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Reading Larps: The Larp Experience Through Larp Scripts

Larps exist outside the ephemeral reality of larping. Some larps are published as books, others are archived as PDFs. Larps can be read and experienced without being played. But to grasp a larp through reading without playing, you need to have the skill, the literacy. Literacy means that you have the skills for a particular way of thinking, reading and writing (Street 2001).

In the spring of 2022 I browsed through 2303 larps in search for European *larp scripts* published in English or a Nordic language. I took on this mission because I would like to prove that a larp can be read, that larps are more than larping. To prove the importance of larp scripts, together with Tor Kjetil Edland and Anna Groth, I also published the larp script of *Just a Little Lovin'* as a book (Groth, Grasmø, and Edland 2021). At 628 pages, the book is designed for you to touch and feel the weight of larp design.

To play a larp is like immersing yourself in water. If you are larping, you can feel it inside and on the surface of your body. Interaction. Co-creation. Musky smell of bodies. It's the chilling feeling of being in the water itself. So how can I compare that to the dry shores of words?

By mapping published larp scripts, this essay discusses what larp scripts are, how to read them, and how to keep them. Regarding keeping them, I have interviewed four representatives of Nordic larp archives. But, just as much, my aim is to inspire you to read larps, make larp scripts, and publish them as books or in archives.

Can You Read a Larp?

Larps are described as ephemeral: “larp does not exist until it is over, but at the moment it ends, it dissolves.” (Koljonen 2008, see also Stenros and Montola 2012, Jara and Torner 2018). In larp research, it is common to think that larps are “only possible to re-

search and analyse after they have been played” (Stenros 2004). So larp is only happening while you are larping?

But larps also may be read as books, in hindsight; to explain what larp is (Grasmø 1998, Pettersson 2005, Stenros and Montola 2010), as memory of the larp (e.g. Raasted and Gronemann 2013, Stenros and Montola 2017), or in anthologies of articles discussing design including, for example, the Knutpunkt-books. These texts are generally about narrativizing what happened after it happened. This is a complex endeavour, as every player — a first person audience — has their own reading of the event.

Furthermore, the focus on larps as what happens during gameplay may overshadow the multitude of text documents that are part of larps, and maybe the larp in itself, namely *the larp script*. Often meant for the larp designers' and the game producers' eyes only, the larp script is sometimes also published for the players and other readers to access.

Defining Larp Scripts

A common way to “read larps” is turning to the websites of larps, where the designers describe and advertise their upcoming events, that can include fictional setting, background information, and sometimes characters. But this is not “the larp”. This interface between writers and players of larps that we can name *design abstracts* (Grasmø and Stenros 2022) is websites, brochures, compendium or other invitation publications which explains the larp to its audience. Other kinds of text I have encountered that are part of what makes a larp are *larp retrospects*, which is blueprint from designers, “books about...” the larp or other documentation and players stories, *methodic texts*, that explain and discuss design and methods, like Knutpunkt books and articles at nordiclarps.org, and lastly *academic texts*, that discuss the phenomena and meaning of larp.

While all the other texts are *about* the larp, I think the *larp script* can be seen as (part of) the larp itself. The term was used by Harvianen the first time in 2009, and widely spread by *The Larps from the Factory project* (2013) where it is coined as it is understood today. Josefin Westborg has discussed the term in an article on nordiclarp.org (Westborg 2022). In *Larp Design*, larp scripts are defined loosely as “all the written material needed to stage and play a larp”, but at the same time these written material are regarded “only the starting-point – the score – for play” (Stenros and Montola 2019, 16).

All larps have some kind of text made before the larp, like a hand-out, characters, ruleset and background info. But to be defined as a larp script, it is not enough to have some documents in a shared folder, or some notes on a hard drive or a stack of paper documents. As such, I do not agree with the abovementioned definition of larp scripts as “documents needed to run the larp”. Instead, I lean on J. Tuomas Harviainen’s frame when defining larp scripts. He distinguishes between larps that the designers will only re-run themselves, and larp scripts written so that anyone can run the experience: “The former you can correct as you go along, the latter, when the script is published, you cannot. It is therefore important to have the game as perfected as possible when it goes public.” (Harviainen 2009, 102).

I am interested in how larps are created textually, as design and beyond design, and this essay looks at larp script from a designer and producers point of view, as *re-runnable larps*. Re-runnable larps are becoming more popular amongst organisers, ”and designing for multiple runs from the get-go are increasingly common.” (Stenros and Montola 2018).

I narrowed my treasure hunt for written larps to *larp script books*, traditionally published, e-books and print-on-demand alike, as a book is a definite form that cannot change. In these books, we can

read re-runnable larps from the designer’s view. I have also chosen to include published PDFs in my understanding of “book”. This is necessary since there are sparse examples of published larp script books in Europe, while in contrast the American larpers may choose among many hundreds of larp script books (Kessock 2013). Here is my definition of a larp script:

A finalized text that is published and re-runnable by others than the designer(s) of the larp, in which the skilled reader can experience the story and design of the larp for themselves.

600+ Larp Scripts Published

If you want to glance over all the larp script treasures I found across the digital landscapes of Europe, some of them can be found in Table 1. I have screened archives and web pages, categorised them and made a map to the best of my knowledge. I did not travel everywhere, nor do I know many European languages, but I have made a map of where larp scripts are to be found. Here’s a summary of my findings: 10 published monographs, 7 of them in book form (including one published in 2024) and 10 anthologies (with 133 larp scripts, including one published in 2024), as well as 20 larp scripts that are part of a book, often to explain edu-larp. In the Nordic larp archives, I found 2303 larps, about 500 of which were published as larp scripts. Some larp organisers also publish their larps on their own web site, and when I happened to find such a treasure, I included them.

Table 1: European Larp scripts published (02-2022)

Monographs (10 larps)

Paper books:

Muriel, (French larp, lack information). Paper-book, long-form larp.

First they came (Chaos League). Softcover and pdf, Hybrid larp, 2-6 players.

Infinite minutes (Chaos League). Hardcover print on demand 7-9 players.

The Space Between Us (Chaos League) Print on demand, chamber larp.

Sign 2017 (Thorny Games). Hardcover print on demand in English, Dutch and Norwegian, chamber larp.

Just a Little lovin' larp script (Volvemál, 2021) Kickstarter print book and free pdf, longform larp, 55 - 70 players.

Added 2024: *Gothic*, (Avalon Larp Studio, 2024). Hardcover print-on-demand, 10 players, but XX consecutive runs, so 25 each time it is set up...

PDF's :

Last Will (Foreningen Ursula) <https://www.foreningenursula.se/last-will/the-larp-manuscript/> , 44 players, 23 hours.

Nästa Station Kymlinge (Foreningen Ursula) <https://www.foreninge-nursula.se/understockholm/nasta-station-kymlinge/>, 15 players, 4 hours

Mad about a boy (Tor Kjetil Edland, Margrete Raaum, Trine Lise Lindahl, 2010/2011): <http://mad-about-the-boy-larp.blogspot.com/p/larpscript.html> , 30-40 players, 3 days.

Collections of larps

Larp-anthologies (142 larp scripts):

ERITTAIN-humoristinen: Pienimuotoinen-miniLARP saannhupa-elma (Krisse Tuominen). Softcover and online. Short humor-larps in Finnish.

Scenariebogen: 9 fremragende danske rollespilsscenarier 2006-2010. (Rollespilsfabrikken ed Raasted & Elleman, 2011). Hardcover, in Danish, winner scripts from Fastaval festival.

Larp Factory Book (eds: Trine Lise Lindahl & Elin Nielsen, 2013) Softcover and online.

Check Larps (Lujza Kotryová, ed, 2015). Softcover print. 10 chamber larps from Czechia, translated to English, elected from 300 scenarios.

#feminism - a nano-game anthology (Lizzie Stark, Elin Nilsen, Anna Westerling eds, Pelgrane Press, 2017) Published in US, but includes several Nordic larp designers.

Prism 2017 19 Polish queer larps, 19 games Project financed with support from Campaign Against Homophobia as part of the „Together We Can Do More” 2017 programme.

Phone Larps (Chaos League)

Crescendo Giocoso (The Italian Chamber Orchestra, 2017/2020) Two Italian chamber larp anthologies; Kickstarter print book and digital, Both an Italian and an International Edition.

Stolt (2019) lajv-antologi RFSL 2019 LGBTIQ e-book, free to download.

War Birds (US, Morya Turkington eds): includes 1 danish larp script

Bubbles - a hot tub larp anthology (Agnes Hultén and Mo Holkar, eds, 2024) - 16 short-larps

Larps as part of a book(20+ larp scripts)

Peoplemaking by Virginia Satir (1972), two short forms (15-20 minutes)

Myrskin Sankarit (Mike Pohjola, 2003, in Finnish), hardcover. Includes how to play larp scenarios in this world.

The Book of LARP (2003)

Roolipelimanifesti (2005, Juhana Pettersson) Game Museum Tampere, Finland

DO Larp - KP-book (Charles Bo Nielsen)

Oppskrifter på rollespill i institutioner og skoler (Kasper Friis, Claus Raasted). Examples of larps ready to play.

Roll-inclusive diversity and representation. Avery Alder et al (includes european larp designers). About inclusivity in rpg's, also some nano-larps. <https://www.amazon.com/Roll-Inclusive-Diversity-Repr%C3%A4sentation-Rollenspiel-ebook/dp/B07YBHMNFD>

Larp Archives

Alexandria.dk: 300+ larp scripts, mostly in Danish, Swedish and English, but also Norwegian and Finnish. 300 (there has been added a lot more since 2022)

scenariofestival.se: 170+ (including 2023 and 2024), all in English, often translated from Nordic languages. (Many of them also added to Alexandria)

laiv.org: 1. The one that was included is deleted, no-one used the feature.

The larp scripts that are published are commonly short larps (less than five hours) and for few players (2-20), many of them best suited at festivals and cons where many premiered. The Fastaval festival in Denmark is an important incentive for the development of larp script as a format, by having a contest and mentoring larp designers. Afterwards, *alexandria.dk* acts as an amplifier by publishing them online for the general public. Another important publisher is Chaos League, which publishes several of their chamber larp scripts in English.

The other feature most of the larp scripts have in common is that the larps were run several times prior to publication. That opens up an interesting discussion about the role of players as co-writers of the larp scripts. *Just a Little Lovin'* had been played 10 times before we published the larp script book in 2021. As such, it is not only formed by the designers and organisers rewriting and polishing the larp script before each run, but also by players taking the agency to form the story which, in turn, altered the larp script.

The journey into the archives told me that European larp scripts can make their way into books, but that most of them don't. It helps if the larp is short, made for a festival, or with an educatio-

nal aim. Fellow American larpers and their anthologies also support Nordic-style larp designers in getting larps in print. European larps in books are often in a contemporary genre and with a purpose of making art or changing society.

Archiving Larp Scripts

Since few larps scripts are published on paper, the best place to look for these lasting parts of larps is in the larp archives. I met four keymasters who guarded the Realm of Larps, and I interviewed them for a paper presented at the Game Studies Spring Seminar 2022 at Tampere University.

In the Nordic countries, there are some very different traditions of larp archives. The traditional museum archivist for the Finnish Museum of Games, Niklas Nylund, tells me in an interview that they have two larps on permanent display: *Rajakatse* (a long-running fantasy campaign) and *Halat hisar*. In addition the museum holds some role-playing books that include larp scripts (Pettersson 2005, Pohjola 2003). This is in a museum with the goal of archiving all Finnish games. They have many hundreds of tabletop role-playing game books. Where are the larp scripts? One reason may be the Finnish tradition of making 20-page-long characters, and producing more and more text for each episode of long-running campaigns.

The larp archivists are keepers of history, providers of knowledge and often work in the shadows: The Keeper of Norwegian Larp history, founder and master of *laiv.org* (similar archive exists in Sweden, *lajv.se*) for nearly 30 years is Tommy Finsen. He has kept track of every larp ever played in Norway, and also lists the ones that got cancelled. He tried, more than 20 years ago, to include a feature in *larp.org* to include larp scripts in *laiv.org*, but only one larp designer decided to do that, and that feature no longer exists.

This archive is about the history of larping, but does not show the content of actual larps, as a collection of 30 years of larp scripts would do.

The Larp Script Warrior, forcing all designers at Stockholm Scenario Festival to publish their finished larp script in English – 170 larp scripts free for all to download – is Anna Westerling. Her successors have also taken on this mission. Because of this requirement, many excellent Nordic Larps have been translated into English, and maybe also made into a proper larp script for the first time. Anna tells me the main aim with this web collection is to spread excellent Nordic design to all larp organizers and festival runners out there. Many of these larps were published in the Nordic languages before, in alexandria.dk, or found their way back there, after the festival.

It was in the impressive alexandria.dk where I found more than 2000 of the larp listings I read for this essay. The Librarian, Peter Brodersen is the founder of this archive, and he reveals his vision: To hold space for *all* role-playing games, including larps, ever made. He keeps the Alexandria.dk steadily growing, with a little group of helpers. Of the 2000 listings, around 300 also include larp scripts. Since I did the interview with Peter, the activity in alexandria.dk has increased, and he has himself presented and promoted the archive at Knutepunkt conferences. At this point, it seems like the ultimate place where all larp designers can publish their larp scripts digitally, in English or Nordic languages.

Larp Scripts as Playable and Readable Text

Who reads a larp script? Primarily, it is those who have a close relationship to the script, namely the larp designers and organisers, either as they are running their larp again, or considering doing so. If the larp is transparent, engaged players may also read the

whole script before they play. But as larp is increasingly published, larp scripts also meet readers with no intention to play the larp, who engage with the larp through text only. They may be game scholars, cultural critics, or funding bodies, as well as other larp designers.

We may read a larp script as a (role-playing game) manual, as a (theatre) manuscript and/or as a (game) hypertext. A theatre director can read and experience *Hedda Gabler* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. But to understand the literary (artful) value, we need to do a literary-ludic reading of games (Ensslin 2007), and thereby larps. Here, the greatness of literary reading lies not in formulated words nor a pleasurable read, but in how the designers create action, interaction, storylines, conflict lines, and social maps. A larp script, and a game design document in general, has the specificity that it may be understood, experienced and evaluated as a social interactive network, without needing to ever play the game (Jara 2018).

As such, 600 larp scripts in the Nordic tradition let you sit safely on the shore – or on your couch – and imagine the whole larp, understanding how it can be played, and experiencing their art in your heart. The larp scripts themselves are encounters with art. But to experience the larp by reading it, you need the ability to imagine how it will be played. A skilled designer or player can know after reading the larp script if it will be *this* larp or *that* larp. While everyone can of course read a larp script, it takes a frame of reference and some skills to understand what is described, and to evaluate both the ludic and the literary quality of the piece. A theatre critic, a theatre director, or a theatre scholar can understand a theatre play by reading the manuscript.

The literacy needed for understanding larp scripts can be described with digital culture scholar Astrid Ensslin's theory of (video) art games as literary-ludic texts (Ensslin 2014): The reader needs to understand the larp script both as playable like a game (ludic)

and readable like a book or a film (literary). To read a larp, you also need to be able to read ludonarratology and study aspects of in-game narrative, the same way you would analyse a film or theatre manuscript. A ludoliterary analysis of a larp also involves the understanding of style and genre in larp. This can for instance mean to describe the larp in which style you would play it: Ensslin (2014) divides between a *game* where you typically use hyper focus; trying to win it or solve it and *deep focus*; immersing as one does in literary genres. This would be a typically Nordic style larp.

Let's take for instance "Just put some salt on it", a three-page larp script from *#Feminism* (Stark et al 2016): the larp is strongly scripted, suitable for non-larpers and classrooms, has very thin characters and clear educational goals. The playstyle is non-literary and you need to hyper-focus. It is not about winning, though, it is fun, fast-paced, with a time-game-mechanic and repeating scenes which make it easy to play and just jump into the cringy theme of menstruation blood. To do this reading, you need some skill in understanding art in general, and larp design in particular. When you, on the other hand, get the 290-page larp script of *Gothic* (Brind et al. 2024), the skilled reader goes way beyond general understanding, but can analyse the flavours, the design choices, the narrative traditions it is a part of. *Gothic* is bespoke Nordic larp design, but with a heavy emphasis on text as art in itself. It can look like the long-written characters come from a standard Nordic style fantasy-larp, with a lot of background information to memorize to "win" the game, but when you see the whole design as a reader with larp literacy, you understand it is meant to be played in a literary way, with a deep focus.

Conclusions

Why I am so interested in larp scripts to be published as a fixed text is of course partly because it contributes to spreading excel-

lent larp design beyond the circle of players that participated in the original run of a larp. A well-written larp script is necessary for future organizers of that specific larp, but it can also be used by other designers to learn, find inspiration, and build upon when they design their own projects.

My hope is that a larp script can be understood as much more than a bunch of documents to run a larp. To me, the literary-ludic texts made by larp designers are cultural artifacts that in the future should be regarded as "high culture", like theatre manuscripts and novels. To become that, larp scripts must be written and published so that they can reach a wider art public, and ultimately be recognised by the cultural grant bodies.

With this study, I show how larps are not only ephemeral, but can be read as literary art games. I aim to encourage studying larp script books as part of game design studies, literary studies, game culture studies, game production studies and research-through-art.

To develop larp scripts as a form, we need to re-run larps that are not our own, but also foster a discussion on the nature of larp scripts, what they can and should include. With a growing readership of larps, we can also open more discussions about what kind of artistic experience larp scripts can be.

Let us open the magic door to the lands of larping, by reading larps.

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