the person playing the House touched the other players, this represented emotions that the character being touched was experiencing. For instance, the House could grip another player's shoulder tightly, to signal that they were angry, or caress them gently, to signal their lust. This could be escalated to the point of human characters losing control of their bodies entirely, essentially creating a situation where the person playing House

could control the other participants at will.

REPLACEMENT TECHNIQUES

We needed a way to represent a person playing a house. We tried to make it as simple as possible. Thus, the person playing the House was an abstract representation of the building, that could be interacted with, by interacting with the person. The person playing the House could represent any object in the house. For example, touching the person's arm might represent touching a chair within the diegesis.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Since there would be conflicts for control over the different characters and their actions, we needed some kind of conflict resolution mechanic. We went for the rule "House always wins," which simply states that whenever they were in a fight with the House for control, the human characters could resist, but would finally have to give in, if the House insisted.

PLAYER INTERACTION RULES

We established specific rules for how the House player would interact with the others, and how the others could interact with the House. Particular focus was placed on how they were allowed to touch each other.

The feel we were going for was one of intrusive physicality, with the mechanics deliberately making the players enter each other's personal space and touch each other in socially and physically uncomfortable ways within the frame of a very safely calibrated experience.

DESIGNING PLAYABLE ACID TRIPS

// Troels Barkholt-Spangsbo
// Jonas Trier-Knudsen
// Søren Ebbenhøj
// Anders Lyng Ebbenhøj
// Klaus Meier Olsen

In Nordic-style larp drugs are commonly simulated by people snorting powdered sugar, acting crazy for a while, only to revert back to normal when it gets old. Drugs are mainly used as a shock effect, without touching on the darker sides of use or abuse in a realistic fashion. Only rarely are drugs a story catalyst or used to drive development in character arcs or relationships.

We designed the “drug box” for the larp *Morgenrøde* (2014, Denmark, Eng. *Red Dawn*). The larp told the story of a hippie commune in the early 1970s and we wanted to include LSD in a way that would reflect all aspects of how the hippie movement used the drug; how it widened perspectives for some, but also came with terrible consequences for others. We viewed dropping acid as a critical part of the era’s spirituality and exploration of the self; a key to hippie culture. First and foremost, we wanted to include the drug in the storylines of the characters, making it a meaningful and playable part of the larp.

DESIGN CHOICE

The drug box was a 2×4 meter enclosure framed by cloth in a gymnastics hall. We placed a projector outside the

fabric shell and projected psychedelic visuals upon it. In the fiction, no one did LSD alone, and we briefed the players that using the drug mechanic was a narrative tool to develop character relations. Entering the drug box, the players would draw a card from a deck. The card determined whether the trip was good or bad, and after playing a short surreal scene representing the trip itself, the relationship between the characters would grow or deteriorate accordingly. The deck of cards was re-balanced during the game, gradually lowering the chances of a good trip.

We did this to make sure that doing LSD would always have consequences for the characters and thus also for the players. We figured that if this was the case, players would not use the drug box lightly to kill time. Instead they would use tripping to develop their characters’ personal stories and relationships. The drawing of the card would signify the dark potential of drug abuse and add a random element to the mechanic.

The trip itself was represented by short surreal scenes set by game-masters. The scenes could take place in four different settings represented by the visuals and accompanying sound-

scapes (a moving train and a forest representing good trips, and a bourgeois living room or a damp dungeon representing bad trips). The specific location, as well as the specific scene, was chosen by the gamemaster to facilitate the development of the relationships in a way that was relevant to the specific characters.

Examples of scenes include two deer finding the best grass in a forest, a sultan having captured a princess or prince in a castle, or a mother and child travelling on the train of communism towards America. The scenes only lasted for a few minutes, and most of them intentionally didn't lend themselves well to longer playing times. After a final out-of-character negotiation on the future of the character relationships, the players would re-enter the larp.

OUTCOME

The technique worked brilliantly for showcasing the different sides of psychedelics in the 1970s, and succeeded in making the drugs a central part of the story arcs. It gave players a con-

crete opportunity to explore the more spiritual and spacy sides of their characters and relationships, successfully integrating this side of hippie culture into the larp.

It became a tool for players to develop their relations and stories together in a diegetically meaningful way, and something of a reboot generator for players who had reached dead ends in their character's story arcs.

Because it was new, entertaining, and worked really well, most players wanted to try the drug box. But because it was diegetically tied to doing LSD, it wasn't an obvious choice for all characters. This was a challenge, since those players were torn between playing their pre-written characters to the letter or participating in a central game mechanic of the larp. Most of the players ended up steering their characters towards trying LSD; but if we were to redesign the larp, we would probably ensure that all characters were inclined to at least try dropping acid.

FURTHER READING:

nordiclarp.org/wiki/Morgenrøde

NAILED IT!

THE NOTEBOOK MECHANIC

// Bjarke Pedersen

The notebook mechanic was designed for the larp/participatory performance *LevelFive*, an ongoing series of larps originally performed at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles (2010), later at the Zero1 Art festival San Jose (2010), The AND Art Festival Liverpool (2011), and The Berlin Biennale (2016). The piece was created by Brody Condon, the larp mechanics and structures by Bjarke Pedersen, and additional work by Tobias Wrigstad and Monica Hjort Traxl.

LevelFive investigated the ideological legacy of controversial large group self-actualization seminars from late 1970s in America. These seminars were emotionally intense multi-day sessions of talks, physical exercises, and manipulative group dynamics with the goal of breaking down the participants' everyday identities and liberating the inner self. A single seminar could attract thousands of participants, who hoped to unlearn societal constraints and achieve personal transformation. Values and practices from this once-influential movement still shape fields like management consulting today; the larp took the participants back to the self-actualization seminars at the source.

GOALS

Working with this self-realization and transformation as part of a role-playing process was a design challenge. In the self-actualization worldview, most humans live their lives playing roles based on societal expectation rather than who they really are. Diegetically, this meant that all the characters had come to the seminar because they wanted to stop feeling fake – to no longer feel like they were playing characters – in their everyday lives. In other words, the larpers were portraying characters who felt they were bad at playing themselves. The goal of the seminar was to release the “true self” of the character. And since this was a larp, beneath the true self of the character was a third layer of personality – the actual player's own self. How could we help the participants keep track of and model this process?

A secondary design goal was to move some of the character creation process into the runtime of the larp, as there were tough time constraints on the pre-larp workshop. The notebook was introduced to solve these two challenges.

THE NOTEBOOK

The mechanic was a way for the participant and the character to communicate their feelings and thoughts. We handed out notebooks to all participants – any notebook with a spine in a size small enough to fit into a pocket will do. Diegetically, the notebooks were part of the workshop materials, and the participants were encouraged by the diegetic seminar leader to write in them.

We instructed the participants to write in the notebook on three different levels: 1) As their *character*, 2) as *participant*, observing the *character*; and 3) as *participant*, about their experience. They were simply asked to note in the corner of the page the number of the level they were writing on. At Level 1 the character used the notebook to write about themselves, their personality, and their experience at the seminar. Later in the larp, the seminar methods led the characters to have breakthroughs. The participants were informed, in a meta break, that their characters were now able to read Level 2 entries in the notebook. The effect: the character could suddenly understand they were not as smart as they thought, or that they needed to work on their temper. Their faults and issues were revealed to them, through the emotionally invested, but outside eyes of their player.

During big breaks like lunch and dinner we collected the notebooks and looked through them to pinpoint where to push and apply pressure to the characters going forward, to ensure an optimal experience.

HOW THE LEVELS WORK

Level 1: The *character* writes their thoughts about the situation they are in – the kinds of things they would write in a notebook at a seminar. Any self-reflection will be written as how the character views themselves on a conscious level. Examples are: “I am really bored with this exercise.”, “I think the seminar leader is sexy.” or “I am a really smart and independent woman, better than anybody here.” Since these lines are written by the character, they can be read by the character. The character cannot read the other two levels.

Level 2: The *participant* writes about how they *see the character*. This is a way for the participant to evolve the character in the first part of the larp and to meta-reflect on the character’s journey. Examples are: “God this character is full of herself. She is not smart at all.”, “The character has a really bad temper when provoked about his looks.” or “My character will break early. I am sure of it!”

Level 3: The *participant* writes about *their own experience* participating, framing and reflecting on how they are doing to help them steer their experience. Examples are: “I really loved screaming at that annoying character.”, “I am so tired right now. I need to do something.” or “I am overwhelmed. Maybe I need a break?”

RESULTS

The notebook mechanic worked really well. It focused the inner journey of the characters and helped the partici-

pants with their experience. The characters used the notebook throughout the larp, referring back to what they had written earlier. Reflecting on their character, and writing different options for what direction to take next, helped participants map their journey through the larp. It enabled them to make choices during runtime and to build a nuanced character on the basic foundation they had made during the workshop.

Especially people new to larp commented that the notebook mechanic was a great help in understanding their function throughout the performance

piece. The first run of the larp also taught us that the mechanic worked best when we scheduled undisturbed time for writing in the notebook.

We really nailed what we set out to do: to have a clear and simple tool used by all participants, that met our design challenges and enhanced their experience significantly.

FURTHER READING:

nordiclarp.org/wiki/Levelfive

NAILED IT!

CLASS PRIVILEGE AND CONFLICT ESCALATION

// Kaisa Kangas

Tuhannen viillon kuolema (Finland, 2018, Eng. *Death by a Thousand Cuts*) was a larp by Juhana Pettersson (designer) and Massi Hannula (producer) about class war. I was in charge of the pre-larp workshop. There were three types of characters: the poor, the middle class, and the rich. The basic idea was that towards the end of the larp, the poor would become so frustrated with inequality that they would start killing the rich.

CHALLENGE

We first ran a small test larp at Ropecon, the biggest role-playing convention in Finland. The test larp had only poor and rich characters, no middle class, and ended with an event where the poor served champagne to the rich. In the workshop, we played various scenes from the characters' pasts to drive home the point that the rich characters had acted like assholes towards the poor. For example, some of them had hired a couple of poor characters to renovate a villa and then refused to pay them properly. We instructed the players that in the last scene of the larp, the poor characters would be so

wound up they would start stabbing the rich.

After the playtest, players complained that it had been difficult to escalate the situation so that physical violence would emerge. The rich felt they had no reason even to speak to the poor since you usually ignore waiters; and the poor felt there weren't enough in-fiction reasons to act violently, as the rich didn't provoke them. One of the players of the poor said stabbing the rich felt forced and artificial, and that they only did it because they had been instructed to.

DESIGN CHOICE

As a solution, I suggested a mechanic for class privilege. When a rich character holds the palm of their hand up in a rejecting gesture while speaking, the poor characters cannot speak, unless they physically touch the rich character. Middle-class characters were allowed to ignore the mechanic, but were told that it would require a lot of psychological effort from their character to do so. The idea was that in order to have their voice heard, a poor charac-

ter would have to cross the boundary of touching the other person (which in Finland, where the larp was set, is a clear transgression), and this would lead to escalation.

OUTCOME

The mechanic was used a lot in the larp and players seemed to like it. It was a great help to less outgoing players to allow them to take up space, and it did lead to scenes where it served to escalate the situation as intended. However, most of the time, the players of poor characters seemed to treat the mechanic as an absolute rule instead of

one you were expected to sometimes break by touching the other person. This meant that the mechanic created less escalation than I had hoped and expected. The problem could perhaps be remedied by practising the mechanic more in the pre-larp workshop, especially by playing scenes where the poor person would touch the rich one to interrupt them.

FURTHER READING:

nordiclarp.org/wiki/Tuhannen_viihlon_kuolema

NAILED IT!

LARPING THE BLUES

// Iva Vávrová
// Kateřina Holendová

For our noir-themed larp *Valley of Shadow* (Czech Republic, 2018) we decided that half of the larp would be set within the characters' dreams, and that these sequences would use dancing as the primary mode of interaction. We also wanted the larp to be accessible to everyone, meaning we needed a dance we could teach from scratch in a weekend. Our design challenge was finding one that would also allow equal in-character communication for everyone, and be suitable for people of varying abilities.

In larp we generally want all players to have an equal ability to contribute with their own ideas. However, most couples' dances have two unequal roles: leader and follower. If one imagines a dance as a conversation, many dance styles frame the roles as the leader 'speaking' all the time (proposing most moves), while the follower mostly listens (carries out moves proposed by the leader).

The follower's agency can be limited by many practical matters. In tango or ballroom dances, humans are squished onto other humans very tightly just to perform the basic connection, limiting the possibility of independent movement. Charleston or boogie woo-

gie require dancers to perform complicated, high-speed step sequences before even getting to creativity. In most dances we knew, the built-in options for follower agency were usually limited to optional styling, purely aesthetic in purpose and to be added once the follower has mastered everything else.

Naturally, one can 'hack' a dance to make it more suitable for larping. But hacking has limits and would require more labour and more valuable workshopping time.

We knew our players would include both avid dancers and complete beginners. If the style was difficult to learn and one partner's dance skill determined the quality of the dance, our larp would suffer from the good dancer flocking paradigm: where if for the dance (and larp) to work, people need to do difficult things well, then better dancers will automatically gravitate towards better dancers, effectively creating several "castes" of player.

Other demands for our platform included having a lot of versatile options for emotional expression (most dance styles gravitate heavily towards expressing one emotion dominantly, whether it is "joy" in swing, or "bittersweet drama" in tango); where even

not very physically fit players would manage several songs in a row without dying; and where intense physical contact was purely opt-in, not the main basis for the dance.

We slowly eliminated most of the dances we'd collected in our combined decades of studying and teaching dance. Fortunately, our last and most beloved stop on the road of dance ticked all the boxes.

Blues is an American vernacular dance, stemming from the Western African dance tradition. It became widely popular in the USA in the Jazz Age, and today has a passionate global fan base. Most importantly, it addressed most of our needs through its inherent features!

Blues started as a solo dance, only developing into a coupled form gradually. Subsequently, follower agency is not an afterthought or a tentatively offered "as long as you don't disturb the lead". That both partners have an equal ability to contribute to the dance is one of the most central concepts of blues dancing. As soon as beginners are taught to connect in a couple and perform a simple under-arm turn, they are taught follower agency. Therefore, introducing blues as a larping platform where players have equal voices required much less tinkering with the fundament of the dance. We did not need a separate workshop to teach the players to move within the dance, with its rigid leader- and follower-shaped spaces, and another one saying "now forget what we taught you; this is how we work with it for this larp". We could smoothly transfer from teaching agency and content-creation within the dan-

ce for all dancers, to teaching agency and content-creation within the larp for all larpers.

Blues also has an extremely low entry barrier. If you can transfer weight from one leg to another while bending your knees or lowering your hips in a certain rhythm, you can blues (a bit). Naturally, learning blues well is difficult and time-consuming, but starting is quite easy. The connection is also relatively loose, starting with just holding hands, which allows everybody a lot of space to dance in, and significantly limits frustration in dances with less skilled partners. If one player cannot really do much and the other can, they can move within their bodies and have fun nevertheless, allowing players with different dance skills to interact freely.

Thanks to that, after around four hours of workshops, a group ranging from complete non-dancers to people entrenched in "men lead; women follow" stereotypes, spent the night pulsing and grooving in the rhythm of blues and creating together, regardless of dance role, raw skill, or gender.

The emotional range of blues allowed players to express love, hate, remorse, and reconciliation through dancing. The options it offered beyond the couple, including solo and group dancing possibilities, let us create safe mechanics for aggression within the dance, by including group dance-offs, solitary reflection, and dancing in groups of three or four with varying connection. Its affinity for slower tempos meant that players with different bodies and different levels of physical fitness could manage a workshop weekend and two hours of dancing in

the game. And finally, we could offer the players many options of physical contact: from none, to holding hands, to tight embraces, and ways to navigate between them, for diversity of both expression and playstyle intensity.

By the end, blues empowered our players to perform a rounded storyline, rage, flirt, steal partners, interact with NPCs, express a range of moods, and accept that (almost) anyone can dance with (almost) anyone and feel good about it. It led us through the *Valley of*

Shadon, and we'd be quick to recommend it as an excellent path for dance larps, to those ready to respect it and embrace it in its entirety.

FURTHER READING:

nordiclarp.org/wiki/Valley_of_Shadow

NAILED IT!

META- TECHNIQUES

// Anna Westerling
// Anders Hultman

A metatechnique is a mechanic enabling player-to-player communication during runtime without pausing play to talk out of character. Metatechniques are used in order to create a broader experience. If you design a larp about social surface, you may want to include some technique to let the players reveal their characters' inner thoughts and motivations, while at the same time keeping up that social facade. If you design a larp about people going crazy as society collapses, you may want a metatechnique that allows players to calibrate play intensity between each other; and so on.

Below are examples of three types of metatechniques: metacommunication inserted into play by one player; words or objects containing or activating meta information for the players; and meta scenes played by two or more players. [*Meta scenes are the odd bird out on this list, because the actual role-playing of the scenes can be normal character interaction. Here the metatechnique more specifically is the initiation and negotiation of the scene. This is a theoretical distinction: in everyday speech, meta scenes commonly belong amongst the metatechniques. –Eds.*]

Depending on what story you as a designer want to enable with your larp, you can add, redesign, adjust, and invent new metatechniques to fit the vision and themes of your particular larp. Not all mechanics work at all larps; you need to find the type of tool that works for your design.

INNER MONOLOGUE

Metacommunication inserted into the play by one player

A character may lie, tell half truths, and keep secrets. As this could be something only the player knows about, in order to bring the character's thoughts into play the metatechnique *inner monologue* can be used, permitting a player to verbalize the character's thoughts and feelings. The inner monologue is audible to the other players, but not to the other characters. This can be done in a number of different ways, but there needs to be a clear distinction between when the character is speaking, and when the character's inner thoughts are being expressed. That means an inner monologue needs to have a clear beginning and end.

If a character is thinking about revolution, for example, it's not truly expressed in play until the character tells another character, or acts on it in an obvious way – but some characters never would. The inner monologue metatechnique allows the players to formulate and express character thoughts externally,

without their character needing to reveal them diegetically. This is done in part to guide the player towards a deeper understanding and a more developed story of their own character, and in part for the benefit of the other players and everyone's collective storymaking.

Knowing what a character is really thinking reframes and changes the meaning of their actions, creating dramatic irony, which makes witnessing the actions more interesting. When the other players understand a character's inner motivation and thoughts, they can also collaboratively create a more focused, meaningful, and emotional story arc through playing against the tensions that they are now aware of. They can make a more informed decision about where to take the larp next, or choose what theme or scene would be interesting to play, than if they just need to guess where the character is.

For example, a scene can be made a lot more interesting if both players know one character secretly loves the other character. The unknowing character can play on believing that she is unlovable, or on being in love with someone else, to give more emotional impact to the scene.

This metatechnique is helpful in a larp that focuses on the characters' story and emotional experiences. It is especially useful in larps where characters can't say what they mean: for example, in settings with lots of social control or oppression.

On the other hand it is an intrusive metatechnique: it forces everyone close by to listen to information their characters would not have. Particularly if the larp is quite big this can be problematic, since players in a larp are usually focussed on their own story and their closest relations. If a player has never met a character it can be uninteresting to listen to their inner thoughts. Hence the use of techniques that force everyone to listen should be limited to smaller groups of preferably a maximum of eight persons.

Below are a few examples of what the inner monologue metatechnique might look like in practice.

DIRECTOR INSTRUCTION

Some larps have so called directors in the larp. A director is a runtime gamemaster present in the larp to actively enable play, and is visible to the players, but not to the characters. [See *Westerling & Hultman on Runtime Directors*. –Eds]. If your larp uses this type of function, a director can simply ask a player to do an inner monologue during a scene, and say thank you when it's over. The director can use an agreed-upon phrase like "What are you thinking?" or "Please do an inner monologue" to clearly communicate that the metatechnique is being used.

This mechanic was used at *En stilla middag med familjen* (Sweden, 2007, Eng. *A Nice Evening with the Family*). For clarity it was combined with a gesture called *gamemaster's touch*. The director put their hand lightly on the player to signal a meta level interaction and asked, for example, what the character felt. The player could then tell the director what their character was thinking. It also finished clearly

when the director said thank you and removed their hand.

ZONING

In the room a special area or position is marked, and when someone stands there and speaks they are understood to be doing an inner monologue. The downside with this is that there needs to be someone around who wants to listen, so that the player is not speaking to an empty room. This works best in spaces where small groups play together, and when the rest of the group is willing to listen to an inner monologue.

A SPECIAL GESTURE

To start an inner monologue you do a special gesture to mark that it is a monologue. For instance, *Mad About the Boy* (Norway, 2010) used forming the shape of a TV screen with your hands around your head to start and finish your monologue. The downside is that someone entering in the middle may have missed the gesture, and so uncertainty can arise about whether what is said is audible to other characters or not. In other larps, alternatives have been developed where you for instance touch your heart, or a specific object throughout the monologue instead. For example, in some larp it might be elegant to agree that if a player is touching the Bible, it means the player is monologuing about the character's soul.

A SPECIAL RITUAL

In some settings there are certain rituals that can be adopted for the use of meta-techniques. For example at a dinner party giving speeches, or in Jane Austen's time reading poems together. You can establish in your design that while the characters will hear a speech or poem, the players will give an inner monologue instead.

In the larp *Joakim* (Sweden, 2011) the player signalled the start of an inner monologue by ping-ponging their glass and getting up as though to hold a cheerful speech, but really to perform an inner monologue.

At *Fortune & Felicity* (Sweden, 2017) the poetry mechanic for inner monologues required the player to say the first line of a real poem, then the character's thoughts or emotions, and end with a line of real poetry. The listeners then applauded as though they had just heard an emotional poem read.

A ritual like this can also provide a convenient code word for inner monologue, with the advantage that the players can ask someone to read a poem knowing that what they will really receive is an inner monologue. A monologue also requires a listener and focus, which the social scripts around both poems and speeches offer.

WORD AND OBJECTS

Words or objects containing or activating meta information for the players

You can introduce keywords or objects that have a special meaning to the players but not the characters. The character will interact with them normally, but the player can use them to direct their play or story choices.

A larp that used objects in this way was *Delirium* (2010, Denmark), which was set in a stylized mental asylum. One design goal of the larp was to allow the participants not to have to pretend to be suffering from mental illness, but to experience the frustrating and sometimes terrifying social reality of their reality not matching that of others. In the setting, any red objects would be treated by the characters as perfectly normal – except for the person interacting with it. For example, one of the spoons at the table would be red and have holes in it. The player who ended up with the red spoon would be unable to eat soup without spilling, but everyone else would punish them, socially or actually, for being messy and creating problems. Complaining that the spoon has holes in it will, of course, make the character seem even more insane.

In *BAPHOMET* (Denmark, 2015) the characters possessed by Baphomet and Pan would be wearing necklaces depicting the deities. The necklaces do not diegetically exist, or represent neutral jewellery if interacted with physically. The players know that to their character, the person wearing the necklace is now the most interesting in the room, and they would do anything to please them. The wearer of the necklace is given a specific goal to guide their interactions with the others.

In the jeepform scenario *Fyllo* (Sweden, 2008, Eng. Drunk) players will attach cues for flashback scenes to a real bottle from which the one of the characters will physically drink during scenes set in the present. As the level of the liquid reaches a scene marker, that scene is played.

You can also load words with meta information to allow participants to communicate out of character without pausing play. Common uses for meta language are magic systems and playstyle calibration.

Using certain words in a spell can describe to other players what the effect is intended to be. In *Dragonbane* (Sweden, 2006), the word “Veritas” implied that the sentence that followed was a spell, and that the player should pay attention, because it would include an instruction about how to react appropriately. The code word and spell were diegetically real, and the instruction was to be followed absolutely – with possible wiggle room provided by any unintentional vagueness on the magic user’s side.

In *Inside Hamlet* (2015, Denmark) the thematically appropriate words “rotten” and “pure” were used in a sentence to increase or decrease intensity in an ongoing interaction. The character’s opinion and the playstyle instruction could

be communicated simultaneously even when they did not match. If a character was outraged or scared, but the player wanted to invite more abuse, they might say “you’re *rotten* through and through”. (The co-player could still choose to continue at the current level). And if a character was happy with the interaction, but the player wanted to tone it down, they might say “what a *pure* delight this is”; which communicated a hard limit to the other player. It was the responsibility of both parties to continue play in a way that respected player wishes. This was a way for players to work together in telling stories about themes like abuse, allowing both to contribute without fear of overstepping.

But meta language can be used for any purpose that you think is useful. In *Black Friday* (Italy, 2014) the word “verum” was used to signify that the information being given was the offgame truth.

PLAYING META SCENES

Meta scenes played by two or more players

Just as it can be interesting to explore what the character in a larp is thinking on the inside by using inner monologues, it can also be interesting to explore the character’s history, possible futures and dreams. A so-called meta scene is a scene that does not fit into the linear time and space of the larp itself, and is instigated by players, or on their behalf, to give the storymaking in the main timeline more meaning. (A scene played in this manner for purely logistical reasons, for instance because building space fighters was too much work, or because a quick trip to a neighbouring city is inconvenient to enact, would not usually be considered a meta scene).

Meta scenes too are most suitable in a larp that focuses on creating stories and dramatic arcs for the characters and an emotional journey for the players. If two players play a married couple considering divorce it is interesting to explore why they got married, how they met and what that looked like. This can be done by simply playing a scene of when they meet, with the help of a gamemaster (in this context called a director). Playing a flashback does not need props or the correct environment. The couple can be in any kind of room with the director, who can set the scene – “you are in the garden outside her parent’s house”. The players explore what happened in that garden, and improvise from there. When the director thinks the scene finished they can simply say “thank you.”

Creating and playing scenes outside the larp’s frame of time and space gives the character more context, understanding, and story. If larping a break-up with someone one just met, then ending the relationship will likely be very easy. But they will miss a great opportunity for drama, since the relationships wasn’t built up. Playing meta scenes where they promise to love each other forever, and scenes about future children they would have, and more, will make breaking up a lot harder – and the breakup a better scene.

Below are three examples of how to play outside the immediate frame of the main larp: the blackbox, the hour of scenes, and directing.

ZONING FOR META SCENES

The meta room as it is known in big (often 360°) larps today was introduced into the Nordic larp context at *A Nice Evening with the Family* in 2007. A meta room is a room in the context of a bigger larp venue designated for playing scenes that will not fit the linear time represented by the runtime. It can be any kind of room, as long as it has a door for some privacy. Even though the meta room at a longform larp is often referred to as a blackbox, very seldom is it an actual theatre blackbox or even a black room at all. The name is inspired by the freedom of a theatre blackbox, where any type of scene can be staged. [*Since 2007, the ascendance of the (theatrical) blackbox larp genre has made this common usage confusing, which is why we talk about meta rooms below. –Eds*].

The meta room is usually staffed by a gamemaster experienced in running freeform larp, who can help the participants set up and create scenes. Of course participants can just enter and play by themselves, but having a person to set and break the scenes and possibly use other structuring or narrative freeform techniques will help with focus and pacing.

The players will come to the meta room with an idea or purpose, so they and the director will know what they would like to explore. As the players enter the meta room (or sometimes its waiting area), they will go out of character, but should not lose concentration. The meta room is not a place for offgame chat, but for focused out-of-character discussion about story choices: what scenes to play, and what themes to explore.

You would usually establish some kind of code word or phrase so players can invite each other to go to the meta room. It could be “would you like to take a walk?” or “do you want to look at the family photos?” The other player can then answer as they prefer. You can adjust your code words to fit the setting for the meta room. At *Fortune and Felicity* the meta room was referred to as “the fortune teller”. Characters could discuss amongst each other about visiting the fortune teller and what fates they would like to see. This also nudged everyone to formulate a purpose and clear idea of what to play on when arriving.

THE HOUR OF SCENES

The Hour of Scenes is essentially the same thing as the meta room, but instead of being a place you create scenes in, it is a specific time when you meet up with your closest co-players and a director to do the same thing. This is useful if you do not think your players would be likely or able to break away from the runtime action to visit a meta room, or when you want to make sure all the players reflect on and explore their character journeys at the same time.

At *A Nice Evening with the Family* the entire larp was paused for an hour for everyone to play scenes in small groups, lead by a director. These groups should ideally be three to five people, so everyone has the chance to participate in scenes and to explore their characters, without needing to sit inactive and watch others

for too long. A group should be no more than eight people.

At the collaborative-style *Vampire the Masquerade* larp *Convention of Thorns* (Poland, 2016), some of the daytime hours, when vampires would not diegetically be active, were used for *day play* – optional facilitated meta scenes.

GAMEMASTER INSTRUCTION

If your larp design uses directors, they can basically create a meta scene anywhere in the larp at any time by just asking players to play a specific scene. But it needs to be clear to everyone what is happening, both to those participating and others who might walk by. This makes it preferable for the director to work in smaller groups in one secluded space rather than in a big public settings.

PORTRAYING SEXUAL CONTENT IN LARP

// Frida Lindegren

WHY PORTRAY SEX IN LARPS?

When you are making a larp for grown-ups, whether the focus of the larp is sex or not, sex always needs to be considered. Sex is connected to a lot of the things that make up a person: gender, identity, procreation, family, social behaviour, culture, and norms. As Anneli Friedner discussed in a lecture at Prolog in 2018, sex in itself can be interesting to explore in larp – but thoughts around sex can also be used as a part of creating the world of the larp, its plot, characters, and their identities. Sex can also be completely irrelevant for your larp: but choosing whether or not to engage with it should be an active design decision.

The next step is to consider whether sex will be represented during play. One possible choice is to assume that sex is important in the characters' lives, but still decide that none of them will engage in it during the hours of their lives explored in the larp. If you do decide that the characters can have sex during the runtime, you must next decide in what way. How will it be represented so it best serves the purpose and aesthetics of the larp?

When you talk about “sex”, what do you mean more specifically? In reality, sex can be so many things: masturbation, sex with one or more people, giving pleasure with one's mouth or one's hands, anal sex, good sex, bad sex, awkward sex... There are also a lot of activities, behaviours, and objects connected to the sexual act: kisses, violence, power, condoms, sperm, lubrication, toys, nudity, erogenous zones, physical limits, erectile dysfunction, pain, cuddling, hiding the mess one has made during the sex... Depending on the larp, specific aspects of sexual activity might be more or less important to represent. In a larp about hoopups at a music festival, one might need to go into both practical details – who did what with whom in what kind of environment – and whether the sex was any good. In other settings you might just mention in passing that the characters had sex, and be done with it.

Some larps have sexual content, but also make those storylines entirely optional for the participants. In the rerun of *End of the Line* (Finland, 2016) made for US audiences, two participants will first consent to taking their stories in a sexual direction, and only then negotiate how the sex will be portrayed – either verbal-

ly, or with an individually agreed-upon level of physical realism up to actually making out (always with clothes on). The theme of the larp being “hunters and prey”, sexuality is only one of many possible arenas for exploring that topic. In other larps, where sexual themes are woven into the core of the story, asking for this kind of *story consent* may not make sense. In that case it is important to make very clear before signup that avoiding sexual themes will not be possible, to be very specific about how they will be portrayed, and to let the players themselves choose whether the larp is for them.

You will also always need to communicate just as clearly what the players cannot do. In some larps, players are not allowed to touch each other at all. In some larps touching is allowed but nudity is not. (Remember in your communication that “nudity” is defined differently in different countries: in the Nordics a person is not considered naked until their underwear is off.) In some larps the players are not allowed to play on nonconsensual sexual situations, or make stories about sex involving any kind of violence. Many well-known larps that deal with sexual themes – like *Just A Little Lovin’* (Norway, 2011), which is about love during the AIDS crisis, and *Inside Hamlet* (Denmark, 2015), which is about decadence and corruption at a crumbling court – specifically prohibit real genital sex.

Understanding that sex-themed storytelling is limited absolutely to the chosen simulation mechanic helps establish and affirm the contract between players that they are still in a fictional frame telling stories about sex – not actually having sex.

DESIGN QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

In larp, sexual actions are usually represented through some kind of *replacement mechanic*: the sexual actions are replaced with other actions or symbols. Here are some important factors to consider when designing a sex simulation mechanic for your larp.

What’s the narrative purpose of the sex mechanic?

Is it a tool for creating romantic plot, a way for the characters to demonstrate power, or just a nice experience that makes sense in the larp setting? The purpose has to be in line with the theme, style, and goals of the larp as a whole; slapstick sex created by a slapstick sex mechanic will not fly in a serious larp about repression and loss of control.

Is the sexual story content intended primarily for the players actively involved in the scene, or is it input for surrounding characters? A more visually and auditorily realistic mechanic can be a better choice, if it’s meant to create an impact on others; and exactly what is happening may be more comprehensible in a visually realistic style of simulation. For the players involved, something more symbolic and abstract can convey the emotions and dynamics just as well.

Who are the participants?

Mo Holkar and Monica Hjort Traxl have described how more explicitly “sexy” mechanics can exclude some participants, e.g. people who, because of cultural, relational, physical, or psychological reasons are not comfortable touching people they don’t have an out-of-character intimate relation with. You will have to adapt your mechanics depending on the target audience of your larp, and communicate the mechanics properly so that all potential players understand your vision. If you have a player group from different larp cultures, you can’t presume they have the same ideas or levels of comfort. You have to be very clear about the lowest and highest intensity levels in portrayals of sexual interaction.

Remember to consider how the mechanic can accommodate different bodies. A person with a big and heavy body might not be comfortable laying down on top of anyone; a person without full mobility might need a mechanic that’s less acrobatic. Accommodations to make the play more inclusive will also help players whose limitations might be cultural, psychological, or just a matter of preference.

How much should out-of-character attraction be allowed to affect play?

Out-of-character attraction and preferences will affect in-character attraction and preferences, and vice versa. Depending on how much you want to control this, you may choose to predetermine the in-fiction relationships (and potential sex partners) for the characters, or let the players set them up themselves through prenegotiation or in play.

If you let the players find their own relationships, they are likeliest to play on sexual storylines with players they already know and trust, or with people they personally find attractive; either of which will leave some people out. If you decide to control these relationships more, the probability of everyone having access to sex-related story content will be higher. On the other hand, expecting people to explore these themes with random strangers requires them to be very brave. You will need a good workshop process, overall design, and mechanics, for sex scenes not to become too awkward. When it does not work, players will opt out of this content entirely.

How much physical immersion and realistic feelings are desired?

In the same way that the players’ bodies can have joyful or fearful physiological/psychological responses when playing a character, they can also be sexually aroused. This can be more or less taboo or desirable in your design and something to think about carefully. If you think it’s acceptable that players might be aroused by the sex simulation, you can design a more realistic mechanic for stronger physical immersion. If you think it’s less acceptable, you can design a more abstract and distanced mechanic.

If you want the players to experience more emotional impact, e.g. if your larp focuses on intense dynamics like suffering, coercion, passion, or love, you may choose to go in the more realistic and physical direction. It will likely lead

to the players experiencing more physical immersion, but probably also lead to more larp crushes and bleed. Players experience emotions with their bodies, and the body does not understand that its stomach butterflies and pupil dilations are caused by a person that does not really exist. If you don't want your players to experience romantic bleed, you can enhance the feeling of alibi and distance. You can also make sure your players have more cognitive and emotional resources to cope with the experience by making sure they are well-rested and relaxed.

In what kind of physical environment will the larp take place?

Is there an abundance of soft, horizontal surfaces with a high hygienic standard? Or is it a cold, dusty gravel pit with no light after the sun's gone down? How do you want to prioritize the players' comfort vs every other factor, like the setting or the purpose of the larp? Does the lack or abundance of comfortable or available places to have sex in create interesting play on a story level?

What's the larp's setting and aesthetic?

If the larp is theatrical and decadent, the sex mechanic might also need to be. If the larp's setting is based on some kind of innocent romanticism, where the most erotic event would be someone looking at you from across the room, then the sex mechanic might also need to be a bit more restricted (unless you are intentionally aiming for a contrast). If the larp is based on an already established storyworld, how is sex portrayed there? Is it something that's just alluded to, or a detailed affair with physical descriptions?

Do the players need a way to communicate or negotiate before and after the scene?

If the larp has darker themes, the need to check in out of character with a co-player might be higher than in a more easygoing larp. It is a good idea to establish how the players should communicate to check whether their co-player is okay with moving the scene in a more sexual direction, and how they feel after the scene. You can use non-intrusive consent calibration mechanics, or encourage players going completely offgame to negotiate. [*For more detailed suggestions about how to teach physical consent negotiation, see Mutsaers in the next chapter. —Eds.*]

Is the communication between the characters, before and after, interesting play?

In a larp where most characters do not speak about their inner lives, it might be interesting for the players to hear characters express their real feelings and thoughts before and after sex. A metatechnique, like a pre- or post-sex monologue or meta scene, might do the trick.

After the hard parameters of your design have been established, the most important questions need to be revisited: Why is it important to portray sex in this larp at all, and what is the narrative purpose of the sexual content?

Is it because having sex has important social consequences for the characters? In that case focusing on the emotions and decisions before, during, and after sex makes sense. Or is the exact nature of the sexual acts, or the power dynamics of the interaction, narratively important? Then a simulation mechanic in which details of the sexual act are somehow represented could work better. If the story potentially involves non-consensual interactions or sexual violence, how will that be represented?

EXAMPLES OF SEX SIMULATION MECHANICS

One advantage of using an already existing simulation mechanic is that it'll save precious time in your design process. A disadvantage is that as the mechanic isn't specifically designed for your larp, the players, or the environment, it may not suit the purpose. To save time and sanity, you might still want to adapt an already existing mechanic instead of designing a brand new one. In any case, familiarizing yourself with some of the available choices will help you think about the design choices involved, and will give some idea of what kinds of mechanics players might have encountered before.

STORYTELLING SEX

Summer Lovin' (Norway/Sweden, 2012), a freeform scenario about friends telling stories about hookups, used storytelling as the simulation mechanic. After a scene where the sexual encounter is talked about, it is played out as a flashback to explore what really happened. Two people sit in front of each other, holding hands. As is common in freeform scenarios, the other players will not be portraying characters while not in focus, and will just sit by the others as an audience. One of the players holding hands says, from a character perspective, what they do to the other character. The other player answers with how their character reacts and what they do in response. They then take turns describing the sex act until one of them lets go of the hands.

The mechanic is focused more on co-creating a story about sex than on experiencing the sex physically, which may be experienced as easier to play. Just describing what the character does may be easier than actually doing it with one's body. The mechanic demands of the players to be quite verbally creative in front of an audience, which for some players might feel quite embarrassing or difficult. An alternative in your larp could be to use the same mechanic without an audience, or to decide at the start of the scene broadly what's going to happen in it. If you want the mechanic to feel more immersive, the players can stand/sit closer to each other, or maybe even whisper into the other person's ear what their character does and feels.

In *Fortune & Felicity* (Sweden, 2017), a Jane Austen-inspired 360° larp, the sex simulation was a similar metatechnique, but focused on what the act meant for

the characters. The larp's handbook described it as a three-step process:

Foreplay – hold both hands, and take turns telling each other what your characters are thinking about before the sex. Nervous, horny, confused, etc. Use both reason and emotion.

Sex – continue holding hands, but lean forwards and touch your right cheek to the other player's right cheek. Then you take turns saying single words that describe the character's emotions during the act. When you feel you are done, you can lean back. But keep holding hands.

Afterthought – while holding hands, tell the other about what this will mean for you, your family, and your future. Let both reason and emotion play their parts. When done, release hands. Nothing of what is said is heard by the other character. This is just your character's thoughts as they have sex, shared with the other player. If your character wishes to talk to the other character in game, you can do so when you have let go of the hands.

ARS AMANDI

Designed for *Mellan himmel och hav* (Sweden, 2003, Eng. Between Heaven and Sea), Ars Amandi is one of the best known sex simulation mechanics in Nordic larp. The core of the mechanic involves the players touching each other's hands, arms, shoulders, and part of the neck (but nowhere else on the body) while working with eye contact, breathing, moans and intensity of touch as appropriate. In the original larp, set in a fictional culture on a distant planet, this was how characters diegetically had sex – the actions represented themselves and were not symbolic replacements for other actions. In later use, Ars Amandi has become a replacement mechanic. One way to adapt Ars Amandi is to change the limits of the touching, from only hands to arms and everything above the breasts.

To get comfortable with the mechanic, all players try it out in a workshop many times with a lot of different people. A common positive reaction to the mechanic is that it feels safe and sexy at the same time. A common critique is that it feels weird and uncomfortable to practise the mechanic with so many people in the workshop, especially with moans and breathing. Depending on how comfortable the players are with the mechanic, you might need to tone down the intensity during the workshop, or only try out the mechanic in smaller groups, and save the moaning and heavy breathing for the larp. Some players might also more generally feel that touching each other's arms while maintaining eye contact is too intimate to do with strangers.

The mechanic is rather straightforward, it has specific phases, and you can start and end it without having to think about props or clothes. If you want a more realistic representation of pre-sex and post-sex behaviours, you can think

about how to symbolize condoms, lube and the like. Another question is how to handle clothes – will they stay on, or does the potential shedding of clothing serve a purpose? In a cold/dirty environment one might prioritize comfort and leave the clothes on: or one might decide that it will create a sharp and immersive contrast when everyone's huddled in layers of clothes, and one sees a flash of naked arm in an intimate scene.

Narratively, the mechanic may be a bit confusing for onlookers. It can be hard to see whether a soft stroke of the shoulder should suggest gentle penetrative sex or an intimate caress. If you want other people to be able to really read the actions, then *Ars Amandi* might not be the best fit.

THE PHALLUS METHOD

The Phallus Method, designed for *Just a Little Lovin'*, has three steps: the negotiation, the sex simulation, and the monologues. The larp is about love, AIDS history, and gay sexual culture in the early 1980s; and the simulation mechanic needs to be very explicit to allow for nuanced storytelling around sex-related content.

In the first step, a player will offer another player a pink feather as an invitation to play or escalate to a sex scene. The player has the choice to pass; if they want to play, they take the feather and then negotiate the approximate content and physical intensity of the scene with their co-player(s).

Playing out the sex involves using a phallus prop to symbolize sexual actions. The phallus is aesthetically suitable to the larp's focus on male gay experience, and is understood by the players to be a gender-neutral symbol for assertiveness and penetrative sex. How to specifically use the phallus prop is open for players to decide, depending on their comfort level in the specific situation. They can for instance choose to touch each others' arms with the phallus, to suck it, or to use it for "dry humping" (theatre sex). The rules do instruct the players to keep at least some clothes on, and that any actual sex involving genitals is not permitted.

After the sex scene has been played, the players stand side by side, without eye contact, and hold monologues of one or a few sentences from their character's perspective about their thoughts and feelings about what has just transpired. This is a meta-technique; the monologues can be heard by the players, but not the characters.

Since the mechanic is so open to interpretation, you would have to establish what range of behaviours is intended and allowed in your take on it: there's quite a jump in realism between touching each others' wrists with the phallus and deep-throating the prop. Especially if you'll be in a dirty environment, think about hygiene. How are the phalluses supposed to be cleaned and stored? If you for some reason can't fix specific props, or the players do not have one at hand, would anything with a phallus shape be fine? Of course the symbolic object you choose does not have to be phallus-shaped.

ARS IMPERIO

Designed for the 2018 reruns of *En stilla middag med familjen* (Sweden, 2007, Eng. A Nice Evening with the Family), Ars Imperio is focused on the larp's themes: power, potency and control. It combines elements from Ars Amandi and storytelling sex with a more physical interaction. The player who judges their character to be more submissive will lie down; or, if the scene has an element of force, be asked by the other player to lie down. Either player can opt out at any time, and the larp offered the option of finding a gamemaster to play out the scene in a more abstract way in the meta room.

The player of the more dominant character sits down on the other person's stomach. Then they touch each others' hands, arms and face, to simulate kisses and sex, and take turns saying one word that describes what the character is thinking or feeling. The larp's materials state:

This is not a competition and you can spend many seconds choosing your words. When the act goes towards a climax these words might be repeated over and over in a more ecstatic way. [...] It is okay to make very short sentences or noises to complement the words if it feels right for you. [...] If you want a rhythm and movement you can use your hands together and combine this with repeating the words. Please do not add pelvic motion or other very sexually coded elements during the act. You should also refrain from touching anywhere else than hands and face on your partner.

The power dynamics may shift, with the dominant character's player lying down, and the previously submissive one choosing to get on top. The sex is over when the dominant person stands up.

Ars Imperio places a lot of focus on a physical representation of power and control, which can have a great effect, but will be less relevant in settings where not all relationships are a site of conflict and competition. The mechanic is also meant for just two people: so if you want to portray some form of group sex, you might need to think about how to symbolize the power dynamics and the physical control of the submissive/s. On a practical level, not everyone is able to lie down on the floor or sit on top of another person, or comfortable with doing so. You can always adapt the mechanic to a sitting or standing position where you use your hands or arms to signal the physical control.

TEACHING THE SIMULATION MECHANIC

The simulation mechanic you select or design needs to be described *before signup* on a general level, *after signup* in more detail, and then be *practised on site* to ensure everyone knows it, and to help counter a sense of embarrassment or confusion while using it. One of the most important things to do before trying

out the mechanic is to build trust. If the players don't trust each other, they won't be comfortable playing on stories involving sex. Your workshop will need a trust-building progression and exercises. And don't rush it. Stress won't help to soothe anxiety.

Practising these mechanics, without the alibi of character and in a room full of people, is often more awkward than playing them in context, where the character and the magic circle provide more alibi. If the mechanic is more immersive and realistic, you might want to instruct the players to try it out more mechanically in workshop, without much feeling. You can verbalize the emotions to help normalize them: "this will feel awkward, so if you think this is a little weird at first you're doing it right."

In any case, but especially if the mechanic involves close physical proximity, it's a good idea to remind participants that the body might have automatic mechanical responses, including erections, and to not make a big deal about it. If you are too embarrassed to say the word "erection" to your players you should select a less physical representation mechanic.

If you choose to allow the players to play on sexual themes in the larp, you have to be prepared to talk about sexual things with your players. Make sure you know why you have made your choices by reflecting on the different questions above. Communicate your design clearly to the participants, and make sure they always know how to take responsibility for their own limits.

FURTHER READING:

Charles Bo Nielsen: "Playing in love" in Nielsen (ed): *Once Upon a Nordic Larp*. (2017)

Mo Holkar & Monica Hjort Traxl, "What Does it Mean When Sex is Sexy?" *nordiclarp.org*. (3.2. 2017)

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THE LANGUAGE OF CONSENT

PRACTICAL CONSENT NEGOTIATIONS FOR PHYSICAL PLAY

// Susan Mutsaers

Most larps define in their design what kind and intensity of physical interaction between participants is acceptable and permitted. Some larps make this a range, leaving space for playstyle calibration between individual participants. These negotiations between participants can happen through either informal structures or formalized measures of communication.

An often used type of structured playstyle calibration is the formalized prompt, for example “How would you like to play this?” The other person answers, and asks the same question, after which both parties select a level both are comfortable with. This kind of calibration is called a consent negotiation.

Knowing and choosing the right words to use when talking about one’s physical boundaries is instrumental to successful consent negotiations. Like any kind of social skill, this one is not inherent and must be learned. Most humans have very little practice in negotiating boundaries in their daily lives. If your larp design requires the participants to negotiate how physical interactions in different scenes are played, you should therefore teach them how. Giving them the *questions* that need to be asked is not enough; you should also make participants consider and practice potential *answers* to be given.

Words to use when negotiating consent for physical play can be roughly divided into three categories:

- Locations on the body – used to indicate where the participant wants to be touched (or not to be touched).
- Adjectives and intentions – adjectives describe the way a participant wants to be touched (or not to be touched). This category also includes movements one can make.
- Situations – Used to describe external circumstances that might change the given consent.

Locations on the body	Adjectives & intentions	Situations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Face - Neck - Hand - Legs - Breast/ chest area - Below the belt 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tender - Harsh - Rough - Stroking - Sudden 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not when we are alone - Only in spaces with light - Not when certain people are present

In order to make participants aware of the wide range of language they can use, it is instrumental that complete examples are given during workshops. This is especially relevant for workshops where larpers who are inexperienced with consent negotiations are participating, or where there is a language barrier.

Workshop designers often tend to use extreme situations as examples when teaching consent mechanics. But complete examples would include words not just from all the above categories, but also all intensity levels.

The consent ladder can help you choose examples from a broad range of situations as you are designing your workshop. Making it available to the players will help them think about their limits. The range represented on the list is also of vital importance in framing what behaviours are acceptable and encouraged at your larp. This helps manage the participants' expectations.

Violence	Intimacy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Screaming/yelling without touch - Grabbing/pushing - Threatening - Light slapping - Stage violence - Full contact, low impact violence - Violence with real force (bitting, pushing, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Verbal without touch - Soft and gentle touch on arms - Soft and gentle touch on face/body - Soft and gentle touch in private areas - Harsh touch on any body part - Sex simulation mechanics (e.g. <i>Ars Amandi</i>) - Simulated sexual action (stage kissing, etc.) - Non-simulated sexual interaction (actual kissing, touching, etc.)

It is important to remember that any list like this will not be exhaustive and cannot apply for every participant. A situation which is high on your ladder might be low for another individual. Or the other way around. There are also cultural variations. Some larp cultures will rate real kissing as a medium-intensity activity, but employ very physical sex simulation mechanics that might have a higher threshold.

Using a wide variety of examples helps to validate the boundaries of participants who are looking for lower-intensity interactions in certain situations.

Remind your participants that their limits are likely to be different with different individuals, and might change day to day or hour to hour. This will help normalize renegotiation between the same two players at different points in the larp.

The use of a diverse range of specific examples helps participants evaluate their own boundaries, as they apply the newly-learned words to their personal limits. A participant might for example never even have considered the external situation as something that could affect their boundaries.

Specific vocabulary will also help those initiating consent negotiations to communicate clear intent. A shared language raises awareness of boundaries in both individuals and the participant community, and can help you ensure that anyone new to consent negotiations in larp starts with a vocabulary level closer to that of more experienced participants.

PORTRAYING VIOLENCE IN LARPS

// Martine Helene Svanevik

For anyone who comes from a tabletop systems or boffer larp tradition, simulating violence in larp might seem inevitable. Combat systems, rules, and hit points would be a part of the design of almost any role-playing game. But simulating violence is, as everything else, a design choice. Some larps might need a complex method for this, some might need a simple one, some might not portray any physical conflict at all.

If violence (or the threat of it) fits the theme, genre, setting, and aesthetic goals of your larp, you should first ask yourself what your players will otherwise be doing during play. Are their actions represented realistically or abstractly? Will the body and abilities of the player represent the body and abilities of the character? The answers to these questions will inform whether you need to add game mechanics to simulate violence.

Violence mechanics address two separate issues: how to determine the outcome of a violent interaction (i.e. which character will win), and how the violence between the characters will be represented by the players during play. In the collaborative-style larps discussed in this book, the players are not in competition with each other even when their characters are. Many Nordic-style larps allow the players in the scene to determine the outcome of the conflict based on what makes the most narrative sense to the parties. Others involve light mechanics.

Once you've decided that players will be simulating violence at your larp, the next thing to think about is what you want the violence simulation to make the players feel. What is it that you want to gain from portraying violence at your larp? And what style of larp are you making?

When you design or select a violence mechanic, think about the benefits and the drawbacks of the system you are choosing. If you choose very light mechanics in a larp with a very physical style, you will need to put effort into designing and practising trust within the player group, opt-out mechanics, and playstyle calibration. If you go for a higher simulation level, that will enable characters to do things that their players are not able to do or are not comfortable doing. If you go all the way to a numbers-based system for controlling the outcomes of

different violent interactions, you will require players to memorize a lot of rules; but you will allow for outcomes that are fair and representative of different character skill levels, and more tightly control the balance in the larp.

Your mechanic for simulating violence should compliment the feel and theme of the larp. Adding airsoft weapons to your Western larp might sound like a good idea, until you realize it also means everyone needs to wear safety goggles. Adding a very realistic-looking violence mechanic to a comedy larp about the Knights of the Round Table might lead to no one using violence at all – or seriously detract from the feel of the game as King Arthur grabs Lancelot by the neck and smashes him head-first onto the table until he stops moving.

Keep in mind that rules complexity is relative to local norms. More detailed rules may be required if the player culture is very competitive, or players do not trust each other out of character. Memorising tens or hundreds of pages of rules for statistical systems is completely normal in many larp cultures, and the complexity is considered to be essential for the game in order to ensure fair conflict simulations.

There are certainly also Nordic-style larps where stats and hit points play a big part, for instance in larps centred around military conflict and focused on battle. But most of these larps are still fundamentally collaborative, and the players do not view each other as adversaries. From the perspective of many other larp cultures, these larps would still be viewed as rules-light.

It is also not uncommon in larps like these to let the fighting ability of the participants play a significant part in determining the outcome of a conflict; whereas other larp cultures might prioritize a more abstracted system, to allow players to portray strong fighters regardless of their physical ability.

LIGHT MECHANICS

The Liveform spellcasting system for magical combat used at *College of Wizardry* (Poland, 2014) lets the target determine the effect of the spell. Casting spells is simple. Performing gestures and saying a magical-sounding word does it. It is the responsibility of the spellcaster to communicate the intention of the spell, through role-playing, threats, and choosing an appropriate-sounding spell. However, it is up to the target of the spell to interpret whether the spell lands and its duration and possible effects.

At *The Monitor Celestra* (Sweden, 2013), a larp set in the *Battlestar Galactica* universe, the rules for who won a gun fight were simple: a gun controls a room until another gun is pulled. So by pulling a gun, the character would take control of the scene and get what they want. The only way to stop someone brandishing a gun from getting what they wanted was to pull another gun. In the larp's materials, the rules are described in detail:

The second gun now trumps the first. Control shifts to the most recent gun wielder. Either side can naturally pull more guns. When all of them are out (in general, allow 5–10 minutes for this, so players can make something out of their pull and not immediately be neutralized), the side with the most guns gets final control over the scene. Yes, dual wielding counts as two guns. In a tie, the side with the biggest guns achieves control.

Both of these examples work well in non-competitive play cultures where the players care more about the narrative of the scene(s) than about who wins a conflict. However, even though Nordic larp often prides itself on its *play to lose* or *play to lift* culture – where participants make story choices based on what creates the most interesting outcomes rather than working towards character goals – larps that have an element of competition in them will make people want to win. Having a system where you merely perform the battles might lead to a lot of frustrated players and out-of-character tension. Having clear rules (or numbers) is a good idea for this type of setting.

REAL VIOLENCE AND CALIBRATION

It is uncommon, but not unheard of, to represent fictional violence with real violence. This typically has the effect of greatly limiting its use inside the fiction, as players will escalate slower and limit themselves to whatever actions they as individuals and the player collective can handle. But there are rare exceptions, e.g. larps with a player base of for instance martial artists or people from kink communities, where consenting adults will get violently physical in a way that is not possible for the average player.

A more playable version of this combines real violence with calibration mechanics giving each individual participant some control over physical playstyle intensity. *The Quota* (UK, 2018) was a larp set in a refugee detention centre. It was meant to feel realistic and oppressive, but physical violence was not intended to be a core part of the experience and there was no simulation mechanic. Participants used a spoken phrase for escalation and de-escalation to calibrate the intensity of their interactions. Although participants could go offgame and decide whether or how to play out a violent scene (using theatrical combat, for example), the default was to escalate slowly from strong words and raised voices to pushing, wrestling and even to real blows, if participants agreed. However, if participants wanted to escalate to an actual, real fist fight, they were asked to come to the blackbox to play it out rather than to do it inside the normal play area. This was done as an offgame safety feature, since the blackbox would be staffed by a member of crew who could monitor the situation.

SYMBOLIC MECHANICS

At *The Solution* (Sweden, 2016) – a larp heavily inspired by social experiments such as the Stanford Prison Experiment, and promoted as a hardcore, physically and emotionally challenging Nordic larp – violence was a group activity. The system used no punching or kicking, but rather slow, intense, downward pushing motions. Each person started in a wrestling move and tried to force each other down to the floor. Numbers won, so two on one would guarantee success, and the struggle would be played out with this end in mind.

Even if *The Quota*, as previously discussed, used no simulation system for representing violence, the soldiers in that larp strategically used stress positions to push characters and make them feel helpless. Holding people down and forcing them to stay on the ground for prolonged times, tying their hands behind their back, taking their clothes and simulating torture was used to induce a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness.

For these larps, the key to the violence was to make the characters involved in the scenes feel something, rather than to make it look realistic to other players. To depict helplessness and oppression, you might choose either to dispense with mechanics, or to design systems that focus on making the players feel what you want the characters to feel: helpless, humiliated, hurt. This could mean choosing small, powerful actions that make people feel demeaned, slow rather than fast violence, and refraining from a numbers-based attack and defence system.

One example of a metatechnique which focuses on feeling rather than enacting is the *Ars Ordo* technique. The base of the technique is to focus on eye contact as the central tool for establishing a status hierarchy. Once two characters gain eye contact, a status fight occurs. Whoever lowers their gaze first loses. If no one gives in, the fight can escalate to making themselves look bigger, shouting and drawing the attention of a crowd, and finally circling each other. Once the fight becomes public, the other players will decide who is the winner by standing behind the one they support.

CINEMATIC ACTION

For cinematic-looking larps, on the other hand, the system for violence should be focused towards making the fights look good to other players. If the point of the action is to let characters be action heroes and make the larp feel like an adventure, rather than to depict violence in a realistic way and make the characters involved feel the effects of actual, real violence, then your system should focus on big movements, planned and practised fights, or showy scenes. Your play space should leave room for people to move around, jump and fall safely. And your system should be lower tempo and with larger, signalled movements, so players have time to counter and flash their skills.

Duelling with clear rules of engagement can be a great system for a larp like this, or telling people to pre-plan or go offgame to practise larger set-piece fights.

The more elaborate and flashy you want your fights to be, the more important it is to workshop the techniques you use. Scenes will look really good if your players are martial artists or experienced show fighters; but if they are new to this style of play they might not know how to do this safely and might not feel confident trying. It is important to note that knowledge about how to fight, even pretend fight, is very gendered in most societies, and many female players will be shut out of violence play by a design that assumes everyone automatically knows how to perform aggression and violence for others or, for instance, look proficient in handling a gun.

Not every system will work well in a high-adrenaline setting. For instance, telling players to go slow and play cinematically will be difficult to remember in intense, competitive settings, and once adrenaline is flowing, you might find your players going hard and fast and playing unsafely after all. If your larp is high-tempo and full of adrenaline, having a more numbers-based or abstract system for depicting violence could be advantageous because it will guide people away from dangerous situations.

WEAPONS

The types of weapons you have, and how people will use them to fight, also inform the types of mechanics you use. As previously mentioned, the gun mechanic in *Monitor Celestra* aimed to emulate the feel of the TV show. Therefore, Mexican standoffs were important to the game mechanics. In the larp *Conscience* (Spain, 2018) – inspired by the HBO show *Westworld* – most shootouts happened in the traditional Western part of the larp, and all guns were cap guns which made a bang. In the first run of the larp, the organisers restricted the number of caps given out to players on day two to lower the number of casualties in the host (robot) population.

For *Avalon* (Poland, 2018), fighting with larp-safe latex swords was an integral part of the larp. Every student at Avalon took a Warfare class, and there was a competitive ingame event for the students called “The Run”, where groups of characters competed with each other with both magic wands and swords.

NO COMMON GROUND

Before running *Avalon*, the organisers did a quick round of research about different rules for fighting with larp-safe weapons and the rules in different larps, and found that there is little or no common ground between different larp cultures. The rules of engagement in the UK are different to those in Denmark and Poland. Germany does it in yet another way. Actions that in one culture are normal

and acceptable might be viewed as unsafe behaviour in another. For example, in the UK, all blows are pulled and thrusting with a larp weapon is not permitted unless that weapon has been specifically designed for thrusting.

If you choose to add a mechanic to depict violence in your larp, keeping the instructions clear and simple is important. Assume that there is no such thing as “normal” and that you need to tell people exactly what is right and what is wrong, and to teach even players who might be familiar with a specific mechanic in advance, how to use it in the context of your larp.

FURTHER READING:

nordiclarp.org/wiki/The_Monitor_Celestra

MEANINGFUL CHARACTER DEATH

// Stefan Deutsch

Demeter (Germany/Denmark, 2015) is a four-day larp set on the doomed ship bringing Dracula's coffin to England. It is directly inspired by Chapter 7 of the novel by Bram Stoker, in which the voyage of the *Demeter* is described using logbook entries and newspaper clippings. The larp is played on an actual traditional sailing ship, sailing on the Baltic Sea between Germany and Denmark. The design goal was to create a gothic horror larp and follow the plot of the novel, wherein all crew members of the ship die before it arrives at its destination in Whitby harbor.

In a limited environment, such as a ship, it would be possible but impractical for characters to die during the early stages of the larp. Participants could possibly return into play portraying other characters, but this would make death less impactful and, as the new characters would be less connected to previous events, the experience shallow. On the other hand, it would be quite unsatisfactory if no one died.

Therefore, two rules were established to balance the practicalities with the design goal:

1. No character can be killed before the last chapter of the game.
2. There will be no living souls aboard the ship when it reaches its destination.

The first rule means you could choose to die as the result of an action, but no one can take your character's life without your permission before the endgame. The second rule means all characters will either die during the last chapter of the game – or “offscreen”. You could also become a soulless undead, depending on how your character's journey goes...

The four-day larp has a runtime of 34 hours. Breaks during the event allow participants to calibrate their experience with each other, to coordinate actions and events and fine-tune their character's path through the larp. This happens mostly informally, but is facilitated by gamemasters, and includes new information on how the plot progresses: e.g. that a certain time has passed between two chapters. In the break before the final chapter of *Demeter* a kind of “murder speed dating” happens, where participants talk

to each other to agree on how they would like their character's story to end.

There is one final component to make this design choice work flawlessly, and that is that there is a clear communication from even before signup that *this will happen*. Making the design choice transparent is a very important element to ensure that all participants are onboard with it, and that how character death is handled becomes part of why participants sign up for the larp. Suspense is created from the beginning by not knowing *what* will finally kill your character.

Other larps have used similar design in other genres, e.g. *Inside Hamlet* (Denmark, 2015). Here, the Shakespearean tragedy is fostered by tensions between the characters and, ultimately, their end. For the gothic horror experience we want to create in *Demeter*, the focus is on internal conflict. The inevitability of death and the desperation this results in creates the internal conflict and drives the characters to

their breaking point.

This knowledge about the characters' approaching end can be used actively by participants during the course of the larp to develop their own character stories. Foreshadowing remarks or wilful ignorance gain a deeper meaning during the earlier stages of the larp, as all participants are well aware of the final outcome. Even though you know that your character cannot be killed before the end of the larp, you also know they most definitely *will* be killed, making all their actions both futile and immensely important at the same time – being as they are the characters' final choices.

From within their characters, participants watch these fates unravel: knowing that just like in a horror movie, there is nothing they can do to stop it.

FURTHER READING:

nordiclarp.org/wiki/Demeter

NAILED IT!

HOW TO DESIGN A PLAYABLE ENVIRONMENT

All experience design is fundamentally about the design of physical and social spaces. These always interact.

If you want people to dance at your party, it helps to turn up the music so they can feel it in their bodies, but also to turn down the lights, which will make them feel less awkward about being watched. If you want people to talk at your party, the music should not be as loud, and the light should be better so they can see each other's faces. It also helps if people are forced by the shape of the space to stand or sit no further than about a metre apart, and if they have some kind of practical task to do at the same time. This is why the best conversations at parties are often in the kitchen.

Larp design is experience design with the extra layer of fiction transposed onto the runtime. The characters may have invented histories, and the cultures to which they belong may differ in values and practices from the players'. But the players are still humans, in physical bodies with predictable psychological reactions and deeply seated cultural assumptions about what kinds of behaviours are possible or desired in different spaces or situations. If you design for this, it can support your goals; if you ignore it, it can undermine your work.

In the following chapter, Søren Lyng Ebbenhøj, Signe Løndahl

Hertel and Jonas Trier Knudsen draft the fundamentals of spatial design for larp. J Li follows with a detailed look on how physical distance affects the social dynamics of conversations. Examples illustrate the use of spatial design to create different story possibilities, and remind you not to forget to reserve some space for yourself.

Finally, Anni Tolvanen writes about how you are already making sound design decisions for your larps, and suggests practical approaches for making them intentional. In the concluding example, sound becomes completely central as all light is removed from the play space.

SPATIAL DESIGN FOR LARPS

// Søren Ebbehøj
// Signe Løndahl Hertel
// Jonas Trierr-Knudsen

Spatial design is shaping or planning the physical space of a larp in order to facilitate desired interactions and behaviour among participants.

Larps are set in physical spaces. Most larps are physical experiences where a player's movement in space equals a character's movement in a fictional world. This statement may seem banal, but it is one of few characteristics that really makes larp stand out from its tabletop sibling.

Considering that the interaction between the players makes the larp, surprisingly little larp design discourse has engaged with designing play spaces. Like the painted set of a theater stage, many larp designers tend to use locations as passive backgrounds.

But using scenography to superficially represent the diegetic world is a missed opportunity. Just like clever characters or meta-techniques, spatial design can play a huge role in shaping our experience. Though we rarely think about it, most have already encountered this in our daily lives.

Consider for instance how romantic restaurants often have dimmed lights. This creates a feeling of privacy (though the neighboring couple is a metre away), which makes it easier to be intimate. Or, take courtrooms, where the symmetrical layout is centred on the judge who sits in an elevated position. This forces both plaintiffs and attorneys to look up at her. The space is designed to make others feel small and to amplify the authority of the judge.

In terms of larp organising, spatial design is related to disciplines like scenography, prop design, logistics, and costuming. It also draws on fields like architecture, interior design, and the recent surge in behavioral “nudging” used to shape everything from airports to coffee shops. Spatial design is much more than dressing something up to look right. Fundamentally it cares about function: what is the expected social effect of a space? Which types of interaction does it facilitate? How will layout X drive the players towards interaction Y?

Physical and social spaces always interact, with the shape of the space affecting social affordances – what people are able and willing to do. This means that your intentional design of spaces, or the lack of it, will interact directly with other parts of your larp's design, and will either support or counteract them. Spatial design is a way of enhancing certain experiences and nudging players more seam-

lessly towards certain types of interaction. It is part of the equation, but only rarely the full solution.

Everyday spaces such as homes, streets and airports are designed to promote many different types of behaviour and interactions. Good airports aim for frictionless efficiency, living rooms are designed to be cosy, and urban spaces are often intentionally hostile to the homeless. You can learn from the real world, but when designing spaces for larps it is important to keep in mind that a realistic looking space might not support the type of interaction you need. Look for functional similarities rather than visual ones.

TOOLBOX

The following design tools will help you make sure the physical space supports your design goals just as much as your characters, setting and workshops do. The toolbox is divided into five concepts: function, distance, movement, line of sight, and separation.

FUNCTION

Creating places of significance in a larp requires programming the spaces with functions. If players are supposed to stay in a certain space, they need something to do there. Vice versa, if players are supposed to do something in particular, they need a place to do it. Most larps have a list of functions required by practical necessity or by other parts of the larp design. This can include everything from sleeping quarters and a mess hall to places for the players to perform rituals, traditions or other activities.

All objects and spaces have certain *affordances* – actions suggested by the design of the object. For example: a softball has just the right shape, weight and size for humans to throw it. Affordances are not universal however, but depend on cultural context, previous experience, physical ability, etc.

Spaces too have affordances governed by the objects in them and by their ambience, size, delineation, etc. Affordances are communicated subconsciously by which actions we perceive as possible and appropriate, but also overtly, for example by signs. Designing clear functional spaces usually takes a bit of both.

Consider designing a bar for your larp. Hang a sign over the door that says “bar”, and people will know what actions are possible and desirable there. Leave the room without chairs and glasses however, and players will probably go elsewhere for beverages and letting loose. If you try to force them to be there anyway, they might take it upon themselves to equip the room properly, whether or not that makes sense for their characters, or rebel against the larp in other ways. Equip the room as a bar but leave out the sign, and most players will probably act as though they were in a bar (assuming that they can find it).

If you do not provide places for the activities you want your players to be

doing, they will improvise such places themselves, if at all possible. Designing specific spaces to support specific functions will focus the larp on the actions most relevant to its themes and your vision, and will let you guide how, where and when these actions are played out.

Function tool 1: What is this place?

Create functional spaces by equipping them for actions and interaction

Place objects in each space with clear affordances supporting the type of actions and play that the players are supposed to perform there. If a location is supposed to be for lovers to come and watch the sunset, provide a comfortable bench. If you want soldiers to hang out somewhere during their free time, give them comfortable sitting arrangements and props like a deck of cards, free weights or letter writing equipment. And if a place is meant for secrets to be shared, make sure it *feels* private, as privacy affords secrecy (whether or not it actually is private is another question; see Transition tool 2 below).

Another example of this is to program the level of formality of the interaction in a space by designing the seating arrangements. Think of this as a scale from pillows on the floor instead of comfortable lounge chairs, to a boardroom arrangement of straight-backed throne-like chairs.

Function tool 2: Activating boring functions through location

Integrate potentially boring functions into the larp by placing them next to social hotspots or in plain sight of interesting interactions

Many larps involve tedious functional tasks such as cooking or dishwashing. These tasks tend to be removed from areas of social interaction. Often this is done for practical purposes (such as access to a kitchen) or for diegetic purposes, as these functions often have low status and are therefore hidden away in many real and fictional cultures. This tends to remove players – often of low status characters – from the play for varying amounts of time.

One way to avoid this is to place these functions next to hubs of social interaction, or in the midst of them. For example, the dishwashing station of a tavern could be placed in the middle of the bar, enabling interaction between the dishwasher and the patrons sitting at the bar.

Another way of solving this is co-locating several functions. For example, the kitchen could have other functions such as resting station, a place for trading rumours, or a place to send people to work for punishment.

Function tool 3: One man's trash

Create conflict by assigning different values to the same function

Different functions have different value to different groups of characters. A ceremonial ground will be important to the religious characters whose daily routine is filled with rituals, while the marketplace is important for the merchants.

Programming the same spaces with different functions for different groups

can create conflict or interesting cultural encounters between them. If a room is a common resting area to one group of characters, and a bar to others, conflict will certainly arise.

The same effect can be achieved by designing movement. If one group's natural path through the larp interferes with a place of significance for another player group, it will create a feeling of trespassing and thereby conflict. Imagine, for instance, that the local townspeople have to move across a firing range of occupying military forces in order to get to their ritual ground.

DISTANCE

The distance between two people governs how they can interact. Simply put, the closer we are, the more emotional we (can) get. This effect is wholly subconscious. It is something we intuitively understand and act upon, making it a great tool for nudging your players towards specific behaviours.

Imagine that you are walking down a street as you see another person approaching. At about 75 metres you *assess* the person. You can see whether they are young or old and have the first notions of bodily characteristics. Closing in to under 50 metres, you enter *recognizing* distance. If you know the person, you will see who they are. You can still barely interact. Even waving would be out of the ordinary. This changes at 20 metres where you enter *interest* distance. You can start to read crude emotions like anger or happiness. This is also where you would start to nod, smile or otherwise acknowledge your relation. Within 7 metres, real *contact* begins. It *can* be verbal, though that would mean awkward shouting. Conversation is still out of the question.

Gradually, from 7 down to 3 metres, we start to *interact*. This is the *public* distance where many power-dominated interactions takes place – the teacher in front of her students, the judge facing the courtroom. From 3 to 1.5 metres we are within the common *social* distance. This is where the bulk of our interactions with strangers play out. But especially towards the 3 metre mark, conversations will still feel formal.

This brings us to the closest distances. At 1.5 metres, we are within *personal* space where we start to get a fuller sensory impression of the other person. How they smell, how minor facial expressions influence the meaning of words. The final metre is our *intimate* distance which is reserved for people we have a close connection to. And this is an oddly accurate distance. Ask two people to move slowly towards each other until they feel close. Move them back 10 cm and get out the measuring tape. Odds are, it will say 1 metre. Of course, people often move temporarily into intimate distance, e.g. for a hug, but staying within that distance feels very intimate.

Another example of distances at play is looking at a house party. If a crowd of 10 occupy the living room, they will often form a circle with a diameter of around 3 metres. This places everyone within the *public* or *social* distance, but

outside the *personal* distance of almost everyone else in the circle. Conversations in these settings tend to turn into series of monologues in slightly raised voices, which are anything but intimate. Sometimes the circle will break up, with neighbours turning toward each other (closing the distance to below 1 metre), forming smaller intimate spaces for quieter more personal conversation.

Note that the research this is based on is from a Western perspective, and even within that it varies depending on context. Naturally, you should always consider your players' cultural starting point when you design.

Distance tool 1: The magic metre

Limiting space to create intensity, intimacy and aggression

Within the intimate 1 metre, humans interact emotionally with the person in front of them.

This means that the layout of a room can have a significant effect on the intensity of interaction. By shaping rooms or passages so that players must move or stay within one metre of one another, you can increase friction between already opposing characters or support the formation of intimate relations.

Having only narrow passages forces players to negotiate who gets the right to go first, which can create tension between them.

A way of avoiding the circle of monologues described above is arrange larger rooms with furniture in smaller circles, room to sit on the floor, etc. This will create smaller, more intimate spaces for personal interaction.

Distance tool 2: Cut room size in half

Enhance intensity by cramming your players closer together

Nordic style larps often focus on intimate relations and interpersonal conflict, and designers want them to be intense. If this is your goal, cramming your players together in small spaces – often smaller than what seems reasonable – is generally a good design choice as it will catalyse tension.

As a rule of thumb, make rooms about half as big as they would be for actually living in. The same goes for tents that can be pitched closer together, and walkways, which can be half as broad.

It seems simple, but it is disproportionately effective. And you won't have to rent as large a location.

Distance tool 3: US vs. THEM

Establish teams by managing distances between player groups

Many larps build on an “us vs. them” dynamic. If this is your goal, distance is your friend.

The closer we are, the more nuanced our mutual impressions will be. Using this idea, you can divide your location into sections that place clear distance between factions. Distance prevents people from being able to read one another's emotions, which discourages sympathy. This can support the generic image of

“the other”, which could be desirable for a larp about animosity.

The obvious use is dividing two armies – by keeping opposing forces a standard of 50+ metres apart, the enemy will be reduced to their uniform colors. But the use of distance can also be a bit more nuanced. At *Krigslive XIII* (Denmark, 2017, Eng. Warlarp XIII), two armies shared a camp and engaged in exercise battles. The tents of each army were pitched close together in a long line, so that everyone would camp close to units they served with. The lines of tents of the two armies were separated by a gap of roughly 25 metres. Even though all soldiers ultimately had the same leader, this simple layout immediately spawned a rivalry between the two armies, and internally a sense of belonging.

Another way of using this is in the classical fantasy or medieval larps where characters are supposed to have lived in the same village their entire lives, but where players don't always remember each other's in-character names. Creating neighbourhoods separated by distance or obstacles allows strong ties to be formed inside each small community. This will also support other distinctions, such as social rules and cultural differences.

MOVEMENT

Depending on the scale of a setting, players will move between different parts of it to varying degrees. A single room blackbox requires little movement and the players might be able to sense everything going on in the room. In a larger setting, different functions will be spread out in different places. The placement of these in relation to each other will decide how the players move through the setting.

Any setting consists of places and passages. Places are areas where the players stay for a while, that have often been programmed for certain activities or with a certain function. Passages are places that the players move through in order to get to a new place. Obviously some spaces can act both as functional places and passages (see Function tool 3).

The physical placement of functions in the various places of the setting defines how the players move through the setting. This creates a *flow pattern* of often intersecting *flow lines* where players will move between different functions. Some functions are only visited by the players at certain times of the day, like the dining hall during meal times. Other less formal functions, like the courtyard, will be visited frequently by players hanging out or catching up.

The placement of functions and the resulting pattern of flow lines between them can have a major impact on the larp. These concepts define everything from where the players meet, where play emerges, and whether players can find each other. It can create possibilities for conflicts and shifts in power dynamics, and it governs the distribution of information throughout the larp. The flow pattern can also work against other design intentions by shutting down lines of commu-

nication or leaving players unable to find each other. Therefore, when choosing a location and designing the setting, be aware of which flow of movement is being encouraged.

Bear in mind that spaces might be programmed with different functions or have different meaning for various groups of characters. This means that different characters or groups of characters might have significantly different flow patterns in the same space.

A great tool is to map the flow of players around the setting. Simply find a map of the setting and mark the different functions you have placed (e.g. camps, ritual grounds, smoking area, toilets). Then take a moment to consider the different ways players will move between these functions, and how often. Connect the functions with flow lines following the easiest accessible paths. This is your flow mapping and it will be a great help in applying the following three tools.

Movement tool 1: Junctions are where the magic happens

Place functions so that flow lines intersect to create meeting points

Accidental meetings at just the right time can create some of the most narratively valuable larp situations. Designing junctions supports the possibility of these unplanned meetings happening. If interactions between characters are also coded for conflict or positive encounters by other parts of the design, enabling meetings will enhance these aspects of the larp.

Junctions not only create possibilities for meetings and emergent story, they are also crucial in letting information travel around the larp. In a flow pattern with very few junctions, information risks being exchanged less, which is often not preferable. In thinking this through, be aware that different character groups will traverse the location in different patterns. If the goal is to ensure that the soldiers interact with the merchants, consider letting the route between the camp and the battlefield cross the route between the trade stations.

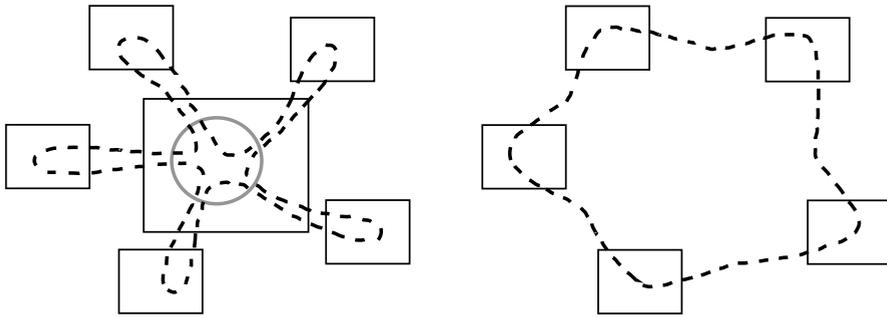
Movement tool 2: Aiding overview through a central flow design

Design a central flow pattern to support transparency and allow players to easily navigate the larp

A central flow of movement emerges when functions are accessible only via one central location. This location should give a players a great overview of the larp area, and be a place the players naturally return to when ending the play in another place. This could be the lobby of the hotel, the town square or similar.

A central flow pattern gives the players somewhere to return to at times when their play doesn't have a specific purpose. This makes it easier for players to find each other and seek out new situations or interactions among the player group. It can also support sharing of information, as players will meet up with others when they have played a scene somewhere else.

Depending on the type of location, a central flow design may provide a feeling of overview of what is happening, enabling players to choose which parts of play to engage in.



Central vs. decentralized flow design

Movement tool 3: Create confusion with a decentral flow

Create a decentral flow pattern to make the dynamic of the experience chaotic and difficult to control

A decentralized flow pattern makes it more difficult for the players to find each other. A player group can easily move from one function to another without being noticed by other players searching for them elsewhere. In a larp pitting player groups against each other in a conflict, for instance where one group might be oppressing another, this flow design creates shifts in the power dynamics between players by giving the oppressed characters the possibility of periodically hiding or escaping.

LINE OF SIGHT

Line of sight describes what is visible to you from where you are standing. Securing lines of sight between two places will create a connection between them, thus supporting transparency and interaction between the players occupying the places. Blocking lines of sight between two places will separate them, prevent interaction between the players and support secrecy. When designing spaces for a larp, it pays to consider how the lines of sight between each place and function in your setting support the interactions you want.

Smaller settings as used in blackbox and chamber larps often enable direct lines of sight between all places and functions. Larger settings and larger player groups will make it more difficult to keep everything within the players' line of sight. Here it becomes important to consider between which elements, functions or spaces you should prioritise having lines of sight.

The objects or people within your line of sight are the ones that will draw your attention and the distance between you and them will define to what degree they dominate your focus. When placed close enough, any object or person in front of you will be difficult to ignore. Similarly, people not wishing to interact with other people standing inside their personal spaces will turn away to exclude

them from their line of sight. This makes it possible for strangers to stand close together without interacting in places such as an elevator or at a stop light. Conversely, places that direct people to face each other support interactions between them. Knowing this, we can design to enable or prevent interaction by designing for people to face in the direction of each other or away from each other.

Line of sight tool 1: They are watching us!

Place areas designated for secrecy out of earshot but in plain sight to create a feeling of unease for the involved players

The feeling of being in a space visible to everyone can be one of discomfort and self-awareness – or one of safety and comfort, depending on the situation.

An unsafe situation where the interaction contains a risk might feel more safe if someone has an eye on you from afar, for example when leaving the well-lit street to follow a stranger into a dark alley. If, on the other hand, someone wants to share a private moment with another person, it will add discomfort to know that others could be watching, even if no one is.

Many Nordic style larps are designed to feel uncomfortable or to encourage conflict, which is why creating lines of sight to places designated for secrecy can be an effective tool. This could be having the place visited by young lovers situated in clear sight from where their parents live, or by setting up cameras or watchtowers close to where shady business takes place.

Line of sight tool 2: They're everywhere!

Support a feeling of oppression by placing symbolic objects within line of sight of the oppressed

When creating a larp with an oppressing force such as a military occupation or a prison larp it can be wise to break the lines of sight between the oppressors and the oppressed at times. Making sure the oppressed characters are not under direct surveillance at all times leaves room for them to gather and scheme against the oppression. However, cutting lines of sight also tends to remove the oppressor from the awareness of the oppressed. This brings a risk that the feeling of being oppressed can be eased, which might not be desirable.

Placing symbolic objects of the oppression in clear sight of the oppressed enforces the feeling of oppression. This can be a watchtower close to the homes of the oppressed, a foreign cultural object, or even colours, banners or logos representing the oppressors. Making sure that the oppressed can see these symbols no matter where they are will support the feeling of the oppressing powers being omnipresent and influencing all parts of the lives of the oppressed.

Line of sight tool 3: Look at me and I will talk to you

Support interaction between people by making them face each other

We mostly interact with people in our direct field of vision. Designing a bar where people order drinks at the counter enables the customer and bartender to face each other while the drink is ordered, supporting a stronger interaction than

when the order is given sitting at a table facing away from the bartender. Placing the only stools in the room alongside the bar encourages people to stay by the bar with their drink, inviting the bartender into the conversation around the bar.

If, on the other hand, the bar is supposed to set the stage for intimate or secret conversations and is organised with the patrons around smaller tables, the waiters might be left out of the interaction. This might be “realistic”: in the real world patrons rarely invite long conversations with the waitstaff. In your larp, however, the flow of information or the inclusion of everyone in play might well require this – especially if they are all player characters. In that case the space should encourage it. You could for instance make room at the end of each table, like booths in a diner, allowing all patrons to face the waiter instead of some of them sitting with their backs turned.

Line of sight tool 4: Gather round!

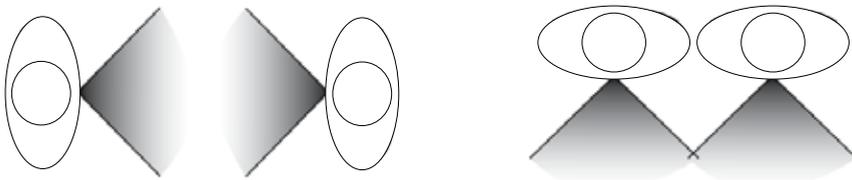
Locating a main event to support or prevent interaction between people attending the event

When people are gathered to watch an event, for instance a sports event or a speech, they will be facing in the direction of the action. Centering the event in the space allows people to watch the event from all around. This way, the people watching will also be facing each other. This creates possibilities for people to make eye contact and play on their reactions to what is happening, but also to just have a sense of who is present at the event, sharing the experience.

Situating the event at one end of a space, with the audience all facing the same direction – like in an elevator – prevents people from interacting unless they turn to face away from the event. This forces people to choose between directing their attention towards the event or their fellow players, creating a feeling that the event or performers are more important than the human interactions of the viewers. It also pushes the players of the viewing characters into a passive audience position, making participation and interaction awkward.

This effect can be desirable when, for instance, designing a totalitarian regime where the people are secondary to the system. But it can also mean that people get bored, ultimately missing parts of the action because they have their backs turned in order to interact.

TRANSITIONS



Places are separated by physical, symbolic or atmospheric barriers and crossing

these is the transition from one place to the next. This change of physical environment and affordances also entails entering new expectations, social norms, etc. The transition from one place to another, and the delineation between them, affects the way we experience moving between those places, and the way we experience other places separate from the one we are currently in. Examples of transitions include moving through a doorway or corridor, stepping over a line on the floor, moving from darkness into light, or stepping up to an elevated position.

Transitions have qualities that influence the experience of crossing them. Some transitions can be almost invisible, like the transition from a bar area to a dance floor. The programming of the different parts of the room creates the different places; the size of the places defines where they meet and where the transition from one to the other occurs. Other transitions are almost ritualised to amplify the feeling of entering a new or important place. Many religious buildings have a small room to separate the sacred space of the religious community from the public space of society. This room is often used to prepare people to enter the sacred space by removing hats, washing their hands, mentally preparing for a ritual, etc. After this preparation, the visitor will be more likely to attend to what the sacred room represents when transitioning from, for example, a small antechamber to the large and impressive sacred hall.

The delineation of places – the way in which spaces are separated from one another – also defines how we experience the next space and the people in it from the space we are in. The delineation can block the line of sight or allow it. It can allow or prevent people from hearing or sensing what is happening on the other side. It can also support the authority of the people in one space over the people in the other, and so on.

Tape on the floor in a blackbox larp can signal the boundaries of the space for playing while allowing the players outside the space to see and hear what is being played out. This supports transparency in a larp. Other types of interaction, such as intimacy, require full sensory focus. Design for this by preventing outside visual input from interfering with the active players' focus.

Transition tool 1: Let's go dark

Turn off the light to enable sensory focus

Dim the lights to encourage people to focus on what is immediately in front of them – this lowers people's range of vision and increases the focus on other senses. This can be used to great effect by hanging lights in warm colours over the tables of a romantic restaurant, or letting the important scenes of a blackbox larp take place only in a column of light.

Large rooms like gym halls can contain smaller spaces for intimacy by leaving the room in darkness while only one spotlight lights an area. This prevents the people in the light from seeing objects or people in the dark, thus creating focus on the person with them and supporting the feeling of privacy and intimacy.

Similarly, a large room with a high ceiling can be made to support a more intimate atmosphere if the light sources hang low. The low hanging light will take focus from the ceiling above, thus creating the illusion of a smaller room.

Transition tool 2: Secrecy or “secrecy”

Screen spaces for intimate play by using opaque materials that let sound travel to enhance transparency

In order to make people feel comfortable playing intimate scenes or sharing secrets, it can be effective to provide small spaces and block lines of sight to screen them from prying eyes. This, however, will usually also obstruct the flow of diegetic information between characters and/or narrative input between players, which might be in conflict with other design goals.

Using thin materials that block line of sight but let sound pass unhindered will increase transparency without ruining the sense of privacy for the people in the screened space. Think for example how some people will act inside camping or festival tents when, for a moment, they forget that even though no one can see them, everyone can hear them.

This is used to great effect in many larps with varying kinds of symbolic scenography, such as the *Androids* trilogy (Sweden, 2017-2018). In the first of these larps, *Do Androids Dream?*, the brothel of the *Blade Runner*-inspired city had rooms only screened by paper walls allowing everyone nearby to hear what was going on inside, and who was in there.

Transition tool 3: Respect my authority!

Make powerful characters seem dominant by giving them elevated positions to interact from

The association of power and status with physical elevation is so ingrained that it can be utilised to underscore the status or power position of some through literally putting them on a pedestal.

Elevating the throne above floor level will increase the perceived status of the queen in a fantasy larp; raising the floor behind the bar will empower people in service positions, such as the bartenders, in relation to their rowdy customers. On the other hand, if the queen is to come off as weak, you can decrease her perceived status by placing her at level height with her subjects.

Another effect of putting people in power positions on higher ground could be to supply them with a better overview of the immediate situation, not only raising their perceived status but actually providing the player with an advantage.

Separation tool 4: The tree house

Sitting at different heights than others provides distance to create intimate spaces or seclusion of players

Elevation can be used to create spaces as well as distance and screens. Think about how people at a party will drop out of the general conversation and start their own when they sit down on the floor. This happens because they are no

longer in the immediate field of vision of people otherwise inside their personal distance.

People climbing a tree, a ladder or just sitting on top of a fence will enter their own secluded semi space.

These tools were used to great effect in *Totem* (Denmark, 2007) about two tribes of hunter gatherers in a future stone age meeting for a transition ritual. While most of the play took place sitting around a campfire, the players could climb a wooden structure like scaffolding outside the circle around the fire. This would allow more people to gather around the fire, but also allowed the players to use elevation, distance and sight lines to play with status and seclusion.

FURTHER READING:

Steen Eiler Rasmussen: *Experiencing Architecture* (1957)

Jane Jacobs: *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961)

Jan Gehl: *Life Between Buildings* (1971)

GEOMETRY OF CONVERSATIONS

// J Li

The essential unit of social interaction is the conversation. A designer can shape the conversations that take place in a game not only by supplying content, but also through crafting the physical form that conversations take on.

Environment and context are major factors in shaping social behavior. Although it's not possible to control what happens in any given interaction, physical conversation design can shape the overall social trends in a game.

Thus, the art of physical setup can go far beyond conveying content or representing realism: it is also as an opportunity to create subtle guardrails that enhance design intent through directing unconscious player behavior down paths of least resistance.

HOW MANY PEOPLE PARTICIPATE IN A CONVERSATION?

The average number of participants in a conversation (“conversation size”) will affect the tenor and subtlety of the content that gets transacted and shaped among players.

Smaller conversation sizes lead to content that is more complex and nuanced, and larger sizes lead to content that is more simplified and generalized. In other words: the more people, the narrower the common ground. As an example of this principle, consider the sophistication of a real-life debate between two engaged individuals, compared to one within a group, compared to a broad public discourse. The following are some rules of thumb for average conversation sizes.

Two People

Good for driving empathy and emotion. Here you have a deep, high-bandwidth direct channel connecting both participants. A lot of truly new experiences, reactions, and possibilities can be born when a connection between two individuals has space to bear fruit on its own terms, without constantly having to negotiate understanding and direction with additional people.

Because ideas are transferred and reacted to in single steps instead of at scale, taking meaningful action is quick, but consequences – actions in the larp – may not travel far very quickly. This is great for relational games or games that emphasize individual experiences.

Three People

Good for driving momentum and activity. While bandwidth is still pretty high, there is also a quick, dynamic diversity of responses to any given thought. At the same time, work gets done because three people can focus naturally with minimal distraction, and consequences can spread quickly. This is great for games driven by player action and plot, and is a good default size.

Four People

Good for driving exploration of ideas and differences. If two people present contrasting viewpoints, a difference of interpretations and responses is immediately available from the other two participants. However, players are much slower to action because bystander apathy becomes a factor: if one person introduces an idea and another person is moved to react, that person is by default automatically outnumbered by the two other people who are not acting. This is great for philosophical, discursive, and faction-building games where the act of raising buy-in – getting people to agree with you – is an intended component of gameplay.

Five or More People

Average conversation sizes of five or higher will generally slow a game down with inertia. Individual moments or scenes with larger numbers of participants will play a crucial role in almost every game. However, it is rare for a game that is not explicitly about committees to need five or more people participating in *most* conversations. Larps are about participation: scenes where many players become an audience will drag them down.

FORMING CONVERSATION SIZE

Many techniques can be used to shape average conversation size. The most direct approach is simply a literal game rule that regulates how many people can participate in a conversation.

- a) “Only two people can be involved in a given conversation after 5pm. If you want to talk to someone who is occupied in a conversation, signal to them and wait your turn.”
- b) “All conversations must either have no more than three people or be a part of a scene that involves everyone,”
- c) “In this culture, men cannot join an existing conversation, they may only approach individuals.”

Passive encouragement through arrangement of physical environment is another great way to shape conversation size.

- d) All seating is explicitly arranged in groups of four
- e) Wind-sheltered alcoves will only fit two people, or three poorly
- f) There is a large central area for everyone to gather, and then a range of smaller private lounge areas only comfortable for three

THE GEOMETRIC SHAPE OF A CONVERSATION

How does the conversation occupy space? Where are participants in a conversation located relative to one another? The physical layout of the conversation affects what participants most easily bring to it.

In every conversation there is a common social zone, created in the middle of all participants. In a public announcement or ritual, the social zone might fill the entire room; in a whispered confession, it might only be the size of a beach ball.

The social zone is often an uneven shape, like an amoeba: its center might be located closer to a louder and more energetic person. It might thin near the person who doesn't speak the language well. If the play space is such that more participants are located toward one end (like an uneven campfire ring), the social zone might skew toward that side. But if characters with higher status are clustered on the far side like in a throne room, perhaps it will skew to that side even though fewer people are there, or perhaps it will stretch out into an awkward long thin shape.

At the same time, each player also has a personal social bubble, the space around them that they socially occupy. In order to participate in an interaction, people must extend their own social bubbles to intersect with the common social zone. (To picture this, imagine the act of socially reaching that takes place when trying to join a conversation located inconveniently on the other side of a large table, such as at a wedding reception or a conference.)

Social bubbles vary widely in size both on an individual basis and a cultural basis. Most find it hard to keep their social bubbles extended for a protracted period of time; many also find it hard to retract and hold it back.

Here are some techniques for creating specific interaction dynamics using social bubbles and zone shaping:

Participation

Does the shape of the social zone facilitate the participation of some people over others? Consider if there are specific characters you wish to highlight or edge out of a given space, such as in the throne room example. Is it more interesting to be inclusive and balanced, or to have some people on the fringes who must invest great effort in order to be heard?

Player Energy Profiles & Defaults

Because it takes effort for players to extend bubbles past their natural size, it's important that key interactions can take place at a range of sizes. For example, a mechanic that requires players to socially project across the room will be used by fewer and fewer players as a day wears on. Similarly, a game about hiding and whispering should only count on players to remain suppressed for an hour or so – less if they're doing other tiring things at the same time. Over time as players get tired, they will hold more and more interactions in their default social bubble size, regardless of environmental or narrative cues. This means that either the majority of play can take place at comfortable sizes, or the design must factor in the fact that the unusual social zone size requires an ongoing, sustained effort from the players that reduces their ability to spend energy on other things – especially things that also cost social energy, such as portraying an unfamiliar culture.

Tenor Variation

Different types of interactions happen more naturally at different social bubble sizes and shapes. People are generally more comfortable having intimate, close interactions when their own social bubbles are small. Pronouncements and public declarations are more natural at large bubble size. Nobody lets their guard down in a conversation open to the world. Create more interactions of the desired tenor by using environmental cues to encourage the corresponding bubble size.

ARCHITECTURAL TOOLS FOR FORMING DEFAULT SOCIAL ZONE SHAPES

Environmental Layout

Where are players most likely to be physically located, and how far apart are they? Don't forget that a comfortable distance for a large person might be a tiring social reach for a small person and vice versa. Check also for postural requirements – if a player has to hold an uncomfortable position to access a social zone, they are likely to either give up or change the tenor of the conversation

Physical Barriers

A physical barrier will cut through the middle of a social zone and make it harder to connect. Even a table can sometimes act as a barrier: use this to facilitate more oppositional interactions, or promote collaboration by placing participants on adjacent sides. In absence of clear directions or expectations to unify them, arranging people in a ring around a large, sight-blocking centerpiece such as a bonfire can create rapid cultural scattering as people align behaviors in clumps with only those immediately near them.

Temperature

Most people's social bubbles shrink when cold and expand when hot, so an extreme-temperature environment will shift everyone's default bubble sizes. Cold environments will also make all social actions take more energy. (This is why running a well-proven game in an unexpectedly cold room can sometimes fizzle: dynamics that count on cascading social engagement lose momentum.) Remember that men and women have on average a 2.5° C difference in preferred temperature.

These are only a few example techniques and rules of thumb for physically shaping conversations to generate specific types of gameplay. Exact outcomes will vary by game and by culture.

THE BUS STOP MECHANIC

// Simon Lindman Svensson

How do you create the feeling of a massive fictional setting in a very small space? That was the question we tried to answer when we first started designing *Do Androids Dream?* (Sweden, 2017) late in 2016.

We decided to create a set of wildly different environments, representing different parts of the city, but all packed into a single 9x14m blackbox set.

We had done larps and studied other larps in the same kind of closed warehouse environment that we were running this larp in, and we had taken part in blackbox scenarios that created large spaces from nothing by simply using tape and highly abstracted transitions between spaces. To go from one to the other, you would just step out from one tape square and into another.

But that had never felt *large*. It only felt abstracted, like a cut scene happening, suddenly taking you to another place. For *Androids*, we wanted people to *feel* as if they were in this massive city, a metropolis of the future – not just imagine it, as they stepped over a drawn line.

The problem with instantaneous travel over great hypothetical distances is that you never feel as if you have traveled somewhere. You feel as if there exists several separate locations, sever-

al spaces, but no space or time in between them.

This was partially solved by creating a physical place, centred in the room, in the early iteration. A crossroads which people had to pass in order to go anywhere else. At this crossroads, they had to wait for at least a minute before they could continue to their destination. Our set designer, Carl Nordblom, first had the idea to create a rickshaw or some kind of transportation device with a driver, but we settled on making it into a bus stop, where you could go, sit down on a few chairs and wait.

In order to keep the feeling that you were travelling across a big city, I decided that the participants would not be able to meet other characters there – they would always remain in character, but everyone else would simply represent anonymous strangers who were also waiting for the bus. We all know them, the vaguely familiar faces around us as we travel on public transportation.

This way, traveling became a solitary activity, one that had you waiting among people, not talking or engaging in your storyline, but simply being your character. The idea was that you could hold monologues here, talking about what you were feeling as if nobody

was listening, or as if pouring your heart out to a stranger. Others could comment on the monologues, but they would do so as a random stranger at the bus stop, not as their character, just as you could comment on their monologue as a stranger in their story.

Another idea that we had was using the bus stop as a way of introducing Fate Play – the act of introducing an element that would be destined to happen, into the larp. We imagined that people would be able to say their goals out loud at the bus stop, such as “When I get to the apartment, I will tell them what I really feel”, and use this voiced motivation as a way of promising themselves to be brave and carry out this action once they got to the next scene. We wanted to encourage people to have a moment of breathing room to really think what they were doing and why, and act on that.

If you simply wanted to be left alone, you could opt to read a newspaper. You held up your hands with an imaginary newspaper and pretended to read it, showing that you simply wanted to sit there for yourself for a while.

In the post larp survey after *Do Androids Dream?*, the bus stop was praised for how it created a feeling of a larger city, how it separated the zones and how it made it possible for you to get some separation between one scene and the next. Others felt they never wanted to wait, or felt outside the larp while sitting there, and most did not use the Fate Play mechanic.

For the last part of the trilogy, *Where Androids Die* (Sweden, 2018), we

decided to make the bus stop less of an abstract space and more an actual mode of transportation in the City. In the new set, we built a symbolic subway car. It was a box along one of the walls, decorated to be reminiscent of a subway car, with ropes in the ceiling that people could hold onto. The most impactful addition was the soundtrack. I created a set of fictional stops, each stop representing an area in the city and also the zones represented at the larp, and a loudspeaker voice that announced these: “Next stop, High Street.... Stopping at High Street.” In addition, we decided to remove the fateplay aspects and focus more on the experience of actually travelling in a subway car, with screeching rails and time spent waiting for your stop, while still keeping the more successful monologue mechanic.

This allowed people the feeling of actually traveling in the city, without having to think of it abstractly as transportation outside the zones. One player described it as if they could have sworn the subway car was moving, despite it being built from stationary scaffolding.

The feedback on this development and the method in general has made us confident that it is an excellent tool for the toolbox in widening the possibilities of larps played in symbolic or abstract spaces. It allows you to expand the theoretical area of play, it allows people a natural place for monologues and inner reflection and it allows you to give people a sense of purpose.

The feeling of seeing people crowd a subway car, then press against each

other as everyone tries to get off at the same station, just like in real life, is also something we heartily recommend to any designer of an urban scenario similar to the *Androids* larps.

FURTHER READING:

nordiclarp.org/wiki/Do_Androids_Dream?

nordiclarp.org/wiki/Where_Androids_Die

NAILED IT!

THE PISS ROOM

// Juhana Pettersson

One of my perennial organising failures is leaving the gamemasters' space during the larp as an afterthought. I'm focused on the experience of the players, and this includes the use of venues and spaces available. Unfortunately, the people who suffer for these priorities are myself and my fellow organisers.

One example of this trend was the original run of the Palestinian-Finnish larp *Halat bisar* (Finland, 2013), for which I acted as lead producer. Our venue was a little bit too small for the game, so we didn't have a proper organiser room at all. Nevertheless the need for it arose and we used a closet the size of one square meter. At the height of its use, three people were working in that closet. I was in character as a New York Times journalist, making a phone call to a player, while another team member was writing ingame news headlines on a piece of paper with a felt tip marker. Meanwhile, our photographer also somehow shared the same space, organising his equipment.

Enlightenment in Blood (Germany, 2017) was an urban larp played in the Friedrichshain area of Berlin. We had a wealth of locations, including two nightclubs and a church. We put all

of our energy into getting these into shape, so we failed to secure a comfortable backstage space for ourselves. Finally, we got permission to use a local game store as the gamemaster headquarters. It was centrally located and close to all of our venues, but (in stark opposition to what we had been promised) we didn't have a room to ourselves. We found ourselves organising a large NPC crew portraying tens of supporting characters, and monitoring player actions online and over the phone, on little stools cheek by jowl with German dudes painting miniatures on their work benches.

Yet perhaps the worst backstage room I've ever had in a larp was at the original Helsinki run of the *Vampire: the Masquerade* larp *End of the Line* (Finland, 2016). As the venue, we used an abandoned apartment building next to a decommissioned mental hospital. We'd originally planned to use the hospital as the venue, but during our negotiations with them we realized that while it was cool, the apartments were better for larp. They were full of graffiti from all the squatters who had lived there at different times and had an attic we could use as a dance floor.

However, the plumbing didn't work anymore, so the squatters had apparently designated a specific room

as the toilet. You could tell because of the overpowering smell of piss. We decided that we couldn't use the room as a playable space, because even though it was very realistic for a squat, asking people to larp in such a stench was too much. Instead we designated it the gamemaster room.

I spent much of the larp hanging around in that room. I wish I could say that I never made the mistake of forgetting to plan for a good organiser space again, but that would be a lie.

FURTHER READING:

nordiclarp.org/wiki/Halat_hisar

nordiclarp.org/wiki/Enlightenment_in_Blood

nordiclarp.org/wiki/End_of_the_Line

FAILED IT!

THE FUNDAMENTALS OF SOUND DESIGN FOR LARP

// Anni Tolvanen
// Irrette Melakoski

Sound is a core part of all larps and sounds should be designed with the same care as all other aspects of the experience. Sound design isn't only about implementing special effects or music. Seventy people talking with each other is also sound – so having a larp with several rooms to help players talk in smaller groups and be able to hear each other better is also a sound design decision.

Larps are, in essence, about communication and interaction between people. A major part of that happens via speech. This is why it's useful for every larp designer to spend some time, at minimum, checking that this sound, which is organically present, will not cause problems or contradictions with the rest of their design.

This chapter will discuss sound design from the point of view of an adult of average hearing ability. The toolkit presented below can also be used to design for other groups such as children or people with auditory processing issues, but the specific considerations in those cases are out of the scope of this text.

WHAT IS SOUND DESIGN?

Sound design exists in many places where we wouldn't think it's a factor. Studies tell us that if a vacuum cleaner or hair dryer is too quiet or makes odd noises while running, consumers think they aren't doing their job properly – even though they generally claim to prefer quieter appliances. In addition to all other features that impact a user experience, designers of any item or situation that makes noise need to consider and test its sound quality and volume.

Sound design is the process of specifying, acquiring, manipulating and generating audio elements to create intentional outcomes. For a hair dryer this process may involve researching and analyzing users' expectations in order to *specify* what a hairdryer should sound like, *acquiring* examples of hair dryer sounds to make comparisons between models and user responses, *manipulating* the machinery of the hair dryer to change its sound, and using the finished product to *generate* the sound the designers *intended*.

In larps, acquiring and generating sound is something designers are already

considering. Players and characters talking to each other generates sounds in a larp, while creating a Spotify playlist as runtime background music means acquiring audio content to be used.

However, merely implementing sound elements – speech, background music, specific sound effects, use of safewords – into your larp is not sufficient sound design. Individual sounds can change or disappear when mixed into the full soundscape of a larp scene. Just raising the volume of important sound cues doesn't solve the problem, because the way people perceive and interpret sounds is more complicated than just their ability to physically hear them. For this reason sound design should be considered from a wider perspective and as a part of the complete larp design process.

Sound design for larp starts by specifying these three parameters about sounds and soundscapes in your larp:

1. What kinds of sounds do you want to bring and allow to exist in your larp?
2. How do you want those sounds to behave and be perceived in your larp?
3. How are the participants expected to react and contribute to the sound scape in your larp?

When we understand what we want sound design to achieve, we can take steps to manipulate the audio environment to serve design goals and create intentional design outcomes.

SOUNDS EXIST IN A SPACE

The latest time to start addressing sound design in your project is during site visits and site selection. Imagine the soundscape in the different areas when the larp is running. How loud will it get? Will talking be easy and natural? What if you put on some background music?

What kind of sounds or noises exist naturally at the site? Are there any sounds present that organizers can't control? Note that our everyday brain may ignore sounds we would notice in the context of the larp. The quiet hum of a distant highway may not feel like a big problem to our everyday selves, but for a medieval village larp the constant sound of traffic might spoil the whole atmosphere. If your site visit is on a weekend, consider whether a weekday might sound different for some reason.

It's also essential to assess site acoustics and pay attention to how sounds interact with each other in different spaces. How do sounds carry between separate rooms? How about outdoor spaces? How are sounds and acoustics likely to change when scenography, props, and players are brought in?

Bad acoustics can lead to bad larp scenes, unwanted interaction, and erratic narrative outcomes. For example, the impact of an important speech by the

queen will be different depending on whether it is a barely audible mumble or an enthusiastic proclamation.

If you are planning to use a PA system of loudspeakers, amplifiers, microphones and so on, or any other sound gear as part of your design, it's good to reality check these plans early on. "We'll just set up some loudspeakers" is easier said than done – starting from the availability and positioning of power sockets at the site. If any part of a larp's design relies on a PA, and especially if the venue doesn't come with one, adding a sound person to the production team is mandatory. Professional level knowledge of sound design or a full-time commitment isn't necessary, but specifying and implementing sounds for a specific larp and location is a design job and needs someone to be in charge of it.

SOUND IS PERCEIVED DIFFERENTLY IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

In a typical fantasy larp tavern, there are multiple simultaneous *auditory streams*: conversations by different groups of people, the clatter of dishes and furniture, possibly a band playing, people moving about. Even though all of this sound reaches the players' ears, they do not consciously follow most of these streams. The human brain is efficient at ignoring audio information that it deems irrelevant and focuses on whichever auditory stream seems most important at the moment – for example a conversation with co-players.

The brain automatically measures different sound qualities like direction, distance, pitch, mood, and volume. Together these define how you react to different sounds, or whether you pay active attention to them at all. If some characters start a loud, angry argument at the table next to you, you will probably actively notice it and start making a threat evaluation. If the same kind of dispute starts at the far end of the room, or outside the tavern, the brain won't necessarily consider it serious enough to divert active attention to.

But even the auditory streams you are not consciously following are tracked by your brain. If someone mentions your name in a table next to you, you are able to notice it, even if you weren't actively listening to that stream. This is known as *the cocktail party effect*, and works for any audio cue that the listener's brain flags as important via experience, knowledge, and/or practice. The importance of the cue is not connected to mere volume or the sound's acuteness. People react readily to sounds from their mobile phones even when they are quiet compared to the environment.

In other words, our human perception of sound isn't measured by what we can physically hear, but by how our brains – mostly subconsciously – analyze and contextualize incoming auditory streams. In other words, the circumstances in which players are exposed to sounds in a larp are in practice inseparable from the players' ability to pay attention and react to those sounds.

Reacting to important sound cues in a larp can, and often should, be briefed and practiced in workshops. Attaching specific sounds to events and activities gives new meanings to both the sounds and the events, and helps players pay attention to them later.

On the other hand some sound cues are culturally and socially so well known that most players will react to them without even thinking about it, for example a phone ringing, or someone tapping a glass at dinner to signal a speech.

Sometimes even the most precise audio cues fail due to the intensity of competing auditory streams. At *Inside Hamlet* (Denmark, 2015), custom theme music was used to mark transitions to cut scenes, during which all play would be paused and players gather in a specific area. At all other times play was spread across several rooms, with players talking loudly and playing increasingly intense and physical drama. The more the diegetic action escalated, the more difficult it became to hear, let alone pay attention to, the theme music. To further confuse the players' perception, some tracks in the runtime background music were stylistically close to the theme, causing players to react erroneously. Is this the theme music? Do I need to react to it? When the answer had been "no" a few times, players became less likely to notice the real theme music when it played.

This sound design problem was fixed in the later runs of *Inside Hamlet* by making structural changes to the theme music, rearranging loudspeakers in the spaces, and adjusting the volume levels between background music and the theme to create a clearer dynamic change for the players' brains to pick up on.

An interesting side effect of having custom theme music and priming players to listen for it is that players often mention hearing the theme outside of the larp brings back a surge of emotions, even months or years after the run. As a design tool, our brain's ability to connect sound cues to strong emotions and memories is immensely powerful.

DIFFERENT SOUND ENVIRONMENTS CREATE DIFFERENT KINDS OF INTERACTION

When we walk into a church or a library we instinctively lower our voices. Both the acoustic environment and our cultural understanding of the social codes in those spaces have an impact on our behavior. We behave differently when sitting in a concert hall listening to The Vienna Philharmonic than when we're at a Ramstein gig even if the venue is the same. When wandering through supermarket we may ignore an announcement of discounted laundry detergent on aisle seven, but if we heard the same announcement in a hospital, we'd find it uncanny and might investigate what is going on.

In larps, the way sound environments and social codes shape behavior can be a great design asset and a shortcut to self-explanatory, functional player interaction. If ignored, however, it can also lead to unintentional, unwanted outcomes.

Pelargirin ympyrä (Finland, 2004, Eng. *The Circle of Pelargir*) was a plot-heavy mafia trial larp where characters tried to discover each other's secrets. The venue was an old manor house with a high main hall, paneled with old wood, and an open balcony over the hall – creating crystal clear acoustics and the opportunity to spy on all conversations in the hall. Unsurprisingly, this sound environment ended up changing the intended interaction and dramatic pace of the larp, steering players towards silent conversations and polite smalltalk instead of arguments and intrigue. The space didn't feel like a natural setting for addressing conflicts or airing disputes.

What happened in *Pelargirin ympyrä* reminds us of the Achilles' heel of all larp design: if not instructed otherwise, players will default to behavioural patterns that make sense to them in the real world – like not sharing secrets in a space where everyone can hear them. Therefore it's not enough to think about which sounds suit a larp setting and how to make those sounds distinct and perceivable. We must also think about how we want players to interact with sounds and with each other, how to support that interaction with design choices, and how to communicate that design to the players.

Let's go back to the fantasy larp tavern. There is a band playing. What are the patrons expected to do with this? Is it just background music to give the right kind of mood? Are players supposed to stop talking and listen? Or jump on the tables and dance, or join in and sing?

Perhaps you have also chosen to give the tavern a PA system for background music and ambient sound effects, like the crackling of a fireplace and the chatter of patrons. Maybe during the larp a diegetic storm breaks out, and the PA communicates this with wind, rain, and thunder. Or perhaps the tavern is haunted, and ghostly whispers start slowly creeping their way into the room. How should the players react to the storm or the ghosts? Should the characters start securing the windows, or try to hunt down the source of the scary whispers?

The players know there is no actual storm outside, or any literal ghosts to be found. They have to decide how to act not on the basis of their out of character sound perception, but using existing social codes from equivalent situations, their assumptions about genre, and their interpretation of what the designers are trying to achieve. If they don't know the designers' goals for the sound effects, they may engage unexpectedly and differently, creating inconsistencies in genre, playing style, and narrative flow.

Communicating sound design to players doesn't have to be elaborate or time-consuming. It can be as simple as a ten second statement during briefing: "your characters can't hear the ghosts, but they sense something is wrong." In a more ambitious design workshoping sound elements may be needed, e.g. practicing the storyworld's popular drinking songs to be able to sing them in the tavern.

When the players know the function of sound design elements they encounter, they can adjust their behavior and enjoy and contribute to the soundscape without awkward runtime worries about how to behave.

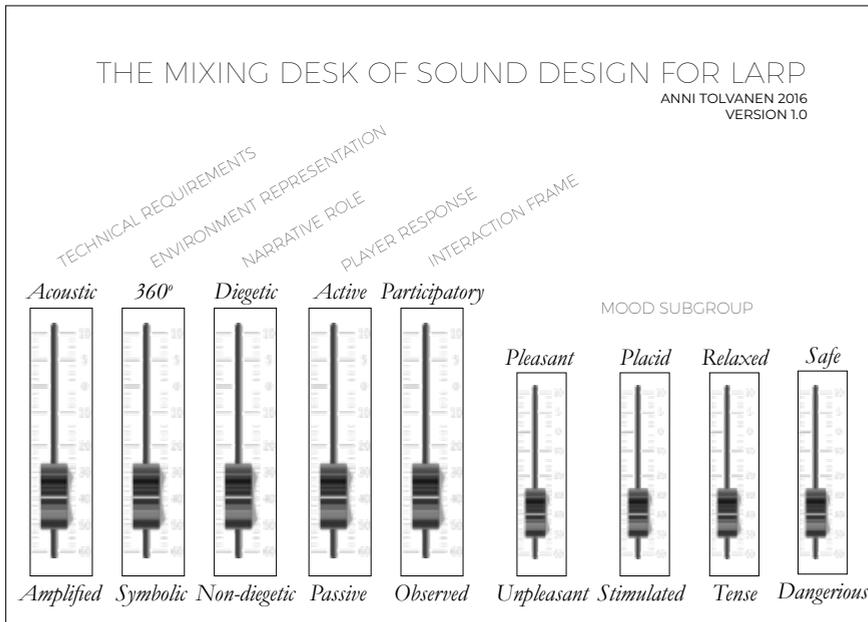
THE MIXING DESK OF SOUND DESIGN FOR LARP

The Mixing Desk of Sound Design for Larp is a toolkit that can be applied to any sound-related design choice in a larp. The concept is based on the design framework *The Mixing Desk of Larp*, which was originally created by Martin Nielsen and Martin Andresen for the Larpwriter Summer School community in 2012.

The sound design mixing desk is a practical checklist of larp-specific sound design variables. Its purpose is to give larp designers some concrete parameters through which to evaluate their sound-related design choices, and to understand challenges and possibilities connected to sound design in larps. It's also useful as a tool to understand and predict where, when, and why sound design can fail. Each fader in the mixing desk can be used to examine both individual, specific sounds in a larp, as well as more generic sound design goals and guidelines as part of larp design.

TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS: ACOUSTIC VS. AMPLIFIED

The first fader of the sound design mixing desk defines the technical framework for sounds in a larp. Is the larp completely acoustic, using no amplification or sound equipment? If amplification is used, either for the whole larp, or for a specific scene or object, what are its design goals? What are the upsides and



downsides of relying on the natural, acoustic soundscape, versus setting up a PA system or using other sound equipment? Are there any sounds that absolutely need to be heard by all players for the larp to function, and what are the best ways to ensure that this is physically possible? Is the site acoustically suitable for the intended soundscape of the larp?

While some expertise in sound design is useful when figuring out finer details of acoustics and the use of sound gear, the road to adequate solutions is more often than not a matter of testing and common sense. If the larp for instance has necessary scenes where many characters will be listening to a speech or performance, trying out different spaces and positions will soon reveal the optimal acoustic location for maximum audibility.

Very simple tricks can improve the acoustics of a space. Echo can be dampened with padded screens, cloth, and furniture, making a space more comfortable for a big crowd to talk in. Cutsscenes and speeches can be staged on an elevated part of a room or terrain. Players can be instructed to position themselves in different ways for key scenes, and to use specific spaces for specific activities. For example, as sound from blackbox scenes contaminating other runtime spaces can be confusing, staging a blackbox or meta room into a more secluded location is often a solid design choice.

Common sense and simple solutions work for setting up amplification as well. At a Halloween-themed participatory art piece a cunning soundscape was created by lifting an old battery-powered boombox high into a treetop. In a pitch dark forest, with an autumn storm creating an impressive natural soundscape around the participants, it was basically impossible to track down the source for the spooky, disturbing sound effects played from the boombox. As an unexpected bonus the wind was rocking the boombox around, shooting the sound in random directions. The end result sounded other-worldly and magical, with little technical effort or skill required to set up these effects.

Understanding the context and role of individual sounds in your larp is the key to making smart calls on whether to use amplification or not, and how a PA system or other sound sources (e.g. players, performers, or props that produce sounds) should be positioned to serve their purpose. Note that these goals can be different for different scenes within the same larp and location. Making conscious design choices and testing their implementation will lead to better practical outcomes than blindly trusting that sound will just organically work.

ENVIRONMENT REPRESENTATION: 360° VS. SYMBOLIC

A 360° larp most commonly refers to a photorealistic, tangible game experience, in which what you see is what you get: a sword is sword, a car is a car, a fight is a fight. The opposite of this is a larp taking place in a blackbox, or some other place not physically resembling the fictional setting of the larp. Props and activities can also be symbolic: a stick can be a sword, a couch a bus, rock-paper-scissors can be a fight.

In larp, sound design representing the environment works differently. A 360° visual environment doesn't necessarily produce a 360° audio environment; and often this fader setting will vary within the same larp. For example, even in the most photorealistic Western larp it's rare to shoot with real guns. A realistic mockup power generator, constructed as part of a science fiction set, likely doesn't sound like a real generator as it doesn't work like one.

It's often easier to create authentic, 360° soundscapes in a professionally equipped blackbox than, say, a historical castle or an old nuclear bunker. Take a medieval village setting: few larps have horses, pigs, sheep, and chicken running around and making noises, smiths beating hot iron, and people doing the variety of chores that contribute to the soundscape of an authentic medieval environment. Meanwhile, re-creating this soundscape with a professional PA system in a blackbox is a trivial task.

When thinking about the representation of sound environments, it's important to consider what is relevant to the players' experience of their environment. A silent power generator may be an adequate prop as a random object in the background, but if several characters spend relevant chunks of time maintaining that generator, its silence may underline that what they are doing is not in fact real, and has no actual impact on the generator as a functional object.

Implementing realistic, interesting, responsive, and surprising sounds in specific spaces and events is a powerful tool that can enhance players' experiences of the narrative. As a part of scenography, well-designed sounds communicate functionality and plausibility, making the environment feel more real.

On the other hand, it's inaccurate to presume that the more authentic sound effects are, the better the outcomes they produce. A realistic diegetic fire alarm may create a lot of confusion – or become a safety hazard. Pointing a gun at someone and yelling “bang” to their face may feel more intimate and threatening than hearing a muddy sound effect from a small loudspeaker on the other side of the room. Keeping the audio volume unrealistically low in a nightclub means players don't need to leave the space for their characters to be able to talk.

A symbolic soundscape can sometimes create a more atmospheric background to a larp or a specific scene than a realistic one would. At *Baphomet* (Denmark, 2018) a haunting playlist of background music was used throughout the

game. As the larp progressed, the volume of the music was slowly raised from almost silent to quite loud. The evolving, symbolic soundscape made the 360° physical environment more immersive – it added a fourth dimension to scenography by marking, among other things, passage of time, shift in moods, and the increasing intensity of character interactions.

NARRATIVE ROLE:

DIEGETIC VS. NON-DIEGETIC (VS. SUPRADIEGETIC)

For a sound to make sense in the context of a larp, players have to be able to parse whether the sound belongs in the larp's narrative or not. An in-character conversation, or the sound of a realistic fight scene, are in most cases *diegetic* – they belong inside the fiction and characters are able to hear them. A safeword, or the sound of an airplane flying over a medieval village, are *non-diegetic* – something the characters don't hear even if the players do.

In larps it's often presumed that the distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic sounds is self-evident and doesn't require further explanation. In practice, it's more complicated. Therefore, having clear boundaries between diegetic and non-diegetic sounds, including metacommunication between players, helps everyone distinguish between ingame and offgame interaction better.

This is especially important with larp meta-techniques and rules that rely on non-diegetic sound cues and dialogue: e.g. safewords, cut scene and act break signals, and out of character negotiation during runtime. If there's ambiguity in whether these sounds are diegetic or non-diegetic, the techniques stop working, which can make the larp confusing and less safe.

Between diegetic and non-diegetic sound there is a third category, *supradiegetic* sound. This term, borrowed from film sound design analysis, refers to cases when the narrative role of a sound is ambiguous by design.

BAPHOMET's soundtrack is a good example of supradiegetic sound. The background music used in the larp was not diegetic, as it was not heard by the characters – but it was nevertheless meant to have an impact on player mood and thus character behavior. Some players ended up humming along with the music in character, and this humming was, presumably, audible to other characters. Different songs had a notable impact on the pitch and tempo of diegetic ritualistic chanting done by the characters – an important part of the larp's design and character interactions.

At *Europa* (Norway, 2001), hidden loudspeakers at the refugee reception centre would play war sounds, which were not diegetically present in the real time, but represented real memories and PTSD-induced flashbacks of the asylum seeker characters. Players were instructed to play on them to the degree that made sense at each moment. In effect, the narrative role of these sounds was implicitly defined by players, depending on whether they wanted to play on their characters' memories, and what role they wanted to assign to the sound effects in those scenes.

In most larps diegetic, non-diegetic, and supradiegetic sounds can be present simultaneously. The key to successfully navigating between the categories is to understand them in the context of the larp in question, and to clearly communicate the role of different sounds to players.

PLAYER RESPONSE: ACTIVE VS. PASSIVE

While parsing between diegetic and non-diegetic sounds helps us understand which sounds belong to the narrative of the larp and which don't, this is separate from how players should react and respond to either type of sound.

During runtime, the majority of diegetic sounds invite active response: in character dialogue, or sound effects within the larp's narrative (e.g. a phone ringing, a bomb exploding, a radio transmitting a newsreel) are there to tell part of a story and create interaction between characters.

The majority of non-diegetic sounds are disregarded – unless they communicate relevant information to the player who hears them. An out-of-character negotiation before a sword fight is passively overlooked by players who walk past by accident, but requires active participation from players engaged in it. A safeword or a fire alarm are non-diegetic sounds that require an active response from all players within earshot.

Some diegetic sounds are symbolic and require players to first interpret them correctly to choose their response. If gunshots are symbolically represented by a player yelling “bang bang”, the sound of imagined gunfire would be diegetic, but the sound of someone yelling is non-diegetic. Thus, player response to the real world sound (yelling) is, in effect, passive, but their reaction to the narrative sound (gunfire) is likely active.

The more different types of sound effects and sound-based meta-techniques there are in use, the more important it is to have clear instructions on default player response. This is especially important with supradiegetic sounds. At *Inside Hamlet* during the last acts of the 2015 runs, a soundscape of rioting was mixed in with the larp's background music. In the larp's narrative a rebel army was indeed approaching Castle Elsinore – but it was unclear if players were supposed to actively react to the riot soundscape in character (“Look, the angry mob is just outside the gates!”) or if the sound effects were there to provide a symbolic feeling of threat and pressure. Without prior instructions, some players ended up reacting to the rioting where others ignored it, creating a discrepancy in the overall mood and narrative flow.

INTERACTION FRAME: PARTICIPATORY VS. OBSERVED

What makes larp sound design distinct and exceptional from most other forms of sound design is its participatory nature. Player contributions to the soundscapes of larps are continuous and pervasive. However, the framework for the level and mode of participation is not always intuitively clear.

In our everyday lives we are socially conditioned to recognize and distinguish between situations where we are expected to listen to sounds, versus actively participating in producing them. Expectations can shift quickly within the same context: in a concert we are first and foremost in the role of observers and listeners, but at certain points expected to show our support and participation by applauding, cheering, whistling, stomping, shouting, or dancing. It's important to note that just the frame "concert" does not tell us what the expected level or form of participation is; figuring it out requires deeper understanding of the cultural context and social cues.

In larps, we rarely get this cultural context and socialization for free. What is the interaction frame for Skaldic storytelling in a Viking camp? For a revue at fae court? A prayer circle among orc warriors? Larp is all about exploring different interaction frames, and very often one of the most relevant ways of participating into a larp scene is producing sound: speaking, shouting, reciting, clapping, humming, coughing – the list of both verbal and non-verbal ways to make noise is endless.

It is therefore of utmost importance to larp designers to think about sound design from the point of view of interaction. When do we want our players to observe, and when do we want them to participate? If there are staged scenes, performances, or rituals in a larp, can players react to them freely as their characters? If so, what's the diegetically appropriate interaction frame? If the characters would know when to applaud, shout, or hum, the players need to know this, too. A character may also choose to go against the diegetic interaction frame (e.g. interrupt another character's speech, or refuse to sing along in a ritual) – unless the player is specifically asked to participate within a certain framework. Some scenes may require players to observe them without interruption, no matter how their characters would normally react, and in that case telling the players this explicitly in advance is good practice.

Many scenes in larp rely on players creating sounds together. At *Halat Hisar* (Finland, 2013, Eng. State of Siege) a lot of narrative weight was put on student and activist demonstrations against an oppressive military power. The designers wanted specific scenes to be loud, chaotic, and aggressive, and decided to workshop that in advance, as many Nordic larps don't have an existing interaction frame for antagonistic rioting in demonstrations. Two interesting things happened.

First, workshops helped players calibrate the modes of participation (be-

having aggressively, shouting slogans and booing) designers wanted to capture. Players didn't have to improvise their actions, or guess how forcefully they could and should escalate towards conflict. This made it easier for them to steer specific scenes towards the designers' vision.

Second, workshops encouraged the overall mood of unrelenting opposition by the underdog and gave players agency to build on it. Instead of just aggressively demonstrating against the soldiers, players organically decided to sometimes express character resistance by singing, or more accurately quietly humming, the *Finlandia* hymn, a familiar composition perfectly capturing the nationalistic theme at *Halat Hisar's* core. Understanding the designers' vision for the interaction frame around political resistance enabled the players to come up with their own appropriate content and collectively implement an elegant piece of sound design into the larp.

MOOD SUBGROUPS

While the other mixing desk faders address the implementation and function of sounds in larps, mood faders can be used as a framework to think about the actual content of sounds and soundscapes. The moods picked for the faders are based on music psychology, and describe different reactive states that sounds evoke in us. These moods are:

- Pleasant / Unpleasant
- Placid / Stimulating
- Relaxed / Tense
- Safe / Dangerous

It's worth noting that these moods do not consistently match the basic human emotions (e.g. happiness, sadness, fear, or anger), but leave room for all of them. As different players and their characters can be in different emotional states in different scenes, it's practical to think about moods through their reactive and interactive representations, rather than their emotional charge. In other words, it is more constructive to think about a scene as "unpleasant, placid, and tense" than "sad".

Mood faders give an alternative starting point for thinking about sound design in specific larp scenes. While the greatest hits of the era are an obvious choice for a 1980s disco, with mood faders we can push the sound design further. A disco is usually a pleasant and stimulating environment – but is it really in this larp, for these characters? Is partying in this disco relaxed or tense? Do the characters feel safe, or is the environment dangerous? The answers can be different for different characters, but thinking about these moods can help a sound designer or DJ to pick the kind of music, and possibly extra sound effects, that support

the intended mood.

Moods also work as excellent guidelines for finding suitable sound effects and ambient soundscapes to match a larp's scenography and temporal mood shifts. If a particular environment or phase in a larp is supposed to be unpleasant, stimulating, and slightly dangerous, one can think of real world environments or movie scenes that evoke similar moods. Analyzing the soundscape of those settings (what can be heard, why do those sounds boost certain moods in that context) can give a lot of insight on sound design for larp.

DARKNESS AS SCENOGRAPHY

// Tuomas Hakkarainen
// Katri Elisabet Lassila

Valve (Finland, 2011–2013, Eng. The Waking) was a larp inspired by Pedro Calderón de la Barca's well known play, *Life Is a Dream* (1629–1635), as well as many dreamlike narratives, books, writers' memories, film genres, and dystopian scenarios. The larp's characters were often based on Carl Jung's symbolic dream principles. Our design team – Tuomas Hakkarainen, Antti Kanner, Katri Lassila and Petri Leinonen – were all experienced gamemasters in both larp and tabletop.

The first year of *Valve* was produced in cooperation with The Alvar Aalto Foundation, which was interested to find out whether it would be possible, through the lens of larp, to perceive one's home city differently. The architecture and cityscape were important starting points for the campaign, and over the years also developed to seek out various interesting indoors settings. *Valve* was played in venues such as private apartments, garages, a beach, a graveyard, a mansion, office buildings, art galleries, the forest, and the Alvar Aalto Museum.

To connect to the campaign's theme of dreams we decided, on two separate occasions, to use darkness as design element in a scene. The first was played in the tunnels of Suomenlinna Sea Fortress; the other one Iiris, a cen-

tre owned by the Finnish Federation of the Visually Impaired, in Helsinki. The first attempt failed, from the point of view of the design team as well as some of the players. The second attempt succeeded significantly better, mainly because the runtime gamemasters on location were both visually impaired. They were able to act in the darkness, anticipate the players' needs, and help them efficiently during the scene.

For the first darkness scene, at Suomenlinna Sea Fortress, the idea was to transport the players by private boat to the island, where the characters were supposed to retrieve important information from one of the dark tunnels, thereby foiling the plans of the Gods controlling reality. Earlier that day, the tunnel had been opened by some of the players on a scuba diving mission to turn an underwater lever. The transportation by boat was successful, but we hadn't thought thoroughly enough about where to park the boat. A passing cruise ship caused severe damage on the boat, and a broken thumb for the runtime gamemaster, who tried to prevent the boat from crashing into the pier in the cruiser's wake.

The players didn't fare that well either. The tunnel was wet, muddy and very dark. The file we had previously

planted had been taken away by visiting tourists, and the players (unknowingly) found only some secondary material. As they returned – cold, dirty and with scratches – to the boat, they found it had needed to move far away from the original spot. The boat had no roof, and on the way home it started to rain. As the miserable group disembarked from the boat, we had to admit that this part of our larp was far from a success.

The next scene played in darkness was a better experience for everyone involved. It was designed and written in cooperation with two of the campaign's visually impaired players, Riikka Hänninen and Iris Brocke, who also volunteered as embedded gamemasters for the scene. It was executed in Iris, a centre owned by the Finnish Federation of the Visually Impaired.

The adventure leading up to this was played first as a tabletop role-playing game; in the part they would larp, two human characters had to make their way through underground tunnels in complete darkness. The tunnel's exit was blocked by the nest of two creatures portrayed by the gamemasters, one of whom was hostile, the other friendly. An audio tape left by previous adventurers contained instructions for calming the creatures to proceed past them, a procedure that involved mixing a specific potion in the darkness.

Riikka Hänninen, who is currently planning a larp campaign based around lack of sight, describes the scene in *Valve*.

Players were prepared for the scene in advance, the space was safe, and we had discussed what kind of touch and contact would be okay for them. Still, when they heard us breathing, they were very careful and slow before proceeding in the dark, so we finally ended up making direct contact with them. We were very careful when touching them, as everything feels stronger in the dark, and used more voices and sound than physical contact. We are both singers, so it was easy for us to create the creatures by using different voices. Our outfits were also designed to create sensations in the darkness: one creature wore something furry, and the other one a rubbery, slimy material. In the nest there were things that felt like bones and slime, even though in reality they were dog bones and wet mozzarella cheese.

When the characters prepared the calming drink for us they had to listen to the audio recording very carefully. They then had to cooperate to mix the ingredients in the drink. They had to either taste or smell every ingredient. At every turn, it was crucial to communicate clearly what they were doing. If you're not heard, you don't really exist in the darkness.

Even if you're prepared for a scene in complete darkness, some people may suddenly get afraid or distressed. This may come as a total surprise, so it's important that the players know that there's an easy way out from the space. It seems that if executed well these kinds of

scenes may strengthen the bonds between players and give them new extraordinary experiences. After all, the sound of breathing in complete darkness may be more scary than any visual prop.

The two players of the scene also describe it as positive and exciting, and that the complete darkness in itself was an intense and disorienting experience. They experienced the space as much smaller than it really was, and that it was difficult to judge how many others were in the space with them. They said it was important that they had already a trusted relationship with the NPCs before entering play. With total strangers, they said, the experience might have been more harrowing. An interesting detail is that the players felt they were exploring the space quite courageously, while from the point of view of the visually impaired gamemasters – who move comfortably in the darkness and could follow the players movements by sound – the players were hesitant and slow.

In retrospect, these two different scenes played in darkness demonstrate that sensory deprivation is a powerful tool in larp design. Successful execution requires a structured briefing and careful planning of the scene in close contact with the players. Sometimes a scene might be ruined just because the players are missing some meta-information, or if runtime guidance is not available. When using these kinds of techniques, the safety of the players should always be paramount, even though one might have to compromise a little with the players' immersion to give them details of the scene in advance.

FURTHER READING:

nordiclarp.org/wiki/Valve

Antti Kanner & Katri Lassila: "Valve: the Grand Adventure". in Petterson (ed): States of

Play: Nordic Larp Around the World. (2012)

NAILED IT!

HOW TO RUNTIME GAMEMASTER

Runtime gamemastering is the term for all the activities you and your runtime team perform while the participants are playing to guide and support their stories. You are also protecting the integrity of your design: players will come up with unexpected things that will require big or small adjustments on your part for your larp to still produce desirable outcomes.

How much runtime gamemastering is required depends entirely on the design. Some larps are entirely closed pressure-cooker systems: you put the players inside and let them out at the end, making yourself available only for out-of-character problems. Others can be very responsive, with player actions constantly monitored and reacted to. If you are a skilled runtime gamemaster, the larp is small enough to allow you a good overview, and it will never be run by anyone except yourself, you can even choose to replace some structural design elements – like a hard schedule – with yourself. You would then place yourself inside the magic circle to portray a character who has diegetic reasons to control pacing or plot direction. (A low-status role is best, not to become a “main character” that the players’ stories are in service of).

The problem with getting actively involved is that participants who recognise you as a team member are likely to read your play suggestions as hard instructions, and might feel pushed towards actions they would otherwise not have chosen. Or they might interpret what you meant as hard instructions as mere suggestions, since they were conveyed diegetically by an unreliable character. Some designers use instructed players for this very reason – plants that may otherwise be normal participants, but who are secretly

tasked to, for instance, make a diegetic choice in support of your plot, have their character killed at a particular time to provide a turning point in the story, or even just step aside every few hours to report to you about what is going on in their character group. This, too, requires some *fingerspitzengefühl*: do it clumsily, and the players will feel manipulated.

This is the tension inherent in runtime gamemastering: your presence can enrich play enormously, but it has to be aligned with your design and the aesthetics of the larp, or participants will feel you are infringing on their narrative agency. For the type of larp centred in this book, which rarely involves running specific prewritten plotlines, and where players are not expecting to be entertained by you but to make a story themselves, a subtle approach is often best. Remember that in larps and player groups where a lot of the play is internal, and in cultures where big emotions are not always visibly expressed, you will struggle to know whether people are bored or having the time of their lives. The temptation will be to introduce a plot event, which risks completely disrupting all story the players have created. If you must, do it in an opt-in way, so they can choose not to engage.

Even so, it is always useful to have eyes on the room. Identify which characters drive each plot, and monitor their body language. Keep an eye out for players who are wandering aimlessly, looking for interactions. Look for people who are sitting down very passively, or who are quite engaged but look exhausted around the eyes and seem to have trouble focusing (they are about to crash). Learning to read the runtime of the larp will teach you about your own design, and offer you opportunities to experiment with more subtle interventions, like changing the lights, turning up the heat, serving a snack, or tweaking the exact moment for ending an act.

The four chapters of this section cover four very different kinds of runtime gamemastering. Simon Lindman Svensson writes about how to simulate a full fictional world around your larp's setting. Anna Westerling and Anders Hultman write about directors, gamemasters tasked to intervene directly in play, often using freeform mechanics. Evan Torner explains how to run a freeform scenario that someone else has written, and finally Josefin Westborg discusses running larps for students who perhaps did not even choose to play. Examples suggest tools for following the characters' physical and inner journeys.

SIMULATING AN OUTSIDE WORLD

// Simon Lindman Svensson

In larps the participants step into other worlds. However, due to practical restrictions, they only see a small part of the world. That confined area, the setting of the larp, is portrayed in higher definition, physically represented in some manner, and inhabited by player characters. Yet all the rest of that world also exists in the fiction, even if it cannot be visited physically during the larp. In order to simulate an outside world to the participants of a larp, that world must be portrayed and presented to the participants somehow.

A common way to present the world is through contact with individuals from the outside world, portrayed by gamemasters or NPCs in writing, video, or speech. Another common method is through props and materials that represent parts of the simulated world, such as drawings, contracts, maps, money props, etc. These methods and others can be combined in order to create a *world simulation*.

COHERENCE, CAUSALITY AND CONNECTION

There are three important principles that runtime gamemasters need to follow in order to produce a convincing outside world. In order for the world to feel complete and real, it needs to have coherence, a feeling of causality, and provide connection.

Coherence in an outside world simulation is what creates the feeling of sharing that larger world with the other participants. It is the collection of facts, established norms and knowledge that the gamemasters know and communicate to the participants. Without coherence, both participants and gamemasters lack a common frame of reference when they refer to or communicate about the simulated world.

Common information should be known to both participants and gamemasters. This can be things like where the setting is located in the larp fiction, what year it is, and what the norms in the fiction are.

This extends to the established facts about the world beyond the participant perspective, known to all the gamemasters. A few examples would be how existing power structures look, how institutions might react to things, or how magic really works. Basically there needs to be well-thought out metaphysics that can be extrapolated on by the runtime gamemasters during play.

Of course, it is not enough that the information content matches – delivery and packaging also need to be uniform. This means that props and physical information sources about the outside world that are available to the participants in the larp (such as letters, maps of the relevant world areas, and other props) should seem to originate from the same world. All of these contribute to a coherent worldview, and a feeling of inhabiting a shared, real enough world.

The actions of the players need to matter; what they do must have an impact on the world. This creates a feeling of *causality*. When the participants take an action or give an order, it should mean something to the worlds – and possibly come back to haunt them later during the larp.

By ensuring the causal relation between participant actions and gamemaster reactions, you can create the feeling of a world that communicates with itself before the reactions are felt by the participants. Some examples of this could include:

- A letter arrives with the results of an investigation that the participants have initiated in a previous interaction.
- A gamemaster calls back and portrays an upset individual, berating the participant character for something they said in another conversation.
- Consequences from one interaction being returned to other participants as rumours or hearsay.
- Domino effects where one thing leads to another event happening, coordinated between runtime gamemasters.

Finally, there needs to be *connection*. There should always be a sense of meaning to interacting with the outside world. In order for a world to feel meaningful, it needs to be loaded with emotion. The outside world connections can reference things in the character backgrounds. Letters or phone calls can come from friends and family; things they thought were safe could be placed in jeopardy. These kind of connections are only possible if the participants have been given a feeling of realness and the previous two aspects have been fulfilled.

When a world is coherent and the actions of the participants have consequences, the players will start feeling invested and connected to the outside world. Examples of connection between a character and an outer connection could be:

- An emotional conversation with an old lover over the phone.
- A telegram calling a traumatized character to military service.
- A news reporter calling to ask sensitive questions about what is happening in the larp.
- Urgent information from a friend about a bomb raid threatening the characters.

METHODS AND TOOLS

There are multiple tools and methods available to you as a designer in order to achieve these three aspects. They can be divided into equipment and means used to organize the gamemaster team itself, methods that can be used to track the simulated world, and finally the techniques used by the gamemasters to interface with the participants.

Organizing the gamemastering team is the foundation of a coherent world simulation. Separate physical space is practical and important. Make sure that your gamemasters do not share a workspace with a lot of other functions for the larp, unless those functions tie into the simulation. A separate physical space allows the gamemasters to have all their computers, resources and tools available without disruption. The gamemasters will need good note taking and visualization tools, like extra computer screens, printers, whiteboards, and notebooks.

Create a clear structure for the gamemaster team. It is recommended to have a head gamemaster who handles the communication between the other organizers and the rest of the gamemaster team. Make it clear who makes the final calls about the outside world and ensure that the gamemasters all know what their duties are. Make a rotating schedule for their work hours to avoid burnout or exhaustion, and ensure that everyone gets food and sleep.

Once the team is in order, it is time to *track the state of the simulated world*. When it comes to means of organizing information and handling the information flow of the larp, there are several different good practices.

Ensure that participants can only communicate with your game masters through specific, limited channels. This way, the game masters can ensure that no information falls through the cracks in either direction and that everything that happens can be recorded. Ensure that all the participants know how these channels are meant to be used, and what their limitations are.

Use a system to store common information and important facts about the ongoing event is needed to coordinate the runtime gamemastering. This can be anything from a very basic system, a shared spreadsheet or a chronological list of updated events on the wall, to a complex database system specifically tailored toward the needs of the larp. Here, the gamemasters will note down whenever something significant changes in the simulated world, whenever they make decisions that will impact the work of the other gamemasters, or any information emerges that needs to be shared among everyone. It is very useful to be able to read up on everything that has happened during small breaks or at the beginning of one's shift.

Extra computer screens that always display the most relevant and up-to-date information and are not used for individual gamemastering work are highly recommended. They can be used to track the most important processes that are

happening, for instance the progress of an invading army, the position of the participant spaceship in the galaxy, or major decisions made by the characters during the larp so far. A whiteboard visible to everyone can fulfill the same role.

Keeping a shared who's who list of individuals that exist in the fictional world and might have an impact on the ongoing stories is also very useful. This list should include people mentioned in the characters' backstories, as well as outside connections that have been created by the game masters throughout the larp, or created by the players either spontaneously or (if your design allows it) invented by the players and submitted to the runtime gamemasters in advance. Once a character has been activated, make sure to make a note of which gamemaster or NPC portrayed the specific connection so internal coherence can be maintained.

Print all the relevant materials players have received in advance and create clear and structured printouts for the gamemasters to have at hand. Screens are best used for information that is prone to change, while printouts are useful for permanent information or information that is unlikely to change throughout the course of the larp. They also provide a backup in case you lose power. Remember that internet connections are unreliable; ensure all key materials are available offline in case yours goes down.

Finally, the world simulation comes alive when the *gamemasters interface with the participants* using dramatic techniques. These are ways that the outside world is made real and present for the participants directly. It can be sounds and recorded messages, voice communication, written letters, in person communications, etc.

Sound is a common method to create the feeling of being influenced by the outside, and here there is a significant difference between one-way interactions and two-way interactions. One way-interactions tend to be pre-made sound clips sent to individuals or played through a speaker system. They can also take the form of a computer voice telling participants what to do and when to do it, or environmental sounds, such as the noise of bomb planes flying over the location or a pre-recorded voice mail delivered to an in-fiction computer terminal. It can even be an old tape found lying around.

Two-way voice communication is very efficient when it comes to quickly extracting or sharing information between the gamemasters and the participants. They can be set up through digital voice communication or through analogue means. Old, copper-wire military phones, as used for instance in *Inside Hamlet* (Denmark, 2015), are very secure and rarely break down, and are particularly useful in areas where the internet connection is unstable, unreliable, or where digital tools are unsuitable in the fiction.

Any communication involving sound is greatly enhanced by background noises. The singing from a church choir, the sounds of war in the background, or the noise of machinery all add to the feeling of realness, and is relatively easy to set up even for real time communications if you have a computer with speakers next to your phone.

Naturally two-way communication can also occur in writing. It is more per-

manent, easier to refer back to, and a convenient way to ensure character secrets exist in a format where they can be lost, stolen or fought over in the fiction.

No matter if communication is taking place in text, over voice, or in person, a recognizable style of writing or pattern of speech give the interaction a personal touch. Such personality also provides other gamemasters who might be portraying the same outside connection a tool to use to give the idea that the participant are in contact with the same person. Furthermore, gamemasters should have access to all the sources of information about the participant characters, and by constantly referencing issues that tie into the characters and information that the participants will recognize, they reinforce the sense of continuous fiction. What is written in their character sheet is not simply there to inspire them, but is a reflection of a greater, coherent world.

Never underestimate the impact of memorable details. Be it a crest, a certain motto or credo, a way of always responding with a certain honorific, or background sounds that match the expected scenery, a small detail might mean more to the players than any amount of content in a letter or a conversation. Such details are what bring the outside simulation from a technical support function to a inspiring storytelling tool for both players and gamemasters to use.

USING DISCORD IN A CYBERPUNK SETTING

// Ericka Paige Skirpan

Sinking Ship Creation's *Project Ascension* (USA, 2018) was a cyberpunk larp in New York City set 15 seconds into the future. Producers-designers Ryan Hart and Jason Knox hired me as the head storyteller and together we ran the event across three square miles of Manhattan.

The biggest challenge of running an event with a big patch of the largest city in the world as the set was real time coordination, both ingame and off-game. We also had to simulate the larp's cyberpunk reality, where the facilitating characters should have access to the matrix to see everything as it happened, and the characters should be able to hack this matrix as needed.

Lastly, there was a great concern over organizing and tracking the movements of over fifty players, many of whom had never been to Manhattan before. We solved all of these challenges with one elegant solution popular with many styles of game nowadays: The video, voice and chat service Discord.

While many larps have been using Discord to form pre-event connections, we used it most actively on the day of the event for both offgame and ingame communications. The app's

ability to set up multiple private and public channels on a server with various levels of access allowed us to organize the following groups easily: Head staff, all facilitators, out-of-character factions, in-character crews, crew leaders, operations security, the self-aware matrix, and hackers. Depending on the level of staff or character, they had access to the appropriate channels and were able to organize on the ground in real time. The head staff, playing all-knowing ascended cyber-beings, were able to access and speak in every channel.

The larp did not have a single starting location, but each crew received a Google Map link in Discord as to where they were to meet their contact – a facilitator – and get their first mission for the day. Being able to link directly to other apps on the players' phones meant even brand new visitors to New York City were easily able to find their way around to mission locations.

Using Discord to coordinate behind the scenes was one of the true successes of the larp. As head storyteller, I was able to communicate to all of the facilitators in the field and have them report back to me on player actions. When the game started, the

crews were spread all over the city. I directed the facilitators to report back to me when the crews arrived safely, but also with details about each of them – things like the color of Jeff’s shirt, when does Michelle pass a specific bridge, is Orli drinking coffee yet, etc. Once I received that information, I went into the in-character crew chats as the all-seeing ascended character Glazer and began to make comments on the player’s personal actions in real time. To the players, it seemed like I had eyes all across the city at all points in time.

These small details nailed the paranoia of the event from the first hour.

But most importantly, it allowed us to keep an eye on both players and facilitators for safety’s sake. We knew when plots were delayed in the field, if a player felt lost in the city, or the moment any incident happened where an organizer was needed to give support. Having a real time communication tool like Discord really helped us nail a cyberpunk setting in one of the busiest cities in the world.

FURTHER READING:

nordiclarp.org/wiki/Project_Ascension

NAILED IT!

USING RUNTIME DIRECTORS

// Anna Westerling
// Anders Hultman

A tool in runtime gamemastering of big larps is using *directors*, gamemasters whose task it is to actively enhance or guide the play of others during runtime. Runtime directors are different from other types of runtime gamemasters in that they are physically present in the play area, sometimes out of character – perhaps only in symbolic or neutral costuming – or sometimes as abstracted or symbolic characters.

This type of active gamemaster is very familiar in some other larp traditions; the Storytellers of Mind's Eye Theatre and referees or lore marshals of many competitive-style boffer campaigns are effectively runtime directors, even though they often work through telling players what happens rather than nudging them in specific directions. Much like Storytellers are a translation of the tabletop gamemaster into a live action environment, the runtime directors of Nordic larp are a way to bring the input and agency of the freeform gamemaster into a more 360° style larp.

Runtime directors can help ensure a complex plot is not lost in the chaos that is the larp and guide the players towards more emotional play. The list of variations on how this is done in different larps is long, but the different usages share some common characteristics.

- Their role is to enhance players' experiences rather than their own.
- They have specific and limited ways of influencing play.
- They are partly or fully separated from the diegetic play.
- They have a function that can be similar to an organizer but usually more limited.

Runtime gamemastering often requires being physically present in the set to observe the play, control pacing or solve practical tasks. For all of these reasons you may choose to have gamemasters in the room in very thin characters. If their focus is the larp as a whole, they are probably not runtime directors. We also do not consider a regular NPC with specific tasks in the larp or a diegetic leader

(like a high profile character with special instructions or responsibilities) to be a runtime director. In addition, this chapter excludes functionaries who reside only within a blackbox that is separate from the main play area; these are functionally freeform gamemasters. In this discussion of runtime directors specifically, the focus is on actively *guiding* and *enhancing* the player's experience in the main play area, usually through input on story.

Some recent takes on runtime directors in 360° larps are:

- “Phantoms” at *The Monitor Celestra* (Sweden, 2013). They were invisible until initiating contact with a player, at which time they could communicate. The larp was set in the *Battlestar Galactica* universe and the Phantoms, dressed in red, were diegetically modeled on the hallucinated cylon character of that series.
- “Shadows” at *Lindängens Riksinternat* (Sweden, 2013, Eng. Lindängen International Boarding School), invisible but able to influence play with whispers, touch or signs.
- “Gamemasters” or “directors” at the 2018 runs of *En stilla middag med familjen* (Sweden, 2007, Eng. *A Nice Evening with the Family*). These were invisible and omnipotent.

The following techniques are some of the more common tools for directors, but each larp has to design its own toolset. The techniques are divided into two rough categories but many can be used for both.

GUIDING THE PLOT

With a larp structured around predetermined plot you will either have to make the storyline very simple for your players to be able to remember, or have other tools to remind and nudge them. A director who follows the larp and has the agency, overview and knowledge to help the players along is a useful solution for this. It quickly makes the player freer, since with someone around to take responsibility for the overall narrative arc they can follow their impulses without losing track of where they are heading.

Because the directors interact directly with characters they can also notice interesting new developments early and make behind the scenes preparations to nurture emergent storylines, in a way a gamemaster just observing the room may not be able to. Examples of such focussed actions could for instance include spreading a rumor at a precise moment, or bringing a character into a room where they are needed for a particular scene.

The main difference between gamemastering a tabletop role-playing game and runtime gamemastering larps is that you will usually not have the focus of

all the players at once. This means you have a less omnipotent role and need to employ more subtle tricks.

Guiding techniques

- *Changing the environment* – moving objects or people around to create more interesting scenes or help the narrative along.
- *Initiate metatechniques* – helping or inviting the players to initiate the usage of inner monologues, the backbox, or other.
- *Virtual blackbox* – setting a scene in runtime, temporarily removing the limitations of time and space from the larp: “You are now at the Eiffel tower and about to propose to him, let us see it.”
- *Spoken instructions* – suggesting actions or inner thoughts to the player, often in the first person using a “bird-in-ear” or “devil on your shoulder” technique. The externalised inner monologue can be combined with a symbolic gesture, like looking into the players eyes or placing the hand on their shoulder, to signal the meaning of the words that will follow.

ENHANCING PLAY

Larp is not only about telling great stories, it is about living them: feeling what your character goes through and what your character feels on the inside. Directors with the right tools can make these experiences even stronger, whether the feeling you are after is fear, love, anxiety, or doubt. The only really limiting factor is the imagination of the person enrolled to be the runtime gamemaster.

A character sitting all alone, locked in a cell, can become a strong and memorable scene through the presence of a runtime gamemaster who might not even be saying a single word. So might a screaming contest on the dance floor, with a few directors supporting each combatant.

ENHANCING TECHNIQUES

By suggesting specific actions directly or indirectly, the director can give the player alibi to make choices that feels difficult to perform but could make the play stronger.

- *Emotional touch* – using touch on the player’s body to influence a character’s emotions.
- *Empowering presence* – using the unseen (by the characters) presence of a director standing behind a character who needs extra power in a scene.
- *Gamemaster bombing* – in intense scenes like violence or madness, a number of directors can make use of a mix of sound and touch techniques

to make a stressful psychological situation tangible and possible to experience, not just imagine.

- *Inner dialogue* – being someone who a character can talk to that is not really around is a great way for many players to explore their character's real thoughts, and for the directors to push and guide the players. This works particularly well when the character is diegetically alone, for instance in a jail cell or in front of a bathroom mirror.
- *Sounds and music* – sounds made with the body, tools, or instruments.
- *Witnessing* – witnessing a character playing on their own, or in intimate situations with others, can make the scenes both more meaningful and safer.

WHEN TO USE DIRECTORS

Any larp could probably be improved with the right use of these techniques since both guiding and enhancing play experiences can be very useful. If directors fit the general design and aesthetics of the larp they can be a very potent tool.

Guiding works well in larps with a high degree of transparency and predetermined narratives – for instance in fateplay designs – that the gamemasters can help guide the the players towards. If there is a plot to follow and many storylines have to come together in a predesigned way, it is also more crucial than in a sandbox larp that the players are helped along. Enhancing techniques, on the other hand, can be employed in most types of larps since tools like *witnessing* and *inner dialogues* can work well even if the director does not know exactly what is going on between the characters or in a specific situation.

DIRECTORS AS CHARACTERS

A more fundamental choice than what tools to give the directors is to decide whether they should be characters with their own objectives and preferences, or if they are neutral, diegetically invisible, and focused only on the experience of the other players. The former choice will probably require more limitation of what tools are available, since an omnipotent director can overrun a larp if they have their own objectives. It is not necessary to inform the players of all these limitations, but in a very transparent larp it is probably a good idea. If players are unaware of the directors' limitations they can feel like puppets, instead of characters in their own right.

In some larps the directors can be diegetic, appearing as people or as some type of deity that is part of the diegesis. At *Knappnåls huvudet* (Sweden, 1999, Eng. Head of a Pin) the human characters interacted with angels who were diegetically present, with their own goals, but invisible to the humans. The angels were playable characters: fantastical creatures, but part of the story.

At the other end of the spectrum are the directors of *A Nice Evening with the Family* who represent nothing in the diegesis, except when they decided to take on a specific character for instance in a flashback to provide a specific experience. They could enter any space in the larp without being visible, and did not affect the larp unless they or a player actively initiated an interaction.

THE EXPRESSION WALL

// Maury Elizabeth Brown

How do you encourage players to become artists, mentally and physically, and to embrace creating as an integral part of the experience? What if your larp is about art as its subject but also *is* art in its creation? What if your larp design will fail if your players do not embrace the essence of creating and being artists? You need to incentivize the behaviors you seek and make the larp's social contract establish the centrality of art to the experience. You also need to make sure your players have the means and the will to create.

In *Beat Generation* (USA, 2018), a Nordic-style collaborative larp set in New York City in 1963, players portrayed artists of various sorts: musicians, photographers, writers, painters, film directors, actors, choreographers, etc. Mechanics in the larp encouraged them to explore creativity through their character's art form and spontaneous performances, using a variety of avant-garde techniques pioneered by the Neo-Dadaists, Abstract Expressionists, Beats, Jazz, and The Factory. Players portrayed historical figures such as Jack Kerouac, Willem de Kooning, John Cage, Andy Warhol, and Denise Levertov.

THE PROBLEM

I sought to design a way to incorporate art as a mechanic for play into larps.

I also wanted to distribute that artistic output so it could advance the collaborative narrative. Explicitly, this design conundrum broke down into these smaller challenges:

- How to use art (the artistic output of the players) as a tool for role-play, rather than over-reliance on conversation and combat as ways to tell a story.
- How to improve immersion into an artistic ethos and aesthetic.
- How to encourage players to feel creative and take the risks of making art, even if they themselves are not artists (but their character was); in other words, to give an alibi to create.
- How to get players to produce more art and engage in the mindset of the artist.
- How to embrace spontaneity, a key tenet of this artistic movement.
- How to put the various sub-cultures in conversation with each other, driving the conflicts and relationships of the characters.
- How to document the artistic output from the larp on a meta level.

THE DESIGN CHOICES

We created the “Expression Wall,” a designated and accessible physical place within the larp to post and perform individual or group art. At the Expression Wall, other players may experience the art produced, be inspired by it, add to it, converse with it, critique it, and, by the end, document the output of the larp. It functioned both in-character and for the players.

We gave the players explicit prompts for artistic output in the design document. These were also available as ingame documents on the Expression Wall. These prompts were designed to help players know what to do if they were struggling. Many of them were collaborative and involved another character, either as muse, artistic subject, sounding board, or co-creator. There were some 30 different prompts involving writing, drawing, or creating, curated from the tenets of these artistic movements. Any creative output was to be posted on the Expression Wall, which was central to the physical space of the larp. All players had a suggested goal for their character to engage with it:

Look at something on the Expression Wall and add to it, riff on it. Use it for inspiration, to create something new. Add it to the wall. Attribute or thank the inspiration. Ferlinghetti said, “The best writing is what’s right in front of you. Sometimes, I’d walk down the street with poets and they wouldn’t see anything. I’d have to shake their arm and say, ‘Look! Look!’”

HOW TO MAKE AN EXPRESSION WALL

Encourage players to create ephemera, such as doodles, drawings, letters, notes, lists, random thoughts, diary entries, etc. Provide some instructions for specific activities for players who may be stuck (e.g. blind drawing, collaborative drawing, magnetic poetry, etc.)

Designate a specific place in the physical space of the larp for this creative output to be posted. Ensure that it is accessible and recognize that it will become both a high-trafficked area and a place where participants will pause and converse, like a water cooler. Consider the location in terms of blocking passage to other areas, safety, etc.

Begin the Expression Wall with four or five pieces of varying formats, posted by the organizers. Model the pieces in artistic conversation with another by adding to one, doodling, drawing arrows, etc.

Provide supplies such as paper, post-it notes, markers, pencils, paint, glue, scraps of fabric, art supplies, etc. and/or encourage players to bring their own. Be sure to have tape or adhesive that is both approved and functional for the surface you are using.

Model adding something to the Expression Wall toward the beginning of the larp, as a character (or ask specific characters to do it).

Ensure that the Wall is documented as an “exhibit” that captures the experience. No two walls will ever be the same, even if they start with the same pieces.

RESULTS

The Expression Wall became a gathering spot for interaction – both with the art and with other artists. The performance area was adjacent, where anyone could do a spontaneous reading of a poem, demonstration of a dance or painting, sing, rant, play the drums, or announce that a new piece was going on the wall. Sketches and photographs of the performances also emerged. The designated area became a place for “found” story, plot, relationships, and emotions, and many pieces were written or created as a reaction to another piece posted on the wall.

It became a text of the experience. It shifted and changed as the hours went by, growing in both number,

complexity, and intersection of the art. It became a web of the experience that demonstrated mood and relationships among individual characters, characters to an artistic movement, and movements to each other. It also became a map to the story the players had told collaboratively. Key narrative moments were visible in the art. While we saved all individual pieces from the wall, we also had to photograph the wall as the art was posted, as it was a piece of art in and of itself.

FURTHER READING:

nordiclarp.org/wiki/Beat_Generation

NAILED IT!

HOW TO RUN FREEFORM

// Evan Torner

Freeform is a rich and rewarding style of role-playing game that requires no costumes, little preparation, and typically only 1-4 hours of play. The answer to the question “is freeform tabletop role-playing or larp?” is always: “Yes.” It is tabletop role-playing, except rules-light, standing up and moving around. It is larp, except without long weekend commitments or costumes, but with strong scene framing and oral storytelling components. Freeform allows players to depart from their character sheets and engage in emergent physical play, but does not overcommit them to any one specific narrative or physical situation.

Whereas bigger larps are rarely published to be run without the designers being present, freeform scenarios are often available in print or as pdfs. Running this type of larp, which often elicits vulnerability from its players, requires a steady hand and an eye for the overall themes of the piece.

HOW TO READ A FREEFORM SCENARIO

Before you run a freeform scenario, you need to read it. This sounds obvious, but cannot be overstated. Careful reading and re-reading in advance will help a gamemaster avoid major pitfalls and make better decisions on behalf of the players and the larp before, during, and after runtime.

Successful freeform gamemasters *read between the lines*. Scenario texts are not just sets of instructions; they suggest certain styles of play. Does the scenario contain a large number of ingame mechanics? Those will need either extensive workshop time to ensure player knowledge and success in using them, or to be available in the room in a legible format. Is there sparse information about how play should proceed? You will need to come up with a timeline for yourself of what will happen when. The overriding question while reading should always be: “*How can I enable players to successfully play this scenario as it is designed?*” An early and insightful read lets you enthusiastically commit yourself to the larp.

First: Read it through quickly from cover to cover to answer for yourself the following questions:

- What are the overarching themes of this scenario?
- How will I guide the players?
- How long should each part of it run?
- What do I need to provide?
- Is there anything missing from the materials that I may have to supplement or provide in addition?
- Do I need to adjust anything due to the local play culture or the physical environment?

Second: Think of some provisional answers and then *read through the scenario slowly a second time*, making notes in the margins. Write down a *checklist for yourself* that should contain the following:

Materials you need

- How long you want to spend on each segment of the larp
- The order of your tasks
- What players will need to know when
- What behaviors you want to encourage

This process of reading can be trickier than it appears. Sometimes an author will conceal an important detail in a non-obvious part of the text, or will make cultural assumptions about players that won't work with yours. Sometimes the stated length of the scenario is nowhere near the time you think you'll need to run it. Look for those cues in the text and intuit how it'll work out. Remember, too, that your players may surprise you, no matter what you think about how the text will play out. That is perfectly normal.

RUNNING FREEFORM

Now you are ready to run the scenario. You are the gamemaster, and thus *possess absolute authority over what happens*. The players know nothing and have trusted you with their time for the duration of play. For every question they may have, you will have an answer. Your certainty and confidence about the scenario are crucial to its success. Despite all author intentions, the piece is now yours. Your passion and quiet enthusiasm will embolden your players to further explore the nuances of the scenario.

Gamemasters run the scenario, coach players, and direct and pace the action. Running the scenario means implementing its rules within the time, space,

and player culture provided. Coaching the players means consciously supporting their play so that they are able to rise to the full realization of the larp or, at least, can enjoy an interesting and provocative experience. Directing the action means explicitly intervening in scenes if and when players seem lost, or are radically diverging from the most basic intent of the scenario. Each of these tasks requires making demands of the players. Broadcast these demands clearly and you will receive better questions, feedback, and overall play from your players.

SET UP

It is your responsibility to set up the space and materials for the play, as well as keep time. Whereas space and materials are obvious, what we mean by “keep time” is also crucial: A gamemaster is responsible for the length of time a scenario runs. *Keeping track of time is your most important job.* Make sure you have the time you need, or adjust the scenario accordingly.

Come to the space with all the necessary materials at least 15 minutes early. Arrange player-facing materials on a table, and ideally put the character names and/or structure of the larp on a board or wall for all to see. Arrange the furniture. If the gameplay requires lots of movement, make sure there’s open space. If it requires specific distinct locations, set up chairs, tables, and materials so that they can be distinguished from each other. Remove extraneous furniture or materials from the space, if possible. Anything that’s in the space will likely be used.

The action and requirements of a scenario constantly *transform the space* of a freeform room. Use your imagination and make the space physically evocative. Understand the room you are in, using the five senses: hearing, vision, taste, smell, touch. Does the scenario require music? When and at what volume? What lines of sight are there? How light or dark should the room be? Can players still read their character sheets? Is there food? Food should either be thematically appropriate or placed in an out of character area. *Resan* (Sweden, 2010, Eng. The Journey) is a freeform about starvation, and having a full pizza nearby would be disruptive.

A topographical understanding of the room means being aware of how the room is laid out and how it affects the story. *Det sidste eventyr* (2013, Denmark, Eng. The Last Adventure), for example, has the gamemaster map a whole fantasy world onto the room. A player standing in one section may be in a jungle, whereas another part of the room may be a cave. Show these diegetic facts to your players with your own body, or label them clearly with tape, furniture, or imagery. Chairs can be configured into prison walls, driver’s seats, inverted tree roots, or any number of fantasies. Tables obstruct lateral movement but can be crawled under, simulating caves or bunkers. Your topographical understanding also includes the four levels: Standing on a chair or elevated surface, standing on the floor, sitting, and crouching or lying on the floor. These human levels can be used well to create new spaces, enhance players’ authority, inhibit their movement, or any

number of factors.

When the players arrive, look them in the eye as you welcome them, point them out to their materials, make yourself available to answer any questions, and otherwise step out of their way so they can focus on the character sheets or whatever else is necessary to get them ready. You are showing them that you trust them to take care of their own needs, and that you respect them and their agency.

Do a round of introductions with everyone's real names. Briefly summarize the experience the players are about to have, so they can renew their consent to play (this also lets those who showed up to the wrong room to find their way out.) Lay out the safety policies of the scenario right up front, and practice any safety or playstyle calibration techniques during the warm-ups. Tell them what to expect in terms of bathroom breaks, the presence or absence of food, and physical accommodations, such as chairs for those who cannot stand up for long periods. De-escalate anxiety or demands on the players' attention. Say you do not expect them always to remember all the rules and would never judge their performance with respect to anyone else's. In the end, you are all just several people in a room willing to create and experience something together.

RUNTIME

Once the warm-ups or workshops are done, running a freeform often means standing back and watching players work through scenes, intervening only when meta-level action is needed: Rules questions, transitions between segments, scene framing. Nevertheless, those moments are critical and require confidence in the larp's themes, an ability to set scenes in motion, and vision regarding the set-up of the room.

Look for what the larp explores. Find the red thread, the intent of the scenario. You should be able to summarize the game to yourself and your players in one sentence. Let that sentence be your guidepost. Knowing what the scenario is about helps you support your players. When players create something that coincides well with the core themes, pick up on it and build. Be an open fan of their characters. When players reach key turning points in the game, do what is necessary. If it involves a surprise or twist, keep a straight face and make the reveal explicit and dramatic. If it involves the execution of one of the characters, prepare the player to lose that character. And so on. In those key moments, *clearly present the players' options.*

Sometimes a gamemaster will have to *directly set scenes for the group.* The first and foremost are the dramatic basics: Who is present among the characters? Where are they and why are they there? What conflicts are present? Announce these in an unambiguous fashion: "Gisela and Javier are in a backroom of the bar, and Javier has just learned she swindled him of money." Clarity of communication sets the scene better than any additional flavour text. If there are any new mechanics or rules for the scene, note them clearly, especially if they pertain

to when the scene ends: “The scene ends when someone rings the bell.” Players not in the scene will stand over by you and watch the drama unfold. Ensure that there is activity for the players in the scene to do, even if their character is just sitting off in a corner. Their bodies in relation to each other will communicate volumes: Are they standing in a line? Are they crouching? Are they in a physical or metaphysical space? Have them use their bodies in the space to set the scene.

Once you have run the scenario, transition into a short de-roling and debriefing session before the players return to the real world. Implement a scenario’s post-game procedures as written. If it has none, however, improvise a debrief from materials in this book. Make sure you *always end the run early enough to debrief*. Finally, *make sure you reset the room to its original state*.

PROBLEM SOLVING

Many freeform scenarios contain content that may cross a certain boundary of psychological or physical comfort for the players. Moreover, not all scenarios are written well or have taken all possible runtime outcomes into account. What do you do with the scenario that casually introduces unavoidable sexual assault of the characters in Act II, or which involves actual headbutting in a dark room to resolve conflicts?

Be transparent about what to expect from a scenario. Clearly broadcast what story elements and player interactions are included. If the scenario has a twist or a lot of hidden surprises, include language that elegantly hints at them being present. Certain genres bring certain expectations with them: horror games presume characters will be endangered and likely killed; kitchen-sink dramas presume there will be intense family conversations and unresolved emotions. Any content beyond that horizon of expectation works well only if players continue to express consent. Acknowledge any challenging or problematic content with your players and work with them to look it in the face.

Modern freeform scenarios often have appropriate opt-out and calibration mechanics built into their structure. Nevertheless, it is important for the gamemaster to emphasize the use of safety and calibration mechanics. As players can sometimes be too immersed to remember to use them, it is the gamemaster responsibility to both have the players try the safety mechanics in the workshops and warmups, and proactively encourage their use during runtime.

HOW TO RUN EDULARP

// Josefin Westborg

Edularp, short for educational larp, is about using larp as a method for learning. It is based on the idea that one can learn something through doing it and living it instead of just reading about it. Specifically for role-play, the idea is that playing a character will help the player take another perspective. Of course, players learn something from every larp they play, but educational larps are designed to focus on a specific learning goal – the designers are attempting to teach a specific thing.

Edularp is most commonly used as an introduction to a subject, as a way to work with the subject, or a way to put your previous knowledge to use in another context. It is particularly good for learning from the constructivist and sociocultural perspectives, where learning is viewed as something that happens in the social exchange and when learners get to do and try out something themselves. If you want to teach all the capitals of the world, larp might not be the best tool. But if you want students to explore the mechanics behind a power structure it can be great.

One of the biggest assets of edularp is the *alibi* participants get from playing a character. Pretending together to be other people gives agency to try out new things and take up new social roles and positions in the group. Edularp also provides fresh perspectives both from the character the player portrays and from the interaction with the other characters. To be part of an edularp gives a reference since the player actually experiences something in their body, while the larp also gives a vicarious experience. The participants can bring the experience out of the larp and see the real world in a new way. Larp is also good because everyone is participating and there is no external audience. It is about experiencing something together.

FRAMING THE LEARNING

While we can learn many things just playing a larp, if you want your participants to learn a specific thing, you have to facilitate their learning process. Learning new things requires effort and participants may resist it since it can be taxing even when it is fun. That means you need to frame the experience so that the

intended learning can come through.

One important way to do this is through having a reflective debrief where you talk about the experience after the runtime. This consists of three parts. First, you should *validate* the experience. This is done by talking about the experience, letting people share their story and hearing others. Second, you *create understanding*. This is about clearing up any misunderstandings that might have happened in the larp both between players and about the content. Maybe you conducted a vote, but it was rigged to make a certain point; maybe you took artistic freedom about the historical accuracy. Such things should be cleared up. Finally, you *contextualize*. This is where you take the learning experience and connect it to the real world. This works best if you connect back to the participants' experiences to make them relevant.

Part of the framing is understanding the target audience. Who is playing this larp? Is it adults or children? Is it experienced larpers or beginners? Have the participants volunteered to play or was the larp mandatory for them?

Edularps are, for example, often used in formal education. That means running the larp for participants who are new to larp, and who did not choose to join but had to, as a mandatory part of their education. Such participants do not know what is expected of them, and can resist just because they have not chosen to be there.

If your target audience is very young it might be very easy for them to larp since they are used to playing, but if they are teenagers they may be hesitant to do anything that could be seen as embarrassing or childish.

RUNTIME TIPS

Gamemastering an edularp is similar to running any other larp, but there are some additional aspects to consider.

THE OFFGAME SITUATION

When you are new to larp and do not know what to do, the most common reaction is to step out of the game – to go out of character. This becomes a problem when dealing with a large group of new players. If you have sufficient *herd competence*, i.e. the majority of the group knows what to do, the others will mostly follow along. But when the first-timers are the majority, your best bet is to lead by example: stay in character yourself. Keep playing, and signal extremely clearly in your interactions that you are still in character. This will bring the players back into the fiction.

RESPONSIBILITY AS A TOOL

The opposite challenge is that some excited and energetic players dominate in the group and take up most of your runtime gamemaster time. A good way to

deal with this is to give them some specific responsibilities. This makes them feel special and important, encourages them to play along, and helps to keep the other players in game as well.

COMMUNICATING ABOUT OFFGAME THINGS

Some first-time larpers get very nervous when they do not know if they are allowed to go offgame or not. Others go in the opposite direction and purposefully try to break or even destroy the game for the rest of the group. A practical way to handle this is to give them a cue to use during runtime to signal offgame communication. “I would like to speak with you alone,” is a good cue. When somebody says this, you will follow them to the side so as not to disturb the other players and quietly handle the offgame communication. You can use the same cue to give them information, such as secrets to play on; or to ask them whether they would like to be part of a specific scene.

When explaining this, make it very clear that they should follow even if it does not make sense for their character – and that the same applies to you if they say this to you. The cue can also be used to take someone who is actively disturbing the larp, out of play for a moment. A lot of the times it can be enough to say “I see that you are really in character, but I need you to tone it down a bit, because it is taking too much focus from the others’ experience. Can you do that for me?” Then they know that you see what they are doing and will stop. But you can also have a more serious talk with them if needed, without having to do it in front of everyone else, which would make it a prestige issue.

LOSS OF FACE

The fear of losing face affects both teenagers and adults. Most commonly this means being afraid of looking stupid in front of others – or about performance anxiety. One way to handle this is by easing the participants in. Tell them that role-playing will take place, but not yet. Then lead them in a workshop, and at the end make them play small scenes. Later you can tell them that they have already role-played and that nothing they will do from here on will be worse than what they have already done.

PLAYERS DOING SURPRISING THINGS

Players at a larp will always do unexpected things. However, beginners think differently than experienced players do, and they will do different kinds of strange things as they are not used to reading the flow of the gameplay. You need to be aware of this in the back of your mind – preparing for it in any specific way is hard, but knowing that it probably will happen helps you deal with it when it does.

In conclusion, edularps are a great tool for learning. They can be time-consuming to design, but make up for it by being strong experiences. Running an edularp is not the same thing as running a leisure larp. You need to think about how you frame and design the learning experience just as much as the larp itself. You will deal with beginners and people who did not choose to play. Even so, you can create fantastic experiences that the participants will remember for a long time – and have the chance to introduce new people to the wonderful world of larp.

AFTER RUNTIME

The runtime of your larp ends; the participants step out of character, laughing, crying, quiet, happy, or indifferent. Perhaps everyone has ended their play at the same time. Perhaps your larp allows them to wrap up their stories at different times. At some point, no one is in character anymore, and the runtime has ended. Your larp has not.

In the period that follows, the participants will process their character's stories into a narrative, forgetting or downplaying many parts of their play experience in the process. They will talk to each other about the experience and negotiate some kind of common understanding of what your larp was like, what it was about, what diegetically happened, and whether your event was a success.

Most importantly, the participants will assign meanings to the actions they performed during the larp. In our culture, fiction does not count. Decisions and choices made while portraying a character do not reflect on the player; actions performed within a fictional frame are in some sense not performed by the participant. At the same time, the character's experiences are those of your player. They have experienced the character's emotions within their bodies, moved as them through physical and social worlds that were fictional, but present all the same. What happens in larps is not true, but quite a lot of it is real. After the runtime has ended, all of these experiences will be sorted into boxes and labelled as more or less relevant to the life experience of your participants.

In character, the players have looked at each other and seen friends, family members, lovers, colleagues, adversaries. Many larps are constructed around dynamics of belonging, and when

the fiction ceases, it is normal and common to feel a sense of sadness as the collective disappears. What often remains, is a sense of trust in the co-players, because playing together is complicated and exciting to have succeeded in together. This free-floating trust can feel awkward, strange, and alienating – or rapidly transform into warm acquaintances and meaningful friendships between people who might never have met in another context. A good outcome requires, at the very least, for the players to have the opportunity to interact as themselves without the mask of the character.

All of these processes will happen whether you design them or not, but as Maury Brown writes in this section, you can facilitate and guide them by making active choices. This will benefit the participants, particularly so if you design very impactful larps. It will also benefit you, as the post-play period is where the memories of your larp, and ultimately its reputation, take shape.

Because your impact on this process is very strong, learning about the strengths and weaknesses of your work is not as straightforward as just asking the participants how you did. Sometimes you still need answers from them; Annika Waern discusses how best to go about it.

POST-PLAY ACTIVITIES

// Maury Elizabeth Brown

Post-Play Activities is an umbrella term that covers all portions of a larp's design that occur after the runtime has ended. Just as designers must pay attention to how participants are onboarded to the experience, post-play activities seek to ensure a clear transition from the fictional frame of the larp back to everyday reality, roles, and relationships. The period just after the runtime is also where participants organise their first-person experiences into coherent narratives, both individually and as a group. Much of what the participants will remember and feel about the experience is decided here.

The type, duration, and facilitation of post-play activities should be an integrated part of the design of your larp as a whole. A four-hour, light-hearted larp about comic book characters requires different post-play design than a four-day experience that interrogates social problems. Regardless of what kind of larp you're making, post-play design should not be forgotten. The processes following the runtime – narrating the experience, leaving the character, sorting through any lingering emotions, reconnecting with the other players out of character – are an inevitable part of the larp experience. As they will occur whether or not you design their framing and facilitation, integrating post-play activities into your design is good practice. It will support participants and your team in processing the experience and achieving a sense of closure.

When considering which post-play activities to incorporate, you need to answer two fundamental questions:

1. What do players of this larp need, due to its content?
2. What do players as human beings need, after their larp experience?

Post-play activities should be selected based on the aesthetics, design goals, and logistics of a game, as well as players' needs. Multiple types of post-play activities may be offered, either in succession, or as alternatives. As larps are different, and players have different needs, it can be a valid choice to offer optional debriefing, or even no structured post-play experience at all – as long as it is a choice, makes sense in your overall design, and meets the players' needs.

THE PURPOSE OF POST-PLAY ACTIVITIES

Post-play activities provide the space for participants to process an experience, to resolve intellectual, emotional, or psychological thoughts and feelings, and to exit the headspace of a character. Unresolved feelings from an intense experience can contribute to *post-larp blues* (sometimes known as post-larp “depression”) or *larp drop* (analogous with *con drop*), a melancholia brought on by the contrast between the mindful, intentional and socially connected play experience and the participant’s everyday life. Reflecting on the transition in and out of character will also help the participants process *bleed*, the phenomenon when the emotions experienced in character affect the player. (For more on the post-larp blues, see Sarah Lynne Bowman and Evan Torner in the Further Reading section below; it also lists many resources for post-play design).

Without the support of a structured post-play process, players may experience some kinds of bleed more strongly and more negatively than they otherwise would – for instance what Eirik Fatland calls a “moral hangover” from playing a villain. Special care should be taken with residual emotions from fictional relationships or social dynamics, which left unresolved can accelerate or even cause interpersonal conflict in the player community. Players might also have conflicts or problems completely unrelated to the play experience or your design, for which you have no responsibility. When these emerge or are intensified through play, they become your problem, and reasonable for you to try to resolve if possible. In the post-runtime phase, emotions are raw, and any negative or overwhelming feelings can end up being blamed on you or your larp design.

There are three main goals to post-play activities: reconnection, reflection, and recuperation, all achievable through designed activities.

- Players *reconnect* with their primary identity, and leave behind the role of their character. They reconnect with others as their primary selves, and not as characters.
- Players *reflect* on their experience, considering what surprised them, what they may have learned or felt, and give name to these feelings. They process their memories and emotions with others who have been through the same experience, establishing a shared sense of understanding.
- Players *recuperate* from the intensity of the experience with self-care and care for others. This helps ground the participants in their bodies and their real lives.

HALLMARKS OF POST-PLAY ACTIVITIES

All post-play activities should be specifically designed (or selected) and facilitated for the event you are running, and you should schedule adequate and unencumbered time for post-play activities to take place.

In addition, it is good practice to design your post-larp process so that everyone is expected to participate, but no one is required to, making post-play activities opt-out rather than opt-in. Ideally, all players participate, but choosing not to attend for whatever reason should be respected without pressure. You should also offer participants who are present the choice to opt out of specific exercises, no questions asked. If the space and social situation allows them to stay in the room, you can invite them to do so quietly; for instance, participants who do not feel like talking in small groups can still reflect individually on the prompts provided by the facilitator.

Participants who do not participate in structured post-play activities should be encouraged to create their own, such as informal debriefing with trusted friends or co-players, resting, socialising, or alone time.

TYPES OF POST-PLAY ACTIVITIES

Post-play activities fall into four general categories:

1. Larp Wrap or Epilogue
2. De-roling
3. Debriefing
4. Decompression

LARP WRAP OR EPILOGUE

Larp wrap or epilogue is time to close the fictional narrative. At their simplest, these post-play activities give participants time to narrate how a character ended an experience and sometimes also what they do next. Designers and participants can reveal any secrets that were left unexplored, and individuals or the group can create a sense of closure and intensify the shared experience.

If you do not provide a structure for this, players will do it anyway – often the narrating of one’s experience starts at the moment the larp ends, as players turn to each other and share what their character was doing or feeling at the very end, or retell some shared moment and what it meant in the context of their character’s story. It will also continue as players socialise later, both in person and online.

Providing some time and perhaps a structure for telling these stories – briefly! – in small groups can still be valuable. The character’s journey will be top of mind at the end of the larp, and players may feel a need to get some of the narration out of their system before being able to move on to other parts of the post-play process.

As Bowman and Torner have discussed, narrating one’s larp experience orders and makes sense out of chaos, including going back and attributing motivation or logic to choices that were made impulsively at the time. Through personal narration and piecing together the stories of others, a player gains a mastery over

their experience.

This post-play activity can begin the de-roling process as well, as it encourages participants to consider their characters in the third person and to activate their analytical and reasoning capacities, which helps create a sense of distance from the character.

In these activities, individual participant stories are validated by their peers and connected to the wider frame of the shared event. The player's experience will feel more real and epic due to the positive responses of others, which increases feelings of community and personal esteem. Participating helps players feel more comfortable with their personal experience and allows them to see other sides of the larp.

Some players will feel a need to write an epilogue for their character in the days after the larp; you can encourage this and provide a place online to share them. You should also be aware that for some players, the character's story ends with the runtime, and they see no reason to speculate about what might have happened later. Be careful as you design post-play activities on site and online to allow both kinds of participants to feel validated.

DE-ROLING

De-roling is the conscious and often ritualised process of setting aside the character and re-affirming one's self or primary identity as distinct from the character.

De-roling post-play activities are helpful for leaving behind the world of the fiction and the headspace of the character, and for making a comfortable transition to reality. They separate the roleplay experience from everyday identity and reality, and help players reclaim or reunite with their own identities or ego. De-roling is especially important when playing intense roles or after engaging in transgressive play.

Benefits of de-roling include:

- Helping players control their exit from the larp and create a slow landing after the experience.
- Reinforce the boundary between player and character by distancing one self from any negative traits or emotions that were embodied in character, and claiming any positive traits or emotions that were experienced in character.
- Transferring what is felt viscerally through the embodiment of character to what is known and remembered intellectually (from the body to the mind) through reflection and analysis.
- Definitively signaling that the roleplay experience is over.
- Allowing players to interact as themselves in a facilitated space.

De-roling activities usually fall into one of three types: Establishing *physical (bodily*

or spatial) distance, establishing *psychological distance*, and *ritualised demarcation*. Some examples of de-roling activities include:

- Body movements, such as shaking each limb or the entire body to “shake-off” the character or changing one’s posture to the player’s usual posture and gait.
- Change of physical location: Or “gating,” involves moving players from the space where the event or roleplay happened to another space as a signal for shifting out of character. This can also be done by changing the environment, such as turning on the lights, opening curtains, removing decor, or the like.
- Counting out of character. A facilitator asks participants to close their eyes and uses their voice to count backwards, guiding players out of character and back to their primary identities, sometimes accompanied by meditative background music.
- Cool-down exercises such as dance, music, meditation, walking, or talking in third person about the character, or getting snacks or drinks.
- Taking off the name tag is a type of ritualised “disrobing” activity in which a facilitator asks all participants to remove their name tags, and replace with a player name tag, if available, and to state “I was [character name]. I am [player name].”
- Taking off a costume item. An item that particularly embodied a character, such as a hat, brooch, watch, gloves, etc. can be removed and set aside, marking the removal of the role.
- Take with, leave behind. A facilitator asks participants if there is an aspect of their character that they would like to claim, and/or an aspect of their character they wish to reject. This can be especially helpful for those who have played villains or whose character experienced something difficult, or if a player experienced something powerful or liberating as their character.
- Positive Feedback Round or Appreciations. Having participants express gratitude to another player or to the designers for aspects of the experience facilitates third-person speaking, thinking about the experience in the past, intellectualising the experience, and moving the focus to another.

DEBRIEFING

In Elin Dalstål’s definition, larp debriefing refers to “structured conversation held after a larp ends about the larp that just ended” with the purpose of “helping players articulate and deal with difficult emotions, thoughts or relationships that arose in the larp.” In addition, debriefing is a transitional period between the fiction of the larp and everyday reality that, as Brodie Atwater explains in his

article 'We need to talk', "lets players reinforce the social bonds that allow play and reflect on their own actions."

Larp debriefs, where participants contextualise a powerful experience, should not be confused with debriefs after traumatic events, which have therapeutic goals. Emotions experienced during a larp can be surprising or new, but they are not traumatic: If a participant experiences something traumatising at your event, they will need professional help, just as they would in case of a physical injury. Debriefs are not designed to deal with the emotional fallout of real-life mental or physical emergencies, only emotions stemming from play.

The purposes of larp debriefs are:

1. To provide the opportunity for participants' voices to be heard and to have their larp experience validated by their co-players.
2. To begin processing the larp, moving from the immediate experience and emotions into memories, reflections, and learning.
3. To provide a space for others to become aware of anything particularly challenging that a player experienced, and to take steps towards processing it.

The debrief in collaborative larp usually takes the form of structured and facilitated conversation exercises, using guidelines that help create a welcoming environment and ensure everyone has a chance to speak and be heard. It is usually conducted in small groups with participants in a circle. Through a series of open-ended questions that encourage players to reflect on and identify strong moments and emotions, debriefing helps players express and process emotions, thoughts, or social connections that arose in the larp.

Benefits of debriefing:

- Normalises having emotions after a roleplay experience and provides a safe space for them to be expressed.
- Facilitates processing difficult scenes or interactions, regrets for expectations that were not met or choices that were made during play to allow for the release of negative or overwhelming emotions.
- Facilitates separation from in-character feelings of attachment or animosity.
- Reaffirms character alibi by attributing actions and feelings relating to character conflict to the character and not the player.
- Fosters an open, trusting, and supportive culture among players.

The responsibility players have to treat each other with respect and compassion

does not end with the runtime. Special care should be taken with participants whose characters participated in socially excluding, snubbing, bullying, harassing, abusing, or depriving another character of any basic needs during the larp. It is often at least as emotionally taxing to portray an oppressor as it is to portray a victim. But just after the larp, the person who played the oppressed character may not have the bandwidth to reflect on the emotions of the other parties. Likewise, the person who played the oppressor might be feeling unreflected guilt for their fictional actions, blocking them from asking for support they might need.

Encourage players to check in after the runtime with everyone with whom they have played out a conflict. If a player is not able to do this personally for whatever reason, ask them to describe the scene they have in mind to a team member or another player to make sure someone can check in with the other participants.

If your larp engages with conflict or power imbalances – and most do – it is ultimately your responsibility to create a structure where all players and NPCs (as well as any team members who might have portrayed characters during runtime) will be seen and validated as themselves after the runtime and asked about their needs.

DEBRIEFING OPEN-ENDED QUESTION SUGGESTIONS

The following questions are from Learn Larp Studios' debriefing template. It was developed with consultation of Martin Eckhoff Andresen's and Lizzie Stark's articles that you can find under Further Reading, below. These questions are not prescriptive or exhaustive, nor do they all need to be used. They can be selected from or used to serve as inspiration for your own reflective questions to fit your larp.

1. Do you have any burning feelings that you need to get off your chest?
2. What was your most intense moment? Why?
3. What was your most difficult moment or difficult part of the experience?
What did you do?
4. What interested you the most during this experience?
5. What was your most positive moment during the larp?
6. What was your most negative moment during the larp?
7. Does this larp have any parallels to real-world reality or situations?
8. What is your strongest impression that you will take away from the larp?
9. What surprised you about the larp, your performance, or the experience?
10. If you could go back in time and change something in the larp, would you?
If so, what would it be?
11. If you could give your character a piece of advice, what would it be?
12. If your character could give you a piece of advice, what would it be?

DECOMPRESSION

Decompression is an umbrella term that refers to the process of attending to one's needs and to each other after powerful experiences. Decompression can include being alone or quiet, sharing the experience with another, hydrating and eating, resting or sleeping, getting a change of scenery to reset the brain, taking a smoke or vape break, sitting quietly, getting exercise, showering, hugs, cuddles, huddling under a blanket, or other ways of expressing kindness to oneself and each other.

Often decompression will involve participants caring for their own needs, but you can enable and encourage them to do so by scheduling time for snacks, showers and other basic needs, as well as time when they are not expected to do anything in particular. Most players will then gravitate towards whatever they need the most.

Such breaks are an important part of your post-play design. Even if you prescribe no other formal activities, you can still schedule a break between the end of the runtime and the start of an out-of-character after-party. This further allows for distance from character to player, as they can reappear at the after-party in out-of-character clothes, voice, and mannerisms.

An after-party is a post-play experience designed by the organisers that allows participants to get together to celebrate, mingle, and share their experiences. They are often at the site of the larp, but sometimes are held at a nearby venue. A different place for the after-party reinforces the shift from runtime to post-play.

Benefits of an After-Party:

- Ends an experience on a high note.
- Encourages participants to get to know each other outside of the roles they have played and allows them to transform the trust they innately feel from having shared an experience into real-world social relationships.
- Provide an environment for continued de-roling, informal debriefing, and appreciations.
- Serves as a cleansing of the physical and emotional discomfort of play by renewing and supporting participants.

Design Principles for an After-Party

Ideally, the after-party takes place in a space that comfortably holds all participants with the ability for people to gather in small groups.

- *Inclusive:* Create an open after-party that all participants can attend

if they choose. Put some thought into the atmosphere, tone, and potential activities. If you do not design the party, players will default to familiar patterns. This might reinforce pre-existing out of character social hierarchies and cliques and leave some participants isolated; go in a direction you were not hoping for (for instance, participants dealing with adrenaline from an exciting final battle by drinking heavily); or having participants rehash in-character jokes and social dynamics instead of moving forward with getting to know each other for real.

- *Accessible:* Take care to ensure that there are spaces that are more private or quiet for participants who experience sensory overload, have hearing problems, or just want to talk more intimately. Be certain you have enough seating for participants, and that the event space is accessible to participants with mobility difficulties.
- *Safe:* Remind participants of conduct guidelines and to look out for each other. Have a designated no alcohol space for people who choose not to drink or don't want to be around others who are drinking.

FURTHER READING

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HOW TO GATHER FEEDBACK FROM PLAYERS

// Annika Waern

It's becoming increasingly common for larp-makers to ask for some kind of participant feedback after a larp. There are many good reasons to do so, as well as some reasons that might be less good. This chapter is about why we ask for larper feedback, and depending on the reasons, how to do it and what questions to ask.

Gathering feedback after a larp can be a very useful way to learn. It may help you improve the larp for the next run, as well as help you improve your designer and organiser skills. But gathering feedback also means work, for you as well as for your players. It makes sense to make a cost-benefit analysis before gathering feedback: What will I learn from this? Which methods should I use? Plan your feedback carefully, and you will save time for yourselves as well as for the players.

Most design teams would probably say that they ask for feedback because they are interested in what people thought of the larp. But is this really reason enough to pester the participants with post-game interviews, surveys, and what-not? When asking for feedback, you are using their time and tapping into their own design skills – make sure that it matters!

Be honest to yourself and your team. Below are some good, and some less good, reasons for collecting feedback.

- 1) “We want to understand what worked and what didn't, so that we can improve the larp for the next run/design the next larp better.” This is the most constructive reason to collect feedback. It places players at the centre and makes them co-designers of the experience for future players. It is also the kind of feedback that is the hardest to get: you do not just want people to review your larp but give you details on what worked, and what didn't.
- 2) “We want to hear what players say when we, the organisers, are not present.” Most players are kind. This sometimes makes it hard to give negative feedback. Collecting feedback anonymously helps a bit, even if most players will still be reluctant to express very negative reactions.

3) “We want to know if they liked it and will come back, and perhaps bring some friends.” If you are a larp professional or otherwise keep making similar larps over and over again, your main reason will most likely be this one. If it is, you should do an anonymous customer satisfaction survey; more on this below.

4) “We want to bask in positive affirmation.” Organisers, especially volunteers, are often physically and emotionally drained after a production. Positive feedback is one way of recharging their batteries. This is a good reason to ask for the players’ stories and key moments, but not a good reason to ask for honest feedback! If negative feedback would crush you and make you never want to organise another larp, better not ask for feedback at all.

5) “We want to control the post-larp narrative.” This is a sneaky but sometimes important reason to ask for post-larp feedback. By asking specific questions about the larp, you put the idea into the heads of participants that these were the important aspects of the production. For example, if your larp was played in an exquisite venue but the larp characters poorly written, you can include several questions about the venue and few, if any, about the characters. If the larp was really bad, asking for post-larp feedback can become a form of damage control as it lets players let off steam in a controlled manner.

6) “All larps have feedback forms, so we also want one to look professional.” This is not a good reason to gather feedback. Gather feedback because you need to and are able to use it, not because it makes you look good.

POST-LARP IN-PERSON FEEDBACK IN GROUPS

Advantages	Disadvantages
<i>Most players will take the time to participate</i>	<i>Players will not have completed their post-larp processing</i>
<i>Can be done very quickly</i>	<i>The group will affect what people say</i>
	<i>Some people will talk much more than others</i>

The simplest way to gather post-larp feedback is to sit down with the players directly afterwards to ask them about their experience. This method is particularly useful when the larp is short, for example a chamber-larp played at a festival.

Important considerations for group feedback

- Don't mix the feedback round (which is for you) with the post-larp debrief (which is for the participants). Make sure that the feedback round is clearly separated from the debrief.
- Communicate an overall schedule for what happens after the larp to the players. Stay on time.
- Tell the players why you are collecting feedback. Thank them afterwards.
- Make sure that the feedback round is truly voluntary, and make it easy to opt out. It is a good idea to take a short break between the debrief and the feedback round, during which people can leave.
- Make sure to distribute speaking time so that all get to talk. If you have a large group of players, it is good to break up into smaller groups. The optimal size for a feedback group is 5-10, and it is difficult to do if there are more than 15 players present.
- During the whole feedback, you need a helper who takes *extensive* notes; this cannot be the person who organises the feedback round. If you have no person to do this, ask the participants if you can record the session.
- Consider carefully who will be running the feedback round. Players may be intimidated if a key designer or organiser is present. On the other hand, players may really want to talk to those people! Whether your feedback crew is part of the design team or not, find people for this role that know how to encourage the players to speak up and be honest, and who make them feel respected.

A MINIMAL POST-LARP FEEDBACK ROUND

1. Start by asking the players to sit silently for a while and think about what they want to say. Give them two questions to think about: "What worked well?" "What worked less well?"
2. Go around the circle and let everyone say something. You can ask the others to participate in silence by waving their hands in deaf applause if they had the same experience.
3. You may continue by asking specific questions about things you want feedback about. These should have been prepared in advance. Start with open questions that people answer by comments (ask people to raise their hand if they want to answer). End with simple yes/no questions that people can vote for by raising their hands.
4. Thank the players for their feedback.

A POST-IT METHOD FOR POST-LARP FEEDBACK ROUND

This is a slightly more elaborate method that can be used to avoid players influencing each other too much. It requires more time per participant and is not suitable for groups larger than ten persons.

1. Hand out post-it notes and pens. Start by asking the players to sit silently for a while and write down answers to the same two questions: “What worked well?” “What worked less well?” Answers can be anonymous but need not be so. Ask them to write only one answer on each post-it note, and tell them that you will collect the notes.
2. Let the moderator (a team member or possibly a participant you have asked the players to select among them) group the post-it into groups of similar comments.
3. Discuss one group of post-its at a time.
 - a. The moderator first reads all of them aloud.
 - b. Let players analyse them together, focusing on the questions such as ‘why did this happen?’ The moderator keeps track of speakers so that all get to speak.
 - c. If you are doing this in several separate groups, have one player take notes and prepare for presenting the discussion for the other groups.
4. If you had break-out groups, make sure to reconvene before ending the feedback session.
 - a. Keep group presentations short.
 - b. Since this feedback method is not suitable for asking more specific questions, the organisers may want to end by asking a few specific questions to the players. Avoid this if it is not absolutely necessary and keep it to a minimum; this is already quite a long exercise!
5. End by thanking the players.

ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRES

Advantages	Disadvantages
<i>Players fill it in when they are ready to do so, at their own convenience</i>	<i>Not all players will respond. The larger the larp, the higher the risk for low response rates.</i>
<i>You are in full control of the questions</i>	<i>The form needs to be short (answerable in less than 15 minutes)</i>
	<i>Answers will be coloured by what players have already heard from other players</i>

It is becoming increasingly common for larger larps to use online questionnaires as their main way of gathering feedback. The main reason is probably that these are fairly easy to produce as you don't need to plan for a feedback round on-site. They also present less of a burden on players, as they will not need to produce analytical feedback while they are tired and still emotional from the larp experience.

Important considerations for questionnaires:

- Limit the number of questions, but make it possible for people who want to give extensive feedback to do so. A questionnaire should be answerable in ten minutes while also allowing people to write as much as they want.
- Make sure to ask about the specific things that you are most curious about. But don't ask specifically for everything you can think of!
- Test-run your questionnaire. Ask somebody to fill it in before you send it out to players. Check language and wording – is it possible to understand what you are asking for?
- Some online questionnaire tools can time out. If players write long answers to questions, the player will lose all feedback they have written at a timeout. If your tool is likely to do this, warn players about it in your questions!

A BASIC QUESTIONNAIRE STRUCTURE

1. *Introduction:* This is a short text informing about the purpose of the feedback form and why the player has been asked to fill it in. Emphasise that this is voluntary. Provide information about how data is stored and used, if relevant.

2. *Demographics*: This section collects information about the respondent's name, age, character, home country, gender, previous larp experience, etcetera. It can be placed first or last. If this section is short, it is better to have it first, but if it is long and has many optional questions (which should rarely be the case), it is better to place it at the end of the survey.

- If you want to do an anonymous survey, avoid asking for, or make it optional to fill in, any information that could be used to identify the player. This includes things such as address, email, or phone number, character name or any ingame information or experience that was limited to a very small group of players.
- If your survey is not anonymous, you should still make it optional to fill in information that can identify the respondent or can be considered sensitive.
- If your survey is not anonymous, make sure to *GDPR-secure* your survey. Among other things, this involves telling your participants how you will handle the data, why the survey is done, and for how long the data will be kept.
- Keep this part short. Don't ask for information that you won't be using in your analysis.
- If you are sending the same survey out to players from different runs, remember to ask which run they participated in.

3. Full text questions that encourage players to "review" the larp. These are the questions that most players will like answering. Give them the opportunity to write long texts here. Use questions that encourage some concrete feedback here, rather than just rating the larp as 'good.' One option is to use the same basic questions suggested above for onsite debriefs.

- "What worked well in this larp?"
- "What could be improved?"

You may also want to ask for larp experiences, with questions such as:

- Tell us about your most memorable moment in the larp
- Tell us about your least appreciated experience during the larp

Ask each question separately, and give players space to fill in long texts. Make it optional to answer these questions! This is particularly important in anonymous surveys, as detailed answers to these questions very easily convey who has responded.

4. Short questions related to your evaluation goals.

These questions relate to specific issues you really want answers about. For these, it sometimes makes sense to use yes/no questions, scaled questions and checkbox questions (see below). These are fast and easy to respond to, they can be made compulsory, and they do not expose the identity of the respondent.

5. Final open question

End with a final open question such as “Is there something we forgot to ask” or “Do you have some final comments for the organisers?”

TEXT QUESTIONS

Questions that require players to answer in full text are called qualitative questions. They are exciting because they leave open what players may answer. Players may surprise you with answers that you never thought about! But they are a bit difficult to analyse, since you will never know how many players had the same experience. An answer may reflect a very random experience, but it may also be that many players experienced something similar but did not think of writing it down. Text answers also take time to write, and create an accessibility issue. They make it difficult for players to respond if they are not good at writing text or are not fluent in the language of the survey. It's worth noting that qualitative answers need not be text. It could sometimes make sense to ask players to upload drawings or sound files – although these will be even harder to analyse than text answers.

When posing qualitative questions, don't use 'leading' questions. A leading question is one that makes players think in a certain direction: “Tell us everything about the wonderful castle you visited”. Use neutral language such as “Tell us what you thought about the venue”. Also avoid questions that can be answered by yes or no: “Give some feedback on your character description” is a better text question than “Was your character description readable?”

Openly worded text questions also let the players write extensive feedback. Make sure to include at least one very open question, such as “Overall, how did you experience the larp?” Do not limit how much text players can write on such questions.

CHECKBOXES, SCALES AND RANKINGS

Questions that are answered through checkboxes or scales are 'quantitative' questions. They are most useful when you know exactly what you want to ask the players, as they leave no room for surprises: You get exactly the answers you are asking for. They allow players to respond quickly and they allow you, the organiser, to 'count' how many of the players were of a particular opinion. Finally, they do not risk exposing the identity of the respondent. You can also put an open 'Comment' text field under quantitative questions that lets players explain their answers and provide some insight into why the answers were given.

Scaled questions are questions that players answer by giving a number. They can for example be used to ask players to rate some aspect of their experience (see figure 1).

Rate your experience!

	Poor				Good
<i>The overall larp experience</i>	1	2	3	4	5
<i>The food</i>	1	2	3	4	5
<i>The venue</i>	1	2	3	4	5
...	1	2	3	4	5

Figure 1. Rating the experience using scales

Another way to use scaled questions is to let players grade how much they agree with a series of statements. This allows you to ask more precise questions than mere ratings. When formulating statements, make sure that they are both positively and negatively worded. It's inevitable that the wording of statements create bias in much the same way as leading questions. By varying positive and negative wordings, some of that bias is countered. Another advantage of varying the wording is that it makes the statements slightly unpredictable, so that players have to read them more carefully before responding.

How much do you agree with the following statements?

	Disagree				Agree
<i>The character sheet was readable</i>	1	2	3	4	5
<i>It was hard to play my character</i>	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Larping in a castle was a major part of my experience</i>	1	2	3	4	5
...	1	2	3	4	5

Figure 2. Statements to agree or disagree with

Checkboxes (and pure yes/no questions) ask players about things that are either true or false and less a matter of opinion. "Did you attend the ingame funeral ceremony?" is a typical yes/no question. Checkboxes (see figure 3) allow you to ask several yes/no questions in a condensed manner.

Mark which apply to your larp experience:

- I got the character I asked for
- I attended the ingame funeral
- My character died during the larp

Figure 3. Checkboxes

Finally, *rankings* allow players to rate how important or good they thought one thing was in comparison to some other things. You can ask players to rank a full list of items, or select a limited number of items out of a longer list. Rankings are seldom used in feedback questionnaires, and they are also difficult to analyse statistically.

BE CAREFUL!

There are a lot of potential pitfalls when using quantitative questions.

1. Using scaled questions promotes reviewism. Players that are positive overall towards the larp will have a tendency to answer more positively to all scaled questions than those who are negative.
2. If you only use quantitative survey questions, you make it difficult for players to tell you what was most important to them. One way to get around this is to include a ranking question, but it is often better to just start with an open text question before going into the more precise questions.
3. You will have very few surprises. Most of the time you have a pretty good hunch of what the results will be – especially since this hunch probably made you ask these very questions.
4. When the results are surprising, it will be very difficult to figure out why! This is a major reason for including open comment fields beneath scales, rankings and checkbox questions.

ANALYSING SURVEY DATA

Once you have gathered feedback through a survey form, you need to analyse it to figure out what all these answers mean to you, as a designer. When analysing data, you need to keep in mind why you are doing the analysis – go back to the reasons for doing the survey and find the answers to what you are most curious about.

A good way to analyse text answers is to group them together into similar responses. You may for example group all answers related to food together, or

responses that mention a particular ingame event. If the survey uses open questions, it will often be necessary to group answers from multiple places in the survey, as the same reflections often appear as answers to different questions. If you are analysing qualitative responses, the number of similar answers will tell you nothing (especially if the same respondent has repeated an answer in several places), but the (recurring) *themes* will. Where players are divided in their responses, you can dig deeper, go back to the demographic information or investigate what happened during their larp, to see if there are any particular backgrounds or play groups that were problematic. Maybe the larp was confusing to first time larpers? Maybe it was the Orcs that had a bad experience? Qualitative feedback does not give you conclusive evidence that the larp was bad or good overall, but it will very often be useful in order to find out what went wrong or what might need to change.

Quantitative feedback can be deceptive. There is something alluring about numbers that makes them feel more ‘true’ than text feedback. If the average rating of the larp is 4.8 on a scale of 1-5, we probably conclude that it was a rather good larp. If all respondents answer some open questions rather positively, we somehow become less sure of the same thing.

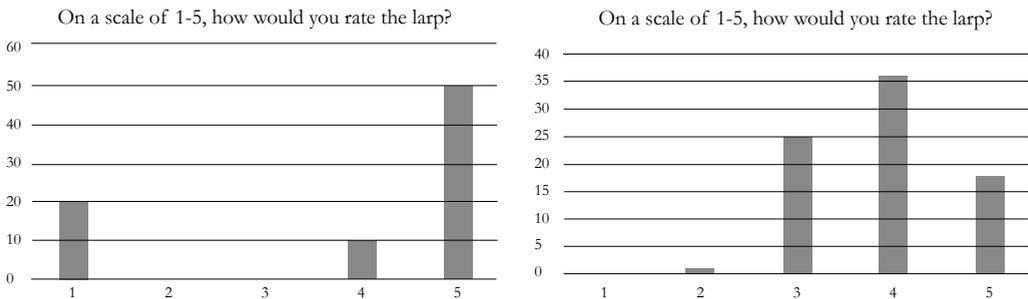


Figure 4. Almost exactly the same average rating (3.9), but which one was the better larp?

Remember that survey feedback doesn’t allow us to draw definite conclusions from either form of data, be it qualitative or quantitative. Since players are reluctant to give negative feedback, scales tend to be skewed so that an average rating is in fact be a rather bad grade. Furthermore, larps aren’t just good or bad: Every participant has a different experience and what is a good larp for one player can be a bad larp for another. An average grade says little if the spread is large (Fig. 4). Finally, larps are complex experiences: they may suck in some respects and still be excellent larps.

There is one particular situation where it makes perfect sense to trust quantitative feedback, and that is when the same questions are asked, over and over again, in many different runs of the same larp (also for different but similar

larps). When the same question is asked over and over again, we can start to compare answers between runs: This run got better responses than the last one. At present, there exists no openly published questionnaire that has been reused sufficiently in multiple productions to become a reliable tool for comparison. Some commercial developers have come close to developing such tools for their own productions. These tend to be ‘customer satisfaction’ surveys rather than surveys that help them improve the larp over time. A customer satisfaction survey is dominated by review questions, and will often contain the marketing department’s favourite: “Would you recommend this larp to a friend?”

It is very easy to make stupid mistakes with statistics, such as placing importance on something that looks like a correlation but turns out to be a completely random result. (For example, if you want to do any statistical analysis of scaled answers, there should be at least five different steps on the scale. This is because the most common statistical methods assume that the scale is continuous, i.e. that players could just as well have responded 4,12394 instead of 4. This introduces an error, but the error is smaller the more steps there are in the scale.) For organisations that collect quantitative feedback on a regular basis, it makes sense to put time into constructing statistically sound surveys and ways of analysing their results.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Advantages	Disadvantages
<i>Extremely rich and detailed information</i>	<i>Only a few players can be reached this way</i>
<i>Interviewer and interviewee collaborate on deciding the scope of the interview</i>	<i>Be prepared to listen to LONG stories about how the larp played out for this particular person</i>

This is when somebody from the organising team (or somebody enrolled by them) sits down with a few, select participants to interview them in depth about their larp experience. While this is not a commonly used method, it can be a useful complement to both the post-larp debrief and the online survey.

Semi-structured interviews are interviews where the interviewer comes with a set of prepared questions, but is prepared to let the topic(s) of the interview drift with the interests of the interviewee. The interviewer will still typically try to cover all prepared questions during the interview, but the order is not important. The interviewer will also need to pay attention and adapt to the importance that the interviewee places on the different topics, as well as to unexpected topics that come up during the interview. A good way to use in-depth interviews is as a fol-

lowup to a previous survey, where specific topics have been identified as topics of interest. Those topics will then be covered in more depth in the interview.

Important considerations for semi-structured interviews

- Since you can typically interview only a few players, make sure to select them carefully. While each interviewee will only represent themselves, they can be selected for the particular perspective they provide. A good way to find candidates for an interview can be to include a final question in the feedback survey: “If we need more information, would you be willing to participate in an interview about your larp experience? If so, please provide your name and email be-low.”
- Make sure that the interview happens on the interviewee’s terms. Do they have the time? Are they truly volunteering? Don’t try to convince somebody who is reluctant. Make sure that you can actually meet – online or in the real world.
- Avoid interviewing only people that you know, or that the organisers recommend. This introduces bias.
- Always start with an open question, and let the interview move in its own direction and at its own pace. Bring in your prepared questions when the interview is not moving on its own. Don’t be afraid to cut a discussion short if it is irrelevant for the focus of your interview – you can always blame lack of time.
- Be prepared to listen to lengthy stories about how the larp played out for the particular person, even if these are marginal to your interview questions. Your attention is how you pay them back for participating in the interview – and you might find new angles to your investigation that you had not thought of before.
- Make sure to record the whole interview session.

ANALYSIS

Semi-structured interviews need to be transcribed before they can be analysed. This is a time-consuming and expensive process. Typically, it pays to listen through the full interview and make notes of the interesting parts, and then transcribe only those parts. Once you have a transcription, you can divide it into distinct discussion topics and organise your analysis in a similar way as for qualitative survey data.

First, group answers according to your interview goals. If you have already made a survey, you will want to omit any responses that seem completely random, as well as those that are perfectly obvious. The interesting findings are those that are unexpected but not random. Since you have a low number of interviews, a singular answer can be just as important as the recurring themes that pop up in multiple responses.

FINAL COMMENTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

POST-LARP RECONSTRUCTION OF EXPERIENCE

It is important to realise that post-larp feedback will not give an accurate description of what players experienced while playing. They will already have begun to forget some things and place great importance on others; this is a natural part of the post-larp process. Furthermore, players who have gone through a well-designed post-larp debrief are most likely more positive towards the larp experience than those who have not. Very often this is not a problem, since you are likely to be more interested in the players' reflections on the *whole* experience (including the debrief), than what they experienced in the moment while the larp was ongoing. If you are actually interested in capturing the ingame experience, you must turn to other methods than the ones discussed in this chapter.

Players also talk to other players about their experiences after the larp. This means that when you ask for post-larp feedback, players will be influenced by what they have heard from other players. There is a performance aspect to this, especially in the Nordic larp tradition where a 'good' larper is one that has been able to play themselves towards strong experiences. If the other players tell stories about their strong experiences, the single player who did not have one may not dare to say so. If you want to avoid this effect, it becomes important to collect post-larp feedback anonymously and as soon after the larp as possible.

FEEDBACK VERSUS REVIEW

Whenever you gather feedback, you will first and foremost get "reviews". Here, we are not talking about professional journalistic larp criticism (which can be hard to recruit) but about players 'grading' the larp. These are statements, and sometimes just numbers, that give the larp a grade: Was it good, mediocre or bad? A review from a player may be worded something like this (authentic example): "All in all, it was a fun game, with some good moments of character play and interesting relations."

A (player) review is useful if you want to bask in positive affirmation or do a customer survey. But if you want to gather feedback to help you improve the larp, reviews are next to useless. *What* was good? *What* was bad? This particular example at least tells you that one character (although you don't know which) had "interesting relations." Very often, a review doesn't even tell you that much. You cannot avoid reviews, so better include questions that allow players to review the larp. Just make sure to ask other questions as well.

FEEDBACK ON CO-CREATED DESIGN

A trickier issue is that larps are always co-created. Players will not just play on the characters, relationships and storylines that the designers have provided, but will take initiative, develop their characters further, build their own relationships. The player who takes such initiative is of course aware of it, but their co-players will have difficulties distinguishing between what players created, and what was there by design. When this happens, feedback becomes at the very least confusing and sometimes irrelevant.

HOW TO FIX THE LARP

When gathering feedback, it is important to keep in mind that while players typically are good at telling you that something didn't quite work, they are not as good at telling you how to fix it, even though they will very often try. Every larp is a complex web of design decisions, aesthetic goals and production limitations, most of which are not visible to the players. You are still the designer of your larp, and need not heed all the participants' suggestions.

FURTHER READING:

Netigate: "GDPR: How will the new regulations affect your survey culture?",
Netigate.net

NORDIC LARP FOR OTHER CONTEXTS

In the last few years, bespoke larp in general and Nordic larp in particular have become of great interest in a range of fields. The term larp is recognised and used by everyone from contemporary artists to immersive theatre practitioners, from theme park designers to educators.

The general public, whose interest in participatory storytelling is only increasing, finds its way to larp in a tone of happy astonishment. Participants attracted to low threshold blackbox festivals or high-concept blockbuster larps tend to fall in love with the medium, and marvel at how this world could exist without them never having heard about it.

Players who identified as larpers, but have played other types of larps, are similarly attracted to the wider range of themes and forms of collaborative-style bespoke larp culture. These meetings are not always as fortuitous; managing the expectations of participants with deeply held assumptions about what larps are and how they should be played can be quite challenging. In this section, Maury Brown and Ericka Skirpan write about what to keep in mind when designing or running Nordic Style larps for participants from very different traditions.

The fundamental experience design skill set of larpmakers is already in great demand in professional environments, but the greatest need in other cultural fields is for our skills in narrative design. Enabling meaningful storymaking in three dimensional spaces with full participant agency is of great relevance to de-

signers of virtual realities and almost every other kind of immersive entertainment.

Collaborating across disciplines is beset by difficulties. James Lórien MacDonald closes this volume with his discussion of what to keep in mind when collaborating with other art forms and their institutions.

NORDIC STYLE LARPS IN OTHER TRADITIONS

// Maury Elizabeth Brown
// Ericka Paige Skirpan

Play is inherently cultural, and cultural norms are reflected in it. Nordic larp arose from the cultures of Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland and was originally created by people from those countries. While there is no monolithic “Nordic” culture and each country has its own language, larp scene, and traditions, the rotating annual larp conference among them, Knutepunkt, has helped establish a relatively coherent and evolving set of ideas related to larp.

The societal principles of modern Nordic countries influenced Nordic larp as a medium. These countries have a strong sense of communal ownership of resources, an ethos that everyone is a contributor, and of a shared responsibility to the group. Cultural norms of order, restraint, collaboration, sharing, responsibility, and community are at the heart of Nordic larp designs.

Since Nordic Larps were originally designed by and for Nordic larpers, these are unexamined assumptions of behavior. There was no need to articulate or codify these underlying behavioral assumptions with rules or policies. Yet once Nordic Larp began migrating to other cultures and people from other cultures began attending Nordic larps, the cultural assumptions underlying a Nordic design were made visible.

Nordic larp is inextricably bound to its culture. If you export Nordic Larp or import non-Nordic players to Nordic events, organizers must *translate* the design principles and cultural norms to non-Nordic audiences. Here, we offer some tips, techniques, and tools to facilitate this cross-pollination.

COMPETITIVENESS VS. COOPERATIVENESS

Generally, non-Nordic audiences approach larp as a competitive activity, which differs from the collaborative foundation of Nordic larp, in which the characters can often be in competition but the players are always understood to be playing together. This is not to say that there are not competitive players and larps in Nordic countries, nor collaborative players and larps in non-Nordic countries, nor to say that players of Nordic larps do not also enjoy or even sometimes play

with competition. But the *assumptions* of non-Nordic and Nordic players are different, which affects many aspects of their play and the organizer's design.

A designer of a Nordic larp for a broader or international audience must be aware of these assumptions and anticipate culture clashes. Any Nordic larp transported beyond the original tradition will not be quite the same in another cultural setting, and organizers may introduce non-Nordic elements as they adapt for their audience. Design additions could include: Giving players concrete goals, designing workshops to repeatedly coach cooperative play, establishing herd competence for Nordic style through strategic casting, formalizing unspoken procedures from Nordic larps, and setting player expectations about the narrative style.

Design solutions: Competitive larpers attempting to access Nordic larp must be taught play style norms. You can increase the *herd competence* in your run by making sure there are enough players present who understand the play style. When US larpmaker Lizzie Stark ran *Mad About the Boy* (Norway, 2010) in the US in 2012, she collaborated with the Norwegian team and imported some Nordic players to play with Americans. Similarly, the makers of *New World Magischola* (USA, 2016) collaborated with an original writer of *College of Wizardry* (Poland, 2014), hired members of its production team, and brought over a group of Nordic players to hold ingame leadership positions.

However, there can be difficulty with “larp muscle memory.” *NWM* players snapped back into previous habits when factors such as similarity of scenes or playing with others from previous larps triggered their competitive reflexes.

ON GAMING AND LOSING

In the Nordic countries, a “larp” does not necessarily mean a “game” and larping is not generally understood to be a competitive activity. One of the issues translating Nordic larp to other cultures is the reflex to equate larping with gaming, and gaming only with trivial entertainment. The designs and serious topics of many Nordic larps are anathema to some cultures who consider larps games, as they in that view appear to be trivializing trauma.

This misunderstanding was evident at Worldcon 75, held in Helsinki, when the convention removed a well-known Nordic larp, *De gamles hjem* (Denmark, 2013, Eng. A Home for the Old) from the schedule after receiving criticism from non-Nordic people on Twitter. The commentators were outraged at “making a game” of Alzheimer's Disease and, based only on the blurb in Worldcon's published program, felt that the condition was being made fun of, rather than being thoughtfully addressed through role-play. Serious larps that explore topics such as torture (Eg. *Kapo*, Denmark, 2011) or AIDS (*Just a Little Lovin'*, Norway, 2011) can seem insensitive or even exploitative if they are considered games.

Design solutions: Resist using the word ‘game’ when advertising a larp. Refer to players as participants to further emphasize this difference. Create and host conventions to showcase the variety of larps, rather than having larps only available at other types of gaming conventions.

Playing to Lose, a well-known Nordic larp tenet, does not translate well to competitive larps. In the Nordics, the phrase means to take risks with your character and allow nonoptimal or problematic consequences to happen to them because it leads to an interesting story. Many Non-Nordic players immediately recoil when they hear the word “lose”. They do not want to be losers.

Design solutions: Use an alternate phrase such as “Play for the Best Story” or “Play to Lift.” Recalibrate expectations through workshops and larp descriptions to encourage participants to take risks. Give maximum praise when a player does something great for the story but harmful to their character. Remember that narratives require characters to make mistakes; consequences advance plot. Most importantly, build trust among the participants so they feel able to take these risks with storytelling.

CONFUSION

Hallmarks of Nordic larps are the communal responsibility for telling the story and the absence of points-based mechanics to resolve conflict or determine hierarchies among players. Without points-based mechanics, many competitive larps do not understand the objective of the larp. Competitive players often struggle with how to *prove* aspects of their character without points to support their claim. For example, a competitive player whose character has a 10 out of 10 in fighting ability can point to that number to show others how strong or formidable they are.

Nordic larps are relationship-focused, story-forward experiences that are not dominated by specific quests or goal-based objectives. In Nordic larps, aspects of the character become real through collaboration. A character trait or ability is demonstrated through dialogue and action. Other players role-play their reactions to the character, such as deference, gossip, or rivalry. In other words, Nordic players believe what others assert through role-play and build upon what has been established.

When larps from a non-Nordic tradition do not find these numerical mechanics they are used to, they may be at a loss of what to do. For example, in *New World Magischola*, the player guide states that the larp does not contain character builds with attributes, skills, or powers; hit points; levels, races, or classes; contingency envelopes; dice-throws, card-pulls, rock-paper-scissors, or another adjudication system; physical combat; designated storytellers; nonconsensual character death; min-maxing; or rules-calls. A competitive player considers these the tools they use to access play and achieve their competitive goals. Without these mecha-

tics, players are often uncomfortable.

Design solutions: In pre-larp workshops or short videos, demonstrate how to *play up* another player and remind participants how they may have played pretend as a child. When someone said they were the police officer, other children agreed and played along. They did not need statistics or skills to demonstrate that. Agreeing to defer to another playmate did not mean they had lost; it meant they created fiction together.

To help competitive players, adding specific experiential goals such as “make a mistake” or “do something your character would never do” may help them discover something to do and emphasize the risk-taking play style.

AGENCY AND PLOT

The idea of *plot* is quite different in Nordic and non-Nordic larp cultures. [*For more about this, see the section How to Make Larps Where Stories Happen –Eds*]. In Nordic larp, story, as a series of actions and consequences, arises organically through interactions between characters within the designed frame of the larp. Storymaking is the responsibility of every player, in collaboration with the designers who make it possible through stage-setting, themes, and constraints. “Plot” is in infinite supply – if you need more story, acting in the world of the fiction will create it!

In competitive larping cultures, larp organizers give players access to story in the form of *plot* they have created. The presence of Storytellers implies that the story is being told *by* them, with players as passengers in someone else’s narrative system. In competitive larp, story does not derive from internal character motivations or personal agency. Instead, players often feel they are playing against the organizers as well as each other, and must keep their actions secret so they can surprise others and succeed at their schemes.

Creating one’s own story and taking agency are not skills taught to competitive larpers. Often, making up story is frowned upon, or players fear they will spoil plot events the organizers have planned.

In these larp cultures, plot is a scarce resource, which players compete to access. This can lead to *plot hoarding*, in which players who have found a storyline do not share it with others. When competitive players bring this behavior to a collaborative larp, it creates a culture clash. In Nordic larp, sharing information among players to advance the story is expected. It stems from the communal ownership of the experience, and Nordic players would not expect someone to resist sharing information as long as there is a diegetically plausible reason to do so. Players are expected to steer towards situations where their characters might be enticed or forced to reveal information. An oft-repeated phrase is “in [Nordic] larp, a secret is a cool surprise waiting to get out.” In addition, some collaborative larps have a *transparent design*, with players expected to share secrets out of

character, explicitly to enable guiding the story towards interesting tensions and reveals.

A player accustomed to competitive larp's definition of plot may find themselves waiting forever at a Nordic larp for an organizer to gift them with story. They will not realize that "plot" is all around them – all that is required is to have an idea of what their character might do, get buy-in from other players, and begin role-play.

Design solutions: Reiterate that everyone is a storyteller. A good metaphor might be a potluck. Your character has a dish (that is, a story or an idea), that they share with others. Like potlucks, some dishes are finished completely with people wishing for more, while others are duplicates or hardly touched for a variety of reasons. Players must remember that just because they bring a plot idea, others may be hungry for a different idea brought by someone else.

Organizers can also have a grab-bag of ideas available for players who are plot-stuck. These are often general, like "consider confronting your rival" or "take ill at an inopportune time in public." They are designed to provoke a dramatic response and then see where the story goes.

ASKING FOR HELP

Nordic players who are confused or bored in a larp know that they can ask for help from organizers or fellow players, but non-Nordic players have cultural norms that make that difficult. In competitive larps, "bothering" the organizers is generally taboo, since players should wait their turn for plot to come to them. Players who use their character's backstory or motives to start story in non-Nordic larps have been called spotlight hogs or "special snowflakes." Many competitive players have been trained out of taking any personal agency – a vital component of collaborative larping.

Design solutions: Remind participants that everyone is a storyteller and encouraged to build their own stories in Nordic larps. Remember the social conditioning competitive players have and go out of your way to be encouraging, friendly, and approachable. Demonstrate a genuine interest in working with the player to do something awesome. Continuously opening the door to personal story, both in workshops and during play, will help players break this habit. A gamemaster can also play an embedded character during the larp and lead through example.

FEAR OF DOING IT WRONG

Competitive players in their first collaborative experience are often paralyzed by the fear of doing it wrong. A new Nordic larper may also have decision paralysis from having so many choices. Therefore, just when organizers want players to

take more risks in trying this play style, they may take fewer due to either fear of getting it wrong or fear of missing out.

Design solutions: Herd competence goes a long way. If that is not possible, stack the deck by casting Nordic-competent players as characters with higher levels of in-fiction agency. Trained facilitation staff actively playing the larp can guide less-experienced players. They know how to recognize players who are bored, how to pull shy or risk-averse players out of their shells, how to spread plot even if players are hoarding it, and how to promote non-mechanical role-play.

Another strategy is to communicate honestly and transparently to manage players' expectations. In Nordic larps, many stories are told simultaneously and it is impossible to be involved in every plot or scene. Encourage players to follow what interests them and to tell the best story using the choices they have made. Expect to have some players who get emotionally overloaded as result of these two anxieties, and have safety team members on staff to help talk them through it and suggest self-care.

DOMINATING PLAYERS

Collaborative designs encourage people to take risks and embrace failure. Once competitive players realize they have the freedom to create story without gamemaster permission, they tend to swing dramatically in the other direction. Competitive players are accustomed to strict rulebooks that give them clear boundaries and violations. With rules and mechanics removed in Nordic designs, competitive players may step on other players' stories and play towards situations where their character has the most power to 'win', still not understanding that the base goal of this style of larp is equal collaboration of all parties.

Design solutions: First, codify the "Yes, but" concept. "Yes, but" is one of these unexamined assumptions of Nordic larp as the ethos and behavior is calibrated due to the collaborative cultural and play style norms. *Project Ascension* (USA, 2018) featured a workshop on the "Yes, but" concept that had players practice tweaking an idea into one that creates interesting outcomes for everyone. Alternatively, use *character coaches* who help players understand how to create their own narrative arcs.

Second, explicitly outline the behavior and stories that are prohibited. Having to state the kinds of ideas and behaviors that will wreak havoc on other people's stories is quite foreign to Nordic designers. The communal cultural ethos of Nordic larp means that their players automatically consider the implications of their actions before they take them and temper their actions to ensure their story does not disrupt the communal contract all are playing within. For example, you may need to spell out that constraints in a larp's lore, such as a disease that has no cure, the maximum speed of a spaceship, an impenetrable prison, must be respected. And that it is not the job of a player to stop other characters from making mistakes.

HYBRID FORMS

Many larp designers seeking to introduce the collaborative play style have created a mix of organizer-run plot and player-generated action. *New World Magischola* was one of the first larps to take collaborative Nordic-style play to North America, but it included some directed plot for players who had trouble creating their own. Like its predecessor, *College of Wizardry*, the larp contains a competitive element – the House Cup – within the fundamentally collaborative style. This central conceit allows interested players to engage with competition, but it is not the entire experience. *NWM* also sends in staff members with some pre-written plot hooks. These are not considered more important than player-driven stories; in fact, one of the functions of the larp director is to pull back on these inserted storylines if players have brought enough of their own.

While not strictly Nordic larp, these hybrid experiences blend the collaborative, “bring-your-own” style with the non-Nordic players’ expectation that plot will be provided to them. The hybrid style gives players as much agency as possible and helps them create their own stories while the gamemasters’ plot invitations help the less agency-oriented players to learn the new style of play.

FURTHER READING

Maury Brown: “Creating a Culture of Trust through Safety & Calibration Mechanics”. Nordiclarp.org (9.9, 2016)

Jaakko Stenros & Markus Montola: “How Worldcon Banned a Larp” (13.8 2017)

Susanne Vejdemo: “Play to Lift, Not Just Lose”. Nordiclarp.org. Feb. 21, 2018.

Annika Waern & Jaakko Stenros: “Trust and Intimate Interaction in Nordic Larp.” CHI 2015 Workshop on Embarrassing Interactions. (2015)

COLLABORATING WITH THEATRE AND OTHER ARTS

// James Lórien MacDonald

Larp mingles with established art forms, from theatre, television, and film to site-specific art, participatory art, and escape rooms.

This chapter is about larp and theatre but is also applicable to collaborations between larp and other art forms. Since each collaboration is unique to the artists and their traditions, it will not be possible to create any universal rules about how larp designers should work with theatre directors, or how performance artists should work with larpers; hopefully this guide can still make these projects run more smoothly.

Artists who come from different backgrounds and traditions often find that when they start to collaborate on a project, they feel as though they are re-inventing the wheel: Going back to their art form's first principles and challenging them, looking around for peers and not finding any, or encountering new difficulties in funding and production. Genre-crossing projects turn out very differently from how they were first imagined, partly because new ideas and solutions are discovered during the process, but far too frequently because time and resources are wasted in learning things the hard way.

WHY COLLABORATE?

Working in a new field can get you out of a creative rut and greatly expand your network; you can also wind up with a few more grey hairs by the end. Among the reasons to collaborate with other artists include access to grant money, festivals, and the support of institutions like state-funded theatres (as was the case with *Gertrudes möhippa* (Sweden, 2016, Eng. Gertrude's Bachelorette) at the Royal Dramatic theatre in Stockholm). You may want to do it for the prestige or to find a new audience for your work. Your project may require some artistic skills you do not have – for instance, you want to do a musical larp but you have never directed a musical. Or you simply may want to make your next larp more spectacular, and wish to work with people with specific skills like sound design.

The larpmaker is not the only opportunist in the equation. Your co-creati-

ve design skills are wanted by theatre makers, installation artists, curators, event planners, performance artists, universities, and major theme park brands. You might be approached by someone in an established art form, asking you to bring your skills to the table. It is very exciting to be asked to work on something prestigious, but most of the time the person asking you to collaborate has very little idea what they are actually asking for. It is up to you, as the expert in your field, to help them define exactly what “collaboration” means.

For example, Berlin-based American artist Brody Condon has worked with larp for more than a decade. He works in performance, sculpture, and video, and often collaborates with larp designers (Bjarke Pedersen in particular). For Condon, however, the larp is not just a work in itself, it is a *performative engine* to generate another work. In visual arts, it is not uncommon for artists to outsource the generative engine for their work, and focus their skills elsewhere.

Some would-be collaborators are chasing the hype. For example, theatre artists around the world continue to look to larp to “enhance” a work of theatre. The main difficulty is that theatre is not inherently interactive in the sense that a larp is interactive, even though theatre artists are indoctrinated in believing that interactivity is where theatre’s real power lies. The energy exchange, presence, reactivity, and shared space of theatre are not the same as larp’s narrative co-creation. This leads to problems such as those at *Gertrudes möhippa*, where play is railroaded, and it is difficult to know when one is supposed to obey the actor-characters, and when one is allowed to interact with them.

Go in with your eyes open. Does the other person actually want to learn about larp? Are you making a larp as part of a totally separate finished product? Are they a large corporation offering a lot of money, but very little artistic control? What are you looking to get from working with them? In your early conversations, do they seem to have respect for the craft of designing larps?

WORKING TOGETHER

How do you start when they do not speak larp, and you do not speak art? Try to avoid making assumptions based on what you think the other field is like. Experts are not made overnight, but you are going to have to bring them up to speed a little and take on some new ideas yourself. Be patient, acknowledge when you are not familiar with another person’s concept, and try to foster a sense of learning. Make it part of your working culture to ask basic questions about each other’s tools and processes.

You may find a shared creative vocabulary arises early in the process, because you will try to define *what* it is you would like to make together. Is it a larp? An environmental theatre piece? An interactive installation? A performance game? A choreography? However you choose to talk about your piece, recognise that

there are values inherent in each of these. Choreography tends to value human bodies and movement; a game may prioritise playability or even competition. These values tell you what would make us consider the piece an artistic success, and allow you to design accordingly. The way you speak about your work will also inform your potential audience or participants and their expectations and desires.

If you're collaborating with, say, a theatre director, go and see a play *together*. This gives you both an opportunity to establish common ground surrounding an art piece, and to start building the vocabulary that you will use together. Talk about what you considered successes and failures in the piece without trying to win the other person over to your "side". Talk specifically about as many aesthetic and technical aspects of the performance you can think of: acting, directing, lighting, sound, set design, text, pacing, emotional arc, etc. Specifically means that "the lighting was nice and the acting was annoying" is too general. Describe moments, colours, dynamics, or a single line that spoke to you. Ask how things were done. Do not be afraid to ask questions, and do not worry that your opinion is not an expert one. Your tastes and opinions may differ, but your experiences are your own. It is even a good idea to take note of the things that you disagreed on or found surprising, because those are likely to be blind spots – things that you or the other person would never have even thought of, but that affect the experience of the work.

Expand your discussion of the work to encompass more than just the time between the opening scene and final curtain by reviewing the experience as a whole: your expectations going in (what did you think you would experience and what made you think that?) and the feeling you were left with, your strongest memories, the way ticket sales were handled, cultural references or homage made to other artistic works, impression of the venue, what the piece made you want to do afterwards, etc. Try to see all the ways in which your experience was designed, either explicitly by the artists, or quietly by the context – for example, if the piece is at a theatre, perhaps you already know how to get tickets and what is expected of you when you walk in the door.

Go to a larp together – the closer in scale and production level to your own project, the better. This may seem like a big ask, but if you are creating a three-day experience for 100 people that is either a larp or draws heavily from larp traditions, and you are not willing to go to a larp of similar scope, you have no business taking other people's money. Talk afterwards about your high and low points, and how you experienced the larp in your imagination and emotions. Talk, again specifically, about the spatial design, the playability, the food and sleeping arrangements, the costumes and set, the lighting, the sound and music, and the world design. Describe the planned group scenes (such as a speech at the opening of a banquet) and the spontaneous heart-to-heart talks in the corridor between two characters who barely knew each other. Talk about the pre-larp

workshop, the mechanics both in principle and in practice, the safety rules, character sheets, sign-up form, debrief and afterparty, and the travel to and from the venue. Talk about how the organisers communicated to you what they wanted from you as a player; talk about how you knew what you were going to do, and what you did when you did not know. Talk about all the ways in which your experience was designed.

When theatre makers or larp organisers get together to start a project, there is usually a common understanding about what constitutes success. However, when performance and larp makers collaborate, success criteria are not as obvious. Great art is not necessarily great larp, and vice versa. Their aims may even be conflicting. Discuss what you want to achieve. What do we want people to do? What can we expect from them? What do we wish for them to experience? What are we expecting from each other as artists?

Once you have a basic landscape, try to make that even more specific. One exercise you can do is to imagine a scene in your work – it may be something that you already know is going to be in the piece, or it could be just a thought experiment. All of you should describe what would make the scene amazing: “It looks beautiful and immersive”, “the players are frightened”, “everyone suddenly realises the truth”, etc. Then take apart what those statements actually mean. Are they about visual aesthetics? Sensory experiences? A successful manipulation? A moment of collective action?

Now take the same scene and describe what would make it a disaster: “nobody could hear what the librarian was saying so the speech was useless”, “people thought the props were important but they were just decoration”, “nobody understood that the people painted blue were ghosts”, “we didn’t account for a revolution”, etc. What would be the simplest ways to prevent these from happening?

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

By collaborating with someone from another field, you are expanding your available tools considerably. Here are some that cross over between genres and are worth considering.

ACTORS

People who have specific performance skills can make a piece look and feel magical. Actors can deliver a lot of text and, through characterisation, help establish the mood and the world of the piece.

Keep in mind a few things when working with actors. Those who have never larped before may not be used to improvising with people one-to-one, and they may find it frustrating to calibrate their performance to your piece. In conventional theatre, the storytelling depends entirely on all the arts on stage directing the

audience's attention to the right things at the right time, so actors are very skilled at drawing attention to themselves, or giving it to another actor. A good immersive theatre actor will have to know how to make the scene less about them and more about the audience.

There is also a question of intensity: an actor onstage is usually trained to have a high degree of focus and energy for the entire time they are presenting their character. In an immersive piece, where the audience can walk around and even interact with actors, this means more improvisation, but it still means that the actor is very "on". You might know from experience that this is an exhausting thing to do in a larp; you need quiet, low-key moments; moments where you only observe what is going on, moments where you do not expect to be seen. You also expect to *develop* your character throughout the larp by improvisation, whereas actors typically know their character's development from the beginning. Both the difference in energy, and the difference in *knowledge about the outcome of the piece* create hierarchies between actors and audience, which you may or may not want in your piece.

Should your actors be like NPCs? Will they larp? Do you want audience to be able to approach them as equals, or as authorities/helpers/guides within the work? Can you convince a theatre to work without any actors at all?

AGENCY

The focus in larps is on what people can do. How can people move their own narrative forward, and are there actual consequences and outcomes to interaction? Discuss what agency means for your players and be prepared to defend the concept of *playability*. Often, theatre-larp hybrids wind up with a stop-start feel to the playability, because the sandbox sections do not actually have any effect on the scripted scenes.

AUDIENCE

Define who is coming to your piece. Are they artists themselves, escape room aficionados, larpers, families with small kids? Think about their expectations and their *herd competence* – their collective know-how on what to do in a situation. For instance, larps are usually designed knowing that a good number of the players will be experienced and able to carry the larp once it begins, and new larpers will pick up on that behaviour very quickly. If you are creating a genre that is new to your audience but requires that they behave in a specific way, you will need to facilitate. What you want them to do should be *clear*, it should be *possible*, and it should be *desirable* to do. If you are not clear about what you want, they will break your piece.

COMMUNICATION

Performers typically do the vast majority of their communication with the audience during the performance. In larp, most of the communication between creators and participants happens before runtime begins. This can mean that performers may prefer to deliver key information to players or audience diegetically, but this is almost always utterly chaotic, and will cannibalise a great deal of the work. If a character gives out important information or rules, players will interpret them as the wishes of that *character*, and might even decide that the best course of action is to resist them. A fictional character is not a reliable source of information.

If you definitely want to reveal information in runtime, consider communicating “there will be rules and/or crucial information given during the piece, and you will know it is important because X”, where X is “delivered by a specific person” or “contains these keywords” or something else that is clear. Also, do this so that people do not feel under-informed when the piece begins – they may feel like they do not have all the information, but at least they know that that is the correct state for them to be in at the beginning of the piece. If your audience/players feel like they have no idea what to do, they will not play. They will either default to the behaviour of a conventional audience, and wait and watch, or they will try to make play out of nothing and wind up resentful.

CONTROL

Lack of control is a common cause of interpersonal meltdowns during runtime. Non-larp designers are used to having a great deal of control over their work, and the introduction of uncontrollable elements (i.e. players) can stress them out. If an artist’s usual performance environment is designed for controlled behaviour (the audience sits in seats, do not talk, and watch), they will design with that behaviour in mind.

Larp designers know that when a larp is running it is often impossible to “see” if it is going well. For a theatre maker this is a nightmare, because you cannot fix what you cannot see. Help your fellow artists learn to trust the participants and believe in them.

CREDIT

Who did what, and how will credit be given? If you work with someone who is clearly established in the art world, are you content to let their name be all over it, whilst yours is a footnote? Another issue you may come up against is giving credit for the work that informs your larp design: in the art world, you are expected to acknowledge your influences, and if you encounter others doing work similar to yours, you should investigate and reference their work – much as academics do with ideas. To ignore this is extremely bad form and can result in lost opportunities. Larp has no such culture established.

INSTITUTIONS

These are great places to get your work produced and/or meddled with. Institutions may provide prestige, marketing, venues, or festivals for you to work with. They also bring along the world of art criticism and contextualisation, which might be very unfamiliar to you.

“What is the genealogy of your work? What questions of embodiment are engendered by (meta-)liminality? Is ontology humbled by the surfacing?” Arts-peak occurs when universities and art are deeply enmeshed with the magic net of monetary funding. Writing about your work in this way is somewhere between intimidating and infuriating – but your collaborators might have good reasons to take it seriously.

Ask questions and remember that everyone has to start somewhere. You can also easily have misunderstandings with institutions, particularly the marketing department. If an institution is doing the communicating between you and your audience, get involved because they will fuck it up.

LANGUAGE

If you share vocabulary – e.g. scene, story, immersion, character – do make sure you’re talking about the same thing (you probably aren’t). This also goes for the people who will come to experience it: audience, spectators, actors, players, participants, experiencers, viewers, larpers, co-creators, consumers, etc. Note that the way you conceptualise your audience will also affect how you design, and it will affect how they in turn perceive the piece in the first marketing materials they encounter.

LIGHTING, SOUND, AND SET

In conventional theatre, all of these are used to direct attention, build emotion, and contribute to the story. In larp, they might also communicate rules. In the first runs of *Inside Hamlet* (Denmark, 2015), insufficient lighting and bad acoustics put a damper on the excitement of doing Shakespeare literally in Elsinore. Particularly when the performers are not professionally trained, the language is not everyone’s first language, and the text is complicated, it is essential to be able to hear the words; seeing the actors’ faces clearly actually helps us hear them. Over several runs the team has improved all of these things, including having crew dedicated for sound and light. Spatial design is also an important factor: how people flow from space A to B; how the space affects interaction, etc. Remember you can also design for smell, touch, and taste.

MONEY

Depending on where you are, your project may be funded by arts grants or social programs. You may be budgeting entirely on ticket sales. Start discussing money

early on and go into detail about where you get your money, what you spend it on, and what you all expect to get paid. Larps are also frequently far more expensive than the average theatre or gallery ticket, and as consumers we place expectations and value on these as well. We may expect a comparable level of bang for our buck from a stage piece that costs €30, as a larp that costs €200.

NARRATIVE

Typically, theatre involves a third-person narrative that everyone in the room can follow. Larp, on the other hand, involves multiple first-person narratives, each only known by one person. First-person narrative is not the same as multiple first-person narratives: it is also possible to design an interactive work where the sole player is the “protagonist”, and everything that happens around them is specifically for their story.

You might also use theatre within a larp, presenting a third-person narrative that will be a part of multiple first-person narratives, which is the case at *Inside Hamlet*. Allowing your narrative to be co-created by the participants requires a high degree of flexibility and improvisation.

REHEARSAL

The function of rehearsal is to explore possibilities, practice, and lock down anything that must be presented a certain way. This includes characters and lines, but also lighting and sound cues, entrances and exits (including the movement of large crowds of people – it is always a sad moment when a grand crowd scene is followed by 100 people trying to exit two doorways at the same time to get to their next scene, as though an airport larp has suddenly materialised).

Staged events that are planned and timed well create a specific kind of energy and mood. The more improvisation your piece relies on, the harder it is to stage anything with multiple creative inputs (actors, lights, sound, space, etc). But how does one rehearse for improvisation? One possibility is to rehearse so one can be as familiar with the text as possible without locking down too many motivations or emotional responses, because those would be generated in the larp.

RULES

The art world has its own history of using rules to generate and execute work, from visual art to performance. Take John Cage’s *4’33”* – a musical work where the score dictates four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence – or theatre improv games where performers invent a narrative based on words given by the audience. Rules and limitations are great ways to generate creative work.

However, larp and games use rules in a much more sophisticated way: rules for behaviour can create culture, mood, action, or even plot twists. Your collaborators may be trying to solve a problem aesthetically, when a rule would actually

do the trick – and encourage transparency. For example, a sound designer might suggest that changing the music to something harsh and industrial would create a tense mood in the room, while a larp designer might tell players “when you hear this music, start to make your interactions more tense and paranoid”. Both instructions should work together, but the explicit, rule-based instruction gives more clarity and certainty to the players as co-creators, rather than an aesthetic *suggestion*.

It is not uncommon for larps to have several hours of workshops in order to learn the rules and conduct. Many artists will not have worked in this way before, so if *you* are designing with the assumption that there will be a workshop, be sure that your collaborators understand why.

SAFETY AND WELLBEING

Larp’s toolbox is far more advanced in audience/player safety. In the performing arts, it is even common to deliberately put audiences in shocking situations. Be prepared to stand your ground; it is not more artistic, authentic, or hardcore to work loosely with safety.

Remember, though, that some audiences may be coming to the show *expecting* to experience duress. Be clear on exactly what you want to put people through, your safety rules, and how you will communicate them. Without a culture of safety, you will often find audience members break your safety rules. Be extra clear about how you will enforce them.

What will you do to create a culture where humans are conscious of each other in your work? And in terms of wellbeing, will you need to provide your audience with food, water, or sleeping space?

STAGE MANAGEMENT

While this role varies depending on location and size of theatre, a stage manager in the Western tradition is the person in the booth with the headset whose job is to know exactly what everyone in the theatre is doing during runtime. Every change in lighting, sound, effects, and space is called over the radio by the stage manager.

A system like this enables a tightly timed show. If you have lighting and sound, be clear on who will operate them and how to time them. Budget time to rehearse your technical cues, quick costume changes, changes in the space, etc.

TRANSPARENCY

Transparency is underused in participatory arts. A narrative or parts of it is known to the author (the playwright, the actors, the director) but not to the audience, and part of the enjoyment is its discovery. Even interactive pieces have used this – for example, British immersive theatre company Punchdrunk’s *The Drowned Man* (UK, 2013) had a dedicated fanbase who attended the show multiple times and recounted their experiences online as a way of collectively piecing together the narrative. For them, there was value in the work’s lack of transparency. However, that audience was familiar with Punchdrunk’s modus operandi and knew what to expect; do not expect your audience to spontaneously do this.

In art it is very common to subject the audience to a manipulation to evoke an unexpected realisation or emotion (which is read as “authentic”), whereas in collaborative larp it is not uncommon for the players to know everything or almost everything about the general plot beforehand. Make sure you are working on the same assumption of transparency.

RETAINING SANITY

Every project has its misunderstandings, kill-your-darlings moments, or sleep-deprived hysterical laughter. The clearer you all are about what you need to do, why you want to do it, how long it is going to take, and who will actually get it done, the better. Consider scheduling the whole project backwards from the opening night: Try to ask as many practical questions as possible about how long it will take to build the set, rehearse performers, do the workshops, and when your communications should go out – even if you have only a vague idea at the outset of what they will be. Talking early about practicalities like budget and scheduling has artistic value, because you end up revealing expectations and conventions in your ways of working, and these conversations always spiral off into questions about the goals of the piece itself.

It helps to have someone outside the project to talk to, but it may be hard to find peers. You will find a few active groups on Facebook dealing with participatory art and larp/art crossovers: start with *Larp in an Art Context* and *Everything Immersive*.

Part of retaining sanity can be in compartmentalising or retaining your own artistic independence. You do not need to collaborate so deeply you are finishing each other’s sentences. You might be working in a hierarchy, where your larp design is basically generating action for a piece, and the artist you are working with does not need to know exactly what’s going on so long as the output looks right. Or maybe it is your big larp, and you are enlisting artists to create objects and experiences that need to serve the look, feel, and playability of the larp, and

ultimately you have the final word on everything.

Finally, do not get so wrapped up in notions of “artistic purity” that you fail to take advantage of opportunities to hone your skills and forge new work. You cannot please everyone, and no single work will ever be the holy grail.

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FURTHER READING

Penny Rafferty: “Brody Condon, the Invisible Director”, Berlin ArtLink (8.8. 2018)

Annika Waern: “Gertrudes möhippa, a Near-successful Crossover of Larp and Theatre”, Nordiclarp.org, (15.6. 2016)

GLOSSARY

360° illusion Larp design idea where what you see is what you get. The environment is perceived as authentic, everything works as it should affording participants to engage in authentic activity for real, and participants perform immersive role-play.

act (noun) A segment of the larp runtime that has some kind of thematic unity, comparable to an act in a play.

act break The breaks between runtime when runtime is divided into acts. Often used to pause, reflect, and calibrate play.

agency The capacity of a participant or a character to act in a meaningful manner in a given environment, to have the possibility to impact the proceedings.

alibi The things that enable a person to (role-)play and to do things they would never do in everyday life while in character. Alibi is value neutral (“It says so in the character description”) and can be used in a positive (“We have all agreed to explore these themes together in a physical way”) or a negative way (“I was drunk at the time”).

amusement park design In the context of larp design this means creating a larp where there are preplanned ‘rides’, story units, for the characters to explore.

bespoke design Approaching every larp as a new work and designing everything from scratch. As opposed to either iterating on a local tradition, or using the same *larp system*, such as Mind’s Eye Theatre, in multiple larps.

blackbox A genre of larp played with minimalist setting, with carefully curated props, and controlled light and sound. Often played in theatre black boxes. A room in a *longform* larp devoted to acting out scenes out of temporal sequence is also sometimes called a blackbox, although a better term for that is *meta room*.

bleed When the feelings of character impact on the participant, or vice versa.

blockbuster larp Longform larp that targets an international audience, features an expensive venue, high participation fee, and are hyped before and after. They usually have a high concept idea, often based on existing intellectual property. Originally, the term was critical of this type of larps.

boffer A padded weapon. Historically made out of foam covered with duct tape, nowadays often made out of latex.

boffer larp A larp where fighting modelled with *boffers* is a central feature.

briefing The part of the event before runtime where designers instruct participants about the larp.

calibration Negotiations relating to playstyle and personal boundaries, usually between participants.

campaign A pre-planned series of larps set in the same fictional world where events from one larp impact events in another.

chamber larp Shorter larps, with their length measured in hours, often taking place in a small venue and with participants in single or low double digits. Low demands for scenography and costuming make chamber larps easier to package and restage.

character The fictional persona a participant portrays during runtime. Sometimes also used to refer to the *character description* that is an inspiration for the character actually played.

character alibi The alibi provided by portraying a character.

character description The material on which a participant bases their performance of a character during runtime. Usually takes the form of text describing character background, motivation, goals, and contacts. In some traditions these can be very long and individually tailored, in others they are not used at all.

- close to home* Playing with themes, situation, experiences, or personae that one is very familiar with from everyday life.
- collaborative-style* Larps that have no victory condition and encourage participants to share and co-create, rather than conceal information and best each other.
- competitive-style* Larps in which there is a victory condition that only limited numbers of participants can achieve.
- consent, physical* Permission for something physical (e.g. relating to intimacy or roughness) to happen. Can be withheld at any time.
- consent, story* Permission to do something particularly impactful to another participant's character (e.g. give permission to another participant that they can kill your character).
- content larp* A style of larp, predominantly Czech, primarily focused on pre-written and tightly structured plot content created by the design team.
- debrief* Post-runtime event organised by the larpmakers, where participants and designers talk about what they just did together. Can be structured or relatively free-flowing. Usually the goal is to put the runtime in perspective, to share stories, or to meet the other participants without the masks the characters provide.
- decompression* The cooldown period after the runtime of a larp, when the participant is leaving the fiction and the character behind, and gearing up to return to everyday life outside the larp. Sometimes also called aftercare.
- de-roling* The process by way a participant divests themselves of the physical embodiment of their character, often used as a method to attempt to prevent or reduce bleed.
- designable surface* Anything that can be changed and made choices about that can impact the experience that is being designed. In larp, everything is a designable surface: the typeface of the website, the soundscape, the interaction patterns, character names, toilet temperature.
- diegesis* Things that exist inside of the fiction are part of the diegesis. For example, music during runtime is part of the diegesis if the characters can hear it, and non-diegetic if only the players hear it.

diegetic Something that exists inside of the fiction is diegetic. In a larp participants can address, react to, and interact with things that are diegetic, without breaking character. See *diegesis*.

director A *runtime gamemaster* who guides play in a very hands-on manner. Basically a freeform gamemaster in larp.

escalation (and *de-escalation*) The process of incrementally increasing or decreasing the intensity of a scene to come to the optimal atmosphere for all participants involved. Sometimes there is a specific metatechnique for signalling desired (de)escalation.

fate (sometimes *skjebne*) A play instruction for character action that the participant is obliged to follow; occurs in *fateplay* designs.

fateplay Prior consent by participants and/or organisers to certain, immutable narrative beats or outcomes. A conscious design decision that presumes that *how* something happens or someone feels about it happening can be just as interesting to explore as *if* it happens.

freeform (*freeform larp*, *freeform scenario*) As the name implies, freeform scenarios have no standard form. They typically last a few hours, are usually played without costumes, props, or special lighting in whatever space is available, often feature heavy use of inventive bespoke mechanics and metatechniques, and are sometimes heavily gamemastered. In the Nordic countries, these used to be considered halfway between *table-top role-playing* and larps; today, in the international discourse, they are lumped together with larps.

gamemaster, runtime A runtime story facilitator for a larp, keeping track of plot flow, solving narrative problems, and, if applicable, making rule-system calls. Sometimes but not always one of the larprawrights.

herd competence The amount of competence in the ensemble of participants. Running a larp for a group of participants where some have prior experience is much easier than running a larp for a group with only beginners. If there is enough experience in the room, beginners can learn by following the example set by more experienced participants.

immersion A term with multiple meanings, usually relating to how far the participant is engaged with the fiction of the larp. One common usage is in the sense of character immersion, that is, the participant experiencing the diegetic world through the eyes and mind of the character. Sometimes the word is used to mean immersion into the setting or the milieu, as in *360° illusion*, or even engagement with the story as in narrative immersion.

ingame Things that happen during *runtime* and are true within the world of the larp.

inter-immersion In a larp, a participant is pretending to be a character, but is also pretending that everyone else is their character. The feedback from the other participants enhances the character immersion, creating a cycle called inter-immersion.

jeepform A specific tradition of freeform role-playing mostly coming from Sweden and Denmark. See www.jeepen.org.

Knutepunkt (also *Knutpunkt*, *Knudepunkt*, *Solmukobta*, *KP*) Annual conference devoted to larp and larp design travelling between Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland that began in Oslo in 1997. The tradition as a whole is discussed under the original, Norwegian name.

larp crush An infatuation with another participant, or maybe just their character, that a player develops during runtime due to playing a romance with them. See also *bleed*.

larpmaker All the people responsible for the creation of a larp, both in production and in content.

larp script All the materials (character documents, rules, venue requirements, etc.) created by the designer that are needed to run a larp.

larp system A set of rules for larping if they can be separated from the individual larp, i.e. multiple larps are run with the same system of rules. Some larps use complex rule *mechanics* to explain what characters can and cannot do, and those rules can be printed as books. This is the opposite of *bespoke rules*.

larpwright The author(s) of a larp. The person or group who define the larp's vision, world, workshop structure, characters, etc. A synonym for *larp designer* from an era before game studies terminology colonised larp discourse. Also, a person who creates larps.

longform larp Larps that last a full day or several days, possibly with *act breaks* between different parts, with full scenography and participants in full costumes.

magic circle Metaphor for the separate space of playing. The time and space of the larp, in which characters are played and different rules apply than normal; upheld by a social contract.

mechanics In larps where the skills of the characters are important, and they are markedly different from those of the participants, these actions are expressed through replacements that simulate things that are impossible, undesired, or too intimate (e.g. violence and sex). In some traditions, mechanics imply points, levels or other numerical systems representing skills.

meta room A dedicated room in a *longform larp* devoted to acting out scenes out of temporal sequence. Often features a *runtime gamemaster*. Sometimes also called a *blackbox*.

metareflection The player reflecting on character actions or the fictional situation, switching between the *fictive frame* and the *metareflexive frame*.

metatechnique Mechanics that allow participants to communicate player to player about their characters, without breaking play. Metatechniques are commonly employed to let participants share their character's inner thoughts or motivations, or to let participants together establish things about their characters' shared history and relationship.

Mixing Desk of Larp A theory of larp design, guiding the designer to make conscious decisions between contradictory virtues of larp design. It consists of a series of faders, such as transparency-secrecy, illustrating that a typical larp cannot feature both high transparency and many secrets.

narrative Narrative is what you are left with after the larp is done, when participants look back on the plot, the story, and the character actions and try to answer the question "what happened in this larp". The narrative

is the choice of events included, and the way they are related to each other, when a story is told. The narrative of a larp continues to change long after the larp has ended.

narrative design All design choices made in the service of enabling participants to tell stories.

NPC The acronym is short for non-player character. It refers to a character who follows the larp designer or runtime gamemaster's instructions. NPCs are typically played by organisers, or a crew dedicated to this purpose. NPCs can be present for the whole duration of the larp, or appear only briefly. The term was inherited from tabletop role-playing games.

offgame Participant activities or utterances outside of both the larp's diegesis and of the play of the larp itself.

one-shot A larp designed to be stand-alone and not part of a series of connected larps like a campaign.

opt-in An instance of choosing to participate in something.

opt-in design Designing in a way where participants have to actively choose to participate in certain aspects or design elements of the larp.

opt-out An instance of choosing not to participate in something.

opt-out design Designing in a way that presupposes participation in certain aspects or design elements of the larp, where participants have to actively choose not to participate.

organiser A person who is at least in part responsible for making sure the larp runs. This can include logistics work as well as runtime gamemastering and other activities.

paralarp The practices, designs, and texts surrounding the runtime to enable the playing of that larp.

playstyle calibration Participants or gamemasters communicating beforehand about the desired playstyle of a scene or larp. This type of calibration is not about the content, but about how the participants approach larp

in general and to find common ground: physical or not physical, slow or fast paced, very emotionally intense or with levity.

plot Sequences of narrative events pre-planned by the larp designers, for example in the form of intrigues written into the character descriptions giving characters motivations for actions during the larp.

post-play activities Any activities undertaken after the official runtime of a larp.

pre-written Created prior to the run of the larp; often implies that the elements of the larp have been consciously designed and intentionally related to each other.

producer Person or persons responsible for the physical production and logistics of a larp.

role A collection of legible social behaviours in a given social position. Everyone plays numerous roles (customer, larper, offspring), both out of the larp and within a larp as a character.

rules-light Containing few enough rules that the larp can be learned instantly by a novice and that these few rules can be recalled on the spot with little difficulty.

run (noun) An instance of a full staging and playthrough of a larp. “Some see the first run as a playtest, I see it as a premiere.” (verb) To stage a larp. “We ran *House of Cravings* last weekend.”

runtime The allotted time for playing, when characters are being played and the *narrative design* unfolds.

sandbox design Sandbox design focuses on providing participants with a playable world that reacts to their input, in which participants can freely bring in or create on-site the plots and the drama they find interesting to play out together.

secrecy The use of secrecy in larp design is to purposefully prevent participants from knowing things their characters would not know. Common ways to add secrecy is to give participants secret character goals and motivations, and to include surprise happenings during runtime. See also *transparency*.

secrets & powers larp North American larp design pattern. Pre-written characters in typically a single-run larp all have often-oppositional goals that they are primarily able to reach by leveraging secrets (hidden information not known to everyone) and powers (game mechanics that permit participants to get other characters to do what their character wishes).

setting a scene The act of framing and describing who is in a scene, what is happening, and where it is taking place. Hitting particular themes or emotional overtones is particularly desirable.

status line exercises An abstract larp exercise in which participants physically queue up in order to demonstrate and visualise where their characters lie on a specific status continuum. Examples include oldest to youngest, most powerful to least powerful, or degree of agreement with an ideology.

story Story is created in real time from the moment the larp begins until the participants are done playing.

tabletop Role-playing style played verbally, where you do not act out your character's actions, but instead narrate them.

theme The theme of a larp is what the larp is about, in contrast to what happens at the larp. Setting clear themes for a larp informs participants about the desired tone and playstyle of the larp, and affects what participants expect they might be likely to experience. Larps divided into acts often have different themes for each act.

transparency The use of transparency in larp design is to purposefully let participants know things their characters would not know. Common ways to add transparency is to let participants read more pre-written characters than just their own, to divide the larp into acts with announced themes, or to tell participants what is going to happen during the larp before it starts. See also *secrecy*.

workshop The workshop is a structured period of exercises that your participants will do before the start of runtime, to familiarise themselves with each other and the larp mechanics, enabling them to play together. Typically done on-site before runtime.

BIOGRAPHIES

Arbjørn, Jesper Heebøll
(b. 1979)

Jesper Heebøll Arbjørn is a Danish mathematician, light design engineer, and family man who does larp and blackbox designs in his spare time. Jesper organised his first larp in 1998.

Barkholt-Spangsbo, Troels
(b. 1983)

Troels Barkholt-Spangsbo is a Danish sociologist, teacher, larp and blackbox designer. Troels has designed and produced larps and games since 1999.

Bielli, Marco
(b. 1983)

Marco Bielli has spent the past 15 years writing stories, designing games and digging rabbit holes. In his spare time, he just tries to be a horrible human being.

Brind, Simon
(b.1970)

*Simon Brind's PhD research *Combat Narratology: Strategies for the resolution of narrative crisis in participatory fiction*, looks at how stories emerge in larp. Noted larp productions include *Odyssey* (UK, 2010-2016), *The Quota* (UK, 2018) and *Avalon* (Poland, 2018).*

Brown, Maury Elisabeth
(b. 1969)

*Maury Brown is a games scholar, educator, publisher, and a participatory experience designer, writer, producer, and consultant. She is the president of *Learn Larp, LLC* – a US live roleplay company.*

Deutsch, Stefan
(b. 1969)

Stefan Deutsch is a larp designer. For a quarter of a century he has been creating worlds for all kinds of people to explore and to meet. He mixes methods from psycho- and sociodrama, Nordic Larp, freeform and free improvisation.

Ebbehøj, Anders Lyng
(b. 1988)

*Besides the *Drug Box for Morgenrøde*, Anders Lyng Ebbehøj's greatest larp-achievement is probably 60 perfectly cooked, medium rare hamburgers for *Just a Little Lovin* DK.*

Ebbehøj, Søren
(b. 1984)

Søren Ebbehøj is a Danish engineer and larp designer. Working his way from logistics, Søren has become more interested in the physical and practical aspects of game design.

- Edman, Karin**
(b. 1980) *Karin Edman is a Swedish larp designer and consultant. Her areas are risk awareness, expectation management, empowerment through play and alternative history.*
- Elofsson, Alma**
(b. 1992) *Alma Elofsson loves the way larp lets us live hundreds of lives, and mostly designs and plays historical larps. She lives in Gothenburg with her fiancé and two ridiculously floofy cats.*
- Friis Hansen, Kasper**
(b. 1985) *Kasper Friis Hansen is a Danish copywriter and larp designer who recently became a dad, so he couldn't really focus on writing a bio.*
- Giovannucci, Alessandro**
(b. 1980) *Alessandro Giovannucci is an Italian lecturer and larp designer. He has co-founded Chaos League, co-written the Southern Way – New Italian Larp manifesto and designed some international larps (Black Friday, New Atlantis, Bunker 101).*
- Giovannucci, Andrea**
(b. 1977) *Andrea Giovannucci is an actor, writer and game designer. He has co-founded Chaos League, co-written the Southern Way – New Italian Larp manifesto. He has written many larps, including New Atlantis, 1630, Bunker 101, and many more.*
- Grove, Anne Serup**
(b. 1987) *Anne Grove works in service and communication design and has solid experience in producing, incl. Fastaval (12 years), Black Box Horsens and The Solution. She also knits shrimps.*
- Hakkarainen, Tuomas**
(b. 1977) *Tuomas Hakkarainen works in the Finnish games industry and never queens for buckets. He writes emo poetry, uses German nicknames and likes hugs.*
- Heij, Karijn van der**
(b. 1983) *Karijn van der Heij has been an active role-player and larpwright for over fifteen years, working with others to diversify and enrich the local scene. She loves her husband and kid, over-dramatic plotlines and cool larp anecdotes.*
- Hertel, Signe Løndahl**
(b. 1988) *Signe Løndahl Hertel is a Copenhagen based architect, freeform writer, blackbox designer and con organiser. She laid a large part of the theoretical groundwork for the application of spatial design in larps.*
- Holendová, Kateřina**
(b. 1985) *Morgain Kateřina Holendová started to focus on experimental and dance larps through designing Dance Macabre: A Tango Larp. She later fell in love with blues and co-designed Valley of Shadon.*
- Holkar, Mo**
(b. 1967) *Mo Holkar is one of the organizers of The Smoke: London's International Larp Festival; an editor at nordiclarp.org; an organiser of The Game Kitchen; and a designer of chamber larps, some of which are at holkar.net.*

**Czech Republic**

Kateřina Holendov
Iva Vvrov

Denmark

Jesper Heebll Arbjrn
Troels Barkholt-Spangsbo
Anders Lyng Ebbehj
Sren Ebbehj
Kasper Friis Hansen
Anne Serup Grove
Signe Lndahl Hertel
Frederikke Sofie Bech Hyer
Jesper Kristiansen
Oliver Skjdt Nglebk
Klaus Meier Olsen
Bjarke Pedersen
Edin Jankovic Sumar
Jonas Trier-Knudsen
Danny Wilson

Finland

Tuomas Hakkarainen
Merli Juustila
Simo Jrvel
Kaisa Kangas
Laura Krger
Katri Elisabet Lassila
James Lrien MacDonald

Irrette Melakoski
Markus Montola
Juhana Pettersson
Eleanor Saitta
Jaakko Stenros
Anni Tolvanen

Germany

Stefan Deutsch
Tina Leipoldt

Italy

Marco Bielli
Alessandro Giovannucci
Andrea Giovannucci
Chiara Tirabasso

Norway

Martin Nielsen
Elin K. Nilsen
Aina D. Skjnsfjell
Grethe Sofie Bulterud Strand
Martine Helene Svanevik

Sweden

Karin Edman
Alma Elofsson
Anders Hultman
Johanna Koljonen

Frida Lindegren
Simon Lindman Svensson
Annika Waern
Josefin Westborg
Anna Westerling
Kerstin rtberg

The Netherlands

Susan Mutsaers
Karijn van der Heij

United Kingdom

Simon Brind
Mo Holkar
Joanna Piancastelli
Sebastian F. K. Svegaard
Laura Wood

United States of America

Maurly Elizabeth Brown
Kat Jones
Jonaya Kemper
J Li
Ericka Paige Skirpan
Lizzie Stark
Evan Torner
Henry Piers Towsner

- Hultman, Anders**
(b. 1975) *Anders Hultman has designed larps like *A Nice Evening with the Family, Fortune & Felicity, Women, The Testimony* and more. He is also a producer for *Stockholm Scenario Festival*, and of the book *Nordic Larp in 2010*.*
- Høyer, Frederikke Sofie Bech**
(b. 1995) *Frederikke B. Høyer is a larp designer who has been one of the head organisers of the larp campaign *Fladlandsagaen*, that runs at Østerskov Boarding school.*
- Jones, Kat**
(b. 1981) *Kat Jones is a queer, Latina game designer, organiser, and scholar. In her day job she teaches in the fields of *Sociology; Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies; and Game Design*.*
- Juustila, Merli**
(b. 1985) *Merli Juustila has a passion for inclusive larps. Her larps are always aimed at one specific demographic like beginners, low budget larpers, or parents and children. She has a child and is eager to teach them all about larping.*
- Järvelä, Simo**
(b. 1978) *Simo Järvelä designs and studies experiences. As a cognitive scientist focusing on primitive affective processes, larp experience design is a sweet spot where theoretical academic and more practical artistic interests meet.*
- Kangas, Kaisa**
(b. 1979) *Kaisa Kangas is a larp designer who made her first larp in 1996. She works as a mathematician at University of Helsinki and enjoys cross-country skiing.*
- Kemper, Jonaya**
(b. 1985) *Jonaya Kemper is a designer, educator, and games scholar who looks at role playing as a means of liberation for those with marginalised identities. Her favorite themes are urban fantasy, afrofuturism and folk tales.*
- Koljonen, Johanna**
(b. 1978) *Johanna Koljonen is a participation designer, larp theorist and media analyst. She is the CEO of *Participation Design Agency* and the executive producer of larps like *Inside Hamlet*.*
- Kristiansen, Jesper**
(b. 1983) *Longtime organiser from Denmark, with an academic background in the study of religions, Jesper Kristiansen is working with developing Danish larp and improving the conditions of larpers and larp-organisations in DK.*
- Kröger, Laura**
(b. 1983) *Laura Kröger is a long-time larper and larp organiser best known as creator of *Complicated Relationship Drama*. Her latest larp *Pyhävuoren perilliset* was played seven times and rewarded by the community for best writing and best organising.*
- Lassila, Katri Elisabet**
(b. 1979) *Katri Lassila is a photographic and film artist occasionally designing larps of a mostly adventurous and/or romantic nature.*

- Leipoldt, Tina**
(b. 1979) *Tina Leipoldt lives in the Tannus-forest and works as an advisor on conflict mitigation and peacebuilding in Development Cooperation. Larping around the globe has been her hobby for over 18 years.*
- Li, J**
(b. 1983) *J Li is a Chinese-American larpwright and design theorist focused on design patterns and human-centred design. She writes games for emotional immersion and advocates for neurodiversity accessibility and representation. Her studio is Vermillion Games.*
- Lindegren, Frida**
(b. 1991) *Frida Lindegren is a Swedish psychologist, gamemaster and larp designer, who spends her time working with men's sexual and mental health.*
- MacDonald, James Lórien**
(b. 1977) *James Lórien MacDonald is a Finnish-Canadian larper, theatre and performance artist, writer, and stand-up comedian. He began mutually polluting larp and theatre in 2009 with the Walkabout performance games, created with Aarni Korpela.*
- Melakoski, Irrette**
(b. 1974) *Irrette Melakoski is a larp designer who has returned back to larp after a few years of absence. She works as a usability analyst and likes being en pointe.*
- Montola, Markus**
(b.1978) Finland *Markus Montola is a game designer and scholar who has worked on games such as The Walking Dead: Our World and books such as Nordic Larp and Pervasive Games: Theory and Design.*
- Mutsaers, Susan**
(b.1990) *Susan Mutsaers is a larp designer who has been active since 2008. She has a bachelor degree in social work, founded a company and worked on roughly 15 different larps and pervasive storytelling productions.*
- Nielsen, Martin**
(b. 1980) *Martin Nielsen works as manager for the Oslo based larp company Alibier. He is a volunteer in the NGO Fantasiforbundet, organising Grenselandet, The Larpwriter Summer School, and other events.*
- Nilsen, Elin K.**
(b. 1980) *Elin Nilsen was co-editor of Larps from the Factory and the 2017 Knutepunkt book, headed the programme group for Knutepunkt twice, and has helped design larps like KoiKoi, Summer Lovin', and Screwing the Crew.*
- Nøglebæk, Oliver Skjødt**
(b.1982) *Oliver Nøglebæk is a Danish larpwright and serial rerunner designed in 1982 for mass market consumption.*
- Olsen, Klaus Meier**
(b. 1981) Denmark *Klaus Meier Olsen has been part of the Fastaval scene for many years, and considers himself more of a freeformer than a larper.*

- Pedersen, Bjarke**
(b. 1975) *Bjarke Pedersen is a Danish larp designer. He is one of the creators of larps like Inside Hamlet, End of the Line, Enlightenment in Blood, U-359, PAN and BAPHOMET. His designs often focus on strong alibi, physical play and occult themes.*
- Pettersson, Juhana**
(b. 1980) *Juhana Pettersson is a Finnish novelist, writer and designer of larps and roleplaying games. He has made larps in nine countries, in venues ranging from beaches to ships, from Friedrichshain to the European Parliament.*
- Piancastelli, Joanna**
(b. 1988) *Joanna Piancastelli is a larpwright who combines mainstream genres with transparent, high emotion design in larps including Dawnstone, Unheroes, and Marked.*
- Saitta, Eleanor**
(b. 1978) *Eleanor Saitta is a hacker, designer, artist, and barbarian whose vocation is understanding how complex systems/ stories fail and redesigning them to fail better. She's been larping since 2011 and has edited The Foundation Stone of Nordic Larp.*
- Skirpan, Ericka Paige**
(b. 1983) *Ericka Skirpan is a North American larp designer who focuses on merging theater, immersive design, modern technology, and competitive players into character-focused, collaborative larp events.*
- Skjønsvjell, Aina D.**
(b. 1986) Norway *Aina Skjønsvjell is a larper, translator and larpmaker. She has made larps sporadically since 2004 and will continue in this leisurely fashion until the very end. She loves to help out and throw her brain at others.*
- Stark, Lizzie**
(b. 1981) United States of America *Lizzie Stark moonlights as a larp designer, playable theater professor, and facilitator. Previously, she wrote the nonfiction book Leaving Mundania, and co-edited the larp collections #Feminism and Larps from the Factory.*
- Stenros, Jaakko**
(b. 1976) *Jaakko Stenros (PhD) is a University Lecturer in Game Studies at the Tampere University. He has published nine books and over 50 articles on games, and curated exhibitions at the Finnish Museum of Games.*
- Strand, Grethe Sofie Bulterud**
(b.1980) *Grethe Sofie Bulterud Strand is a larp designer and organiser, as well as one of the editors of 2017 Knutepunkt book. Polyester costumes and rituals during a solar eclipse got her hooked on larp.*
- Sumar, Edin Jankovic**
(b. 1992) *Edin Jankovic Sumar has been larping on-and-off since he was eleven years old. Since 2015 he has been professionally working as a larpwright on larps such as College of Wizardry.*

- Svanevik, Martine Helene**
(b. 1984)
- Martine Svanevik is a larper, fiction writer, and a narrative and game designer. A co-founder and the CEO of Avalon Larp Studio, her work has featured in both AAA games and indie productions. She's been playing and making larps since 1999.*
- Svegaard, Sebastian F. K.**
(b. 1976)
- Sebastian F. K. Svegaard is a PhD candidate, researching fanvids. He has actually written about larp design without ever having designed or written one himself. As a queer larper, he has previously written about larp experiences from a queer and fan studies standpoint.*
- Svensson, Simon Lindman**
(b. 1984)
- Simon Lindman Svensson is a larp designer and one of the founding members of Atropos. He has a Master's Degree in History and enjoys worldbuilding and writing for larps.*
- Tirabasso, Chiara**
(b. 1978)
- Chiara Tirabasso has designed larps since 1999, and is a co-founder of Terre Spezzate, the leading larp collective in Italy. She was lead designer on Black Friday, Icarus, Dracarys and Keystone and co-lead designer in Red Center.*
- Tolvanen, Anni**
(b. 1982)
- Anni Tolvanen is a composer and sound designer working in the games industry in Finland. She has played and organised larps for over twenty years, and explores communication through sound and music in games.*
- Torner, Evan**
(b. 1982)
- Evan Torner, PhD, is a German professor at the University of Cincinnati and an avid larper and larp theorist. He also co-founded the Golden Cobra contest and the journal Analog Game Studies.*
- Towsner, Henry Piers**
(b. 1981)
- Henry Towsner is an American mathematician, larper, and game designer.*
- Trier-Knudsen, Jonas**
(b. 1983)
- Jonas Trier-Knudsen is a game designer and journalist turned copywriter. He has made educational games and larps for the past 15 years.*
- Vávrová, Iva**
- Iva Vávrová is a Czech larp translator, designer, and dancer. She translated and internationalised Legion: Siberian Story and De la Bête. Valley of Shadow was the first larp she co-designed.*
- Waern, Annika**
(b. 1960)
- Annika Waern is a design researcher focusing on the design of technology-supported game and play experiences with a long history of researching larp and pervasive games in particular. She is a professor and chair in human-computer interaction at Uppsala University.*
- Westborg, Josefin**
(b. 1984)
- Josefin Westborg is one of the world's leading designers of edularps. She is co-owner of and working at Lekreativ/Lajvbyrån. Though she be but little, she is fierce.*

Westerling, Anna
(b. 1981)

Anna Westerling designed and produced A Nice Evening With the Family, Fortune & Felicity, Love Stories by ABBA, Robin's Friends and more. Producer of Stockholm Scenario Festival, Knutpunkt 2006 and 2010, and the book Nordic Larp in 2010.

Wilson, Danny
(b. 1987)

Danny Wilson is a danish larp designer who has written for the Danish conventions Fastaval and Blackbox Copenhagen. His games often explore the darker sides of the human experience.

Wood, Laura
(b. 1986)

Laura Wood has written several chamber larps, which have run in festivals across Europe. She is a co-organiser of The Smoke (London's international larp festival) and On Location, and an organiser of the Immersivists Club.

Örtberg, Kerstin
(b. 1976)

Kerstin Örtberg is a sport fashion designer and has larped since forever. She was assistant Costume Producer for The Solution. Costumes makes her strangely happy, and she is on a mission to spread that joy.

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