





Once Upon a Nordic Larp...

The official book of Knutepunkt 2017

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Once Upon a Nordic Larp...

## **Twenty Years of Playing Stories**

Being a complex grimoire of received wisdom, forbidden wisdom, and questionable wisdom; techniques (both meta- and otherwise); lies, damn lies, and associated ephemera. It was written by an eclectic mix of wonderful people from across the globe and

edited by

Martine Svanevik, Linn Carin Andreassen, Simon Brind, Elin Nilsen, and Grethe Sofie Bulterud Strand.

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# Introduction

Martine Svanevik

**WHEN I SET OUT** to write this editorial, I wanted to talk about the anniversary of Knutepunkt and our choice to look to our roots as well as to the future. Now, twenty years later, we planned to be retrospective; introspective even ... to pause, consider, and take stock. But in the last few years, nordic larp has become international, perhaps even mainstream. Once again, people are debating whether nordic larp is inherently political, artistic, ethical, non-commercial, good or bad. The original question of defining nordic larp has resurfaced (give up, it can't be done in any meaningful way). And I realised that this is not the time to step back and reflect: this is the time to step forward and act.

Nordic larp is changing. We're doing things bigger, bolder, better, but also smaller, weirder and more daring. We're reaching out across communities and we're seeing both how similar we all are but also how fundamentally different. The increasing interest in, and commercialisation of roleplaying

means that things we thought we'd already debated to death and things we'd taken for granted, suddenly need to be defined and argued about. But more than this, as well as debate we need to create, to play, to write, and to make larps. Now more than ever, we have an opportunity to shape the future, to become that social movement that some argue we already are, to create stories that change the world.

Stories are important. They shape us, frame our experiences, they help us make sense of the world and our lives. By playing stories, we catch glimpses of other people's lives. We can, for brief moments at least, live their experiences. If done right, this type of experience can foster understanding and connect people across nationalities, class, age, and genders.

Collaborative storytelling is a powerful drug. Creating something together gives a positive feedback loop, a joyous emotional high of communality, creativity and trust.

We're playing games of "Yes, and" with tens (and sometimes hundreds) of people at once. It's no wonder that playing together can foster a sense of kinship with people you've only known a few days (or, in some cases, merely hours). This elation might be why people keep coming back to larp, and it is definitely part of what makes larping such a powerful tool. It can change the world. That is, if we want it to.

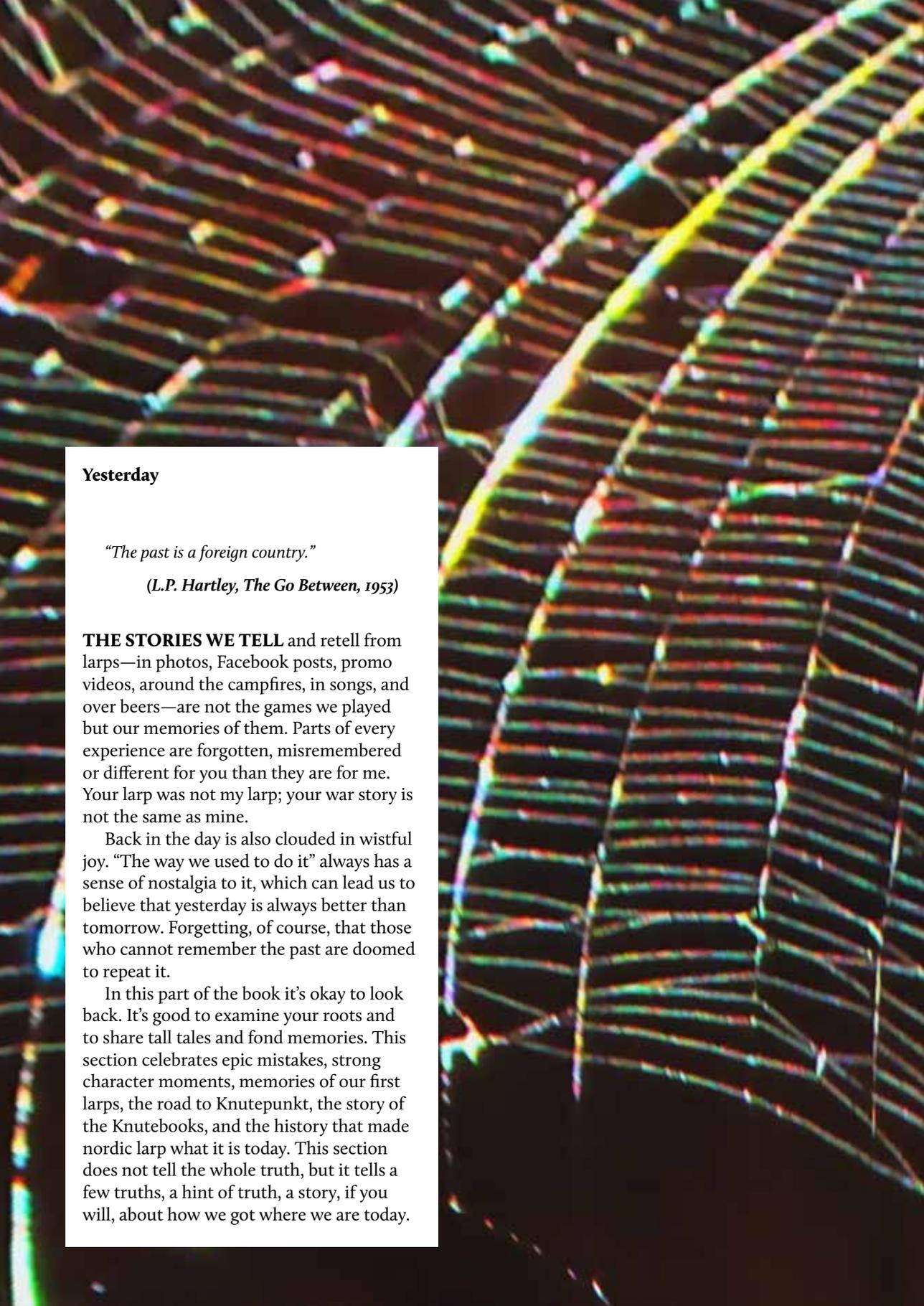
That is why the debate about what nordic larping can and should do is so important, especially in the age of transmedia experiences and commercial larping. And that is why it is absolutely paramount that we continue creating, playing and telling new stories.

This book is an entry in the current debate about nordic larp. It looks back to the roots of our movement and the Knutepunkt conference; it is also a collection of meta-techniques, debates, memories and a discussion of cutting edge larp design. This collection also has some articles and opinions from larp

writers and organisers who are not from the nordic tradition but who we believe will further the discourse. At the end, the writers set out to imagine where we're headed with all this in the future.

Although we've chosen to split the book in three sections: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow, it is not designed to be read cover to cover. You can flip through it, starting in one spot and skipping to another, but in the end, we hope that you'll read every article. Between articles, we have scattered memories and anecdotes from 20 years of larp experiences and design as well as short predictions for the future. We have also introduced opinion pieces where responses and ripostes are published back-to-back.

We wanted this year's Knutepunkt book to be something special, and looking at the collections of articles, memories, stories and predictions gathered in this volume, I believe we succeeded. I hope you enjoy it.



## Yesterday

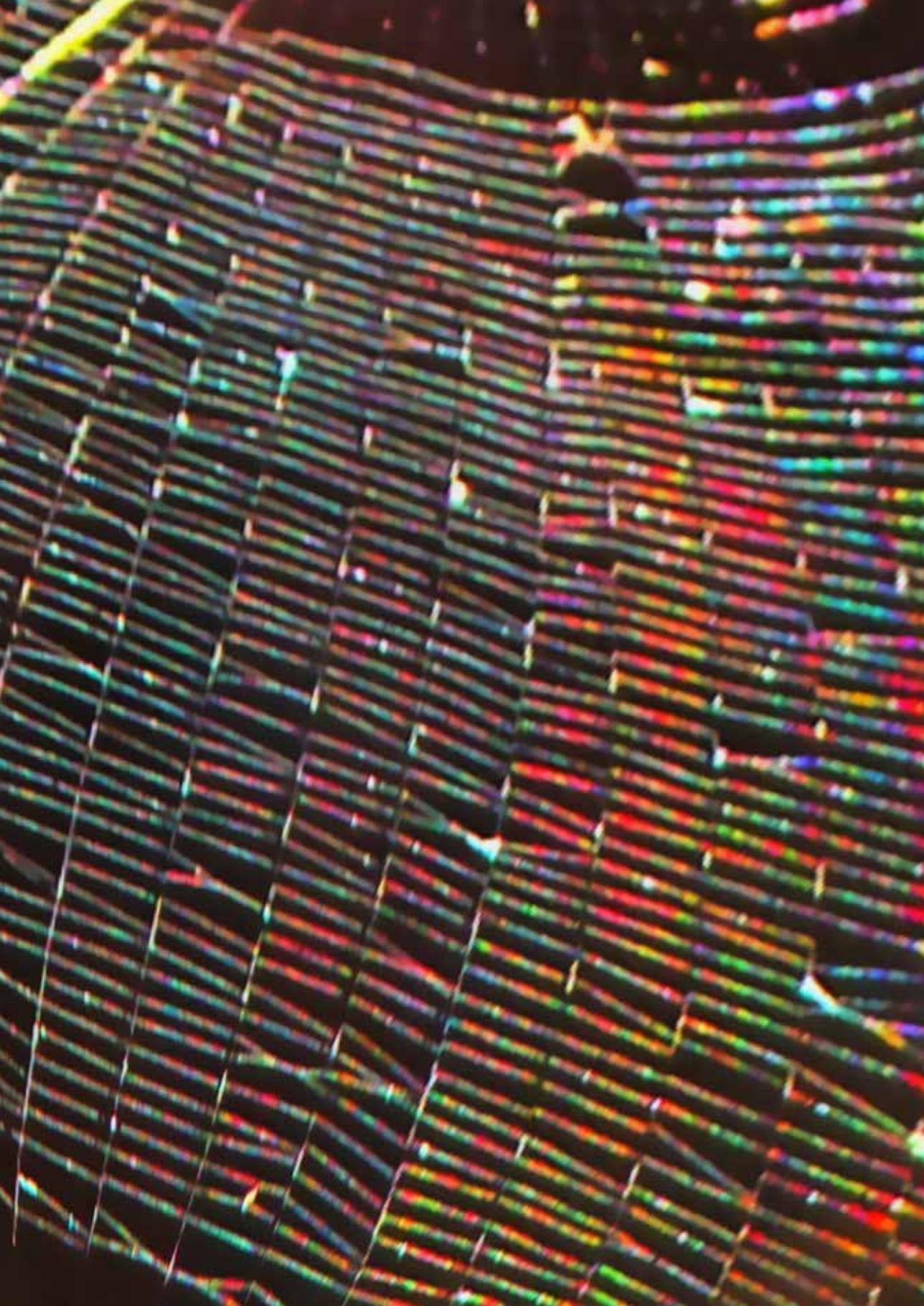
*"The past is a foreign country."*

*(L.P. Hartley, *The Go Between*, 1953)*

**THE STORIES WE TELL** and retell from larps—in photos, Facebook posts, promo videos, around the campfires, in songs, and over beers—are not the games we played but our memories of them. Parts of every experience are forgotten, misremembered or different for you than they are for me. Your larp was not my larp; your war story is not the same as mine.

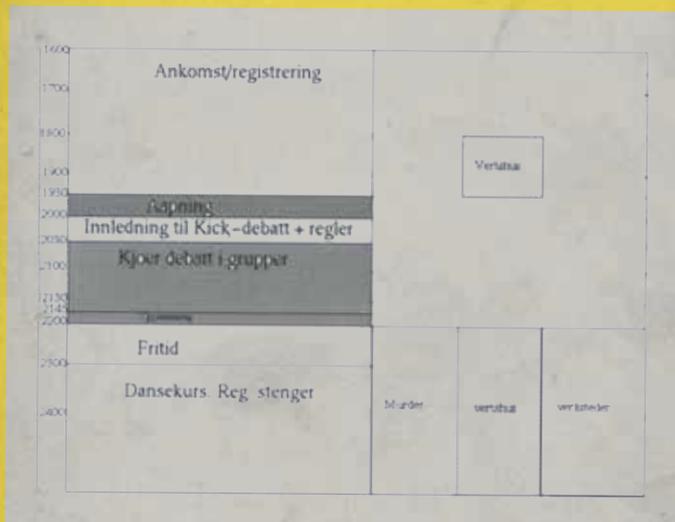
Back in the day is also clouded in wistful joy. "The way we used to do it" always has a sense of nostalgia to it, which can lead us to believe that yesterday is always better than tomorrow. Forgetting, of course, that those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it.

In this part of the book it's okay to look back. It's good to examine your roots and to share tall tales and fond memories. This section celebrates epic mistakes, strong character moments, memories of our first larps, the road to Knutepunkt, the story of the Knutebooks, and the history that made nordic larp what it is today. This section does not tell the whole truth, but it tells a few truths, a hint of truth, a story, if you will, about how we got where we are today.



# LET'S LARP THIS!

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—THE ROADTRIP THAT  
SPAWNED KNUTEPUNKT

written by Grethe Strand  
told by Hanne Grasmø

47.  
Ung var eg fordom,  
eg einsaman fór,  
vegwillið á eg vart.  
Rík eg tóttast  
nár eg ráka einkvar;  
mann er manns gaman. (*Hávamál*)<sup>1</sup>

**IT ALL STARTED** with a road trip. In the spring of 1997 three Norwegians, Niels Wisth, Erlend Eidsem Hansen and Hanne Grasmo, rented a small, cheap car and drove from Oslo to Stockholm. The goal of the trip was to find a collective called Babylon Five, where the creators behind the larp *Trenne Byar* (Grins and Ericsson, et.al, 1994) lived.

For this anniversary edition of the KP book, we want to look backwards as well as forwards and Hanne Grasmo wants to give us a personal account on how the seeds for a Nordic larp conference were first sown. As one of the founders of Knutepunkt, together with Margrete Raaum, Erlend Eidsem Hansen and Ståle Askerød Johansen, and the author of the first Norwegian book about larping, (Grasmo, *Levende rollespill—LAIV*, 1998), we were very excited when a pitch from Hanne about a fast and fearless roadtrip to Sweden dropped into the Knutebook's digital mailbox. Therefore, on a dark November night, Hanne and I sat down at my living room table. The fireplace and Hanne's energy were doing a marvellous job keeping the cold at bay. We had just shared a meal

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1 "Young was I once, I walked alone,  
and bewildered seemed in the way;  
then I found me another and rich I thought me,  
for man is the joy of man." (*The Elder or Poetic Edda*, 1908)

together, I tucked my six-year-old into bed while Hanne worked on her other article for the Knutebook. When I came back downstairs, Hanne started telling her story about the road to the first Knutepunkt. This is her personal account and subjective memory.

“The way I see it, this was the trip that sowed the seed of Knutepunkt in our minds. We didn’t have a specific address, only knew the name of the collective and the people who lived there, Martin Ericsson, Daniel Krauklis, and ‘Koffe’ (Christoffer Sandberg). We were planning to participate in the sci-fi, or more specific steampunk, larp *Mineva* (cancelled) and we knew they were having an organiser meeting that weekend. If it wasn’t for the incredible design of the larp compendium of *Mineva* we, the alternative larpers from Norway, would probably not have signed up for the larp. And then there wouldn’t have been any surprise visit/trip to Stockholm and maybe, just maybe, the idea of Knutepunkt wouldn’t have been born.

“I drove all day, obviously the other two guys, like most larpers in Norway, didn’t have driver’s licences. Fortunately, the car was a lot faster than we had expected, being the cheapest car we could rent. So I paid no attention to speed limits. The car literally flew over the speed bumps.

“What we talked about during the trip?” Without a pause, and with just a quick faraway look like she’s staring into the past, she answers: “Larp. Larp, all the time. Larps we’d been to or heard about, upcoming larps, larp ideas. We were all high on larp. The world was larp. Larp was the world for me. The larp *Kybergenesis* (Fatland, Rydland and Wisth, 1997) was the big thing in Norway that year and we were also discussing the larp *Moirais vev* (Fatland and Hansen et al., 1997), which involved a lot of rituals. We wanted to find out how to create strong, real experiences and by that to break all boundaries and develop ourselves and the world.

“We started in the morning and reached Stockholm at about five or six in the evening. It was still light outside when we arrived. Erlend had a proper TV camera with him and wanted to document the meeting and promote the kind of larp the Swedes did to Norwegian larpers. In 1994, a couple of Norwegians had participated in *Trenne Byar*, the largest larp in the Nordic countries so far with 1100 participants. The Norwegians had just as big larp ideas but mostly made them for 30-50 participants.” Hanne takes one of her very few pauses, and emphasises her next sentence. “Back in the 90s we didn’t, and still in 2016 Norwegian larpers don’t, think big enough in sheer numbers or bold ideas. Norwegian larps are 50-60 participants at a maximum, once in a decade we go close to a hundred.”

The right door appeared and the three travellers were welcomed by Martin's partner Anna Eriksson. The guys weren't at home. Fortunately they were all three gathered, together with more organisers, in the basement planning *Mineva*.

### LET'S LARP THIS!

"Lets larp this!" one of us said.

Hanne grins. "So Niels, he's a really good larper, he immediately went into character as a Norwegian television reporter;

"This is Niels Wisth reporting for NRK<sup>2</sup> from Stockholm. Today we are meeting a group of Swedish larp designers to hear what they have to tell us about their upcoming larp *Mineva*."

Erlend naturally became the camera operator and started filming while they walked towards the room. Hanne, who started her larp career as a journalist who was only to have a short guest appearance as a volva for three hours and then stayed the whole three days of the larp, took out her pen and notebook, ready to take notes.

Hanne is agitated while she explains: "This was a way for us to get the upper hand. At the time, we were completely starstruck by their amazing and megalomaniacal ideas. I knocked on the door, and the second it opened, Niels stuck out his microphone and started asking questions. Erlend followed with his camera and I started to write down their names and age.

"They completely took the bait and believed the fiction we created. Of course the project was fantastic enough to attract the attention of a large national TV channel from the neighbouring country. They were all really eager to talk to the camera. The ability to pull off a huge project like *Trenne Byar* had already been proven and now the sky was the limit. A professional designer had even made impressive costumes that were shown to the camera.

But the larp had to end, we had more important conversations in mind. We blew our own cover and returned to our personalities of Norwegian larpers. We sat down and talked. It was a heartfelt meeting. To finally meet someone that took larp as seriously as we did."

---

2 The Norwegian national broadcasting station.

The larp (*Mineva*) as promoted and presented in 1996 was never to be, but still had quite an impact in the Nordic larp community.

### A NORDIC GATHERING

“As I remember it, the idea that we would collect the larp organisers in the Nordic region that were ‘like us’ started growing not long after the meeting in Stockholm. By organisers like us I meant alternative (leftist) people who wanted to save the world, make important larps, and show that the medium has all the opportunities it has proven to have today. We had to come together and learn from each other and share amazing ideas.”

The University of Oslo was a stronghold for larpers in Norway’s capital. So, naturally, the event took place at Vilhelm Bjercknes hus at the Blindern campus.

“We weren’t that good at inviting people to join the organising crew,” Hanne admits. “We needed people with practical skills and good ideas so we, Erlend and I, got ‘Margo’ (Margrete Raaum) and Ståle (Askerød Johansen) to join us.”

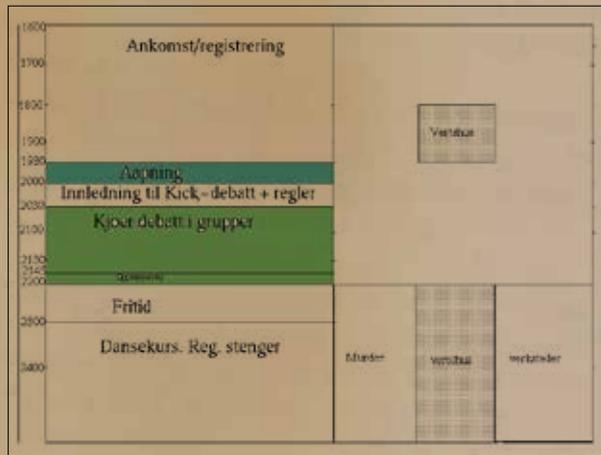
Through hectic networking, the organisers of the first Knutepunkt managed to get people from different parts of Norway to the gathering. Even a group from Trøndelag (mid-Norway) came to the first Knutepunkt, although few of them have ever returned. The Swedish magazine *Fëa Livia*<sup>3</sup> was a glimpse into Swedish larping. Other than that, the Norwegians didn’t know much about what was going on in the other Nordic countries. By calling his large network of larpers, Erlend managed to get them to spread the word to Sweden, Denmark and Finland.

“Remember, this was before the Internet was a big thing,” Hanne explains. “Calling people on their landlines was the best option in 1996.”

Between 60 and 100 people attended the first Knutepunkt ever. The event did not have a set program except a big debate, an open tavern, a dance class, and meals. The participants were encouraged to contribute with their take on theory, design, practical work, techniques, debates and so on. Hanne was head of programme and tried to organise it somehow.

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3 *Fëa Livia* is a non-profit association that specialises in publishing magazines and books about avant-garde larp and role-playing.



*A glimpse of the programme for the first ever Knutepunkt conference.  
Provided by Hanne Grasmo.*

“There was a portable board where you could stick notes of paper with a pin on it. Not very digital! It felt like I was playing ‘Tetris’ the entire weekend, trying to fit programme items to the right room and time.” Hanne shakes her head. “I didn’t have time to talk and participate in all that was going on. But I sensed a common feeling of ‘now we have found home.’ At the end of the first Knutepunkt, a group of Swedes agreed to take on organising the next event, thus starting the four year cycle between the Nordic countries.”

On Sunday evening, a large group of the participants in Oslo still wanted more.

“‘Hutchy’ (Ragnhild Hutchison)’s parents had a large villa and we had a legendary afterparty there!” Hanne’s face lights up. “Finally, I had the chance to talk to everyone about everything, just like I had hoped for when the idea of Knutepunkt started growing. How to tell stories, what techniques to use, what have people done before?”

We share a smile before I ask Hanne what she thinks about Knutepunkt twenty years later. Looking back on where it all began, has this conference become what she thought it would be?

Hanne grows serious. "Well, we believed that larp would be great, become art, comment on the world and save it. And that Knutepunkt would be a way to gather those who believed just that.

"We have learned a lot from each other over the years. Together we, the Nordic larpers, have become greater than we would have been separately. But I don't like the way Knutepunkt has turned into a 'larp festival for everyone.' I remember back in 1997 we talked about not serving any alcohol during the two first days of the conference and having one big party the last evening. Nowadays, there's a bit too much hard partying going on.

"There are too many larpers coming from outside the Nordic countries. In my opinion, Knutepunkt should be a meeting place for larp designers, producers and theorists of nordic larp. If larps are being run at the event, they should showcase new larp designs. Knutepunkt should be predominantly Nordic. Non-Nordic participants should be limited to a few that bring their ideas to the Nordic larpers and bring nordic larp back to their communities. By all means, go ahead and create a gigantic larp festival, but then it's not Knutepunkt anymore. I'd rather have several small conferences between 150 and 250 participants than 500. And with a more focused programme and a tight target group. The networks will grow stronger and better then. Now, Knutepunkt has grown too big. You have to be pretty confident to get to know new people. Knutepunkt was meant to be a certain thing, a conference for Nordic larp organisers sharing their ideas and techniques."

And with those last words, the founder of Knutepunkt packs up her things, leaving me to ponder how far we've come from where it all began. Today, there are more and more crossroads for people who want to talk to others who look at larp in a similar way, or have a completely different approach. The roadmap keeps expanding and includes both highways and dirt roads where you can meet someone who knows the same language as you, the language of larp. Over the past twenty years, this conference has grown from a small gathering to something quite different. Whether Knutepunkt should become a world wide intersection, remain a small crossroad, or fade into a dirt road is ultimately up to you.

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## REMINISCES FROM THE EARLY DAYS OF LARP

by Charlotte Ashby

I am new to larp and, what is more, I have never played computer games or tabletop, so a great deal of the past two years has been a voyage into uncharted territory. What is an “NPC”? What is a “hit-point”? A “game master”?

I have loved uncovering these roots, linguistic and cultural, and the more I uncover the more of the alchemy of what we do in larp starts to make sense to me. I am a historian of sorts and so I believe that an understanding of the past always illuminates the present. As larp expands and gets more diverse in its player-base and practices, now is surely a good time to recall the stories of the much smaller communities that coaxed the initial flames into life in the late 80s and early 90s.

The reminiscences collect-

ed here are just that. They are stories, rather than Histories-with-a-capital-H, and fragments of what could fruitfully be a much larger project. I am a newcomer and have relied on generous suggestions of who to approach and still more generous contributions from people getting pinged out of the blue by a stranger asking them for “tales of the old days.” I have included a couple of stories from outside the Nordic countries at the end, for contrast.

Of course this collection is the tip of the iceberg. But even with this brief survey there are common features that stand out for me: The almost simultaneous bubbling up of the desire to “play live” among different groups in different places, with no contact between one another; The enthusiasm (and necessary touch of hubris) of

early larp makers who had to trust in their own conviction that “this could work”; Most of all, the echo in many stories of that seminal moment when the player finds themselves unexpectedly transported across the line between reality and fantasy. When they left behind their initial discomfort or self-consciousness and stepped into another world. This is something that has not changed and which continues to fuel our passion for larp into the future.

My heartfelt thanks to all the contributors here, who produced their pieces for this collection at very short notice. There are more stories to tell. Anyone who has a story of their first larp they would like to contribute, please mail a text or link to Gdoc to myfirstlarp@gmail.com.

—Charlotte Ashby

### SUSANNE GRÄSLUND

SWEDEN — “You have read *Lord of the Rings*, haven’t you? And played role-playing games? Do you want to join our live action role-playing game later this spring?”

I was asked these questions by a boy in my school theatre

group when I was fifteen and that was the start of my adventurous life as a larper. At the time we didn’t call it larp or even the Swedish word *lajv*. We used the term live and the event I just mentioned was the first one of its kind in Sollen-tuna and was just called *Liven* (“The Larp”). I don’t know exactly where the organisers got the idea from, but from

what I heard, inspiration came mainly from two sources: the role-playing magazine *Sinkadus* and a scout event called *Luinnaur Quest* where they had used fantasy themes.

In any case, I did of course say yes, and was the only girl among the about 35 participants for *Liven*. Instructions were very scarce and as I remember all I got was one dou-

Sollentuna den 17 februari 1989

L I V E - 8 9

HEJ,

förra terminen var det meningen att vi skulle ut och äventyra i skogen. Alltså praktisera rollspel. Bli hjälte på riktigt, sova under bar himmel, möta orcher i skogen mitt i natten och ta in på värdshus och sitta vid lägerelden.

Den gången blev det tyvärr inget av pga dålig planering. Men den här gången skall det bli av.

När?            Pingsthelgen -89, 12-14- maj.  
 Var?            Någonstans i Stockholms-området.  
 Hur?            Allt kommer att ske i tidsenlig anda, såsom kläder och mat.

Vad kräver vi nu av er?

Att              - ni är intresserade  
                   - ni är redo att satsa  
                   - ni fixar kläder och utrustning själva  
                   - ni i god tid får tillstånd av era föräldrar.

OBS! Live-arrangemanget kommer att innehålla två övernattningar i obekväm miljö.

Det kommer senare att komma ett inbetalningskort på drygt 100 kronor. Dessa pengar kommer att gå till mat, dryck och andra saker som hör till äventyret. Ni behöver alltså ej ta med er någon mat under hela helgen.

Cirka hälften av alla anmälda kommer att få vara "arrangörer", dvs spela rollen såsom orch, alv eller värdshusvärd. Detta betyder inte att man kommer att få tråkigare än de andra.

ble-sided page where it said I was going to play an elf and that I should make myself a boffer sword and some suitable clothes, bring a couple of blankets to sleep under and then get on a specific bus from Stockholm on a Friday evening on the 12th of May 1989. On the bus, I found a few more people who were also going to play elves. When we got off the bus, it was raining a bit and it was almost dark as it was quite late in the evening. We walked alongside a road into the forest of Tyresta (later a national park, from 1993) south of Stockholm and after a while we found one of the two organisers who were going to be our group leader. He had brought some food for the group and also a tarp that was going to be our home. We wandered off into the pitch black woods trying to find a place to set up camp. We used the first good clearing we could find and went to bed. It was wet and cold and with just two regular blankets and nothing to insulate myself from the ground, I thought I was going to freeze to death. That night I promised myself many times that I was never going to do this again.

In the morning, we were woken up by a human whom we had promised to escort through the woods the day before. We realised that we

had set up our tarp on a path crossing, not very suitable for a secret elven camp. However, the sun came up and made us feel a bit better. We ate some of the cabbage and raisins the organiser had thought should be suitable food for elves and then the adventures started. I can't remember much of the story, but it was about the good side and the bad and there was a sigil that we all wanted. There were two taverns (also made with tarps), one for the orcs and one for the good people. Half-way between them, a band of robbers had their camp on a high cliff. We met people from time to time and had some conversations and did some fighting. There were no fighting rules so we just went on until we were too tired, and then we relaxed for a bit and started all over again. There were no safety rules at all and I don't think any of the weapons used would pass a security check in a modern larp. All swords were also very ugly, circular in cross-section, and made with camping mattresses and duct tape.

By the end of Saturday, all people on the good side moved their camps to the good tavern. We feasted on the food that was stored there and spirits were high. The good weather did of course help a lot and I remember eating a fried, but cold

pork loin and thinking it was the best food I had ever had in my life. That night we slept much better and did not freeze as much. The morning after, we met the evil side in an epic end battle, close to the robber band camp. I don't remember who won and I don't think anyone thought it was important either.

Instead, we were all euphoric about the experience afterwards. We had taken our first baby steps into a magical world and we decided that we needed to go back again, and soon. We had been about 35 kids around 15 years of age, most of us from the school theatre group, playing together for a magical weekend. I think that if our parents had known how ill-prepared we were for this and that no responsible adults were around, they probably wouldn't have let us do it. But I am forever thankful that they gave us the freedom to discover the magical world of larping. The tradition that was started that weekend later led to the larp magazine *Fëa Livia* in 1991, the blockbuster larp *Trenne Byar* ("Three Cities") in 1994 and has been an important foundation for the nordic larp community as we know it today. We have come a long way and I am happy to still be part of this magical movement.

## Got Stories?

Anyone who has a story of their first larp they would like to contribute, please mail a text or link to Gdoc to

[myfirstlarp@gmail.com](mailto:myfirstlarp@gmail.com)

## MADS AHOLA

DENMARK — Disruption is a term from economic theory whereby a small operator can conquer a market share simply by doing things in a way no one has done before, and keep a lead for a short time until the rest of the market operators catches up.

I was there.

It went so fast.

The older I get the more surprised I am every time I recall these events, how rapidly they followed one another. A parallel development where larp went from dispersed local groups of friends to a national phenomenon, and me and a group of friends went from being 14-year-old noobs and nobodies, to cocky 17-year-old masters of the universe.

It began as a rumour. Someone had been on a youth TV show called *ZigZag*. Wearing costumes and swords, fighting each other in an epic forest location. Doing a duel on a narrow wooden bridge, defending honour in a last stand. Someone from Jutland nobody knew at the time.<sup>1</sup> And then one day a friend named HP showed up at our D&D session with pipe insulation and a wooden pole. Someone was playing “live” that weekend in Harreskoven. The room exploded, books and dice were forgotten, and not twenty minutes later we were all shopping for supplies in a local hardware store. It

was 1992 and the Harreskoven campaign was easily the largest community in the country ... with about 30 regular players at that time, and it was growing.

Rumours were about the land, and a trend was forming to meet the first Sunday of every month. The phenomenon grew. And so did we, puny as we were.

Two years later something was about to happen, and luck would have it that we made it come to pass. We were a handful of 16-year-olds with a vision to outdo every larp that anyone had done before. We were still new to this, and others had done new, bold things before. So how difficult could it be to excel at every single part of the game? I guess being 16, going on 17, instills a great deal of overconfidence in some people.

Last year our friend Frede had rented a cabin and organised a larp running 24 hours for 50 people. But meanwhile Harreskoven showed a steady increase, and now had close to a hundred regulars. We simply took everything one step further. We rented two cabins instead of one. We wanted 48 hours of larp and most importantly we wanted people from all of Denmark. Mikkel’s dad worked at a place with a Xerox machine. We raided the place at the weekend and printed hundreds of advertisements. HP got us a municipal grant of kr. 14.000, — and a list of role

playing clubs from all parts of the country. And so, we set about printing folders, mailing them to everyone, putting them in stores and pushing them to everyone we knew. We hoped to break every known limit and have a whopping 100 participants for our game! Still not knowing what we were doing. The thing about being 16 is that you just do shit.

A point about not knowing what we were doing: Our plan at this point was to have me cook for everyone. And I could make spaghetti. That was it! And we were aiming for a hundred participants. Fat chance, that a 17-year-old kid could cook and provide for one hundred people for two days. Little did we know that we would receive more than two hundred applications in a matter of weeks. An entire American football team signed up as orcs. We had more than 200 players! Two hundred players who were going to starve, or go home in anger, unless luck was on our side. So luck it was.

It turned out that 3-5 of our participants, grown men (in their early twenties), were willing to spend most of the weekend in the kitchen fixing food for folks. I don’t remember us asking them to do it. It just sort of happened. I still owe them a debt of gratitude for this. But we didn’t know that ahead of time. We had a plan. And it was a plan that really, really sucked at the practical level.

<sup>1</sup> They turned out to be a group, later known as Einherjerne who began at Vilhelmsborgskoven ved Beder.

At some point HP decided that we needed a world, and he set about writing 10 gods and a genesis mythology. This was new, and it was “nice.” Written rules were also unheard of at the time, and we had pages of them, with layout and pictures. We began mailing the whole thing to people, as well. Why not?

Little did we know that those texts would be studied rigorously in the weeks approaching the larp, and in years to come. And frankly they were not all bad. Today, thousands of Danes play in the “Niraham” world, and many of the rules live on using some of the names and concepts we cooked up on a whim.

I think our advertising (lacking as it was) made a huge difference. Mailing a flyer to everyone had some sort of authority about it back then, because no one had done that before. Once the word got out, the whole thing simply got out of our hands and escalated on from there. And so this Saga happened. The title was quite clever for a couple of teenagers: *En Saga Fra Evigheden* (“A Saga from Eternity”), with the eponymous “Eternity” being the name of the in-game inn. Here, dark robed figures met up with hardened fighters and happy-go-lucky thieves and hobbits.

It was unreal.

Everything went wrong. Everything you can imagine went wrong! Wet paper character



*Kasper Bandmann,  
Jakob Marott and  
Valdemar Kølle at  
Harreskoven, 1994.  
Photograph: Hans  
Peter Hartsteen*

sheets, burned gruel for breakfast and supper, players rebelling against the idiotic plot, dozens of weapon standards, only 2 toilets, and 200 kids aged 13-20 alone in the woods for three days. And still it was a huge success! Not because it was good but simply because it was. No one had tried anything like it before. To gather 200+ nerdy nerds in a forest for the first time will make anything a success.

We totally lacked restraint. We were 16, and had the strength of total blindness to the relation between action and consequence. We later coined said blindness being Retard Strong! And so, we told everyone: This is what we do, this is when, and this is how. Trust us on this one! It is going to be awesome! We would never trust ourselves again, but for a few years, everyone else did.

Larp exploded and became an integrated national endeavor (for nerds). Thousands joined, local campaigns grew bigger, and back home in Harreskoven we led armies of hundreds in the quest for our joint

fantasyland. But with higher expectations and more people organising it got harder and harder. In a word, we still pushed the borders of the possible, but now we were competing with ourselves. Outdoing the performance of the last game was requiring an accelerating amount of work. It got harder to make impressions. No more slacking. Four years after our initial success, running a larp would require a full time commitment and a team of at least a dozen people preparing for months. With this first endeavour, we had disrupted everything. Looking back, we are still surprised that we actually pulled it off!

So in my analysis, novelty was key. Novelty, inspiration and guts was all we brought to the table, and despite how stupid the whole thing was, it made us experts overnight. Experts with no expertise. Such was the poverty of the time. Back then, in the “Age of Eternity,” knowledge was a burden, and vague visions created a world that stands today.

## STÅLE ASKERØD JOHANSEN

NORWAY — In the early 90s, larp came to Norway. Almost simultaneously in Trondheim and Oslo. There is still some discussion as to which “gatherings of people in the forest” in the late 80s can be considered larps or not, but the big start was in the early 90s.

For me, it started in 1992. I was 22. Like many of my friends, I was into AD&D and fantasy literature.<sup>2</sup> Some friends at the University of Oslo were part of a group called Ravn, who made a big fantasy larp every summer. The participants were around 16-24 years old. Many were, like myself, students, with a big lean towards science and IT. Others had a background from the scouting movement. Many had played tabletop role-playing games (RPGs), whilst others were friends of friends. For many years, the university worked like a sort of base.

So I set out larping as a magician’s apprentice. I had no idea whatsoever what I was getting into, or that it would change my life so much. The organisers sent me my pre-written character in an envelope in the mail. Not email. It was one page, but was accompanied by a 5-6 page leaflet explaining the setting. I made a costume, I bought food, and set out with my friend, who played the ma-

gician. He was almost seven feet tall and wore a blue robe. His character’s nickname was “Little Blue.”

It was utterly magical. The mood at these first larps was something else. I had tremendous fun and met lots of nice people, many of whom are still my friends today. At the same time, it was a big social push for me, and it was also scary as hell. I was happy (and mildly surprised) to see that there were only 50-60 % boys at these events. I even remember that for a time Ravn accepted only girls as new members.

For us, like many who look back on the early days, it didn’t matter that the castles were made of orange polyester or that the city walls was actually only a piece of string. We were still scared shitless when the savage, werewolf-like “shadow beasts” fought with the city guard trying to get inside. Many friends still put up a glassy stare when you mention these beasts. It was mostly about the fun. And it was, contrary to what many think, not only about fantasy. Many larps had historical settings like Celtic Ireland or Norse Vikings. We were 1920s gangsters and cultists. We were American high school kids, settlers in the Wild West, or post-nuclear survivalists.

And we had parties. We drank beer. We met outside of the games and learned from each other. Some start-

ed studying things they had learned. Some are actors, historians or archaeologists today. And we expanded. In an effort to learn more about how to actually defend a gate from attackers, we looked into what soldiers actually did. We started admiring the tactics and organisation of the Roman army. After attending a larp as a group of Roman-inspired soldiers, we started a group doing Roman re-enactment. Part of the motivation was to attend some big Swedish larp and really kick their ass, but other things became more important. Our group became quite big, and spent many wonderful summers as special guests at a Danish iron age park.

Others focused more on other parts of larping. Some thought rituals were cool. Others started buying “real” armour for their characters. The late 90s is the period where some, jokingly, divide the Norwegian scene in two: The Womba-Womba-Ritual people with drums on one side and the March-March-Soldier types with boots on the other.

My first experience as an organiser was in 1998, when we made *1944*, a small larp about the German occupation of Norway. It was one of the first larps about the period. It was also, I believe, the first larp to actually be run more than once, at least in the Nordic countries. The topic was controversial, and some (non-larping) Swedes

2 Advanced Dungeons and Dragons.

used quite strong language to describe us, hinting strongly that we had dubious political motives.

But was all this nordic larp?

At the time, we used email for organising. I have access to many complete discussions from the period, and it is pretty interesting. The first larps had classic elements from RPG gaming rules, like hit points and such, but already in the late 90s, the arguments were many and persistent to abandon the old point-based rules and instead focus on “role-playing the fighting.” Already then, many argued for less rules and more freedom for the players.

The I-word (immersion) had been mentioned. Some wanted magicians to “do whatever they wanted,” which is similar to the mechanics we today see in the *College of Wizardry*-style games. Many were in favour of this, although some still remembered the famous “Haaksby genocide” incident in 1993, where a magician killed a whole village and its 40 or so inhabitants with a single sentence. Not very playable.

And suddenly, in 1997, someone asked me if I wanted to help make the first Knutepunkt. And everything sort of exploded.



From top to bottom: Ståle's once manifest hair. Ståle. A blanket. Medieval 1970's boots. From Ravn's summerlarp in 1994. Photograph: Anon.

## ELF VESALA

FINLAND — I blame Tom Hanks.

In 1984, the TV movie *Mazes and Monsters* (1982) was shown on Finnish TV. It featured a group of college students playing a tabletop role-playing game and later experimenting with live action role-playing, which naturally was a gateway to madness for Hanks' character.

Back then even tabletop role-playing was unknown to me, and before the end credits were rolling, I had started planning a tabletop RPG of my own. But I had also made up my mind: someday I would be playing live as well, with or without a convenient cavern nearby. I knew it would need to be done properly, so it had to wait for several years while I

got rid of the game board and scrounged-up plastic miniatures for my first tabletop game draft and desperately tried to find out more information about real role-playing games.

In the spring of 1989 I discussed this long-entertained vision with my friend Sami Toivonen, who lived in rural Renko. Sami's courtyard had a shed that could perhaps be converted into a medieval inn, and suitable fields and woods within walking distance.

Our first *Synkmetsä* (“Mirkwood”) game depended heavily on a spellbook and some other wondrous items lost in the depths of the forest, as well as a single NPC monster (the other had to leave early) preying on the four unwary adventurers. Character descriptions consisted of a few written lines of background information and

goals. Our combat and magic rules were simple, with players counting their own hit points. But the players did not need a game master overseeing their actions. They could wander freely, in the fields and forest, made magical by the permanent twilight of the Finnish summer night. Although the initial attempt was crude, with improvised costumes and painted plywood weaponry, we knew that we were onto something.

Our first games gradually expanded the world and its mythology. By 1992 we had named the world Nordarak, with plot elements from the previous games now put in a global context. It was time to put some thought into what would be the most sensible way to develop our games further.

The games had been de-



needed rest or more information from other characters.

Despite my doubts, the conflicting goals and essential pieces of information distributed between the various characters ended up working nicely. It seemed that the players could be trusted, after all. (In a later game we once more provided a troll-like hiisi warband for the action-oriented players to encounter, but after that we agreed that even this was not necessary: the organisers would be more useful as characters providing local colour, such as villagers.)

After this initial foray into open world gaming, we did one additional experiment with the opposite approach: We had only half a dozen players but double that as NPCs. We had planned a linear route through a wintery nature park with some artificial castle ruins and other landmarks as waypoints. Along the route there were plotted NPC encounters. After each encounter, the NPCs took a shortcut to the next stop to masquerade themselves into something else, while the adventurers wandered along a more tortuous route. With

special effects prepared in advance, the adventure certainly was exciting, but it was clear that the linear method was far too costly for our resources. We had indeed chosen the right way.

The chosen plot-heavy open world approach was further defined during the following years, and the blatant cheating got even bolder. Our rules were developed game by game, giving players more and more options for customising the game mechanics of their characters. The idea was to give the players freedom of choice before the game, but to keep the game-time rules simple, so that no refereeing was required.

Originally, we had asked the players what kind of characters they would like to play, and tried to provide their wishes as well as we could. As the plots got more complicated, this was no longer viable. Instead we compiled a non-spoilery list of the available characters and let the players wish for their favourite choices when they enrolled. To our pleasant surprise, the wishes tended to be quite evenly split. Although not every character could be a

powerful mover and shaker, it was our duty to make each of the characters interesting centrepieces of their own stories, with meaningful choices to make.

Although we still attempted to make each game more impressive than the one before, the importance of staging and props gradually diminished. We did use (dulled) steel weapons and did have a full-sized dragon skull hanging from the inn ceiling, but no longer thought it necessary to spend the night before the game lugging an iron-reinforced chest or dragon egg shells to the other side of the forest. Perhaps we were getting old, but we had started to replace hernia-inducing props with autonomous schemers that took care of their own physical exercise.

But even that was nothing compared to the ultimate luxury that arrived in the summer of 1993. This was when we learned about other Finnish larp organisers. Suddenly it was possible to play in games arranged entirely by somebody else. How lazy can one get?

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## LINE THORUP

DENMARK — I went to my first larp in 1994. And the thing was; I did not want to go! It felt like something potentially stupid and embarrassing. And the 17-year-old me definitely didn't want to do anything embarrassing. But, my friends had been pestering me about going, and after a long while of

not really saying "no" but definitely not saying "yes," I had run out of excuses. So, finally, I thought: "I'll just go this one time. And then I'll tell them that it wasn't for me."

So there I was. In the woods, surrounded by orcs and elves and dwarves and warriors, with my human/thief "character," a "blanket-cape," and some fur-things around my shoes. I

don't remember if there was a story in the game, but if there were, I didn't get it. And in any case, it seemed like most people were there to hit each other with huge boffer swords, showing off homemade (or more likely mum-made) costumes as "orc-slayer" or "elf-king" or something (there were a lot of slayers and kings in those days). So I took my first steps into the



*My first long larp  
En sommerfest ("A  
summer's feast")  
held in 1995. My  
character was that  
of the princess, and  
my "plot" was to  
marry the winner of  
the king's tourna-  
ment. Photograph:  
Daniel Benjamin  
Clausen*

woods, convinced that I would feel ridiculously stupid and out of place. But the further we got into the game, the more I saw and experienced, the more I began to realise: WOW! Because the truth was, that even though I was trying hard to be one of the cool kids, I secretly read fantasy novels and dreamt of being part of all their epic drama and romance. And here it was! In real life ... well, kind of real life, anyways, but good enough for me. So yeah, larp and me was "love at second sight."

After attending my first larp, I began considering myself "a larper." First, in the woods as human or elf or orc. Later, when the games migrated into more serious or elaborate settings, within the minds of characters living tragic, funny, loving, hateful, or ambitious lives. And though not all games have been great, and not all characters have been interesting, all games have left an impression

and absolutely none of them have I regretted going to.

But back then, in the mid/late 90s, the larp scene was very different than it is today. We kind of lived in a bubble in Denmark, and besides rumours of a "Gathering" in England, we just didn't know if we were the only ones in the world larping. This was before the Internet, mind you. You couldn't just go online and google it. To our knowledge, we had more or less invented this thing, which meant it had no intrinsic norms, rules, seniors, or authorities. Thus, in the absence of authorities, we were free to define what was "good" and "bad" within larp. And in those days, good role-playing had to do with showing off. Being seen and making it big: big fighting-scenes, big shouting-scenes, big ego-scenes!

But, that all changed with a letter from Norway in 1997, inviting all interested Danish larpers to come to the

first Knutepunkt. To this day I still don't get how the first Knutepunkt-crew manage to find us? Did they go through phone-books looking for larp-like names of organisations, called switchboards, contacted table-top organisations, or what? And inevitably, they didn't find all of us. Far from it, as it turned out. See, the 90s held the perfect conditions for larp to arise, resulting in numerous but isolated inventions of larp. We now know that the Nordic countries alone hosted multiple groups of larpers, all living in their individual bubbles, all thinking that they probably were the only ones in the world. While some were tracked down by the Knutepunkt team, it took years before we knew the extent of it. But for those of us who did get the letter, just like that: our bubble burst! And we became a part of something that later would become the nordic larp scene. A paradigm shift almost

as big as discovering the continental drift!

But, with the Nordic “larp continents” drifting closer to each other, I also began to see the side-effects of stepping out of our former solitude. Our concepts of good and bad larping were being challenged, and while some couldn’t wait to embrace the nordic turn, others felt disregarded and looked down on. In other places, their playing-style was different from the Danish “going-big” mentality. I mean, they presumably had big fighting-scenes, big shouting-scenes and big egos-scenes, but they also had this thing called immersion. Going to my first inter-Nordic larp, I was for the first time confronted with a mirror to my Danish larp-norm and practises.

At *Et vintereventyr*,<sup>3</sup> I remembered being completely shocked and intimidated by the seriousness of the other Nordic larpers: They played all the time. No off-game! Not even at night or in the solitude of their groups. And playing a character for them meant playing, even when you were alone! Man, I felt like such an amateur at that larp: Playing big when I shouldn’t, going off-game and generally feeling like I had been thrown in at the deep end. Still, once that door had been opened, there was no going back. And for some of us, immersion became the

new black. Danish larp, with all its high fantasy and going-big playing-style, all of a sudden felt old-fashioned and limited. I wanted everything to be full-on nordic larp-like, and would have none of that Danish stuff. Yes, I know, I was being stuck-up and annoying at the time, looking down on a really great Danish larp-scene! But, I was 20-years old, and I felt like I had found the best thing ever—once again.

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## MIKE POHJOLA

FINLAND — I went to my first larp at the age of sixteen in 1995.

In 1994, I was fifteen, and had been a long time tabletop roleplayer. At the RPG store in Turku I saw an ad from the local youth theatre looking for actors in “*Draiocht, a role-playing theatre play*.” It was an interactive theatre play where a group of heroes set out to rescue a princess from the clutches of the demon *Draiocht*. The audience could help the heroes make choices and a game master would roll dice determining the results of combat and magic. I ended up playing one of the heroes, *Dizmal* of the *Shadows*, a sort of caricature version of *Raistlin*.<sup>4</sup> An incredibly bombastic and horribly distressed wizard.

Needless to say, the key people behind the play were gamers, as well. Together we drove to Helsinki that summer for the *Ropecon* role-playing convention, and there saw an ad for a “live role-playing game” organised at one of the few castles Finland has. Obviously we signed up.

Finnish larp was still finding its form. Back then, there were a few pages of rules, mechanics, and character sheets with hitpoints and skills and experience. But the first hints towards pre-written characters and relations and plots were already in place. So I played a first level guard, whose main function in the larp was to guard the castle. A boring standard role for a first-time male player.

And I loved it. It was a clear night when I stood at the foot of the portcullis, hearing the sounds of elves and goblins, knights and fairies all around me. And my own voice, insulting them any way I could. Behind me, the once magnificent castle. Above me, all the stars of the Milky Way, shining as bright as they do over Middle-Earth. It was a magical experience.

I immediately offered my help in developing the world (and was accepted), signed up for any other larps I heard of, and started playing my own. Most other players at the larp were either tabletop gamers,

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3 *Et Vintereventyr* (“A Winter fairytale”) was held in Norway in 1997, and is commonly recognised as the first inter-Nordic larp.

4 *Raistlin Majere* from the *Dragonlance* series by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman.

boffer sword enthusiasts or art school kids. Everyone shared a common love of works of fantasy such as *ElfQuest*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Dragonlance*. Some were also into Finnish, Viking, or Celtic mythology.

Organising my first larps the next winter, I would advertise them to school mates and on the Finnish larpers' mailing list. People would sign up over the phone, or via email, or in person. I would mail them printed and copied material in envelopes. We'd travel to a forest on a bus, play our larp in the snow, and take the bus back.

The first larp I organised was with a classmate, and called *Routametsä* ("The Frostwood"). We wanted to innovate in the field of larp, so instead of medieval fantasy, our larp was Stone Age fantasy. Two hunter-gatherer tribes encounter each other and negotiate over something.

The biggest artistic dilemma for us organisers was how to incorporate boffer swords into the larp since Stone Age hunters wouldn't have swords. The solution was elegant: There are dwarves in the nearby mountain and they sell the tribesfolk steel swords. That way everyone can carry a sword and still be a Stone Age hunter-gatherer.

*Frostwood* had three sequels before we moved onto bigger and better things.

beginnings. It's an experiential form of entertainment, expression and perhaps even art, after all. The subjective view is built into the whole shebang, from the ground up. So, here's one of them.

The first time I saw anything similar to larp was probably a boffer fight staged on a lawn outside one of the Spelkongress tabletop role-playing conventions in Stockholm in the 80s. I wasn't terribly impressed. As years went by, rumours started flying about gamers dressing up in bed sheet tabards and hitting each other with duct taped sticks, out in their neighbourhood woods. Me and my close circle of friends thought the whole thing silly, busy as we were with long running narrativist tabletop campaigns. Against my better judgement, though, an enthusiastic friend eventually managed to talk me into trying the "real thing." 3D role-playing, as it was called, because *Doom* hadn't been released and 1st Person wasn't really a concept yet.

I debuted as an Arch Druid in *Drottning Nins profetia* ("The Prophecy of Queen Nin") in 1992, in a failed, home dyed (pink) cotton cape actually made out of bed sheets—because I was clueless, most of the committed larpers were already beyond that stage—and a pair of grey suede hippie boots. Getting good looking shoes was the real problem.

I recall quite a few details from that first game, like entering the larping area through a swamp and grumpily carrying another player's shitload of

belongings in the Santa Claus style of jute bag he'd brought, completely fed up with his whining about how the load cut into his back, and doing it for him to get us the hell out of there quicker. Of the actual interplay, what sticks to this day is forced lines like: "Forsooth, I greeteth thee, traveller," followed by silence because there wasn't actually much to talk about. But there was also some pretty decent interaction going on.

Most players were enacting various tabletop characters of theirs, but some were showing a fairly solid amateur acting background. The gender mix was way better than anything I'd ever seen in tabletop, maybe 60/40 male/female, including the organiser team (and I'd soon learn that female organisers were a rare thing, regrettably growing even rarer for a decade or so until the trend turned). There was even a guy in his 30s with a real beard.

The game was a slow start for me. I took part in some hokey ritual and stood on the sidelines while some significant piece of narrative was read out to players. This was supposedly an important occasion in the campaign story but meant little to me. I hadn't read all the handouts. Real life prestige, in those days, could be gained from writing excessively detailed sword-and-sorcery fantasy worlds and pushing them onto not very keen participants in thick copier printed booklets. The bigger, the better.

Anyway, a hubbub broke out after the reveal, gameplay grew

**Got Stories?**

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more intense, and from then on the coolest group—more or less a mix of tribal Pathfinders and Jolly Robbers—and their interpretation of things took over. Dusk fell, and suddenly there were orcs among the trees, revealed by pairs of LEDs glinting evilly in the dark, underscored by the occasional grunt and hoot. An epic, epic moment for a first-timer. Supposedly, the orc players had poured the juice of canned fermented herrings all over themselves to be more authentically disgusting, but I can't confirm this as I never got close enough to tell. Pink cotton is too clearly discernible even in moonlight.

*Drottning Nins profetia* was rather fun, and definitely had its epic moments, but I was also kind of irritated at what I perceived as things that could have been done better, so got to know and pestered the organisers until they invited me to help put together the next thing, *Sagan om Ariannas bröllop* ("The Wedding Saga of Arianna" in 1993). That mood of creative annoyance drove much of what I did in connection with larping. We were a small group of friends who met up in person to work, most of our players were also friends, or friends of friends. Getting to play wasn't a problem. You just went to the area. As an organiser, you were happy if participants read the booklets,

didn't dress outrageously, and for the most part conformed to game mythos and refrained from coming as Samurai or Picts. Also, you really wished they paid their fees. Organising a larp often meant burning out and going bankrupt.

The unassuming larp magazine *StrapatS* and the more high brow *Fëa Livia* started being published at this stage. They printed practical tips on sewing, debates, and game calendars. Internet hadn't really broken through yet, although it could be heard breathing through the door, so those two mags filled its function. I phased out a little after discovering acting, but would later return to larp with a more artsy view on what could be accomplished. Others were starting to wear cloaks and glued on plastic elven ears in public. It was an identification thing.

At around this time, it seemed as if larp was growing exponentially. Maybe we were just discovering that others were doing similar things all over the country, and soon realised it was also happening in other Nordic countries. New contacts, and even news about the big game of the summer for a particular year, spread mostly by word of mouth. Internet started making a dent, but communication was sort of sporadic until ICQ<sup>5</sup> was launched a couple of years

later, and exploded with the G-punkt forum.<sup>6</sup> The medieval festival in Visby became a natural meeting place, turning more or less into a rock festival for the larping generation. In time, Knutpunkt would also become an important hub, but more for the analytical intelligentsia than for the dirt-under-your-fingernails kind of organiser.

Everybody needs to reinvent the wheel. In the coming years it would be fitted with meta technique spokes, remade into black box metal tracks and with the retro fantasy campaigns of the ros be hammered back into a more primitive wheel shape again—refined and warped and born anew. Not infrequently with an ounce of attitude and often with a disregard for history. And that can be a pretty good thing, a certain measure of disrespect for what has come before. So I raise my glass to that.

**Got Stories?**

[myfirstlarp@gmail.com](mailto:myfirstlarp@gmail.com)

5 An early online chat and messaging service.

6 A discussion forum managed by a group of larp organisers, Galadrim, that became a central debating platform in the 1990s.

## CLAUS RAASTED

DENMARK — “This sword? I kind of stole it.”

In 1993, I was at my first larp. It was called *Gastars Weekend VI*, took place at a public school, and had something like 60 participants. There was one girl. One. Most of us were teenagers (I was 13), and we had horrible costumes, ridiculous plotlines and a rule set inspired by *Dungeons & Dragons*. The line about the stolen sword was one I uttered when two hulking city guards—maybe 15 or 16 years old—met me late in the evening and asked where I’d gotten an illegal weapon from. It just showed that even then, I didn’t think straight, and that the whole thing was pretty overwhelming.

In the years to come, I would go on to be a regular player at the *Gastars Weekend* campaign and its spinoff, DEF42,<sup>7</sup> and in ‘95 I’d join the organiser team. In ‘99 I took over as chairman of the organisation, and in 2002 I went full time pro larp. Today, I’m one of the two owners of what is (arguably) the largest larp production company in the world. But in the early 90s, that was all in the unimaginable future.

Remember, this was pre-Internet, pre-public acceptance, pre-anything. In Denmark, there were probably a couple of thousand larpers at the time, instead of the 100.000+ we have now. But it was fuck-



*Claus at Knutepunkt/Solmukohta 2000.*  
 Photograph: Mikkel Rode

ing awesome. I still have so many memories from my first larp. Memories that I treasure dearly, even though I know that they’re viewed through rose-tinted glasses of nostalgia. But nonetheless, these are episodes that I can recall at the pull of a mental trigger.

I was part of an evil ritual (I played a Chaotic Evil Alchemist) in our church (a classroom filled with student projects), where we were attacked by the knights. They were the good guys of the larp. Go figure. Our high priest—a gangly 14-year-old with charisma up the wazoo—was holding a ceremony while standing at the teacher’s desk and brandishing a homemade boffer knife. He was going to sacrifice somebody when the knights and

the good priest came barging in, and I’ll never forget jumping out a window at breakneck speed in an attempt to survive.

I huddled in fear when the knights went on crusade (there was a rule that let them yell “Crusade” and then get special powers for 15 min), and I remember the thrill of skulking on the rooftops of the school, being shown the secret weapons cache of the thieves, behind a chimney. I remember eating vegetarian microwave pizza with add-on pepperoni, because the main organiser was vegetarian, and I remember hanging out with guys who were much older than myself and being welcomed into this weird tribe of nerds, gamers, adventurers and dreamers.

It was a time of physical

<sup>7</sup> Dansk Eventyrspils Forening 42 (“Danish Adventure Gaming Club 42”).

mailing lists, pre-event meet-ups, rule books copied and hand-folded, 18-year-olds leading teenagers, and a young and growing community. People came from high schools, from gaming circles, from board game clubs and they came in droves from the tabletop role-playing community. Some were geeky in the extreme and some were charismatic and visionary. For a young, impressionable man-to-be, it was a time of formative memories.

I'm 37 now, and I've been larping for about  $\frac{2}{3}$  of my

life. It's formed my career, my way of looking at life and my friendships. It's my passion, my hobby and my job. One of the reasons my wife loves me is because she knows she'll never be the most important thing in my life—that's larp. It also means that what started as a strange and bizarre adventure back in the early 90s has since grown to become a sort of life mission—spreading the gospel, transforming lives and creating shared fictions that people can not only consume, but co-create and be part of.

Writing this during the closing night of a *College of Wizardry* event—arguably the most famous larp ever—seems both fitting and proper. And if I could send a message back in time to that 13-year-old kid who started larping, it would be simple and heartfelt: "You've found your place. Never doubt that."

And now I'm going to go end the larp, with a tear in my eye and a smile on my face.

All because of a chance meeting, as they say in Middle Earth.

## MARGO RAAUM

NORWAY — My career as a larper started early and late. Early because we are here in the very beginning of the 90s, and late because I started larping at the ripe age of 26.

Most larpers I met were 7-10 years younger than me, still in school, and came from the tabletop gaming scene. I had a degree, I was the current head of the student society, had a lot of friends, and did not role play. One could have thought that my love of playing theatre and dressing up was what pulled me into the larp community, but it was the thought of safely living a nightmare. It's true. I was absolutely intrigued by the thought of being terrified without really being in mortal danger. I got what I wanted, especially since the lack of safety mechanisms (like "cut") led to some, I have realised later, quite questionable situations

safety-wise. But I do think some of this lack of safety was perceived as "hardcore."

The larping style in Norway in those days were mostly aiming for "total immersion," on 24h for 3 days. We were actually able to immerse fairly well with an inn made of orange nylon, and a bear that looked like Sprocket from the muppets, a suspension of disbelief I sometimes miss today. The organisers, though, would happily prance around sporting t-shirts with meta off-game slogans throughout the game. But that was their prerogative as almighty organisers.

Ah, the almighty organisers. To me this was a new type of role. They would assess the costumes, the gear, the living quarters and the way you acted. To me this was a much more authoritative role than I was used to dealing with, they were masters of my universe and I fell back and became submis-

sive. It'd been years since I had thought about who were "in" or "out," but here I was back again.

Fun fact from the early days was that they had an affirmative action program for girls. You may think this was some progressive thinking, but I'm afraid I have to disappoint you. The program only applied to young and "interesting" girls, and not older women. In my opinion, this was part of a problem that has later been discussed, that some of these girls were part of a smorgasbord. After a few year there became a larger diversity in organisers, as new groups emerged. This was good for the community and opened up a much larger range of ideas and events and kept up my interest and love for the hobby.

I look back at the roles and the costumes with quite a bit of love. I was given quite a few evil characters, something I loved, but the funny thing is that I would also tend to be given

the older characters because my age would be closer to the character's age. You gotta give them credit for that thinking: of course you can more easily think like a 90-year-old when you are past 25!

The costumes were "best effort," which sometimes involved gluing fabric to your wellingtons, turning the skirt inside out to hide the plastic buttons, or sewing something from some old curtains. The latter being eco friendly and hipster, but since I am a terrible seamstress, I looked more like I had walked through a flea market wearing glue, and wore whatever stuck to me. This low key costume regime didn't disturb the game, and it probably matched our acting skills.

The logistics of organising a larp was not a trivial task. Most announcements were made at the local comic book store (yes, not only the Big Bang Theory people hang out there), and

fliers were important (to the younger crowd: kind of like a Facebook event printed on paper). Since there were no mobile phones, everything was more predictable. We met at a set place once a month, there were always a larp around Easter and another in the summer, and player meetings would be thoroughly announced. But when things went south, they really did, as you could not "call a friend." Lastly, not only were many not even old enough to drive, very few had access to cars. This resulted in angry bus drivers, frustrated parents, and some beat up cars that stopped in the middle of nowhere on the way to some larp.

As the crowd grew older, the games were professionalised, and there were revolutionary thoughts emerging like, for instance, not starving or freezing the players to death. And today, even if a larp can be "hardcore": at least you can get a selfie.



Margo in *Curtains*, early 1994.  
Photograph: Raaum

## IAN ANDREWS

UNITED KINGDOM — I came into the hobby via the "freeform games" route in the late eighties and early nineties—an unusual route for UK larp. A small group of people were generating short, 2-5 hour chamber games with high levels of pre-briefing and little or no systemic support, usually run in free rooms at UK tabletop conventions such as GenCon and GamesFair.

The first games I played were set in the (then very popular) *White Wolf World of Darkness—Vampire* mostly. The first such I clearly remember was Pete Whale's *Vampire* game (set in Canterbury if I recall) from GamesFair 1990.

This prompted me to run an equivalent set of games set in the *Ars Magica* background,<sup>8</sup> which lent itself far more to complex politics without difficult-to-phys-rep violence. In my experience, players found

reasons not to create situations that would require systemic support—mostly. The conflict was all interpersonal but as a rule there was no pre-play, no sharing of background prior to the game—people hit it cold, played very hard for a few hours, then debriefed informally to each other afterwards.

Word of mouth was our primary communications and advertising tool and mostly, once it had broken out of the convention setting, it spread

8 RPG originally developed by Jonathan Tweet and Mark Rein-Hagen, first published in 1987.

through tabletop games' friend networks and via games shops. A lot of the ethos of game design that went into these early games was informed by tabletop sensibilities—from both White Wolf's early games design and from older games still. One of the best games I ever played was a full on weekend scenario with fifty players set at a conference in the AD&D Greyhawk setting.

Off the back of these so-called "freeform games"—which bore a not-inconsiderable resemblance to some of the looser nordic style games now running—a small community network built up of people running such games for each other. At its height in the late nineties, there were overnight or weekend games every few months and every year an "event" game for up to a hundred or so players, usually run at a youth hostel or site of interest.<sup>9</sup>

As the games proliferated, so it became more and more common to run a "sequence" of games—three, four or five games with an arc plot. People became invested in the characters they were playing and debriefs after the game became less and less common as people held onto their secrets for the next game.

People formed collectives—usually three to six individuals—to write background

material, plot out narrative and background and to generate the documentation. Bear in mind, a lot of this was at the dawn of the computer age without access to email, the Internet or anything like it. Mostly we met in person, talked, then went away and typed. Sometimes we rang each other to read out bits of text for second opinions. The arrival of email and bulletin boards in the late nineties made this process a lot easier.

Some of the writing I did for those early games remains some of my best and favourite work, but looking back on them with an honest eye, irrespective of the value of the writing, they were terrible game actuation documents. If we had it to do again, there would be much better ways of doing such things.

I am an unashamed hardcore narrativist gamer, and the route into the hobby I took is largely both a shaping influence on, and a result of, that. The UK freeform game scene is still alive and well, and maintaining a quiet, informally-networked profile beneath the thunder of the big fest live games. Indeed, for many players at those big fests, it's just a chance to run their own, small chamber games with someone else providing the setting and the cast of thousands ...

## LARSON KASPER

GERMANY — We all had heard about larpers. Some of us even knew someone whose friend was a larper. "These guys must be totally crazy!" Oliver said with a mouthful of pizza while sorting his dice to decide which ones would be suitable for the next round of D&D. We were a bunch of long-haired, role-playing nerds in the 1990s and while most of our non-role-playing friends though we were the freaks, we knew that those larpers were the real freaks.

Then, in 1996, I went to my first larp. I had the company of four friends and we drove with my car packed to its limits to a small game in the countryside. We had no idea what a larp would be like and had combined some 1970s frilled shirts with leather trousers and velvet vest, added some scarfs, leather bands and some of us even had found a boffer weapon in the local role-playing shop. We looked like a bunch of hippies or a romantic, kitch gypsy band ...

We weren't the only ones with no clue about larp, the same went for the organisers. They had also only just heard about larp and while we decided to participate to find out what it is, they decided to just organise a larp. We ended up in a fantastic outdoor week-

9 The Feast of All Souls, Mortal Wombat Games, 1999; various *Ars Magica Tribunals*, 1991-98, Machiavelli Games, and 1999-2004, NWO Games; *Untitled Greyhawk Game*, Ware Collective, 1998; *Untitled Jacobean Theatre Game*, Ambrose Hall, 2002.



VÖLarp—Auf immer und ewig  
("Forever and ever"), December  
2000. Photograph: Ralf Hüls

end with scout tents, bonfires, scavenger hunts and lovely costumes. We even had an orc player, who—of course—was a very nice orc.

Everything was new, fantastic and totally awesome. But I think what really got me was my first short moment of immersion, when me and a friend walked through the forest on the last night. While we were totally aware that all NPCs were already drunk and singing at the bonfire, our characters still expected a bunch of raiders in every shadow and behind every tree. I was totally sold and part of the second wave of German larpers.

Back home we found the "Thilo Wagners Larp-Kalender"<sup>10</sup> and learned that there were games every weekend and sometimes you could even choose between several games. The larp scene in Germany was

pretty big at this point. There were already some larp shops in the bigger cities and most larps were three to four days and many had a hundred participants and more. Of course, there were also rules and regulations—it was Germany after all. At least two big rule-systems were printed in books competing against each other. A whole world to discover.

In 1999, we organised our first larp. Yes, we already had internet at this point. But a homepage back then was rather a show of how many gifs of burning torches one could put on one page than a source of information. And while we actually invited some people via email, most people were recruited via snail mail, at larps, and with flyers in role-playing shops. It was more important to include one's character name than our real names in

communications, we mostly knew each other only by our character names.

It all ended in 2001 when the first *Drachenfest* drew more than one thousand players and after the *Lord of the Rings* came out for Christmas, we were drowned in the third wave of German larpers. While some of us thought this might be the end of a small community, I think we just felt some growing pains, while transforming from the freaky nerds to something even more beautiful ...

<sup>10</sup> Thilo Wagners Larp-Kalender can still be found at [www.larp-kalender.de](http://www.larp-kalender.de)

# The Knudepunkt Companion Book

The Foundation Stone

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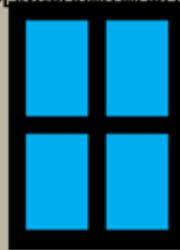
CROSSING

PHYSICAL

THINK

LARP

PLAYGROUND WORLDS



REALITY

## Larp Politics

## A Tale of Knutepunkt Theorycrafting

J. Tuomas Harviainen

**THE STORY OF KNUTEPUNKT** is a story of divergences and maturations. From a network of interests it has grown into a community of practices, in which people learn from each other, share experiences, and agree to disagree on best design decisions. Yet underneath it all, it is also a community that has slowly transmuted itself by including certain themes, while phasing others out.

This chapter explores that change through the discourses exhibited in the Knutepunkt books. As anyone who has ever been to the event itself knows, they are not really representative of actual talks at the conferences. Much more takes place in hallway discussions, lecture rooms, and room party talks, and while a lot of it is just free-form chat, those are where many of the inspirations and insights for the coming years actually emerge. The books nevertheless present our corpus of preserved ideas, including many that were first inspired by those other talks at the events.

The phases discussed in this chapter were never complete. They are just trends. For example, even after a lot of academic larp work moved elsewhere, an occasional few

have kept appearing in the Knutepunkt books. In a rare few cases, external research works were even co-opted by the community back into its corpus, if they were done by a prominent member of the community. An example of this is Markus Montola's influential *Positive negative experience in extreme role-playing* (2010), later re-printed as part of *The Foundation Stone of Nordic Larp* (Saitta, Holm-Andersen and Back, 2014). Yet I believe these are exceptions to the rule, and speak as much of the community's focus on personas as they do of the included articles' high quality.

In many ways, the Knutepunkt community has evolved in the same way smaller tighter role-playing groups do. As Leonard and Arango (2013) have thoroughly observed, many larp communities exemplify Tuckman's (1965) and Wheelan's (1994) model of group development (see also Balzac, 2014). At the *Forming* stage, connections are sought, and the work tends to be unfocused, unless guided by a skilled leader or facilitator. In *Storming*, individuals are judged by others and conflicts emerge—even as the group still seeks to work together—and can in fact gain strength from its internal conflicts. In *Norming*, conflicts have been largely settled, as challenging individuals have either left or been driven out, and the community has developed norms that govern behaviour and hide dissonance. In the final *Performing* stage, which few groups reach, members have entered a level where they autonomously work toward common goals, provide exceptional results, and have a significant risk of burning out. Groups can and do fluctuate between the various stages, especially whenever their composition changes as members come and go. This is especially important to Knutepunkt, as its membership changes from one year to the next, and new movers and shakers occasionally enter the scene.

This chapter explores the transformations and trends in the scene as I personally, aided by the books, recall them. My narrative viewpoint is that of an author in each year's books, even as I too have selected what I consider to be the most influential of the contents of the volumes into new books published outside Knutepunkt proper, yet within its sphere of influence.

## Shared steps, at first

**THE ROOTS OF** all of the future stages discussed here were already present in *The Book* (Alfsvåg, Storrø and Hansen, 2001), the first of the books, published after four earlier conferences had taken place. It contained theory speculation, documentation, design, and gender issues. From that point forward, we have seen a refinement of each of those topics, but not necessarily in the company of each other. When one looks at *The Book*, it is important to realize that its appearance was in many ways already a late part of the *Forming* of the community—by the time it was published, the community had been constructing its membership and discourses already for several years, also on the photocopied pages of the *Panclou* larp zine.

The next volumes were likewise *Forming* stage works. *As Larp Grows Up* (Gade, Thorup and Sander, 2003) very much reads like the expanded sibling of *The Book*. *Beyond Role and Play* (Montola and Stenros, 2004) in turn emphasised the analytic side, something which a few years later would spark a change of style. The plurality in many ways culminated with *Dissecting Larp* (Bøckman and Hutchison, 2005), which featured contributions of very varying types, but due to its sloppy editorial work alienated several aspiring larp academics, who felt that the quality requirements of their work were not sufficiently appreciated. At the same time, it contained some of the most influential larp design works, ones that keep getting mentioned over a decade later.

## “Good riddance” or, the exit of academia

**AS ITS TITLE** suggests, *Role, Play, Art* (Fritzon and Wrigstad, 2006) went for a lighter style, with an artistic tint to it. Academic content was still present, but in a more controlled tone, and the work focused on design. This was intentionally fostered by the editors' guidance to that direction, as well as a coinciding event: in March 2006, the University of Tampere organised its Playing Roles seminar, which not only invited in the more academically inclined Nordic role-playing scholars, but also launched a new publication channel, the *International Journal of Role-Playing*. As a result, larp academics now had a venue that their home universities appreciated a lot more than the Knutepunkt books. Yet some academics still wanted to contribute to the annual volumes.

To cater for them, and the other audiences, *Lifelike* (Donnis, Gade and Thorup, 2007) organised different types of editorial processes for different content. Some parts were reviewed by academics, as academic texts, while others were not. One of its articles, Ulrik Lehrskov's *My name is Jimbo the Orc* (2007), about the author's encounter with a larper fixated on his character and its axe, still remains one of the best examples of larp cultures colliding. Some otherwise pleased academic authors complained, however, that the book's lack of a descriptive sub-title lessened its potential impact. *Playground Worlds* (Montola and Stenros, 2008) made the content difference situation even more explicit,

segmenting the contents by not only topic but also type, with reviews for the academic parts included. Probably the heaviest read in the entire series, even in its less academic parts, *Playground Worlds* while being well received also inspired a counter-reaction: whereas game documentation had until then been a side part of the books, it rose to prominence with *Larp, the Universe and Everything* (Holter, Fatland and Tømte, 2009)—and has never since left that position. Documentation still shared much space with design material, though, at that point. *Playing Reality* (Larsson, 2010), rising from practitioner and activist circles, stretched the distances even further, by being almost hostile to the academic format. Rumour has it that the editor even contemplated the banning of all references in it, but eventually relented, yet still encouraged people to write in a succinct, journalistic style.

The final division nevertheless appeared during a year when the editors actually did their best to cater for an academic set of authors, alongside the others: 2011. The editorial team explicitly invited contributions of many sorts, probably expanding on the idea of *Playground Worlds*. As also resources and not just submissions poured in, however, they somewhere along the line decided to make three books instead of one. One would be academic, one on design, and one a set of provocations, inspired by public talks the years before. This was not, however, told to the authors, several of whom would have liked to contribute in more than one style, had they known of the decision. Suddenly, many people were placed in separate categories—one was either an academic in *Think Larp* (Henriksen, Bierlich, Friis Hansen et al., 2011), a practitioner in *Do Larp* (Andresen, Nielsen and Carbonelli et al., 2011) or an embittered, sarcastic practitioner in *Talk Larp* (Raasted, 2011). A handful received sub rosa advance warnings, enabling them to slip in a quickly written provocation in addition to a larger piece in another book. In a kind of advance reflection of later norming in gender-related topics, the academic book was made with two covers. One of them featured a tank with soap bubbles, considered too phallic and too militant by some, the other

one a blank, supposedly “more academic” white. In typical counterculture form, the chief editor was given a white copy with an actual phallus drawn on it with a marker—a move that would in later years probably have sparked a massive Facebook discussion.

This period marks a kind of *Storming*, during which people argued and even fought quite visibly on what exactly Knutepunkt was, how culturally inclusive it should be, and what things like immersion actually were. By 2011, hallway discussions at the event itself in Denmark showed a new amicable spirit of agreeing to disagree: a move towards clear *Norming*. At the same time, several key figures in the scene made it quite clear that they felt academic research was harmful to the community, effectively removing incentives to contribute further. And finally, the result of the book division was that now many people skimmed through only the one book that interested them, whereas before, they would have at least glanced at the other parts as well. A division underneath the *Norming* was beginning to form. This coincided with a second paradigm shift, to which we turn next.

## From design to documentation – and back?

**THROUGHOUT THE YEARS**, design had been the most respected part of the Knutepunkt corpus. It was the yardstick by which other article types were often judged: does this contribute to actual practice? As noted above, documentary pieces had been included here and there already, with chapters like Koljonen’s (2004) description of *Hamlet* exemplifying the best qualities of what the community had

to offer in writing, and special treats like the *System Danmarc* video documentary DVD (Opus, 2005) whetting appetites for more. Cults of personalities were based on those works, as some games were established as canonic masterpieces and others forgotten. Yet methodology was still prominently present in the discourses.

With larp photography increasing, however, the community moved from dry descriptions of technique to juicy descriptions of how awesome some larps had been. Depictions of experiences triumphed over talk of improved design and writing—and they made credibility and funding easier to acquire. In a short time came *Larp, the Universe and Everything*, the massive *Nordic Larp* (Stenros and Montola, 2010), and *Do Larp*, accompanied by similar volumes from other larp communities. By 2012, separate documentation books on past games entered the market, with *The Book of Kapo* (Raasted, 2012) leading the way, and with *States of Play* (Pettersson, ed. 2012) carrying the same tune. The normative narrative of the Knutepunkt community had changed: from “we make larps” it had turned into “we made these awesome larps,” in proper corporate storytelling style.

Therefore, it was no surprise to see the next year carrying the trend: accompanying *Crossing Habitual Borders* (Meland and Svela, 2013a), *Crossing Physical Borders* (Meland and Svela, 2013b) and *Crossing Theoretical Borders* (Meland and Svela, 2013c) was a documentary photo book, *Exploring Borders* (Meland and Svela, 2013d), with the other books consisting mostly of light essays on larp. In the wider picture of Knutepunkt, the three books together do the same for earlier topics as the documentary books do for design: rather than describe concepts and ideas, they describe the feels, moods and experiences of those concepts and ideas, ranging from theory to practices and actual play.

Then, a new watershed appeared, in the form of the two 2014 books that were strangely at odds. While *The Cutting Edge of Nordic Larp* (Back, 2014) reintroduced design to the discussions not only in the contexts of celebrating success but also as analytic study, *The Foundation Stone of Nordic Larp* (Saitta et al., 2014) intentionally left design out, focus-

ing on mostly works known as the basis of famous success stories, with an author list I view as being close to a celebrity roll call. In essence, the latter presented the community as it is viewed from the outside, more than it did the foundations upon which the community's theorycrafting was built, even as many parts of that too naturally were present. 2015 preserved the point to a great extent, with both a *Nordic Larp Yearbook 2014* (Nielsen and Raasted, 2015b) and *The Knudepunkt 2015 Companion Book* (Nielsen and Raasted, 2015a). One detailed the preceding year's success stories, the other provided viewpoints, design essays masquerading as light academia, and one academic contribution.

Eventually, *Larp Realia* (Särkijärvi, Lopenen and Kangas, 2016) and *Larp Politics* (Kangas, Lopenen and Särkijärvi, 2016) repeated the formula, bringing the book series' style almost back to where it all started. With documentation now too in the mix, they otherwise approach the first two books, just with a bit more of an analytic bent. One central trait of many works in the post-2011 books can nevertheless be observed here as well: long essays on serious topics, with very little to ground them to earlier works. These are intermingled as equals with more seriously grounded chapters. "Who says it" has become as important as "Why should we believe this argument." And this chapter may well be guilty of that too.

## Discussion

**OVER THE YEARS**, several Knutepunkt editors mentioned academia's exit with a note of it having in a sense served its purpose for the community and now thriving elsewhere (Pettersson, 2012; Meland and Svela, in preface to 2013c). This echoes other critical discourses from the community,

including talk of academics being too removed from actual play, outsiders defining what is important in and about Knutepunkt and what is not, and designers being so focused on impressive documentation that they neglect organising a good game. Parts of this are probably true. It likewise reflects years when the editors had diverse backgrounds: academics both appreciating and knowing how to handle academia, artists being particularly good with artistic pieces, journalists with journalistic contributions, and so forth, with each group wary of editing submissions outside of their own areas of expertise. With the nordic scene moving away from larp academia, North American research is taking over. With each celebration, we advertise the success, but not the work done behind the scenes. When we do, it is in the tone of *Norming*.

The written, public evolution of the nordic larp scene is a reflection of the development of the sub-communities that constitute the most visible scene. Those sub-communities exist as summaries of local, national, cultural and creative drives. They often work together, thanks to the *Norming*, *Performing* and communal appreciation of the larger Knutepunkt community, but also show signs of more isolated pulls and wears. At the same time, they are subject to the forces that work outside the community. Examples of this include normative language policing, the personal professional interests of past and future editors, and commercial interests of larp designers. Each of these is good to some extent, but when they become measuring sticks of *Norming* or *Storming*, rather than guides for *Forming* or *Performing*, they are a menace to furthering the development of what we as a community seek to achieve. Differing editorial decisions and goals give us variety and versatility, but they cannot be too bound by goals other than those of larp creativity and innovation.

Do not take my comments the wrong way. The fact of the matter is that, at least the way I see it, Knutepunkt is also benefiting from this separation. Larp academics, having tried out their proverbial wings in the books, have now found their way to more prominent channels—or into posi-

tions in companies. So while their work no longer reaches the eyes of as many practitioners, they add to the credibility of the activity in their own way. The same way, even as documentation has become celebratory, it is also inspiring, and it keeps even the celebrities accessible to the larping public. We have come to realise that larps are too numerous to really define, so design too is more of a tool than a norm now. It is, if anything, a brand now, advertising the specific experiences that may end up documented elsewhere later on, whether those come from a tiny chamber larp or a massive magic school. Perhaps the community is now reaching the state where it is actually *Performing* beyond our wildest expectations. In its texts at least, that is.

I love each and every one of the Knutepunkt books, even the ones I criticise and claim to hate. They have been, and they are, important. What I no longer recognise are the people around them. Even as many members are busy *Performing* in what they do, many are doing their best to keep up the *Norming* of how they should do it. A clear conflict is now present, between individual drive and the community's needs. Unless something is done, it will lead to the dark side of *Performing*—burning out, and then dropping out. Having contributed to Knutepunkt books every single year they have been published, I have come to realise that I actually design and play larps less and less each year. Knutepunkt is *Forming*, *Storming*, *Norming* and *Performing*, all at the same time, because it has grown so massive in both size and influence. It is a whirlpool I can no longer navigate, and dare no longer enter, even in writing. Especially if that written form is increasingly likely to be a normative post on social media than a chapter in a new book.

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## Response to J. Tuomas Harviainen

I had my first meeting with Knutepunkt in Finland, 2012. I felt both out of place and very welcome, as I was slowly moving around in the shadows and trying to figure out what it was all about. A few months later, I was (lovingly) thrown headfirst into the scene by being asked to be one of the editors of the book in Norway the following year.

Reading Harviainen's article has made me wonder whether Katrine Øverlie Sveta and I would have managed to take on the massive editorial job at an earlier point in the story of Knutepunkt. Would we have known "enough" to make sense of all the *Storming*, to be able to account for the choices we made? I'm not sure. Perhaps it was moving towards *Norming*, or in the words of Harviainen, the increased tendency to agree to disagree, that made the process of editing the book of 2013 accessible for two newcomers? (At least, that's what I felt we were at the time.) In addition, having the possibility to let the writers, to a large degree, express and document their subjective feels, moods and experiences, felt empowering and possibly made the editorial job even less daunting.

Because of this, I feel it particularly interesting to read Harviainen's discussion and thoughts on the overwhelming complexity of today's Knutepunkt scene. He writes about a whirlpool that has reached a point where he finds it impossible to navigate, and even undesirable to enter. Even though I sometimes feel completely overwhelmed by all the events that are organised, and by all the discussions happening in myriads of places and forums, I would never rather be without it. But I do find it frustrating that even though I have never been as involved in the larping community as I am now, I also feel more lost now than ever. In a way, it's like I keep experiencing being a newcomer over and over again: Each time I turn a new corner, a whole new world appears. Most of the time, I enjoy it—after all, it keeps me on my toes, satisfies my curiosity and leads me to meet really incredible people. But it also makes me sad that I don't think I'll ever get the feeling that I really *know* this community. How do you really *do* that?

I felt like I got to know the community a little bit more when we were working on the book, and even though I never read the books cover to cover I do at least get a general overview of what's stirring. And the books have become an important token of appreciation for me, too—even though they aren't really representative of actual talks held during the conferences, they used to be almost the only things that were left when it was over (in addition to the occasional name tag, newly acquired friendships and a growing Knute-plague).

But now, importantly, the hallway discussions, room party talks and larp projects are being preserved elsewhere, too: On social media, in various (often badly organised) discussion threads, forum posts, blogs, videos, and photographs. Is social media killing the Knutepunkt book? In one way, other platforms are taking over to such an

extent that contributing to the book and to Knutepunkt, while not really playing or designing a lot any longer, doesn't give the same comprehensive overview of what goes on in the community as it used to do. The complexity adds to experiencing different larp scenes as less approachable or accessible, and to the growth of each scene being more dependent on committed individuals working towards separate goals. But social media is also yet another creative outlet and place for people to continue discussing, continuing *Forming*, *Storming*, *Norming* and *Performing*.

This informal way of meeting up probably enables participation from a lot of people, both new and old to the scene. But to me, having such a lot of the discourse online hasn't really lowered the threshold and made it easier to take an active part in discussions. I can scroll for ages, read and reflect about what others write, but I almost never reply.

But what it is doing, at least, is giving me the opportunity to say "oh yeah, I remember reading about that somewhere!" And this is, in its own way, helping me a tiny bit towards feeling that I'm getting to know the community a little bit better—just like reading the Knutepunkt books was very important to me in the beginning (as I really saw them as the key to what the trends were, and had been). They have obviously changed their meaning to me, personally, over the last year—and maybe we'll end up somewhere where I don't feel like I need the books. Or the books don't need me. But picturing a Knutepunkt without a book still feels a bit weird. And I do think it's good to get some writings from and on the larp community that is a little bit less of an echo chamber than my own Facebook feed.

While our steadfast commitment should be guiding our joint *Forming* and *Performing*, there may be times where we miss our mark and it becomes (more undesired) a measuring stick for *Storming* or *Norming*. I'm not sure whether Harviainen's last discussion is an example of the former or the latter. Wouldn't writing this article also be an attempt to measure or steer the *Storming/Norming* that is going on? I do find it peculiar to criticise that a community is starting to take measures and being aware of not only *what* we do and that we do different things, but also *how* we are doing the things we do. I guess we have to figure out how to do just that, too?

I agree that we seem to be *Forming*, *Storming*, *Norming* and *Performing* all at once, to such a degree that it's hard to keep up on everything that goes on. It can be complicated and feel overwhelming to do it, and we should strive to not make this process unwelcoming. I also think that we really are at a place in our *Performing* where we run a serious risk of committed members of our communities burning their light in both ends and subsequently dropping out. Of course we all have our ideas about what Knutepunkt (and the Knutepunkt books) should be, and I do believe that it really *is* important that we are increasingly aware of *how* we are, and should be, designing, participating in, documenting and talking about larps and our larp scene.

**[future of larp]**

***"I believe larps will become cooler and cooler in the future. I will make sure of that with my two best friends who also larp. We've grown up with larp around us and I've always been fascinated by what you can achieve and who you can be. I think it's probably going to be quite similar, but perhaps we could get better special effects and larger play areas.***

***Fantasy, Victorian era, sci-fi larps and all other kinds will probably still be there, but we might find new things to write about. I think that in the future, larps will probably***

***be bigger and planned better. We will have learned from our mistakes and everything will be ready on time, long before the larp is taking place.***

***But if they continue construction and deforestation, will there be room in the forest for fantasy larps? We need the forest if all types of larps are going to continue. And with everything that's going on in our modern world, it's difficult to manage everything. But there's still a while until we lose all the forests so there are probably a few more good years for***

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***us larpers who appreciate a good fantasy larp.***

***In the future, I think larps will last longer and be shorter than now, and some of them might become well-known and even turned into movies. No, I don't know. I'm only fourteen but I know that this is something I love doing. I want to hold on to it and pass it on to my own children one day who will pass it on to theirs. So we will continue larping and it'll be at least as good as now. Just wait and see, we're going to take the world of larping by storm."***

**[Vilde, age 14]**

**\*translated by the editors**

extent that contributing to the book designing a lot any longer, doesn't give goes on in the community as it used different larp scenes as less approachable being more dependent on committed. But social media is also yet another context discussing, continuing *Forming, Storm*

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But what it is doing, at least, is giving me remember reading about that somewhat tiny bit towards feeling that I'm getting just like reading the Knutepunkt books (as I really saw them as the key to what previously changed their meaning to me) end up somewhere where I don't feel me. But picturing a Knutepunkt with it's good to get some writings from an

**[killed darling]**

***For the Star Wars larp Röd Måne (Red Moon) in 1999, we wanted players to be able to play stormtroopers, but we didn't think it realistic to demand they had proper armour. So we made the background story with a crash and emergency landing for the Imperium. That way we had an excuse to let the troopers only wear their black coveralls and no plastics.***

***In practice: One group of players designed and vacuum pressed their own. So we had ~20 proper stormtroopers at the larp and a bunch of very humbled organisers.***

**[Anders]**

**[character moment]**

***He just needs to save someone, anyone, that's what he said. I push the little clay heart into his pocket. Thank you. But I don't want to be saved.***

**[Ability/Veronica  
The Solution]**

**[killed darling]**

***Legendernes Tid VII — "Grey is the sun" (2004) was a Berlin Wall inspired larp, which featured a wall in the middle of a low-fantasy city. Sadly, budget cuts meant that "Severnaja's Wall" went from being walkable and patrollable to being more of a "Severnaja's Fence" sort of thing. It worked on the symbolic and practical level, but it was NOT imposing at all.***

**[Claus]**

# Three Roads (of Translation) Not Taken

Different degrees of openness  
of the work (and of the game)

Tadeu Rodrigues Iuama

## ABSTRACT

From the Julio Plaza's proposition that, based on the concept of open work of Umberto Eco, categorises the relationship author-work-reception in three degrees, and the division in cultural events in reception, interaction and participation, seen in the research of Kristoffer Haggren, Elge Larsson, Leo Nordwall and Gabriel Widning, this study plans to compare three works called *The Road Not Taken*: a 1916's poem by Robert Frost, a 2008's larp by Mike Young and a 2014's music piece by André Mestre. Besides that framework, this research uses the notion of game from communication and culture theorist Vilém Flusser, which divides them between open and closed. In open games, the translation process would be seen as a modification of the structure of rules in a given game. From this theoretical basis, the objective is to draw a relationship between the open work and open game. In this context, the poem would stand as receptive work, the music piece as interactive work and the larp as participatory work.

**Keywords:** Communication; Narratives;  
Poem; Music; Larp.

### THREE DIFFERENT ROADS NOT TAKEN: A BRIEF PRESENTATION OF THE WORKS

In 1916, the US poet Robert Frost (1874-1963) published a collection of poems called *Mountain Interval*. The opening poem was called *The Road Not Taken*. In general, the four stanzas of the poem make up the story of a traveller who finds himself at an impasse after the initial event in which “two roads diverged in a yellow wood”. (Frost, 1916, p. 9) After watching each of the paths, the traveller chooses one. However, he keeps thinking about the other. The end of the poem perpetuates a puzzling atmosphere, since the poem ends complementing the initial starting sentence, pointing that “two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and I - I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference”. (p. 9)

In 2008, the larp *The Road Not Taken* was created by US game designer Mike Young, described by him as “a game of emotions and decision” (Young, 2008, p. 3). In his script, designed for six to twelve players, each one will be the main character in a scene of about ten minutes, where he or she will be in a moment of critical decision. The other participants represent voices that indicate different views or decisions to the protagonist. According to the author,<sup>1</sup> the influence of Frost occurs since both the poem and the larp are about decision making, so it seemed appropriate to give an eponymous title.

In 2014, the Brazilian composer André Mestre writes *The Road Not Taken*, an “open piece for two instrumentalists” (Mestre, 2014, p. 2). It is clear that Frost inspired more than merely the title, since:

*[...] The two voices contained in the work poetically represent the path taken and the path that could have been. One acts upon the other as a shadow, a memory, an anxiety. It is my hope that the spirit of the poem can also be extended to all*

*levels of decision-making of the piece, especially those pertaining to performance. Contemplate the multitude of options at every moment, take the road less traveled.* (Mestre, 2014, p. 2)

Mestre’s proposal extends beyond the literary sphere and the musical sphere to the imagery sphere, since the very music score escapes from a more orthodox pattern to merge itself with the poem and the wood’s image where (in Frost’s poem) the decision was taken, as seen in Figure 1.

In order to immerse the instrumentalists deeper in the experience of playing the roles of path taken and path that could have been, Mestre suggests the use of live electronics, as pointed out by indicating that the piece:

*[...] makes use of two electroencephalogram headsets, to be used in real time by the performers. These headsets are responsible for measuring and monitoring focus levels and performative efforts. This data is then used to process and trigger recordings that are constantly being made during the performance. Both performers should be microphoned. Each of them, however, can only access the other’s recordings — “playing” the other on the level of the mind. It is a poetic metaphor for our constant pursuit of alternatives, of “what ifs?”, of trying to go beyond our fate of always having to choose one instead of the other”. (Mestre, 2014, p. 3)*

Thus, we present here (although superficially) three different works. Two of them, despite being made to other artistic platforms (music and visual elements in the case of Mestre, the larps’ dramatisation in the case of Young), derived from the Frost poem.

### A ROAD LESS TRAVELLED IN TRANSLATION

For the scholar Vilém Flusser (1920-1991), a Jewish Czech who spent 32 years of his life

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<sup>1</sup> Although the relationship with the Frost poem is not made clear in the larp script, it was clarified by Young in an email conversation on 05.03.2016.

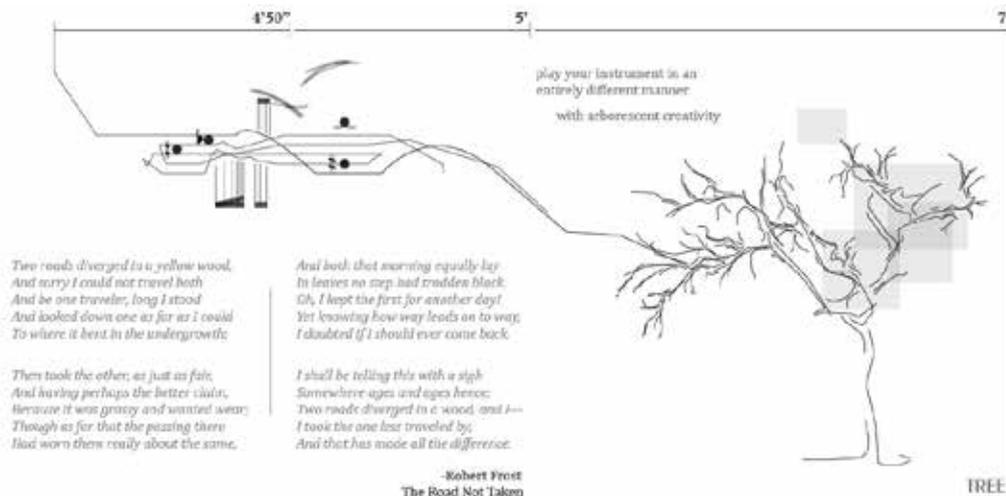


Figure 1 – Excerpt from *The Road Not Taken* music score. Source: Mestre, 2014.

in Brazil, the game is a comprehensive concept, considered “all systems composed of elements combined according to rules” . (Flusser, 1967 p. 2) Flusser (1967) calls repertoire the set of game elements, while the set of rules is called structure. Competence in this case would be “all the possible combinations of the repertoire in the structure” (p. 2), while the universe of the game would be all of such combinations already performed. In games where repertoire and structure are unchangeable, “competence and universe tend to coincide. When this happens, the game is over”. (p. 3) Once defined, Flusser’s relevant terms for this study (repertoire, structure, competence and universe), it is observed that:

*“The game’s competences, although specific, given their disposal, tend to interpenetrate themselves. There is a tendency for anthropophagy between games. In spaces of anthropophagic interpenetration of competences there is the possibility of translation, and does not exist outside of these spaces. And the translation is always a modification of structures”. (Flusser, 1967, p. 5)*

In this manner, one arrives at one of the focal points of this study: the notion of transla-

tion. In the works cited, understanding that we are dealing with three different formats (literature, music and larp), there is a translation process. The common element in all of them is the notion raised by taking a road. Each of the works (or each of the games, adopting Flusser’s term) fits the elements to its structure, thus creating a completely different game, yet with elements that refer to each other. Thus, from the element taking a road, it allows to relate the polysemy of the poem both the decision-making of performers and visual presentation of the musical play score as in the creation process of a narrative in larp.

This position could be supported by a separate definition. For the Spanish multimedia artist Julio Plaza (1938-2003), the translation process between the three briefly outlined works could be considered an Intersemiotic translation, a term supported by the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson (1896-1982), which defines it as the interpretation of a sign system to another (Jakobson apud Plaza, 2003a). Plaza extends the concept of Jakobson, because for him the Intersemiotic translation would be an artistic practice, since it is:

*“[...] a critical and creative practice in the historicity of the means of production and re-production, such as reading, metacrea-*

*ation, action over event structures, dialogue of signs, synthesis and rewriting of history. It means, as thought in signs, such as traffic of meanings, as transcreation forms in historicity". (Plaza, 2003a, p. 14)*

The common point between both hypotheticals is that the translation would refer not only to an adaptation of one language to another. Because they have different rules, they form different games.

### **THE (GRADUALLY) OPEN WORKS: RECEPTION, INTERACTION AND PARTICIPATION**

Although not the aim of this study, exhausting or even encompassing the myriad of possibilities related to the concept of translation, the notion presented here allows us to bring to light the second of its focal points: the concept of open work. Coined by Italian philosopher and semiologist Umberto Eco (1932-2016), open work refers to the idea of a text that conveys not only one interpretation. In these works, "a plurality of meanings coexist in one significant". (Eco, 1991, p. 22)

The concept of Eco concerns the subjectivity of enjoyment, and not the objective structure of a work. Thus, while closed (in the sense of finished) as an author creation, Eco points out that:

*"[...] in the act of reaction to the web of stimuli and understanding of their relations, each spectator brings a concrete existential situation, a particularly conditioned sensitivity, a determined culture, tastes, trends, personal biases, so that the understanding of original form is found in an individually designed perspective". (Eco, 1991, p. 40)*

Plaza (2003b) starts on this definition of Eco to demonstrate three different degrees of openness in the work. To Plaza, the fruition of the work would have different degrees of participation of the spectator, following a designed pathway between passive participation, active participation, perceptive participation and interactivity.

In this logic, the first degree of opening

would be the open work advocated by Eco, characterised by polysemy, ambiguity, multiplicity of readings and wealth of meanings (Plaza, 2003b). The second degree of opening, in turn, was unrelated to the ambiguity, which is related by Plaza with a passive participation. Instead, counts with the active and/or perceptive participation of the viewer, aiming to bridge the gap between creator and viewer, using as tools playful participation, randomness and creativity of the viewer (Plaza, 2003b). Flourishing as a counterpoint to the mass culture, this "art of participation" (Plaza, 2003b, p. 14) understand the perception of the spectator as a re-creation of the work, as opposed to the polysemy of the first degree of opening. Finally, the third degree of opening would refer to the interactivity, placed by Plaza as the art related, above all, to contemporary technologies. Here, artists were "more interested in the processes of artistic creation and aesthetic exploration than in the production of finished works" (Plaza, 2003b, p. 17), so that both the artist and the work "only exist for effective participation the public" (Plaza, 2003b, p. 19). Because of this requirement of a receiver so that there is the author and the work, Plaza also gives this degree of opening the name of communicational art as it "allows a creative communication based on the principles of synergy, constructive collaboration, critical and innovative". (Plaza, 2003b, p. 17)

Synthetically, the different degrees of openness proposed by Plaza could then be called in accordance with the inclusion of the viewer in the work on:

- a. First degree of openness: passive participation;
- b. Second degree of openness: active/perceptive participation;
- c. Third degree of openness: interactive participation.

However, polysemy also affects the very theoretical concepts that underlie it. This is the case of the positioning of Swedish researchers Kristoffer Haggren, Elge Larsson, Leo Nordwall and Gabriel Widing. Similar to Plaza, they divide the arts according to the

relation author-work-reception in three different categories.

The first artistic category would be speculative art, assuming that “to spectate an event is to subject an individual to a solitary internal mental process: our senses perceive stimuli, we interpret them and create an experience for ourselves” (Haggren et al, 2009, p. 33). For the authors, the works of art encompassed by this category would occupy the space of thinking, had here as the “potential experiences that a certain sensory stimulation can bring up at a certain time in a certain observer” (Haggren et al, 2009, p. 36), including that spectrum “all possible thoughts, emotional reactions and associations that the subject can connect to the stimulation of the work” (Haggren et al, 2009, p. 36).

The second category is the interactive art, which “can be described as a perception of stimuli driven by choice” (Haggren et al, 2009, p. 39), since the works in this category “gives the observer the possibility to choose which sensory input will be exposed” (Haggren et al, 2009, p. 40). Here, although the authors show that the vast majority of works generate a space of potential thinking, we also have the space of choice, or “the range of all possible stimulus where the viewer can choose” (Haggren et al, 2009, p. 41).

The third (and last) category would be participative art. Participation in this context is understood as “the process by which individuals produce and receive stimuli to and from other subjects in the framework of an agreement that defines how these exchanges will be performed” (Haggren et al, 2009, p. 43). Here, the viewer’s notion breaks down, since he becomes a participant, a simultaneous consumer and producer of stimuli. The rules of stimuli exchanges make up a pillar of the participative art, since they give to this agreement a social meaning and, therefore, communication. It comes as the space of action, that “indicates to participants subsidies and restrictions to act communicatively”. (Haggren et al, 2009, p. 46)

The main difference between these two theories are in the meaning employed to the word interactivity. While, in Plaza’s research,

interactivity refers to the “reciprocal relationship between the user and an intelligent system” (Plaza, 2003b, p. 10), showing the position of the author of that interactivity is related to “issue of technical interfaces with the notion of program” (Plaza, 2003b, p. 17), for the Swedish authors interactivity refers to the notion of choice. From this concept, the categorisations of both are distinguished by creating distinct incremental positions.

In this respect, this study is based on the second theory, marked by the apparatus notion viewed in Flusser (2002; 2007): the apparatus would be the producer of information, or non-things (as opposed to tools and machines that perform work or, in Flusser’s terminology, produce things), always subjected to a program. The person operating the apparatus (or that for it is operated, if we take the servant’s notion mentioned by Flusser) seeks to exhaust the options already pre-prescribed in the program. In this sense, it points to a connection between the use of the term interactivity both by Plaza and by the Swedish authors: interactivity would occur for a series of choices resulting from the user’s relationship with the program. The participation, however, is part of a more complex level: a deprogramming of the apparatus, namely the freedom to incorporate noise as part of the repertoire (Flusser, 1967) of the apparatus. The American media researcher Henry Jenkins also points to this sense of insubordination to the apparatus as ulterior to the interactivity, under the name of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2009). Explaining: only a culture that has dominated the apparatus, as seen in some contemporary groups, could insubordinate themselves as the way we see in the Jenkin’s participatory culture that deprogram the apparatus moved mainly for entertainment and pleasure.

In short, the speculative art is a first degree opening, polysemic, where there is a dependence of an viewer on a finished work by an author. In interactive art, the third degree opening restricts the dependence between author and spectator just to one program mediating the process, and no longer to a work. Finally, participative art, the relationship between the participants (a second de-

gree opening in Plaza studies) is given by an agreement.

### OPEN WORK AND OPEN GAME

Once demonstrated, the three aspects that make up this study (i.e. the aforementioned works of art, the concept of translation, and the opening of the work), this research reaches its central point: the relationship between opening of the game and opening of the work. It is evident that by opening the game means the increase or decrease of the repertoire and/or modification of its structure (Flusser, 1967). The increase or decrease in the repertoire would occur by the transformation of noise in game elements, and vice versa, understanding noises like “elements that are not part of the repertoire of a particular game” (Flusser, 1967, p. 4).

In Frost’s poem, the original<sup>2</sup> of which the other two works has operated translations, could be admitted an opening of the first degree, or a spectative art. The possibilities of game openness are limited to the repertoire of each spectator, i.e. the set of elements, in this case the meanings, that he can give to the work. However, the structure of the game/work remains unchanged.

In Mestre’s music piece, the translation, or modification of structure (an openness in the game), incorporate different elements to Frost’s poem. The usual score’s pentacle is replaced by a structure that unfolds in the image of a tree, in allusion to the point where the roads diverged in the poem. The two musicians take on the role of the possible paths, invited to improvise on the suggestions of musical notes that they may possibly take from such subjective musical notation. The very distinction between the two demonstrated interactivity concepts here have their place: on one hand there is

the third degree opening, the interaction between user and program, seen as changing the music through the capture of concentration and relaxation states of the performer (hereinafter also receiving the output of the other performer) by electroencephalogram (EEG).<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the relationship with the possible choices, based on the music feedback returned to each of the performers, suggests a second degree opening.

Finally, in Young’s larp, the very perception of the participants on the few lines describing each scene and each role is the heart of the matter, because it allows them to create, in every execution, a completely different work for producing and receiving completely distinct stimuli.

### WHICH ROAD TO TAKE FORWARD?

Although Mestre never played Young’s larp, he has been a role-player for several years. To which degree would the immersion in a participative art affect the production in other (and sometimes less opened) artistic structures?

Larps have been around for a while: about 20 years as an artistic expression, if you take the nordic larp slope; about 40 years if you take a common origin with the tabletop role-playing games; or even millennia, if you take the relationship between larps and Roman Saturnalias, as pointed out by Brian Morton (2007).

Eco stays in the metaphor of a wood to the narrative. The Italian semiologist, with this term, honours the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986), for whom:

*“[...] a wood is a garden of diverging roads.  
Even when there are not well-defined  
paths in a wood, everyone can draw their  
own path, deciding to go to the left or to*

---

2 Despite the use of the term original, it is assumed that even the poem can be considered a possible translation of Frost’s thoughts, memories, perceptions and interpretations.

3 This study highlights the metagame played by Mestre, who incorporates a noise to the electroencephalogram repertoire, which could be understood, in Flusser’s terms, as a deprogramming of the device in question.

*the right of a particular tree and, in every found tree, choosing this or that direction".*  
(Borges apud Eco, 1994, p. 12)

Using this metaphor, the narratives, whether they be literary, imagistic, musical or ludic, would be composed of options all the time. Eco even compares the fruition of a work to a game, given the relationship between the author and the spectator, whom he defines as "someone who is eager to play" (Eco, 1994, p. 16). As pointed out by the Brazilian communicologist Monica Martinez, human expressions, even over the millennia and innovation of techniques, relied on "new interpretations layer overlaps on the same content". (Martinez, 2015, p. 4)

Thus, passed this literature review, it is suggested that a possible road to be taken in the future would be to research, learn and absorb how a participative art, as is the case of larps, could contribute (or already contributes) to the choice of new layers to overlap the elements contained in different artistic expressions and/or structures.

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*[character moment]*

*"I took the test." Ike's eyes  
were dark, his voice raw.  
I crumbled, my feet failing.  
"It was supposed to be me.  
I'm the..."  
He kissed me. Violently.*

*[Chain,  
Just a Little Lovin']*

## ots of Larp

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TION

ar-old mystery by using tools pro-  
l mosaics from the ruins of Pom-  
gy, media studies, and ritual stud-  
the tragedies of classical Greece?  
has anyone since. But they were

ng from Hollywood films to Rus-  
pon Aristotle's *Poetics* (1902): You  
ave the story being told (the pres-

*[character moment]*

*I laid his head in my lap.  
He said he hoped his  
friends had survived. I  
looked around and saw  
them lying on the ground  
around us.  
I didn't say anything.*

*[Mo, Krigshjärta VII]*

*[character moment]*

*"Congratulations on  
becoming prefect,  
Kienan," she said thirty  
minutes before she killed  
herself. He didn't know  
her plan, and thanked her  
wholeheartedly.*

*[Kienan, College of  
Wizardry 1]*

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Hagran, Kristoffer, Elgo Larsson, Leo Nordvall and

*[future of larp]*

**Larp will grow popular. Some people will never be able to fully understand it, but they will have to deal with the fact that a considerable amount of respectable, non-sociopath, non-deranged, self-sustained grown-ups created a strong community around the world to “play dress-up.” Virtual reality will act as a springboard to larp, as more and more people find the lack of physical contact and**

**human warmth they’ll experience in virtual worlds unsatisfactory. Augmented reality will play a major role in blockbuster larps, while it will be carefully rationed in smaller productions—there’ll be a debate on whether or not augmented reality adds value to the larp itself: does it make a larp more realistic, or does it make it more fake? Some pioneers will try to use remote-control drones as a NPCs in their larp, with poor results (see VR dissatisfaction**

**above—interacting with a machine won’t be fun, yet). Permanent larp sites, like Bicolline, will grow in numbers and settings, allowing people to relocate their “real” life in the fictional world they prefer. Does it sound unreal? Too good to be true? Then listen to the last, most unbelievable prediction of them all: larp organisers will get paid for their work, and they will make a LOT of money!**

**[Seby, 26 years]**

# The Classical Roots of Larp

Mike Pohjola

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This article is an attempt to solve a 2300-year-old mystery by using tools provided us by larp, as well as ancient plays, wall mosaics from the ruins of Pompeii, contemporary archaeology, anthropology, media studies, and ritual studies. The mystery is: What was the chorus in the tragedies of classical Greece? Aristotle could not figure it out, and neither has anyone since. But they were not larpers.

Most of contemporary Western storytelling from Hollywood films to Russian epic novels is based on theories built upon Aristotle's *Poetics* (1902): You have the audience (spectator, reader), you have the story being told (the president saves his family, a poor student wallows in guilt after committing murder) and the medium through which it is told (movie, book) by the creators (filmmakers, author).

This, it has long been believed, fits in perfectly with what Aristotle wrote about the tragedies of Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus: You have the people on their seats in the amphitheatre (audience), watching a play based on Greek mythology or history (the story), being played by one to three actors who wear masks (the medium), and the script for all this is written by the poet (creator).

However, there is an element in Aristotle's description of Attican tragedy that he cannot explain, and which we tend to ignore: the chorus.

Aristotle was the first of many theorists who have tried, and failed, to explain the chorus. The chorus cannot be explained within Aristotle's framework because it supposes the chorus exists for the benefit of the audience. I propose that the chorus is not meant for the audience at all! By looking at the chorus as a participatory act for the tragic dancers in the play, this part of Greek storytelling begins to make sense.

## 2. THEORIES ON THE CHORUS

Attican tragedy from 500-300 BC consisted of one to three actors and a chorus of up to fifty men. The actors would wear masks, play different characters, and recite dialogue and monologues written by the poet, who was the writer-director-composer of the tragedy.

The members of the chorus, also called the tragic dancers, would also wear masks, and play a group of some sort, such as “the elders” or “the women.” Sometimes the chorus could also have dialogue with one or more characters.

Attica was the area around Athens, so Attican tragedy basically means tragedies performed in Athens. Tragedies typically premiered at the religious City Dionysia festival as part of the games. Awards were given for the group with the best play. After that the poet, actors, props, masks, the set, and the chorus would be packed on carts to go on tour playing their tragedies all around the ancient world. They were musicians on tour, or larpers setting up events in strange lands.

During the two hundred years of Attican tragedy, the chorus as well as tragedy as a whole went through drastic changes, and analysing anything at the end of that era might not provide great insight into how things were at the beginning of it.

The function of the chorus may have ranged from a frenzied ritual to a narrator, from musical song-and-dance troupe to an actor. We will review some theories to gain an understanding of what scholars have said about the chorus.

### 2.1. Aristotle on the chorus

*Poetics* is a transcription of Aristotle’s lectures on writing tragedies, probably put together by one of his students around 335 BC. These would probably have been fairly recent lectures, within the last few decades. However, the tragedies Aristotle uses as his examples all premiered 70-164 years before the publication of *Poetics*, and 22-115 before he was born, so Aristotle had no first hand experience of them at the time.

Tragedy was very much a new form of art, much like cinema is today. If one imagines trying to analyse the black-and-white silent films of Chaplin or Eisenstein based on only having seen 3D 48fps full colour surround sound remakes of them, one can perhaps grasp at the difficulty Aristotle must have had making exact analyses of the plays of Aeschylus.

This is what Aristotle writes about the chorus in *Poetics*, translated by Samuel Henry Butcher in 1902:

*“The Chorus too should be regarded as one of the actors; it should be an integral part of the whole, and share in the action, in the manner not of Euripides but of Sophocles.”*

– *Poetics, Part XVIII.*  
*Butcher translation*

Albert Weiner (1980) has discussed this chapter. Weiner points out that not all of Sophocles’ choruses are dramatic, either, or in any way take the plot forward, using *Oedipus Rex* as an example. He points out:

*“Either Aristotle is dead wrong when, referring to [Oedipus Rex] as the model tragedy, he suggests that the chorus should be regarded as one of the actors (as is clearly the case with Aeschylus’s tragedies) or our interpretation/translation of the Poetics is wrong. Our test of the dramatic-ness of [Oedipus Rex] has shown it to be a total failure.*

*If Aristotle did not mean that the tragic chorus should be regarded as a collective character what did he mean? Perhaps the first clue that a reinterpretation of this point is necessary is the very fact that he has said so little about the chorus. It would seem that because the chorus’s lines in even the least choric tragedies comprise such a large portion of the total lines (not less than 2/5), that Aristotle would have devoted at least a proportionate space to it in the poetics.”*

*Weiner, Albert (1980):*  
*The Function of the Tragic Greek Chorus*

Even if Weiner was right in explaining Aristotle, this does not really help us get to

what Aristotle might have thought the chorus was. Except in the sense that it was or was not a part of the story, and it should be designed with care to assist in winning the dramatic competition.

But let us now look at other attempts at explaining the chorus. (One of the key texts would have been a prose treatise on the chorus by Sophocles himself, but unfortunately that has been lost in time.)

## 2.2.

### No singing unless it advances plot

In 19 BC, the Roman poet Horace wrote a long poem *Ars Poetica* about writing drama. He gives much advice on style, originality, tradition, and many other things, but also on chorus.

*The Chorus should play an actor's  
part, energetically,  
And not sing between the acts unless  
it advances,  
And is also closely related to the plot.  
It should favour the good, and give  
friendly advice,  
Guide those who are angered, encourage  
those fearful  
Of sinning: praise the humble table's food,  
sound laws  
And justice, and peace with her  
wide-open gates:  
It should hide secrets, and pray and  
entreat the gods  
That the proud lose their luck, and the  
wretched regain it.*

**Horace: *Ars Poetica* (19 BC)  
Translated by A. S. Kline (2005)**

Horace wrote in a time of a revival of classic Greek tragedy in Rome, centuries after even Aristotle, and after centuries of Roman remakes and adaptations of Greek plays where the chorus was removed. But in Horace's time, the Chorus was brought back.

However, where Aristotle wrote about the chorus in ambiguity, Horace is dead sure that the function of the chorus is to sing songs, make commentary on the plot, and help the audience pass judgement on the characters. So the function of the chorus by

Horace's time, at least according to him, was 100 % related to the way the audience saw it.

Like Aristotle, Horace also frowns upon extra "stage numbers" where the chorus is used during interludes for singing songs unrelated to the plot. (However, these may well have served a function for the chorus if not for the audience.)

It seems that during Horace's time, the chorus was less like the chorus of Greek tragedy, and more like a song and dance group of contemporary musical theatre.

## 2.3.

### The ideal spectator

August Wilhelm von Schlegel (1767-1845) was a German Romanticist poet and philosopher who wrote about his views on the Chorus:

*Whatever [the chorus] might be and do in each particular piece, it represented in general, first the common mind of the nation, and then the general sympathy of all mankind. In a word, the Chorus is the ideal spectator. It mitigates the impression of a heart-rending or moving story, while it conveys to the actual spectator a lyrical and musical expression of his own emotions, and elevates him to the region of contemplation."*

**August Wilhelm von Schlegel:  
*Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and  
Literature*, pp. 69-71.**

Von Schlegel chose a perspective opposite to that of Horace, while staying within the performer-audience paradigm: the chorus is not an actor but is the ideal spectator, a representative of the audience on the stage.

## 2.4.

### The spectator without a play

Before becoming well known as a nihilist philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) was a philologist who wrote about Greek theatre.

Nietzsche refutes Schlegel's concept:

*This view, combined with the historical tradition that originally the tragedy consisted entirely of the chorus, reveals itself for what it is, a crude and unscholarly, although*

dazzling, claim.

...

*For we had always thought that the proper spectator, whoever he might be, must always remain conscious that he has a work of art in front of him, not an empirical reality; whereas, the tragic chorus of the Greeks is required to recognize the shapes on the stage as living, existing people. The chorus of Oceanids really believes that they see the Titan Prometheus in front of them and consider themselves every bit as real as the god of the scene. And was that supposed to be the highest and purest type of spectator, a person who, like the Oceanids, considers Prometheus vitally alive and real? Would it be a mark of the ideal spectator to run up onto the stage and free the god from his torment?*

...

*[This] saying of Schlegel's indicates to us that the completely ideal spectator lets the scenic world work on him, not aesthetically at all, but vitally and empirically.*

**Friedrich Nietzsche (1872):  
The Birth of Tragedy, Chapter VII**

I find it interesting that in refuting von Schlegel, Nietzsche comes so close to my own understanding, yet fails to take the final step. Yes, the chorus (like the actors) does pretend to believe everything on stage is true. Yes, they are a part of the action, and the world presented on stage. Yes, for them it is, in a way, real.

From the perspective of the audience, it serves no point. But for the tragic dancers of the chorus, the experience is incredibly powerful.

*What sort of artistic style would there be which one might derive from the idea of the spectator, for which one might consider the "spectator in himself" the essential form?*

**Friedrich Nietzsche (1872):  
The Birth of Tragedy, Chapter VII**

What sort of artistic style, indeed? One based on participation, not observation. Perhaps participation was out of vogue in Nietzsche's time, but it is very much alive now.

### 3.

#### RITUAL DRAMA

One thing we do know about Greek tragedy with some certainty, is that it arose out of rituals. This is agreed upon by historians, is evident in many plays, is shown in surviving ancient visual art, is proven by archaeology, and is also mentioned by Aristotle:

*Tragedy—as also Comedy—was at first mere improvisation. The one originated with the authors of the Dithyramb [hymns sung and danced in honor of Dionysus], the other with those of the phallic songs, which are still in use in many of our cities.*

**Aristotle:  
Poetics, Part IV**

If tragedy sprung from ritual, then what were those rituals like?

According to performance scholar Richard Schechner, one cannot always tell performance and ritual apart, and in prehistoric times they may well have been one and the same:

*Evidence indicates that people were performing in caves at least 40,000 years ago. What kinds of performances? The words "dance," "theatre," and "music," or their linguistic equivalents, are not universal, but the behaviors are. Of course, such behaviors vary from place to place, culture to culture, and epoch to epoch. But surviving cave art and prehistoric artifacts indicate that rhythmic movement (dancing), beating of bone-to-bone drums and flute sounds (music), wearing masks and/or costumes while impersonating other humans, animals, or supernaturals (theatre) were going on. No one knows if these paleolithic performers were acting out stories, representing past events, experiences, memories, dreams, or fantasies.*

**Schechner, Richard:  
Performance Studies:  
An Introduction, p. 221**

Schechner's point that all performances are indeed "to some degree both ritual and entertainment" is useful for one following

the development of Attican tragedy, as I shall later show.

### 3.1.

#### Abydos Passion Play

There is a historical genre directly between ritual and drama, appropriately called “ritual drama.” Understanding it is key to understanding the origins of Attican tragedy.

Perhaps the best and certainly the oldest surviving description of a ritual drama is from Egypt. The so called Abydos Passion Play (existing from ca. 2500-550 BC) was contemporary to Dionysian dithyrambs, which gave birth to Attican tragedy, and also in the same cultural sphere, making the exchange of ideas and practices possible.

The Abydos Passion Play was a part of the cult of Osiris, which has many similarities with the cult of Dionysus, to such an extent that the two gods are sometimes considered the same. Both gods were part human, were crucified, had a virgin birth, died and were resurrected. These characteristics obviously also fit the figure of Jesus Christ, whose worship would emerge many centuries later. (Freke and Gandy, 2000)

One of the key surviving descriptions of the Abydos Passion Play comes from Greek historian Herodotus, a contemporary of Sophocles and Euripides:

*The few then who have been left about the image, draw a wain with four wheels, which bears the shrine and the image that is within the shrine, and the other priests standing in the gateway try to prevent it from entering, and the men who are under a vow come to the assistance of the god and strike them, while the others defend themselves. Then there comes to be a hard fight with staves, and they break one another's heads, and I am of opinion that many even die of the wounds they receive; the Egyptians however told me that no one died.*

**Herodotus (440 BC):  
Histories**

Swedish larp designer Martin Ericsson has written about the Abydos Passion Play in comparison with larp. According to him

(2004), the pharaoh “did pretty much the kind of job a megalomaniac larp organiser would do with a few thousand slaves and unlimited resources, instead of a guy with a van and a loan from the local role-playing guild.”

*We have no real way of knowing exactly how pre-scripted these ritual plays were. Our scant sources hint that they were set [...] with a scripted core cast at the centre of a violently ecstatic crowd.*

**Ericsson, Martin (2004):  
Play to Love**

Ericsson arrives very close to what I believe the early Attican tragedies were: A scripted core cast of one to three actors at the centre of a violently ecstatic chorus.

It is not unthinkable that the early tragic dances in worships of Dionysus would have been poor man's versions of these grand celebrations of Osiris. Nevertheless, this type of ritual drama would certainly have been familiar to Greeks.

### 4.

#### DITHYRAMBS AND DIONYSIAC RITUALS

If dithyrambs arose out of rituals or ritual dramas, then how did they differ from other rituals or ritual dramas? What, in fact, were dithyrambs? We know they were connected to at least the cult of Dionysus, and likely to other cults, as well.

The Romans called Dionysus Bacchus, and celebrations of the god “Bacchanalia.” This word is still used to describe crazy parties similar to the ones that were thrown by the Dionysus followers of old, consisting of sex and wine and loud music, such as dithyrambs.

Attendees were typically dressed in purple robes or skins of goats, foxes, fawns or leopards, wearing crowns of laurels on their heads. Masks were used to summon different persona. Ritual objects carried also included staves, scourges, bowls, and drinking cups.

Nevertheless, these were not only festivals of the body, far from it. Wine and sex also

served as means for getting closer to god.

If one compares these religious festivals to contemporary rock festivals, an attendant might enjoy sex and intoxicants at both, but at Dionysiac rituals there would also be a more spiritual element. Becoming one with your god, seeing your favorite artist, experiencing symbolic death and rebirth, singing along to well known songs among hundreds of other celebrants, having an epiphany.

A major part of Dionysiac rituals were the Dithyrambos. They were ecstatic narrative songs with a special rhythm, danced to by large groups of celebrants called a “chorus” or a “tragic dance,” which means “goat dance.” The chorus consisted of fifty men or boys dancing in a circle sometimes dressed as or wearing the masks of satyrs. Typically each dithyramb had a story related to the life, death or rebirth of Dionysus or some other hero or god. Typically they were accompanied by a flute known as the aulos.



*(Roman mosaic from the tablinum Casa del Poeta tragic in Pompeii. See end of article for full description.)*

It is not impossible to think that sometimes trumpets, drums, bullroarers and

cymbals were also used in to accompany the dithyramb to make the dancing even wilder. There is no indication that this was a performative dance like the ballet, as an audience is never mentioned. Since it was a religious ritual, it was quite probably more of an experiential dance such as bashing your head at the moshpit of a heavy metal concert, or raving into a trance at a techno party, or waltzing with your loved one at a seaside restaurant.

#### 4.1

#### Public participation

The key difference between singing and dancing to dithyrambos and Attican tragedy is that one is more of a private ritual and the other more of a public spectacle. That is to say, tragedy had an audience.

As Richard Schechner pointed out, there is no clear division between ritual and performance. Similarly there is no clear division between being in a member of the ritual audience or being a ritual participant. And yet they are different.

Nevertheless, we know that at least the initiation rituals of Dionysus worship happened in secret, so clearly not all of it was meant for an audience to observe, but only for the initiates to participate in. There were also Dionysian rituals that were meant for the public, such as a procession through the polis streets carrying phalloi—actual or representative goat penises.

We also know that Attican tragedy was performed at amphitheatres, so clearly it had at least many components that were meant for an audience to observe. Possibly in the beginning, tragedies had more participatory elements, and later on evolved into being more performances and less rituals, also meaning more friendly for a passive audience, and involving less participation.

Greek legends tell of the musician Arion who invented dithyramb as a literary composition for chorus around 600 BC. Having pre-written songs opened up the possibility of giving repeat performances of a similar nature, and created a new role: the poet! In this case, the poet would write the lyrics and the music, conduct and direct the chorus, be their producer and manager, and play the

aulos or the lyre.

Soon after this, big religious festivals really became a thing in Greece. They had already had the Olympic Games every fourth year, but between 582-573 BC they were complemented by three other such events, making Games an annual thing. Games included athletic competitions, but also ritual dramas (comparable to those at Abydos), giant banquets, and cultural competitions such as singing hymns, playing instruments, painting, and eventually singing dithyrambs. Comparison with the annual Knutepunkt larp conferences, also rotating between four different places, are tempting.

Dithyramb competitions were introduced into the Athens Games sometime between 561-534 BC. At a dithyramb competition, each tribe would enter two groups of dancers (choruses), one of men and one of boys. Each chorus would be led by a coryphaeus, serving a role similar to Arion above. The choruses would dance and sing in ecstasy, and be observed by an audience and a jury. The winner would receive a goat as a prize. How intoxicated or enthusiastic the chorus or their leader—or the audience—was, we do not know.

This was a period of rapid cultural evolution, and the jury might naturally reward external performance over participatory immersion, since they could only observe the former.

#### 4.2 From dithyrambs to tragedy

Having a tragic chorus dance in front of an audience is not a theatre play. It is similar to putting larp on stage and hoping people get it. But a hundred years later it had evolved into theatre.

According to legend, a poet named Thespis introduced an actor with a prologue and pre-written monologues, and gave the actor several masks so he could play several characters. From a larp perspective this would be similar to having the Game Master put on a funny hat and play supporting characters to take the action forward. From a theatre perspective this would be similar to finally hav-

ing an actor that also speaks to the audience.

Aeschylus, the next big innovator, first competed with his tragedies in 499 BC. He was active for almost fifty years, and made many great inventions, which Aristotle describes thus: “Aeschylus first introduced a second actor; he diminished the importance of the Chorus, and assigned the leading part to the dialogue.” (Poetics, Part IV.)

What does this mean for the chorus? According to Aristotle, their importance was diminished. But *On Poetics* was written over a hundred years after these events, so it is possible Aristotle did not fully capture the meaning of the second actor for the chorus. Certainly they would have had less to do, if they stand around while Dionysus and the King of Thebes are having a long conversation. No dancing or singing is necessary or even welcome. From the perspective of the audience, the chorus might sometimes seem even superfluous, like watching a Disney movie: “Why is the story constantly interrupted by singing?”

But from the point of view of the chorus, things can seem quite different. They are still participating in a festival in honour of the god Dionysus, they have a distinct role in the story and have a presence in most scenes even if they don't actively *do* anything. They do, however, play characters that are at the centre of the action, perhaps interacting with each other in a subdued way, commenting on the action of the main characters, and definitely experiencing it all as if they were there, because they were. For them, the King of Thebes is not Aeschylus wearing a mask he made last night, he is the King of Thebes!

The final innovation described in *On Poetics* came from the poet Sophocles, who started about thirty years after Aeschylus, and still over a hundred years before Aristotle. “Sophocles raised the number of actors to three, and added scene-painting,” credits Aristotle in Poetics, Part IV.

According to Aristotle, Sophocles' Oedipus Rex was “the highest achievement in tragedy,” and it is, indeed, still performed today.

Some twenty years after that highest

achievement, the golden age of tragedy and of Athens came to an end. Sophocles and Euripides both died around 406 BC, Aeschylus having passed away fifty years earlier. The gradual decline of the chorus was in progress, and soon it would disappear altogether from contemporary tragedies. And after this, Aristotle wrote *On Poetics*.

And thus, over two thousand years ago, participation mutated into performance and spectatorship.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Let us return to Nietzsche's question from the beginning: "What sort of artistic style would there be which one might derive from the idea of the spectator, for which one might consider the 'spectator in himself' the essential form?" I suggested any participatory art might fulfill that demand. Nietzsche would perhaps not have been satisfied with this answer:

*The spectator without a play is  
a contradictory idea.*

*Friedrich Nietzsche (1872):  
The Birth of Tragedy, Chapter VII*

A participant in a larp could easily be considered a spectator without a play, and the whole medium of larp an artistic style derived from the idea of the "spectator in himself." Indeed, the term "first person audience" has become commonplace in describing the feeling of being immersed in the story and the character, and seeing everything, "as if you are really there."

Grotowski used these words to describe his attempts at participatory theatre: "In the ritual, the montage takes place in the minds of the doers." (Osinski, Herron and Filipowicz, 1991) That is another way of saying "first person audience."

Similarly, perhaps a tragic dancer in a chorus could be a "first person audience" for the events of the tragedy.

If all performances are indeed "to some

degree both ritual and entertainment," (Schechner, 2002) and "all experiences are to some degree both passive and participatory" (see above), it is impossible to find a specific point in time when ritual dithyrambs for participants turned into artistic tragedies for spectators. Even trying to find such a point becomes meaningless.

We do not know at which point tragedy became a spectator sport, but since Thespis added an actor and a prologue in the latter half of the sixth century BC, it is clear that the tragic dances were already performed for the audience at that point.

My proposition is that around 550-500 BC the experience for the people in the chorus (the tragic dancers) was that of a participatory ritual, and the experience for the people in the seats of amphitheatre was that of a passive audience observing a combination between ritual and entertainment. But in 335 BC (when *On Poetics* was published) the experience for the people in the chorus was closer to that of actors performing a play, and the experience for the audience was very similar to passive audiences of theatre and film entertainment today.

This would mean that at some point during those two hundred years, there was a shift in tradition.

### 5.1 What does it feel like to participate in a ritual?

Based on my two decades of work in the field of participatory art, it is not fruitful to observe participation from the outside. It is not meant to look interesting. It is meant to feel interesting. Therefore, to understand rituals, a participatory experience, we must ask what it feels like to take part in one.

*Play gives people a chance to temporarily experience the taboo, the excessive, and the risky. You may never be Oedipus or Cleopatra, but you can perform them "in play." Ritual and play lead people into a "second reality," separate from ordinary life. This re*

ality is one where people can become selves other than their daily selves.

**Schechner, Richard:  
Performance Studies:  
An Introduction. p. 52**

Schechner's friend, anthropologist Victor Turner also wrote a lot about rituals, based on extensive fieldwork among tribal societies. He says rituals are characterised by "liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity, etc., from the normative constraints" (Turner, 2004).

Individuals participating in a ritual are no longer bound by their everyday identities, their social statuses, their families, their sex, age, caste or class. They absorb a new "liminal" identity for the duration of the ritual, and relate to each other through that identity. The new role can be "celebrant," "man," "woman," "god," "bull," "ancestor," or anything else. But the other participants have a similar role, and only see each other through that role. In *The Ritual Process* (1995), Turner defines *communitas* as "an unmediated relationship between historical, idiosyncratic, concrete individuals."

As one of the most developed contemporary participatory art forms, the practice of larps shows what participation and liminoid experiences can feel like. But they also provide another useful perspective on rituals. Larps allow the participant to experience personalities, lives, cultures and events from dozens of perspectives, and even participate in rituals while pretending to believe they are true. Experimenting with and experiencing different sorts of rituals provides one with some tools for understanding actual rituals, as well.

## 5.2

### Mystery solved

The chorus served many functions. The function may have been different for the tragic dancers in the chorus, for the audience, for the poet, for the actors, and for the jury of the dramatic competitions. It clearly

changed over time from a participatory ritual to a performance meant for the audience, and Aristotle may have been instrumental in hastening this transformation.

Nevertheless, even today, performance and especially performing shares attributes with ritual. Only analysing chorus from the perspective of the audience or the jury, as Aristotle does, automatically leaves out a major part of the importance of the chorus.

The chorus had aspects of first person audience and participation, which are shared more by ritual than by theatre.

Today those aspects live on in participatory media, including transmedia, larps, improvisation, multiplayer digital games and dance battles. To better understand and develop these recent and emerging media, it is useful to look at what has been done before. Similarly, the practice of these contemporary "ritual dramas" provides unique insight to the chorus 2500 years ago, such that was not available to earlier researchers.

The chorus lives on, and the roots of larp go beyond history.

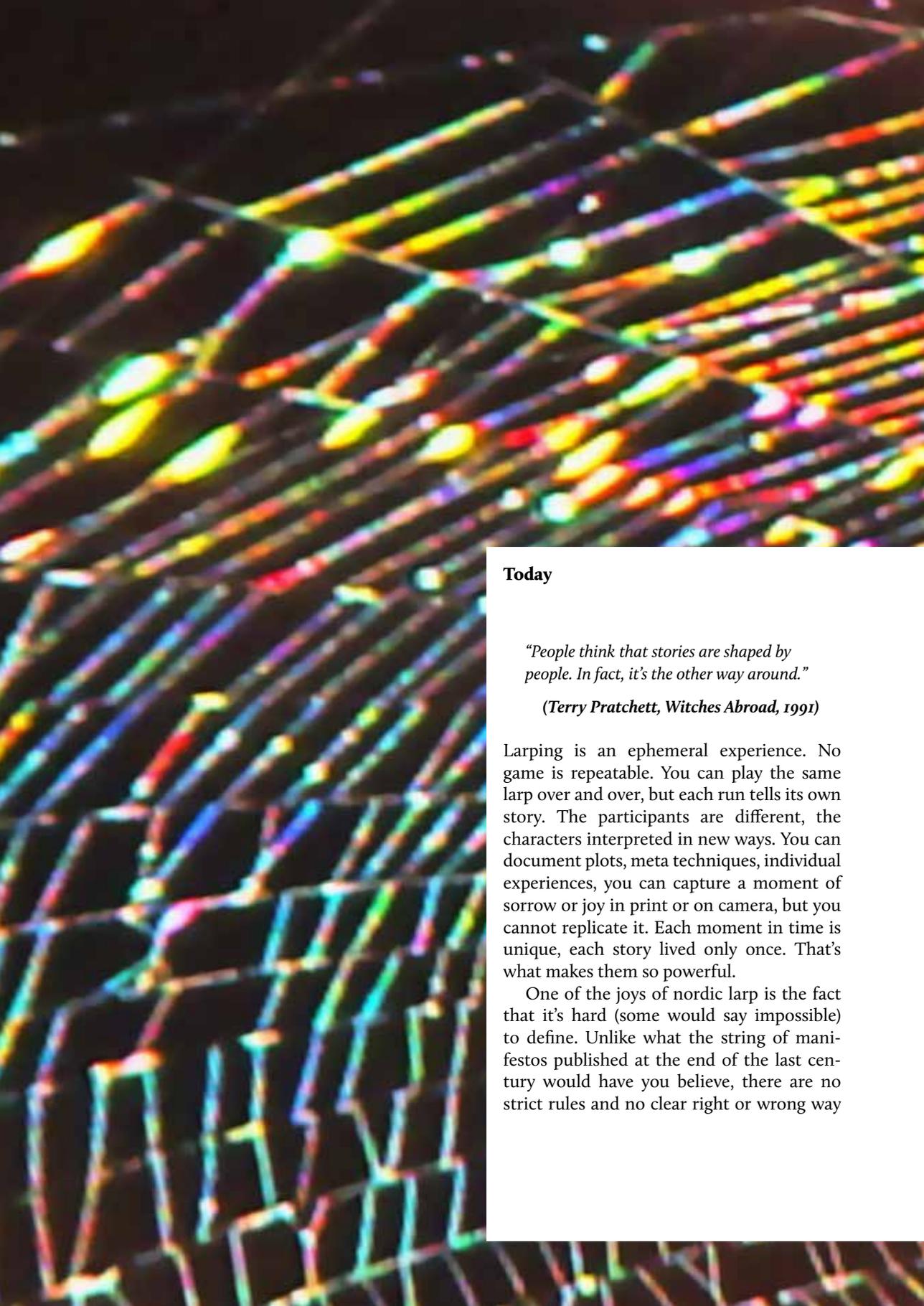
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This article is based on the author's Master's Thesis titled *Chorus Novus: Or Looking for Participation in Classical Greece*. The full thesis can be found at <https://aalto.doc.aalto.fi/handle/123456789/18089>.



Roman mosaic from the tablinum Casa del Poeta tragico in Pompeii with an aulos player wearing a wreath of laurels, in front of him a box of masks, to his left two men wearing goat skins, on the right a youth helping another man get dressed in a purple robe, and next to him another man wearing a purple robe, sitting an older man holding a mask, perhaps giving it out. Interpreted as "Theatrical scene with flute player and actors wearing goat skin costumes" or "Actors backstage getting ready for a performance" or "A poet giving directions from a theatrical scene." Why the aulos player would be necessary for any of these is unclear, but he was very necessary for Dionysian rites. For a proper Dionysian ritual, plenty of women would have been present, but dithyrambs were often sung and danced by only men. In my interpretation the men in the mosaic are getting ready to sing and dance dithyrambs.



## Today

*“People think that stories are shaped by people. In fact, it’s the other way around.”*

*(Terry Pratchett, Witches Abroad, 1991)*

Larping is an ephemeral experience. No game is repeatable. You can play the same larp over and over, but each run tells its own story. The participants are different, the characters interpreted in new ways. You can document plots, meta techniques, individual experiences, you can capture a moment of sorrow or joy in print or on camera, but you cannot replicate it. Each moment in time is unique, each story lived only once. That’s what makes them so powerful.

One of the joys of nordic larp is the fact that it’s hard (some would say impossible) to define. Unlike what the string of manifestos published at the end of the last century would have you believe, there are no strict rules and no clear right or wrong way



to make a game.<sup>1</sup> Today, someone trying to come up with a definition of nordic larp cannot even lean on geography, since nordic larps are written, played and performed far outside Scandinavia.

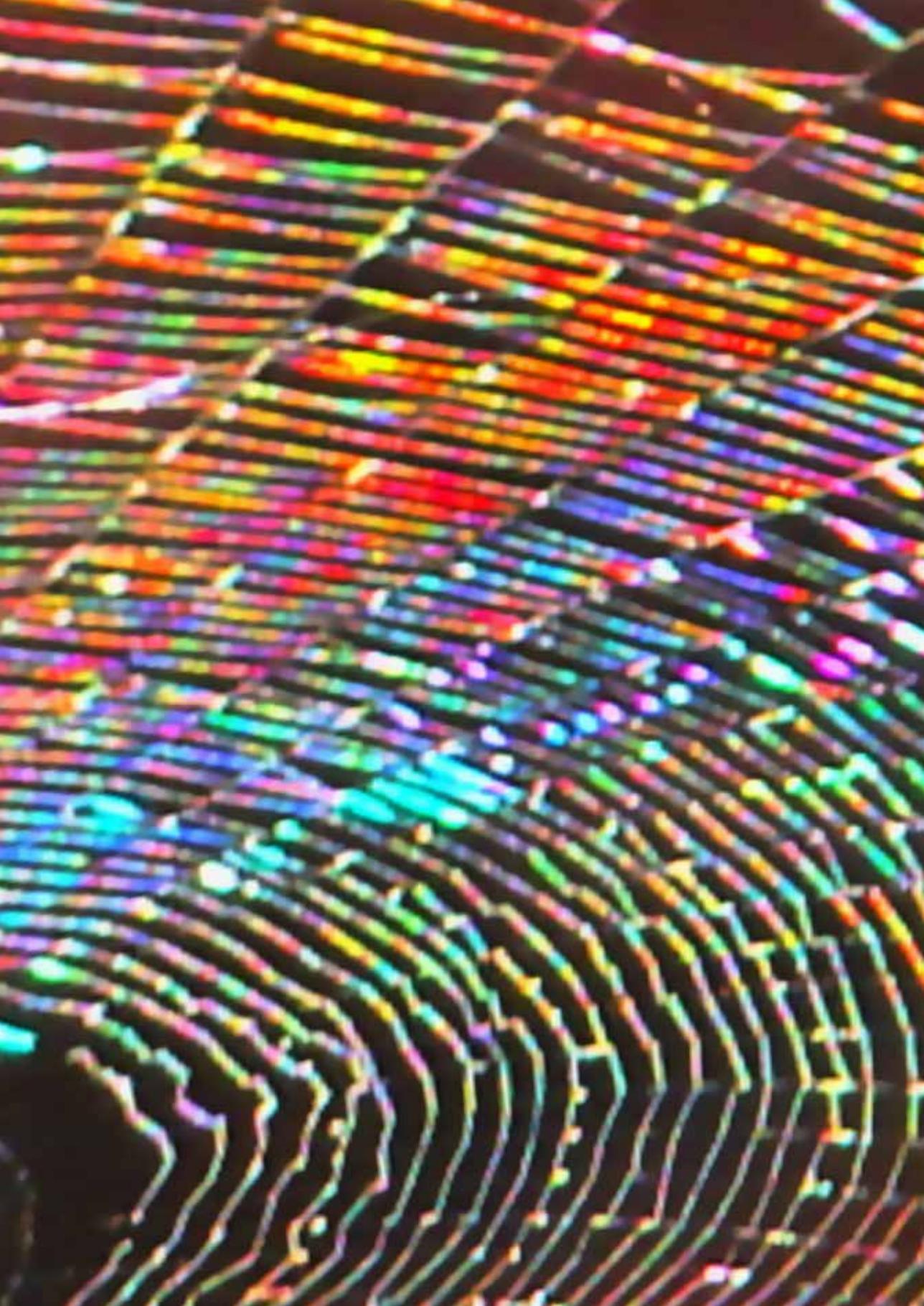
Our genre, whatever it is, is growing, changing, and gaining popularity all over the world. It's a multifaceted collection of cutting edge meta techniques, new forms of storytelling, and large and small games of every kind. With that in mind, perhaps trying to define nordic larp is the wrong avenue to take anyway?

In this section you will find a collection of articles dealing with the types of stories we're telling today. Techniques we use to create compelling characters, scenes and settings. Discussions about the use of pre-game and on inclusivity. What you will not find, however, is a comprehensive list of all the things happening, simply because there is just too much of *everything*.

And how wonderful is that?

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<sup>1</sup> Some would even argue that larps aren't games, but let's leave that for another day, shall we?



**[killed darling]**

***For the game Odyssey, which was set in the mythical ancient world, I had hoped for both an elephant and mounted archers. Both of these were seriously considered, budgeted, and approved.***

***In the end, the effort of the set piece—the spectacle—has been sacrificed in place of player agency and “play.” The crew required to clean up 60 minutes of elephant crap are better allocated to other parts of the game.***

***The number of people able to fire a larp safe bow from horseback was smaller, but safety issues meant it fell by the wayside.***

**[Simon]**

## **d the Italian Alps**

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crowned King, Claudius. We all know how the story ends: In a bloodbath in the castle Elsinore as one sordid plot after another yields its rotten fruit.

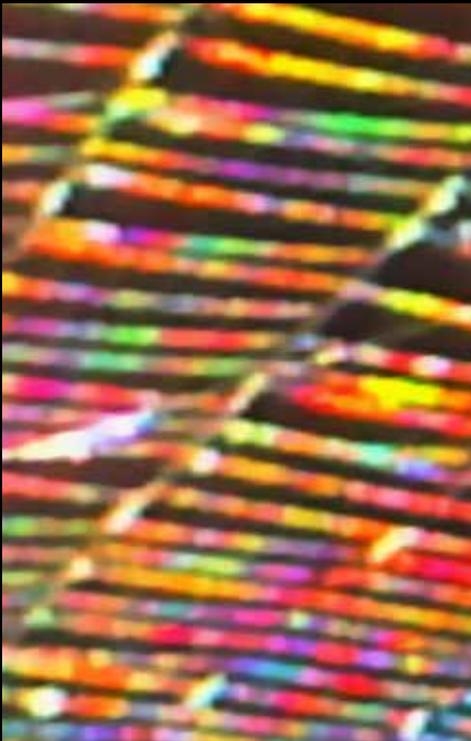
*Inside Hamlet* (Ericsson, Pedersen and Koljonen, 2015) is a larp based on the classic play. It's an updated version of one of the best-known early larps in the Nordic tradition from 2000, *Hamlet[inifrån]* (Krauklis and Ericsson et al.). *Inside Hamlet's* connection to story is straightforward and obvious. The larp is based on a story. In terms of game mechanics, it's events are fated to happen. The story will play out during the game. Individual scenes from the play are integrated into the larp, where for a few moments most players gather to watch as a few central figures do their lines. These are key scenes like the funeral of Ophelia or the murder of Po-

**[future of larp]**

***I think larping will be a bit easier to promote, as society takes some time to get used to newer pastime activities and even if larp isn't “mainstream” by 2037, it likely becomes more “accepted” and thus easier to recruit new people into.***

***That, or perfect VR technology arises (connects into your brain perfectly, not this goggle stuff we have today) and many larps migrate to VR games. I don't think that's likely to happen by 2037, though, if ever.***

**[Brage, 22 years]**



**[killed darling]**

**I particularly remember taking out the combat/conflict/rules system from a vampire larp (this was the late 90s.) We ran one evening of the ongoing campaign as a “social event” and I wanted players to do more roleplay and freeform.**

**Sadly, it turned into a huge conflict of cultures and several players refused to turn up at all because they felt that they would have to be “untrue to their characters” to avoid using the rules.**

**[Anders]**

**[epic fail]**

**In a vampire campaign, what would be the ultimate punishment for an unfaithful servant? Burn the vampire alive, of course. Hard to make it look realistic, you think?**

**Not really. All you need is a willing subject, a fleece vest drenched in paraffin, and a torch. Did we have safety measures? Yes. We made the player sign a waiver of liability relieving us of any responsibility. And we lit him up on a pier by a lake.**

**He did not burn as well as we had hoped, but no one was hurt.**

**[Katrin]**

**[epic fail]**

**We ran an urban fantasy larp with several locations in Stavanger city. Of course we informed the authorities beforehand to avoid any misunderstandings, but after a civilian spotted one of our players heading out from our base wielding an airsoft pistol, the police raided our larp site. Luckily, no one were present: we were all off blowing up a car on the other side of town.**

**[Hallgeir]**

# Hamlet, Vampires and the Italian Alps

Juhana Pettersson

What does it mean to experience a story in a larp?

When we talk about larp, we use the word *story* in a very confusing way. The larp has a story. The characters have stories. Yet larp is an improvisatory medium where things happen much as they do in life, and stories are often merely narratives imposed afterwards, stitched together from a selectively chosen collection of events brutalised into an arc of sorts.

Larp is the art of the experience. In this essay, I want to chart through personal larp experiences how story fits into all this. I'm a story sceptic when it comes to larp. I don't believe that stories are an automatic or integral part of the larp experience. Yet we make up stories in larp as we do in life and so it makes sense to explore how that can happen.

Do you experience the story as part of your moment to moment play? Is there some kind of a story-ness that you can feel while playing? Do you construct the story afterward? How do you mesh the personal story of what happened in your game with the story of the larp as understood by the organisers or formed in discussion with all the players after the fact? These are some of the questions I've been thinking of when I've tried to understand how story ties into the experience of larp.

## THE STORY OF INSIDE HAMLET

William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* is one of the best-known, classic stories of world literature. The Prince of Denmark wrestles with doubt and uncertainty over his father's death and the culpability of his uncle, the newly

crowned King, Claudius. We all know how the story ends: In a bloodbath in the castle Elsinore as one sordid plot after another yields its rotten fruit.

*Inside Hamlet* (Ericsson, Pedersen and Koljonen, 2015) is a larp based on the classic play. It's an updated version of one of the best-known early larps in the Nordic tradition from 2000, *Hamlet[inifrån]* (Krauklis and Ericsson et al.). *Inside Hamlet's* connection to story is straightforward and obvious. The larp is based on a story. In terms of game mechanics, it's events are fated to happen.<sup>1</sup> The story will play out during the game. Individual scenes from the play are integrated into the larp, where for a few moments most players gather to watch as a few central figures do their lines. These are key scenes like the funeral of Ophelia or the murder of Polonius.



*In the larp Black Friday, the story was disseminated through numerous small details, like letters found at the site. Photograph: Martina Ryssel*

*Inside Hamlet* is a very straightforward, simple example of a larp with a central story. Because of the fate-play mechanic, the game

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<sup>1</sup> "Fate-play" is a larp term encompassing diverse mechanics that are all about determining the fate of a character in advance, whether in terms of a single act or something more comprehensive. Normally a player would have total agency to decide what the character does, but in *Inside Hamlet*, for example, the player of Polonius knows that their character will be killed by Hamlet in a staged scene and seeks to make that scene happen.



*Black Friday's secret-based design drove participants to uncover the backstory. Photograph: Martina Ryssel*

will always produce that story.

Yet here we come to an interesting question. Where is the substance of the larp located? Larp is not recorded, it's not played for an audience. Larp exists in the minds of the participants. The totality of the larp is the totality of the individual experience of all who were there. This fact is hard to square with the idea of a single story of a larp. *The story*. In a sense, nobody experiences that story, since every single participant is busy experiencing their own game.

As a side note, this issue is often illustrated through the way organisers and participants experience and talk about a game. Because organisers often don't directly experience their own larps, their analysis can privilege the pre-created, central story of a larp while disregarding the reality of actual, individual participant experiences. This means that there's also a practical reason to always be suspicious of any overarching story of a larp you hear after the fact, especially

if it comes from an organiser.

For me personally, *Inside Hamlet* was a great example of this dichotomy. My larp experience was not really narrative at all. I played a fire-and-brimstone priest whose character description precluded any sort of personal growth or trajectory. I was in a number of cool scenes, but the experience didn't add up to anything that would make sense as a personal story. I was a stock character facilitating situations that required a priest, whatever they might be. Once I had done enough of that, I died.

I don't mean this as a criticism of the game. I had fun at *Inside Hamlet*, and the substance of my game came from other things: Scenes, interactions, reflections, random moments, intentional and unintentional comedy. I merely want to use it as an example of how a larp can have a strong aesthetic veneer of story, yet still fail to produce individual character stories for actual participants. The larp might have had a central story, but for me

that story was just a backdrop; it didn't define my experience.

## THE STORY OF CONVENTION OF THORNS

*Convention of Thorns* (Raasted et al., 2016) is a historical larp based on the role-playing game *Vampire: the Masquerade*. (Rein-Hagen et al. 2011) Convention is an important event in the game's fictional history, a meeting where the future factions of the Camarilla, the Sabbat and the Anarchs<sup>2</sup> coalesced. In the discussion around the larp, the event was often described as a "vampire United Nations."

As a larp, *Convention of Thorns* had scope and historical grandeur, but its primary framework was definitely not as a story. Here I'll pause for a moment to consider what it means to see a larp in story terms. I've started to suspect that when we talk about story in larp, we're not really talking about a rigorously defined theoretical concept. Rather, we're talking about an aesthetic idea. Stories are not about the concept of story but rather the appearance, the surface mythology of "story" and "storytelling." This also means that we can experience a story in many ways. I can have the emotional experience of having been in a story that has those all-important "story" qualities without really going through what that story is. Whether the story is satisfying is an emotional or an aesthetic question, not an analytical question.

Back to *Convention of Thorns*. In its marketing, it was not framed in terms of this aesthetic idea of "story," and certainly not to the extent that *Inside Hamlet* was. It was a meeting, a convention where things would be decided. There was an official version of what happened, as set out in the books

published for the role-playing game, and the larp's version that came together as a result of player actions. These results took the shape not of a story resolving itself but rather a political process. While you can argue that *Convention of Thorns* had a story the same as any other larp, it wasn't central to the game's core experience..

My character at *Convention of Thorns* was the host, Father Samuel. He started as a naive man who wanted to have peace in the world of vampires. He looked up to all these important people and believed in their sincerity when they talked about how we must all come together.

During the larp, Father Samuel slowly started to understand that all these vampires were actually selfish liars who valued their short-term goals more than the common good. (Naiveté was one of Father Samuel's characteristics, remember.) He became despondent, and then radicalised. He lost hope in the high and the mighty of vampire society, the vampires who would form the Camarilla. He wanted to know what the other side had to say, and went to ask. Before long, he was in a vaulderie ritual conducted by the future Sabbat Archbishop Moncada.<sup>3</sup> These vampires were the only ones who didn't seem to lie. They had community.

In short, Father Samuel had a very clean personal story arc. I experienced a story of hope, betrayal and joining the monsters for moral reasons. It didn't happen spontaneously: I was aware of what I was doing, and purposefully directed my game towards a satisfying story arc. The ingredients and ideas for that story came mostly from actual in-game events, and I experienced the satisfying nature of the aesthetic "storyness" of my game while it was happening.

In this sense, the experience was the op-

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2 In the world of *Vampire: the Masquerade*, the Camarilla is a global organisation of vampires ruled by the eldest and attempting to blend in with humanity. The Anarchs are young vampires who rebel against this system in the name of freedom. The Sabbat is a mix of a paramilitary organisation and a blood cult seeking to end the rule of semi-mythical vampire progenitors called the Antediluvians.

3 A significant figure in the lore of the game *Vampire: the Masquerade*. An ideologue of the vampire sect Sabbat. Moncada and other Sabbat members represent the more depraved side of the game's various vampire societies.

posite of *Inside Hamlet*. In *Convention of Thorns*, the overall game wasn't really built around story aesthetics, but my personal game benefited from them greatly.

### THE STORY OF BLACK FRIDAY

Unlike *Inside Hamlet* and *Convention of Thorns*, the Italian larp *Black Friday* (Aman-tini and Busti et al., 2014 & 2016) was not transparent. Transparency in a larp means that you know about the secrets of the other characters and the general progression of the game's events in advance. Players have no secrets from each other. *Black Friday* was the opposite: Pretty much everything was a secret. Going in, I knew my starting position. I was a union activist and a chief engineer in a small mining town in Wyoming, U.S. (In reality the game was played in the Italian Alps, in the town of Lusernetta.) The first night, we'd be having a company party.



Many scenes in *Black Friday* were about characters trying to piece together information. Photograph: Martina Ryssel

What would happen after that, I had no idea of, but obviously I suspected that the peaceful life of the town's inhabitants would be shattered in some way. In the beginning, in terms of story, I had no idea what would happen. Due to the aggressive secrecy, possible story-related experiences could only start to form during the game and afterwards.

I had a character arc, but it wasn't particularly satisfying. I became defined as a family man. I had a wife who expected a child. I spent much of my time trying to make sure

she was well, and after she got sick, to get her cured. In the end, our family was doomed. Our journey ended when we were killed in a nerve gas attack. As it was happening, it felt like the sort of environmental stories built into games like *Fallout 4*. You see two skeletons on the ground, a few items scattered around them, and you can piece together how those people died. We were those people. Clean but a little too simple.

Where *Black Friday* really gets interesting in terms of story is the wider narrative material present in the larp. The game was set in the settlement of Liberty Town, in an area inhabited first by Native Americans, then hippies and finally the miners. The history and the back story of the game's events could be gleaned from a hundred sources, from characters, from letters you found, from advertisements on milk cartons, from FBI documents, from softcore pictures pinned to toilet walls. The complexity of the game's history and the attention to detail in the physical production were amazing. They created the feeling that there was always more to learn and understand, and that nothing was as simple as it first appeared. This information was always immediately actionable, since succeeding in their goals the characters depended in large part on their understanding of the situation.

At one point in the game, I sat with another player in one of the cabins for three hours putting together what I called The Story and he "the movie I'm making." Every time someone came in the door, we heard more details that added interesting complexity to the narrative we built. The Story was an explanation of what was happening and why. It started a thousand years ago and ended up in the present.

Later in the game, I told The Story to many people, often in an attempt to convince them to do what I wanted them to do. In one scene, I was talking with people from a corrupt chemicals company. I wanted to impress upon them the danger of the situation, so I said: "Right now, there's a thing out there we call the Story. It explains what's happening, and it has good guys and bad guys. You are the bad guys, and you're in a

town full of guns.” I used The Story to convince people, but I also used the very idea of The Story to make my point.

This was also relevant because credibility and trust were the key issues determining if we survived or not. For example, the chemicals company had many of the things we needed, but they were also widely distrusted, hampering cooperation. In a choice that I really appreciated, only surprisingly few among the characters were really truly sinister. Most were decent folks trying to survive. Nevertheless, in this environment of distrust, stories and narratives had great power to shape the behaviour of people, sometimes beneficially and sometimes detrimentally. During the game, I essentially fact-checked many times: When people said that the Center for Disease Control<sup>4</sup> did something, for example, I went and checked if that was true, and then attempted to revise the stories circulating based on what I found.

The larp also had an overarching story in the sense of what are the events of the game itself. An epidemic spreads in a tiny mining community. Officials get called in. After a failure to save everyone, President Obama orders the army to kill the inhabitants. Enough people manage to escape that the infection spreads to the rest of the world, creating a mass pandemic. This story was less compelling than the organic story material found during the game, since the “everybody dies” ending meant that so much of the game’s events felt irrelevant. What did it matter what my character did, since he got killed in an essentially random way in terms of his narrative?

However, it also illustrates something interesting about the nature of stories in larp. The way I explained it above was based on my experience. I had a meaningless nerve gas death. Yet for other characters, like those who escaped, the experience of the ending and thus the story of the larp was different. *Black Friday* was very definitely a simulation where organiser decisions were based on

“what would logically happen.” This created a strong sense of depth in the larp, but this collective fiction broke down in the end and became a set of individual experiences. For example, from the perspective of the FBI players, they attempted to escape to save the community. From my perspective, as someone witnessing them drive away, they were a bunch of cowards fleeing the scene. Any information that would tell me otherwise was beyond the scope of my game experience.

It comes back to the question of what is true in a larp and who gets to decide. Larp is fiction, so if I believe something for the duration of the game, isn’t that as true as something the organisers put into the game? Does the fiction of the game have a reality, and is that reality more real than my reality as an individual player? This question in turn directly affects the stories that the game consists of. Can an organiser tell a participant that what they experienced in the game was not “true”?

Normally in these discussions I’m 100% on the side of individual player experience. If it wasn’t part of the player experience, it wasn’t in the game, and that’s that, no matter what the organisers might imagine. Yet *Black Friday* presents a compelling case to the contrary, simply on the strength of its simulation. The key here is that the simulation was also narratively relevant and satisfying. *The Monitor Celestra* (Summanen and Walch et al., 2013) is another game that attempted a deep simulation of a definite environment, but in that case, the world illusion was narratively thin. In *Black Friday*, I can accept some privileging of “the story” instead of “my story” because “the story” is so rich, and unlike in *Inside Hamlet*, wasn’t reduced to a back-drop.

## STORY AESTHETICS

What do we mean when we talk about story in larp? This essay was originally supposed to have been based on interviews. I wanted

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4 The game featured teams from the U.S. Army, Center for Disease Control and the FBI.

to ask people how they experienced story in larp on the moment-to-moment level of larp action. Doing that, I noticed that while we have broad theoretical ideas about story and larp, the concepts we have for talking about the experience of story are weak. Because of this, I chose to write about my own experiences instead, and attempt to map out some kind of a territory for how the story affects the actual gameplay of a larp as it is happening.



*The story design in Black Friday embraced asymmetric experience design, where different characters had wildly different access to information. Photograph: Martina Ryssel*

A question beyond the scope of this essay is how the story of a larp develops after the larp is over. I've often found that this is where the greatest brutalities of how larp is discussed happen, with a monolithic view of a game supplanting the richness of individual voices, the organiser views overriding actual player experiences. The story of the larp as told by the organisers is what they decided it was even before it was played, and the players can't affect this post-game narrative even when they were the ones who were actually there.

To me, *Black Friday* points the way forward if we want to engage with story as a larp device further. Instead of a crude, broad story idea, we need tools to facilitate individual players creating personal and unique story experiences for themselves. We need to find ways to make story rich and actionable, relevant to the totality of the game. If we decide to do story, we need to take it seri-

ously and consider it from the micro-level of moment-to-moment play, not as a grandiose marketing idea.

Story as an aesthetic idea has to become a tool that enables the player to make a good game for themselves and for others instead of a lie that gets plastered over a rich field of separate and contradictory experiences.

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***[killed darling]***

***Using lots of reindeer blood at a larp instead of, or in combination with, fake blood to create that physical instinctual reaction you get to the smell of blood. We were also planning to rot some meat to use at some places for an even more pungent smell.***

***Skipped due to the cancelling of the larp. But you also need a venue where you are sure you can clean away the blood in a sanitary way, and make sure that vegan players***

***etc. don't have to come into contact with the real blood. We were considering filling the sink in a bathroom with blood, and then use even more fake blood on the bathroom floor.***

***[Elin]***

## **Dissonance in Larps**

***ary***

gameplay, but denies the player that freedom of choice through its narration, creating a breach in the player's adhesion to the overall game history.

Other examples of such dissonance are abundant in video games. For instance, in the 2013 *Tomb Raider* reboot, a "hero next door" young man or woman is presented in the intro cinematics as immature and fragile and then transformed in the early stages of the game into a killing machine, almost without transition. Another typical example appears in *Batman Arkham City*, when Batman is poisoned and encouraged to rush to find the antidote; actually, the player has all the time in the world to fulfill as many side quests as he wants. As soon as he explores

***[character moment]***

***The morning after the wedding he took me to my father's tent. As I folded his jacket I heard him unbuckle his belt. And I was so happy that he would hit me.***

***[Hilda Sindrist  
Brudpris]***

to ask people how they experienced story in larps on the moment-to-moment level of larp action. Doing that, I noticed that while we have broad theoretical ideas about story and larp, the concepts we have for talking about the experience of story are weak. Because of this, I chose to write about my own experiences instead, and attempt to map out some kind of a territory for how the story affects the actual gameplay of a larp as it is happening.



**[epic fail]**

***My most epic fail ever was to fall head over heels in love with my in-game love interest.***

**[Anonymous]**

**[future of larp]**

***“Players will have more lives and there will be more games to go to.” Additionally she thinks it will be harder for her because she will have to obey the combat rules (as a child at the system she plays she doesn’t have to).***

**[Isabella, 7 years]**

**[killed darling]**

***In the original draft of my Fastaval scenario The Intrepid Seven, co-written with Jacqueline Bryk, the other 250 colonists were dead and the seven player characters were the only survivors. That turned out to be a disaster, because it’s IN FACT hard to explore your new seven-way marriage and kinky sex play when you’re trying to mourn for your dead comrades and deal with their remains.***

**[Evan]**

# Ludo-narrative Dissonance and Harmony in Larps

Hélène Henry

## OUT OF TUNE

Ludo-narrative dissonance seems like a pompous term but actually defines a simple concept that appears when gameplay (“ludo” from *ludis*, “game”) and narration (“narrative”) diverge or oppose: the story created by players’ actions contradicts the story tailored by the narration.

For this article, the definition of “gameplay” in larps includes the system of rules, techniques and meta technical setup which allows players to express themselves in the larp-specific fictional universe, thus to build and expand their story through common tools. The term “narrative” refers to the context in which the game takes place (historical period, genre), displayed themes, game masters’ intentions (what experience they want the player to have), tone, etc. In larps, the narrative is set up primarily through character sheets, player tips and guidelines (describing the universe, social conventions, background), scripted events, etc. The marriage of gameplay and narrative creates the story.

## PRELUDE IN VIDEO GAMES

Clint Hocking,<sup>1</sup> the creative director at LucasArts and Ubisoft, first used the term “ludo-narrative dissonance” in 2007 when discussing an issue related to the video game *Bioshock* (2K Games, 2007). The term became an instant success and a practical tool of analysis for video games.

To summarize Hocking’s original argument, there is a conflict between the ludic contract and the narrative contract in *Bioshock*. The game enhances the theme of personal interest vs. generosity through the

gameplay, but denies the player that freedom of choice through its narration, creating a breach in the player’s adhesion to the overall game history.

Other examples of such dissonance are abundant in video games. For instance, in the 2013 *Tomb Raider* reboot, a “hero next door” young man or woman is presented in the intro cinematics as immature and fragile and then transformed in the early stages of the game into a killing machine, almost without transition. Another typical example appears in *Batman Arkham City*, when Batman is poisoned and encouraged to rush to find the antidote; actually, the player has all the time in the world to fulfill as many side quests as he wants. As soon as he explores the city, the game mechanics actually encourage him to do so in order to increase his skills, negating the feeling of emergency put in place by the narration.

The ludo-narrative dissonance goes beyond a simple bug, continuity error or occasional incoherence. When it emerges, it’s the whole system that is at fault, where the story promised to the player is contradicted by the story that he lives, which is precisely what we wish to avoid in larp.

## COUNTERPOINT IN LARP

Like for video games, I believe ludo-narrative dissonance is not only a useful analytical tool, but also a key challenge for larp storytelling. Whether a larp is gamist, simulationist or narrativist (or any other category if one does not adhere to these) does not say anything about its quality. However, if the rules are not consistent with the announced intention, then the organiser is exposed to the likely disappointment of the players. Imag-

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.clicknothing.typepad.com/click\\_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html](http://www.clicknothing.typepad.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html)

ine a larp centred around introspection or character relationships, but whose preparation material instead focuses on encyclopedic rules that detail every aspect of the external world; or a larp promising to explore the daily life of 16<sup>th</sup> century Venetian merchants, without designing an in-game economy or rules of exchange.

Although other classifications are possible, I'd like to distinguish the most frequently encountered dissonances into two categories: passive and active.

**Passive dissonances are related to unnecessary rules.** Sometimes these are rooted in the desire to present a comprehensive overview of the world or the designer's work, which leads to an encyclopedic system. Other times, they are a result of the designers' anxiety to cover all possible avenues of play and not limit players' freedom or immersion. It is even specified sometimes that some rules are detailed "just in case," even if it is not advisable to use them.

Players' observations tend to show<sup>2</sup> that the more our memory is cluttered by the need to take charge or remember the rules of a game, the less space it can devote to emotional impact and empathy. Consequently, a game that would favour an abundant, complex or counterintuitive system of rules diminishes the quality of players' immersion. This argument alone should lead designers to promptly and ruthlessly suppress any rule not actively reinforcing the game themes (safety rules not included, obviously).

Not forgetting a more insidious effect: some players, intuitively familiar with the famous trope of Chekhov's gun,<sup>3</sup> may be tempted to think that if the rule exists, it is to serve a purpose. It would be a shame to unintentionally encourage players to use a rule that doesn't serve the intention of your game, or worse, which lessens the impact of

the game's story. Even though combat, sex or healing rules cover basic subjects (from a simulationist point of view), this is not a reason why they should appear by default in a game system. Every rule should meet a need. One way to avoid passive dissonance and strictly focus on relevant rules may be to suggest to players other means of resolving situations that might occur, more in line with the game themes. Organisers should also clearly communicate what will not take place during the game because it is not part of the scope. For instance, in *Prima la Musica or L'Agonie du Poète* (The Poet's Agony, 2016), there are no rules to simulate sex. In operas or 17th theatre plays, protagonists do not sleep with each other, so the same rule applies to these larps set up in the same context, period. However, the theme of being in love is central, thus other means consistent with the setting are suggested to express it like sighs, looks, and gentle touching of hands.

Active dissonances are caused by rules conflicting with the intentions of the game. The experience they offer to the player is different from what the larp promises. As a consequence, the story experienced by the player is different or even in contradiction with the narration of the game. This situation can take many forms, among which:

- A discrepancy between the intention of the game, and the type of rules set up by the game design: games anticipated as fun and light but burdened with heavy or complex rulebooks, or games without rules or with minimal rules, where players' objectives require simulationist mechanisms. This last case can make players and designers think that rules are necessary in a larp, when the actual problem is that it's not possible to achieve the game

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2 <https://youtu.be/rP7kIHRF62A>

3 Chekhov's gun is the name of a famous trope, based on the following quote: "If in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired. Otherwise don't put it there." From Gurllyand's *Reminiscences of A. P. Chekhov*, in *Teatr i iskusstvo* 1904, No. 28, 11 July, p. 521.

objectives with the tools provided.

- Poorly chosen rules, inconsistent with the narration, and ultimately harmful to the game. *Ars Amandi* for instance, is a sex simulation rule requiring touching one's partner's arm that allows a wide variation of interpretations. Nevertheless, it should not be systematically used as a default sex simulation rule: in games where sexual intercourse is not an important stake, other rules that don't involve physical contact may be as relevant, and less intrusive for the player.

Rules are marvellous tools to support, structure, and build a story. Just as it would be unthinkable to reuse character sheets from one game to another (except in the case of a very innovative concept), it would seem at best neglectful, at worst counterproductive, not to design specifically tailored rules for each larp in order to define the game's own identity. The assumed ambition by most larps—to propose original, varied, strong, and inspiring experiences—requires designers to pay attention to the consistency of all tools used to reach the Holy Grail of ludo-narrative harmony.

### FROM DISSONANCE TO HARMONY

Following the above thoughts, a term has naturally emerged to greet the effort of preventing—and indeed actively counteracting—the dissonance: ludo-narrative harmony.

#### Passive and active harmony

In the same way that passive and active dissonances can be categorised, it seems relevant to distinguish passive and active harmony:

- **Passive harmony:** when the rules are consistent with the premise of the game, without necessarily supporting the theme. Consider for instance a post-apocalyptic game where everyone is accustomed to the rigours of survival since childhood, but that promises players the opportunity to explore interpersonal relationships, the importance of family ties, and the experience of group life. To fully focus rules on combat or survival would be consistent with the setting, but would be inadequate to convey the theme. Dissonance is then avoided but harmony is not fully achieved.
- **Active harmony:** when the rules, whether chosen among existing ones or created, are always selected specifically to support the whole story by incorporating themes into players' actions. By this means, the focus of the rules and their tone and treatment are in line with the fictional framework. Again using the post-apocalyptic game example, it may translate to rules setting up group rituals for instance.

In an effort towards active harmony, many games have brilliantly set up such rules, through the choice of their subject matter (which rules to focus upon, such as sex-play or inter-generational dynamics) or the choice of their treatment (the mechanics by which this focus is handled). Let's take a look at some examples:

The first path to ludo-narrative harmony is to choose rules that address a specific topic, to frame the specific larp narration setting and themes. It ranges from designing rules about quodpot for a Harry Potter university larp (*Salem-Never forget*, 2012), where the championship is not only competitive but part of the narrative; or duelling rules in a western larp to create smooth scenes (*Hell on Wheels*, Appl and Dulka et al., 2015); to more unexpected ones, like rules that allow players to forget or blur serious events as a means of reinforcing the desired dreamlike atmosphere in an oneiric larp (*La Sirena Varada*, 2015); or a rule that channels madness through a necklace that enhances charisma and lowers a character's inhibitions, imbuing the game with psychological horror (*Pan*, 2014).

Once the designers have chosen the subjects of the rules, it's time to design them in a relevant way that reflects the narration

specific to the larp. Sex simulation rules are a good illustration for that kind of choice. The needs unique to each of the following games has led designers to address this topic, but each set of rules has been executed differently, echoing the identity of the larp:

- In *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* [*Dangerous Liaisons*](2014), where love is seen as a tool of power and competition, a tarot deck is provided in each room to calculate the sexual performance of each character and determine the winner, with consequences ranging from change in reputation to pillow talk; and even the ultimate disgrace for both characters, the birth of true love.
- In *Les Canotiers de Santeuil* [*The Santeuil Boating Party*](2014), where love is a floating dream in a light and leisurely atmosphere, there is no crude simulation, no undressing, and (almost) no contact, but a system of ribbons to lovingly tie each other's wrists before counting clouds together to climb to seventh heaven.
- In *Les Fleurs de Mai* [*Flowers of May*](Algayres, 2014), where love is designed as a tool of power and enslavement in a brothel, each player is required to use a range of various and subtle interpretations of *Ars Amandi*.
- In *Just a Little Lovin'* (Edland and Grasmø, 2013) where homosexual advances are at the heart of unbridled evenings, bowls of feathers are available in some scenes: to give a pink feather to someone is a smooth way to suggest directing the scene towards sex. If the player ignores the feather, the scene then moves elsewhere. If black feathers had not also been used to invite to black box scenes, this meta technique could even have been integrated as an intradiegetic mechanic to further strengthen harmony—the feather would then have been considered a usual code of these kind of evenings and well-known by the characters.

The same attention to consistency can also be advantageously applied to explain the game intentions or overall design. In *Vivre Vite* [*Live Fast*] (Allermoz, 2014), a game about young punks in the 80's, rules are offered to simulate headbutts or ass grabs, in order to enhance a violent, vulgar and sexist atmosphere. Aside from these rules, though, the playing intentions are all consistent with the subject, either in the writing (some paragraph titles for instance: "I'll punch you," "I'll stab you," "I'm on drugs" "I'll f... you") or the numerous incentives to break generic larping codes, including those regarding conflicts ("let's prioritise shouting over discrete quarrels") or physical fighting ("in that culture, opponents may finish off a fight either with a few insults or by grabbing a beer together, depending on the case").

In the same vein, the rules for *Dirty Little Secrets* (Algayres, 2013) provide several dramatic elements based on tropes from the soap opera genre—dramatic monologues, slamming doors, looks toward the camera—creating an innovative experience where ludo and narrative merge seamlessly.

### Arabesques

Pre-game workshops could also be regarded as tools of ludo-narrative dissonance or harmony, as well as other kinds of rules; for example, the many and varied workshops for *Mad about the Boy* (Raaum, Edland and Lindahl, 2010)- especially the one collectively building the world through examining how the disappearance of all men would impact each character's daily life. Similarly, the meta technique of using safewords may enable greater harmony, even if it does not create it. In our violent post-apocalyptic world example, safewords would allow to safely and fully experience the rigour or cruelty, designed as pillars of a society fighting to survive.

Another interesting reflection: once aware of the ludo-narrative harmony mechanism, one could imagine playing with it, in order to create what I'd call constructive dissonances: dissonances that at first don't appear to be part of the story, but in the end benefit the game, as described in the first musical definition of dissonance:

*“Despite the fact that words like ‘unpleasant’ and ‘grating’ are often used to explain the sound of dissonance, all music with a harmonic or tonal basis—even music perceived as generally harmonious—incorporates some degree of dissonance. The buildup and release of tension (dissonance and resolution), which can occur on every level from the subtle to the crass, is partially responsible for what listeners perceive as beauty, emotion, and expressiveness in music.”<sup>4</sup>*

Game designers can use players’ unconscious desire for resolution as a (comprehensive and benevolent) manipulation tool, to push them towards playing in a certain way, creating a home for some unexpressed expectations that will be resolved in-game, or to induce the tone of game without announcing it.

Such use may be dangerous, exposing the organiser to the risk of poor communication and the player to disappointment, but tempting to lovers of non-transparent games.

Why not imagine, for instance, apparently ill-designed rules (rules too simulationist or insufficient, detailed topics unfit with the announced themes) ultimately justified by the unexpected change of direction along the way, with the introduction of new issues that finally justify the original rules (it was all a dream, your character wakes up in another world/lives in a different one than they thought they were living in, etc). Or also, the use of certain preparatory workshops in order to create an artificial intimacy on a meta-level, which can resurface during some unexpected internal changes to the game and impact characters’ actions; for instance, characters supposed to hate each other who are teamed up during the *Ars Amandi* workshop, seemingly as a joke, but discover in-game that they are attracted to each other. In this case, the dissonance allows designers to avoid foreshadowing in character sheets, suppressing the consequent risks of players

understanding, and enhancing the emotional impact of unexpected events and psychological turnarounds.

## THE BREAKTHROUGH, A PERFECT TUNE?

To go further, I would like to introduce a notion sometimes called “breakthrough” in the field of video games. I do not, however, use it in the overall sense of “breakthrough that marks the era or the history of the game,” but in a more restricted sense, a technical or design innovation at the heart of the game, defining its specific identity and allowing for—in the most successful cases—a new way to play. This concept provides an interesting construction and analysis framework to apply to larps.

### Crystallisation of storytelling

It is possible to create a breakthrough that does not lead to ludo-narrative harmony—for example, in the case of a gameplay innovation that isn’t related to the game’s theme. But when given its full potential, the breakthrough is the innovation that amplifies and gives an unexpected echo to the narration. It is the one rule that will often be the most memorable and regularly cited when trying to describe the game—and therefore a good way to help define and differentiate one larp from another.

For example, the massive medieval fantasy larp *Légendes d’Hyborée* [*Legends of Hyboria—Opus I*] (2015) offers an innovative system of instances, derived from video games. Instances scattered throughout the site were accessible to players during some quests, with the objective of recreating the kind of epic pulp scenes that groups of adventurers had been told about in their character sheets. For instance, the dungeon of thieves, a succession of rooms filled with physical and mental puzzles to decipher in order to access the following room was an exciting adventure in which each player could refine

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4 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consonance\\_and\\_dissonance](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consonance_and_dissonance)

and affirm their role within the group.

The breakthrough is a particularly valuable way to direct the player's attention to the theme at the heart of the game. In all larps—even the most detailed and carefully designed—immersion is an illusion. Only the agreement of the players, who willingly suspend disbelief during the duration of the game, allows what is commonly—albeit imperfectly—called “immersion.” To do so, the players tweak their sensory perception. They mentally erase what doesn't align with the proposed narration (other players' appearances, boffer weapons or other anachronisms), and instead focus on elements in tune with the story that they want to experience, which ideally matches the narration offered to them. More than aesthetics or the story of a game, what best enhances this objective are the rules which provide the framework for action and drive the story forward. The breakthrough is a meaningful way to help them focus their attention towards what enriches their game experience, and away from what contradicts it.

*Tant d'Espace [So much space]* (Duvned, 2014) is a game for two players based on the themes of melancholy, nostalgia, and a known non-dramatic ending. Participants can play in a real bar, which reinforces on multiple levels the intention of the game. First of all, thanks to the familiarity of the setting, it utilises known references such as the selection of drinks and the presence of other customers as a way of strengthening the bleed-in inspired by the game design. Playing in a real, open world also encourages the interruption of reality through its unpredictability (rose vendors interrupting, the dynamics of background music, server downtime, closing time that forces the game to end). These hazards do not break immersion, but rather reinforce it, immediately merging with the story and offering a different experience for each session. In this sense, one could even qualify it as a systemic feature.

The larp *Comme le Houx [Like the holly-tree]* (Henry, 2015) explores quite another path, as the game consists entirely of a phone call between two friends. This idea is

born out of the desire to remove the bodily dimension from a larping experience, in order to facilitate “immersion” and identification with the character rather than the player, as well as to encourage listening, confession and dialogue, which are the essence of the intended experience.

### Creating languages beyond words

Many larps already include breakthroughs, although they have not necessarily been identified as such. The following examples provide players new ways to express their characters, through songs, dance and music:

- *L'Eté 36 [Summer 36]* (Artaud and Frénot, 2012): In order to recreate the “bucolic, romantic and festive” atmosphere, designers invite players to sing as a way of expressing their state of mind at key moments of their choice. To achieve this, a song book with customised songs of the relevant period is provided in addition to each character sheet. They become a powerful means to channel emotions, relevant both as a way of expressing the concerns and hopes of the era, and for reinforcing, through communal choirs, the characters' sense of belonging to a group. The songs can also reveal dilemmas and intimate revelations, either through force or subtlety. This tool could be transposed and fully exploited in a musical larp, for example, where ludo and narrative would then be perfectly tuned. In any case, singing is a specific gameplay technique to personify characters.
- *Les Noces de Cendre [The Wedding of Ashes]* (Gresset and Abbey, 2012): In this game, players are invited to express their characters' moods through tango. The rules emphasise the diverse palette of emotions that can be communicated, as well as the universality of the language (everyone can dance and convey an intention while dancing: love, friendship, passion, hate, ...) thus providing an additional tool shared by all players.

- *Prima la Musica* (2016): This game, typical of the French romanesque genre, revolves around the world of opera and offers the players a game mechanism called the Theatre of Emotions: a clearly defined theatrical space in which the player can play a scene, sing, mime, or dance with the accompaniment of famous arias in the background, selected from a catalog available before the game so the players can familiarise themselves with the music. It punctuates players' stories by enhancing key scenes that they choose, at their discretion, to disclose to the other players (open curtain) or play in private (closed curtain). It is a clever mechanism to enhance the atmosphere and intimately connect the opera to the game, allowing the players to interpret scenes worthy of a real opera.

Make no mistake: I am not claiming that every game should have a breakthrough or should create an innovative rule. Innovation only makes sense if it adds to the game narration. That's why it can be an interesting question to ask when creating a game, and the answer will depend on the nature of the larp.

## THE SOUND OF MUSIC

It seems obvious that when creating rules, one should keep in mind their relevance to the game. Yet the persistence of ludo-narrative dissonance in larp suggests that it may be not that simple, as it requires from larp designers both a clear vision of what they want the players to experience, and what the rules and mechanics will engender.

Still, larps have by nature many advantages, especially compared to video games, and these advantages should be utilised as much as possible:

First, the team composition and the workflow pipeline: in a larp team, designers often conceive all aspects of the game, including the rules and story. Even when that is not the case, the team is small enough for

everyone to work tightly together. In video games, this kind of collaboration is an exception. Worse over, video game designers are not necessarily trained to take the story into consideration while developing the game design. Fortunately, narrative designers and producers, who translate the story into gameplay, are more and more frequently part of the development teams. But the fact that writers are not always included in the video game development team from the start of the project increases the chances that narration and gameplay are treated as parallel strands rather than as two sides of the same coin. On the contrary, larp designers usually keep a clear overview of the experience they want the players to live, and can more easily harmonise their design and story, since they control everything.

Also, contrary to video games, last-minute gameplay changes in larp do not usually have cost implications, which makes it easier to align ludic and narrative elements and to address any divergences, right up to the very end.

Finally, and most importantly, larps are ahead of video games when it comes to avoiding ludo-narrative dissonance, because larps are *by essence* a collaborative form of storytelling. One of the most exciting and difficult challenges that video games are trying to overcome today is at the heart of most larps: providing players with tools that allow them to take an active role in the creation of the story and to build and tell powerful, non-generic-stories within the framework of the game.

In conclusion, here are some questions that can help game designers interrogate the ludo-narrative harmonics of their game design:

- What experience do I want the player to have? Which eras, themes or questions will they explore? Therefore, what kind of actions would logically happen during the game?
- As a consequence, which topics require rules in order to frame, guide and strengthen this exploration? For instance, if the game is categorised

as gamist, it should include rules for defining the winner of various kinds of conflicts; if simulationist, it should introduce rules reflecting the atmosphere and detailing societal injunctions and codes; if it's a campaign, it needs to provide rules for the play happening between events.

- Conversely, what kinds of rules do not fit into this framework? Does each rule support the narration? If not, is it useless and therefore dispensable?
- Once the rules have been defined: what kind of execution best reflects the themes of the game? Do relevant rules already exist to support the intended theme? If the answer is no, they need to be created.
- What is the focus of the game, the essence of the experience? Which specific game mechanics should I create to enhance it? What about preparatory workshops or rules dealing with unexpected topics or treatment? A specific structure (linear, ellipse, cutting into action with gradation of intensity)? A specific medium? etc.
- Would constructive dissonance be a meaningful way to create a specific feeling or tool for my larp?

These are only some leads to help explore new paths towards a meaningful and consistent larping experience, without any claim to absolute truth or completeness. Employing these concepts of ludo-narrative harmony and breakthrough may help drive the expressive power of the game, and ultimately, improve the players' experience.

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# Pre-larp Communication

## or, how to make sure no one dies from peanut allergy

Alma Elofsson and Mimmi Lundkvist

### INTRODUCTION

This is an article about communication. It's not, however, an article about what you, as an organiser, need to communicate to your players. That topic has been covered from many points of view by for example Johanna Koljonen (2016a), Karin Edman (2012) and Massi Hannula (2015). This article is instead about how to communicate all that relevant information you've managed to come up with, both amongst organisers, and between the organisers and the players, focusing on the timespan between coming up with the idea for a larp and actually running the larp. The article will be in three parts, stated below.

- How to communicate within the organiser group
- How to communicate information to your participants
- Communication between organisers and participants

All of these three parts could

obviously be expanded to entire articles of their own and we make no claim of having said everything there is to say on either matter. However, we do believe that they are tightly connected, and that they therefore deserve to be discussed as three aspects of the same thing—pre-larp communication—rather than three different topics.

If you're only going to read parts of this article—read part 3. Part 1 and 2 will probably feel familiar to anyone who has organised larps before, while we dare to say that part 3 probably will feel new and fresh in the eyes of many beholders. For clarity, we are going to use examples in the text. Most of them will be from our own experiences—and in those cases, they will be from our most recent production *Lindängen International Boarding School* (Elofsson and Lundkvist, 2016) (or from its previous Swedish runs, then called *Lindängens Riksinternat* (Elofsson, Lundkvist and Rogvall, 2013 & 2014)).<sup>1</sup> Other examples will be made up to make a point.

### 1. HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITHIN THE ORGANISER GROUP

#### Agreeing on a vision by using the Mixing Desk of Larp

In our experience, the most important thing when it comes to communication between the organisers is to make sure all the members of the organiser team share the same vision for the larp.

**Example:** You have all agreed to make a quite historically correct larp in the empire era. The setting will be a ball for rich people. But what will the experience be? Will it be about love, friendship and marriage in a Jane Austen inspired fashion, or will it be all about class inequalities and institutionalised oppression of women—or perhaps the horrible sides of slavery?

It doesn't have to be as clear as this example. When we organised *Lindängens Riksinternat*, we had to be sure everyone in the organiser team agreed

<sup>1</sup> Lindängen, in both its international and its Swedish version, is a larp about bullying and traditions in an upper-class boarding school.

## THE MIXING DESK OF LARP



Illustration on how you can use the Mixing Desk of Larp to agree on a vision.

on which parts of the bullying structures and school life we would like to emphasise to get the larp to the point we wanted. This important work needs to be done thoroughly and it needs to be done before the larp is released.<sup>2</sup> After having some discussions on this matter, but still feeling we weren't really sure everyone in the organiser team agreed on the design, we decided to use the *Mixing Desk of Larp* (Andresen and Nielsen, 2013) as a tool for communication.<sup>3</sup> It turned out to be very useful for comparing your vision for the larp with the other organisers' visions, even though that perhaps isn't its primary usage.

**Example:** Before one organiser meeting, all three of us had prepared a screenshot of the picture

of the Mixing Desk, and then pasted it into Paint, putting some colourful blobs where each of us believed the sliders for *Lindängen* were supposed to be. When comparing, we discovered that we had placed some sliders quite differently and got pretty nervous. Were our visions really that different? Some discussions later we relaxed. We had made different interpretations of the word “sandbox”—Alma meaning we would be steering the participants a lot through having quite few accepted story lines, and Mimmi saying they were free to improvise a lot within the setting. We agreed that we actually meant the same thing and defined it as being “quite

sandbox within the very strict frames,” and could move on to the next slider.

The goal here is that within the organiser team you should be in so much agreement on what you're doing, that when a participant asks a question about the experience or vision, it shouldn't really matter which organiser answers it. In the ideal case, you shouldn't even need to have a discussion first.

### 2. HOW TO COMMUNICATE INFORMATION TO YOUR PARTICIPANTS

#### Finding important information

The first and most important point to make here is this: It has to be easy for your participants

2 Otherwise you may end up answering questions in a misleading way. And what if you realise halfway through that you and your co-organisers are not organising the same larp?

3 The Mixing Desk of Larp is, basically, a mapping of the design choices you make as an organiser, visualised as different faders on a mixing desk, like transparency—secrecy or stories—action.

to find the information they need. We won't go into detail about what information that would be,<sup>4</sup> but focus on how to deliver that information. Do you have a webpage? Make sure all info the participants need is available on your webpage. Do you have a facebook group? Make sure all important points from discussions there actually end up somewhere. Like on the webpage for example. Or in the info-text of the facebook group.

### Spamming important information

Here's a hard fact: Only a handful of your participants will read your entire webpage. Take a moment and let this sink in.<sup>5</sup> This is why you, after identifying what your participants need to know, also need to identify the pieces of important information they will probably miss—or at least won't know they need to know.

Information such as time, place, participation fee and other practical information does usually not go into in this category, since those are pieces of information all participants know they will need to look for. Instead, this could be information like: "the workshop is actually mandatory," or: "there's a participant who will die from allergy if you bring peanuts."

These are very important pieces of information, and the consequences of missing them could in fact damage the larp. After identifying these scraps of easily missed information, your job is to make sure everyone knows it anyway. Our way of doing this is spamming.

**Example:** For *Lindängen*, all participants need to bring suit jackets, since they're a part of the school uniform. When everyone

has a suit jacket, the larp looks really awesome, and without them, not so much. We decided to include the suit jacket not only in the packing list at the webpage, but also in at least three emails and two Facebook posts. After that we posted a challenge in the Facebook group where we asked the participants to do a suit jacket selfie. 93 out of 93 participants



**Alma Elofsson**  
den 25 april · Göteborg, Västra Götalands län

**SUIT JACKET SELFIE!**  
One week to go! 😊 Give us a picture of you in your Lindängen suit jacket!

👍 Gilla    💬 Kommentera    ➦ Dela

👤 Du, Mia Häggström, Eva Wei och 9 andra    ✓ Visat av 76

Visa 9 kommentarer till

**Mia Häggström** Elena Vitkova.  
"You don't get your suit jacket tailored? That's so daring." \*kisses\*



Gilla · Svare · 🗨️ 9 · den 1 maj kl 13:12

➦ Clara Linderland har svarat · 3 svar

*Suit jacket selfie. Printscreen: Alma Elofsson*

4 Massi Hannula makes a very good list of this in her Nordic Larp talk. See also Johanna Koljonen's blog series Basics of Opt-In Opt-Out Design, especially part 3.

5 It's okay if you slightly break inside. It's still true, and you can do very little to change that fact. Even if you repeatedly state how important it is that everyone reads everything on the webpage, you'll get at least some percentage relying on secondhand information from their friends, or on them being friends with you.

(for all the three runs of the larp) brought their suit jackets to the larp.

In this aspect, treating your participants as infants might actually be good idea. They will notice that this is what you're doing, however, and if you do it with too many things they will stop listening altogether. Choose the information you want to spam carefully, because you only get approximately one to three pieces of information you can do this with.

### Keep your larp alive!

Larpers' enthusiasm is a fickle and unstable little creature which must be nurtured to survive. If your participants don't do this themselves, that's your job. Too many larps have died because the Facebook group was dead. A good way to keep the enthusiasm going is basically just reminding the larpers that the larp is happening and reminding them you're enthusiastic enough (even when you feel like dying inside due to 20 hours extra work every weekend). In our experience, the easiest way to do this is by making sure the facebook group is kept active—something which is especially important the last two months leading up to the larp. Too much input before that might just stress some participants out. This is a balanc-

ing act. Too much enthusiasm will freak your participants out. Too little will have them quit the larp. You'll probably find the middle ground. Here are some (paraphrased) posts we ourselves have made with this in mind, according to a structure we believe works and can be adapted to almost any larp:

- “Merry Christmas! We're working a lot with writing characters right now. Have you watched the movie *Evil* yet? It's one of the key inspirations for the larp.” (Low-key enthusiasm, putting no pressure on our players. 5 months before the game)
- “How is your planning going? We've now updated the webpage with some details about what you need to pack for the larp. (link).<sup>6</sup> You will for example need to bring a suit jacket that will be the school uniform.<sup>7</sup>” (Reminding participants they've planned to go to a larp and will need to fix stuff. 3 months before the game)
- “Hey! I will never learn your character names before the larp if we don't find a good way to do it here. I suggest we all post

selfies with our characters' names attached.”<sup>8</sup> (Trying to build player enthusiasm and for them to engage in play preparations. 1 month before the larp)

- A random post about one of the things you need to spam (Whenever you need to. See above about spamming info).

This structure works for us but is in no way holy, and your posts can be about anything related to the larp. Just make sure you do them, otherwise your participants might believe you're not enthusiastic about your larp. This is particularly important if your participants don't keep the Facebook group active on their own.

## 3. COMMUNICATION BETWEEN ORGANISERS AND PARTICIPANTS

### The pedestal of larp Organising

Lastly, and most importantly, communication between organisers and participants is not a one way street. Your participants will also need to communicate with you. They might have questions, a need to be acknowledged, worries about something in your game de-

6 This link might make them visit your webpage one more time. What if they would catch some more info?

7 We have occasionally waited some months to drop this list on purpose, just to be able to make one of these posts about it.

8 This also made the participants think more about what their characters would be wearing.

sign, or a suggestion on how to make your larp better. It is your responsibility to make sure they can do that—that they know where to reach you, for one, and (and this is something we want to emphasise) that you try to make yourself approachable to your participants. This is especially true when and if you are organising a larp which demands at least a certain level of trust and familiarity between your participants, either because it covers heavy themes, your participants are new to larp, or both. We believe that the most common problem on this communication two-way-street between participant and organiser is that the organiser often is put on a pedestal—either by themselves, or by participants—and therefore is seen as unapproachable.

This is not anything new nor something reserved for larp organisers. Quite oversimplified, the journey usually goes something like: by doing cool stuff, people will perceive you as cool. If you do enough cool stuff, you get to know cool, popular people, exchange cool, popular ideas, and then do even more cool, popular stuff—and suddenly you're standing on a pedestal, that you either might have helped build yourself through focused network-

ing with the cool and popular people, or you might have ended up there with no real recollection of what you even did to deserve it. Of course this happens—and should happen!—to larp organisers as well as other types of art creators, cred where cred is due. However, as a larp organiser, your own status and how that influences your ability to communicate with your participants is something you should take into consideration to avoid misunderstandings which could potentially be very damaging to your larp. Do I believe that everyone in my participant group is comfortable enough with me to come to me with any matter they might have? Am I perceived as an approachable organiser?<sup>9</sup>

#### Accessibility and approachability

We therefore suggest you do anything you can to lower any barriers there might be between you and your players before your larp starts. Before going further—yes, we are aware that climbing down from the pedestal of Larp Organising means playing down your own status, and that it might decrease your chances of getting in with the cool crowd, even though we believe this is slowly changing.<sup>10</sup> We argue that it is

often worth risking this, since enabling good and clear communication makes for good larps. The easiest tool for lowering the barrier between you and your participants is to be physically accessible as much as humanly possible, whether it is joining an enthusiastic “tips for gear”-post in the larp's Facebook group, or welcomingly chit-chatting with participants before that week's vampire chapter in your local town. Even in these situations, which are informal for the participant, you are formally in your role as organiser, and you are helping setting the tone you want your participants to use and the associations you want your participants to get.

**Example:** *Lindängen* is perceived as quite a serious and heavy larp and many players are afraid not to be “cool” or “hardcore” enough to participate. We balance this during the workshop by not being unnecessarily strict and formal. We laugh, encourage the players to interact in a playful way and we engage in their silliness slightly more than we would usually do. This attitude creates an open environment where players feel safe

9 Massi Hannula talked about organising “for your larpers” in her Nordic Larp Talk on communication 2015. We would like to expand this to organising “for *all* your larpers”—the ones you've never met before, the ones who are new to your crowd or new to larping, as well as—yes—the ones you might not personally see eye to eye with.

10 We're not saying, though, that anyone in the “cool crowd” (which, of course, is not a static crowd of people but often differs based on context, country and over time) are lousy at participant communication. Just to be clear.

enough to make mistakes.

We do recognise that the balance between an easy-going tone between yourself and your participants and joking your larp away might be difficult, especially if you know most of your participants. One way to hopefully avoid this problem is to make sure you speak to all (or at least as many as possible) of your participants, taking extra care to meet the participants you don't know. If your larp design allows for it, meaning you're meeting your participants a while before your game starts (for example on a workshop)—have lunch with the participants you don't know!<sup>11</sup> Mingle when your participants have a workshop break, or in case there's no workshop, small-talk before your larp starts, and make sure your own planning allows for this. These informal situations are when you'll get the most relevant questions and comments,<sup>12</sup> allowing you to identify possible misunderstandings more participants than just that one might have. As your friends probably already feel comfortable with coming to you with their issues, this is extra relevant for players you've not (or barely) met. It can be tempting to spend all your time with your friends when you're all off-game and the schedule

allows—resist that temptation. You're still the organiser even if your participants have lunch. Simply put, it is easier to communicate with you if you show you're there for your participants.

#### **Being humble, or credit where credit is due**

If you're organising a larp, chances are you're brilliant at a lot of things. Chances are also that you're probably not brilliant at everything—and that your participants might have great ideas you wouldn't have thought of yourself. The added bonus of you showing that you're open to questions and worries from your participants is that they probably will come to you with ideas as well. When they do, and you think it's a bad idea—put it down gently; maybe it doesn't quite fit your larp's vision. When they do and you think it's a good idea—give them credit! The ways of doing that best will differ based on the idea and how you're organising your larp. Maybe you can mention it in the Facebook group, on the webpage, or by initiating a round of applause for the person who thought of it when all participants are gathered. If you make sure to give cred to your participants, others will think of you as more—you guessed it—ap-

proachable. Also, this principle doesn't end when your larp does. Using other people's knowledge and experience is expected of you, and mentioning larps that inspired your larp on your website, or mentioning from where or who you take parts of your workshop can be a welcome courtesy, but not really something you'd be lynched for not doing. Not acknowledging your players' ideas while presenting them as your own, however, might create toxicity among your participants and animosity towards you, if you're unlucky.

#### **FINAL WORDS**

Much has been said about what to communicate to your participants. This article has instead attempted to discuss the how. To summarise, we believe the how can be divided into three parts—how to make sure the members of the organiser group are communicating the same thing to their participants, how to make sure your participants have every piece of information they need,<sup>13</sup> and how to make sure you can communicate with your participants, and your participants can and want to communicate with you. Regarding the last section, we do recognise that it is a bit controversial, especially

11 Or another meal. We're not picky.

12 As well as some questions you just can't believe someone still has to ask because you've written the answer to that literally everywhere.

13 Or at least the ones they and the larp really can't live without.

since much of what currently is written is about organiser care (see for example Lizzie Stark 2014 and 2016 or Johanna Koljonen 2016b)—which could be argued to be the exact opposite of the constant participant focus we are proposing. We do not intend it to be. We are not trying to say never take a break,

merely that it's not optimal to take your own break from organising the workshop at the same time as your players have their break from workshoping, and so on.<sup>14</sup> What we do intend is to recognise the fact that organisers gain social status from organising larps, and that organisers might have

to counter that through conscious actions to make sure all their players are comfortable with talking to them. Our firm belief is that good communication makes for better—and easier!—larp organising. And as an added bonus, you get to have fun with your participants on their terms.

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14 Something which is naturally easier if you are several organisers who can take turns taking breaks from the organising work!

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# Keeping Volunteers Alive

Agata Świstak and Claus Raasted

Organising larps is a multi-disciplinary exercise at best. At its worst, you need a witch's cauldron of different skillsets, and being negligent in one area can mean that no matter how much you shine elsewhere, you still have a failed larp on your hands. A large part of my larp work consists of managing somewhat large (25+) teams of people, most of them volunteers. Doing that for big larp productions like *College of Wizardry* (Nielsen, Dembinski and Raasted et al., 2014) and *Convention of Thorns* (Raasted, et al., 2016) has given me some insights that may come in handy for others.

## PRETEND IT'S A VIDEO GAME

If you think of your helpers/volunteers/team as being human versions of *The Sims* characters,

then you'll have an easier time managing them. Each of them comes equipped with a number of "status bars" that you need to be aware of. They have to be fed, housed and instructed, if you're to get anything useful out of them—no matter if they're at your larp to play the hostile orc army appearing out of nowhere, helping with getting the location ready, or doing cleanup.

It doesn't matter much whether you call them helpers, minions, team members or something else. It matters how you treat them, though. To aid you in your larp organising, I've compiled a list of tips, structured into three chapters. And while I use these strategies when working with larppers, it's just as easy to apply this sort of checklist elsewhere.

And with all that in place, let's jump right in!

## HEALTH POINTS

Health Points represent the physical side of things. If this was a video game, these would be the different status bars that could be boosted using physical remedies. If your helpers are low on health points, it's very hard to make them do anything (at all).

- **Water.** It may seem like a simple thing, but if your helpers don't have easy access to water, they will suffer. If you're using an outdoor location, it's extra critical.
- **Food.** People need to eat. Food should be plentiful, nutritious and if possible account for dietary needs and wishes. Both meals and snacks are important.
- **Accommodation.** Without a place to sleep, it's hard to be a hero. Taking care of this can be tricky, since you have to deal with things like snoring, privacy and the general psychological makeup of your helpers.
- **Temperature.** I've worked on a film project in Abu Dhabi, and I nearly melted. I've also frozen my ass off during late Autumn larps in non-heated castles. You need to make sure that either you or your helpers are taking care of making the temperature bearable.
- **Toilets.** What goes in must come out, and access to sanitation is vital. One toilet for 50 helpers is not good, and if you're feeding them well, it's even worse!
- **Physical safety.** To work, we need to be safe—and to feel safe. If you're doing something in an environment that's less than friendly to humans, it's even more important. Enthusiasts will often take risks to make things work. Do your best to make sure that they don't have to!

## MANA POINTS

Mana Points represent the mental state of your helpers. This is slightly harder to quantify, but nonetheless very important. It's the things that make your well-fed, well-rested work crew put in that extra effort that is necessary to make an event run smoothly.

- **Vision.** “The how begins with the why” is a popular phrase. It's also at least somewhat true. Helpers who know what's going on and why it's important are more likely to actually make that vision come true.
- **Motivation.** There are many different ways to motivate people, and I'll not go into details here, but if you don't manage to motivate your helpers, they'll slowly degenerate into slow, unhappy shades of themselves. Okay, not that bad, but still bad.
- **Morale.** Akin to motivation, but different from it, morale matters when things get tough. When something goes wrong, and you need to ask people to stay an hour extra to dig a ditch or clean toilets, morale is critical. It's the difference between “Okay, if I absolutely must” and “Yes, let's *do it!*”
- **Free time.** This is something that I find is often undervalued in projects: the clear communication of when there's free time, and how it can be used. Are there spaces for resting? Opportunity to hang out with others during free time? Knowing how things work when you're *not* working is important.
- **Solidarity.** Most of us know that some tasks require heavy lifting while others require less obvious forms of labour. Even so, it can feel very demotivating to see someone watching cat videos on YouTube, while you're putting the finishing touches on a prop, regardless of whether or not the other person has worked hard earlier. Providing a good feeling of solidarity in the workforce is a key component to creating team spirit.
- **Emotional safety.** If we're stressed and overloaded—or even feeling unsafe and unwelcome, we're not concentrating on the task at hand. Everyone in your team should feel included and accepted, and creating a culture that supports this is very important—especially when working with diverse teams of strangers.

## EQUIPMENT

Last, but definitely not least, comes the hardware; the things you need to make your highly motivated and cared for helpers actually do the work they're here for. Inadequate hardware is the most common mistake I've come across, and is not just about tools, but also related things.

- **Workspace.** Once you've gotten someone who can build a dragon, they need a place to build it in, or it's not going to happen. Having appropriate amounts of space for the work that needs to be done is a necessary component to making things happen.
- **Tools.** It may be possible to build a wooden house without hammers and nails, but it's certainly easier if you have the proper equipment at hand. This can be small things like scissors and pens, or it can be expensive power tools or technical equipment. Often, it's possible to come up with ad hoc solutions but having the right tools is preferable.
- **Working gear.** If you're working on a

construction site, hard hats are often mandatory. If it's pitch black, lights are pretty much a must. This seems self-evident, but is a place where I've seen too many failures.

- **Transportation.** Perhaps one of the most overlooked factors when doing projects in locations that are off the beaten path (and yes, castles in Poland fit this category). Just telling people to show up on location doesn't work that well if your location isn't easily reachable. Transport solutions take time, and often need to be customised.

- **Physical safety.** This is not only about the more obvious aspects of safety, but also about the more tricky ones. Asking if there's a first aid kit is simple. Remembering that women need lights in toilet spaces because periods are a thing should be simple, but has proven not to be.
- **Emotional safety.** Is there a sanctuary to retreat to if you need one? Are there people you can trust who can help you deal with trouble? Larps are often as high-intensity behind the scenes as on stage, and it's valuable to know if someone is there to make sure that your mental health is taken into consideration.

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## FINAL WORDS

This article could easily have been longer, more detailed or more focused on explaining the whys and the hows. Having been a helper at many larps, and being a helper coordinator for larps as part of my professional life, I will be grateful if you can provide everything on this checklist. Time, money and reality often get in the way for that, but it's a worthy goal, I think. The reason I have chosen to go the video game route is that I've discovered two things while working with helpers (and as a helper myself):

- People are not resources. People have resources, but forgetting to treat them like individual people is not only morally problematic, but also bad for your project.
- People still have similar needs, and once you learn how to think systemically about some of those needs (as you do with *The Sims* characters) you get better at managing your helper teams.

In the end, larps come alive because of the players, but the work done before, during and after larps by organisers and their helpers make the play experience possible in the first place. If handled right, being a helper for a larp can be a very fulfilling experience.

So let's do our best to get the basics right!

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# The Workshop Pyramid

Maryia Karachun, Yauheni Karachun, Olga Rudak and Nastassia Sinitsyna

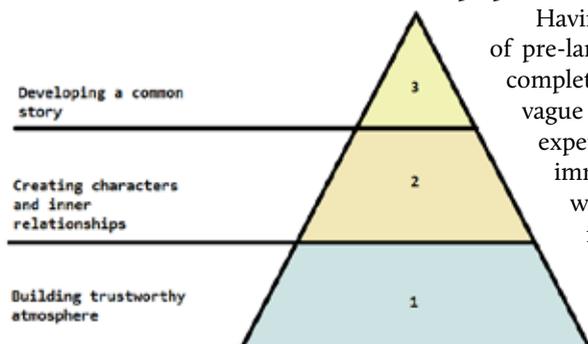
As a group of larp designers based in Belarus writing for both newcomers and experienced participants who are looking for immersion, we cannot underestimate the importance of making them comfortable before run-time starts. The idea behind this article was to create a relatively universal structure that will help larp organisers arrange workshops and pre-larp exercises so that they will compliment the run-time in the most efficient way.

Since we work with chamber and black box larps that require no prior preparation from the participants, the structure of workshops we offer is mostly applicable to this type of larp, but might also be useful for others.

Our primary target audience for our larps are participants with very little or no larp experience. Our main aim is to make them comfortable enough to show up again next time. Because of that, we cannot deny the importance of workshops. People who come to participate for the first time and still don't know exactly how a larp works will be carefully guided through a number of exercises to feel comfortable enough to open up and participate. At the same time, we like to design dramatic and immersive larps for more experienced larpers who also benefit from workshops in order to relax and prepare for a powerful, emotional experience.

Having come to understand the importance of pre-larp workshops both for people who are completely new to larp and still have a very vague idea of what they will go through and experienced larpers who expect to get a good immersion into a character, we've come up with the idea of the necessity of structuring them.

We would like to introduce a concept similar to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which is a popular motivational theory in psychology pro-



posed by Abraham Maslow in his paper *A Theory of Human Motivation* in 1943. According to the theory, some needs take precedence over others, and needs of a higher level can only be desired after basic needs are fulfilled.

As in Maslow's hierarchy, the structure of all workshops should start with basic exercises that establish mutual trust among players and larp designers, gradually piling up to creating characters. Forming relations and, consequently, developing a common story. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is often portrayed in the shape of a pyramid with the largest level of basic needs at the bottom and secondary or higher needs at the top. Similarly, we can visualise the structure of the workshop as a pyramid with three levels.

The most fundamental part of the workshop pyramid<sup>1</sup> is creating mutual trust between players and larp directors. We see it as a vital element of the whole process of workshoping as it keeps a larp going. Without trust, even well-thought scenarios can be jeopardised, especially when players' personal boundaries are crossed. Distrust in an organiser's persona or their competence can lead to players' unwillingness to take risks or their inability to plunge in.

Directors should be well-prepared and confident to be able to win players' trust. It goes without saying that larp organisers set the mood. Their behaviour and their way of communicating is of importance: friendly attitude, careful and thorough explanation of the rules, and reputation make all the difference. It's important to take some extra time to explain the concept of the larp for newcomers as they would need certain introductions. Organisers should know what they are doing and why, so that they can guide their players through workshop, eventually achieving the anticipated results or atmosphere.

It's also crucial to present the story and clarify which techniques will be used in the larp at the very beginning. That way players get to build up familiarity with what's ahead, and have the option to leave without losing face or ruining larp dynamics. Players should feel at ease to be open to self-exposure, as almost any larp presupposes.

Once the fundamental "needs" are met, larp directors can move on to the next level of the pyramid and introduce character creation exercises. To gain better results, organisers need to make sure that everyone feels comfortable playing with other people in the group. To minimise tension, especially if we are talking about newcomers, icebreakers or team-building exercises can be used. They will let players get to know each other and feel more relaxed. However, keep in mind that icebreakers and exercises should serve a common purpose and fit the framework of the larp. Of course, with a group of friends or people who know each other relatively well, icebreakers and team-building exercises can be skipped.

The next important feature of the middle level exercises is to give players a chance to connect to each other, particularly if they are going to play together quite closely. A good way of doing so could be to introduce a physical exercise where players get to test their personal boundaries. Such exercises can also be used at later stages of character creation, when players are already divided into groups.

We firmly believe that during the process of character creation players have to be given room to discuss, speculate, experiment or just get used to each other. Players get a chance to better understand their characters and relate to them. At this stage they should finally feel comfortable playing with others and be able to create intimate stories. This is the most time-consuming part of the workshop, but if a larp is based on characters

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1 For the rest of this article, the term "workshop pyramid" will refer to the visual structure shown above.

and their relations, as in the larp *Have You Come Here to Play Jesus?*<sup>2</sup> (Karachun and Karachun et al., 2013), it's crucial to plan enough time for that. Being a four hour larp, the workshop part takes up to two hours in *Have You Come Here to Play Jesus?* as players spend quite a lot of time developing characters.

The top of the pyramid is story-creation. This part of the workshop is built on the previous two—a good, coherent story is always the result of mutual trust between players and larp directors along with thoroughly developed characters. This set of exercises is needed to create a story that each and every player will be part of and will eventually lead to an understanding which presupposes that all players are aware of the larp framework and their own roles within the larp.

There are different tools and exercises that larp designers tend to use depending on the type of a larp. Flashbacks and flashforwards have probably proved to be the most effective in our larps, as players get to playtest certain ideas and shape a storyline before the actual run-time starts. Scenes can be both suggested by larp directors or players themselves.

We can take an example from the larp *Helianthus land*<sup>3</sup> (Karachun and Karachun et al., 2015), which explores the dynamics of a cult and life within it. This larp takes place in the imaginary country Helianthus where participants play helianthini, who are the resident citizens of the country. We introduced a pre-larp playtest where during the workshop players have to rehearse a typical day in the life of the helianthini. It adds to the story as players establish group dynamics or make unconscious choices that

enrich the plot.

By now we have covered all the three levels of the pyramid and talked about what can be achieved and gained throughout each level. Yet one should not consider using an exercise just because there should be something on this or that level. Every exercise that is used should have a particular purpose and serve a common goal—making players ready for that specific larp. It's crucial to structure all the exercises in continuity with everything else that follows.

A solid structure also benefits from coherence of all the pre-larp activities.<sup>4</sup> To achieve this, a larp director would need to act within the mood of the larp to encourage the atmosphere.

We can take *Helianthus land* as an example. Helianthus is actually a latin word that stands for sunflower. In this country, everyone worships the sunflower—its Greatness Helianthus. The larp is a combination of farce and satire by genre, and quite a lot of absurd things happen during both workshops and run-time. When we run the larp we try to be super energetic and happy from the very beginning to transfer the mood to the players as well as make them feel at ease. For this purpose, we have adapted the warm-up game of *penguins and flamingos* (Munthe-Kaas and Jarl et al.) to fit our game, renaming it *sunflowers and crows*. The essence is the same, but the players get the feeling of being a sunflower/helianthini as well as they are introduced to their main enemies—the crows.

Of course, it goes without saying that workshop exercises can serve multiple purposes. In one of the exercises for *Have You Come Here to Play Jesus?* the players are asked to sit in pairs, back to back, while the larp directors are

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2 A black box larp that portrays a controversial phenomenon of euthanasia in the modern world, where the characters face the unbearable choice of determining whether or not to end the life of a paralysed family member.

3 A larp based on the works of George Orwell, specifically *Animal Farm* and *1984*.

4 Everything leading up to the actual run-time; from the moment the players enter the venue till the larp starts.

reading out character questions. This establishes a situation where there is a physical connection between players at the moment when they start thinking about their characters. This exercise thus gives a basis for creating a character as well as forms trustworthy relationships between players.

This is the basic structure of pre-larp workshop as we see it, yet there are some exceptions, things that do not always fit this model. For example, one might need exercises aimed at learning a particular meta technique or trying out *cut* and *brake*. That is very important to do especially with inexperienced players, as to make sure that they know the safety features and other opportunities they can invoke in the larp.

To sum up, we have strong grounds to believe that the sequence of exercises is an important as-

set to the whole process of workshoping. We suggested in this article, one of the ways to organise pre-larp workshop based on the workshop pyramid as we firmly believe that everything should be intertwined. Every step further should be building on the previous one; as even good character creation exercises might flop if there is no basis of trust between the players and organisers.

Judging from our own experience we would always emphasise that a thorough workshop structure is a key to success. It helps a larp director create a more effective way of preparing participants for the run-time and gives players of any larping background an opportunity to immerse into the larp in order to have a powerful experience.

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# Beyond Play

## *Functions and design of debriefs*

Simo Järvelä and Karete Jacobsen Meland

In larp design, everything surrounding the actual larp can be altered and designed to fit what you want your players to experience. Of course, unexpected things will happen the minute your players touch your design—but, either way, larp design includes so much more than the actual runtime (Koljonen, 2016). Everything that goes on in addition to the runtime of your larp, from the moment you announce that it will happen, can be referred to as the paralarp. It includes, but is not limited to the sign-up, briefing and workshop, debriefing, post-larp parties, reviews and legacies. If we divide the paralarp into what happens before the runtime, and what happens after, you could say that we have two gates of fiction through which our players enter, and exit, the fictional framework of the larp. Those gates can be designed to shape players experiences into desired directions.

All larps have different social rules between players, compared to ordinary life outside them. Those alternate rules—where it is allowed to yell at each other, flirt or lie—are what makes larping possible. In larp, we follow one set of social rules while pretending to follow another one. This dynamic has been called the magic circle, frame or an alibi. To larp, we need to first step through the gate into the magic circle where different social rules and meaning structures apply, and then we need to step out again.

Stepping out of a magic circle involves different needs and actions for different people, and it will happen anyway, even if you don't design a structured debrief.<sup>1</sup> But, this process is also a designable surface, and through this article we want to present an outline for how to view debriefing in terms of its different possible functions.

### What is structured debriefing?

Structured debriefing is about facilitating the transition back to a normal frame of reference after the larp experience, and giving the players tools they can utilise in processing their own experiences. Designing and facilitating that process is an essential safety feature. A properly designed debriefing gives a clear signal to the players that their organisers have

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<sup>1</sup> Read more about what people do themselves, in Eirik Fatland's blogpost on landing, (2013).

thought about the post-processing, that they are positively concerned about their players' well-being, and that they are indeed handling their responsibility and not leaving the players to their own devices. However, structured larp debriefing is not professional health care. If such aid is needed, it should be acquired elsewhere.

At the same time, debriefing is not just about safety. It is also about community building, sharing and forming collective narratives, and designing the reinterpretation of the larp experience and designing how it will be remembered. In addition, players are often not aware of what they actually need. It is especially difficult in post-larp confusion, when the tired, disoriented and stressed players go through all the emotions and struggle with reorienting to the world outside the larp. In such moments, it is often good to have a structure to follow, or someone to tell you what to do next, or at least present a few alternatives from which to choose.

## Why do we need debriefing?

When the larp ends, we all have different needs. In a structured debrief it is impossible to cater to everyone's unique needs; it is always a compromise that aims to cover the most important aspects and kickstart the whole after processing. Not every debriefing technique works for everybody, and there are also some who don't need any sort of debriefing, or even feel worse if forced to debrief before they are ready for it. Also, not all larps necessarily need heavy debriefing, but this should still be a conscious design choice.

We have individual needs, relational needs, and collective needs. We might need to talk about our strong experiences, might need to share, might want to share. But, we also need to be aware that it will not necessarily make you feel better. We might also want to check on our fellow players if they are okay, how did go for them, or if they need something. It's also perfectly natural to compare your experiences to others' to see how did it go, are you the only one or are we all in the same boat.

Debriefing is also needed because our poor brains are confused after the larp.<sup>2</sup> For our brains, everything was 100% real. Sure, it was fiction or

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2 There are different parts in the brain, some evolutionarily older and some more recent. The newer parts, cortex and especially our frontal lobes, are the parts that can handle complex social relations, and (importantly!) interpret and contextualise the emotional signals coming from the more primitive parts of the brain (Chayer and Freedman, 2001). This means that your evolutionary younger brain receives information from your older brain, information that it tries to make sense of, and modify in order to fit socially acceptable norms and to stay in line with your identity: Who you are and who you want to be. In essence, when larping, the brain has many conflicting processes going on at the same time! Going through these processes can at times be very confusing.

fantasy that needs to be interpreted differently from our everyday lives, but it still was completely real; that person really did yell at you, you did really experience tragic loss when that person said goodbye, and you really were blatantly flirting with that other person. We say it is our characters who did that, and our characters who felt all those emotions, and that is a crucial alibi for the whole art form of larping, but to our brains it is all real, all the time. In a way, there is no bleed. Or, there are no character emotions that would bleed, they are all player emotions, just framed differently. All the actions and all the emotions were really yours, not your character's.

## The different functions of debriefing

Often debriefing is approached from the angle of individual debriefing exercises, and they naturally are the practical side of the matter, but all those different exercises exemplify certain broader functions debriefing can have, and most importantly they manifest the culture where larp experiences are thoroughly and responsibly designed from the start to beginning.

While there are numerous functions a larp debrief can have, we believe they can be divided into four main categories: (1) Reframing the Fiction, (2) Emotional Support, (3) Community Management, and (4) Collective Narrative. An appropriate emphasis on each function is needed depending on the larp, its design, and the type and intensity of experiences it evokes. Every function is primarily focused either on the individual or at the collective level and they have varying impact on both. Also, how they should be applied depends on the time frame; immediately after the larp other forms of debriefing are in order than two weeks after the larp, for example. The functions are often overlapping; the same phenomena can require both Reframing and Emotional Support for example, likewise, the practical debriefing exercises invariably fulfill several functions at the same time.

### **I. Reframing the Fiction**

Reframing is about recontextualising our experiences during the larp after it has ended. This is something that inevitably happens, but a well designed debrief enhances it and guides it to the right direction. When a larp begins, we are transported into an alternate frame of interpretation where some of the social conventions and meaning structures are no longer valid, but are replaced by those of the fiction. This is the alibi, the magic circle, that enables the larp. Afterwards, however, we need to return to the social context outside the larp. That returning includes both derolling, stepping down from our character roles, and the recontextualisation of the whole experience that just took place, and the elements of the fiction that was just enacted.

Deroling is transitioning from the character in the fiction to the player in real life, outside that fiction. The personality, social relations, power structures, personal history, agendas and motivations of the character are all left behind—sometimes gladly, sometimes grievously, sometimes quickly, sometimes very slowly. The aim is that after the larp, the players see each other as performers backstage: aware that it was roles everybody was performing just moments ago, the fictive situation is behind us now, and the social structures and conventions are getting back to normal.

On the other hand, we do not necessarily want to return to normal completely; in many occasions, we want to take something with us, to feel that the larp was a transformative experience after which we see and feel things differently. The most classic example here is probably the romances that started from character relations. Sometimes they are a nuisance and a well thought-out debrief sessions helps contextualising those feelings, but then again occasionally they are feelings that are most welcome, and even then a certain contextualisation of them is in order. A proper deroling is necessary in all larps, but particularly essential in larps with highly asymmetrical power positions, betrayal of trust, social exclusion and dehumanisation. Those elements could very strongly affect our views on those players outside the larp also, unless they are properly reframed.

Besides personal roles, there are other elements in the larp fiction that needs normalisation and recontextualisation. Many larps want to say something, have a political message, or have players go through a process of experiencing something in such a profound manner that the experience will leave a permanent impact on the players. Hopefully a positive one. Facilitating that process where players recontextualise those experiences and helps shedding those that are unwanted, is also what debriefing is about. Supporting that process might make the message of the larp clearer.

## **2. Emotional Support**

Many larps aim for an emotionally intensive player experience, and it would be inconsiderate to leave players without emotional support. This might sound like a heavy task, but we want to emphasise that part of that support is simply providing a time and space for the players to share and talk about their experiences and emotions felt during the larp and now after the larp. That process hugely benefits from an atmosphere where fellow players are also actively and empathically listening, and not just waiting for their own turn to say something about themselves. Debriefing is a good tool for establishing certain play-related, cultural and social elements that you want to be in place after your larp, and in your community of players as a whole. Most of it is of course good to establish already before the larp while workshoping, but debriefing is still an important tool in continuing the process.

Besides unloading the emotional burden of a heavy experience, the

aim of Emotional Support is to normalise the experience. It is not uncommon for players to feel alone with their feelings, uncertain whether anyone else feels the same way, or possibly even embarrassed or feeling guilty of the subjective experiences they have had during to larp, or are still feeling. The whole range of typical post-larp negative feelings (with many different names such as post-low, post-larp depression, etc.) are like this, we are often not aware where they come from, and sometimes feel like we should not be feeling that way. Normalising those feelings in debriefing helps in post-processing of the experience.

Similarly, infatuations that happened during the larp, lingering feelings that are hard to reframe, larp goggles of all sorts, are effects that happen to many—if not most players, and knowing where they come from, how to handle them and starting that process properly and to the desired direction can be accomplished with debriefing. A lot of processing will take place a long time after the larp and structured debriefing, but support systems can be designed and implemented that help the players in their processing even though time has passed.

### **3. Community Management**

Larping is a collaborative and collective art form, and we are a community. For each larp we create a smaller community and those selected people are in it for the duration of the larp. Any single larp has a playing culture of its own. It might resemble any other larp very closely, but it can also be quite unique. The culture within the community starts to form before that larp, and some parts of it will live for a long time after the larp. It can also be designed.

Debriefing can have a significant impact on how the players feel immediately after and some time after the larp. Some aspects of the larp experience are better left behind, whereas carrying other parts with you can be beneficial. Especially the feelings of communal sharing—that something amazing was created together—and the loving closeness and acceptance are elements that most players want to hang on, even if their characters, roles, their worldviews, and the power structures involved are left behind. Sharing an intense experience in a larp can create tight bonds and closeness even between players who were complete strangers initially.

Fundamental to cultivating the positive elements of a shared experience, is how players treat each other after the larp. Even if the mental mode when playing is often very self-centred, when the larp is over, the attention could be directed more to fellow players. Asking how their larp went, how they are feeling, listening, empathising, and at the proper moment, sharing your own feelings to others, helps creating an atmosphere that reinforces the collectivity and positive mood. By sharing and actively listening to others when they are sharing, everyone's personal experiences are validated by others and accepted as a part of the collective experience. Then, even though there might be only one player who feels sad or

angry, no one has to feel they are alone with their experience, or wonder if there is something wrong with them when they did not experience the larp the same way as others evidently did. It also reinforces the positive aspects of communality. Players chronically receive too little feedback on their playing performance. Giving positive feedback to other players is an efficient method for emphasising the positive aspects of the collective experience and steering the general post-larp atmosphere towards collective feel good.

Structured debriefs can have parts that aim to start these collective processes and guide them to the right direction. Initialising the desired social behaviour patterns and tones in a structured debrief helps players to uphold them throughout the social interactions after the larp. In a sense, debriefing can act as a workshop for post-larp social interactions, by having a structured interaction where players are instructed to talk about their own experiences, ask about other players' experiences, listening and giving feedback. This is commonly most efficient in group sizes small enough, and depending on the amount of players, the player pool needs to be split in smaller groups and/or to be facilitated to ensure that everybody has the time and space to share their own feelings and get feedback, not just to loudest and most extroverted players.

Another important aspect of this, is that you as a designer to a certain degree actively can steer (or manipulate?) your players' stories after a larp. If you want your players to feel like rockstars after a larp, you can consciously design and use your debrief to shape their stories about the larp after it has finished.

#### **4. Collective Narrative**

Collective Narrative is about communicating and sharing the fiction among players. No two players experience a larp the same way or have the same character stories. That is the beauty of larp as an art form, but it also might leave a very shattered picture of what happened during the larp. To contextualise their experience, and to just plainly satisfy their curiosity, the players might need to have some sort of holistic picture of the larp, a narrative what happened and what the larp was about. Sharing individual stories and experiences among players helps merging the various perspectives to a more unified narrative. This sharing helps players in putting their own individual stories to a perspective, and that supports emotional processing and provides a better chance for a feeling of closure. Sharing the fictional stories and merging players' experiences generates and reinforces the feeling that players shared something and they are in the same boat—that the larp was a shared experience.

A merged experience makes it easier to contextualise each individual experience and ponder the more deeper questions, wider implications, and lessons that the larp experience elicited. Heavy emotional, political, or personal themes require extended processing afterwards, and without

merged experiences and a shared narrative, the player is left alone with her emotional work instead of having a meaningful shared experience to support her.

Sharing and merging usually takes time, especially the more detailed aspects, and rarely there's not that much time available in a structured debriefing. But like always with debriefing, the point is to start the process properly and give good basis for it. For Collective Narrative, that means figuring out what aspects of the fiction and individual subjective experiences need to be shared soon after the larp so that a sense of shared experience is created or enforced among players and if there are some specific themes that need it so that after processing is supported.

Note that a complete merging is not possible nor needed; all larps are ultimately so complex that most of it will not ever be shared. Some level of merging is needed so that it feels whole and complete. Some players might not want to pull apart their experience, or show it to anyone—so there will be gaps in-between the narratives. But this is ok, and there is no need to fill them all, and your players will be perfectly well left with creating their own interpretations of their (and others') actions and experiences.

An important note on this matter is needed, however, if you are creating and running a larp with an educational agenda. In an educational larp, filling in the gaps and drawing parallels between the players' experiences and the specific learning goals, is the whole engine behind actually learning something from having larped. Ideally, you would want to steer your players in very pre-defined directions.

## How to design a debrief for your larp?

If you have decided that you need some sort of structured debrief after your larp, remember to bear in mind what kinds of experiences you are designing for. What do you want your players to go through when they larp, and what needs might they have when your larp is over? Be aware of the different levels where needs may occur (on an individual level, relational and collective levels), and what you, as a designer, can do to assist your players. Of course the responsibility is not 100% yours alone, and there is no way to know accurately what all your players will need, as we are all different and respond in our own ways. We are allowed to make mistakes, but if we know most of the steps we took along the way, we might make the process of going back and editing our design easier for us.

As previously mentioned, you should think of the different functions you want your debrief to serve. They are not exclusive in any way, as quite a lot community building and management will happen when you provide your players with space for emotional support. But, remember it as a rough check-list too, when you design both your paralarp and the actual runtime of your larp. We see it as the larpwrights designing the base levels of the debrief, and in some instances it might be necessary to give your

players a way to signal that they would like further (or less) support, other exercises, and so on.

Also, consider your method, and what you can do to enable everyone to actively participate in your debrief. What skills or qualities is required of the person(s) running the debrief? What could be the pros and cons of you running your own debrief, if you only spent hours preparing, organising and running your larp? And are there any of the exercises that can be done by the players themselves, without any active involvement from you (or any other organiser)? In other instances, you might even want to bring in a dedicated person for doing emotional support-debriefing for players who played aggressor characters, or players who were exposed to especially difficult scenes or behaviours. Think about what atmosphere you create for your players: by sitting down or standing, by using a loud or a soft voice, by answering questions only at the end, and by having players talk to each other in pairs, groups, or doing introspection.

## Let's make a debriefing toolkit!

Talking about, designing and running debriefs is really exciting, and if you think so too, please grab hold of us—and let's do some cool stuff together! We have a goal to make a debriefing toolkit,<sup>3</sup> for all to share and take part in, where we can write down examples and ideas of debriefing exercises, maybe even create a Mixing Desk of Debriefing? Like a co-creative melting pot of resources, with larpers and larp designers from different larp cultures and communities sharing their ideas and practices.

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3 A bit like the *Workshop Handbook* (Munthe-Kaas and Jarl et al).

## Response to Simo Järvelä and Karete Jacobsen Meland

Don't come here and tell me what to feel and how my feelings should be expressed!

In my opinion, Simo Järvelä and Karete Jacobsen Meland are taking the matter of debriefing larps a bit too seriously and are underestimating the capability of players to take care of their own emotions and needs. In their article, they also fall into the trap of thinking that players can easily be steered to or enforced into telling the right story for the larp, according to the larp designer's "truth." After all, it's not real, it's just larp.

On the other hand, their article on functions and design of debriefs are lacking some quite important points that should be covered in a structured debrief.

"A proper deroling is necessary in all larps," writes Järvelä and Jacobsen Meland. I disagree. Deroling doesn't have to be proper at all. When the larp has ended, the players understand that the magic circle has been broken. A player can take off their hat, remove their goggles, loosen a braid or simply smile to show themselves and the group that they are out-of-character.

What I do agree on, is that organisers should as a minimum provide some time and a space for the players after the larp. Especially space and free time to hang out. A lot of the functions of a debrief can be taken care of in an informal setting. By putting too much on the program during the debrief, organisers risk taking too much responsibility for the emotional state of the players.

The participants are still grown-ups, even if they have spent the last few days playing. And they know who they would want to talk to or if they want some alone time. The process of debriefing as described by Järvelä and Jacobsen Meland also risk being tailored to one type of actions and reactions. Namely to players that are talkative, fond of sharing emotions and love group hugs. Too much of a steered debrief can alienate the players who didn't experience strong emotions or disagreed with the organisers' message.

People are different and have different needs. It's totally OK to back out of a group hug.

### **EMOTIONAL SUPPORT FOR MONSTERS AND ORGANISERS**

An important participant group in larps that Järvelä and Jacobsen Meland do not address in their article, is players and NPCs taking on the characters of aggressors/guards/villains/monsters. They can have specific needs in a debrief and tend to be forgotten. The most mentioned is the need to be seen as themselves and not at all

the evil character they played. Thus reinforcing their alibi, and being forgiven by the players for their actions during the larp. On the other hand, aggressors can experience to be pushed beyond their personal limits by players escalating a scene. They may then have a need to reinstate their personal borders/limits and feel respected. And lastly something that is rarely mentioned: It's quite possible to act evil and enjoy it, feeling high on the power rush. This is in conflict with the expected norm of being apologetic about their character's actions during the larp.

Another just as important group are the organisers of the larp. The needs of the organisers might need to be taken care of at the same time as the players are supposed to debrief. Exhausted, overtired, emotional, hungry and with a heavy workload waiting before you can leave. Many a larp organiser has been there. The current, very public critique culture in social media<sup>1</sup> can be quite ruthless to exhausted organisers. There are few, if any, known cases of mental health issues caused by larping alone for the common participant. However, that's not the case for organisers.

"Larps do seem to trigger mental health situations, primarily depression and exhaustion problems, IN LARP ORGANISERS because of physical and economic stress." (Koljonen, 2016)

If you can't take care of yourself and your own needs, how can you then be able to take care of the players' needs? Organisers need to plan ahead and ask for help from their participants and also lower the expectations of how much they should serve on a silver platter and take responsibility for.

### **ENHANCING THE LARP EXPERIENCE**

I'd like to credit Karete and Simo for their work of structuring the functions of debriefing, and thereby making it possible to have more interesting discussions on the topic. I'd be happy to contribute to a debriefing toolkit with things I've learned in the larping world. As long as we can agree to stop using the word post-larp depression. Depression is a medical diagnosis that is far more serious than most post-larp feelings.

But what I'm most interested in are discussions in how a debrief specifically designed as a part of larp, not just the players needs, could enhance and deepen the larp experience.

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1 On the other hand, this can also lead to criticism being left to closed fora but that is a topic for a different time.

## Reply to Grethe Sofie Bulterud Strand

It's probably not useful to pinpoint all the places where we agree with Grethe Sofie Bulterud Strand's comment on our article, because there are so many of them! But we do feel the need to explain ourselves and clarify some aspects of it.

**The importance of specialised debriefing of (monsters and) organisers** should never be underestimated. This was not the intended focus of our article, as we wanted it to be a general introduction to a discussion of the possible functions of a debrief, but of course we want to emphasise the importance of organisers not forgetting about themselves. (Part of this is also whether the best solution always is that the organisers themselves should be responsible for debriefing the players, or not.) Enabling yourself and other co-organisers to have your own time and space to blow off steam, process immediate thoughts and emotions about the larp, celebrate that you just pulled off a (probably) time-consuming event together is part of letting yourself be more capable of taking part in all that could happen after the larp has ended. One should always discuss ways to empower the players to take care of themselves, in order to avoid organisers taking too much responsibility for the players' emotional state. Organiser debriefing deserves several articles of its own, and should be discussed at length to avoid unnecessary and exhausting physical, economical and emotional stress.

**Strand puts a heavy emphasis on the players' emotional safety**, i.e the (possible) emotional impact the larp may have on the players, and how and when to express it when the larp has ended. We realise this might be a prevailing perspective through which our text will be read, and that it might come through as us saying that all larps are so emotionally rough that they need to be debriefed properly to ensure safety. Emotional Support is ¼ of our proposed functions of debriefing. Whereas it might dominate the reading, we would like a stronger focus on how we also are responsible for, and play a vital part in, shaping our communities (Community Management). This is true both for being designers and players, and in the way(s) co-players play important parts in each others' debriefing experiences.<sup>1</sup>

**Every player need to derole**, in the sense of leaving the character and the fiction behind, and return to the everyday life outside the fiction. We do believe that most players are more than capable of doing this themselves, and as Grethe Strand writes: "(...) the players understand that the magic circle is broken. A player can take off their hat, remove their goggles, loosen a braid or simply smile to show themselves and the group that they are out-of-character." We believe that in a lot of cases, these things could be exactly what is needed to reframe the fiction, or to start the process of re-

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1 As players, we become co-designers of the experiences for other players, and through being available for the rest of the player group, we help sharing stories and build communities.

framing it. This could be proper (sufficient) deroling for many players! And that is good.

Yes, we would like to take the matter of debriefing players seriously—but we are not looking to create new, more complex models; or creating uncertainty about how to debrief. We don't believe that we are underestimating player capabilities, but rather want to shine light on the responsibilities, and possibilities, you have as an organiser (and co-player), to create safe sharing spaces for your participants (and co-players). Our goal is to take a closer look at the debriefs that already exist, what functions the debriefing might serve, and try to work towards a comprehensive framework that may be used when designing debriefs in the future. The comments made by Strand are important, because it also tells us that we view debriefing differently—and it further emphasises that not all four functions need to be weighed equally at all times, and not every function is relevant for all larps.

**We try to refrain from using clinical terminology**, and we completely agree with Strand on that matter. We know that quite a lot of players are used to the term “post-larp depression,” and although it is both misleading and incorrect, we used it as part of a common frame of reference.<sup>2</sup>

**Avoiding debriefs that enable only one type of actions and reactions.** Players come in all shapes, sizes and preferences, and not only talkative players, fond of emotional sharing and group hugs, should benefit from debriefing. We would love to discuss in what ways debriefing processes risk being tailored to only one kind of actions/reactions; and what methods we can use to avoid this. We also need to continue discussing methods to avoid this. We should strive to avoid alienating players who feel that their experiences are not like other players' or the organisers' views, and to avoid that those who speak first (or are in the majority) set the tone and invalidate other comments. We believe that facilitation of debriefs is key to enabling people to speak of their experiences, and to validate different and contradictory thoughts and emotions.

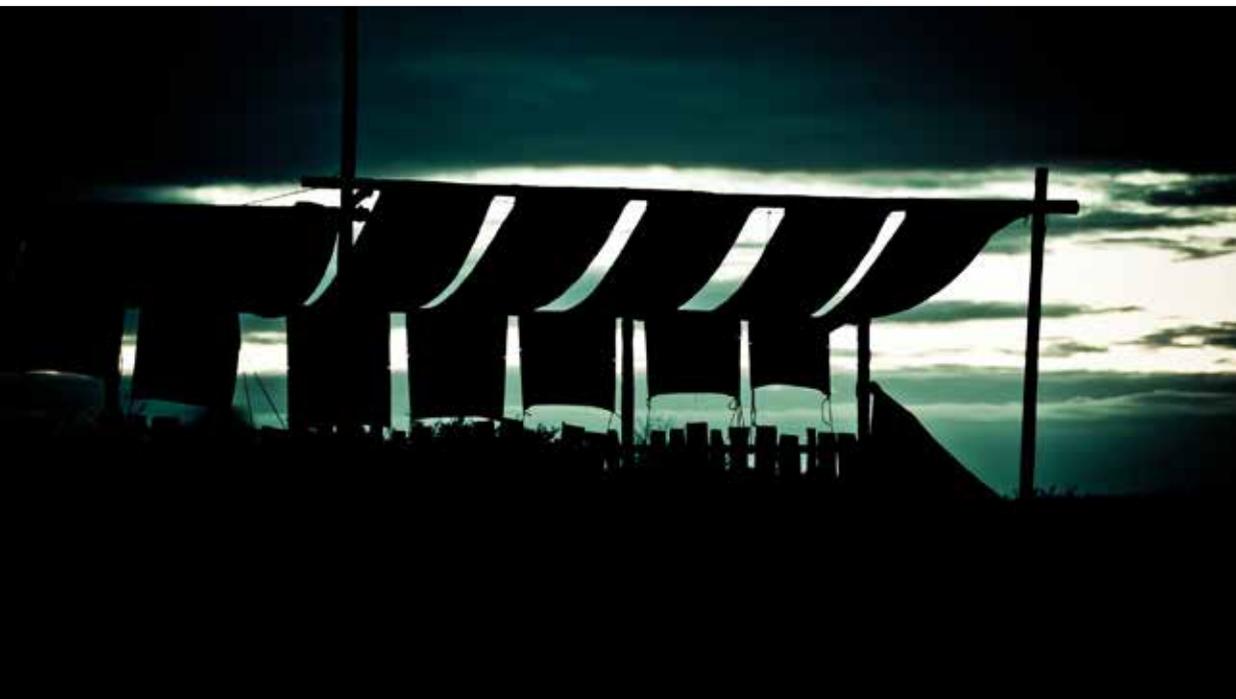
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2 Another interesting discussion is whether we should come up with another term than “debriefing,” as it might be confused with psychological debriefing methods after severe trauma, such as Mitchell's Critical Incidence Stress Debriefing, that generally fails to provide clear, positive results, and even shows possibilities of harmful long-term effects (see for instance Lilienfield, 2007; Raphael, Meldrum and McFarlane, 1995). To clarify: What larps do when debriefing larps, is not the same as trauma debriefing.



Sunset over the arena on Atlantis. Photographer: Charlie Moss [www.larpimages.com](http://www.larpimages.com)

# Sing in Me, Muse, and Through Me Tell the Story...

Harry Harrold

In the UK, there is a long tradition of *fest* games. Larp games of this sort are designed for hundreds of players in a continuing campaign, with the majority of significant interactions expected to be between player character and player character, rather than between player character and non-player character.

*Odyssey* was a fest game set in a time of classical myth. Its finale was in August 2016, after a run of thirteen events, each for hundreds of players, over seven years. It started with a welcome:

*“Alexander of Macedon, he whom you called Great, is dead.” ... “He will be remembered as one who challenged the gods and failed. His armies, his leadership and his skill at war were not enough even when combined with stolen magic and alliances with hidden powers.”*

The background to the game held that Alexander’s conquests had been the wars of a deicide, and at his last battle gods had been brought to combat. After their victory, the gods struck a deal with the Fates to restrict future mortal combat to an arena on Atlantis, brought back from the waves for the purpose.

*“Each year, the heroes of the civilized lands would fight: territory and wealth the reward for heroic deeds. To each of these Annunals, the gods would call the best and the brightest: priests, warleaders, champions and philosophers. In arena combat, in quest, in deeper understanding of the magics of the world, and in the presence of the gods themselves would be born the legends of the Age of Heroes.”*

The arena was to solve the central tension of

the system in game design terms: we wished to encourage player vs player conflict and also deliver impactful story arcs for our player characters. We wished conflict to be meaningful; every fight in the arena had some concrete advantage on conquest, and many also had deep significance to the wider story. Character death, and specifically unexpected character death was, we felt, necessary to the drama of such stories, but would have most impact if it happened rarely. As it was, the genre of classical myth meant that some characters *could* return from the dead, and it took some time before we managed the balance of peril and survival to our satisfaction.

The arena was one of a triptych of obviously available levers player characters had to affect the world: the others being the magic the game named philosophy, and carefully managed meetings with the gods. Access to philosophy and the gods were restricted by player choice of “path”; only priests could meet their gods, and only philosophers enter the place where the raw material of magic was most available, just as only champions and war leaders could enter the arena to fight. This restriction was intended to encourage interaction and therefore roleplay: no one character could do everything they might need to, so they had to negotiate to achieve their goals, and the rare opportunities for a character to do what others of their kind could not were prized.

These player-accessible levers were also part of the armoury of the story team, who additionally spun dozens of narrative strands per event though non-player characters and organiser-delivered quests. A key experience of *Odyssey* as a crew member was the ever-changing dance of roles which would start the game as a schedule, and end only recognisable as characters’ narratives of the event distilled from the bare ingredients of plot. This submission records that experience.

*“I dreamt I was an Egyptian cultist, or a mad Roman cannibal. Perhaps it was a Carthaginian ghost, memories lost to time. I was an Ushabti, called to the arena to fight. I think I was a husk, called to guard a fleece, and I was the Persian wraith who abhorred the light. Was I the man the Souk killed? Did I guard a false god, or two or more? Did I die worshipping the Aten, as clouds rolled over the sky? Was I a maenad, drunk on gore, or a shepherd, helping the cyclops guard his flock? You should know: you killed me. And I loved every minute of it.”*

#### **Anonymised crew member’s submission**

The game was about the battle between nations, gods and monsters. It was not a game of authentic history: player characters came from five and later seven nations: Carthage, Egypt, Greece, Persia, and Rome at game-start, with Hellas Phoenicia and the Platonic Republic of Humanity emerging in play. As we said at the start of the game, “History has been used just as much as Homer and Harryhausen to create the world of *Odyssey*, and we recommend that players take the same broad approach to find the most fun in the game.”

By the end of the campaign, nations were being subsumed by nations, gods were dying at the hands of player characters, and player characters were taking the mantle of monster themselves, some to the point of ascension to their own divinity, some choosing to lay their monstrosity down to return to a mortal existence. At the last event, nearly 400 plot threads helped 300 players to bring their individual narratives within the world of *Odyssey* to a conclusion.

This paper uses 48 short stories of characters from the game to draw assumptions as to the themes and design choices players found engaging. In addition, it attempts some conclusions about how we tell stories about our

characters. Players and crew submitted these stories as 100-word “drabbles,”<sup>1</sup> with some associated metadata to put the narrative in some context.

The core of the questionnaire was six questions.

- What is your memory?
- What was your character’s name at the time?
- How would you describe them?
- What nation was your character part of at the time?
- Can you link your memory to a particular event?
- Why did you choose that memory?

### NAME, NATION AND EVENT

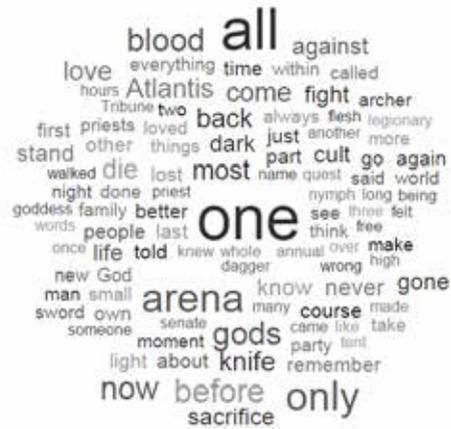
People who responded to the call for stories submitted 48 in total, on behalf of 33 player characters. The stories featured characters from all 7 of the cultures which appeared in the game—Carthage, Egypt, Greece, Hellas Phoenicia, Persia, Rome, and the Platonic Republic of Humanity. Only one event inspired not a single story, even though the stories were recorded between event 12 and the present. The stories in their raw form can be found at <https://larpx.com/2016/10/09/odyssey-stories-guest-post-by-many-hands/>

### WHAT IS YOUR MEMORY?

The form asked for the words a player would want their character to have in the epic of the age in “a paragraph, a drabble, 100 words or so.” It said that submissions might be a moment in the player’s character’s story, or perhaps a story about someone else. The stories we tell about our characters can illustrate the

success of design choices, the resonance of themes, and the collaborative effort of larp.

It’s more difficult to read failure out of stories: we received feedback from players that illustrated when they felt our choices had been the wrong choices, or implemented poorly. Like—I would imagine—any larp organiser we have a store of decisions we should have made differently at the time, or would make differently now. It is more difficult to surface issues like those through the medium of stories submitted by players about their characters.



Word cloud illustration showing most common words used in responses to the call for stories.

Illustration: Harry Harrold

### STORIES FROM GAME DESIGN

Success in terms of our game design choices would be stories inspired by the levers of the game world: the arena, the magics of philosophy and meetings with the gods.

The stories players have submitted suggested foam sword combat did succeed in inspiring emotional investment in our events. This story of the arena indicates it helped tell the kinds of stories we intended it to inspire:

1 A drabble is a short work of fiction of around one hundred words in length.

*"We form up, those few heroes hurriedly gathered facing off against the legions of the accursed iksander. I stand there Lion have taken a city by myself the previous day, Romans and Persians stand by my side united by a common cause. King Minos announce out our names and deeds before the overflowing stands and we are loved by those of faith from all across the middle sea. It does not matter if we lose we were there when no one else would stand against the heretics!"*

***Kaveh, of Persia.***

"King Minos" in that story is a non-player character, part of a team who ran the arena and aimed to help people use it to tell precisely those kinds of stories; short, sharp moments of meaningful battle. Our intent was that the arena should become a place of role-playing as much as a place of combat, and indeed that the two would be as indistinguishable as possible. This pair of stories, from a Carthaginian and the one after from a Roman, indicates that we had moments of success.

*"First Annual, facing off alone against the (10?) Romans of House Praxis in the Arena for a Territory battle. Convincing the Roman Commander to face me in 1-1 combat. When defeated he refused to let his men beat the crap out of me and took the defeat with good grace (course as a Carthaginian I cheated and had an artifact weapon). Without which, as he was the far better swordsman and I would have lost."*

***Marathak Du`rane of Carthage.***

*"One warleader and four champions enter the arena, and see that there are A Lot of Carthaginians lining up. The warleader walks forwards and suggest we fight five, then five, etc... They are not willing to deal. We spread out, and as they charge, we strike our shields in defiance."*

***Ridea, gobby priest of Mercury  
(champion at the time of this incident)***

I find it difficult to conceive of two stories that might better indicate the difference between Rome and Carthage in the setting and the roleplay of the players. That honour, that trickery.

Often, such stories were played out on quest as much as in the main field. Our quests were designed to be "leaner" moments to remember, rather than padded 10-encounter "liners." Short-sharp-fun. It is a tribute to how well these worked that the most renowned warband of the Age chose to finish their time at *Odyssey* on quest, rather than in the arena.

I can't imagine a story that better illustrates how arena, quest, and magic knitted together than this; a tragedy worthy of the setting emerging because mechanics used by various players for various reasons collided with one character's' story to tragic end.

*"What's this sword you need?"*

*"The wedding sword of Alexander, the sword he got before he got married."*

*"If I get it, can I get married? To you?"*

*"Um... Yes. Get the sword. Retake Corinth. Defend Athens. Then we will marry."*

*I go on the quest, my only quest since I swore never to kill. We get the sword.*

*I join the Lakodaemons, to fight to retake Corinth. We succeed.*

*I fight in the Battle for Athens, skirmishing behind the line. We win.*

*We are united, briefly, in joy as she rushes into the Arena and my arms after Athens stands. Then she needs to go back to Corinth. She will return, she promises.*

*But the World Forge breaks, Corinth vanishes, and so does she." Blood of Hellas Phoenicia, born Senef of Egypt. Desperately seeking a place in the world, something to fill the void of emptiness after his resurrection. Found it in the companionship of Hellas Phoenicia, and wanted to secure that with a marriage. But it all went wrong...*

That last story is the one that comes closest to mentioning the specific activity of manipulating the “World Forge,” a mechanism and mechanic inherent to the practise of magic in the game. Although *magic* is mentioned, and the effects and choices made by those who practised it are mentioned, the mechanism is not. That’s an indication that it wasn’t entirely successful, a weak piece of design.

The stories of magic come from the role-play of those who used it, rather than from the mechanism itself. An example would be this, indicating that the use of magic also gave rise of stories inspired by memorable moments.

*“Sikander<sup>2</sup> stops speaking, and before the minoans move on, I step forwards, almost as in a dream. Knife. Palm. A sudden blossoming of pain. The words come tumbling forth, in one great release of the boy I was, dreaming of wizardry, and a birth of the man I must become.*

*I AM LYSANDROS OF SIKANDERGUL,  
CHIEF PHILOSOPHER TO PLATO’S RE-  
PUBLIC OF HUMANITY, WHO SHEARED  
THE GOLDEN RAM. I CLAIM NOW MY  
ONE WISH. I WISH FOR THE PIVOT OF  
THE WORLD RESTORED, WHOLE AND  
NEW, AS IT WAS IN THE START OF ALL  
THINGS!*

*...and like that it is done. Why am I not weeping?”*

***Lysandros the Student,  
an orphan of Sikandergul,  
become Philosopher to Sikander himself,  
of the Platonic Republic of Humanity***

The design of *Odyssey’s* god audiences worked better than that of the World Forge. Audiences were strictly rationed and access gated—quite literally for the characters involved, as they had to travel to see a god at a particular time, to an off-field location. This

increased their impact by making the experience easier to control. Lighting, sound effects, physical effects were all used in a tightly controlled environment. The reason for the choice of this story, “*Exclusive god-audiences are always a bit special,*” indicates this was a successful design choice.

*“I came before Athena; all the Hellas Phoenician priests had failed to attend, but reshaped by Jupiter I could stand before her and not perish. I tried to convince her to come to Rome. She suggested I was making a bid at courtship; I mentioned that I had just seen the Titan of Love. “There is no love in Hellas Phoenicia,” she told me, and more than ever I pitied the gods.” Amafinius, Roman priest and patriot, with wisdom born of bitter experience and terrible error.”*

Meeting the gods was an opportunity to be awed which players bought into.

### **STORIES FROM CAMPAIGN THEMES**

Success in terms of our themes would be stories submitted of the battle between nations, gods and monsters.

The stories of Carthaginian and Roman play in the arena cited above speak to the effectiveness of the theme of conflict of nations in generating narrative.

Gods were central to the theme of the game—their nature, their personalities, and roles as inspirers of action and seemingly unconquerable antagonists taken straight from classical myth. A favourite quote from the system came from a Greek; “*Ares is a c\*\*\*.*” That story from Amafinius, shows that for all the frustration the gods gave rise to, they did their job in the campaign.

The following two stories illustrate the tension between monster and mortal, a tension we aimed to explore:

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2 Another name for Alexander.

*"Taking the difficult decision to give up my immortality and N'Hru abilities, because I wanted to pass onto the fields of Reeds with my friends when I died and because Egypt's Gods didn't approve of my transformation. But we still had need of the power of an N'Hru in the arena. Thankfully a certain fish containing Osiris' phallus appeared on a quest with the ability to restore life among other things."*

**Nassor, of Egypt.**

*"My touch brings pain to the flesh of others, their flinch from me a reminder of what I am now. Ifreet. Fire-borne. I am no longer mortal flesh and blood. Yet as I let my hand trail in the flames of the camp fire, I feel the echo of a touch that does not flinch from me. Passion ignites as the flames dance along my fingers. In a beautiful irony I shiver in anticipation of feeling Her touch again, my wife, Queen of the Ifreet. Adara"*

*"But I also remember why I have done this. I remember for whom. I remember every person who has reached for me regardless of the pain I cause. I remember my husband and love, Asim."*

*Yes, I am lost to Fire, but they are worth it."*

**Ziba Nasrin, of Persia.**

### **STORIES FROM COLLABORATIVE NARRATIVE**

Success as a larp, defined as a collaborative effort between organisers and players to produce compelling narratives, would be stories that emerged from neither theme nor mechanics, but from setting and story.

This, from Rome, shows how an arc inherent in the setting came to end at the final event of the campaign. That tension in Roman history; a republic rejecting monarchy, and then falling into rule by one, was played out in our game also.

*"Romans pack out the Minoan senate room, some bent over the huge table, faces expectant in the low candle light. Alexa's skin is charged. One way or another, this is the moment. The climax of everything she has worked towards for years. She seeks out the faces of her allies, her family, her friends. Senator Priscus reads the senate proclamation. The results of the motion that she and Ticus put to the senate hours earlier. The gamble. "Let it be known that the people and the Senate of Rome support the appointment of Craigus Tempus Bavariuous to the position of Dictator." Finally, it is done."*

**Marcella Alexa Praxis,  
High Priest of Mars, Triumvir of Rome**

A fittingly final example of such is this, from the player who towards the end of the campaign took on the challenge of portraying as a player character the central personality of the background: Alexander of Macedon. For me, this story resonates because it clearly defines a motivation, and that motivation could have been taken straight from classical myth.

*"Once there was a man named Hephaestion. He was brave, and clever, and bright as the sun.*

*I loved him. He was too good for me. I was a thug with a spear. He was a scholar and a poet who dreamed of a better world.*

*I was betrayed. I ran mad. I did terrible things. I died.*

*He sacrificed everything to restore me.*

*He believed that humanity could be better. That we could rise above our fate and forge a new destiny.*

*He believed in freedom. He died for it.*

*Now he is gone. I must finish his work."*

**Alexander of Macedon**

## HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR CHARACTER?

Respondents described their characters in terms of how they looked, in terms of their profession, their nation, and how they thought. Two thirds of all submissions included the one of the specific terms used in the rules for professions. This usage formed the core of a short character description, rather than its totality, but it seems to indicate the rules shaped people's perception of their characters. Three examples of Romans illustrate this: "Gobby priest of Mercury (champion at the time of this incident)," "Utterly devoted priest of Rome," or a "Roman priest and patriot, with wisdom born of bitter experience and terrible error."

**Rules affect how people tell their characters' stories.**

## WHY DID YOU CHOOSE THAT MEMORY?

In the interests of keeping the questionnaire short, only one question was posed regarding motivation for selection, and that only asked for a free-text answer: "Why did you choose that memory?" I think, however, that it is possible to draw some themes out of the submissions.

Seventeen of the stories are described as "character-defining" in some way—either explicitly using some variant of the word "defining," or using some other form of words. This example gives "It was the night that changed the character utterly and led to his death" as the reason for choosing the story:

*"Everything felt more real since I drank from the cup, I felt flooded with wonder and longing for everything new and forbidden, the thrill of Dionysus's stroke on my face, the sweet taste of the champion's flesh as it slaked a hunger like I'd never known, the sweet smell of his blood flooding my nostrils, the music of his screams as we ate feasted on his still living flesh..."*

***Theokratos, of Greece,  
an up to this point reserved  
and aloof priest of Poseidon***

The stories we tell are often those when a character changes, or is defined in some other way.

Eight are concerned with groups—either bands of characters, or nations. This from Rome:

*"We enter the arena, and I deliberately step forward, distancing myself from what will come. It is only afterwards that I hear the clamour, "What have you done?" and "The Ducks have murdered Gaius." I take a deep breath, arrange my features into shock, "What has happened Septimus? Of what am I accused?"*

***Q. Servilia Poppaea, a Roman senator,  
champion, tribune, politician at  
Event 9—Dweller of the Deepes***

This from Egypt, at "a point where Egypt were at our lowest ebb and marks when we started to turn it around." exemplifies the crossover between the personal and the national story.

*"Sutekh demanded that Egypt should obtain The Black Sarcophagus. It was held by a nation three times our size and many felt the request was impossible. Morale was low and we were on the verge of giving up, or pleading with Sutekh for a reprieve. Then we suddenly snapped and decided to make the effort, no matter how impossible it seemed. It was a defining moment for our small nation that we would always fight to win and to obey our gods, never mind the odds."*

***Ramses, Keeper of the Goats, of Egypt,  
at Event 3—Claws of the Tide King***

The stories we tell are often about how our character is part of a wider narrative, built around groups of characters.

Many of the stories people have chosen to tell speak of emotion, but four identifiably and specifically centre on this aspect. This one notes the physical aspect of the experience: ". . . I felt genuine fear and heartbreak, a sign of the level of immersion that this campaign has given me and oh my god has it been emotional."

*“The cold and damp wooden slats of the arena pressed hard against my back as a God who I didn’t believe in or care about—other than the fact they had decided to eat one of my Gods—stared me down and laughed as I begged for my life. The guilt that came from being the only Persians to come back from that without a curse or time limit.”*

***Laleh, Daughter Of Artaxes, of Persia.***

It is, of course, particularly pleasing to terrify your players and their characters if you’re aiming at fear, and the player who submitted this story did so with the comment “Waking to hear the Sirens drag an unfortunate to his doom was one of the most terrifying moments I never saw at an event. I hid under my blanket.” While there was an out-of-character sleeping area, one of the design choices of *Odyssey* was to impose a 24-hr live experience on players who chose to sleep in the game field. It is fair to say that this imposed a duty of sleeplessness on some of the organising crew that we’d not necessarily choose again, when sleep deprivation worked as a means of immersing the players in the world, it worked extraordinarily well.

*“I lay sleepless on my bed that evening, the booming voice of Melqart still echoing in my thoughts.*

*I must have dozed for I awoke to darkness outside and a despairing wail in the middle distance.*

*“Don’t go with them Tribune!” a wavering Roman voice called from a small distance off. A faint snatch of music, high voices singing a haunting, alluring, receding harmony. “Don’t listen Tribune! Block your ears!” The eerie singing slowly faded to nothing. “Tribune!” Sobbing. Silence.”*

***Adonibaal of Tyre of Carthage***

**The strongest stories we tell are about emotions experienced, as much as they are about the character or player.**

Four give a reason related to the impact a moment had on the player. Two of these reasons are worth quoting directly. The first of these I think marks a moment in a player’s experience of larp as a past-time through a design choice to maximise immersion wherever possible:

*“The memory of that event still effects me to this day and it was the first time I had been properly immersed so much so that I cried and couldn’t stop myself from feeling that way.”*

*“She looked down at the body, the goddess laying beside her, blood mixed with quint.<sup>3</sup> She hadn’t expected her to die, the huntress who had struck the killing blow to her Father, Anu, now she was as weak and scared as any human. Adrinna had took her dagger as she told her priests she didn’t want to be wasted and they devoured her body, the heart ripped out and the blood bottled. Every piece of her in use, as she wished. She felt numb as she walked out of the map room and in a daze walked to the Blades tent, dripping in her goddess’ blood and then she sank to her knees*

*and yelled a cry so primal and guttural and held onto the the quint that was her goddess.”*

***Adrinna of The Blades, of Persia.***

The second, speaks to a design choice implemented and recognised; that our players should have the opportunity to feel like heroes:

*“It was the time Odyssey made me feel most like a big kick ass hero. I’d done a lot of non-physical being awesome stuff (because odc made everyone feel awesome) but this was a chance where I was allowed to feel*

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3 “Quint” is a slang term for Quintessence, the fuel of magic in the *Odyssey* world which might in other games be called mana. It was available through many sources; notably, and as here, the blood of gods.

*awesome for my physical skills (as limited as they were)."*

*"It is midnight and I have been challenged to pass a test to rise up the ranks within the cult of Mithras. I'm wearing armour and carrying a shield that i can only lift due to philosophy. My friends are not allowed to watch me, they are not high enough within the cult. I'm armed only with a dagger. It is a Minotaur of course, it strikes me down again and again but, eventually, I beat it. Only a handful of minoans and the high ranking Mater saw it. I can't think of another game where I'd have the chance to feel like such a big damn hero."*

**Hester Vidius,  
Utterly devoted priest of Rome**

**The stories we tell can be about ourselves as much as they are about our characters.**

### FINAL THOUGHTS

As I had expected, some of the stories that players submitted were of events I observed and remember, and some had become part of the fabric of the campaign as it ran. Many were new, and of more a private or internal nature.

What I had not expected was themes and design choices to shine quite so clearly through the stories that were submitted. That led me to categorise the stories and use that categorisation to consider where we'd been successful and where we'd not. My measure of success was simple. If a theme turned up in a story—then it's resonated in a player's experience and that's a success. If a design choice, a mechanic perhaps, showed up—then it had worked. This is hardly academic rigour, but I think there's something to using a more sophisticated implementation of the approach in genuinely evaluating the success and failures of writers' and organisers' choices. One refinement would be for an organiser to come up with the list of categories, but for a third party to do the categorisation. It is a little circular: you might expect the majority of the event plot to concern the campaign themes, and for most stories to be about what was most often

featured in plot.

In the case of *Odyssey*, the arena was a wooden structure 25 metres by 14 metres and 5 meters tall in the middle of the game field, where player characters fought every half hour during the hours of daylight, every event. You'd expect some stories about it. However, as an organiser, it's gratifying to read stories of those themes and choices emerge alongside those generated more from interactions based on players' characterisation.

My reason for playing and running larp events is to generate stories to share afterwards: to "froth," to use the UK term. Summing the reasons given for submissions up in a word cloud, there's a sentence fragment that stands out: "one character defining moment." I think any of the *Odyssey* team would be happy with that as the output of the campaign: stories with character defining moments.



*Word cloud illustration showing most common words used to describe the reasons given for submitting a story. Illustration: Harry Harrold*

### LUDOGRAPHY

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# Do You Want to Play Ball?

## *How to be a good team player (in a single-team player vs. player game)*

Josefin Westborg and Carl Nordblom

**IN NORDIC LARP** and the culture of *playing to lose* we have seen that a common thought is that all you have to do is be true to your character and a story will automatically emerge from that. This is a huge lie and we need to stop telling it. Creating a collaborative story takes work and it's not something that just happens. It's a skill that can be learned, and in this article we want to focus on this skill. What is it? How do we learn to read the gameplay and see what the story needs? How do we avoid some of the traps of drama? All this is about taking responsibility for the story. A shared and collaborative responsibility. There are loads of advice for organisers on how to use meta techniques, write characters or guide participants in a certain direction, but there are fewer talks and texts on how to make the best of a larp as a participant. We want to encourage players to practice seeing game patterns and to actively create story content. With this article we want to encourage a deeper discussion and development of tools and terms for such skills.

Larp is a participatory culture where you can't be fed an experience; you have to contribute to it yourself. Have you ever been to a game that felt a bit strange or unbalanced and things didn't really work the first day? Then the next day a lot of it just worked like magic? Chances are that one or more players (and perhaps organisers) had a crisis meeting about how to fix these problems. What did they see and do? They probably analysed the plot distribution and flow. We want to give you tools for this, and with some practice you can do it too.

The things we will discuss here, some players have already automatised, and maybe never even thought about. It is useful to reflect on these, not just for the sake of our own experience, but also for beginner larpers who want to understand our strange way of interacting in larps. If we have words for it we can describe it and then teach it.

## So what is a story?

That's a huge question, but a very basic definition of a story is that it is establishing and breaking routines. Most stories start with a protagonist heading away from everyday routine. "This is Sam. Every day Sam takes the bike to work. But on this day..."

The same also goes for larp. If you notice a new routine it could be a good idea to give it some time to sink in and then to break it or redirect it to create new directions. For example, if you realise that the quarrel between the angry neighbours is drawing out and the routine "passive aggressive war" starts to feel a bit drained, maybe it's time to introduce an external threat that will make the neighbours unite and work against the park management instead. If everything is coming along nicely, some new gossip about a secret past might stir things up a bit. Break routines and redirect stories. Don't let a stable normality settle too much. If your larp isn't explicitly a feel good larp then you can always introduce drama or problems if things become too simple and jolly.

This of course has its problems too. When you zoom in on a routine you will find smaller routines inside. You might not notice if a majority of the players are exploring several routines and story elements inside one routine. At which point introducing a new dramatic plot might just annoy and disturb others. Also if you never let new routines establish a new normality, introducing new ones will just create chaos. It is desirable to let every new routine slowly influence the story and raise the jeopardy or tension so it's not just a series of short independent happenings but a dynamic arc of events that all tie into the same themes. One recurring example is the village larp where manure suddenly hits the windmill and changes everything, but as there was no time to form an already established normality beforehand, no one knows how to act when their world is turned upside down. "On a scale from minor kerfuffle to the ending of the world—how are we to react to this? And when we speak about before, what do we say?"

Of course this can also be the larp where everyone plays a special snowflake and therefore no one supports a norm. That again will decrease the value of reactions given, which lowers the resolution of play.

## Player preferences

Different players like different things in a larp. That is what makes it hard to find and create something that everyone enjoys. We believe that the skill of understanding and contributing to the shared experience is valuable no matter what kind of larper you are or what your preferred style of play is. The Three way model (Bøckman, 2003) is one way to categorise different types of playing styles. When we look at the TWM, we see that all three described player styles can gain from knowing about and recognising interaction patterns better. The three play styles defined in the TWM are as follows:

*“**Dramatist** (or **narrativist**) is the style which values how well the in-game action creates a satisfying storyline. Different kinds of stories may be viewed as satisfying, depending on individual tastes, varying from fanciful pulp action to believable character drama. It is the end result of the story that is important.—It’s hard to play a meaningful story on your own and with a better understanding of patterns in play you can contribute to a story that touches more players.”*

If you can’t grasp what the overall story arc of the larp is about, or fail to connect with the other players’ genre of playing style, you might end up out of sync. You might be perceived as overly dramatic and headed in the wrong direction, or experience that others don’t latch on to your play or play you down.

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

Learn to read the game and the system and it will be easier to achieve what you want. See the potential in things you find and make it more valuable than it was when you found it.

If you can’t see the game patterns or keep too much information to yourself you won’t get very much information back. You can also come across as boring and selfish.

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

A normal logical character isn't necessarily very fun to play or to play with. You might be perceived as uptight and passive in that your character's logical behaviour doesn't provide much play for others. If you're really unlucky you can even end up with every player having their own interpretation of their own character, and though they play it as believable as they can, no one is prepared to give and take. This makes the larp dull, even if everyone acted their part. By being able to read the game you can make the most of the character you're portraying and really convey the character's feelings.

Playing a believable character does not automatically equal an entertaining experience. A real person is often passive, afraid of change and spends a majority of their time on tedious everyday stuff like eating, going to the toilet, paying bills and waiting for the bus. Normal people (goes for orcs as well) aren't creating play in themselves. It's hardly ever enough to just reenact people. You have to steer a little to be fun for yourself and for your co-players. It will potentially be very tedious if you just play your character. That's why if you have an awareness about how to play your character with a dramatic bonus and can invest more momentum in your acting, magic might happen. Instead of just catching balls that are passed to you and then putting them down on the floor, you pass them on in an entirely new direction while you tackle another person and blame a third for it. Drama!

We will look at some of the more obvious game distributing roles as well as some with less obvious influence on the game. Let's start with a couple of examples:

You have found an awesome artefact. What do you do with it now? Would you keep it to yourself? Hide it? Sell it? What would be more interesting for you and for others?

Or let's say you are a high status student at a boarding school. All the students are revealing secrets about each other to you for their own gain. What do you do with all the information you've collected? Who do you tell? What can you gain personally (in character) from it? Should you punish someone? Or have someone else do it? What would create more interaction and play? And not least, how will you get time to play for yourself and not just listen to a lot of gossip and making decisions revolving around others?

## Drama as a team sport

Here we want to show some examples of the ways we mean interaction can happen. We will use two different examples for each bullet point to show what we mean. There are of course loads of different ways to do this, but the examples are there to make it clearer. And of course, this requires that you can identify the opportunity or “ball.” Seeing a ball is you becoming aware of someone else’s plot point, in-game need or other information in the game connected to either another player’s story or to the main arc. This will also help you avoid some of the traps of the drama like “dropping the ball” as explained below.

### **Catching a ball**

To see another player’s initiative and choose to act on it.

You walk past a person holding a magic stone who’s saying out loud that the druids need the stone but he himself is too busy to take it there. You take the stone.

(You play a senior) A low status junior steps in front of you with their back towards you and trash talks a senior. You confront the person.

### **Passing on a ball**

To create a new step in the story and to involve one more player or just pass the plot/information/task along to someone else. For example by spreading knowledge about, solving or further complicating parts of your plot.

Give the stone to the druids/give the stone to someone else with the same instructions/give the stone to the druids’ enemies.

You go to a high status junior and give that person the task of punishing the low status junior that trash talked.

### **Multiplying a ball**

The same as passing on a ball but you involve more than one other player.

Give the stone to another person and tell the druids that you saw someone with the stone they want.

Go to the junior that did the trash talk and tell them they need to make more of an effort to behave. Tell the high status junior that the mentioned student is sucking up and is trying too hard in a non-desirable way.

### **Picking up a placed, dropped or idle ball**

To find information or an opportunity and bring that into the game, or to pick up a player’s initiative that no one else saw.

You find a piece of a ritual description that seems to be connected to the druids’ ritual. You take the description.

You notice a beer hidden in a sophomore’s bed. During the next break you find the owner and mention that it’s not good to drink too much.

### **Passing on several balls**

To have many or even too many plots and to pass them along to several players.

You hand the stone and the ritual description to different people/you send people to find the ingredients mentioned in the description/you tear the description into smaller pieces.

As chairman of the students council you have gotten three different complaints to deal with. You delegate them to three different juniors and put a senior on monitoring them.

### **Creating a new ball**

To create and introduce a new plot based on nothing or very little.

You overhear a conversation about the old village Mayor and start an election for a new one.

Take a junior's cellphone and send a (fake?) love confession to their higher status roommate from it.

### **Placing a ball**

To place plot content physically or in a context rather than aiming it at a specific player.

Hide a ritual description at the larp site.

Host a class where you tell the students to comment on each other in specific areas that you have decided. For example "what's your relationship to alcohol?"

### **The idle ball**

To stop or kill a plot by not sharing information or artefacts that are relevant for others but you don't really use them yourself either. You might feel like you are using them by just keeping them and that it might create fun internal denial play for you, but in reality it just stops the overall story from moving on.

Keep the magic stone during the whole larp and never tell anyone that you have it even if they would ask.

You find another student's diary and take it and never tell anyone about it or its secrets.

### **Dropping a ball**

Not that off from The idle ball but with the difference that it is more active. You have said that you will bring the story onwards but don't. It might be outspoken in the game or that you've off-game promised someone to do something or help with their story and when the moment shows, you don't.

Promise to appear with the magic stone at the ritual at one o'clock. Hang out at the tavern and get caught up in something else.

Off-game before the larp you tell the junior player that you will be their bully through the larp. When the larp begins you find a story arc about love and leave the junior alone the entire larp.

### **Smashing a ball in the face**

When you draw someone into a story/scene without giving them any possibility of opting out.

You have found the stone and want the druids to do something cool with it. You decide to barge in shouting that you found the stone but you feel its power fading and they need to use it at once. When you arrive the druids are executing a ritual to help three other players that are part of the scene. You go ahead with your plan anyway because you think it will be cool and don't stop to reflect about it.

You think that one of the juniors is too much of a goodie two-shoes so during the morning line-up you ask what they were doing crying alone with a positive showing pregnancy test.

### **A red ball and a green ball**

Here, colours represent storytelling patterns (we'll come back to this later). A setting contains several themes to explore and people usually have different preferences. A larp set in a factory can contain stories about tight friendship, worker unions, having fun while producing stuff, forbidden romances, salary negotiations and so on. In a game like this, balls are being passed around like crazy. A gray ball about unions, a red ball about romance, a purple one about getting a better contract etc. We often like to larp with play-

ers that throw balls in the same colours as ourselves, but we can still get good plot exchange from playing with others too, especially in shorter interactions. It becomes easier if you can see what colour another player is aiming for, based on that, you can then choose to pass the ball onwards in a suitable direction. If you assume that everyone prefers the same colour/storytelling pattern it becomes a lot trickier.

**Example:** You are playing the school larp mentioned in the earlier examples. You show someone a text message about your partner cheating on you. They interpret it as though you're playing a story about unfaithfulness, which for the sake of the metaphor, is a red ball. Their idea is that you'd like to go in one of the three following directions: Break up and be devastated, get relieved and use the situation to break up and trash talk the person or make a big emotional outplay and then solve the problem and get back together

again. They would then try to figure out in what direction you want them to pass on the ball and then toss it that way.

They, on the other hand, play the story about "The geek that became cool" which is a completely different story, let's say a green ball. But by signalling that this is their story by, for example, stepping on some old friends and referring to the new popular friend, they can give you a chance to tie onto that colour too.

You could either just pass along your respective ball or you can intertwine your stories by making the other player ratting for the cool gang about your cheating partner. This would lower the cheating partner character, give energy to your story where you can get back at your partner and also lift the other player's geek character socially before you split up and continue your respective paths again.

## Play distribution and responsibilities in the hierarchy

Most characters can distribute play, but it can take many different shapes and has varying expectations depending on what you try and portray. It can for example be hard to create and throw group balls (group play initiatives) by yourself. You might require an in-game mandate (by acquiring status, group consensus or other means of backing) to reach out with larger play initiatives. This also means that as a low status character you are more dependent on other players passing you balls. Without it you might spend a lot of time waiting while lacking agency. To create play from "below" you often need to put yourself in slightly unpleasant situations and take space in the story (not necessarily in a physical way). This is one of the reasons it might be a bad idea to cast a beginner larper as a low status character.

The other side of the spectrum is about receiving a lot of balls that you need to handle. This is actually what playing high status is about. You get a responsibility of passing on balls and to create new balls for others. To be played up as cool is often less of a problem than one might think but making sure all players with low status characters aren't bored is trickier, which in turn is why it might be a bad idea to cast beginners in high status positions. Even if it isn't a single person's duty to make

sure that balls reach all the way down, you still want to create a trickle down effect and not a trickle up one, which happens a lot.

To create play no matter what status level you are playing is also about seeing what balls you own, and to that extent, what obligations you have, both before and during the larp. Some of these can be pre-written into your character and some you might have created yourself.

If you are to play the bully that means you have responsibility to bully other characters. Or if you decided before the larp with another player that you are going to bully them the same applies. You can't just leave the bullied character and do nothing. Then you drop the ball and it might have huge effects on the other players game. You can then either bully them yourself (take the ball), delegate this task to someone else (passing it along) or talk to the player to renegotiate the relation.

## Tools

Here we will share some tools that we think could be useful as a player for learning to read and create game play. And to take responsibility for the shared story. A lot of the tools are things you do before and after the larp rather than during. That is because it's very hard in the middle of a larp to have time to stop and think about things. We have found that the more you think about it before and after, the easier it becomes to do it subconsciously during the larp, and the more you can internalise it, the more you can focus on just enjoying the ride.

### Reflection

A first step of learning this is by observing a larp you just visited and analyse a few of the scenes you remember. Preferably some scenes that you thought were extra good or some that didn't work for you at all.

- What happened during the scene?
- What could have been the best possible version of the scene? Were you looking for a specific feeling or result?
- What worked well?
- What did not work well?
- How could the problem have been resolved? Could you or another player have done something differently? Could you have helped the other player make a better choice? Could the scene be designed in another way?
- It is so much easier to see solutions for problems after they have passed, but similar things will most certainly happen again, in slightly different shapes, so it's good to have given it some thought and be better prepared next time.

## Cultural context

Larping is just one way of experiencing stories. Other media use the same stories larp does, so there are loads of things one can learn from watching movies or reading books as well. We think that just as story traditions varies between different parts of the world, so does our understanding of reading the game play. We can all have different connotations to the same themes. This is also something to bare in mind when larping in another country. Our world constantly becomes more globalised and a lot of the references to storytelling and narratives are getting widely spread while others inevitably lose ground.

- Many stories are the same, but in different costumes and set dressings. Sometimes we even talk about how there are only a certain number of stories to tell, and that the same ones are just being told over and over again. Try to recognise storytelling patterns in books and movies.
- Try to guess where a story is headed while watching a movie. Come up with several possible outcomes and compare the alternatives to the actual outcome.
- Guess what scenes can occur or what will happen to the overall arc during a larp before it is run, and then study that up against the outcome, or even host the game yourself. Was your hypothesis correct? Why? Why not?

## Visible affordances

Think of what a character's costume and appearance is saying about who they are.

The relevance of costume is depending on the type of larp you're attending. The larger the event the more articulate you have to be. It's hard to memorise a hundred characters without distinguishable features but if your appearance screams "loner that offers shady trade deals" or "philosophic father of five looking for a business partner" you are more likely to get play on the themes you are interested in. A clearer or more stereotype costume is a clearer invitation for others to initiate interactions with you. Alternatively you can deviate so much that you don't fit into any compartment which can repel players but sometimes make them curious too. This often leads to uncertainty, especially if many players do it, but as most things it can be a design choice as well.

Study the context of the larp. If everyone plays non mainstream characters it won't be low status to be alternative. Rather the the other way around.

**Example:** You're going to play an upper class character and chose to play them so high in status, they can break norms and therefor you

take on a completely alternative look. The result is that you don't get as much play, since the other upper class characters might read your appearance (costume) as lower class, and you don't focus very much on the actual lower class characters yourself since your character wants to be atop of the pyramid. You are signalling that you want to play with an orange ball, that might be read as "I want to be accepted as alternative" while you actually want to get passed a red ball about being lonely in the top of the hierarchy. You could of course prepare with prearranged relations but they will still be limited to those players as most of the others will play you down, since they believe that is what you want.

Or you play a high status character, but as a player you are a bit quiet so when stuff happens in front of you, you don't react. This can result in you losing status when another player offers an opportunity for raising or maintaining your status and you don't seize the opportunity. You don't catch the ball and you don't throw a new one so it's a bit like you're standing outside the sports field and the other players don't know if you're in the game or not.

If you know what type of play you prefer in a game and want to invite others to play with those themes you can do this in several ways. Visual ways to do this is through body language and aesthetic details, but it requires the co-player to recognise the references and have focus enough to spot them. For example it can be that you don't sit down at the dinner table until everyone is present when playing upper-class or wearing a pin with an indie band on it when playing a teenager.

To use small gestures might still give of a certain feeling what you want to project, that most players can pick up on even if they don't realise it or actively recognise them. If you like to play with more subtle signals, you attract players with the same off-game references as you that therefore are able to read your signals. This might make you play with the same kind of players on most larps since you share a way to communicate through these references. This can of course also be a design choice you've made.

### **Actual affordances—what interactions do you offer?**

Be aware of what obligations you have before and during a larp, and how that leads to expectations of your character. Let's say you have been casted as a priest. That's a role that comes with a few preconceptions. You might be expected to have certain moral beliefs, know a few rituals, receive confessions (depending on what branch) and probably host a simple service, wedding or funeral. You might want to prepare a bit for that. If you come to the larp and just play with your family about non church matters, other players might get disappointed, especially if a lot of plots circle around guilt, belief and faith.

What can you as a player offer other characters in form of interaction?

What do you think is fun doing at this particular larp? What themes do you want to highlight? If you want to play on oppression you might angle the priest towards a lot of public shaming and judging. If you want to play around despair you might play a lot around confession and useless advice while not really caring for others' wellbeing. If you enjoy spreading plot gossip you might play a nice caring priest while writing down all confessions and accidentally leave them around. If you like to play violent oppression scenes and shout then maybe you shouldn't squeeze that into the portrayal of the priest but instead play a military character. Then of course the main themes of the larp may decide a lot and you can contribute to that in how you design your character.

### **So why is all this important?**

To a great extent it's important to create and spread agency as well as responsibility amongst all players. It makes for a better game for everyone and will unburden some of the people who often take charge or a larger game responsibility, which can sometimes be frustrating and mentally exhausting. It takes a certain amount of work to make the game flow naturally. Some players find it more fun than others to take responsibility for that, but if more people see what can be done and how they could affect the game, then it will be less work for everyone involved.

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*[character moment]*

***After all the daily rituals, the wild boar family gathers in their three-walled wooden shelter, huddle up together to stay warm, and sing their family lullaby: “Now, we sleep.”***

***[Lyng,  
KoiKoi]***

## **Emotions**

**n in Russian larp design**

eva

emotions” and “character’s emotions.” Therefore I will now introduce two concepts about relations between the player’s and character’s state.

Imagine that you act out a character’s emotions without actually feeling them, but gradually you get more and more immersed, until you finally feel that emotion as a player. This effect I call induction.

Another situation concerns the phenomenon M. Montola calls “indirect bleed” (2010) and dealing with it: if a player feels strong emotions that are different from those of the character and this disturbs her from further playing, she might try to introduce these

*[character moment]*

***“Fight me! Fucking fight me!”  
As the crowd chanted and screamed, I didn’t make a sound. I just hurt Month until my friend went down, then stepped on her.***

***[Laura West /  
Story  
The Solution]***

*[character moment]*

***The demon laughed at her.  
“I don’t want you girl! But...  
I’ll let you keep him as long  
as you are not happy. And on  
the day you are, I will rip him  
away and all your power or  
money won’t matter.”***

***[F. Rafalko  
College of Wizardry 8]***

What can you as a p

What do you think  
you want to highlight  
the priest towards a  
play around despair  
advice while not rea  
ing plot gossip you r  
confessions and acci  
oppression scenes ar  
the portrayal of the  
course the main the  
ute to that in how yo

**So why is all this im**

To a great extent it's  
sponsibility amongs  
and will unburden s  
game responsibility,  
exhausting. It takes  
naturally. Some play

**[killed darling]**

**We cut the armoured  
personnel carrier from  
our larp Skymningsland  
in 2010 for mechanical  
issues (engine-trouble). At  
Hinterland last year we cut  
back on the starvation for  
perceived safety reasons (we  
could probably push it a bit  
further). At Mare Incognitum  
2014 we had to cut the plastic  
moving tentacles from the  
design, it just didn't look as  
cool as we thought it would.  
Ah. And on Skymningsland  
we also didn't blow up and**

**[character  
moment]**

**My friend and I kept vigil for  
his brother in the woods. In  
the darkness, the glowing  
red eyes of the creatures  
that had killed him were all  
around.**

**[Dorian,  
Broadsword]**

**flip a car, as we wanted in  
the initial design. We just  
couldn't get away with  
doing that in that larp  
from a safety perspective.  
We had the logistics for it  
though.**

**[Olle]**

# Designing for Emotions

## An overview of tools common in Russian larp design

Olga Vorobyeva

### INTRODUCTION

Larp is an unbelievably powerful tool for emotions. For many larpers, feeling emotions is one of the main reasons of participating in this hobby. Sometimes the feelings appear through characters' or players' interaction, sometimes they are generated by larp design. In the following article I will introduce a systematisation of the main tools used by Russian larp organisers for provoking target emotions, both for players and their characters.

It is well known that characters' and players' emotions do not necessarily coincide. For instance, steering<sup>1</sup> and indirect bleed (when the player's emotions do not coincide with the character's) are important examples of such discrepancy. But the entire system is more complicated than just "player's

emotions" and "character's emotions." Therefore I will now introduce two concepts about relations between the player's and character's state.

Imagine that you act out a character's emotions without actually feeling them, but gradually you get more and more immersed, until you finally feel that emotion as a player. This effect I call induction.

Another situation concerns the phenomenon M. Montola calls "indirect bleed" (2010) and dealing with it: if a player feels strong emotions that are different from those of the character and this disturbs her from further playing, she might try to introduce these feelings into the diegesis in some way. I call this coping strategy transposition.

To make the system clearer let me show a diagram:

|   |           |        |
|---|-----------|--------|
| Player feels something; character does not                                | Character | Player |
| Player act out character's emotions without feeling them                  | Character | Player |
| Induction: character's emotions induce similar ones in the player         | Character | Player |
| Transposition: player ascribes her non-diegetic emotions to the character | Character | Player |

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<sup>1</sup> A player's conscious management of the character's behaviour.

Consequently, the four main types of tools for emotion design might be divided into:

- Tools for emotional transposition: provoking emotion directly in the player in order to influence the character.
- Tools for players' awareness: informing the player about the characters' feelings to give the player some clues for performance. If the player is immersed enough, she might start feeling them too.
- Tools for characters/players: in-game situations which influence the character's emotions, but also might concern the player
- Tools for players without direct connection with characters.

In the following I will focus on each type of tool.<sup>1</sup> Many of the tools described below have been used for a long time in other types of media. They may not be perceived as tools for making people feel particular emotions; but they are.

## 1: EMOTION TRANSPOSITION

Tools of this type always deal with players' bodies, their unconditional reactions, and usually concern pushing the players out of their comfort zone. The last aspect might be due to the fact that it is much more difficult to provoke calmness, excitement, love, than anxiety, helplessness, or aggression.

### Physical conditions

Let me start with the most illustrating point. There is a type of Russian larp called "ex-

treme," which includes difficult conditions for players. One of the main tools for immersing players into a special state of consciousness within such larps is the so-called "hunger engine," when players are allowed to eat only the food they get diegetically. Besides from that, there are other types of limitations: "extreme" larp may also include deprivation of sleep, limited drinking water, uncomfortable conditions (cold, humidity, sleeping outside without tents etc.). Although such influence is physical, it definitely causes an emotional response in players.

It is noticeable that in Russian "extreme" larps, players do not have a legitimate opportunity to improve their conditions. To compare, in European larps there might be a special "safe zone," where a player is allowed to eat, sleep in more comfortable conditions, or take a break from in-game tension, sometimes even for the entire night.<sup>2</sup> In Russia a player has the right to leave the in-game area only in case of emergency if she really cannot continue playing. Even the spatial design supports this idea: there is no special "safe zone," and dealing with problems takes place only in organisers' off-game location, where the presence of a player is normally prohibited. Therefore, you should have a really serious reason to move off the playground. In Nordic tradition the "safe zones" provides "extreme" larp participants with a choice whether or not, and how much, to suffer during the game. Russian larps of this type imply that signing up automatically means that the players accept to live through everything that might happen. There is no legitimate place for a break, and problems are solved individually and post factum. It is impossible to come to the organisers' location just "to rest," and it seems to be perceived as

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1 I mostly consider larps held by organisers from Moscow and St. Petersburg; very rarely I use data from Siberian larp traditions. Data is collected via participant observation, searching Internet larp blogs and forums and from transcript of a seminar "Dark horror in larps" held within larpwriter convention "Oriental Express" (Yekaterinburg, 2015).

2 Speaking about European "extreme" larps I mostly base my opinion on my experience from "Blue Flame," a Nordic-inspired Spanish larp (2016).

breaking implicit larp conventions, as some players will be in a different state of comfort than the organisers designed for.

To withdraw from playing is legitimate only in cases of socially accepted impossibility to continue playing, like when a player feels discomfort which is not planned as game experience (e.g. sustain a trauma or inability to control her emotional state).

### Environment design

A frequent tool to stimulate a certain emotional effect is environmental design—the complex of venue, props, costumes, music and tricks. All these instruments are used for the same purposes in cinema or theatre. Usually their aim is to increase suspense. Many Russian larps are held in the woods, and a forest at night is strange enough in itself. Adding some scary details, such as glimmering lights, frightening music or murmur, or dark figures on the edge of a lighted space, inevitably affects players, even if they realise how it works.

It seems to be an uncontrollable reaction, as such fear might be felt not only by players (who normally worry about their characters' lives), but even by NPCs and organisers who have created this world and rule it: "You have been sitting and working in the organisers' location all day long and suddenly think: let's see how they are doing. The fortress was already captured by the enemy. I was walking at night. They put infernal green lights everywhere, an enormous bulk is moving towards you from the darkness, and scary music is playing. I could not make myself approach, I went back. I was scared. I knew that it were my own NPCs inside, but I was just scared."<sup>3</sup>

It is well known that the unperceivable scares more than the visible. Therefore it is crucial to create suspense, to enable players to construct their own horror in their minds using available clues: "The worst hor-

ror is an invisible one. Say, there is a legend about a terrible and powerful Reaper, and if something dark glimpses nearby, it is scary. But later you see that it is just Kate with a reaping hook—and all horror is over" ("Dark horror...").

Obviously, spatial design is used not only to provoke horror. It can create any "strange" place, magical, unearthly, and not necessarily frightening. For instance, the creative group "Ostranna" (Moscow) focuses on electronics for larp locations. They have created and promoted different devices, such as colour-changing crystals, flowers lit by a wand, LED navigation for forests, speaking portraits and many other things.

### Music and sound

Music is a strong tool which is applicable not only for producing negative emotions, unlike many other instruments. Music in larps is widely spread: it is broadcasted via devices as well as performed by the players (see details about using music in larps in (Fedoseev Kurguzova 2012)). Different effects might be reached by sombre, solemn, marching music, singing together or other musical phenomena. Here I want to focus on the so-called "music engine" developed for the larp *Ticket to Atlantis* (2014).<sup>4</sup>

The idea of the innovation was the following: Before the larp each player collected music that would tune them into particular emotions (the list of necessary emotions was provided by the organisers). It was important that the music should correspond more with the player's rather than the character's emotions. Just before the larp each player got a special device on a bracelet developed by the creative group "Ostranna," containing their individually chosen tracks. During the play time this device played the tracks in an order unknown to the players, accompanying them all the time they were awake. It was intended that the music would automati-

3 This and some other quotes are taken from the transcript of a seminar "Dark horror in larps" held at the larp-writer convention "Oriental Express" (2015).

4 See details in Vechorek and Zakharov 2015.

cally stimulate the player to feel a certain emotion attached to it, and organisers used this effect strategically: different larping locations evoked different feelings in different characters (boredom, calmness, nostalgia, interest, etc.). Other characters could also serve as sources of specific emotions. In other words, the bracelet was programmed to switch tracks according to a special algorithm. There were also some events which were to provoke panic, during which players heard a scream of horror followed by their individual track of panic.

Individual approach was an obvious advantage of this system. The same music might cause different emotions in different people according to their individual experience, and here emotional triggers were highly customised. The disadvantages were that players reported difficulty with continually having to listen to music and had difficulty remembering the link between each track and the emotion attached to it, as there were dozens of tracks. Therefore, players often remembered only the general idea or type of emotion, but could easily take “interest” track for “joy” or “anxiety” for “melancholy”: “Firstly, I could not memorise all the tracks. Secondly, I almost dropped out of play because of overload of music, and a headache sent me into a corner.”<sup>5</sup> But, all in all, it was an interesting experiment of using electronics in provoking customised emotions.

### Psychophysical triggers

Sudden attacks, chases and other effects, often used in Disneyland-style interactive dungeons for tourists, can provoke certain uncontrolled reactions, like fear or panic. These tools are often combined with environmental design for reaching target effect. It is notable that players consider those negative emotions positively, at least post factum.

It is crucial that those emotions are felt primarily by the player, and indirectly by the character:

*...the same person with a reaping hook is chasing me. (...) he lost me long ago, I run and think: I'll reach that pole and my game will be finished. So I approach this pole and suddenly I see that this person continues to chase me! I keep running, I leave the playground, but he still follows me there. I realize that I will never get out of this horror: I might reach the highway, hitchhike a car to the city, but this nightmare will follow me. It will never end. And obviously I feel a limitless panic, and I keep running (“Dark horror...”)*

Also, waiting for such situations in itself provokes a feeling of fear and danger. For this purpose, waiting can be combined with environmental design:

*... when we were making larps about the Middle Ages, we prohibited electricity, so players had to use candles. It means five meters of visibility, shivering light and fear, because you don't know where you will be attacked” (“Dark horror...”)*

Such triggers are used both directly and in complex with additional circumstances: for instance, a sudden attack distracts a player in a moment of necessary concentration; an object that seemed harmless turns out to be aggressive; a character must make important decisions while being physically disturbed etc.

### Unusual bodily behaviour

These are related in some way to psychophysical triggers, but it is not put upon the player from the outside, the player herself performs it consciously. Such tools are not normally aimed to provoke emotions, they have other goals (competition, aesthetics, etc.), but according emotional states may accompany such behaviour.

In Russian larps the main type of this behaviour is combat. In this tradition it always involves the player's body, which automatically means that the player is unable to stay passionless while immersed in combat. It

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5 Author's database.

makes no difference whether it involves *mele* weapons (made of textolite or latex), guns (air-soft or laser-tag), or even “magic wands” with their system of symbolic movements: the player is made to move intensively, use dexterity, accuracy and speed of reaction, and this inevitably affects her breath, heart rate and finally emotional state. Taking into account that Russian tradition does not imply negotiation about the outcome of the combat in advance and that a character can die at any moment, fighters also feel a wish to win and anxiety for the character’s life and health. Moreover, combat in larps rarely occur out of thin air: normally they are a result of an escalation of emotional activity. Therefore players are already emotionally prepared by the point a fight begins. It is crucial to note that in Russian larp a character’s fighting skills highly depend on that of the player. It means that combat interaction almost always take place more on a metagame level than on the diegetic one, which might cause dropping out-of-character.

Another important type of body behaviour is dance. Historical dancing is widespread in the Russian larp community, and actively used as an in-game skill. Fantasy and historical larps eagerly introduce balls, dancing nights and similar events to the scenario. In 20th century-based larps discos also take place, which enables everyone to participate no matter their dancing skills. It is crucial that dances, unlike combat, represent themselves and therefore allow for staying in character in a more stable way, as there is no necessity to communicate on metagame level.

There are other types of unusual bodily behaviour, such as marching, singing in a choir etc., which also influence players’ emotions powerfully through physical perception. Often larp provides a player’s first physical experience of unity, brotherhood and support while chanting, marching, singing together etc., as many people have no context in their everyday life to experience this.

### **Deprivations**

Deprivation of sight especially, is used for immersing players into a special state of consciousness. Without the possibility to

see, a (seeing) person feels much more helpless, and autosuggestion increases as people tend to project horrors and barriers that are impossible to demonstrate directly. This tool is regularly used for simulating dungeons and other dangerous places, or qualitative change of the character—e.g. *Afterdeath* (see details about this elaborated technique in Fedoseev, and Trubetskaya (2013)), turning into another being etc.

The most picturesque example of this tool is a system, “Abyss,” developed by larp organiser Xing. The principle is as follows: a player comes to a special location (dwarf dungeon, alchemical cauldron, borders of the world) and gets non-transparent glasses at the entrance. Then the player walks (or sometimes crawls) in a labyrinth holding a strained rope, with distracting triggers around her. NPCs might disturb or frighten the player with sudden shouts and bangs, provoking her to let go of the rope; the player might encounter useful hidden objects or harmful traps, etc. If she succeeds in the labyrinth the character gets a reward; in case of failure, she takes some damage (losing a limb, ability or something of value), or dies.

Thus, the “Abyss” enables reproducing any kind of liminal space without large costs, because organisers do not have to make a 360-degree illusion. The task of visualisation shifts to the players, while organisers use other tools to make the players act according to their own visualisations. The players immerse into the target emotional state due to the loss of sight, the necessity of multiple choices with lacking information, fear for the health or life of the character, and the experience of liminality. Other types of deprivation besides the sight might be bondage, physical pressure, losing of equilibrium etc.

### **Alcohol**

Alcohol is another tool for introducing a player into the necessary state of consciousness. Attitudes towards alcohol differ from larp to larp, from limited allowance to total prohibition. Here I do not consider players’ own initiative in consuming alcohol, but focus on the consumption permitted by the rules.

Normally alcohol is consumed in situations where its replacement with non-alcoholic simulation might seem hypocrisy, as in diegetic bars, official events etc. Diegetic consuming of real alcohol pursues two metagame goals: it should catalyse in-game interaction and help the player to get rid of communicational barriers, providing her with an alibi to commit possible inappropriate, sudden or hooligan diegetic actions from which shyness prevented the player before. There might also be rules like “if you get a shot, share a secret with your drinking buddies,” which enhances the narrative, or “if you drink, act as if you are much more drunk than you actually are,” which helps with performance. Obviously, if a player does not drink alcohol, no one forces her: everything can be simulated through the induction principle.

## 2: PLAYER'S AWARENESS

In addition to techniques that focus on the character's emotions through those of the player, there are also a number of tools to inform the player about the thoughts or feelings of the character in a particular moment. This is normally not considered as organisers forcing the narrative, but might cause indignation if there is strong divergence between actual and prescribed reaction. Such techniques can be perceived as breaking the link between the player and her character, since the player does not react directly in character, but has to produce a performance possibly different from her actual feelings. On the other hand, induction is possible when the player, acting out the character's state, immerses in it herself.

### Askold's cards

This tool is nowadays the most widespread technique of this sort in Russian larp. This tool was invented in mid 2000s by Moscow larp organisers Askold and Vlad to reduce metagame presence of gamemasters among the players. The idea of the technique is that a player has a film-laminated card covered with non-transparent sticky tape. In particular circumstances, such as the character being wounded, consuming an in-game medi-

cine, a card is found on some strange object, etc., the player unsticks the first stripe of tape, where she finds instructions of what is happening to the character (that the player should perform), and the conditions for unsticking the next stripe of tape.

Initially, this technique enabled play on experimental medicine (so the tool is also called “medicine-on-the-cards”), where the doctor does not receive information about symptoms verbally but has to “read out” the symptoms from the patient's performance. At the same time it allows for systematic results: you cannot persuade a gamemaster that you are right, you just get a diegetically objective effect. It also makes the results reproducible, so that doctors can customise medicines.

This technique is mostly used for physical states, but sometimes emotional effects are added: “you feel friendship to all people around you and want to hug someone,” “you are extremely angry and can hit anyone you dislike” etc. Thus, instructions offer clues for performance, but allows for realising the instructions according to the circumstances and the player's wish.

### Audio technologies.

A kind of evolution of “Askold's cards” were voice instructions in headphones developed for the larp *Ticket to Atlantis* (2014; see details in Vechorek and Zakharov 2015): in some particular situations the player was to press a certain button to get an instruction. It is notable that these instructions sometimes turned into the first type of tool (an audio equivalent of the laminated card): if the character had drug addiction, a special track for “heroin addiction” started to replay a few hours after taking a dose, and played until the character took the next dose. Obviously, a replayed track irritated both the character and the player.

Another type of informing technique very similar to tabletop RPG principles are “audiodrugs” developed for “*Saint Summer*,” a larp about a hippies' camp in The United States in the 60s (2014; see details in Shovman and Shovman 2015). When a character takes LSD, she starts to have hallucinations, while her

player gets a Walkman with a special track that contains descriptions of visions and actions of the character with sounds and music as a background. These instructions are similar to those given by a dungeon master as performatives: “you see this and that,” “you suspect the person you see for this and that,” “you start doing this and that right now” etc. But the difference is that the player-character actually performs what she is told to by the “inner voice.” Thus, the character’s behaviour becomes absurd and unpredictable for the people around her, while the player enjoys literally following the instructions and adjusting them to the current situation. Verbal instructions are much more efficient in this case compared to “Askold’s cards,” providing the player with continuous instructions without elaborate metagame actions. It is also notable that such cases deal with representation of the character’s altered states of consciousness directly, and not through the player’s emotions.

### Markers of state

Sometimes game masters use diegetic objects with the goal of informing the player that her character’s emotional state has changed. Here I will focus on two illustrative cases: potions in *Hogwarts Seasons* campaign (Bocharova et al. 2005-2011) and “in-love flowers” in *Black sun* (Semenov, Chernikova and Jatsurenko, 2015).

Potions in the Harry Potter-based campaign *Hogwarts Seasons* were embedded into an extensive system of magic and mostly aimed to change the characters’ emotional state. The majority of potions were drinks prepared according to special recipes, and a recipient could realise the effect by the taste and start acting in an appropriate way. The effect is obvious if the potion is taken by its maker, but if the drink is poured into someone’s cup, the recipient often need a metagame explanation of what she had just drunk. It seems that in such moments the potion stops being a marker (as you need further explanations), but for the players here, the narrative fact of taking the potion is much more important than the player’s ability to recognise the taste.

Examples of emotional states programmed by the potions are tranquility, bravery, senselessness, excitement, joy and many others. Participants even tended to declare that the composition of drinks itself helped them to immerse into the target state. Thus, the wormwood extract in “Sip of hope,” which is drunk in troubles, symbolises the gravity of diegetic situation, while tea with sweet condensed milk and a spoon of spirit (“Conciliation balm”) inevitably brings you to calmness. I will not research whether those drinks really influenced the player’s state directly, but such declarations are in themselves remarkable. However, many potions included small quantities of alcohol, so there might be some disinhibition effect.

In the larp *Black sun* based on Latin America’s magic realism, each character had to love someone. There were different approaches for men and women: Female characters could choose a person corresponding to their ideals (different for each woman), while male characters could not choose. Each character had a colour prescribed by larpwriters, and the first woman with a flower of this colour in her hair, became his sweetheart. As a result, this rule often caused emotion induction: a player slowly started feeling sympathy towards a randomly appointed girl, even if he had not planned to play with her before and had no feelings towards her.

### 3: TOOLS FOR CHARACTERS/PLAYERS

These types of tools involve the player’s mind rather than physical perception. This means that they do not work automatically, but only in case of sincere suspension of disbelief and immersion. The influence is addressed to the characters, while the players may feel these emotions via induction. These techniques are mostly applicable to immersionists and partly to narrativists (although there are very few of them in the Russian larp community). Within a gamist approach, a player might be skeptical, and that neutralises the target effect.

Actually, everything happening to the character in the game world, both during the larp and before it, can be considered this type

of tool: development of love or relative interactions, conflicts, achievements and failures etc. All those events and processes are hardly subjected to organisers or to the players themselves, because the most powerful force in Russian larps is chance, accident. So here I will just put out some simple organisers' tools to provoke quite obvious emotions in players, like suspense and horror.

During a discussion dedicated to horror in larps, larpwriters mentioned the following plot devices causing sufficient psychological pressure on the players:

- The “enemy in our home” scenario: evil NPCs terrorise the characters
- A hidden spy or traitor causes paranoia
- The same spy or traitor fears to be discovered
- Waiting for a terrible event (assault, execution, public punishment)
- Fear of losing something important to the character (health, life, beloved ones etc.)
- Uncertainty, especially combined with helplessness

### Tools for players

Finally, there is a special class of tools, which are totally excluded from diegesis, but addressed to players only. It might seem that there is no use for them in larps, but through them organisers can make their ideas reach the players, if the ideas are broader than the game world. The most interesting example of such tools is sudden awakening. Normally it happens by the end of a larp, as continuing play from the character's perspective after a total shift of point of view is hard. Such awakening may concern the cultural context of players (which is absent for characters) or just being a paradoxical fact in the core of game world.

For example, the larp *Ticket to Atlantis* (2014) depicted a small American town in the late 1970s. During the larp some strange

and unexplainable things happened, and players tried to ignore them, perceiving them as metagame mismatches. But in *Afterdeath* the players of dead characters found out that the game world is actually *Afterdeath* itself. Players realised this in a room covered with obituaries, looking at the dates: all characters were dead before the larp started.

A rather positive kind of awakening took place in larp *The Way* (Good Gryffindors, 2012). The larp was declared to represent an abstract prehistoric tribe, which moved along the forest to look for a better place, performed rituals, spoke to evil spirits, hunted to get food etc. In the final scene the people were welcomed by an elf: the larp was actually about Awakening of Mortal Men in Tolkien's world. This device was obviously addressed to players, as their characters knew nothing about Tolkien.

Another interesting tool involving players and ignoring characters is a so-called hidden NPC—an NPC which pretends to be a regular player. Sure, this tool has many functions, but one of the core targets is to neutralise the indifference which players often feel towards NPCs, and make the participants empathise with the hidden NPC as if they were player's characters. From the diegetic (and narrativist) point of view it makes no difference whether you communicate with a player or an NPC, as the diegetic situation should not depend on the metagame status of participants. But in the Russian larp community, interaction with NPCs is considered emotionally flawed, so organisers sometimes try to overcome this effect.

### SUMMARY

To sum up, there are many aspects in larp which provoke characters' and/or players' emotions. A player's emotions do not necessarily coincide with those of the character, but they might influence each other. We can divide larp design emotion provoking tools into those which influence the player's emotions and those which influence the character's ones. Taking into account their possible mutual interactions, the entire system includes four types of tools for emotional

management. In Russian larps the tools used are the following:

1. Influencing the player in order to influence the character (transposition):

- Physical limitations and deprivations
- Environmental design, as in cinema or theatre
- Psychophysical triggers, as in a fun fair
- Unusual bodily behaviour, such as combat, dance, marching, singing together etc.
- Consuming small quantities of alcohol

2. Informing players about their character's feelings:

- Metagame cards with instructions
- Audio instructions in headphones
- Diegetic objects having additional metagame functions to mark a character's state (such as potions in Harry Potter game world)

3. Influencing characters and possibly involving the player emotionally (induction):

- narrative tools to influence the plot and circumstances of the characters' lives

4. Influencing the player without influencing the character:

- "Sudden awakening": crucial shift of the perspective or understanding of the game world,
- "Hidden NPC": an organisers' aide pretending to be a player in order to avoid players' indifference.

Each type of tool has its advantages and limitations. Transposition tools work automatically and consequently can guarantee the effect, but normally they cause a very limited spectrum of emotions, and abusing them might turn a larp into a Disneyland. Informing tools are effective for meta-management of narrative, but might cause rejection among the players who tend to immerse into the character, and abuse might result in a feeling of a theatre play instead of a larp. Induction tools do not require metagaming, but they do not work automatically, so a

player might not immerse sufficiently. Player-influencing tools are successful in bringing players into a necessary state of emotions and almost guarantee catharsis, but are usually difficult in design and highly dependent on players' cultural context and secrecy from the organisers' side, as they are based on non-transparency. Thus, each larp designer should decide on the tools and how to use them in each particular larp.

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# Playing the Stories of Others

Kaisa Kangas

Larps that treat social issues often aim to create empathy for real people who live in circumstances different from ours by putting us in their shoes. One example is provided by games where players from privileged backgrounds take on the roles of characters from a marginalised group, or experience situations where they are in a marginalised position.

In the Norwegian larp *Europa* (Fatland and Tanke et al., 2001), the Nordic countries mirrored the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and Nordic players spent a week as asylum seekers in a reception centre in a fictitious Balkan country. Another Norwegian larp, *Just a Little Lovin'* (Edland and Grasmo, 2011),

treats the spreading of HIV in the New York gay community in the 1980's. Various runs of the game gave many players an idea on what it is to be HIV positive and raised consciousness about queer issues. *Killed in the Name of Honor* (Samad, Kharroub and Samamreh, 2013), organised by three Palestinian women, was set in a matriarchal culture where young men could face a honour killing if they didn't adhere to the sexual mores of the community. In the Palestinian-Finnish larp *Halat hisar* (AbdulKarim, Arouri and Kangas et al., 2013 & 2016), we created an alternative reality where Finland lived under an apartheid regime and occupation similar to real world Palestine (see e.g. Kangas, 2014a and Pettersson, 2014a).

While *Killed in the Name of Honor* reversed gender roles, *Halat hisar* turned geopolitical power relations upside down. In the game world, Northern Europe was a conflict zone full of dictatorships, and Arab countries were rich and influential. Finnish players became oppressed people living under occupation, and Palestinians portrayed privileged foreigners. Such a role reversal is in a sense a form of cul-

tural exchange, and it makes for illuminating post-game reflections, which I will discuss in more detail later.

However, the stories we live in larp are filtered through our real-life selves. In the end, our unconscious reactions and interpretations of events are based on real-life experience. We have been socialised to certain roles and positions of which we are not even fully aware. Therefore it's difficult to consciously set them aside.

A good example is *Mad About the Boy*, (Edland, Raaum and Lindahl, 2010) a game designed for women. It is set in a post-apocalyptic world where a mysterious disease has killed all men. The characters belong to three-woman family units hoping to get selected into a government-run artificial insemination program. The applicants go through the last stage of the process at a secret forest location where three government officials, a politician, a physician, and a psychologist, observe and evaluate their behaviour.

In 2015, a Swedish team made a male version of the game, *It's a Man's World* (Gissén, 2015). It preserved most of the original scenario while switching the genders. Thus, there were, for example, artificial wombs instead of an insemination program. The game became completely different from the original. According to Sandqvist (2016), male players found the basic setting uninteresting: a situation where you are under surveillance and the only way to succeed is to be as perfect as possible. The female players of *Mad About the Boy*, however, found it easier to relate to such a situation because they had real-life experiences of being under pressure in a patriarchal society.

Although larp is an excellent vehicle for creating strong emotions, it cannot replicate other people's experiences. *Halat hisar* doesn't teach a Nordic person how it really feels to live under occupation. However, role reversal can shed light on unexplored aspects of ourselves, power structures and our roles in them. In this article, I discuss this based on my experience of having been one of the organisers of *Halat*

*hisar* in both runs of the game.

## Contextualisation

Games where people from privileged groups play those who are in a marginalised position rightfully raise concerns of being disrespectful. One concern is that such games, especially if emotionally strong, could create a false sense of sharing the experience of marginalised people. One way to avoid this is to properly contextualise the game. When the contextualisation happens in dialogue with the group whose stories are played out in the game, it can spark fruitful reflection.

The German organisation Waldritter e.v. runs refugee-themed educational larps with the aim of preventing racism and creating a culture of acceptance. The games end with a moderated discussion. A Syrian refugee took part in one game, sharing his personal story of the journey to Germany (Steinbach, 2016). In the debrief of the 2015 Denmark run of *Just a Little Lovin'*, HIV, AIDS, and cancer, important topics of the game, were contextualised. Each run of the game has had queer participants, and the 2015 Denmark run also had a cancer survivor.

Mohamad Rabah designed the debrief for the 2016 run of *Halat hisar* to include dialogue between international and Palestinian participants. First, the players went through exercises that aimed to detach them from the game experience, such as guided meditation and the like. After that, there was a facilitated discussion in small groups with a Palestinian in each group. The Finnish and international players could ask the Palestinians about their real life experiences and thus put the game events into context. We had a rule that you could ask anything but the discussion would stay in the debrief group—you would not share its contents with outsiders.

Several participants found this eye opening. A Finnish journalist who participated in the 2016 run wrote in the newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*:

*“When the game ended, there was a debriefing. As one part of it we were divided into small groups, each of which had a Palestinian player as a part of the group. We could ask them about the game and the reality of Palestine.*

*I was naive and thought that the game, as most fiction, was built on exaggerated real-life events.*

*The truth in Palestine, however, is worse than the game. In the protests at Birzeit University have seen much more than one student casualty.*

*The worst thing was the realisation that after the larp the Palestinian players had to return to their everyday lives, where the game and it’s happenings were a reality.*

*I cannot claim that I’d understand what they had to go through. But when I read the news about Palestinians suffering, the human tragedy behind them seems a bit more real.”*

**(Ahlroth, 2016)**

Another Finnish player said that *Halat hisar* didn’t allow her to understand how it feels to be oppressed, but it did make her realise what it means to be privileged. A Finn can choose whether to take part in the struggle against the occupation of Palestine, but a Palestinian cannot. The larp caused her to reflect on how privilege can be problematic even when combined with good intentions. She said this motivated her to use her privilege to make space for others instead of taking it for herself.

## The Normal and the Abnormal

In international mainstream media, stories about Palestinians are often told from the point of view of foreign journalists or Israelis. Even when the coverage is sympathetic to Palestinians, it does not often let Palestinians narrate their own stories, portraying Palestinians only as victims, as if that was the sum of their existence.

While this can build empathy for Palestinians, it also makes Palestinians into objects instead of subjects—“others”, rather than us. We begin to expect that someone who is part of us tells the Palestinian story, as if Palestinians couldn’t do it themselves. This affects our attitudes toward Palestinians, and makes us less interested in their personal experiences. One of the goals of *Halat hisar* is to break this illusion by bringing Palestinians and internationals to play together. After all, in the minds of larpers, others don’t larp.

However, based on post-game reflections and feedback, Palestinian players themselves also received new insights from the game. In the role reversal of *Halat hisar*, Palestinians play characters from the rich and democratic Arab League (compared to the EU in the game materials)—journalists, activists, human right workers, etc. Because the game events are close to home, some Palestinian players have found it hard to stay in character (Musleh, 2015). On the other hand, portraying foreign journalists and other internationals allows them to channel their own experiences into useful game material (Pettersson 2014b, Hamouri 2015). Some Palestinian players have also seen their own situation in a new light through the game. One of them described his experience in the 2013 run:

*“Sometimes when you’re living in a unique situation, you stop perceiving things that are happening around you and to you as abnormal, you become part of a social blend that is neither natural nor normal. But when you step outside and watch your life as a third party, that is when you’re shocked by the reality that you have been part of most of your life.”*

**(aoud Pettersson, 2014b)**

Oppression is not just about laws and practices nor the physical violence used to enforce them, but also about everyday social dynamics. There are the roles of the oppressed and the oppressors and—certainly in the case of Palestine—various outsider roles. In this hierarchy,

those who are oppressed have less power and privileges. When you have lived your whole life in a situation of oppression, things like restrictions of movement, humiliating checkpoint searches and condescending behaviour from foreigners may feel normal.

In the game, the privileged background of Finnish players created a social environment with dynamics different from those of real-world Palestine. After all, a feeling of normalcy is hard to establish in larps, and no amount of workshopping can equal a lifetime of socialisation. To Finnish players, the game events are unexpected and shocking, and their in-game behaviour occasionally reflects this. For example, a player could be induced to radically change their character's opinions after encountering violence by soldiers, even though it would be routine for the character. In a sense, the players react in a normal way to abnormal situations.

The fact that Finnish characters sometimes behave differently than the Palestinian players would do provides fruitful material for the post-game discussion. A Palestinian player from the 2013 run even found the experience empowering:

*"For example before this larp, I would have not cut any conversation or expressed any anger in my real life while discussing the Palestinian-Israeli conflict with a foreigner, even if I felt insulted. In the larp I was playing a role of a foreigner and by default I was insulting a Finnish student by trying to "own" her suffering when discussing the Finnish-Uralian conflict. The character I was talking to in that moment screamed at me and cut the conversation. In reflecting on this incident in my real life, I always have the choice to continue speaking with some annoying foreigner, but I have never chosen not to speak with them. This incident made me re-think about a space of choice in deciding with whom to discuss this Palestinian-Israeli conflict with from the people I meet in my life."*

(Hamouri, 2015)

To the Finnish player, this kind of appropriation wasn't a routine part of life. She instinctively recognised its abnormality and felt entitled to stand up against it. However, it's not unusual for internationals visiting Palestine to put themselves in the centre and concentrate on how painful it is for them to see what is happening without considering how Palestinians perceive their statements.

## A Militarised Society

Like any cultural exchange, a larp where you switch places with others makes you see yourself, your own culture and your own society in a different way. To me as an organiser of *Halat hisar*, one of the illuminating things has been the military action in the game.

Before the game, some of the Palestinian participants were worried that the soldiers wouldn't be portrayed realistically enough. After all, our soldier extras were Finns who don't live every day under military occupation. Moreover, our extras had never been to Palestine to witness the behaviour of Israeli soldiers. Before the first run of *Halat hisar*, I was also a bit concerned about this.

However, you don't learn to act like a soldier by watching soldiers, but through practice. In the end, portraying a soldier comes down to things like posture, movement, and certain kind of efficiency. Military training has the same basics everywhere. In Finland, there is no shortage of people who have undergone it.

Most of our soldier extras came from a group of soft air military simulation enthusiasts. They did not have previous larp experience but all of them had completed military service, and some had been on UN peacekeeping missions. If anything, they were sometimes too professional, considering that most Israeli soldiers serving on the Occupied West Bank are teenage conscripts. We also had a few experienced larpers playing soldiers to add some of the petty oppression and humiliation emblematic of military occupation.

In both runs, the extras surprised the play-

ers by how soldier-like they were. This made me reflect on what a militarized society we Finns live in. In Finland, military service is mandatory for men, and voluntary for women.<sup>1</sup> As of 2013, almost 80 percent of Finnish males of at least 30 years of age had completed the military service. (Purokuru, 2013)

Palestinians, on the other hand, don't have this systemic military training of half the population. Armed resistance to the occupation is secretive and selective in nature, not something everybody is expected to participate in. Thus, it probably doesn't occur to the Palestinian participants that acting like a soldier comes naturally to many Finns.

This also reflects different attitudes in our societies about the idea of using violence to resist a hostile army. In Finland, it's taken for granted that enemy soldiers crossing onto Finnish soil will be shot and killed. A person who questions this idea is not taken seriously in the political mainstream. Even when people advocate reducing military expenses or removing the mandatory service, they don't promote non-violence in the face of an invasion.

In Palestine, the relation between violent and non-violent resistance to military occupation is a major topic of debate. For example, Mahmoud Abbas, the acting president of the Palestinian Authority, has repeatedly condemned all violent resistance, even though the armed wing of Fatah, his party, practices it. In addition, the leader of the Palestinian National Initiative party, Mustafa Barghouti, who won 19 percent of the vote in the 2005 presidential election, actively promotes non-violent resistance. (Rassbach, 2012)

Moreover, the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization), the official representative of the Palestinian people, renounced violence when signing the Oslo Accords in the early 1990s, although various Palestinian groups

have kept using violence. For comparison, the ANC (African National Congress) never abandoned the principle of violent resistance, not even during the negotiations to end apartheid in South Africa. It is also difficult to imagine such a statement from the Finnish government. But why should arguments for non-violence be more outlandish in Finland, living in peace, than in Palestine, which is under daily attacks?

## Cultural Exchange

I have previously toyed with the idea of larp as *experimental anthropology* (Kangas, 2014b; 2015). A game that reverses the roles of players from two different cultural or social categories can also be seen as a playful attempt to study culture. In a sense, it is a form of cultural exchange. This aspect is heightened when the game has a contextualising debrief where participants from the two groups share their experiences.

Culture is often narrowly thought of as something connected to a geographical area, as in the statement, culture is different in Palestine and Finland. Usually, language plays an important role, too; for example, English-speaking countries seem like a connected cultural area, and language minorities within a country are perceived as having their own culture. However, there are cultural spheres inside a country or a language area, and they are sometimes determined by social positions. For example, we can speak of male culture or working class culture. These cultures frequently extend over the borders of national culture and connect people more strongly than it does—we may feel that we have more in common with people who share our educational background than with people who speak the same language.

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1 It is possible for men to do a community service instead for reasons of conscience. However, a complete refusal will lead to a prison sentence of about six months. Nevertheless, it is relatively easy to get exempt on the grounds of physical or mental health.

In a sense, everybody played their own culture in *Halat hisar*. Although the political situation of Finland was modelled on Palestine, Finns didn't try to replicate for example, the ways family relations work in Palestine. The culture in occupied Finland was based on real life Finnish culture, and Palestinian players created the culture of the rich and democratic Arab world. And yet, there were changes. The geopolitical power relations were altered; the roles of the global north and south switched. Arab characters were privileged, and under the occupation, Finns were deprived of their basic human rights.

One interesting aspect of the game was the interaction between characters from these two worlds. It was sometimes different from real-life communication between Palestinians and foreigners. This is no surprise, since the roles were reversed, and we unconsciously react based on the socio-cultural positions that we have grown used to.

Reflecting on this after the game can make us question our social roles and positions. It raises the question of to what extent our cultural and social patterns are determined by power politics. How would they change if we were put into a more or less fortunate position in the world than the one we are in right now? *Killed in the Name of Honor* did the same experiment by reversing gender roles. It would also be interesting to reverse class hierarchies this way in larp.

In my Nordic Larp Talk on experimental anthropology (Kangas, 2015), I argued that larp can't really teach us how it is to live in e.g. a hunter-gatherer society, but it can give us valuable perspectives into our own culture. Similarly, playing the stories of others doesn't make us feel the same way they do or give us the same experiences they have had. However, together with a proper post-game contextualisation, doing so can help us understand their situation better, and build solidarity. At the same time, playing out the stories of others can reveal something about ourselves and make us see our social environments and positions in a new light.

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*Palestinian players Bisan Samareh, wearing a beanie, and Riham Kharroub, front left, 2013.  
Photograph: Tuomas Puikkonen <https://www.flickr.com/photos/darkismus/>*

*[character moment]*

***As his hand touched my knee under the table, I froze. Affection ment that he had lost control. The next thing touching me would be the belt.***

***[Eda Ulfs, Brudpris international run]***

## **backstory: for Thought**

**ender and class  
istorical setting**

school of larp design. For example, the 1970s Berlin of “Heroes” (Holkar, 2016) studies attitudes towards the demonised Other; and how similarities, once exposed, may resonate more strongly than differences. The distance of the setting helps to make clear the significance of the themes in our own world.

- And there’s no denying the emotional power and resonance of larping historical events—perhaps those in which one’s own ancestors, or national predecessors, might have been

*[character moment]*

***My own life felt fragile, when I was standing in front of the mirror, staring into the eyes of a sick person at her last party.***

***[Beatrice, Just a Little Lovin’]***

*[future of larp]*

***I already see a tendency of growing diversity at larps, especially in age. I was 8 months pregnant at Viktor’s “first larp,” and he has attended 7 larps altogether, mostly historical fantasy. It is amazing to see, now that our closest larp-community has reached a certain age and stage of life, that larpers also embrace the atmosphere of kids in the game, and make them a natural part of the story. My son has been a werewolf baby, a zombie growth, an orc prince and a baby. He adds something,***

Purokuru, Pontus. "Suomi liukuu kohti valikoivaa asevelvollisuutta [Finland slides towards selective military service]." *Kansan Uutiset*, July 13, 2013 [date of access 09/09-2016] <http://www.kansanuutiset.fi/artikkeli/3023748-suomi-liuku-kohti-valikoivaa-asevelvollisuutta>

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***he isn't just a thing we have to bring in order to come. Those of us that started as teens and are now grownups won't stop larping, and we already see 2nd and even 3rd gen larpers, so in the future I think we will have a more natural sense of age diversion in character, and not have to pretend that one 20-year-old is 40 and another is 15.***

***We are also amazed at how larps (and larpers) give something to our 2-year-old. After 3 days in the forest, playing with witches, fauns, orcs and humans, his speech***

***and motor skills had reached a whole other level that surprised the kindergarten teachers! He is comfortable around strangers, and he is daring, but careful in playing in real natural surroundings, and we are convinced larp has helped with that. We really hope that larp in the future can be used more towards teaching children to be safe and secure in themselves, and in their surrounding people and environment. In the very diverse larp-community, acceptance and respect is a given, and I think children***

***of Viktor's generation will sorely need that!***

***In Norway, however, there is little ethnic diversity in larp. We are mostly ethnic Norwegians, and every now and then some Swedes, and that's it. I would love more people to come to Norway and larp, and of course I would love to see Norwegians of different ethnic backgrounds discover our wonderful hobby.***

***[Viktor, 2.5 years, and mom Kristine]***

# History, Herstory and Theirstory: For Thought

## Representation of gender and class in larps with a historical setting

Mo Holkar

### WHY LARP WITH HISTORY?

Human history as a setting for larp goes back to the earliest days of the form—even to before larp was identified as a special kind of activity in its own right, in the committee games and fictionalised simulations that preceded the larp that we know today.

What makes history so appealing?

- The richness, range, and depth of the real historical tapestry is such as to make it inexhaustibly appealing as a source of larp material. From Ancient Egypt (*Queen of Denial*, Barnard and Holkar, 2014) to medieval Britain (*The lists of Avalon*, Barnard, Jones and Jones, 2011) to the Industrial Revolution (*Railways and Respectability*, Barnard and Dall et al., 2007) to the Korean War (*M\*A\*S\*H: Brothers in Arms*, Barnard and Dall et al. 2013), there's something for everyone. And provided you avoid exoticisation and respect the people involved, the whole spectrum is available to you.
- Familiarity to participants is another advantage: they may already be familiar with the chosen historical milieu; or, if not, they can easily make themselves familiar by using readily-available reference materials. Compare the difficulty of communicating familiarity with a fictional setting whose details are only available in the minds of the designers.
- Historical settings lend themselves readily to parallels and lessons related to life today, for the more instructive

school of larp design. For example, the 1970s Berlin of “*Heroes*” (Holkar, 2016) studies attitudes towards the demonised Other; and how similarities, once exposed, may resonate more strongly than differences. The distance of the setting helps to make clear the significance of the themes in our own world.

- And there's no denying the emotional power and resonance of larping historical events—perhaps those in which one's own ancestors, or national predecessors, might have been involved.

But a larp design that draws upon history has, perhaps, first to consider the limitations and biases of our societal defaults of historical understanding and analysis.

### THE PROBLEM WITH HISTORY

We must recognise that our knowledge of history is filtered by the (necessarily limited) information that we have about it. We may have access to written accounts from the period: but who wrote them, and why? We may have artefacts, structures, and other physical remains: but who has interpreted them to us? What assumptions did those interpreters make?

To generalise: surviving historical texts were largely written by educated and wealthy men. And these texts, and non-textual historical remains, have also until recently largely been discussed by educated and wealthy men. Even if the author of your direct source is not in that category, you have to ask: who then were that author's sources?—and to what extent

did they question them? So for example Georgette Heyer wrote a feminised take on the British Regency period (Heyer, 1935), in which women have a greater focus than in historical accounts of the period. But she restricted her scope to the same narrow upper section of society that had been depicted by Jane Austen; and she restricted her research largely to the use of materials left by educated and wealthy men and to the study of decor and costume, rather than to establishing what might have been going on in the world outside those stately imagined drawing-rooms. Whether, as an educated and wealthy woman herself, Heyer had any interest in the lives of the poor and underprivileged of that period, we do not know: but she certainly didn't write about them. If you draw your larp-design inspiration from historical fiction rather than directly from history, you run the risk of inadvertently being on the wrong end of a filter of this type.

## OTHER HISTORIES

The study of women's history, and people's history (ordinary people, as distinct from those in power), gives new and fascinating perspectives on familiar historical settings.

"Other" history is of its nature a kind of revisionism—it asserts that traditional historical accounts are partial and/or incomplete. *Women's history* draws attention to the roles of women throughout history; it studies the lives and works of individual women, and groups of women, "of note" and otherwise; it examines the effects of historical events on women; and so on. It necessarily questions the privileged values assigned by traditional history to the lives and activities of men. It may also identify situations where women's actual contributions have been neglected or belittled, at the time or subsequently.

In the same way, *people's history*, also known as "history from below," looks at historical events and developments from the point of view of ordinary people rather than leaders. It proactively focuses on the lives of the poor, the dispossessed, and those who in general have no access to power.

And it seeks to demonstrate how historical changes that we traditionally ascribe to "great men" are often more the product of inexorable social forces rising from below.

In *A People's History of the United States*, Howard Zinn (1980) says: "The history of any country, presented as the history of a family, conceals fierce conflicts of interest (sometimes exploding, most often repressed) between conquerors and conquered, masters and slaves, capitalists and workers, dominators and dominated in race and sex. And in such a world of conflict, a world of victims and executioners, it is the job of thinking people, as Albert Camus suggested, not to be on the side of the executioners."

In larp, even more than in history, positive portrayals of characters are important—because they must be playable. Endowing your female and poor characters with affordances that may not have been demonstrated in the traditional historical record is going to make them more interesting to play, as well as serving the political end of representation. For sure, larp the executioners, they'll be interesting to play: but the victims don't have to be just oppression-fodder.

A straightforward example of this kind of "other" history in larp is *Winson Green Prison* (Sandquist and Göthberg, 2016). It portrays "the women who fought for the equal right to vote, and the men who loved them"—people who at the time were weak, oppressed and despised by society, but who have been vindicated by history. Their struggles are moving and affecting, but we know that they were in the right and that their descendants will see them as heroes. This makes for a good playable mix of struggle and satisfaction.

## HISTORICAL RESPONSIBILITY IN LARP

When looking at and working with historical events and settings via the medium of larp, designers may feel that they owe a responsibility to the people of those times to represent them fairly: to not skew or downplay the depictions of those who have been neglected or diminished by traditional histori-

cal accounts. This is not always easy: but it's a worthwhile use of time. As well as helping to make your design more responsible and understanding, it will also help to make it more interesting and original. There have been countless historical larps in which powerful people take key decisions while lesser folk fill in the background around them: how much fresher and more entertaining to find stories in which women, or ordinary common people can take focus. For example, *Dulce et decorum est...* (Rider Hill, 2012) depicts a noble family and their influential friends, engaging in political discussion around a dinner table in an English country house in the runup to World War II—a solid and well-proven style of larp setting. Meanwhile *Love Letter* (Curd, Gammans, McCormick and Perry, 2015) examines the lives of a group of ordinary English village dwellers as the same war impacts upon them—the effects on those who fight, and those who are left behind—caused by the decisions of remote politicians to whom the larp makes no direct reference. Both are successful designs in their own terms, but one is doing something much more unusual than the other.

*St Croix* (Stammestrø and Voje, 2015) opens the question of how a power disparity between characters—in this case, slaves and slave-owners—can generate good play for both parties. Slaves have authority over very little, not even their own bodies: how do you empower those players in the larp?—what affordances do they have available? *Brudpris* (Linder and Dahlberg, 2015) partly answered this question by giving its oppressed female characters an unhistorical sexual dominance—so those players were able to compensate, during sexual encounters, for lack of agency in other areas of play.

*Beyond the Barricades* (Wei and Göthberg, 2015) brings vividly to life the Parisian revolution of 1832: the sides are clear, but one's relationship to the people alongside whom one stands might not be—especially when unity starts to break down. This design allows for a nuanced approach to social class, and to the development of trust.

*War Birds* (Turkington and Eriksen et al., 2016) is a collection of six freeforms and larps

looking at the war experiences of women; as aviators, refugees, internees, partisans, drivers, or factory workers. It ably demonstrates the range and variety of play experience that can be generated from examining a straightforward other-historical premise.



*A revolutionary woman in Beyond the Barricades.  
Photo: Eva Wei*

## THE MYTH OF AUTHENTICITY

One argument sometimes given for the dominance of wealthy males in historical larps is that this exercise of privilege is authentic for the period being depicted, and that to show otherwise would be a falsity.

Quite apart from the question of whether the “facts” about the period upon which this view is based are correct or not (as discussed earlier, the filter over historical materials is a highly selective one), it can be argued that the whole notion of authenticity is specious. It's impossible to larp “the 16th century” from the point of view of the 21st century: all you can ever do is larp *an approach to* the 16th century, which emerges from the context in which you're designing.

Our contemporary view of the 16th century is very different from that of historians of fifty years ago; and in fifty years time it will be different again. And as an artistic creator rather than a simulator, a larp designer will draw out themes and messages that resonate particularly strongly with their own contemporary audience. Just as performances of the play *Hamlet* take on new directions and resonances depending on the political and social currents of the time when they're being performed, so too do runs of the larp



*Characters in the 2015 run of Just a Little Lovin', celebrating their otherness. Photograph: Arvid Björklund*

*Inside Hamlet* (Krauklis and Ericsson et al., 2000; Ericsson et al., 2015).

Deliberate inauthenticity—for example, giving women more prominent and higher-status roles—should not be seen as a betrayal of historical truth. Rather, it can allow a designer to re-contextualise history more effectively for their audience. For example, *Oss imellom* (Hatlestrand and Edland, 2015) includes working-class homosexuals in a middle-class-based organisation that historically would have excluded them, so as better to present the variety of homosexual experience in 1950s Norway. To skew your design in this way, against the power balance of the traditional historical message, is to raise up living underprivileged people against those dead people who have been privileged by the conventional narrative.

### **MEDIA AND MESSAGE**

It may be that actually, designing larp directly from the historical record is not your approach. Rather, you might be designing to convey the flavour of media works (books, films) set in that period. A larp set in the Old West is perhaps more likely to be responding to a particular sub genre of Western movie

than to the actual history of the period. And a larp set at the 17th-century court of Louis XIV is almost certain to be drawing more heavily on the (19th-century) Musketiers novels of Alexandre Dumas than on documents of the period.

This is no bad thing—resonance with your intended players is more likely to be found within media with which they're familiar—but it's another filter to be aware of. Reading Dumas, one would think that all warrior men are strong and masculine, while women are weak, passive, or conniving, but we know, from the existence of historical figures such as La Maupin, Philippe of Orleans, and the Chevalier d'Eon, that the 17th-century French court was a much more gender-queer world than the 19th-century novelist was happy to admit, and the cowboys of the real Old West were often black, and sometimes women. By looking into history as well as your entertainment-media sources, you can broaden your representation without moving too far away from the material with which your players are familiar. And you should be honest with yourself, and with your players, about whether your game is aiming primarily to be history-based or fiction-based.

## TECHNIQUES FOR REPRESENTATION

- *Look beneath the surface*—seek out “other” histories as well as mainstream ones. By now, women’s and people’s history are well enough established that a wide range of historical periods have been covered by these approaches.
- *Look at the sources*—take in actual history, as well as media depictions of the period. You may find that the way the history has been portrayed on the page or on screen is quite different from modern historians’ understanding of it.
- *Ask the logical questions*—if women aren’t mentioned in the orthodox account, why might that be? Where were they, and what were they doing? What place did poorer people have in the economy?
- *Turn the familiar face of history around*—for example, war histories often focus on men who are away fighting, or on the portrayal of the victors as uncontested heroes. How about those family members who stayed at home?—what can you find out about them, that could make for interesting larp? How about the experiences of those who were defeated?
- *Turn over stones*—why are some periods of history frequently visited by larp, and others neglected? Whose stories are still out there, waiting for a larp designer to pick them up and reflect them as something wonderful?
- *Challenge your own assumptions*—however well you think you know the period, you may without realising it be stuck in a skewed account given by a partial historian or fiction writer. Find another source, and see if it backs up or counters your belief.
- *Don’t be afraid of inauthenticity*—if you feel you need to, you should deliberately adjust the historical “truths” to better make the range of stories that you seek. It’s larp; not re-enactment.
- *Check in*—if you are yourself wealthy and/or educated and/or male, make sure that you’re not inadvertently carrying your own society’s tacit assumptions into the design. Involve people from other groups in your work—build more balanced perspectives by working together.

## THE ENDS OF HISTORY

A historical setting for a larp can be a wonderful thing, but it can also be a painful and betraying thing. You can make sure that you’re giving your design ideas, and the play aspirations of your larpers, the maximum opportunity to express themselves by engaging with history critically, by putting in the exploratory work around it, and by looking for stories that haven’t been told.

When it all comes together just right, you can be sure that your larp design and its enactment will earn their own places in the history of the artform. Take a look at *Just a Little Lovin’* (Edland and Grasmø, 2011)—the story of an assortment of people with little in common apart from their relentless othering by the media and those in power, finding community together, turning suffering into love—respectfully told, solidly researched, and thoroughly contextualised. A larp like this brings its history to raging, pounding life—and makes its messages speak to our hearts and to our minds.

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1 *Heroes of the Hearth* (Jackson, 2015) is a tabletop RPG that looks at this situation.

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# Body Playground Framework

*Physicalising play, gamifying physicality*

Blaz Branc

## Introduction: a personal account

I've never considered myself a dancer. Even today when I hear a dance teacher say: "OK, let's improvise dance now," I get nervous thinking "But I am not a dancer." And then I do dance and I usually enjoy it. Psychologically speaking, the voice saying "I'm not a dancer" is the same voice that claims "but I am a creative person." It is funny how ideas we have about ourselves define us and thus limit us.

At Fičo training<sup>1</sup> our improv dance teacher Goran Bogdanovski chooses a different tactic: he tells us we're going to play a game. Five minutes later it would be obvious to an innocent bystander that in the studio there are people dancing. But in my mind, I'm not dancing *per se*. It's not an activity that would require me to be a dancer. It's just playing.

This article is a rather personal account that would have you believe it's a story about one guy who discovered he enjoys dancing. And it's true. In a grander scheme, the personal story serves as a departure point, an insight into why and how this discovery led me into creating a fully physical larp, *Isabelle*, for the purpose of demonstrating larp to a group of movement and dance teachers, a group who

accepted my invitation to create a playful journey of movement, dance and role-play for those who would otherwise never attend a dancing workshop.

## What is Body Playground framework?

Before we dive into the story, I wish to attempt a definition of what the framework is and what it does.

Body Playground is a framework for gamifying physicality and at the same time, a framework for physicalising games.

The result is a role-playing game, played out purely physically, with bodies only.

Within the realm of physical expression the mind is not needed for its creative/analytic capacities. What is needed is not the mind at all, but its parent: consciousness.

I'll go a step further: something is being expressed through the body, yet I know that it would be a limited perspective to say that it is "me" that is being displayed.

Contemporary dance artist and teacher Michael Klien led a "Social choreography" dance seminar in Ljubljana back in 2013. In the introduction to his *Parliament* game, he gave us a few rules. One of them was: don't be creative.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ficobalet.org/>



You can imagine how I immediately felt compromised. Why not creative? I've always been considered a creative person, especially by myself. So, taking the creative away from the person, what is left? The person, exactly. The aim of *Parliament* was to actually remove even the person. Now what is left? The body. Here is the departure point for beauty. It is not true that only the body remains. Awareness is still here. Therefore inspiration, spontaneity, impulses, intimacy, warmth and love are free to shine through and with the body at any time. No person there to judge or limit them. No person there (Branc, 2015a) to expect them to shine brighter or in a more unique fashion.

**What is so wonderful about the whole physicality thing?**

In my experience, physicality and especially physical play is the source of happiness and

peace. I enjoyed all those years of “we will make you smarter and more successful” intellectual workshops. But returning home after the “grab-a-partner and make-a-nice-circle” physical workshops, something was resolved, restored, appreciated. Peaceful, for no particular reason; a peace that is not achieved by strenuous discipline, but one that just is.

This was the biggest breakthrough moment in my professional path both as an educator and as a game and gamification designer. What joy I would miss out on if I insisted on my “not a dancer” identification. And what a blessing for “accidentally” dropping in to those early workshops!

Simply put: a dance is for dancers, while a game is for anyone who feels like playing. There is universality both in play and in game. I was starting to realise that anything could be designed as a game, thus inviting people



to play without imposing a barrier of their pre-existing identification (e.g. a non-dancer). If this proved to be true, anything could be enjoyed by anyone. All it would take is openness to play. And a game designer, surely.

### **How physical games turn to super-powers**

After discovering contact improvisation (Branc, 2013) back in 2013, I have started to use physical games in my “serious” work with (mostly business) professionals. Yup, bringing the joy of physicality into workshops and training aimed at developing mental super powers :) I’m talking about sales, conflict resolution, team leadership, creativity and innovation. Later, I was using physical games in the warm-up phase of running a larp too.

Sometimes participants ask me how one might tackle a difficult customer or a conflict

with a dominant coworker/boss. Basically the question is how to handle the alpha in a peaceful way while not submitting.

The answer is you cannot handle an alpha with your intellect alone. Unless you’re Yoda, you need to tackle the communication from the ground up, starting on a physical level. You gotta use hands to handle. Actually, you need to “dance” with the alpha first and reason with them later. First you build trust on an animalistic level, using the body. Then you recognise it, articulate it and gain understanding. The alpha, once they feel understood, will discuss things very rationally and effectively.

I discovered that fifteen minutes of physical games connect participants more than four hours of talking, since talking usually means feeding ourselves each other’s personalities.

With physical games, there’s not much

room and appreciation for personality, really. There's just human beings in contact, playing for the love of playing, naturally setting themselves (more) open and thus, more free. What bigger super power can there be than that?

Working on the level of the body is not less advanced stuff. It is more deep. Most in the moment and true. And people tend to respond powerfully to the true.

### **Moment of epiphany**

One Sunday morning after New Year's of 2015, a picture flashed in my mind's eye. I saw a group of regular people who attend a day's workshop where they only get to play "the best of workshop games." You know the games I mean: they're called icebreakers and energisers. What they have in common is they are usually physical, simple and often played out without speaking. The picture I saw filled me with joy.

I needed to only gather a group of "physical" teachers and make a compilation of games they use either as energisers or as an exercise to teach a concept in a game-like way.

When I say "physical" I mean various methods of movement: contemporary dance, contact improvisation, embodied archetypes, circus pedagogy, and martial arts.



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2 You'll find more of his work here: <http://www.trikocirkusteatat.com/>

3 Contact and work here: <https://the100hands.com/>

The team was: Goran Bogdanovski (Fico Balet, SI), Sandra Anais (Dance Ecology, SI), Christian Peter<sup>2</sup> (Triko Teatar/HR), Jasper Dzuki Jelen (The100Hands,<sup>3</sup> NL) and Mojra Vogelnik Skerlj (The100Hands, NL). With five movement professionals and one game designer (me), the journey began.

## The process

### **No concept**

Following the initial idea, I wanted to make a compilation of existing physical games and design a simple journey. The team found my idea good but ultimately over-simplistic. They had a need for a concept. Something deep and profound, really.

*Blaz: "No, no. Nothing artsy. Let's just put the best games together, make a smart order so we don't exhaust people before lunch, and play!"*

*Team: "But Blaz, what's the point in doing that?"*

*Blaz: "To play!"*

*Team: "And that would be enough? We have to at least have some story, no?"*

*Blaz: "Please, no. Let's, for once, create something simple. No big idea. Just a compilation of games and a full-day playful journey."*

*Team: "Yes, but what kind of games, really?"*

*Blaz: "Well... I guess they would mainly fall into one of the two categories: Fun or Deep."*

*Team: "What is deep?"*

*Blaz: "Well... you know... em..."*

*Team: "You see, we need a concept. Something meaningful."*

I enjoyed arguing the idea of no idea. Usually, in my business life, I develop concepts and just generally work to give things meaning and purpose. This time, I enjoyed advocating the “let’s not complicate things” and felt devilish good about myself.

I’ve learned that when someone says “let’s not complicate things” it really means “I don’t have the energy to make this project meaningful for all stakeholders.” Which is, again, a pity.

### **Process—lean development (towards a concept)**

I realised I would not be able to keep them on-board if I stuck to the idea of no idea. So I proposed we develop the project in the fashion of lean development: build something small fast, test it, learn, remake. Repeat.

We agreed everybody would prepare about 45 minutes of material: either games (such as energisers) or exercises that could be turned into physical games. The feedback was that the instructions were not clear. What is a game? What is an exercise with a potential to become a game?

### **Jammin’**

The team gathered in Ljubljana in February 2015. Everybody ran their material. At the end of the jam, we wrote all the materials on a white-board and looked at it through different lenses: fun vs. deep, energising versus relaxing, short versus (too) long.

Three weeks later we met at Medika centre in Zagreb. In the meantime, we all made a new list of materials we wanted to run. I introduced *Isabelle* and *Isabelle, the silent LARP* (Branc, 2016 and Branc, 2015b), got its first playtest. A hit if ever I wrote one! In the debrief, they wouldn’t stop talking, trying to understand what happened and what is this animal, the larp. Sandra exclaimed: “Of course we can’t stop discussing. This larp thing—it’s so psychological!”

We continued to invent and playtest material. The 3rd Jam was about game design theory. I held a little lecture. We decided the most

basic game elements we would be using were: game-world, context, roles (individual or collective), rules, game master and mechanics.

The team realised we would need not just one afternoon, but a few days together, to *really* design something *special*. In the meantime, I have accepted the demand for a concept and gave in: yes, let’s make something extraordinary.

End of May 2015, we organised a co-teaching design camp. We took four full days to design the playful journey, now officially being called Body Playground.

We were a machine, developing games out of existing routines. We were happy; some games worked like a charm. The support team were also our test bunnies, playtesting stuff immediately after it was created.

What the team felt was we lacked a general story to embrace our games as one meaningful unit. And the story would also need a main event, a climax. We had plenty of material to build up, to deepen, to cool down. But to what end?

After a failed attempt to introduce my latest invention, *The Three Kingdoms*, as the central game and the all-embracing-story, we were quite devastated. To make things worse, we were brave enough to schedule a public, commercial run the day after we would return from Rovinj. There was no escaping: we needed to finish our design.

The teammates who played *Isabelle* insisted we run it again, this time with Jasper, Mojra and me playing, while Kiki would act as the game master (storyteller). I kept refusing. It worked so fantastically great at its playtest I didn’t want to ruin the memory of it. But then, what is one leader against his team? So we played *Isabelle* again. This time, the larp exploded with emotion. Bleed-out lasted for days.

It was decided. *Isabelle* was our focal point, the meaning, the climax.

It’s high time you met *Isabelle*.

# Isabelle, a larp with no words

## About

*Isabelle* is a black box larp for five players that uses no language, no mime and no sound (except for naturally and spontaneously occurring bodily sounds). Characters communicate solely with their body positions, bodily movement, physical interaction and “shining” intent to convey their needs and wants.

## Story



Photograph Isabelle Bryber

The story revolves around a young woman named Isabelle. Her Father, a powerful man in a traditional society, decides it is time she married. He chooses two men for her and gives her the choice to choose one to become her husband. Isabelle's Mother will make sure Isabelle makes the right choice even if she has to influence her own husband, the patriarch. The Sage sees the event revolving around engagement as Isabelle's final lesson.

## Larp bio

**Genre:** romantic drama

**Time net (game run + character coaching), excluding brief and debrief):** 60 minutes

**Time gross (including brief, debrief and warm-up workshop):** 150 minutes+

**Players:** 5-25 (5 individual roles, up to 20 collective roles)

**Game master:** 1

**Game mastering work-load:** Easy (requires competences in facilitating movement/dance exercises)

**Playing style:** silent, physical, light, playful, meditative

**Supported languages:** English, Slovene

**Costumes:** none required

**Props:** none required

**Music:** Gerardo Frisina—*Movement*, Yael Naim—*Endless Song of Happiness*, Laren PZ—*Black Lady*, Gotan Project—*Cité Tango*, Interstellar O.S.T.—*Cornfield Chase*

## The playful journey's design: Body Playground framework

### Design—overall

Our playful journey revolved around this structure:

1. **Brief and introduction to playful, silent physicality**
2. **Meeting the Storyteller (with eyes closed)**
3. **Storyteller's memories—the vignettes**
4. **Enter the present: Isabelle larp**
5. **Debrief**

1. Players understand what they're getting themselves into. No speaking, no acting, no "telegraphing."
2. Enter the journey. With eyes closed, players imagine being in the home of Storyteller, the main game master and host. On a side note: only the game master is allowed to speak.
3. The Storyteller is an old friend of the Family of Isabelle. He tells stories, his favourite memories (the vignettes) about The Family to his visitors (the players). After explaining the basics of each memory, a "magical" moment happens and players find themselves inside the memory, actively taking part in it, instead of just hearing about it. Each memory belongs to one of the characters of Isabelle's family. A game master acts as that character, while the players also become characters from the memory, having a collective role (e.g. students at the Academy for Alchemy and Spiritual sciences). After a memory is experienced, the game master invites the players to relax, sit down and close their eyes. Storyteller takes over, makes some concluding remarks about the particular memory and begins to share a new memory. See all vignettes in the chapter Acknowledgements.
4. After about four hours of playing out the memories from Isabelle's family, the Storyteller invites the players to come and see what is happening in Isabelle's home now.
  - Players playing the Isabelle larp thus play out the actual event, instead of hearing about it.
5. Out-of-character routines. Overall debrief and feedback from players. The game master explains the design and theory behind the experience (such as "bleed-out.")

### **Design—vignettes (memories)**

Each vignette (a memory in Storyteller's jargon) is either a contextualised game based upon a physical exercise, a physicalised tabletop game, a mixture thereof, or an original game created during the jams.

An example a vignette:

The red and blue spies

- **Memory owner (by character):** Marcus
- **Context:** Naval Academy training
- **Game master as character:** The Drill instructor
- **Players as collective character:** Students
- **Duration:** 15 minutes (first play is for learning the rules)
- **Plot:** The Drill instructor is leading a class on International Espionage. Students take the roles of either Red or Blue spies. Red spies hug when they meet. Blue spies shake hands. If a Red and Blue spy meet, upon realising their greeting gestures are not compatible, they do a butt bump.
- **Aim:** Players have eight game rounds of greeting to discover the Double Agent. The Double Agent always returns the type of greeting gesture that is offered to him/her. If the players don't recognize the Double Agent before the end of eighth game round, the Agent sets off a bomb, all agents die, and the world peace summit fails.
- **Twist:** Of course, all roles are assigned with eyes closed, thus preventing players knowing their identities.
- **Author:** Blaz Branc

## Conclusions

A year has since passed. I have been using some vignettes in my training courses and workshops, as ice-breakers and energisers, albeit stripping them of context.

What I learned generally in game design is: if a mechanic can be redesigned into a physical mechanic, do it. Physicality connects and speaks to body and mind, is free of language barriers; it's a highway to the solar plexus and the heart, therefore making it a powerful agent of player experience.

In April 2016 I was contacted by Robert Hönn, a yoga teacher. He explained he was finishing teaching a class of teacher candidates, a master class. He was planning a weekend retreat that would be spent in silence. Having seen my work with larp, he was interested to run a larp for his students. *Body Playground: Isabelle* seemed like a perfect match.

But I was self-conscious: how do I run the journey without my team? Surely I was not competent to run all those vignettes. I'm no dancing teacher.

Robert promised his support and suggested we run it together.

I re-examined the vignettes. I excluded the ones that I felt were the most difficult to facilitate and added some new ones.

Robert took over *Energetica*, the warm-up vignette. In this vignette players experience Sage's memory (Isabelle's teacher) of the old days at the Academy. Sage remembers Professor Chi and his famous morning warm-up routine. Disguised in the memory is Robert's movement exercise called "Evolution." Players are being led through the exercises. They begin by moving as a bacteria, fish, they move out of the ocean and onto solid ground, become reptiles and finally humans, moving every time as the particular species.

And so, in May 2016, twenty more souls have taken a part in the Playful journey. According to player's feedback, the journey was beautiful, something that no one had experienced before.

## Epilogue

### **After the 2nd run of the Playful journey:**

For me, working with Robert and running the project for the 2nd time, speaks volumes:

- Body Playground: *Isabelle* is rerunnable.
- It could potentially be run by anyone experienced in facilitating physical exercises and role-playing games.
- It is flexible in its modular design: vignettes can easily be added, removed, modified.

### **Spreading the experience: a contribution to the nordic larp scene:**

To my knowledge, *Body Playground: Isabelle*, first run publicly in May 2015, is a double innovation. It has achieved two things:

- gamification (larpification) of physical methods, exercises and routines.
- physicalisation of "classical" pen and paper and similar games.

To my knowledge, a somewhat similar larp had been created before. *In Fair Verona*, described in detail by Lizzie Stark in her book *Leaving Mundania* (Stark, 2012), used tango as a means of communication, instead of players using language. Later, the Czech larping community created *Dance Macabre*. Surely, other silent, movement-based larps exist out there, *White Death* for example. Ironically, I haven't played any of the three.

### **Considering my professional involvement, I hope for two futures to happen:**

- I hope the nordic larp community will benefit from *Body Playground's* work on physicalising play.
- I hope facilitators and teachers in general will come to learn the benefits of gamification ("larpification," really).

Most of all, I hope to see the *Body Playground* framework used by other dance/movement, and larp professionals.

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# Playing in Love

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First a little intro:

At the end of July 2016 at the Danish Larp Organiser Summer School, Jeppe and Maria Bergmann Hamming and I agreed to do a talk at the Danish “KP-light” event called Forum16. The talk was about playing in love, us sharing our insights and experiences from playing romance and intimate relations in larp.

This in turn inspired me to write an article about this topic for this year’s KP book. It has since then become quite a topic of controversy and interest. I have taken a lot of inspiration from Karin Edman and Oliver Nøglebæks blog posts (2016 & 2016) on the topic and from Jeppe and Maria Bergmann Hamming.<sup>1</sup>

## What is love?!

Love and romance can be a great engine for play in larps. You’ve always got something to do, and always have something to talk about. By getting better at using love relations to distribute and create play I believe you will find it easier to avoid the love relations getting awkward and out-of-character.

But first, a few definitions:

**Character:** The given or created fictional person that the player plays out during the larp.

**Player:** The player is the real person playing the larp. If I write player I am talking about the person playing the character.

**Out-of-character:** Clarifying happenings between the players and not the character.

**Bleed:** Bleed is a term used for real life emotions being mixed the fictional emotions of the character. For example, playing in love might spark emotions for the player out-of-character.

**Creating/distributing play:** The concept of being considerate of other players experience and creating hooks, action and stories for them to play along, including people in your play or simply supporting their story.

**Outing Secrets:** For other players to react to a secret, they need a way to find out. Outing secrets is about leaving clues for your character’s secrets or exposing the secrets of other characters. This often creates play.

**Opting out:** Saying no, choosing to avoid play. Having the option to leave. This is important to feel comfortable and safe.

**Opting in:** Saying yes, choosing to engage in play. Having the option to take

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1 Personal Communication.



part. This is important to feel included and clarifying to others you approve of their play.

**Meta technique:** A mechanic to communicate information between the players, which isn't clear to the characters. Example: Inner monologue is a meta technique where a player explains what their character is thinking to the surrounding players, giving them out-of-character information they can use in play.

**Telegraphing:** Telegraphing play is putting "CAPITAL" letters on your communication, making it clear for other players to take notice. It can be done by changing the tone of your voice or in other ways emphasising information to a co-player.

With this out of the way, let us get directly into the good stuff. Playing in love! Endless fiction and movies have been dedicated to the topic and it is a great tool for drama. Forbidden love, secret love, family love, dying love, insane love or everyday cozy love. Love can be the main theme of the larp or it can be the main theme of your experience or just a small part of your play, either way practise makes perfect.

And remember, love is never rational. It is chaotic, self-serving and irrational. It is the perfect alibi for going above and beyond.

You should try it out!

## Pre-love

Imagine that you are going to a larp in a month and have been told you are to play the lover of another player's character. You

now have about a month to prepare with said player and involve others in the drama. Use that time. It doesn't have to be 24/7, but engage in conversation with your future partner in crime and figure out expectations.

First things first, Facebook is a great tool to find love and to talk about it. You likely got a name of the player to play a relation with, find them on Facebook and just write super casually: "Hey are you X? If so let us talk about our relation for larp Y." Please avoid starting an in-game conversation with your long lost partner or something confusing like that. Be straight to the point and short. Give the other player a chance to read and ready themselves for the conversation.

Once you have established contact, confirmed that this is the right person, and they also know you are playing a love relation together, here is a few things to talk about:

### EXPECTATIONS:

First of all, how do you feel about this larp and what do you expect from the larp and your relation? How much time do you both want to put into the relation? Is it more of a side quest for your plot or is it the main focus of your larp experience? Make sure both parties know what the other person expects and try and find some middle ground if possible.

### AMBITIONS:

What are your ambitions? How far do you want to take the relation? Should it be a rollercoaster of emotions taking you from crying, to love declarations, to jealousy, to crying and back again? Or is it a more casual happy functional partnership? Or do you wish to be a powerplay couple, trying to dominate the larp together?



**BOUNDARIES/LIMITS, PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL:**

So where are the limits? Do you have some out-of-character restrictions from a real life partner? Do you have some bad experiences you generally want to avoid recreating? How do you feel about kissing? Is there a common sex meta technique you both know and are comfortable with?

My recommendation is to be clear about what you are comfortable with.

Example: "I feel okay with hugging and holding hands and maybe an occasional kiss on the cheek."

Having discussed some concrete things to do during the larp gives your partner more confidence than a list of no-no's. It takes a lot of courage to even talk about. Again if you want to explain no-no's be very clear: No kissing, no slapping the ass, no touching intimate areas. But also state what is okay: "If it makes sense in the scene, it is okay to slap me on the ass." Most importantly, be honest and do not let yourself get carried away with getting the most hardcore experience. Never forget consent can change over time. What might feel comfortable at one point might not feel comfortable later on.

Check up on each other, telegraph your play if you are upping it a notch, so your new play date can more easily opt out if so desired.

**CASUAL TALK TO CREATE TRUST AND UNDERSTANDING:**

Once you've gone over the most necessary points it is important to keep up a conversation or at least let the other person know if you do not have time to talk before the larp.

It can really help making a relation more convincing if you had some casual conversation before the larp.

Now you have covered the first part of preparation, which is the communication. Next step is building up your relation and how your romance is going to play out.

Romance in larp has a basic formula: "Romance = dream + resistance"

You should agree on some common themes that keep your characters together. Dreams about the future, the wedding, the kids, the trip to Las Vegas; whatever floats your boat and fits with the setting of the larp. This gives a topic for conversation and something else to talk about, other than how beautiful your eyes are in the moonlight.<sup>2</sup>

Dreams don't have to be a royal wedding in a castle, they can also be about getting some time off work or a weekend away from the kids and daily responsibilities.

Now you have your dreams! Time to add a splash of resistance.

Love is not just about the two of you (or more if you are a poly partnership). There should also be someone out there trying to stop you (or at least question your relationship). Is it the parents not agreeing on your choice of companion or a rich factory owner who has put his eyes upon one of you?

Resistance can also be internal. For this Jeppe Bergmann Hamming has invented the "Bungee Method": Imagine your relation is like a bungee cord. As it stretches out, it jumps back in together and then as it gets

2 Which is also a part of romance, but cannot keep love play going.



too close, it shoots out again. Get reasons why you would get back together and reasons to break up.

Playing in love is a like a dance, it is vivid, living and spontaneous.

Romance should be tense, it should be a struggle, it should be all over the place and unexpected.

When you have established reasons to not get too far away or too close together, you can work with timing and the starting of the larp.

Have the parents, siblings or the evil duke that one is forced to marry come between you. That way you have fun with more people.

How do you meet each other during the larp? Often, this can be a bit immersion breaking if one of you thought you hadn't seen each other in years and the other expects you just saw each other last week. What happens the first time you meet each other during pla (if you have time to play it out before the larp this is highly recommended, then you can adjust it).

Or do your characters not know each other before the larp? Is it "a random meeting" / "love at first sight"? Whatever the reason, it is really important to get it right.

## Wedding in a box

Now, some last things before the larp starts:

Did you bring any equipment for the love play? Papers to write poems on? Pre-made poems? Rings for proposing? Picnic equipment (blanket, cheese, sausage, basket,

glasses, wine?) Is there any of this stuff you can borrow from someone?

At the larp *Khypris year o—*, Jeppe and Maria Bergmann Hamming brought a "wedding-in-a-box" so they could marry someone in their group during the larp. You can also bring props for other players or "just in case." Generally, play works well if you bring props that enable more possibilities.

You are now at location, and you have some time before the briefing/workshop. Check out the location. Are there some good spots you can meet up during the larp? Just having some locations to meet up at is a great idea, and makes the "romance logistics" much easier.

## The perfect spot will get you caught!

The perfect spot is usually one that is easy to find and easy to be seen from since you would create the most play if there is a possibility of being caught. This is also something you can do for other players. If you know someone who is playing in love, you can help them out as your character finding them the perfect spot (possibly also someone to expose them). Again the more people you can involve, the more play you create.

Even if you do not get caught, having the possibility gives the scene a nice tense edge to it and gives a perfect excuse for an "opt out" in the sense that if it feels uncomfortable as a player, you can always leave because your character is too scared of getting caught.

## Do what you do best

Do what you are good at, or at least what



you feel comfortable pretending to be good at. Be it poetry, singing, dancing or giving well timed compliments. It might not always fit with the character, but it is good to have something your love relation can be fascinated by. If you do not feel good at anything, try something and make it funny and awkward instead. Or steal! Steal other people's works of art. At a contemporary larp, play some romantic music on a stereo; if more old school, recite a classic love poem.

It is not important to be romantic but to seem romantic, so co-players can act upon your relationship.

## Cold-canvas / starting from scratch

This brings us to playing in love with no time to prep or communicate before the larp with your love relation(s). Fear not, there is still much you can do to make it a more safe and enjoyable ride.

You arrive at a larp and either it would fit well with your character to find love, or you have been given a relation when you show up with a romantic attachment.

Clarity and giving confidence is important. The first step is making the invitation for play. Make it clear through your play that you are interested in a romantic relation. Tell the other player's character that you really like them, bring flowers, oversell the situation. Be over the top. While this might not always be the best tip in the real world, it is really useful at a larp. You are likely not having too much time to play out the relation, so you need to kickstart your love!

Clichés are great! Give your partner a

compliment. It doesn't need to be a great compliment, and while some people would avoid compliments about people's physical appearance to get to close to the character, I would say focus on giving them a compliment and something you find appealing about the character, physical or not.

## "Go for the eyes, Boo!"

You can almost always compliment people's eyes. Just look into them deeply and say "I really like the color of your eyes." Innocent, yet elegant and it shows recognition to know someone's eye colour. Do not be afraid of again being a bit over the top, to make it clear that it is play. Play them attractive, if you are in love with someone, logic has nothing to do with it and you will find their worst scars to be their biggest feature.

## A little creativity goes a long way

Avoid spamming the same compliments all the time unless you want to be comically cheesy for a comedic larp.

When the other player agrees to the love relation and plays back, it is important to show your appreciation. In the beginning a love relation can be very fragile and needs a lot of attention to grow. Validate your co-player decision of playing this relation.

Now a good tip: once you have initiated your love relation, make sure to have a way out—preferably through another person. Have a common friend in the larp who you can go to if you want to opt out from the relation. This could both be an offgame contact or an in-game contact. But it is a lot easier to



say no to someone else. And co-players are usually just happy about being included in your love play.

Once you have established the connection, you can take it more slowly. There is no need to rush the romance, figure out if your date seems busy or have the time for love.

Now it is time to include others in the fun!

## Including others

Like any good relation in a larp, including more players is always a hit. With love it is even more important. I have already given you some ideas for creating resistance and have others help be the opt out bridge between you.

Including others can be done in myriad of ways: leaving clues about your hidden love affair, using others to deliver messages of love, just having someone to play you up, be the trio with the last friend always telling you: "Could you stop it for a moment? I am still in the room?!"

Players usually respond well to invitations to your love play as an outside force of good or bad. You can either invite them actively or just create space for people to step into.

Creating space is again about being visible with your love play, so potential co-players can step into it and mess it up or help it along. Active invitations can both be done pre-larp but also during the larp. Maybe you need your friends opinion about this lover of yours, or ask them indirect questions about what they would do in your situation? Leading, maybe, to a reveal of you actually being in love or are planning to break up and just want a second opinion.

I have had some of my most memorable scenes in larp with people who wanted to tell me about their love relation and include me just in telling about it. And that is really

all there is to it. Talk about it. Include people. It could also be your character's greatest rival. Perhaps you could end up spilling the beans about you having a weak spot for someone else; maybe even for your rivals' own lover. Get them invested in this relation as well.

Tell your lover's best friend how you actually feel and that it might not be working out or something else to give them something to talk about as well.

Pacing is important though. As soon as you start including people, you can expect them to start acting upon and suddenly noticing you sneaking off with your secret lover as they will then likely expose you or get someone else to do it. So if you tell it early in a long larp, where you want the relation to last a long time, either approach them out-of-character or telegraph to them when a good moment would be to start messing with your relation. Worst case you will get exposed a bit early, and you will just have to improvise. Again this is what larp is all about; why have secrets in larp if they are not to be exposed?

## Intimacy and sex

Now intimacy and sex is always interesting yet challenging topics to talk about. Larp culture is alpha and omega; how physical and direct are people where you are from? If not at all, then for sure respect this culture and tone down your intimacy level. If you've had no chance to talk off-game with your love partner, take it slow and never do something they didn't see coming. Whether it be slapping them in the face or grabbing their ass. Only do it if you had agreed upon it beforehand or you make it really clear for them to get an out: "If you keep doing like that I am gonna hit you, I swear!?" with a raised hand is usually a good indication for your intentions. Telegraphing your actions for your co-player allows them to read and react in a clear and informed way. Saying "I just

wish someone would hold my hands!” would be the more inviting way to initiation some soft intimacy and is often just as powerful as actually grabbing someone’s hands.

As a general rule of thumb I would always go for safe over intense and actually just pressing someone’s hand while biting your lip in front of them can be a powerful way of conveying desire without ever doing anything for real. We came here to larp, not to have sex. It is a larp not a swinger club.

That being said, sex is obviously an option, but I would refer to the intentions of the larp and the pointers given by the organisers. If they say you are only allowed to use a specific meta tool, please respect this and leave the actual sex for after the larp.

But do know that so much can be created from so very little. A popular form of showing intimacy in the nordic larp scene is *Ars Armandi*, and while it has its flaws (it usually suffers from being inefficiently introduced before the larp and not always designed well into the setting) it is still a super powerful tool to do something quite safe. I will not talk more about it but just recommend you to look it up: *Ars Armandi*.

Desire is about using the senses to create strong experiences: a soft touch, a rough grab or a long lasting eye to eye connection with burning passion. Focus on all the stuff surrounding the actual act of sex and play with that.

At a contemporary larp, you can also play around with the whole talk about the condom and safe sex. Again, remember you are here to play out a story between two characters, not necessarily to have wild animal sex. You are real people and real people are easily insecure in the act of having sex

or being intimate. While when you initiate a love relation, you should be confident, now when you are getting to the final stage, you can start showing doubt as your character. Is this really the right thing to do? Is it the right time? Is it the right one? Give both parties reasons to opt out, so that the player can play opting out if they get too uncomfortable.

Whether you use *Ars Armandi*, real sex or neck massage, think about how to include other players in what just happened. Maybe even break out-of-character to just talk about it. Check in if the other player is okay? If they have a good idea where to go from now? Chances are both of you had gone a bit out-of-character already to make sure the sex went in a smart way, so breaking character after to just ask about ideas to do calibration is almost always a great idea.

Again, include others. Roughen your hair and your clothes so others can see something has changed, maybe change your attitude a bit, let people expose you. If you play a Catholic, find a priest and confess your sins.<sup>3</sup>

If you always think of how to move forward with your characters and your larp, chances are you also get a better “landing” with what happened emotionally. It becomes easier to distinguish that this was your character all along.

Love is never rational, so take irrational actions and justify them to yourself afterwards. Do something you think your character would never do and then afterwards rationalise why you did it. This happens all the time in the real world.

Things like breaking up out of the blue, matching the low status character with the

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3 I have this tried once and it is a lot of fun. We were also a bit loud so more people could hear what had happened and could then respond to it.

high status lover can create the most memorable experiences. It does not have to make sense in the moment, but it is really a silver plate of action for everyone around you. There is obviously no reason to overdo it, unless you are playing a Taylor Swift larp.

## Forbidden Love

### PLAYING ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS...

Larp can be used as a tool to work with our own past, or understand the struggles of others. Love relations that are abusive or broken can be very interesting to play around with and both give strong experiences and great insight.

So it is a bit of a broad topic. Like with most of this article I have tried to go with a general approach so it can both help you in your *Battlestar Galactica* AI—human love relation, your cheesy Shakespeare in Love larp and your black box cry-fest. So I will keep the scope a bit broad still and hope it is still useful. This means I might tread a little carelessly over some subjects, for that I must apologise.

You can play difficult relations out in different ways, fitting with what you and your co-players want to experience. Is it tragicomic-over-the-top brother and sister relationship or a deep serious abusive relation? Again, expectation management is key. It is extremely important to agree on you want to play out such a relation and rather aim low for both to play it comfortably, than play past each other.

There are a bunch of things to consider: Do you want to challenge gender stereotypes or enforce them? As I see it, it is a very valid approach to want to experience a classic abusive relationship with a man hitting a woman, but you should do it as a conscious choice and consider the alternative, what would it do if it was the other way around?

Forbidden love can be many things. It can also be you against the world, or more likely the rest of the characters in the larp. Are you exploring love between strict religious groups, love between siblings or paedophilia it is even more important to communicate with your co-players (not just your lover) how to play it out in a meaningful and respectful way. How well does it fit in with the rest of the larp?

I will always recommend giving it twists and many possible outs, have other play to engage in as well, so it is not all about this struggle of getting accepted, staying hidden or figuring out your identities, even though this could absolutely be the sole topic between a few players for an entire larp.

With that I will say thank you so much for reading. I hope you got something out of it and I raised your interest in playing in love. Let me know how it goes, I always love a good larp love story! And remember the love that feels real can also hurt for real, so take care of yourself and make sure you have some time to recover after an intense larp with intense relations. Ending it all off with a favourite film quote:

*"The sweet just ain't as sweet, without the sour."* *Vanilla Sky* (2001)

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# Telling Character Stories

Monika Weißenfels

## Introduction

There are many ways to tell a character story. Nordic larp design often implies that characters are written by the larpwright(s). Relationships and turning points in character stories are set up from the start, often being part of the overall design of the larp. With authorship comes a certain degree of ownership and control over the character for the larpwright. The player who receives such a character, continues telling a story that someone else started and owns.

German larp design mostly leaves it to the players to bring characters they created completely on their own. Characters belong to the player alone. The story belongs to the player and every larp (and every piece of downtime in ongoing campaigns) is another piece in an ongoing tale, which the player influences as she sees fit. Those characters live whenever and wherever the player decides and often collect years of relations, experiences and tales at numerous events.

This article will explore the effects and implications of a self-written, player-owned character on different levels: How do larpwrights, organisers and game masters incorporate this kind of character into a game? What is the influence on design choices? As a counterweight to the German concept, the article will look into the character creation at *College of Wizardry* (Nielsen, Dembinski and Raasted et al., 2014-).<sup>1</sup> Originating from a nordic tradition of pre-written characters, the rerunning larp now faces an increasing amount of characters that are player-written. It will become apparent why both plot-driven and character-driven larps can incorporate self-written characters and how this can enhance the individual player's experience.

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<sup>1</sup> College of Wizardry is a weekend larp, depicting the school life at a college for witches and wizards in an alternate version of our current reality.

## I. The German concept: Bring your own character!

### I.1. Terminology

Talking about “the German concept” of larp characters does not imply that there is only one way all characters are made. The German larp scene includes a growing variety of playing-styles. This article will, however, focus on the most common way of character handling that is typically assigned to German larp. From here on, I will work with the following definition of “the German concept”: A player comes up with a character idea independently from any larp. She develops a background story and traits based on the initial idea, as well as a costume and possibly even props. The character may or may not be attached to the backstory or world-setting of any larp ever played. Anything from using pen & paper inspired backgrounds, references to settings from novels and movies, to free floating ideas is possible. There is no corrective or norm to follow. The only limit that has to be taken into account is the genre of the larp the character is supposed to belong to. As most German larps can still be summed up as based in a “fantasy” setting in the broadest sense, that will be the reference frame for this article.<sup>2</sup> The newly created character may take part in campaigns such as *ConQuest*<sup>3</sup> (Guess et al., 2016) and *Drachenfest* (Schlump and Wolter et al., 2016) and may attend any other smaller larps

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2 Considering plot, the roots in pen & paper show again: The setting of most larps is “fantasy,” ranging from low fantasy (most characters would be thieves, rogues, healers or knights, plots are about politics, justice and fighting the evil) to high fantasy (characters such as elves and other fantastic races get involved, plots are about demons, rituals, otherworldly menaces and evil witches and wizards, etc).

3 Commonly known as “*ConQuest of Mythodea*,” mostly referred to as “*Mythodea*” in the international scene.

of different campaigns, or events that are not associated with a campaign at all. There are no restrictions: any event can be attended with the same character, even if the different games do not refer to the same setting. The same character can be played in different campaigns.

The word “campaign” is not used consistently in German larp. The biggest ongoing campaign is *ConQuest of Mythodea*, with three annual events, of which two add to the main plot.<sup>4</sup> But “campaign” is also used to describe a loose assemblage of larp settings. Among various, one is well established in Germany: The so-called *Mittellande Kampagne*. (Deutscher Liverollenspiel-Verband, [date unknown]) This “campaign” works as a giant sandbox. Depicting a fantasy world, it contains various fictional countries, that vary in politics, population, and subgenres. Over the course of years, many larp organisers have established plotlines that tell the story of a freely scalable part of the fictional continent and uncounted one shot larps have been played in this setting. Other campaigns exist under this definition, but are less frequently played upon. (Larp Wiki, 2106) In this article, the term “campaign” refers to events like *ConQuest of Mythodea* and, to add another European example, *Empire* in the UK.

Nevertheless, the very structure of the *Mittellande Kampagne* reflects the German approach to characters and their stories: It creates an environment, in which players have a huge variety of options on which larp to play next with one character and thus determining how the story continues, while the setting remains vaguely consistent as a bonus to the consistency of the character story.

### 1.2. Roots of the “German concept”

In contrast to Eirik Fatland’s assertion that nordic larp has its roots in psychodrama (Fatland, 2016), larp in Germany emerged quite firmly from the pen & paper gaming tradition. Presumably the first German larp-like events took place in the late 1980s. The first event which is acknowledged to meet the definition of a larp in Germany and was directed at a public audience took place in 1991 under the name *Dracon I*. (Neupert, 2002)

Coming from a gaming tradition, early German larps were heavily regulated by rule systems, which defined what a character could do with a certain amount of experience. As the active larp scene developed simultaneously in different parts of the country, a number of rules systems were

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4 ConQuest being the main event. *Jenseits der Siegel* serves as a prequel to this. *Chroniken von Mythodea* is set in the same world-setting and loosely tied to the plot of the main event.

published, none of which achieved a leading position across Germany.<sup>5</sup> What they had in common was a game-like structure: Skills were bought with experience points, which were gained by attending a larp. The aim was to translate pen & paper rules to a playable and practical framework for larp. Even the conversion between different rulesets was regulated,<sup>6</sup> enabling players to attend more events with the same character. Attending many larps was, save few exceptions, the only way to get to play a powerful, capable character. As previously stated, this collection of experience points could extend over campaigns and stand alone events alike. The amount of experience points that a character would receive after a larp depended on the duration of the event: One day at the larp was rewarded with a fixed amount of points. The skills and power had to be earned over actual years. Personal and systematic progress of the character went hand in hand.

Today, the strict obedience to rule systems is broadly abandoned. Although many events still officially follow a rule system, the rules have less influence on the actual game, which mostly shifts to a variation of WYSIWYG, called “you are able to do, what you are able to depict.”<sup>7</sup>

### **1.3. Practical: Implications, influence on design, problems and solutions**

#### *1.3.1. Prerequisites: Players “versus” NPCs*

From the first events up until now, German larp has developed many forms of organisation and structure. Again, to make the case more clear, I will refer to the best known and widest spread structure, which is also typically connected to the fantasy setting. The larp is run by organisers and a rather big amount of non-player characters (NPCs), aiming at a 1:2 ratio between players and NPCs. The NPC roles vary in quality and importance, but altogether, they drive the plot.

Because the characters don’t come along with a backstory that is inherently connected to the plot, they cannot be used to trigger events. This task falls completely to the NPCs as “tools” of the organisers, creating circumstances that push events forward. Characters and players alike start

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5 Prominent rule systems were among others: DragonSys, Phoenix-Carta, Silbermond, That’s live. As German larp develops away from the gamist approach of the early days, WYSIWYG “rules” now mark a majority of the games held. (Bolle, 2010)

6 Most larp organisers offering a set of “house rules” on how to convert your character from one system to another.

7 “Du kannst, was du darstellen kannst,” commonly referred to as “DKWDDK.”

the larp with very little knowledge about the plot. Their task is to engage in play with NPCs, who carry information about the current in-game situation and try to manipulate the characters for their own advantage, give them mysteries to solve or help them in doing so. They can depict conflicting parties, which try to pull the players' characters to either side. In general, NPCs are used to make the setting of the larp "come to life." Dramatic escalation or factors such as time pressure to solve a plot are communicated in-game through NPCs. Depending on the game designers' choice, NPCs can help move the plot forwards when it is at risk of being derailed by the players.

### *1.3.2. Challenges for organisers and game designers*

Along with this concept of character creation and ownership come a lot of challenges and implications for every party involved in a larp. Game designers and organisers certainly face the most of them. How can you create a plot, not knowing who will be there to take part in it? There are basically two ways to solve this challenge: One is to adjust the game as far as possible to the characters, which is mostly done for smaller events with up to 50 participants on the player side (e.g. Verushkou—*Si vis Pacem*, Bad Monkeys Crew, 2016). The second option is to let the characters adjust to the game, which has proven to be a good strategy for larger events, like *ConQuest* and *Drachenfest*.

### *1.3.3. Know your players*

To gather information about the characters that will take part in the larp, many organisers combine the signup with the option to send in information about the background and special skills of the characters. This serves the purpose of identifying significant gaps between the planned plot and the set of people to solve it. Organisers get the chance to adjust their plans according to their audience and create personalized, small scenes for each player. This may be an individual in-game arrival to the site, during which players meet an NPC that in some way refers to their character's background. It may also be a dream or vision scene during the game that picks up on personal plot hooks which the players gave to the organisers at sign up, intertwining the character's story and the story of the larp. Less frequently, organisers design (side)-plots especially for the characters that have been announced to the game.

Another influence of gaming tradition can be found in the "character check-in" and "check-out." This used to be a standard procedure at German larps but has been dropped by many organisers over the course of years. During check-in, organisers go through the written character sheet and check if skills and experience points match and list up the items that a character brings to a larp. The check-out awards the character with new experience points and documents the new status on owned in-game items. The thorough, written documentation of the character makes it easier to switch between campaigns and settings.

Although all these tactics give designers an idea of which characters are at their games and gives them the opportunity to a certain extent to tailor plot to groups, working with player-written characters does have the effect of disconnecting larp designers from their players.

#### *1.3.4. Beat them with mass*

If an event surmounts a certain size, it becomes undoable to adjust plot personally for each player. The challenge is met by offering a main plot for a certain set of characters, assuming that a fitting constellation will show up and/or that players will steer their characters towards the plot. Additionally, these events offer smaller side-plots. Those are designed for character types that will most likely not become involved in the main course of action and focus more on character game rather than following the more epic setup of the main plot. For example, a main plot could be “reconstruct an ancient magic machine to ward off a powerful demon” while a side-plot about “find out who stole the midwife’s healing herbs” happens. In events that reach a capacity of 1.000 and more players, again like ConQuest and Drachenfest, a part of the larp turns itself into a sand-box.

#### **1.4. German character concepts: An epic journey**

The process of writing characters is surprisingly badly structured and supported in Germany. Knowledge about how to create an interesting and functional character is not spread across players and most larp organisers don’t proactively support character creation for their players. It is assumed that players attend the larp with characters that are ready to be played. The responsibility for the playability of a character lies completely with the player.

For creation, most players deduct from pen & paper experience. For example, they work with sets of questions that a player may answer about their character, determining background and traits, incorporating topics such as religious beliefs, biggest dreams and fears, turning points in life and so on.<sup>8</sup>

This process of creation leads to a set of recurring stereotypes<sup>9</sup> and a huge amount of character stories that are very similar to begin with. The lack of originality in character stories leads to the common conception that telling another player your character background story is considered

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8 Such as the sourcebook of the German pen & paper system *Das Schwarze Auge*, widely known in the German larp community. (Römer, 2007, p. 294)

9 “My parents were killed by Orcs” has turned into a running gag in the German larp community. Additionally, many character stories are set up according to the archetype of the “Hero Quests.”

bad style both in-game and off-game. This does however not apply to telling the stories that make the character an original person, based on larps that have been played. The sharing of “war stories” around a campfire is an inherent part of German fantasy larp which is valued by many players as a part of what makes the spirit of a good game. The unoriginal starting point is kindly disregarded for the sake of stories that are truly unique because they were actually played out.

The focus of character creation is not on making up a deep, highly dense and well designed character, but more about generating a starting point from which the player can immerse into the larp straight away, letting the course of events and the relationships that develop shape who the character is. This aspect of actually co-creating a character during the game is not unlike the process of creating character relations that takes place before a *College of Wizardry* run.

### **1.5. Effects on player and playing style**

Owning and playing a character in the long run also has various effects on the player side. These cover a broader range of categories. Starting on a practical level, one may assume that players planning on playing the same character across several events are more willing to put effort and money into costume and props. It can be argued that the longer a character is played, the higher the identification between player and character becomes.

The longer a character story is being told, the more chances arise to form the picture of a natural person, including bad decisions, traumatic experiences, successes, romances, friendships and so on. Characters that have been played over years can grow to be a part of their player. They go through a development that may resemble the actual personal development of their player. “War stories” that a character experienced are told both in-game and off-game.

Consequently, the death of a character is a highly important event to most players that is thoroughly planned to make it a memorable moment that is “worth it.” Players steer their character towards not dying on most of the larps they attend: They are less prone to take lethal risks to not end the story ahead of time, so for example, they may engage in physical conflict, but not without regard to their own safety. In this, the element of literally having leveled up a character with experience points over years certainly plays a part.

## 2. College of Wizardry — A sandbox for your character

The *College of Wizardry* larps offer another perspective on how character stories can be told and fitted into the design of a game. There are two parallel developments to be observed with *CoW*: First, the opening of the initial setup from mandatory pre-written characters to opt-in pre-written characters and secondly, players extending the stories of their pre-written characters beyond the larp. Both developments are supported by the *CoW* game design.

### 2.1. Nordic concept: Pre-written characters

Locating *CoW* larps as a middle ground requires a look at the nordic end of the scale. Just as for the “German concept,” there is no such thing as “the nordic larp.” The applied approach to “nordic concept” in this article will follow the idea of what is commonly perceived as “nordic” in the German larp community: Many nordic larps tell a standalone story not situated in a campaign. Characters are often pre-written by the game designers, including at least a basic setup for relations and personal character goals during the game. The characters are usually connected in a way that allow a low ratio of NPCs to players.<sup>10</sup>

In this setting, the game designers have a lot more potential influence on how the story of the larp will unfold. By retaining control of the characters, they can insert breaking points and levels of escalation beforehand by anchoring characters in relations and background stories. It’s possible to create a more coherent design, reflecting themes and moods in different elements such as plot, set design, props, and characters. The designers access and influence all layers of the game (Stenros 2014). The player takes part in someone else’s narrative, in which the character plays a fixed part.

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, the defining aspects of a “nordic larp” extend these parameters by far and it can be argued if there is a thing such as “the” nordic larp.

Opposed to that, the German concept means that a player continues to tell their own, independent character story in the framework that the larp provides.

The more detailed the relations between characters are pre-designed and the more their actions and goals during the larp are predetermined, the better drama and escalation can be anticipated and again be incorporated in the overall design. Games which follow this form are consequently much more character- than plot focused.

It can be argued that a pre-written character story, including connections to others, produces a higher level of drama at a larp than a self-written, unconnected character would experience. The fact that the nordic narrative is often more carefully crafted does not necessarily mean that it turns out as planned. Relationships and storylines that develop on the spur of the moment during a larp can be just as powerful as predetermined developments.

## **2.2. Practical: Creating a College of Wizardry**

### *2.2.1. Design and balancing of a sandbox*

*College of Wizardry* is designed as a sandbox larp. Handing out characters that are only roughly sketched out, is a very different approach than predetermining every connection and in fact, the whole game is set up to give the players the biggest possible amount of freedom both in their playing style and with the topics they want to play on.

*“The larp will not fail because a certain character is played differently than it is written; it will just mean that different stories are created. This is important. Your character is your own.” (Raasted, Nielsen and Dembinski et al., 2014, p. 19)*

CoW follows a number of design choices that enable both self-written and pre-written characters and even allow the combination of the two concepts in one larp. Similar to the plot driven German larp that has been discussed so far, the key element for CoW is to give the players broad freedom in choosing the focus of their game.

How a certain run of CoW turns out very much depends on how much players indulge into the co-creating aspect of the design. The larp offers both the space and time for different playing styles to coexist. No matter how many demon summonings go on in the dungeon, the college drama can still be gossiped about in the common rooms (Nielsen, 2016). Although the focus of character stories shifts from run to run, the overall

framework that ties the larp together will still work.<sup>11</sup>

In a plot driven German concept larp, a lot of how well the larp goes depends on balancing the different kinds of characters. That can be done by announcing the larp to be mainly aimed at a specific group (rogues and thieves etc.) or adjusting the plot to the characters that actually attend, as described earlier. The individuals have a high impact on the game. Opposed to that, the structure of *CoW* is focused on groups and collectives. The College has to work as a whole and the Houses have to work as in-groups for their members. (Jankovic Sumar, 2016)

This is achieved by a few, but effective fixed balancing factors at *CoW*: The large majority of players play students. Special roles such as headmaster, teachers, janitor and prefects are assigned by the organisers.<sup>12</sup> To make the collectives and groups at *CoW* work, players have to stick to the Houses and years their characters are assigned to. Whereas the design can take an excess of rich snotty students, evil characters or any other kind of personal alignment, it could not handle one missing House or a school in which no Juniors exist, because the game dynamic evolves around the interaction of Houses on a vertical and years of students on a horizontal layer. The design of *CoW* as a college eventually unites all individual characters due to the fact that they are all students in the first place. And in this, they are all the same and part of the same collective. (Jankovic Sumar, 2016)

### 2.2.2. Character creation

After three runs, *CoW* went through a thorough redesign, removing all Harry Potter references and setting up a whole new background for the larp. What remained was the choice to hand out pre-written characters, which left vast options for individual interpretation and design by the players. (Again: “Your character is your own.” Raasted, Nielsen and Dembinki et al., 2014) Laid out as an international larp from the very start, *CoW* had to incorporate a broad culture of players. Openly created characters enabled various interpretations and playing styles. (Nielsen, 2016)

The pre-written characters for *CoW* have never been balanced on a scale of royals and rebels, werewolves and hunters or other factions represented in the student body. Starting with a very diverse team of character writers and trusting the self balancing power of large groups as well as the natural inclination of players to aim for different styles, the organisers of *CoW* did not actively adjust characters to balance the game for the first

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<sup>11</sup> Events that are fixed in time and place, such as lessons, school gatherings, and the Saturday night ball etc.

<sup>12</sup> This may seem to be understood, but would not necessarily be in a German larp, where there is no given limit to how many kings and queens of made up realms may show up to an event.

five runs. (Nielsen, 2016)

Relationships to other characters were suggested on an abstract level which fitted the character. For example, a bookworm would be suggested to find study partners, a dashing duellist would be proposed to assemble a group of fans. The characters were written action-focused, giving agencies for all kinds of play (Nielsen, 2016). Accordingly, suggestions for “things to do at the larp” were listed as inspirations to enhance the playing experience.

The option to bring a self-written character was not proactively advertised, but was allowed by the organisers on personal request. For the very first run, organisers put a lot of effort into developing characters together with the players, which turned out to be impossible to uphold with the increasing feedback they received from outside the player community as the popularity of CoW grew. (Nielsen, 2016)

One element of design, however, was written into the characters in order to set the tone for the larp. CoW was designed to be fun experience but also a serious larp, so most characters came with a “darker tone and atmosphere.” (Nielsen, 2016)

For run 10, which is upcoming by the time this piece is written, the option to bring a self-written character has been incorporated into the signup form. A 50/50 division between pre- and self-written characters is expected for that run (CoW 10, Casting Document, 2016). Many players who’ve previously played with pre-written characters now opt to return with characters they’ve created on their own (CoW 5, Casting Document, 2016) It can be argued that this degree of opening up the sandbox even further is possible because of two factors: the mood of CoW has been successfully established and settled in numerous runs. And a huge part of players keep returning, carrying on this spirit both through their own depiction of their characters and actively helping newcomers and first time larpers to adjust to the setting (Nielsen, 2016). Foremost, this means to pass on the idea of creating an action-focused character and encouraging the creation of character relations.

The combination of both the design focus on collectives rather than individuals and the strong player community enable CoW larps to not only incorporate self-written characters, but merge them with a set of pre-written ones.

### *2.2.3. Telling CoW character stories—extending the game*

The organisers choice to hand over creative ownership of the characters to the players worked well for a large group of participants. As the runs proceeded, an increasing amount of online pre-game took place. Events leading up to the larps were played out in Facebook groups and chats and

collaborative fiction. The social online platform “Czochabook”<sup>13</sup> served as a tool for characters to stay in touch and forward their plots (Mertz, 2016). After several games, unofficial spin offs were held,<sup>14</sup> continuing to tell character stories.

For example, for a group of around 28 people, a story arc developed that started with pre-game before CoW5, extending to the spin off larp *To hell and back* after CoW5 had taken place, and ongoing text based role-playing up to CoW8, which was set up as a sequel to CoW5 and CoW6 (Jankovic Sumar, 2016). On the final event, most of the character stories of that specific group were led to some kind of resolution. The overall feeling was that they had now been told to a point at which the players could find closure.

This dynamic developed due to the fact, that in the course of intense prebleed (Svanevik and Brind, 2016), bleed and immersion, the members of this group created not only an individual character story each, but a complex network of social connections that shifted and grew throughout the process.

This development was heavily favoured by the action-focused design of the characters in the first place. Starting from pre-written characters, the intensity of the experience lead the players to embracing their characters as their own creations and they tasked themselves with telling their stories in the best (most dramatic, immersive and intense) way possible. Whilst this development in general resembles the German concept in so far as that the storylines evolved over a number of events, there are significant differences. A CoW character cannot be played outside the CoW setting and it is not possible to bring a character from any other larp campaign into the game. Instead of “just” attending more larps with one character, the players of CoW created events, plots and life for their characters outside the hands of the organisers.

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13 “Czochabook; an in-game socialmedia platform in which players sign up in-character. The platform mirrors a Facebook-style format and is thus immediately familiar and accessible to most players who choose to engage.” Ashby, Charlotte: *Playing around the Event: The College of Wizardry* pre-game and postgame, in this book

14 The Debauchery Party, 2015 *To hell and back*, 2016, CoW5: *A Midwinter Night’s Dream*, 2016.

### 3. Conclusion

At first sight, the difference between the German concept of character creation and storytelling on the one side, and the nordic-inspired approach of *College of Wizardry* seem to bear a lot of differences. Having taken a closer look, it has become apparent that both concepts enable players to take control over their character's stories and the option to play them longer, either moving one character from larp to larp, or extending the story of one larp with pre-games, spinoffs and sequels. Both mechanics create high identification between player and character and thus intense immersion during the game.

Both a self-written German character and a pre-written *CoW* character start as sketches that are designed to allow an action-focused, immediate start into a larp, where they can grow and develop during the game and in interaction with other characters. A part of that process is put before the game for *CoW*, where players create relations before the game, online and in workshops. As both design and player community favour the incorporation of self-written characters, *CoW* has successfully opened up to this character concept.

In essence, the German concept and *College of Wizardry* prove that there are (at least) two core strategies to design larps for self-written characters: One is to adjust the larp to the characters, focusing plots on their backgrounds and skills and giving the characters a strong guidance towards a determined goal. The second one is to do much the opposite: Let the individual characters play freely in a sandbox, where they will be re-collected regularly in various collectives that frame the experience.

Giving players freedom to run their own characters and play them over time—through pre-game or several events—has a chance to make them identify more strongly with their characters and immerse more deeply, even if the character only started out as a list of traits or two paragraphs on a character sheet. The war stories they tell are real, in a sense, not just written as background story. As they play the same character again and again (on *Czochabook*, in co-creative fiction or across events) they experience, grow, learn, and create stories that are much deeper than what you may find at a stand-alone event with no pre-game.

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*[killed darling]*

**College of Wizardry 2 was supposed to have the students arriving from vacation by boat(s) in the dark, lit only by lanterns. In the end, we decided not to spend the enormous amounts of time (and some money) that it would have required, though we were tempted. We kept in the second castle for the Werewolf encounter.**

*[Claus]*

**heroes**

**and the quest  
excellence**

ley

and players. Instead, it is more satisfying all around to allow the narrative to develop on its own, with a guiding hand applied by the writers to ensure a consistent and fulfilling experience for the players.

Given that narrative is an organic thing, grown out of player experience of the game, and that the character is the lens through which the player experiences the game, it makes sense, as a writer interested in narrative, to examine how the generation and development of that character might be pitched to influence the overall game narrative. It is this examination that I intend

*[character moment]*

**He was roped into a duel for the soul of house Faust by the house ghost. He realised he had to lose, to heal the house. He'd never lost before.**

*[Xenocratus  
Foxglove,  
College of  
Wizardry 2]*

*[character moment]*

**"I would have said yes," she said, "if you had asked me to the ball; but now it is too late."  
I turned away so she would not see the look in my eyes.**

*[M. Troxler, College of  
Wizardry 3]*

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**[future of larp]**

***I think we will become much more focused on who has friends offgame, since we move to less rules. I also believe that a certain quality of character building will be lost, since more focus is played on costuming and locations.***

**[Christopher, 20 years]**

**[killed darling]**

***Secrets and plotlines, too many to count. While my style of game tend to have a lot of backstory, pre-existing plotlines and character interaction, at some point I need to cut the less relevant storylines to avoid plot overdose (which is a fine line to walk). So everything that is not absolutely necessary to the backstory's cohesion or that doesn't contribute significantly to character building goes away.***

**[Muriel]**

# Making Heroes

## Character building and the quest for narrative excellence

John Shockley

*“It begins with a character, usually, and once he stands up on his feet and begins to move, all I can do is trot along behind him with a paper and pencil trying to keep up long enough to put down what he says and does.”*

**William Faulkner**  
**Author**

Narrative, that is the story of a game, is the most lasting legacy of our efforts as game writers and organisers.<sup>1</sup> The tales our players tell of the games we run, their characters’ places within those games and the constituent events outlast and reflect the experiences that we offer. Reputations, businesses and vast gaming empires<sup>2</sup> are built on the narrative that our games leave behind, and it is clear that the success of future endeavours is built on the remnants of our past glories.

But narrative is rarely imposed. Player experience and perspective informs those stories told about our games. As much as a writer may wish to take control of the narrative and railroad<sup>3</sup> their players, the nature of larp is such that its narrative is an uncontrolled thing. To struggle against this nature is to generate frustration for both writers

and players. Instead, it is more satisfying all around to allow the narrative to develop on its own, with a guiding hand applied by the writers to ensure a consistent and fulfilling experience for the players.

Given that narrative is an organic thing, grown out of player experience of the game, and that the character is the lens through which the player experiences the game, it makes sense, as a writer interested in narrative, to examine how the generation and development of that character might be pitched to influence the overall game narrative. It is this examination that I intend to begin in this article. My experience is primarily in UK larp, and so it is from that angle I will approach things, but I hope that the concepts and principles are interesting for those readers whose backgrounds are in other traditions.

For the purposes of this article, I shall offer the following two assumptions, from which I will work. Firstly, that any larp must contain some element of character. That character might be a skewed version of oneself, but it must exist in order for the activity to be defined as role-playing. Secondly, that the character will generate a story that its

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1 I shall use the terms plot, story and narrative as separate words with individual meanings as defined by Simon Brind in his talk at LDC2016 (Brind: Player agency on an epic scale. Talk at Larp designers conference 2016). Plot is the larp writers plan for what is going to happen throughout the course of the game. Story is what is actually happening as the game is being played out as experienced by the players, and Narrative is how it is described afterwards.

2 One can dream, can one not?

3 Railroading is the act of responding to unexpected player action by altering the plot levers to ensure that the event gets “back on track,” pushing the players into the writer-driven pre-determined outcomes. At this point the game may as well be an unscripted play.

player experiences, and that when grouped together those character stories will strongly influence a narrative representative of its game.

There are many functions of character in larp, many ways in which the role that a player occupies serves to drive forward the game. At its most basic, the temporary occupation of a character is the heart of our hobby, and it is impossible to roleplay without a role to play. The characters that we play are what frame our own personal experience of the game, that colour our perception of it, and that play a starring role in our war stories. They are the lynchpin of our larp experiences. Some of the functions of larp character design are to ground the character within the rules defining its capabilities; act as a means to divide players into in-game subsets (nationality, race, class); or to give the character a place in the broader world and setting. Not all of those functions are directly related to narrative, but it is upon the narrative drivers of character creation and how that influences the different frameworks for character generation that this article will focus.

Within UK larp, characters are generally player and game specific. There is much less of a culture of re-runs of events, with reusable characters than in other larp traditions. Usually, a character will be generated by or for the specific player, often with regard to their personal taste in the game, and then only played by that player. The character will be tied to the game in question, or to the campaign. There is none of the portability of characters that one might see in the German larp tradition, where it is not uncommon for a character to travel between games and campaigns (Weißenfels, 2017) It is also fairly rare to get pre-written characters designed to be played by different people at repeated runs of a game. There is a split across games around character numbers per player, where some games permit a player many different characters resident within the campaign and

others dictate that new characters may only be generated with the retirement or death of an existing character. This latter is often driven by the administrative burden of keeping character records for thousands of players, combined with the desire to keep a level playing field across the game.

Pre-play in UK larp is rare. Whilst there will be conversations between players ahead of the game itself, these are often frowned upon or derided as “metagaming,”<sup>4</sup> or occur only in subsets of players who are members of an in-game community. Character contact between games in campaign systems is sometimes dealt with through the use of “sanctioned events,” games set in the campaign world run by different people to the overall campaign, but with some (varying degree of) oversight from the main campaign organisers and writers. For one-off games, there is often no character pre- or post-play at all. Consequently, very few UK larps consider pre-play when selecting their character generation systems.

It is, of course, impossible to accurately categorise character generation. UK larp is a broad church, and many games will use more than one of the categories I will talk about here, often with the player themselves determining which of the methods is employed. A player in a game with open character design, might take it upon themselves to submit their character to the organisers in an attempt to turn their personal experience towards more of a hybrid design process. Equally, there may be some negotiation around character detail in a pre-generated system enabling the player to tweak their experience without loss of the plot purpose of the character.

For the purpose of this article, I am going to define three broad categories of character creation, and look at the role that each plays in defining the way the narrative of its game develops.

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4 The deliberate use of off-game or out-of-character opportunity to influence the in-game or in-character situation. This is regarded variously as inevitable or blatant cheating (or both).

## OPEN CHARACTER DESIGN

In an open character design system, the player is presented with a game world designed by the organisers, a defined character generation rules system and then left to their own devices. There may be skills to pick from a list and a form to fill out to enable the character rules detail to be inserted into a database; but there is no submission of character background, no direct plot writer engagement with the characters at creation, and no expectation that the game writers will even be aware of that character's personal story. Of course the game experience will be coloured by the character, and background points may become integral to the developing story, relevant to others and inform the overall narrative; but the plot will pay no pre-written regard to the characters involved. Player agency is purely by character action, the game cares nothing for the character until it takes action.

This style of character creation is quite traditional, with larps that grew out of tabletop games focussing primarily on a traditional linear adventure style of game, and thus character generation being an exercise in the definition of character stats. In this instance the background of the character is largely irrelevant to the mechanics of play, as opposed to the statistics which are relevant due to the rule-heavy nature of the character's interaction. So, if the primary purpose of the game is to provide a series of physical and mental challenges for the players and their characters to win through, then it matters little what the status of that character's parents might be, except to the player himself. It is also common in very large-scale "fest" games, where players are numbered in the high hundreds or thousands, and by necessity the organiser-sourced plot

needs to be open to any character present at the game.

In terms of the game writer, there is little burden on them from an open character creation system. Once the system is set up, with whatever method of allowing the player to access it (written, online, etc), it requires very little interaction from the writers. Since plot is character agnostic, there is no need for the writers to know or care about the characters attending the game.

## CHARACTER PRE-GENERATION

At the opposite end of the scale is a style of character generation that relies upon the game's writers to generate and publish the characters to the players. Background and past events are recorded, and often insight into the character's thoughts, desires and goals are offered. Relationships with other characters are predetermined and sometimes a list of aims and objectives are set out for the player. Unlike some of the blockbuster nordic larps, where players are encouraged to amend, alter or discard aspects of their character brief, in the UK this style comes with an expectation of fidelity on the part of its players. Player agency is again purely by character action, they have no control over the state in which their character starts the game.

Character pre-generation is seen by many as the domain of a different discipline of role-playing, that of the "freeform,"<sup>5</sup> but as with all larp the lines are extremely blurred. There are certainly games that are regarded as larp that have used full character pre-generation to provide the players with their characters. For large, complicated games the briefs can become weighty, sometimes several pages long and occasionally very many pages long.

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5 If you put a dozen UK larpers in a room and asked them to define the differences between a larp game and a freeform you would leave with a dozen different answers. Largely they are the same thing. If you had to define a difference it would probably be the amount of rules and mechanics involved, with freeform games having much less mechanical burden.

The burden upon the writers using such a character creation method can be extensive. Depending upon the tightness of scripting, the volume of information to be presented and the number of players, writing all the characters for a game can constitute an endeavour of epic proportions. When one considers the importance of tight and accurate continuity between characters in order to ensure that both sections of a relationship understand the nature of their bonds; the importance of great editorial control also becomes paramount. This method of character creation carries with it a high burden of effort on the part of game writers.<sup>6</sup>

### **HYBRID CHARACTER DESIGN**

Character generation systems that either do not care about the character's history or that present the character as a finished article have been found by many players to be unsatisfying. So hybrid character generation styles have become fashionable. Sometimes this can be as simple as offering an open style of character design with the ability to submit supporting history to the game authorities for plot data-mining; or to offer a pre-generated character with deliberate gaps left in it for the player to personalise. Other games use a truly collaborative approach to the generation of characters, with a back and forth between the player and the organiser in iterative development of concept and brief.

This is a fairly common method in smaller UK games,<sup>7</sup> and is spreading slowly to larger games. The level of collaboration is, of course, scalable and it is necessary to tailor the organiser/player contact to factor in available resources. It is also important to

be aware that not all players wish to involve themselves in the process to a large extent, and time and enthusiasm constraints may cause players to fail to engage in the process. Despite it often being the player who fails to engage with the organiser, it can then lead to a perceived fairness imbalance in terms of organiser attention, and a consequent assumption of inherent game unfairness.<sup>8</sup>

Obviously there is a sliding scale of effort required on the part of the writers for a game that chooses a hybrid system. As a minimum, they must be prepared to weave character backgrounds into their plot writing, drawing upon the core elements of player writing. In more intricate cases, there can be levels of commitment equal to those of a pre-generated character system, with as much writing effort put into meshing player generated or collaboratively generated background and story into the plot.

### **CHARACTER DESIGN AND NARRATIVE OPPORTUNITY**

Each of the character design methodologies comes with its own benefits, drawbacks and opportunities when looking at the overall narrative of the game. Character generation is often the first encounter that the player will have with the game, and thus it has a profound effect upon the player's expectations of the game.<sup>9</sup> There is opportunity to be had here as well, however, as a well-designed immersive character design process can reinforce themes and generate excitement for the game to come, as well as dictating the view from which the player experiences the game.

Open character design can, at first glance,

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6 The largest number of characters I have experienced written in this way for a single game numbered in the low hundreds.

7 Those with less than 100 players.

8 Skewed game balance in competitive games is injurious to the feeling that your participation is valued, and unfairness (or the perception of it) is a common criticism of UK larp games.

9 Your author has had one experience where he was faced with such an impenetrable and confusing system of character creation that he actually cancelled his ticket for the larp in question.

seem to be a narrative dead end. After all, there is no organiser or plot interaction with the character, and so the character is largely irrelevant to the narrative. But in reality it can serve to open the game and its narrative up to more participants. If no one can legitimately claim to be the Queen by virtue of their character background, then it is left to role-playing and chutzpah on the part of the player to land the throne. Making character background irrelevant to the game “in the field,” means that players are free to simply turn up and play, with no requirement to even have thought about their character. Whilst this may seem, on the surface, an obstacle to narrative development, it forces the action into the playing time, where it is witnessed and interacted with by many more than if it were a background action. When the game is a campaign game, played out over many events spanning months or years, encouraging all action to occur during the game is beneficial to building a narrative shared across the whole of the game’s player base, as there is no risk of significant action happening “off-screen.”

There is a danger that, when character action defines narrative, the overall game can seem cliquy and dominated by a select few players with the charisma and will to place themselves into the forefront of that narrative. Those players who have less confidence or who arrive at the campaign late can feel as though the key positions in the game (and thus the narrative) are all spoken for, and that power blocs are entrenched and not open for challenge. Their ability to affect the narrative is diminished, or appears as such, and they disengage from the game.

Open character creation systems do also run the risk of leaving the character isolated from the world in which it sits. Where there is no real need to engage with the

character background in order to generate that role, some players will not do so, focusing solely on what the character can do and not at all on its place in the world. They can also, in some older systems that have been through multiple revisions and additions, become sufficiently arcane that it is hard for new players to decipher and thus they become off putting.

The quest for balance, and through it fairness, is a core design principle for many UK larps, and often pushes the larger scale games towards an open style of character design.<sup>10</sup> If there is an opportunity for a perception of imbalance in a game with player vs player conflict, then it will be taken and used to berate the game organisers. This, of course, in turn colours the narrative of the game. I have heard players discount the enjoyable sections of games that they played more than a decade ago because of their perception of a fairness imbalance. The last narrative from that game was that it favoured the writers’ friends, and not any of the grand storytelling that it also managed.

*“Generally speaking, as an organiser I’m just not very interested in someone’s character background [... what makes a character interesting and engaging is the choices they make while playing—not the background of who they are. [...] experiences that are written on paper are just that—they’re just... writing. What counts is what happens live—what happens in the game—while people are playing. That’s \*real\*—everything else is an illusion.”*

**Matt Pennington**  
**Director, Profound Decisions.<sup>11</sup>**

Character pre-generation offers easier to understand benefits for game narrative. Having complete control over character motiva-

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<sup>10</sup> Despite this apparent desire for balance, UK larps rarely represent “hard skills” as points based picks; so if your side has more people skilled at combat with larp weapons, or more people with unusually large quantities of charm and charisma, then you have an advantage over rival groups.

<sup>11</sup> Profound Decisions run the Empire campaign larp series, fest-level fantasy games set in an incredibly detailed world. These games attract some 1500 participants per game and run 4 times per year.

tions, goals and relationships allows a much tighter direction to be applied to the game levers. Whilst it is still not possible (or indeed desirable) to definitively map out the path that the narrative will take, tightly scripted characters give the writers a better starting point from which to ponder the directions it might take.

With a narrower range of likely directions for characters to go, more time can be spent on linking individual characters to plot arcs and thus providing more personalised plot engagement for the players. The purpose of a pre-generated character is not to “railroad” the player into certain actions, but instead to provide focus to enable the player to get the most out of the time invested in the game. Obviously, this style of character generation requires more buy in from the player and careful writing on the part of the game’s writers to avoid any feeling of pre-scripted play. It is easy for a scene that has been set up by sections in several characters briefs to become an exercise in merely playing out the writer’s intentions, rather than a true scene with full player agency.

Player engagement with the game can be very intense when this method of character creation is used. Receiving a finely crafted and well written character brief, with clear plot hooks and intriguing relationships can be a special moment for some players. For those people, the character reveal serves to build excitement and draw them into their character’s story and thus the game narrative from a time ahead of the game. Having time to understand and own the character gives these players a deep affinity for it which can translate to a very satisfying experience.

There is a tension in all story-driven larp games between the plot as designed and written by the game’s organisers and the desire for player agency and the ability to move that plot into new directions to generate a new narrative for the game. Pre-generated

characters run the risk of exposing that tension more starkly than other forms of character creation, as if too detailed they can lead the characters down a predetermined path. When handled correctly they can allow for some of the most intricate and delicate of plot weaves that produce a realistic and satisfying experience for all. The other danger with this form is that it can lead to a fear on the part of the player that they somehow need to do their character justice and in extremis that fear can cause a state of character paralysis, where rather than get their character “wrong” they do nothing.

*“For a game where the overarching narrative was the primary design consideration, structured characters with specific predefined goals were one of the primary tools we used to build the world, maintain consistency and coherence, and ensure we had an overall sequence of events that hung together from any angle.*

*On the one hand, the degree of control over the narrative that we exercised by writing those characters was considerable[...] On the other hand, one of our cardinal rules was “once we’re in play, the player rules.” If players went “off-piste” with their characters during a game we respected the decisions they made and incorporated them moving forward. So in that sense, the players did really have more freedom than it appeared to begin with.”*

**Ian Andrews**

***Speaking about the New World Order series of games<sup>12</sup>***

Hybrid systems seem to offer the best of all worlds. The combination of writer interaction and player freedom is an attractive one, with the opportunity to blend plot hooks and direction with agency for the player. It is possible for this style of character generation to result in a character that fulfils the plot requirements of the larp writers and affords

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12 NWO, or New World Order were a series of extremely influential games in the late 90s and early 2000s that were set in the Ars Magica world, and featured very long pre-written character “briefs.” The irony of the word brief was not lost on the writers.

the freedom to the player to place their own identity upon that character.

However, there are many pitfalls to a system that tries to be all things to all people. Defining the limits of customisation to your players can be hard. Many players may not wish to engage in the iterative processes in place, and it will be harder to offer these players the same level of detail as those that are invested in the character creation process. Accusations of imbalance are probable, as players will often perceive their rivals as having a relationship with the game organisers that benefits their rival and disadvantages them. The idea of benefits for friends, cliques and unfair advantage can easily ruin trust in the game writers. With the UK's focus upon creating conflict between characters as a source of story, as well as the ongoing nature of campaign games and their consequent buy-in and investment from players, perception of bias is a major threat to the creation of a satisfying narrative.

In a system that encourages player and organiser collaboration in character generation, there is also a very real danger that some players, who have a good understanding of the game style, can come to create characters that fit well with the plot. This can lead to certain players constantly grandstanding, whilst others who are less good at fitting their characters to the plot style, find themselves relegated to support roles.

*"I'm not sure you'd class the system we use as collaborative in the way that the term is usually used i.e. I generally understand the usage of 'collaborative' to be 'work with the player to develop the character up front' and that's not really what we do. Sure, we ask the player for a very basic idea if they have one, but most people leave it to us. We do pitch an expanded concept back to the player just to check that it's okay with them, but we don't work—pre-game—on deeper details with the player themselves.*

*Where I'd say we are extremely collaborative is in the way we don't directly brief*

*the player. We give them a loose framework—defined by IC<sup>13</sup> documents, letters, passports, diaries, photographs etc.—and then allow the player to fill in those gaps for themselves. What they thought or felt about a particular event, or person, for example. How they spent the year between Diary Entry #1 and Diary Entry #2. So there is considerable space for the player to bring their own thoughts, feelings, behaviour and history to the character."*

**Ian Thomas**  
**Writer and Organiser**  
**Crooked House Games**

*"We were both very reluctant to present players with a pile of notes to read through. Having played games which felt more like an exam for which you hadn't revised, or for an interview where you hadn't adequately prepared, we didn't want the players to feel they had to sit down and swot up on details of their characters. The presentation of documents which were open to interpretation about how the character felt about the event, or even if they cared about it at all allowed them to improvise."*

**Rachel Thomas**  
**Writer and Organiser**  
**Crooked House Games**

## CHOICES

As with any creative medium, there is no correct way to approach things when it comes to character creation styles for memorable narrative. Furthermore, as with many open character creation systems, it is often the purpose of those systems to get out of the way of the narrative. To divorce the whole pre-game persona from the equation, allowing only in-game actions to drive the overall narrative.

When used correctly, however, character creation can provide a gateway into the game that helps the players to get a feel for

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13 IC or In Character, is roughly synonymous with In Game.

the game, provides them with the tools that they need to feel comfortable slipping into the mind of the character, whilst allowing them the freedom to truly personalise their experience as they wish. Facilitating the player story should form the minimum bar to clear in terms of the character creation system. If your character creation system gets in the way of the player being able to tell the story that they hope or expect to be able to tell, then it is a fundamentally bad piece of design.

To determine which style of character creation will serve your narrative intentions best, you must understand how you wish that narrative to develop. If you want a broad and open narrative that focuses upon the in-the-field actions of the characters, where inclusivity is less important than the demonstrable effects of decisive action; then an open character creation system may serve your game best. The risk that some players may feel cut adrift, left out or unable to impact the game needs management, lest their contribution to the overall game narrative is negative.

*“I think the key element that we’re trying to create with Empire is to build a persistent world—one which self-generates interaction through overlapping and opposing character ambitions that arise organically from the individual motivations that people make.*

*The narrative goal for Empire? My goal was for “something to happen—something cool, something exciting, something dramatic, something... just anything.” I don’t care what it is—I don’t care \*what\* happens—I just care that something happens. I’m not a story writer—what I try to do is create a fertile environment which will cause stories to happen... basically I’m a glorified muck spreader.*

*So yeah... that’s what the character generation system in Empire is designed to do—to spread muck. To fertilize the ground by providing mechanisms that allow for effective competition within the world—thereby incentivising people to compete—and by doing so create good stories for each*

*other.”*

**Matt Pennington**  
**on Empire LRP’s character creation system**

If your intent is to tightly bind characters to one another, to provide the player with complicated relationships with a coherent theme, or to set up intricate multi-player plots, then character pre-generation might suit. It most suits a heavily themed game where the writers have a situation, game feel or philosophy that they wish to explore. It will inevitably add a large word count to your game preparation and care must be taken to avoid swamping the player with information, scripting too tightly or failing to account for player choice and action. It is all too easy to let writer expectation flourish at the cost of player agency, leading to railroading when things go awry.

*“Did we have an end in mind when we set off? Only in the broadest terms, insofar as we wanted the in-game organisation (the Order of Hermes) to face an existential threat in real terms. We set up a dozen or so possible sources for that existential threat over the first two games embedded in the attitudes, goals and aims of characters and their perception of as-yet-unplayed characters in the background, then let the players actions evolve which of those threats became the primary, how it evolved and what it meant.*

*One of our biggest protagonists wasn’t played in person until the final game, but featured extensively in character sheets for the first four. His sheet for the final game was shaped not just by what we had written of him, but on how players had reacted to that in game over the first four games.”*

**Ian Andrews**  
**speaking on New World Order narrative**

If you wish your narrative to be responsive to player action, but also offer a somewhat guided experience, then a hybrid system will most likely suit. It allows the player input into their character, and through that character into the plot; whilst still offering the

writers a chance to send the game in a certain direction. Its flexibility is also its drawback; differing player expectations (especially around fairness), potentially very high levels of work and record keeping, and the need for very clear communication between players and writers.

*“Narratively, we were attempting to create a series of characters who had stories, secrets and problems which mirrored the themes of our game in a way which intertwined those characters with both our overall narrative and with each other.*

*GRYM was an experiment in overcoming a standard trope of horror games—in most games, a reason for the haunting is discovered, and a puzzle is solved or a ritual is performed to cure the haunt. We wanted to focus on the emotional drama rather than reducing the ghosts to what is effectively button-pushing or box-ticking. Therefore one of our side goals was to give characters secrets or problems that echoed the situations which had led to individual ghosts haunting the manor—that is, each character was aligned in some way with a ghost, without knowing it. If the character succeeded in resolving their own crisis, that ghost would be laid to rest.*

*Given that each crisis—and each ghost—was also aligned with our major themes, the resulting thematic resonance resulted in players feeling they were ‘in tune’ with the event, which I’d count as an unexpected success.”*

**Ian Thomas**  
*speaking on God Rest Ye Merry (2015)*

A character generation system that is well thought through and appropriate to the game for which it is designed can become a part of the overall game narrative. In some cases, the character creation system flavours the game, or can even, in the case of “Dream Park” style games<sup>14</sup> (Niven and Barnes, 2010) be an in-game part of the event. To relegate character creation to a mechanistic process

only, can be to miss an opportunity to help build game narrative.

## LEARNING LESSONS

UK larp has traditionally been quite isolationist in terms of the wider world. It was rare to see UK larp writers and players at events outside the UK, or for them to participate in information and idea exchange with their worldwide fellows. This situation is changing, and more and more UK players are taking steps outside their own traditions and into games and events in Europe and beyond.

At the same time, there is an academic approach to larp becoming more prevalent amongst the UK larp community. Larp theory is becoming a topic of conversation, and sites like *larp.guide* are moving to offer content around larp theory online. With the influx of new ideas, many larp writers are looking at how they can improve their games and what lessons can be learned from outside the UK scene.

*“I guess I’d like to see more LRPs that build on the idea that who you were before the game started is not a critical thing the organiser needs to know about. I’d like to see more games where my character background is important to me—to give me a grounding in who I am and how I’m going to respond—but it’s not important for the organiser in terms of what is going to happen in the game we play.”*

**Matt Pennington**

*“I have not played an event with such an open character creation system before and I found it a very strange experience. The idea of setting up all my secrets as open secrets and asking who else wanted to be part of my character arc seemed very weird.”*

**Rachel Thomas**  
*speaking on Fairweather  
Manor character creation.*

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14 In which the character is an in-game construct.

“One of the things that I took away from my experiments with Nordic and European larp is the collaborative initial approach and the workshopping elements. UK larp in the main—certainly the fest larp part of it—comes at character generation the same way it comes at most things—competitively. I think there’s a lot to be said for the idea of engaging in some structured engagement and workshopping about characters and the game contract ahead of play starting.”

**Ian Andrews.**

There has been little innovation in character generation techniques over the last two decades, with most of them making small iterative changes. Whilst for some games, their choice of character system fits with and serves, their themes and narrative goals, elsewhere it is often overlooked in favour of more visible and “important” sections of game narrative. Like the breadth of character creation systems in UK larp, there is a breadth of opinion on whether this is something worthy of change or not.

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**[character moment]**

**“He killed a man. I will never talk to him again,” Shane said. Nothing Brooke said could bridge the gap that had appeared between her two best friends.**

**[Brooke Nolton, College of Wizardry 1]**

## **the Event**

### **College of Wizardry**

hby

al. 2014) is a four-day larp in a Polish  
g students and staff at a magical col-  
cal world exists alongside the “Mun-  
Harry Potter universe. It is a sandbox  
f player-led play flourish. There is a  
ses, years, paths, a timetable of daily  
ll etc). Within that perimeter, howev-  
ng they wish. It is also a very popular  
mat is demonstrated by the on-going  
d 12 in the pipeline, and a strong in-  
ng players. Enthusiasm for the game  
Harry Potter universe between CoW3

**[character moment]**

**“I will not stand in your way, and not in hers. Just promise me one thing, okay? Promise, that you will not forget what we had. Because it sure was a good thing.”**

**[Ashley Zamos, College of Wizardry 5]**

**[future of larp]**

**We will get more professional organisers who earn money making larps or have it as a side job. The age span is growing, so we will get a larger diversity than ever before.**

**[Eskil, 42 years]**

*“One of the things that I took away from my experiments with Nordic and European larp is the collaborative initial approach and the workshopping elements. UK larp in the main—certainly the fest larp part of it—comes at character generation the same way it comes at most things—competitively. I think there’s a lot to be said for the idea of engaging in some structured engagement and workshopping about characters and the game contract ahead of play starting.”*

*Ian Andrews.*

There has been little innovation in character generation techniques over the last two decades, with most of them making small iterative changes. Whilst for some games, their choice of character system fits with and serves, their themes and narrative goals, elsewhere it is often overlooked in favour of more visible and “important” sections of game narrative. Like the breadth of character creation systems in UK larp, there is a breadth of opinion on whether this is some-

**[character moment]**

**“Nick is gone! He is dead! You have to accept that, MC!”  
Richard Jaeger shouted at her. And she knew that he was right.**

**[Marie-Claire Baston,  
College of Wizardry 7]**

**[character moment]**

**“I have to go. I love you, goodbye!”  
As he ran into the night to die, my heart shattered and I realised that I loved him back.**

**[Irene Heartray,  
College of Wizardry 3]**

**[future of larp]**

**Maybe we have more machines to help us to make the larps a little more reality-like.**

**[Elin, 15 years]**

# Playing Around the Event

## Expansive pre-game at *College of Wizardry*

Charlotte Ashby

*College of Wizardry* (Nielsen and Dembinski et al. 2014) is a four-day larp in a Polish castle where around 135 participants play at being students and staff at a magical college. It is set in the present day where the magical world exists alongside the “Mundane,” reflecting its origins as a game set in the Harry Potter universe. It is a sandbox design, within which many different strands of player-led play flourish. There is a containing perimeter of game architecture: houses, years, paths, a timetable of daily events (classes) and landmark events (sorting, ball etc). Within that perimeter, however, players are free to invent pretty much anything they wish. It is also a very popular game. The appeal of the *College of Wizardry* format is demonstrated by the on-going success of the game since 2014, with *CoW 11* and *12* in the pipeline, and a strong international player base of both new and returning players. Enthusiasm for the game remains undented by the shift away from the Harry Potter universe between *CoW3* and *CoW4*.

In this article I focus not on the game itself but on play around the event. Facilitated by the game design and game team and driven by the players themselves, the game is taken beyond the game-as-event format, stretching its parameters and blurring its boundaries. This should not come as a surprise. It has been observed that the players of games are essentially playful and therefore inclined to tinker with any format or text they are presented with (MacCallum-Stewart, 2014). In a related manner, consumption of other media is increasingly moving from the passive to the active (Jenkins, 2014). Larp, as an intrinsically participatory medium, is therefore a natural site for new, emergent forms of play. (Pearce, 2009)

The expanding world of polymedia socialising is also central to the development I am considering (Madianou and Miller, 2013). As more and more dimensions of our real lives are experienced online, digital media is increasingly not simply an arena for the documenting of life, but a site where it is lived. It is therefore natural that larp should move into this territory as a potential new field of play to augment and complement live play, just as our digital lives augment our (analog) life.

Alongside an exploration of the nature of this emergent form of expansive pre-game play, I am also interested in considering its impact, and potential impact, on player experience. There is, after all, a difference between a game you go to for a designated number of days and a game that potentially follows you around for months on end, ping-pong from your device and popping up on your screen. I use the term pre-game, rather than pre-game, as a noun to signal that while it happens before “the game” it is also a form of game on its own account. It is my contention that pre-game, as presented here, has the potential to blur boundaries between game and not game and, in terms of player experience, between one reality and another.

## PRE-GAME IN THE CROSS-PLATFORM SANDBOX

The primary message delivered to players attending CoW is that your characters are your characters (CoW documentation, 2015). If anything doesn't work for you—barring assigned house, path or year—you can change it. If it isn't working in play, you can change it (Raasted, 2015). Characters can also be written in their entirety by players themselves and group dynamics of family and friends across the school and among the staff may be invented, creating networks of players who wish to co-create story. Players are therefore substantially free to create the game they wish to attend, both in advance and at the larp. The *College of Wizardry* design allows for many different sub-games to flourish alongside one another: gods and monsters in the dungeon, cheerleader tryouts in the courtyard, all whilst someone else is getting stood up at the heart-ache end of the bridge.

This sort of player-led invention is actively supported by *College of Wizardry*. In the months in advance of the game all players have access to the innovative in-game social network, *Czochabook*, developed by Thomas Mertz and his team for *College of Wizardry* (Mertz, 2016). This provides a forum for online role-playing in the run-up to the game event and for a short wind-down period afterwards. In addition, players are given access to a network of Facebook groups in the months before the game, some set up by the game team and some that are player initiatives. These groups map onto the years, paths, clubs, societies, blood status heritage and really anything anyone can think of through which an individual character might construct their identity and relationship network.

This permissive, “anything goes” game design has its advantages and disadvantages, but this is not the focus of the current article. My core discussion is the development of a variety of forms of play outside the pa-

rameters of the game itself as an event. Some of what I am discussing overlaps with the general field of pre-game preparation, character creation and the formation of character relationships prior to a game. Some of it might be compared to the practice of writing fanfiction about beloved characters, to assert ownership of these characters and their stories (McClellan, 2013). However, what I am particularly interested in are the points when well-established practices of character development and backstory blur into the realm of a category-stretching pre-game across a range of digital platforms.

As some characters roll from event to event, particularly with the provision of *Mid-term Madness* sequel games by the *College of Wizardry*,<sup>1</sup> various forms of play within the same game-world may extend over many months. This has been augmented by a number of player-devised spin-off games, where characters and plot threads from the main games are played forward. What pre-game and spin-off games share is the generation of player-led play outside of the game-as-event format, entirely unregulated or monitored by the game team. Based on the sandbox premise, due to the extended time involved pre-, post- and between events, the walls of the sandbox are pushed further and further for players who partake, creating a fundamentally different experience of the game. This high-intensity, prolonged pre-game has the potential to transform player experience, creating something even experienced players are unfamiliar with.

It is not my contention that the *College of Wizardry* is unique in generating rich pre-game, postgame and inter-game play. However the conjunction of permissive game design and the expansion of available channels of digital communication has, I would argue, created a novel context in which the main game event itself has the potential to form only a portion of the experience and narrative content of each game for those players who partake in the “expanded version.”

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1 To date CoW2, 7 and 8 have been sequels.

It is not unusual for players of all sorts of games to develop backstory for their characters. The amount of character preparation expected before an event and the form that it takes is culturally highly variable. The Nordic Larp Wiki Rulebook gives only passing consideration for activity undertaken prior to arrival at the larp:

*A vital part of Nordic Larp is the attitude which you come into it with.*

*If you have a character in advance, you should costume for this character. Unless otherwise specified, you do not need period materials, but the costume should look convincing.* (Stark et.al. 2012)

Costume preparation is certainly a rich field for the development of character identity and this entry reflects the high value placed on costume as a contribution to larp experience in the Nordic countries. It does not, however, encompass the range of preparatory activities players may engage in. Character sheets often include elements of backstory, though this can also vary massively across different larp cultures from a couple of paragraphs to tens of pages. It is not uncommon for the generation of a backstory, in the form of pieces of fiction, to be developed individually or collaboratively as part of game preparation. It is regarded by many a valuable part of making that character come alive. The creation of such backstory is not usually regarded as “play,” with the distinction being that the creator is not in character at the time, rather they are meditating creatively on the nature of that character. (Pearce, 2016, p.458-9)

*College of Wizardry* provide players with two-page-long character sheets, containing factual details, some character background and some suggestions for developing the character. From *CoW4* onwards, player participation in the task of non-Potter world-building for *College of Wizardry* included the opportunity to create their own

characters. This was formalised for *CoW9/10* onwards, where the opportunity to bring your own character is explicitly offered at signup.<sup>2</sup> Both pre-written and player-devised characters then intersect with the *CoW* Facebook groups, as players can join the appropriate groups for house, year, any clubs they are affiliated to and so on. Players can set up their own groups for subcommunities they have devised, which are indexed in the overall game group. These groups and the dedicated “Looking for Relations” group set up for each game, alongside Facebook’s Messenger function, are used by players to introduce characters to one another and pursue character relations.

*Czochabook* is an in-game socialmedia platform in which players sign up in-character. The platform mirrors a Facebook-style format and is thus immediately familiar and accessible to most players who choose to engage. It allows for the uploading of an in-character profile picture, the creation of posts in the form of texts and/or images, commenting on posts, the formation of groups and private messaging. The modern phenomenon of “living online” is thus transposed into the virtual world of *College of Wizardry*.

*Czochabook [Kin] is one of the things that makes CoW more alive. It’s completely optional and you can play the larp without it just fine, but for those who choose to join the madness that is Czochabook [Kin], it adds a whole extra layer to the experience.*

**Claus Raasted, Main Organiser, College of Wizardry** (Mertz, 2016)

Usage of *Czochabook* has increased notably since its launch in 2015.

*To date Kin has been used to post more than 5890 updates, with more than 76576 comments. Users across installations have sent more than 32565 private messages and doled out more than 47554 Likes.* (Mertz,

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<sup>2</sup> For more discussion of player-generated characters at *College of Wizardry* see Monika Weißenfels, “Telling character stories” in this volume.

2016)

As content builds up over time within each self-contained, game-specific iteration of *Czochabook*, a new virtual community comes into being, with running jokes and a realistic patina of close friends surrounded by a wider body of acquaintances. These communities are not designed by the game team. Players with pre-written characters have been provided with foundational and peripheral information on character sheets and everyone has access to a framework of world lore and trivia in the design document and accompanying texts. (Raasted et al., 2014, Raasted 2015a, 2015b, 2015c) Though, as mentioned, a high proportion of these texts since *CoW4* have been generated by players, rather than game team as such.

The virtual community of the pre-game, therefore, develops as an emergent process negotiated between players. It is shaped by player familiarity with the functional tropes of social media: from following one's friends and commenting on one another's posts to relationship status drama, vaguebooking and the ensuing flurry of private messages and comments of concern. This transposition of social media practices to bring fictional characters to life has already been observed in the realm of fanfiction. (Lookadoo and Dickenson, 2015) The difference between fans staking a claim to a favourite character, role-playing as them, tweeting as them, creating fictional blogs etc., is the subordinate relationship to the source media. However engaged the fans are and however receptive the show-runners or actors are, the fans don't control the show. In larp they do and the game is explicitly a vehicle for that practice, particularly in the hands of the *College of Wizardry* team who facilitate rather than "master" the game.

What might have remained individual character backstory thus enter the public game-world, as references to family and characters' homelife make their way into posts, comments and private messages. Whether activities on *Czochabook* constitute "play" is a matter of interpretation. Doubtless, for some players *Czochabook* is

used simply as a preparation tool for profile-building and relationship-building. This overlaps with a performative aspect, in that characters are "previewed" to other players in pre-game prior to their full realisation in-game. It also should be stated that not all players avail themselves of these opportunities to the same extent or, indeed, at all. As indicated above, the game team stress that such preparation is not a requirement of the game. However, statistics relating to usage of *Czochabook* demonstrate that a significant volume of character/player interaction takes place prior to the game-as-event being run. For those players who have lived with their characters' and their characters friends and enemies for months and have multiple threads of plot already running, the game itself is undeniably a different experience. The degree to which this experience can be meshed with players stepping into their character's shoes for the first time, on the day, is debatable.

As the study by Martine Svanevik and Simon Brind on *CoW5* demonstrated, for a number of players engagement with pre-play can be intense (Svanevik and Brind, 2016). Alongside, in-game public and private *Czochabook* interactions, private messaging and video hangouts across various platforms are used, fiction is written individually and collaboratively, commonly using GoogleDocs, and online roleplay events are hosted in player-developed virtual games on Facebook. What is notable is not that players are developing backstory and relations, but the volume of interactions taking place and the weaving back and forth of these different fictional interactions, the complexity of which starts to share parallels with live play.

#### **CASE STUDY: PANDEMONIUM BALL**

As a case study, the Pandemonium Ball was a virtual game event that took place in the pre-game of *CoW5*. It was hosted by a player (Player B/ "Lilith Emilia von Ravensberg") and took the form within the pre-game fiction of an annual ball hosted by the character's aunt. The event was hosted in a private

Facebook group, but was a public event, in that it was promoted off-game on the overall player group for CoW5, with all players invited to participate if they wished. Forty-nine players joined the group, with Claus Raasted and Agata Świstak from the game team also added as non-playing members.

The group functioned as a semi-public pre-game opportunity, with a liminal in-game/off-game character. Off-game posts within the Pandemonium Ball Facebook group gave instructions on the fictional event, framing it for players. Further posts within the group organised activities geographically (the balcony, the library, the forest etc.) and by event-points (opening dance, dinner etc.), creating spaces for virtual play/collective fiction building to take place. Events were constructed by means of comments to the relevant posts presenting the action of characters in the form of third person narration:

*[Thread within “The Dance” post in the Pandemonium Ball group]*

**Player A<sup>3</sup>**

*As the strains of the Dance Macabre fade, Mac marches through the remaining spectres up to Emmanuel (Tag: Player C) and Lilith (Tag: Player B). “Nice spooks, Peb,” she says. “Lilith?” she holds out her hand.*

**Player D**

*Clarissa, who’s been watching the dance, clinging to the arm of the same young wizard from her first dance as though being frightened, is now ignoring him, watching Mac and Emilia with anticipation in her eyes.*

**Player B**

*Lilith looks at Mac with a raised eyebrow. She then looks back at Emmanuel and sighs. “Sorry, sweetheart. I’ve got some duties.” Then just nodding at Mac to show her that she will take the dance.*

As this sample indicates, Facebook did not provide the same in-character roleplay

experience as *Czochabook*. Off-game Facebook identities are revealed alongside the referred-to character names. The convention of tagging the players of other characters was used to notify them of beats in the narrative relevant to their character.

This collective fiction was semi-public, in that events performed in the virtual spaces of the Pandemonium Ball group were deemed to have been viewable and/or overheard by anyone else at the ball. Private conversations, the content of whispers and scenes taking place that players and/or characters explicitly did not want to be public knowledge were simultaneously created in written fictions or private messages. In addition, *Czochabook* was used alongside Facebook before the ball for discussion of invitations and dates and after the ball to roleplay the exchange of gossip and allusions to events that had taken place either within the Pandemonium Ball Facebook group or the surrounding private fictions.

The ball was deemed to have taken place on the evening of the 28th September 2015, and the majority of narrative contributions on and off the group were made between the official opening of play on the 25th and the 30th September 2015. Gossip regarding the event on *Czochabook* therefore did not take off until after the 28th, though this was only informally observed. The division of the Pandemonium Ball group into different spaces and different event-points within the fictional evening allowed players to contribute to comment threads of narrative, arriving at the ball, first dance etc., out of overall sequence. A large group of players could therefore play “together” without all being online at the same time, though synchronous play did also occur.

Example of cross-platform pre-game interaction:

*[Private Messenger conversation co-creating the roleplay or fiction of conversation whilst dancing]*

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3 The author.

**Player A**

*Mac freezes, breaking the dance and forcing the other dancing couples to flow around them. She turns to face Lilith. "You ever loved any of 'em?"*

**Player B**

*There is something indefinite on her face. Not exactly a smirk. "You really want to know it? Well the answer is no. I never loved any of my exes." She's avoiding Mac's gaze now, looking somewhere above her shoulder.*

*[Extract from Facebook comment thread, conveying the interaction devised above. Posted to the "First Dance" in the Pandemonium Ball Facebook group]*

**Player B**

*At one point during their conversation there is almost something like a laugh coming from Lilith, then a rather amused look which makes Mac flush red. Lilith turns her around during their dance, to break the eye contact, before whispering something into her ear from behind her.*

**Player A**

*Whatever she says causes Mac to freeze, breaking the dance and forcing the other dancing couples to flow around them. She turns to face Lilith and asks a question. An indecipherable look flashes over Lilith's face, but she answers easily enough. At her reply Mac grins broadly for the first time that evening.*

The fiction is negotiated between the players in advance and a virtual performance of it is placed in the semi-public forum of the Facebook group to simulate what could have been apparent to an observer at the event.

Within the Pandemonium Ball group hundreds of such fragmentary interactions were created and collected over a fictional evening and a real-time play cycle of around a week. Each individual interaction had the potential to be meaningful (or not) to any other player "observing" it in the group. Player D and her character know that Player B's character is conducting an illicit relationship that the character of Player A is completely

ignorant of. Her amusement performed in the quote above is thus visible to Player A, though its import is not yet understood.

The significance of each interaction enacted on Facebook had the potential to ripple onwards in fictionalised conversations between friends recounting what they had seen or done, either on *Czochabook* or alternate platforms. The result was a richly articulated virtual memory with shades of focus for individual players from the intensely significant and personal to the vague recollection of having seen X talking to Y at some point. In the example above, Mac will later be able to infer that Clarissa knew about Lilith's relationship before she did and that will inflect the relationship of these characters without any overt pre-game negotiation necessary between Players A and D.

The virtual reality of the pre-game overall was heightened by the use of images, music and descriptive text conveying details of the sensory environment. Photographs of players in costume, props and locations were shared on *Czochabook*, simulating an Instagram-like visual documentation of the characters' lives. Shared fictions included descriptions of sensory experiences of the characters involved. The Pandemonium Ball group included players sharing descriptions and photographs of environments and costumes as well as videos of music playing for different dances. All this contributed to the potential for a high level of sensory evocation associated with the character memories formed in pre-game.

Though this collective narrative creation took place primarily in the form of third-person fiction writing, the complexity of it surpassed the simple authoring of a character backstory by a long way. In recollection, fictional events were given a patina similar to true memories in that each character's agency extended only to their own actions and they were confounded, surprised, amused etc. by the actions of the characters around them. The scale of the virtual event meant that, even if certain interactions were carefully negotiated off-game, the tapestry of casual and serious exchanges and the glimpses of other characters engaged in fragments of

their own stories only partially legible to you exploded the linearity of fiction. The same could be said of pre-game play on *Czochabook*, where episodes from collaborative fictions and private messaging of play, both on and off *Czochabook*, played in and out of the public realm of statuses and comments.

### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EXTENDED PRE-GAME PLAY

This pre-game play/collective narrative assemblage breaks the traditional boundaries of fiction and online role-playing, sharing with live play its multiple points of focus and chaotic nonlinearity. Though the character memories developed in pre-game are fragmented across these different platforms and different writerly modes (first person, third person, out-of-character negotiations) it is known that the way memories form is similarly fragmented. Of the two central categories used in memory studies, semantic (factual) and episodic (autobiographical) memory, episodic memory, our memory bank of experiences and feelings, is the realm in which we collect our pasts and locate ourselves. (Shaw, 2016)

Extended pre-game is characterised by multiple tiers of relationships, from close friends and lovers to casual acquaintances. A broad array of characters people each character's (and player's) memoryscape, again approaching a complexity and verisimilitude associated with live action play. Crucially also, it is the intention from the start that this activity will ultimately manifest in face-to-face larping and that all the boasts made, favours owed, slights given will, potentially at least, have to be paid for. It is therefore distinct from the creation of fiction, in that it is haunted by the specter of the real, players will have to, to the best of their ability, sustain the fiction into the larp. It is also distinct from the efforts of the method actor, in that the reality created is not purely internal. It is not wrestled out of the real memories and imagination of the individual through efforts of reflection and projection, but collectively generated through narrative forms that much more closely mirror the accumu-

lation of real memories.

I have earlier referred to the transformative effect of this form of extended pre-game. What I mean by this is its potential to enhance access to immersive play, to shift it from the pretend toward the real. I should say first that is not my intention to pathologise this sort of play or imply that it is in any way a form of delusional behaviour. At the same time, memory studies have shown that repeated imagining and recounting of events can, with relative ease, generate false memories of things that never happened (Hyman and Pentland, 1996; Spanos, Burgess and Burgess, 1999). My suggestion, and indeed my experience as a player, is that a character whose past and relationships are constituted in this way has a reality more easily accessed than other short-forms or private forms of imagining because of the patination these memories provide within and, crucially, between individuals.

Before I go on, I also want to state that I am not suggesting pre-game is the only or best route to experiences of immersion. It is possible that players of long-running campaign games, for example, have the potential to experience something very similar as their character and relations evolve over time. Time is a factor, whether it is the intensity of days of play, play over months or years. As Mike Pohjola says:

*The longer the player pretends to believe, the more she starts to really believe. The more she pretends to remember, the more she starts to really remember. The more she pretends to believe to remember, the more she starts to really believe to remember, and really remember to believe, and really remember and really believe. And she pretends to forget she is just pretending.*  
(Pohjola, 2004. p.84)

What is distinctive to the pre-game I describe, as opposed to campaign play, is its concentration in the months immediately leading up to the game and its ability to synthesise for a new game the rich lifeworld of a campaign character. Similarly distinctive is its virtual character, which is nevertheless able to replicate the real formation of mem-

ories over time, and its collective, relational quality in which the self of the character is realised through the accumulation of actions, reactions and responses to and alongside other players.

This allows for a form of immersive play that moves from representation to being. The term I find useful here is methesis, as opposed to memesis. This term originates in studies of religious ritual and the realisation, usually collective, of the non-real, transcendental or divine.

*The ceremonies are however still intensely sympathetic and cooperative; they are as the Greeks would say, rather methektic than mimetic, the expression, the utterance of a common nature participated in, rather than the imitation of alien characteristics. The Emu man still feels he is an Emu; the feathers he puts on, the gait he emulates, are his own, not another's.* (Harrison, 1912, p.125)

When characters that have the kind of rich past lives and connections created in extended pre-game, such as described above, their coming together in larp can result in play that is methectic, as opposed to representational (Rapti, 2013). It can be experienced as a collective and generative creation of a known, though hitherto non-existing, reality. It is a familiar world peopled by familiar individuals, even though they may have never been seen in the flesh before. The aboriginal Emu man is not delusional, neither is he pretending: his is an Emu. The player who has imagined the feelings of their character for months, communicated these feelings to others, experienced and then recalls the interactions they have had with other characters is similarly not pretending when they become that character in game. They and their community, created on *Czochabook* and across platforms, become something close to real in the methectic space of the larp.

Pre-game is a corollary to this phenomenon but is also essentially distinct from it because of the meta awareness that everything set in motion there is intended as a contribution to the game itself to be played in a few

weeks or months time. It is participated in with a view to creating reality for the characters, but in conscious acknowledgement that this is not the game. The game-as-event is still to come. It is also, it must be said, a whole lot of creative fun, collectively realising, layer upon layer, a life and world for a group of characters.

Metamemory is our awareness and knowledge of the functioning of our own memory. "It is also metamemory that generally allows us to distinguish between things we have imagined, things we have observed and things we have actually participated in" (Shaw, 2016, loc. 475). Pre-game can therefore be understood as metamethectic. It is not the game, it is understood as existing at a remove from the game that will be and yet it feels like game. It is not immersive, in that it is carried out substantially in the form of third person narration, and makes frequent use of off-game strategy discussions between players. However, it requires and produces in-depth familiarity with the character and other characters and it generates real, affective emotional responses within that pre-game space. It is the conscious generation of a reality in the process of becoming.

Pre-game has the potential to enhance play, particularly for players looking for a rich and immersive game experience. Of course, not all players want to play like this in the first place. And, of those that do, there may be some who are able to step off the bus, don an item of character clothing and become "an Emu" without the foundation of any pre-game at all. For many, though, this threshold is more rigid. The experience of playing a character who has grown into being, not simply through your own creative efforts, but through the collective, sympathetic, reflective activity of fellow players, is the experience of getting a helping hand across that threshold. A collective and transcendental experience of shifting, without exertion, from one reality to another. Something like this once might have been provided by religious practices, but it is no longer a common part of many people's everyday reality (Wagner, 2012). This is not to say such an experience is guaranteed by pre-game or

that it will persist through every moment of the larp. But just as with the practice of meditation it becomes easier over time to send the mind into a meditative state, the months of pre-game create a mental groove it takes less effort to find and sustain. The less effort it takes the less it feels like pretending.

But this depth is not without potential cost. As Svanevik and Brind's survey suggested, extended pre-game had an effect on players at CoW5, with all those players reporting 40+ hours of pre-game (25 out of 51 respondents) also self-identifying as having experienced a form of pre-bleed (Svanevik and Brind, 2016, p.111). Bleed is a phenomena more usually associated with the immersive intensity of play (Montola, 2010). As they also point out, pre-bleed is not just a manifestation of immersion but coloured by the particular nature of pre-game, which is the withholding of narrative resolution.

However closely pre-game activities approach the experience of live play, they are conditioned by the knowledge that the game-as-event is still to come. Relationships are developed and plots set up with a desire to enrich the character in advance of the game. Unlike the author of fiction, the pre-game player controls only their individual character, not the characters around them, and so they are at the mercy of events. Unlike online role-playing, interactions are frequently not permitted to roll out too far towards their conclusion because to do so risks robbing the game itself of drama. The newly-evolved extended pre-game of the College of Wizardry is not exactly larp, online role-playing, fanfiction or collaborative authorship in any of the traditional senses, largely because of this game-but-not-the-game quality.

This form of extended, high-intensity pre-game puts unexpected strain on the usual mode of negotiating character relations prior to a larp: "let's be best friends," "my character hates yours," "maybe they like each other," etc. Prolonged pre-game, that-is-not-game, may strive to sustain the original potential of these relations: that the characters might break up, reconcile, fall out etc. Thus every interaction, crisis, confrontation, and

failure to address the pre-agreed elephant-in-the-room puts a particular strain on players. Resolutions that are being saved for live play can only ever be partially approached in pre-game or must be immediately undone by a new misunderstanding.

This has the potential to trap characters, and thus their players, in pseudo-unhealthy patterns of compulsive behaviour that unintentionally mirror avoidance-coping behaviours (Einstein, 2007, p.215-224). The artificial lack of resolution in the course of events and relationships that are otherwise conceived with great depth and verisimilitude has the potential to disturb and distress. Svanevik and Brind autoethnographically position their own character relationship within this paradigm. Their off-game strategy was to "save" reconciliation of their characters' fractured romance to the game itself, but living through a couple of months of pre-game in which there could be no resolution and no moving on for these characters took its toll.

While this adds an interesting level of verisimilitude to characters intentionally created as dysfunctional, the uncomfortable side-effects of pre-bleed could potentially be alleviated by greater awareness of the phenomenon of resolution-avoidant play and its potential impact. Though playing forward the pre-game as if it were legitimate game in an of itself has the potential pitfall of leaving the larp with nothing left to play, it also has the potential to develop complex multi-layered characters and relationships who have, in a very real sense, a history and a potential future. Though Svanevik and Brind kept their characters apart by main force through the pre-game, once the game started they were, despite their best intentions, reconciled within hours. This was not, despite their fears, anti-climactic and they ended up playing through, not division and final joyful reconciliation, but rather the shaky first days after the "happy ending." And it proved arguably more interesting to explore what happens the day after riding off into the sunset, when the sun comes up again and you have to make it work.

Similarly the romance-that-never-was

between Mac and Lilith, touched on above, was transformed by extended pre-game from a simple agreement between players to play a will-they-won't-they attraction into something quite different. The scale and intensity of the CoW5 pre-game myself and Player B participated in made it increasingly clear that the answer to will-they-won't-they in the emerging fiction was a resounding no. The decision I took to withhold this realisation from my character resulted in an interesting dynamic where what might, in the absence of pre-game, have been a simple romantic attraction played through as an increasingly morbid and compulsive one-sided attachment. This added depth and complexity to the character and emotional charge for me and for other players who were in the position of recognising the destructive tone of the relationship. This came with a cost, similar to that described by Svanevik and Brind, of as I experienced the pre-bleed of repeatedly returning to the experience of rejection my character was in denial about. My avoidance, as a player, of realisation and resolution played out through the character as self-destructive avoidant behaviour, was a stresser both in and out-of-character.

For players of pre-game it is important to be aware that the avoidance of resolution in particular may be at the root of uncomfortable feelings of pre-bleed. This knowledge allows informed choices to be made about how to continue play: to "power through" the discomfort, to play forward and explore the next stage in what is no longer a one-act drama or to step back from pre-game altogether. Alongside the phenomenon of pre-bleed, pre-game can have other pitfalls. As an emergent, experimental arena of play no one knows how to do it "properly." Negative side-effects may include the creation of a character whose reality you fail to live up to in the game or whose potential, which you have invested heavily in, remaining somehow ultimately unrealised. If pre-game is participated in by only a subgroup of players they risk arriving at the game with a game of their own that does not mesh with the dominant game culture.

The result of extended pre-game has a

further potential challenge for players. That is the development of a richness of plotlines and relations that cannot possibly be resolved in a couple of days of play. This in turn sets up something of a potential investment: return crisis. Plotlines and relations have been invested in and the player has struggled with the emotional toll of not resolving outstanding issues prior to the game. The participation in the event itself is thus preloaded with fateful significance. Where resolution remains elusive in-game or characters who have been heavily invested in are simply missed too much, players may recourse to live-action spinoff events. Participation in spinoffs or/and in addition to attendance at sequel games may be emotionally necessary for players who still require closure. Though experienced larpers will be familiar with the lesson that there will always be threads left undone after a game, this becomes harder to be reconciled to when the pre-investment has been so great.

Clearly, however challenging some of the repercussions are, many are coming back for more. Extended pre-game, such as that afforded by the *College of Wizardry*, offers players a novel-yet-familiar space for the creation of play of great depth and psychological intensity. Can a sandbox be too big? Possibly for some players and certainly the optional quality of participation in pre-game has the potential to create disjunction between ardent pregamers and those who show up with a different approach to character and game. Ultimately though, it is natural for larp to replicate and colonise the online realities of contemporary life, particularly for games set in the present. And it is also to be expected for the divisions between the two, virtual game and live action, to blur as the tools readily at hand for a rich online life multiply. Pre-game is a new and powerful field of emergent play. It is particularly valuable for international games as it offers solutions to the challenges of playing with total strangers and a forum for ironing out potential culture clashes. It creates a transitional space for players new to larp to grow familiar with other players and the game's culture of play. It offers more game for your money, even if

that game is not entirely like live play. It is a vibrant form of collective imagining that can ease and augment access to immersive play.

“Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?” (Rowling, 2007)

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Matt Pennington

## Response to Charlotte Ashby

I enjoyed reading the article on the pre-game construction of methetic memories using polymedia—or as we call it—“online role-playing.” The first thing that struck me was the underlying implication that this phenomena was new—the author is explicit that this isn’t groundbreaking—but still tries to imply that the evolution of facebook coupled with an open-game approach has born new fruit.

To that I think I would reply “polymedia—my ass.” It’s the internet—pure and simple. Despite the best attempts of Mark Zuckerberg to pretend that the internet began with Facebook—it has actually been around just a little longer than that. Over twenty years ago I was engaged in lengthy online role-playing sessions in a MUD (Multi User Dungeon) that had been constructed purely to extend the live-role-playing opportunities of a popular national game. Participants created their own locations, and the system presented you and your words as your character as you moved about. Online role-playing is contemporaneous with the birth of the internet, there is nothing new about any of this.

The experiences I describe above might have predated the invention of CSS, but I’m not convinced they were significantly different—let alone radically different—to any of the interactions described by the author. Facebook is pretty—but the underlying experience—the exchange of text, the odd picture and an emoticon—is not substantially different to that presented by the countless internet forums it devoured. Facebook is an evolution, not a revolution. I haven’t seen *Czochabook*, but since I’m confident that Raastad et al have not created some extraordinary new app then I can be pretty certain it’s just a dedicated social media server. The internet is an amazing thing... but it’s still just the internet—and it’s been around a while now.

Increasing bandwidth does present a new media opportunity that wasn’t there two decades ago. There weren’t many video applications in the days when we had to access the internet with a 47K modem. Google hang-outs presents opportunities to create online role-playing experiences that are strikingly more visual than those allowed for using text. But it’s clear from the article that this approach is the exception. I can see lots of potential challenges in exploiting video streams for online role-playing—and I was disappointed that there wasn’t more time given over to discussion of that. I’ll be happy to accept the phrase “polymedia” at the point where the range of media commonly employed includes more than just variations of text on a screen alongside the odd picture.

The impact of the online role-playing on the game itself is questionable. Over the last two decades I’ve spent thousands of hours iterating through different mechanisms to create rich motivation-generating pre-game experiences. Our latest iteration... was to bin it all off as a dead end. We proactively discourage online role-playing—we discourage the creation of shared narratives and shared character development. We do that because we’d rather people just did all that at the event—when they’re doing the live part of live role-playing.

Now we have the luxury on an ongoing campaign of events—I accept that if you are running one-off events then online role-playing before the game can clearly help to enrich the characters and make them feel more real. But at the point where you're spending hours in online interactions—in carefully arranged set pieces—the obvious question is why don't you just run another live role-playing event? The author didn't convince me that that would be significantly more work outside of the fairly unusual set-up of a pan-European game.

I have yet to find anything in shared narratives or online role-playing that comes close to creating the sense of connection that you experience when you are physically live role-playing. There's a reason we took this route—moving away from the tables and the dice that our hobby started with. That is because the live experience is unique. I don't want to type a description of what my character does—not even to generate backstory—I want to just do it—I want to live it. The author was clear that they enjoyed the online role-playing associated with his game and believed it added to their game—but they didn't say or describe anything that seemed novel and nothing that convinced me that it would approach the experience I would get from the live element.

I was pleased she took time to look at the potential downsides. We don't actively discourage online role-playing for no reason! The idea of proactively avoiding resolution, of avoiding anything that would advance the narrative—is not well embedded in the players who play our games. And the risk—very clearly—is that the conflicts are resolved, that the narrative does advance. When that happens, my experience is that it is to the detriment of the event itself—although it can be hard to see that because it is hard to notice the absence of things. I would have liked to have read more about how this kind of pre-game role-playing works—what steps people take to ensure they don't resolve the plots.

The other potential downside is in the differentiation that grows between those whose investment is limited to the event and those who take a full role in the pre-game online role-playing. The author touches on the risks—that those who don't have the time or the inclination end up frozen out of the game—but brushes over them too quickly. I was in no way persuaded by the evidence that because lots of people go and there are lots of online interactions that means it is fine for CoW games. I've been the player in games, constantly pushing for more hours to roleplay, more opportunities to interact, heedless of the impact that that is having on other players.

The CoW organisers have chosen to encourage online role-playing before and after their events. What I would expect to happen is for their audience to self-select for the kind of people who find that adds to their game. There is no right or wrong way to run a larp—but the popularity of a game with its own player-base only proves that larpers are smart enough to pick games they enjoy. It isn't sufficient to prove that any individual element of the approach is intrinsically more valuable than the alternative. In simple terms, some people like it, some people don't. If you do it then you'll get the players who like that sort of thing.

Ultimately though I think the weakness of the pre-game experience lies in the way it deepens character backgrounds and enriches individual stories. This critique is of course a question of taste but what I love about live role-playing is the pure spontaneity of it, life is not a narrative, it is a non-linear equation. The best games are not

those that are planned but those that try to recreate the experience of being alive in a world in which we are leaves adrift on the hurricanes caused by butterfly wings.

Crucially the live element of live role-playing revolves around what we do in the game—not who we are before we got there. The irony of the *CoW* games as a subject for this issue is that Harry Potter provides the perfect example of this failing. Potter is an appalling character—the over-used trope of “The Chosen One.” He’s important because he has a rich back story filled with crucial plot twists just waiting to be resolved. Frankly the entire series would have been a lot more enjoyable if the Slytherins had ganked Harry Potter on his way to the toilet halfway through book one.

Charlotte Ashby

## Reply to Matt Pennington

I'd like to start by agreeing completely with Matt Pennington on a couple of points. Firstly on the observation that there is no one right or wrong way to larp. Players gravitate towards the games that satisfy them and that is undoubtedly a good thing. Secondly, I wholeheartedly agree with the point he eloquently made at the end of his contribution: “The best games are not those that are planned but those that try to recreate the experience of being alive in a world in which we are leaves adrift on the hurricanes caused by butterfly wings.” The pre-game I describe has never been intended as a substitute for the immediacy and impact of live play. Nor is it simply a

planning tool for setting up the events that will take place in game.

I have tried to convey how I see pre-game working to augment this “being alive” in the game, which is to ease the character into life in the months leading up to the game. So that, come the game, the paths to that character within your mind (their core values, their loves, their pet peeves) are beaten smooth and worn with practice. And with this practice the slip into that other’s way of being is rendered magically effortless. This is not to arrive at the live game with a recipe of known ingredients to stuff into a game-shaped receptacle, but to be able to respond in a way that feels authentic to whatever the game throws at you. You just don’t know the way the character thinks, before you tcome up with it.

My contention in the article, that this pre-game represented something new, needs elucidating. It is, indeed, online role-playing and predominantly text-based. Where I see the distinction is not in the various media used, but in how it is used—a distinction that is primarily experiential. Character fictions have been written collectively before and elaborate text-based worlds have been played through by multiple participants. What is more recent is how thoroughly the internet permeates our lives and how readily we incorporate virtual interactions into our lived experience. Perhaps I should have said cross-platform or multi-device role-playing rather than polymedia—but it is too late now.

To tie this and the previous point together, the difference is that our role-playing is no longer bounded by the time we can spend sitting in front of our PCs and this

has, in my experience, a pretty big impact. To slip back and forth between your character's lifeworld and your own, on and off throughout the day, day after day, until the artifice of the step evaporates. To have a flaming row, frantically typed on your phone on the bus, with another character and arrive at the office in bloody temper. To have the warm, slightly smug, feeling that comes from having a post your character made on Czochoabook responded to by a gratifying number of "friends," who are increasingly no more and no less real than all your Facebook "friends." To walk down the street with a dopey grin on your face because you've just received a romantic private message from your fictional crush. To weep in front of your computer, far too late at night, because what has been said cannot be unsaid.<sup>1</sup> This background chatter and creative labour in the weeks up to the game is a simulation of life—at least as many of us live it now—and a form of play that, I argue, enhances the experience of "being alive" in the live game.

It means you catch sight of a familiar face in-game and feel an unprompted flash of warmth from the history you share as friends, or of wrath from a (brief) shared history of antagonism. The methesis I alluded to in my article is the alternate reality that comparatively swiftly starts to coalesce in intense pre-game and comes into full being in the live game itself. It is based, I believe, on the collective generation of shared memories. It is not just an accumulation of individual backgrounds and individual stories, but the co-generation of a community of once-fictional people who have woven a complex enough tissue of interactions together that, face-to-face for the first time, a collective psycho-social reality, a new world is born. This is the magic of larp, for which pre-game serves as a tool of enhancement, not the sole route.

In many ways pre-game of this nature simulates the experience of bringing well-worn characters to campaign games. For many that experience of stepping into another soul and another world is well-met by campaign larping. But for others long running campaigns are not an option or not attractive in the same way. Just as there are those who cannot spend an hour or so during their working day surreptitiously role-playing a long and heartfelt conversation with their fictional best friend,<sup>2</sup> there are those who cannot make larp trips that many times a year and whose larp buddies are flung all over the world. There is also an undeniable charm to playing a new game with a new character, but with the depth and fidelity of characters who have played alongside one another before and this is what this more elaborate pre-game architecture offers.

To return to the points raised at the beginning, this is not an approach to play that will suit everyone. There is no such thing. Some will love it, some will not see the point, some will see it as a potentially destructive dilution of the alchemy of play-on-the-field. I love it and I see it as a powerful tool to not just pre-create but pre-inhabit a character and that character's lifeworld, so that when the chance to play face-to-face arises they can be truly alive with as little prompting from me as possible.

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1 I readily acknowledge that some people will be coming up in hives at the mere thought of the unholy, bloody mess of real life and fiction this represents and this response is entirely legitimate.

2 Not that anyone I know has actually done this as we are all exemplary employees.

*[character moment]*

***He is right, Cectpa. But I don't want to sleep alone. In the box. In the dark. I don't want to die.***

***[Svetlana Volkov,  
College of Wizardry 5]***

ing, they just played one on TV. Or in this case, in a larp.

It would be years before I larped with someone who was visually impaired and became acutely aware of the difficulties they faced when interacting with larps due to their disability. Yet in those years, I met people with various physical and psychological differences who encountered challenges when larping due to a lack of accommodation for their disabilities. I was also acutely aware that, much like other forms of entertainment, larp was a rather ableist<sup>1</sup> space, erasing disabled players by creating obstacles for inclusion that kept them out. While conversations about inclusivity in regards to many forms of identity rose to the forefront

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<sup>1</sup> Ableism: discrimination and social prejudice against people defined by their disabilities and as inferior to the rest of society.

<sup>2</sup> Bipolar disorder.

## Place of Issues in Larp

sock

of thought in the larp community, the issue of disability visibility seemed to remain one of the last unexplored countries.

For a long time I was a larper standing outside of the issue, looking in. Then the issue became far more personal. At the time of the writing of this article, I've been larping for eleven years. In that time I've gone from an able-bodied young woman with an invisible disability<sup>2</sup> to a woman using a wheelchair to get around. This evolution has given me a different perception, perhaps, than most and opened my eyes to the pitfalls one can stumble into when designing larps: namely the exclusion of the disabled due to lack of consideration for accommodation. As a heavily physical-based activity game and art

*[character moment]*

***Three students, same House, stuck in a teachers lounge closet after curfew. If found, they'd lose the house cup and be expelled. No sounds. No moves. Time passes. The door opens.***

***[Mattias Deveny,  
College of Wizardry 5]***

has, in my experience, a pretty big impact on the actor's lifeworld and your own, on an artifice of the step evaporates. To have a character on the bus, with another character around, and the warm, slightly smug, feeling that comes from it. On Czochabook responded to by a grin that was, in a way, no more and no less real than all the other grins on the street with a dopey grin on your face. To have a message from your fictional crush. To have a character on the night, because what has been said can be used as creative labour in the weeks up to the next performance of us live it now—and a form of play that is "alive" in the live game.

It means you catch sight of a familiar face, a sense of warmth from the history you share, a sense of history of antagonism. The methesis is a sense that comparatively swiftly starts to coalesce into a full being in the live game itself. It is like a shared memory. It is not just an accumulation of individual stories, but the co-generation of stories that have woven a complex enough tissue

**[killed darling]**

***Motherland (2008) had a scene, where all the recruits would climb rickety ladders to the 15m roof of a huge, old building. After one of our players nearly broke her back when falling during an Indiana Jones style training exercise involving hanging from a (moving!) giant metal hook, we decided that it wouldn't make the players feel safe.***

**[Claus]**

**[character moment]**

***Running howling under the full moon for the first time in her ten years as a werewolf. Finally feeling the freedom and the safety of the pack.***

**[Thea, College of Wizardry 8]**

***Vaterland (2009) which was the sequel, was an "everyone dies if you don't have an escape route" -larp. One of the planned escape routes was a helicopter. Sadly, it couldn't land because of practical issues, so it had to go. So did the ferry and the 4-hour scene there. The speedboat and underground fort stayed in, though.***

**[Claus]**

# The Absence of Disabled Bodies in Larp

Shoshana Kessock

The first time I remember encountering someone who was disabled in a larp was during my long-ago days of playing *Changing: the Dreaming*. My fellow players and I were waiting for the game to begin and a new player arrived wearing dark glasses and carrying a white cane. We were waiting outside the game space at the top of a staircase and were jostling one another quite a lot, so I became concerned by the person's proximity to the edge of the stairs. I stood up from a bench and asked the person quietly if they'd like to sit down. "The stairs are very close behind you," I said. The new player looked at me, puzzled. "I can see that," they said. When I blinked at them in surprise, the player's face lit up and they lifted their glasses to wink at me. "The costume works!" they said. "At least I'm believable. Gotta play up that flaw if I want the points." The player in question wasn't disabled at all. To quote the old saying, they just played one on TV. Or in this case, in a larp.

It would be years before I larped with someone who was visually impaired and became acutely aware of the difficulties they faced when interacting with larps due to their disability. Yet in those years, I met people with various physical and psychological differences who encountered challenges when larping due to a lack of accommodation for their disabilities. I was also acutely aware that, much like other forms of entertainment, larp was a rather ableist<sup>1</sup> space, erasing disabled players by creating obstacles for inclusion that kept them out. While conversations about inclusivity in regards to many forms of identity rose to the forefront

of thought in the larp community, the issue of disability visibility seemed to remain one of the last unexplored countries.

For a long time I was a larper standing outside of the issue, looking in. Then the issue became far more personal. At the time of the writing of this article, I've been larping for eleven years. In that time I've gone from an able-bodied young woman with an invisible disability<sup>2</sup> to a woman using a wheelchair to get around. This evolution has given me a different perception, perhaps, than most and opened my eyes to the pitfalls one can stumble into when designing larps: namely the exclusion of the disabled due to lack of consideration for accommodation. As a heavily physical-based activity game and art form, larp requires players to inhabit their character roles with their bodies, experiencing the game space through their five senses and interacting with the environment and other players with their own bodies as their character's avatar. Larps can be challenging to players physically and psychologically based on the creator's design, even for those who are able-bodied. Imagine then the challenge presented to those who are disabled if the game is designed with only able-bodied players in mind as their prime customers and patrons.

If those who are differently abled are not taken into consideration during the very first stages of a larp's creation, designers may inadvertently set up obstacles which block disabled players from engaging with the game. Furthermore, I'll go so far as to posit another argument: by not taking disabled players into account and allowing them to be under-

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1 Ableism: discrimination and social prejudice against people with disabilities. Ableism characterises persons as defined by their disabilities and as inferior to the non-disabled.

2 Bipolar disorder.

represented or misrepresented through play, then the game in question and whatever narrative it crafts becomes inherently ableist.

## THE DESIGN CHALLENGE

Larp design is a complex and ever-shifting ludic space, requiring consideration of many different factors. Designers engage in discussions of narrative construction, community building, environmental design, sociological and psychological interaction and game design when producing any larp, whether they're aware they're doing so or not. Larp design is a hybrid discipline, one part improvisational acting, one part theatre production, one part playwriting, and one part game design. Yet at its very heart, larp is an attempt to bring to life imagined worlds with characters being physically inhabited by the players.

No matter the complexity of the physical design, from the stripped-down aesthetics of black box theatre games to the blockbuster nordic games set in castles or the combat-intensive live "boffer" games set out in forests around the world, there is one basic design principle of larps: players move and interact with the game space with their own bodies. And in that single conceit, designers are presented with an obstacle in how to allow people of different abilities to interact with the physical aspects of their game. How they tackle that challenge then determines whether or not their game is accessible to a wider range of players.

It's important at this juncture to address and acknowledge the difficulty of this particular design challenge. The term disabled is very broad and encompasses a myriad of people whose physical or psychological states put them outside of what society considers the healthy, able-bodied norm. Therefore, speaking about making accommodation for those who are differently abled in a larp means acknowledging that a creator

will be designing towards an ever-moving target. The paradigms may need to shift when a new player with specific accommodation needs wants to participate in their games. However, the very first step in heading towards more accessibility in games is to start by acknowledging one base truth: larps are not just made for the able-bodied. Just because the design challenge is difficult does not mean it should not be tackled. If a game wants to truly call itself inclusive and welcome all kinds of players, disability inclusion must be part of the discussion right alongside discussions about the participation of all genders, sexualities, races, religions, classes, etc. To be truly intersectional and inclusive, ableism cannot be forgotten as a potential venue for discrimination through design.

Thankfully, larp designers have the opportunity when creating new larps to approach each game as a blank slate, utilising that mindfulness about inclusivity to create spaces capable of accommodating disability needs. They only need to choose to do so from the beginning.

## THE CORNERSTONES OF DISABILITY: CONSIDERATE DESIGN

There are many areas a designer ought to consider from the beginning if they wish their games to be more accessible. They include:

- a. The role of the disabled in the game's world building and narrative
- b. The question of how disabled and abled characters will be played, by whom, and how they are portrayed
- c. Physical design of your game space and its availability for accessibility and/or disability accommodation
- d. Consideration for equal treatment out-of-character within your player community.

While this is by no means an exhaustive list of considerations, I believe they cover a range of basic areas a designer might consider to broaden those able to access their games. Let's break them down and look at their unique challenges.

### **A) The role of the disabled in the game's world building and narrative**

While this might seem like a simple idea, it is often difficult to recognise where narratives skew towards ableism, perhaps even without meaning to do so. For example, most post-apocalyptic narratives make it clear that those who are disabled would have a difficult time surviving in a world without basic social services and modern technology. Those narratives can default to erasing disabled persons without much of a thought in pursuit of "authenticity to genre." That same argument is often used when representing those with disabilities in historical games, or medieval fantasy games, as the idea of someone with disabilities succeeding, thriving, or even achieving positions of power challenges the idea that games set in historical periods must be (needlessly) appropriate to every inch of perceived historical correctness.

Games which choose to marginalise the roles the disabled have in the visible narrative then set the tone for how those characters who are differently abled will be treated, and can even translate into how players who are differently abled feel welcome within a space. Additionally, erasing disabled characters due to "magical cures" such as biotechnology, advanced medical science, and sorcery in a game's narrative also signals that your setting assumes everyone who is disabled should be "cured," signalling a need to erase disabled stories from that setting and your game. Examples of such settings are cyberpunk futures where technology can cure disabilities, magical settings like *College of Wizardry* (Nielsen, Dembinski and Raasted et al., 2014-) and *New World Magischola* (Brown and Morrow et al., 2016) where magic can cure nearly every ailment or injury.

### **B) How disabled and abled characters will be played, by whom and how they are portrayed**

As mentioned in the story at the very beginning of this article, able-bodied players may opt to play disabled characters in a game. Some larps even incentivise such play by offering mechanical advantages for including a disability in the character. One example of this is White Wolf's games like *Vampire: the Masquerade* (Rein-Hagen, 1991), whose system allows disabilities, both physical and psychological, to be taken as *flaws* on a character sheet. Ostensibly this design choice was meant to motivate people to create more nuanced and interesting characters for the game by representing a world inhabited not only by able-bodied people and monsters but also the disabled. Most of the time, however, I saw it used as a cheap and easy way to gain additional points to buy up mechanically advantageous things on a character's sheet, since for every point of flaws you took, you received *freebie* points to spend elsewhere. This process of mechanising a disability in exchange for positive rewards elsewhere provides a problematic view of being rewarded for taking on the "burden" of playing someone disabled, labelling a disability a flaw with all its associated negative connotations.

Similarly, by including disabilities as a mechanical flaw or as an in-character effect gained during play, there is a greater chance a player may be presented with a disability they'll try to or be required to play without understanding the best way to do so. Games that use mental illness as part of their punitive mechanics will afflict players with "insanity" such as in the Cthulhu Live (McLaughlin, 1997) system, or else give people a Derangement as the results of play such as in the *Dystopia Rising* (Pucci, 2009-) system, without giving them much context or preparation for role-playing what amounts to a psychological disability. Without time to research and understand the illness they're being asked to portray, players may default to naturally offensive and harmful stereotypes, making the play space a hostile place for

people who actually have those disabilities. The opposite side of this question includes whether or not disabled players will be able to play non-disabled characters. In games which rely on more “what you see is what you get” or 360 degree immersion play, organisers often require players to do whatever it is their character would do, including all physical activities. Allowing disabled players to play non-disabled characters, essentially asking others to ignore their adaptive devices during play, is a form of making accommodation during a larp, bending the rules of the full immersion for the sake of making all roles in the game accessible.

### **C) Physical design of your game space and it’s availability for accessibility and/or disability accommodation**

This aspect of designing towards inclusivity involves the design of the actual space and materials to make a game accessible for all, and it is perhaps one of the most difficult and controversial topics when dealing with disability advocacy in larp. Unless you are talking about black box or theatre style games, larps rely heavily on environmental design or utilising already created appropriate venues to host their games so as to create immersion for players. However, often when seeking out genre, theme or mood appropriate venues, designers don’t realise or even ignore the fundamental accessibility issues a venue might have. When choosing the beautiful Czocha Castle as the setting for the blockbuster *College of Wizardry* games, the organisers discovered a glorious location full of secret passages, lush forests, and amazing rooms ready to become classrooms in a magical school. What the castle did not have, however, was basic disability access, a fact which did not escape me upon my attendance. This limited my interactions with the game, keeping me from attending classes held in the perilously high astronomy tower or down in the steps into

the murky dungeon.

Even games that try their hardest to provide accommodation can end up falling short, such as in the case of the 2016 *New World Magischola* games in the United States. While the game was hosted by a presumably ADA<sup>3</sup> accessible campus in the University of Richmond, the game locations were scattered so far across the campus itself that those who were disabled found it difficult to interact with game events going on at far flung locations, especially at night. Other games which are designed for grueling conditions as part of the experience, like the Swedish *Hinterlands* (Nyman, Utbult and Stormark et al., 2105), are additionally problematic in that they present physical challenges meant to test even the hardest of able bodied players and therefore exclude disabled players almost by design, in favour of supporting the taxing gameplay part of the experience. This important obstacle to accessibility ought to be weighed against a location’s appropriateness for play, if the designers want to see their game available for all comers to play.

### **D) The consideration for equal treatment out-of-character within your player community**

This last element is less of a physical design challenge or game mechanic design question, but rather requires game creators to take a closer look at how those who are differently abled are considered within the community. It’s no secret that the disabled face discrimination from the general world. Even well-intentioned people can express demeaning and belittling treatment of the disabled, unsure of how to engage with their differences and needs for accommodation despite the best of intentions. The disabled are often seen as less capable or even worthy of doing things people take for granted, such as opening up businesses, holding positions of leadership, or even having stable relation-

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3 Physical accommodations and accessibility as described in the Americans with Disability Act of 1990.

ships and raising children.

When a player who is differently abled is part of a larp community, an organiser must consider whether that player is facing similar discriminatory treatment from fellow players. While it is not an organiser's job necessarily to police their community, the tacit social contract of a larp as a communal storytelling experience requires players to feel welcome and heard so they can participate wholeheartedly in safety and trust. Should a player be treated differently based on their disability, the responsibility falls on the organisers to address the situation, as would be the case with any instances of discrimination affecting their community.

These cornerstones of thoughtful accessibility design are best deployed from the beginning of a game's creation, as the accommodations they may require become more difficult when trying to retroactively fit them in after the entire game has been put together. Indeed, tackling accessibility issues only after discovering a disabled player wants to attend requires far more work as a designer must scramble to find a way to shoehorn those accommodations into a space that might not have that capability. While the intention to find accommodation later is noble, it is often not the most efficient and may end with frustrated designers and players both, should the attempts towards accommodation after-the-fact fail. Designers should also be mindful to check back to these design considerations throughout the process and even during gameplay to make sure they are still in place and functional.

### **THE FALSE DICHOTOMY OF "GOING ELSEWHERE"**

Considering accessibility accommodations as an afterthought also often ends up with designers simply acknowledging their design cannot support those with disabilities, leading to my least favourite theory regarding the including of disabled persons in larp: the separate yet equal argument. In response

to discussing accessibility in games, I've often heard people simply shrug and say "not every game is for every person." They say not everyone likes every game, or is suited to every game, and therefore those disabled players who cannot be included due to lack of accommodation can simply go to another game or seek another role in the game if that will allow for better accessibility. This argument contests that this problem happens even to able-bodied people who must choose based on their tastes what games to attend. This is a false dichotomy.

Able bodied larpers who choose either to attend or not attend a game based on its content or any other myriad of factors are not physically barred from doing so. They are not kept out by virtue of a space not being capable of physically allowing them entrance. The important word to factor in here is choice. Those players are choosing not to go to a game based on their tastes and preferences, opting out because they have an option at all. If a game is not physically accessible to disabled players for one reason or another, designers have taken away a player's agency to opt in or out and instead set up obstacles to act as gatekeepers that bar players from even making that choice.

It's that distinction that created the need for laws around the world protecting the rights of disabled people to interact with society on all levels in an equal matter to those who are able bodied. Ability-based discrimination has been a historically contentious topic, as those who are disabled either visibly or invisibly have fought for recognition as equal members of society all over the world. In the United States for example, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990), which expanded on the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to include anti-discrimination protections for the disabled, was not put into place until 1990. The ADA as it is known not only protects the disabled against discrimination but requires employers "to provide reasonable accommodations to employees with disabilities, and imposes requirements on public accommodations." This included provisions that businesses and public spaces would be required to make their facilities and events

accessible to those with disabilities.

The ADA later provided the inspiration for countries around the world to adopt similar protections. Since 2000, 181 countries have signed disability protections into law, while in 2006 the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006) was adopted by the United Nations and ratified by 157 countries, offering additional protections for 650 million people with disabilities worldwide (Shapiro, 2015). By requiring businesses, venues, and locations to create accommodations for those who are disabled by law, the governments of those countries with equal rights laws recognise that physical design of spaces and events can be discriminatory if they aren't accessible and require organisers to take that into consideration by law.

Yet certain activities have remained segregated, especially recreational activities which require physical activity such as sports, dance, and theatre. The separate-yet-equal idea has remained the cornerstone of this segregation, allowing for the creation of dance companies, sports events, and theatre troupes for example made up of only disabled persons participating and competing with and against one another. The notion goes that if an activity is based on physical interaction as the primary mode of engagement, and a disabled person is differently equipped to engage with that activity, rather than providing accommodation, a separate space should be provided for them to interact. While the concept of larps only for the disabled may intrigue from an artistic perspective, if only to see what might be created by people with those unique life experiences, it cannot be the hallmark of the entire larp world. To say that "maybe this game just isn't for you" to a potential disabled player when facing the need for accommodation is based on the same principle and passes the buck away from that designer's game to some other, theoretical game out there which may better have access.

In short, "not for you" as a response is an excuse and misses the point entirely. The player in question doesn't want to go somewhere else. They want to attend that game

and be a part of their chosen community, and should be freely allowed to, given all other things being equal between them and an able-bodied player. The disabled person should not have to find another game, shuffled along, because considerations haven't been made to keep a space from being discriminatory. As the laws of so many countries point out, the need to consider accommodation falls on the shoulders of designers and organisers, not the disabled person. And if only the designers had done so at the beginning, perhaps those uncomfortable and potentially discriminatory conversations might not have had to happen at all.

## A TWO-WAY CONVERSATION

Of course, it seems easy to say all of this on paper. I acknowledge as of the writing of this article that figuring out the ways to balance aesthetic and artistic choices in larps and accessibility is a difficult design problem. Nor is there anyone out to impose mandates that each game must be accessible in all ways, barring what is required by law in the larp's home country. And while it might be an intriguing mental exercise to go down the "freedom of creation" versus inclusivity accommodation mode of thinking, that conversation has been tread in regards to intersectional inclusivity ad nauseum. It is an understood right of creators to make artistic choices for their games, and should they choose not to build towards inclusivity, that is their right. However, when a game designer chooses to consider accessibility for the differently abled, especially from the beginning, they are signalling to their player base that they consider their space a welcoming one for people of all kinds, even if it makes them a little more work to design around obstacles. Designing towards accessibility is a signpost that a larp creator considers the health and well-being of their players as important as well, and can create a deeper bond of trust between organisers and players in regards to game safety.

The final piece to the design challenge regarding accessibility, however, is communication. As mentioned above, though the

term disabled indicates the need for accommodation to assist the individual with accessing a space or event, each disabled person's needs might be specialised. Not every wheelchair user needs the same level of accommodation, nor do all those with specific psychological needs require the same response. While designers may create spaces for accommodation in the game, it is often necessary for those who are disabled to speak up and request additional accommodation or else adjustments to what is in place to suit their specific needs. While it can be difficult to self-advocate for one's needs, it is imperative to have a process in place before or at a larp for these conversations to take place. Should someone feel uncomfortable stating their need for accommodation, an advocate such as a friend or fellow larper might be a good ally to seek out to help communicate with the organisers. This process can be as simple as organisers making it overtly clear they are open to having these discussions, or for a larger game to have a particular staff member acting as accessibility liaison. Each process can be tailored to the size, length and scope of the game in question, but all serve to make the process of creating these accommodations smoother and less contentious.

One other note to bear in mind when considering disability conversations is the notion of trust and belief. It is important when an organiser is approached by someone asking for accommodation to show that they not only hear the person, but that they believe them. Since many disabilities, such as chronic illness, injury, or mental illness, are largely invisible disabilities, they are often questioned by people who cannot see an assistive device as evidence of a disability. Refrains like "you don't look sick" or "can't you just deal with it?" are typical. Requiring a disabled person to present evidence of their disability to receive accommodation is difficult and often embarrassing for the disabled person. For communication and trust to be fostered in a healthy environment, the disabled person must feel the organiser is receptive to their issues. Should an organiser feel they don't have the perspective to understand the

needs of their disabled players, seeking out resources from articles, organisations, or even disability advocates within the gaming community can help to create better dialogues going forward.

While individual conversations on the local larp level are the bedrock on which change will come, communication in regards to accessibility needs to be fostered on an even larger scale. Conversations regarding how to create better games, better mechanics, and better communities are sweeping across the larp world, spread by the Internet and fantastic convention and conference spaces. One of those conversations going forward in terms of inclusivity in gaming communities must include further discussion of accessibility for the disabled. Our communities are in a period of sharing for the betterment of all, learning from one another in an age of what larp designer and creator Josh Harrison has coined fourth wave larp design. It is imperative for our communities to continue these conversations so better tools and best practices discovered by individual games can be shared, improved upon, and reshaped through communal iteration.

It's towards that spirit of communal iteration that I put forth the challenge to designers to come up with new mechanics for players with disabilities to use, new ideas for interaction in our games outside of the able-bodied norms. New mechanics, such as the Avatar mechanic brainstormed by myself and Lizzie Stark (2014), in which a player with mobility issues may have a surrogate step in during play to perform physical actions that player cannot, is an example of how two designers coming together can create a new mechanic for the game design toolbox. Collaboration will be the means by which more of these ideas become about in the future.

Additionally, iterating on already established norms will expand and improve institutions already in place. To that end, I am suggesting an amendment to the *Mixing Desk of Larp* (Andresen, Nielsen and Stenros et al., 2016), that oh-so useful tool spread from the Larpwriter Summer school and now used to create games across the world. While there

are thirteen slots for faders, used to plan and illustrate the various decisions made during the planning process of a larp, the last one is left blank and marked “Your Fader Here.” This space is left for designers to include their own fader, something not covered among the twelve other ingredients the Mixing Desk suggests goes into designing a larp. While it would be convenient to say accessibility is a good option for including into the “Your Fader Here” spot, I would suggest something even stronger. For a game to truly tackle accessibility and make it as much of a priority for larps as the other ingredients so important to design, a fourteenth fader slot marked Accessibility should go up on the Mixing Desk alongside that write-in category. This would signal a tacit shift in thinking, enshrining the idea that accessibility is not and should not be a sometimes consideration if designers wish to see our community tackle ableism in our design spaces. By adjusting this already understood and widely used mechanic, we as a community would be

indicating how important accessibility truly is for the larp world at large.

And make no mistake, it is an important part of the future of inclusivity in the larp world. Without considering accessibility for differently abled larpers, our community neglects a fundamental demographic and shuts out a plethora of voices who could contribute to making our storytelling communities even brighter. When a differently abled person cannot even attend an event, we lose vital voices whose presence could enhance and innovate, add and amplify the able-bodied community. All that is needed to make sure their voices can add to the collective artistic space is consideration for their needs at the forefront of design by the (mostly) able-bodied constituency of larp creators. Accessibility in design cannot be an afterthought but should live alongside questions of theme and player motivation as a reminder that larp is and should remain a space equally available for all as we go forward into designing the games of our future.

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# Food for Thought

Narrative through food at larps

*Siri Sandquist and Rosalind Göthberg*

Food is an essential part of any culture. Taste and smell may be some of our more abstract senses but they have the power to bring us closer to memories and common experiences than many of the other senses. Anyone who pretends to be an intellectual knows about Marcel Proust and his Madeleine biscuit; how the taste of the madeleine brought forth memories of the protagonist's childhood with crystal clear vividness. It is our belief that food has this power. Food is very strongly culturally bound. What is deemed edible or taboo is strongly rooted in us, and often it does not matter that we intellectually know that something is safe or even tasty. If our culture has taught us that dog meat or insects are taboo we will have a very hard time bringing ourselves to try them. Simply put, food is a strong carrier of both memories and common culture.

Eating food is also often a social ritual. The time during the day when we gather together, and share our experiences with each other. In all these ways food and eating are excellent tools to carry a narrative. To enhance an experience of being in an alien or different culture, or even literally to act as plot-tools. Still it is our experience that a lot of larp designers forget about the power food can hold over the participants experience. Below, we will share our experiences as both organisers and kitchen helpers/volunteers. We hope that our experience and creativity both will bring food to the forefront when it comes to narrative tools but also inspire more larp-designers to use the kitchen staff and the food as narrative tools. If they do it is our belief that they deeply will enhance the larp experience for their participants.

## The food

We are very emotional about what we eat. This is natural since we quite literally would die if we did not eat. Getting food when we are really hungry is among the most pleasurable experiences in the world. Likewise the disappointment of realising you cannot get food when you are really hungry can be devastating. There are very clear cultural connections to food. What is supposed to taste good, and what is expensive. Even if we try to pretend that champagne and caviar are really cheap in a certain larp culture the larpers will have a hard time accepting this as truth. Likewise, presentation means a lot for the eating experience. Texture, colours, the way it is presented and

plated. If you understand this you can start to really play around with the food to create the feeling you yourself envisioned as a organiser and larpwriter. We will now present some case studies of how we have used the food itself to enhance a narrative and in some instances even created narrative with it. We have made jello to make a larp about American gods feel more American and we have made hundreds of fluffy little cakes to give a mad hatter feeling to a mental ward in fable-inspired fairy tale larps. Food is a way to involve another sense into a full body larp experience and we want to tell you a little about the way we have done that in the past.

### **Beyond the Barricades—Literally putting the narrative in the food**

*Beyond the Barricades* (Göthberg and Wei, 2015) was a larp inspired by *Les Misérables*, it took place during the French Revolution of 1832. The players portrayed the revolutionaries on the barricade and all either deserted the cause or died heroically in the ending scene. The wish was to create a feeling of constant pressure from the outside, both from other barricades to stay strong and from the military to give up. We also wanted to serve very simple food, something that made the characters, all from different socio-economical classes contrast each other. Some saw it as luxury dinner, other as basically inedible garbage. The meals were very simple, a french onion soup without the garnish or quite literally lentils and garlic. It was carried in beyond the barricades by the kitchen staff in buckets and served together with loafs of bread. However, in some of the breads letters from another barricade were hidden. This created hilarious discussions between the NPC players, organisers and kitchen staff regarding how to pace the NPCs dramatic curve alongside the dramatic curve served to the players in the breads, making sure that the NPC's portraying revolutionaries from the same barricade as the letter inside the breads followed the same narrative curve as the letters we served up for lunch or dinner. It also

helped giving a feeling of a meaningful surrounding outside the barricade and created some nice scenes when the bad news of the other barricade falling under the military attacks were delivered in a bread during the last day. The kitchen staff also used the food to guilt the players characters into doubting their commitment to the revolution. By blaming the revolutionaries for cutting off supply lines resulting in less profits for the poor workers that made the food for them, and the further the larp went bringing in more and more meager supplies the food became a symbol for the fruitlessness of the revolution. This was possible to do since there was extra food available in the off-game area, and we also served up a feast on the evening after the larp ended.



*The kitchen crew at Made in Hessbrand, Siiri Sandquist, John Bergström and Elin Holm as dirty lying and thieving Fishy, Goatbeard and Fug.  
Photograph: Eva Wei*

### **Made in Hessbrand—Starvation and disgust**

Made in Hessbrand (Zeta, Johnsson, Modin and Isaksson) ran in 2015 and was a part of the long going fantasy campaign, Warheart. The setting was far away from the war in question. Deep in the countryside of Hessbrand, a country visually and culturally inspired by Ireland in the 14th century. The story was something along social revolt and miserable failure. The players portrayed Hessbrännian workers and a manufacture for buttons or supervisors from an occupation-force. During the larp the players made a revolt, barricaded themselves in and finally got completely massacred by arriving soldiers. The feeling the organisers wanted to communicate was one of poverty, sickness, working too much in the factory and oppression. We tried to make that happen through the food serving, but in the same time we wanted to serve tasty food so that people could eat their full. We started of presenting ourselves and the food to the players before game start. We played disgusting and filthy characters. Everyone had probably seen me sneeze in the pots. We asked them to actively play down the food as weird looking and disgusting. The food served was “Fishys mush” which was named after the colour they had, green and yellow. They were served together with honey glazed fried cabbage, bread, hummus, and fried bacon. The compliments were tasty and therefore made it possible for players who have a hard time to stomach the mush on account of them looking almost inedible to still get a decent meal. The green mush was green lentils cooked in garlic and olive oil until it turned into a porridge and the yellow mush was simply mashed potatoes with a mushroom sauce mixed into it which gave it a greyish colour and lumpy texture.

This meant that the food was very tasty even if it looked horrible. This together with the player actively joking about how disgusting the mushes were and the kitchen staff portrayal of thieving lying entrepreneurs happy to make money out of others misery helped create a feeling of the food as a horrible thing you

did not want to touch with a ten foot pole, but the only nutrition to get within walking distance. It increased the players' feeling of being abused by a system and the feeling of poverty. In the same time the actual food was really tasty and filling.

### **Last Will—The taste of something different**

*Last Will* (Stenler, Strand and Gamero, 2014) was a larp set in a dystopian future when Chinese culture had grown in importance together with American. This created a vision of the future where a lot of texts were written in Chinese and Chinese culture was present in name culture and such. *Last Will* was a larp about modern day slavery and the loss of democratic rights, set in a dystopian future Sweden, in a gladiator stall. The players portrayed slaves of free workers (who lived under slavelike conditions). They were not allowed to leave the gym where they lived on plastic mats behind plastic sheet walls. Their whole life circled around making sure the fighters were good enough to survive the gladiator-style fights. Food was served from "upstairs" quite literally as both the in-game administration and the off game organisers were sitting up the stairs from the playing area. The organisers had a clear vision of what they wanted the food to say. It was suppose to speak industry, impersonal, calculated nutrition and Asian. This was very well achieved. The food was simple lentil stews with potatoes and other root vegetables. Added in was also seaweed which gave the food an unpleasant slimy texture and a slightly Asian flavour. It was served in vacuum packed bags of plastic, the food weighed by me and the other helpers to make sure it was more or less the exact amount of an adult's daily intake or calories, supervised by the cooking organisers. It was then frozen and thawed in water baths before served at the venue. Together with your allotted plastic bag you would get seaweed crackers and some of the characters even got "vitamins" to moderate their health. These "vitamins" and the calculated sizes of the food

gave the players a feeling of being under constant supervision and moderation from the people upstairs. The Asian flavours helped create a feeling for the culture that larp was portraying and if you could not stomach the seaweed lentil stew and felt you needed something else to eat the players could go to the off game area where there was plenty of fruits, sandwiches, chocolate and hugs. This made it possible to serve food that was a bit strange in flavour because if the players could not stomach it there was a backup solution.

### **Tre Kronor, Lindängen and the luxury of the upper class**

Just as it is hard for players to really immerse themselves in an experience of poverty and hunger if the food offered is a cornucopia of delights, playing on themes of luxury and richness will also be enhanced and helped by the right food. More than that, food can work as a nice divider between rich and poor at larps where different economic classes mingle. *Tre Kronor* (Linder, Wänngren and Ahlbom, 2012) was a small one night event. The setting a high status upper class masonry association's yearly banquet. During the larp the kitchen staff were players as well, but we paid less than those playing upper class. A professional cook planned and executed lavish multiple course dinners for the upstairs crowd that the staff heated and served during the larp. The downstairs staff got simple soup and cheap alcohol. This created a nice division between player groups, a feeling of entitlement in the upper class characters and a feeling of oppression for the downstairs crowd. The kitchen, dressed up in uniform clothing helped to create an atmosphere where any wish or demand was upheld.

Another larp where the players portrayed the upper class was *Lindängen boarding school* (Elofsson and Lundkvist, 2013). In this section I want to concentrate on the food and how it acted to help create a feeling of luxury for the players. Sometimes you might not have the possibility to get a real chef to make the food,

but there is a lot you can do to play around with the feeling of more luxurious food for the participants even as a volunteer with no formal training. We will talk more about the different way we choose to portray Lindängen below but there is still some interesting points to be made about the food itself on the different runs. During *Lindängen 1* (2013) we opted for classical dishes from Swedish schools but in a fancier setting. Green pea soup with white wine instead of the traditional brown pea soup. Salad served in pretty containers, and homemade bread (cheap and luxurious) gave a feeling of more upper class establishment. During *Lindängen 2* (2014) the kitchen chose to be even more upscale, with a lot of energy going into making food from scratch which made it possible to serve food that usually is quite expensive even if it did not cost that much since it was made from cheap ingredients such as gnocchi and stuffed peppers. For *Lindängen 3* (2016) the homemade croissants were a hit that gave a quite ordinary breakfast spread a more fancy tone, together with the attention to details such as cheese roses and whipped butter.



*The staff at the larp Tre Kronor, looking proper and proud photograph: Anna-Karin Linder*

## The Fluffy Muffin Plot—When you cook up larp magic

Sometimes just the presence of the most mundane normal thing will create game for a large group of players. These stories are

never planned but happens in the moment. Some might even argue that this is the basic strength of larp as a medium. We are as larpers hyper-aware of any possible storyline and we tend to try and make sense of the random. During *Lindängen 3* this happened to great effect in the many twists and turns of “the fluffy muffin plot.” It is—as are so many of these larp stories—too long and too personal to be of a broader interest in its entirety but we will try to give you the boiled down version here, to explain how you can create play with food at larps.

One player (who portrayed a very stern and scary teacher) asks the organisers one morning for some “fluffy muffins.” He was going to make a psychological experiment. The organisers were a bit confused but asked the kitchen staff to make some fluffy muffins. The thought of a very stern and sadistic teacher playing around with six fluffy muffins generated a lot of laughter in the kitchen. The kitchen obviously made sure to have the windows open and to talk about this very loudly to spread the rumours about the fluffy muffins and their longing to spit in them. By the time the muffins reached the teacher who ordered them, the rumour that the kitchen spat in them was already in motion, and therefore by larp magic became true. The kitchen totally DID spit in them.

The psychological experiment is done and create an interesting scene for the players and that could have been the end of the fluffy muffins. However there were five muffins left so the teacher served them to the five students with the highest status in the third year. They were of course terrified to accept such gifts from their horrible teacher, but decided after much anguish that to eat them was better than to not eat them. However one of them was so curious about what these muffins actually meant that he sends a younger student to find out about the muffins (since speaking directly to the kitchen was forbidden.) The student who was sent to find out the truth misunderstands him though and just ends up

ordering more muffins. Since the kitchen was well staffed it had the time to bake new fluffy muffins and serve them. Through the inner working of status fall and reputation this last serving of the fluffy muffins resulted in the fall from grace of some students, the rise of others and some scenes of oppression. All very welcome at a larp about pennialism and boarding schools.



*The original fluffy muffins, photograph: Elvira Fallsdalen*

At the same larp we also let some students make a hat out of cheese that they used to bully another student. And on earlier *Lindängen* frozen peas, spinach and at a memorable occasion frozen scones has soothed black eyes of students. The importance of this story is to show how much you can do with food and kitchen staff to create game and dynamic. The so called “Fluffy Muffin Plot” ended up being one of the most retold narratives in the debrief group, and would never have happened had not the organisers planned for a big enough kitchen crew that a person could be spared to make the muffins in the first place.

## The kitchen

All larps that provides food for their players

needs some kind of kitchen crew. These are often volunteers, or even organisers, who have a huge responsibility to make sure everyone is fed (preferably food that is sufficient in nutrition and quantity and on time ) and who because of that often spends most of their time off game without being a real part of the larp and the story. We would like to propose different ways to use the kitchen as a play area and the kitchen crew as proper characters. People who are responsible for feeding the rest of the larp (as well as with other kinds of practical off game duties) should of course never get involved in the game to an extent where it interferes with those responsibilities but there's still plenty of room to create characters that contributes to the setting and fills an in-game purpose without interfering with the actual cooking.

### **Lindängen—One larp, three different kitchens**

One larp that has already been mentioned in this article is *Lindängen*, a larp about an upper class boarding school revolving around themes such as bullying, peer pressure, social status and the never ending upholding of a system that keeps hurting the people within it. It's been run three times and one or both of us have been a part of the kitchen crew each time. What's particularly interesting about this larp is that the way the kitchen was used as a play resource and the role it filled in the game varied a lot between the different runs.

For the first run, we were aiming to create a contrast between the upper class students and teachers of the school and ourselves, as well as offering a safe space for those characters (and players) who suffered the most from the bullying. The kitchen staff were portrayed as working/lower class who sold home made booze and listened to loud socialistic punk music. Being in the bottom when it came to status and influence also created the opportunity to actually question what was going on in the school. The kitchen itself became a place



*The kitchen staff at the second run were more clean cut, and more a part of the structure, upholding the system as well as the plates of food. Here Rune Nordborg is ready to serve the kitchen staff's meal.*

*Photograph: John Bergström*

where all the “outsiders,” the ones who didn’t want to play along with the system and those who it affected the hardest, could come to breath or hide out for a moment. Within the kitchen walls, no one could hurt them and to it’s staff they could reveal how they really felt about the school. In the end the kitchen staff also worked as a reminder on how status is the only thing that matters within the system when their attempts to actually make a difference and create some justice miserably failed.

The kitchen in the second run was rather another tool to uphold the system than a contrast to it. Not only was the food fancier, the kitchen staff themselves had a much more polished and professional approach with more of a personal distance (at least officially) towards the students. The kitchen also played a role in the actual bullying through the use of kitchen duty as a penalty for students that misbehaved. While the kitchen in the first run was a place

to hide from oppression it was now a place to be even more oppressed. In a similar way the kitchen during this run amplified the need of upholding a surface. They would be very professional towards the player until they were sent to kitchen duty when the facade would be lowered and the player now forced to mop the kitchen floor had an opportunity to hear conversations between people who came from a different social background and had a different view of the world. This suppressed form of dislike towards the school and its traditions worked well in giving the players a feeling of another world outside of the school, but a world that was judging, different and impossible to be a part of.

For the third run, the role of the kitchen was pretty much set by the players themselves. During the pre-game workshop they decided that one of the unofficial school rules would be “no personal socialising with the kitchen

staff” and even though this rule wasn’t upheld at all times it contributed to an us and them-division between the kitchen and rest of the school. This was even more established through for example a scene where the career counselor used a member of the kitchen staff as an “example of bad character” before a group of students. The kitchen staff was in many ways more looked down upon than in the previous runs but still filled the purpose of being the harmless adults, the ones you can turn to when one of the games has gotten out of hand and someone is actually hurt without risking getting in trouble for it.



*One of the covens “juniors” played by Hannah Merkelbach poses from a safe distance in front of household member Elvira Fallsdalen.  
Photograph: Eren Granström*

### **Coven—Increasing the creepiness**

*Coven* (Häggström and Falk, 2015) was a larp inspired by the show “American horror story: Coven” and centred around a small coven of witches with the task of both educating people with magical powers as well as hiding them from witch hunters. The larp started with a group of teenagers who had just learned about their powers and the whole existence of the witch community arriving to the coven, their new home. The feeling of the coven was supposed to be eerie, freakish and unpredictable for those who were new to it and one element that was used to create this was, of course, the

household staff.

The household did not only provide the food but also other chores like tidying up the sleeping quarters, making beds and assisting in magical rituals. The kitchen was not only a place where the food was prepared but also the place to go to if you needed to get blood, salt or plastic covers for said rituals. The staff itself were portrayed as emotionless, ageless and it was uncertain even to ourselves if they even were human. We spent a lot of time stone faced staring out the kitchen window, sweeping the same spot of the floor over and over again, making beds extremely neatly, folding the players clothes and reorganising their personal belongings when they weren’t looking, wiping blood of the floor without showing any sort of emotion and so on. We even listened to the same song on repeat in the kitchen throughout the whole larp. For the players this created a feeling of having walked straight into a horror movie. The knowledge that the household always saw you became very powerful, and the players experienced a feeling of loss of personal space when their belongings would be reorganised as soon as they turned their head. The almost mechanical movements of the household, paired with the same song going on repeat really made you doubt if they were real people. It became very effectively a way of entering into a magical circle of belief as the characters tried to accustom themselves to a new reality where magic was real and dangerous.



*The fear of the household even made it's way to the text message larping. Photograph: Oliver Nøglebæk*

## The do's and don'ts of kitchen work at larps

We have during our unofficial career as kitchen volunteers gathered some overall valuable lessons that make life easier for everyone, participants as well as organisers, that are listed below. We hope that these tricks of the trade will help others, organisers and kitchen volunteers alike to make their work easier.

### Three things you never should do:

- **Poison your players.**<sup>1</sup> With this we mean, do not serve food that the player in question is allergic too. Make sure to clearly mark allergy-friendly food, or serve it separately for the larper in question. Most modern settings will allow to mark the food clearly with a name sign using the player's in game name.
- **Not having enough food to feed everyone.** This means that during starvation larps there should be access to food off game that has not gone bad or is disgusting but good, preferably warm, food, ready to help players through a taxing time. If this is not going to be available, clearly communicate this to the players in advance and make sure there is a convenient way for them to stash off game food for themselves if they need sufficient nutrition to handle the larp.
- **Under staff your kitchen.** It creates anguish, pain, stress and bad role-playing on behalf of the staff. Mistakes happen more easily when the kitchen staff have not had sufficient sleep. Better to have space in the budget for a person too many than to have too few in the volunteer group. That way you can have some designated to do the actual cooking, one to do last minute shopping (which will happen) and some more focused on creating the right atmosphere and role-playing if you want the kitchen to actually enhance your game.

### Three things you should always do!

- **Appreciate your kitchen staff.** Do not underestimate the importance of good kitchen staff. They will be able to help you create the right ambience and make sure organisers and players are well fed. All they want is some cred and maybe some chocolate, energy drinks or other poisons of their choice. Make sure to thank them after the larp and give them a small token of appreciation and they will be happy to go the extra mile for you.
- **Clearly communicate to the players how much food will be served, what kind of special diet you will provide for/not provide for and so on.** It's never okay to let the players discover they won't have enough to eat after they have paid a full participation fee and arrived to the larp (you can of course serve any food you like but tell the players about it). This means be clear if there will be dietary options available, if there will be off game food in cases where the scenario doesn't leave room for a lot of food etc.
- **Work with the players special diets instead of against it.** Look at the players needs before setting the menu and try to make sure as many as possible will be able to eat as many meals as possible. A lot of vegetarians? Make all food vegetarian! Gluten allergies? Serve rice instead of pasta. If you make the food vegan it will also work for lactose and milk protein allergies. This will most likely save you not only time but also money.

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<sup>1</sup> (We have all done it, but try your best and never do the same mistake twice. Like Siri did.)

## Conclusion

We hope this advice will be helpful in your future culinary endeavours. We truly believe food is an essential part of any larp experience. If we allow it to be. Let texture, flavours and presentation play towards the atmosphere of the larp, and make sure to staff your kitchen with enough people so that they will have time to help you create the feeling and game play that truly supports the story you want to tell.

Bon Appetite!

## Ludography

Elofsson, Alma and Mimmi Melkersson Lundkvist.  
*Lindängens Riksinternat 1*. Sweden: 2013.

- Cooking and serving by Siri Sandquist, Rosalind Göthberg, Samuel Sjöström, Hugo Sandelin, Elsa Broman and Anneli Friedner

Elofsson, Alma and Mimmi Melkersson Lundkvist.  
*Lindängens Riksinternat 2*. Sweden: 2014.

- Cooked and served by Siri Sandquist, John Bergström, Rune Nordborg, Mojje Mårtensson, Calle Wickström

Elofsson, Alma and Mimmi Melkersson Lundkvist.  
*Lindängens Riksinternat 3*. Sweden: 2016.—Cooked and served by Rosalind Göthberg, Lukas Renklint, Elvira Fallsdalen, Erland Nylund, Emil Rogvall

Göthberg, Rosalind and Eva Wei. *Beyond the Barricades*. Sweden: 2016

- Cooked and served by Siri Sandquist and Lukas Renklint

Hägström, Mia and Sofie Falk. *Coven 1*. Sweden: 2015

- Cooked and served by Rosalind Göthberg, Sara Gerendas, Hannah Merkelbach, Elli Garperian

Hägström, Mia and Sofie Falk. *Coven 2*. Sweden: 2015

- Cooked and served by Rosalind Göthberg, Sara Gerendas, Elvira Fallsdalen, Carl Nordblom

Linder, Anna-Karin, Oscar Wännngren and Hampus Ahlblom. *Tre Kronor 2*, Sweden: 2012

- Cooking and serving by Siri Sandquist, Frida Karlsson Lindgren, Nicolas Lenman, Jonathan Dahlander, Severin Gottsén, Johannes Harg, Carolina Lindahl och Theo Axner

Linder, Anna-Karin, Oscar Wännngren and Hampus Ahlblom. *Tre Kronor 3*, Sweden: 2013

- Cooking and serving by Siri Sandquist, Rosalind Göthberg, Frida Karlsson Lindgren, Elsa Broman, Lukas Renklint, Nicolas Lenman, Johannes Harg, Elin Gissén, Carl Nordblom, Malva Tyllström and Severin Gottsén

Melkersson Lundkvist, Mimmi, Erik Holst and Teresa Axner. *Organise safely*. Sweden: 2015

- Cooked and served by Rosalind Göthberg and Lukas Renklint

Renklint, Lukas, Rosalind Göthberg, Elvira Fallsdalen and Eva Wei. *Once upon a time 1* Sweden: 2014.

- Cooked and served by Rosalind Göthberg and organisers

Renklint, Lukas, Rosalind Göthberg, Elvira Fallsdalen and Eva Wei. *Once upon a time 2* Sweden: 2015.

- Cooked and served by Rosalind Göthberg and organisers

Reinklint, Lukas, Elvira Fallsdalen, Rosalind Göthberg and Eva Wei. *Sigridsdotter 1*. Sweden: 2015

- Cooked and served by Rosalind Göthberg and Siri Sandquist

Renklint, Lukas, Elvira Fallsdalen, Rosalind Göthberg and Eva Wei. *Sigridsdotter 2*. Sweden: 2016

- Cooked and served by Rosalind Göthberg and Siri Sandquist

Sandquist, Siri, Erland Nylund, Linnea Björklund and Thor Forsell. *Dusk of Gods*. Sweden: 2015

- Cooked and served by Siri Sandquist and Thor Forsell

Sandquist, Siri, Staffan Fladvad, Johan Nylin and Elin Gissén. *It's a man's world*. Sweden: 2015

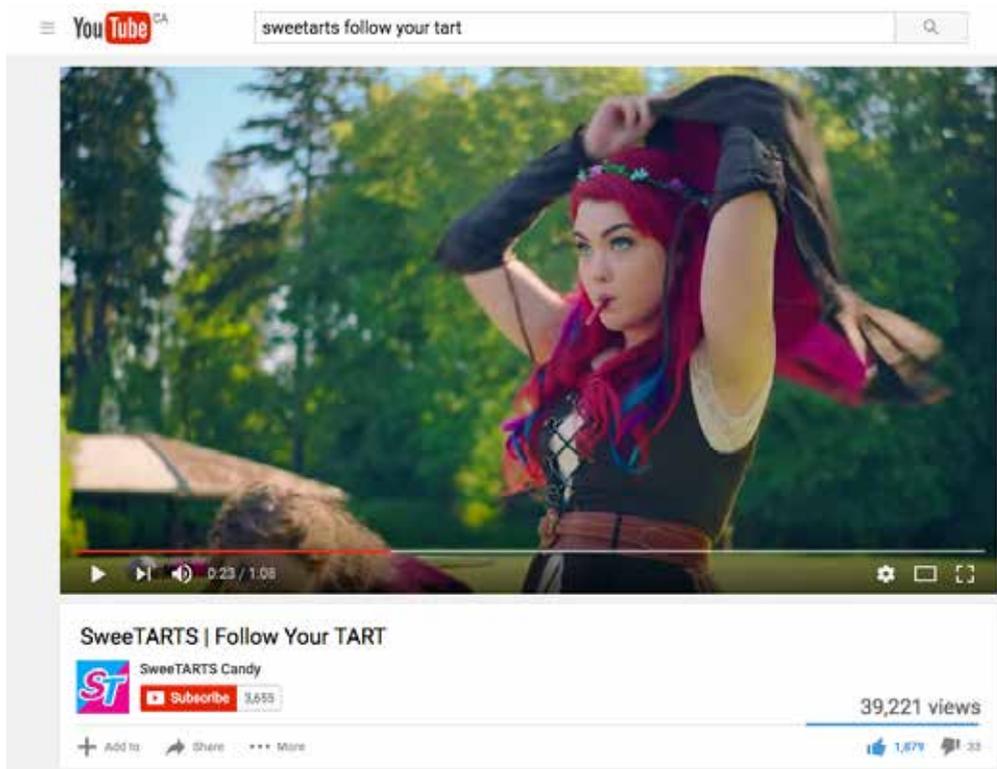
- Cooked and served by Siri Sandquist and Fredrik Nilsson

Stenler, Sofia, Annica Strand and Frida Gamero. *Last Will*. Sweden: 2014

- Cooked and served by organisers and Siri Sandquist and Frida Karlsson Lindgren

Zeta, Sara, Ola Johnsson, Hanna Modin and Josefine Isaksson. *Made in Hessbrand*. Sweden: 2014

- Cooked and served by Siri Sandquist, John Bergström and Elin Holm



# YouTube and Larp

Mo Mo O'Brien

**A WARNING:** This might be a bit more casual than the other essays in this book. From start to finish, my whole journey of success, I have been in way over my head. I have been surrounded by intelligent, capable people that know exactly what they are doing. If you would like to hear from them, check out literally any of the other pages. If you would like to hear my rambling about how I accidentally became a pseudo YouTube celebrity, keep reading and enjoy the ride.

My dungeons and dragons group made fun of me for going larping. I remember being so excited and talking to them all about the character I was making, and the game I had found, and how much fun I was going to have, and they went to YouTube. I began larping in an age when larp on YouTube

was videos of lighting bolt packet throwers and fake looking fight scenes. They went on a marathon to show me how stupid I was going to look, and then we continued to roll dice and describe fighting magic orcs.

My name is Mo Mo O'Brien, and if there's one thing you need to know about me it's that I don't care what people think, so despite the mockery from my tabletop group, I went larping anyway. It was everything I knew it would be, and so much more. I instantly knew this was going to take over my entire life. I went to more events, and uploaded more pictures to my social media, and more people started asking me questions.

I had recently started a YouTube channel, and I thought I'd answer all the questions in a

video. I called the video “Basics of larp” and it covered everything from the definition of larp, to the different genres, to what you needed to start playing. That was the video that began it all. My channel now has over 70,000 subscribers, that video now has almost 400,000 views, the comments are flooded with requests for more larp videos, and I can no longer go to any larp without at least one person coming up to me and telling me they were there because of me. My YouTube channel has even taken me to places like panelling at San Diego comic con and being in a popular candy commercial. Since then, larping YouTube channels have been exponentially growing, and are still growing. So, I thought I’d give people some tips for larp YouTube Channels!

## 1. Speak to non-larpers

You don’t have to tell larpers why larp is awesome. They already know. If you see someone with a t-shirt for a band you like, you don’t walk over to them and try and convince them why that band is awesome. They’re already wearing the shirt. If a larper sees ANYTHING larp related, good chance is they’re probably going to like it regardless of content. Don’t limit your audience. Any video where I talk about larp, I always explain what it is as fast and as simply as I can within the first 20 seconds. How I describe it is “an adult game of make believe.” That seems to cover any genre of larp, no matter how experimental, and everyone can picture it since everyone knows what “make believe” is. Then I proceed to talk about it as if i’m explaining it to a group of veteran larpers, and noobies.<sup>1</sup> People are all secretly narcissistic and love seeing themselves in things. So, try to make videos that non-larpers could see themselves in. In every video I never assume the viewer knows what larp is, and then explain it in a way that could appeal to everyone. Larp is so broad and so

many things, there is always something someone will like about it; costume designing, prop designing, writing, acting, combat. There are styles of larp that incorporate more sport, more tears, more competition, more costume showcasing, more set dressing. There’s a aspect and style of larp for everyone, so make sure everyone knows that. Which means...

## 2. Learn how to tell a larp story

My friend Jamie who runs my main larp campaign once gave me a very long, slightly drunk, speech on how to tell a larp story to non-larpers. First of all: non-larpers do not care about mechanics, skills, or rules. Not at first anyway. When people ask “what was the last book you read?,” their first question will usually always be “What was it about?,” not whether it fit into the 3 act structure or took a more experimental approach. Do not tell non-larpers that you have a level 4 fire spell that allows you to hit a monster with 30 health for 10 flame damage. Say “I hit a monster with a fireball.” One of those stories sounds WAY more exciting than the other. Sell your larp adventures for the adventures you had, not the numbers it gave your character sheet. When you’re larping, the emotions are real, so tell the story as if you were ACTUALLY THERE because that’s what larp feels like. Not everyone likes numbers or behind the scenes information, but everyone loves a good story.

## 3. Sell yourself

This is not as skeezy as it sounds. What i mean by this is just find all the best parts about yourself, and showcase them. YouTubers compared to a lot of other “celebrities” is thwe are a far more personal art medium. We do “question and answers” where viewers can learn all

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1 Slang on newbies, for beginners or people without any pre existing knowledge and experience.

about us, vlogs<sup>2</sup> where they can spend the day with us, and it's a lot less "glitz and glamour" than other beings of well known status. People watch a video for the content, but they stick around and subscribe for the youtuber. This doesn't mean invent a new personality. This means find the parts of your personality people like, and electrify them. That goes for your characters as well.

To expand on this idea, you should check out another YouTuber that's NOT a larper, but pretty close: Miranda Sing's. Miranda is a fictional character with a YouTube channel, created by comedian and singer Colleen Ballinger. In 2008 Colleen started uploading purposefully bad song covers to YouTube as a joke, and Miranda has gained over 7 million subscribers since. As she developed the character of "Miranda" she says she just read her YouTube comments, took note of what viewers found weird or obnoxious, and started to do it even more. Take note of what aspects of your characters and yourself your viewers like, and do it more.

#### 4. Make it look nice

Sit in front of a lit window or bright light source. Make sure any fans, or air conditioners, or any other machinery making noise is turned off. Make sure your camera isn't making you look too orange or too blue (you can change this by adjusting your lighting. Natural light gives off a blue tint, unnatural gives off an orange.) Make sure your background looks tidy and nice.

For a while, I thought none of this really mattered...until I went back and watched my old videos. All these technical things are like the bass line of a song. You don't notice when it's there, but OH BOY do you notice when it's not. So make sure you're well lit, your sound is good, and your shot is set up nice. Which also means, pay attention to your background. If you want people to pay attention to nothing

but your words, consider a blank wall behind you. Talking about costuming? Maybe display some of your pieces behind you. Want people to have a glimpse of your personality? Show your whole bedroom. Let your background tell a story.

#### 5. Get that larp footage

Just talking to a camera is fine, but when you cut to something else, it makes sure the audience is paying attention, because it gives them some new to look at. Also it saves you the time and effort of trying to do your awesome larp justice. You can just show your audience so they don't have to imagine it.

One of the biggest rules in visual storytelling: show, don't tell.

Hide your camera, stay out of game for a while, ask for filming privileges in exchange for some pictures of the event, ask the organiser if they can make the camera cannon in the game.

Even if it's just pictures someone else took, ask them if you may use the pictures.

#### 6. Be picky

Larp is really hard to translate to video because, a lot of the times it's not a spectator sport. Its meant to be experienced, not watched for entertainment. So, try and pick the footage that portrays what larp FEELS like, not looks like. Add some music or sound effects to fight scenes, so it doesn't just sound like latex hitting latex matched with grunting. Pick those intense scenes with dramatic lighting. Remember to market to non-larpers. People don't want to see a larp, they want to feel it. Choose the footage, and edit it accordingly, that portrays how that moment felt when you were in it.

When you larp, a lot of the emotions and adrenaline is real, but this is a little harder to

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<sup>2</sup> Video blogs.

translate to film. When you watch a movie, a scene could have a completely different feel or intensity based on the cinematography, the editing, the music, the lighting. Picture a shot of a few kids splashing in the water. Now picture it with happy, upbeat, ukulele music. It's a fun day at the beach! Viewers are content, and calm, and are reminded of carefree summer days. Now, picture the exact same shot, but with the jaws theme song underneath. Not a carefree beach day anymore is it? Footage provides what the larp looks like, but what you do with it determines how your viewers feel about it.

I tried to put together all of these things into one of my videos which I called "Lock Stock & Barrel: a five minute larp." I was dared by another YouTube channel to create a larp that would last 5 minutes, and film it. So I created a simple life or death scenario; 6 people locked in a post apocalyptic shelter that was running out of air, and the maximum inhabitant capacity would drop by 1 every 1 minute. Meaning, in order to survive, one person had to be eliminated or evacuated every minute. They were given items like: booze, poison,

water, a gun, bullets, cookies, and other items designed to kill each other. There was also an exit to the shelter with a 30% chance of survival in the wasteland. This was apparently fun for the players, and they wished it was a little longer. For the sake of a youtube video though, it was the perfect length. Because it was such a short amount of time, it was high energy, panicked, and 5 minutes of intensity. There was no time for spaced out improvised beautiful dialogue. It worked better, because it was messy and all over the place, like the real situation would have been if it was filmed for an audience. I also held it in my own home so I set up my filming lights, I got to set the scene the way I wanted, all with filming this in mind. Like it was an improvised movie.

But the biggest tip I can give, not just to larp YouTubers, but all YouTubers in general: Just do it! Don't worry about messing up, or having the right equipment, or not being ready. We all had to start somewhere. Watch the videos you make, figure out what you liked, and what you didn't, and adjust accordingly. Just figure it out as you go along. Fall into your place. So get going!

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As an addendum to this piece, Simon Brind conducted a brief interview with Mo Mo O'Brien; edited highlights are included here:

**Simon Brind:** *Would you tell us a little more about the design for the five minute larp? Do the people have characters? Did you pre-write them or did the players do it? Was there a set?*

**Mo Mo O'Brien:** It was very light rules, basically if they wanted to do anything physically, they just asked out loud and I told them if it went ok. They had characters they decided on themselves. Formed their own relationships and backstories. All the knowledge they were given was they had been in this bunker for almost a year. We made up the characters on the spot in a workshop before the game. The set, was my living room, with a spotlight in the middle. You can watch the whole thing here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jgQFuLhe-ks>

**SB:** *Are there ways that larp could become a spectator sport? or a spectator event? Would it still be larp?*

**O'Brien:** If larp was a spectator sport, it would be called improv theatre. If all the mechanics and techniques were designed to entertain an audience and not the player, it would be an episode of whose line is it anyway. Even if there was an audience to an actual larp event, by my definition, it would become improv theatre. Though I'm sure there's 40 essays out there by people much smarter than me with different theories about it.



*Mo Mo O'Brien: A youtuber or whatever.  
Photographer: Carol O'Brien*

**SB:** How else could YouTube be used in larp? Could one be played out using YouTube videos and responses do you think? Or as a part of a game?

**O'B:** What I would love to see is YouTube being used as a tool in larp. We have all this new technology that I feel could be utilised better. I recently did a game called *As we know it* that took place entirely, on my own, sitting in a closet, and all the interactions were over text. It was a game about isolation and through technology, perfect isolation was able to be achieved. There's so much people can do with video, I think it could be used in larp a lot more.

**SB:** *Can you tell the story of a larp in video? Could the 5 minute experiment scale up to 30 minutes, 3 hours or even 3 days?*

**O'B:** Could I tell the story of a 3 day larp in a 10 minute video? Absolutely. Especially when it comes to internet media, it is typically more likely to hold someone's attention. It's important to find the right balance between rambling, and cutting it short. Say what you NEED to say. Sometimes you need to cut what you WANT to say, which is the most heartbreaking thing about good editing. Take notes before you film. It helps you formulate your thoughts, keeps you from forgetting anything, and will help eliminate nonsense and rambling.

**SB:** *Nordic larps have done a great job of documenting their games and they are producing some great promotional videos<sup>3</sup> too. But what else would you like to see from game organisers? How could they improve?*

**O'B:** Blockbuster nordic larps are EASILY the simplest kind of larp to film, because it is so close to improvised theatre. They usually have the best costumes, props, sets, and scenes since it's more about characters, than character sheets. Since it's typically more aesthetically pleasing than a lot of boffer larps, it's easier to share, and easier to relate to, because you have to worry less about portraying how the experience feels, because it looks so nice from the outside. So I think what the western larp media needs, is to focus on what the western larp community HAS. Focus more on the competitive and self improving nature of western sport style larps, and learn how to translate that feeling of adrenaline and action to film.

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3 Promotional videos for Fairweather Manor, Black Friday and the like.



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# Character-based Design and Narrative Tools in the French Style Romanesque Larp

Muriel Algayres

We like to engage in larp through compelling and vivid characters. However, the available tools to create them are many and diverse: whether we go with short or detailed characters, give them a lot of background or just create a short frame for the players to develop, whether we leave the control of the story to the larpwright or give more leeway towards

the player's agenda. All of these approaches are tools that can be calibrated according to each designer's purposes.

France has in the past fifteen years enjoyed the development of its specific, character-based, drama-oriented larp scene called the *romanesque* genre. With a heavy emphasis on character development and personal re-

relationships, this type of game has garnered a huge, devoted following. Though it has been but recently documented (Choupaut, 2013; Algayres, 2016a), the romanesque scene has steadily evolved through almost two decades and developed some specific traits regarding game design.

This article will endeavour to present the romanesque style larp in relation to other similar larp styles in Europe, and establish some tools we use to create characters and narration in this type of larps. The objectives are to expand both the knowledge about larp production in Europe and the narrator's toolbox to create characters.

## What is the French style romanesque genre?

### An overview of the genre

The romanesque term started being applied to games in 2010, by Frédéric Barnabé for *l'Agonie du Poète* (2010). However, that game was the last iteration of a long series of games coined as "emotional" or "dramatic," which was almost as old as the practice of larp in the country. In its primary sense, romanesque means "which belongs to the realm of a novel," a descriptive for dramatic events or actions. Therefore, it is used to describe games that are constructed as rich, narrative experiences, with pre-written characters whose rich backstory and psychology are the driving forces of the larp.

Since then, the term has been appropriated to qualify many games following the same general features. While these features might still be debated, we have focused on the following traits (Algayres, 2016a):

1. Focus on the character. Character creation is mostly in the hands of the organisers, and they will be very detailed, with a lot of intertwining backstory and built-in information.
2. A huge impact of the past which explains the details in the character. The backstory gets a significant importance in building the potential for narration and the character's psyche. Some elements might be kept secret, to be discovered for dramatic impact.
3. An environment built as a microcosm. The diversity of characters serves as a means to establish the workings of society in the specific time and context of the game, which is why the romanesque usually love historically inspired settings.
4. The use of narrative archetypes. Romanesque larps often draw inspiration from literary classics and embrace the romanesque genre's common tropes as a means to drive narration.
5. The dominance of tragedy, with character-based narrative integrating a lot of human drama, conflicts and character dilemma. This is not an absolute, though, some games advocate a lighter atmosphere or tragedy-comedy mix, such as *Rêves d'Absinthe* (Algayres and D'authie, 2011), or *Prima La Musica* (Primoot, 2016).
6. Tightly-knit narrative arcs, which are meant to reach their climax during the game, with characters living out an exceptional destiny or a defining moment of their lives over the course of the game.
7. A focus on the characters' emotions and on each participant's identification with their character, in the same manner as a reader identifies with a character in a work of fiction. Bleed may occur as a result of identification with the character.

The generally recognised strength of these larps is that they provide a very rich, detailed frame, with complex characters thoroughly inserted in their context and network of rela-



*A tragic family reunion, a classic trope in romanesque larp from “Absinthe,” set in 1920s Germany.  
Photograph: Joram Epis*

tionships. However, as a significant part of the world, character-building and control of the story remains in the hands of the organisers. This type of larp places greater limitations on players’ agenda and freedom (in character selection and creation especially). This is usually a design choice that creators justify by that they are using it to enrich the overall story and narrative, to create more closely connected characters and potential for tight narratives and complex story arcs.

## The historically inspired larp in France and in Europe

While the term romanesque has been coined to describe a very specific sub-genre of French larp culture, we can observe games with similar intent in several other European countries. It is also interesting to see that we can find similar traits in the games in the historically inspired genre. History and larp have always

worked well together, since “a historical larp can have a more interesting and challenging gameplay because of the richly faceted social situations history brings with it” (Salomonsen, 2003, p. 94). Game designers from all over Europe have had the opportunity to exploit the richness of history all the while retaining the creative licence to twist accuracy for practical or dramatic purposes, and we’ll quote some significant, but by no means exhaustive, examples.

In Finland, historically-inspired larps are a part of the scene, with Viking history, the Victorian era, and Finnish history around the time of independence featured as time periods of interest. Finland, like France and for similar reasons, has had a tradition of long, very detailed characters, as the absence of workshops made it necessary to include a lot of information about the character’s psyche and environment in written form.

An interesting example is provided by the Czech larp *Skoro Rassvet* (Haladová, Platir et

al., 2013).<sup>1</sup> *Skoro Rassvet* is a game set in 19th century Russia, heavily influenced by Russian literature and especially Tolstoy. The game is played in a day, with a half day of workshops, and the action takes place during a family gathering for a formal dinner. In its approach and objectives, this game would certainly have been dubbed *romanesque* in France. The character design, however, differed sensibly. The written material was relatively short by historical larp standards (less than half a dozen pages), and most of the character development was done during the workshops, essentially through social codes and rituals, and role-playing scenes from the past (Hampejs, 2015).

Other examples from the obviously rich Czech scene include *Salon Moravia* (Bondy and Bondyová et al., 2014), set in a brothel during World War II, *De la Bête* (Pešta and Wagner et al., 2013), a superproduction set in 18<sup>th</sup> century France, and *Legion* (Pešta and Wagner, 2015), which combines historical inspiration and hardcore larp in its depiction of a 1915 retreating military unit.

Norway also has a significant historical larp scene, which used to be dubbed “stocking larps” (Stark, 2013). Norwegian historical larps were presented at the French convention Les GNiales with great interest (Hansen, 2014). They appeared as very rich, deeply layered productions, with high requirements for historical and costume accuracy which put them close to historical reenactment, and, in keeping with nordic larp, bigger creative agenda for the players where the building of interactions and narrative arcs were concerned. *Kjærlighet uten strømper* [*Love without Stockings*] (Voje and Stammestrø et al., 2004) can be mentioned as an example of the historical drama inspiration. The game, set during a wedding in 1771, presents its objective as a mix of intrigue, personal and societal drama, integrating significant amounts of conflict and romance.

The rapidly blooming progressive scene in

Italy, under the banner of the collective *Terre Spezzate*, has made several contributions to the historically inspired genre. *I Ribelli della montagna* [*Rebels on the Mountain*] (Capone and Biffi, 2015) was a rich, vivid rendition of the last months of World War Two which got unprecedented media attention, support from A.N.P.I.—Associazione Nazionale Partigiani Italiani [National Association of Italian Partisans], and praise for its thoughtful and sensitive rendition of the conflict. *Chiave di Volta* [*Keystone*] (Tireabasso and Villa Avogadro, 2015), is a lush dramatisation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century centred around the theme of power, the possibility to play both masters and servants in a complicated power play, and a huge production value. Both of these productions have cleverly integrated design elements and techniques from nordic larp (safety mechanics, workshops etc.) while retaining their own unique style, resulting in extremely well-crafted larps.

And of course, the blockbuster larp also ventured into the historical drama setting with *Fairweather Manor* (Boruta, Raasted and Nielsen et al., 2015), a larp set in Edwardian England and inspired by the hit TV-show *Downton Abbey*. While the brute force design proved partially unfit to cover the complexity of a multi-layered society (including diversity of age, rank and function), the game was effective in carrying over a lot of content and player-generated interactions. The first iteration of the larp warranted an unofficial spin-off, a second run and a sequel over the course of the following year.

Back in France, the most recent larps of the *romanesque* genre have shown a clear ambition to expand on the genre and make it evolve for the better through the inclusion of those nordic style techniques whose use has become widespread in recent years (workshops, black box), keener focus on directing themes, and more refined work on the societal frame. *Pri-*

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1 Whose international runs were organised in Denmark through the organisation Solhverv.

*ma la Musica* (Primoot, 2016) is a larp about the French opera scene of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, using opera-inspired dramatics and music both diegetically and non-diegetically through an open, black box system. *Still Water Runs Deep* (Ruhja, 2014) is a Jane Austen/Dickensian inspired larp with a sharp focus on class hierarchies and gender stereotypes, which was also played as a cross-gender experience, with participants praising the insight it gave them of the opposite genders' constraints and problematics. Finally, *Harem Son Saat* (Algayres, 2016b) was the first international game of the genre, using English as a main language,<sup>2</sup> built around the themes of oppression, gender segregation and culture shock.

Therefore, while romanesque is solidly a French term, character-driven literary and historically inspired larps have by no means been limited to a single geographic area. The rich potential of history and its dramatisation has been widely exploited and feels still rich with great potential.

## Character design and narrations in the romanesque genre

### Archetypes in the romanesque genre

Romanesque larps are character-centred games, with a significant part of the game design being devoted to the conception of the characters, all of them organiser-created. While length and composition of characters tend to vary from one larpwright to another, a couple of techniques can be pinpointed.

The first one is what I'd like to call the smart use of archetypes. This is a very thin line to tread, as any overused archetype can become a cliché and damage the necessary suspension

of disbelief. Let's use an example. You might hear French players harp about the "switched at birth" plot, used as an ironic commentary on romanesque clichés, though, to my knowledge, it has rarely been used in the scene, except in the prohibition-game era Chicago. Illegitimate children and foundlings, however, are definitely a staple of the genre, but this is fitting to historical periods when children born out of wedlock had no status in society.

Classic or archetypal plotlines or characters can be true to period, but also resonate with an audience of participants which has usually grown up learning and enjoying these stories. It has been argued that larp itself can be viewed as an incarnation of the monomyth, each participant's experience echoing the traditional hero's journey. (Hook, 2010, p.34)

So how do we go about practicing the clever use of archetypes? In a romanesque setting, we consider all characters protagonists. Therefore, we'll use archetypes to define them through several angles:

- The inner nature of the character: the patriarch, the overbearing matron, the hotheaded, the cynic, the ingénue, the rebel. This is very basic and can turn cliché if the character is limited to the inner archetype.
- Their contrast in relation to others (also called *foil*). This is particularly frequent in pairs or trios of characters, such as siblings, close friends, etc. You'll have the optimist to the realist, the extrovert to the introvert, the by-the-rules personality against the rebellious type, etc. Foils are really useful because, through simple characterisation, they create a lot of potential for conflict between the characters.

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2 Which stood for Turkish in the 1913 Ottoman background, while French was in-game a diplomatic second language.

- Their position within a network of relationships and in relation to others. Each character is the participant's protagonist, but can be another's sibling, a third's best friend, the romantic interest of a fourth, the antagonist to a fifth and so on.

If we just use any archetype, a character stands a sure chance to become cliché, because its archetype will be instantly identifiable, and its characterisation weak. This is where several archetypes used in conjunction with the others become useful: the character becomes more layered, therefore more human. However, the archetypes at work can still have a universal meaning to participants, which makes them particularly effective.

### **The dual approach in character design**

Another element of character design typical to the romanesque genre is what we call the dual approach. While it is by no means limited to the romanesque, it has also become typical of some of the games. The dual approach in character design is a combination of the following elements:

- The initial approach: the character's motif or *raison d'être*, their reason for being present. This can be accomplished through family ties, a function or specific job, a plot-related motif. This must answer the questions: why are they here? Why should they care? Why will they stay?
- The final approach: what will the character's potential arc be? What will be their greatest moment? It can be a reveal (hence the predominance of secrets in some larps), an epiphany, a staged grand scene, a necessary evolution, but an element (or several) which will make the character's journey (and the participant's experience) significant and meaningful.

In a typical design, both of these approaches, as well as the archetypes at play, are handled simultaneously, as the character (and the network of characters) is constructed bit by bit. The final criteria is to analyse if the characters are playable, interesting, and enjoyable.

The objective of this type of design is to provide the participant with potential for a rich story and interactions. Some games tend to follow a more streamlined route, and have even been criticised for railroading the character's arc too much. However, most of these games definitely have a clear narrativist approach, only limited to what is coherent with the character's context and psyche. For some time periods in history, these elements of context and the social pressure can really be played as antagonists of their own.

### **Conclusion**

With more than ten years of established existence and a very rich history of diverse and celebrated games, the French style romanesque scene is certainly a prime example of a national scene which strives through its own specific identity, all the while getting enriched through contact with other genres and countries.

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## LOYALTY TO CHARACTER

“Ask not what you can do for your character, ask what your character can do for you?”

Charles Bo Nielsen

### *The problem*

I have worked with character creation for many years and making characters fit both the larp and the players at the same time has always been a struggle. The player of the character might change, new ideas for relations pop up down the road, how the player understands the character might be completely different than what you had thought. The larp is most likely going to develop in a direction you were not able to predict, because that is what larps do. They do not follow a script, they adapt, they bend, twist and turn. Some smaller, heavily scripted larps, might have a certain amount of control over the characters and players, but the bigger the larp, the less you can predict or control the course of the action. So instead of insisting to try and keep tabs on everything, work with the character as a starting point, not a script for a character you need to play out like in a theatre. It is your character and your experience that matters.

Some larps introduce work-

shop-created characters to get the player involved at an early stage in and allow designers and players to collaborate to create a shared vision of the character and that solves many problems. I think an easier solution is a change in player mentality. With both *College of Wizardry* (Nielsen, Dembinski and Raasted, 2014-) and *Fairweather Manor* (Boruta, Raasted and Nielsen et al., 2015) we tried to communicate that characters were meant to serve as inspiration for the players, not a chain around their necks. We told players explicitly that they were free to change what needed to be changed so the character could fit the experience they as players sought from the larp. Obviously while still being mindful of others and communicating with their co-players. But the idea to take a character sheet and change as much of it as you want is alien to many larpers and it requires a shift in both player mentality, and in larp design. In this article, I've outlined my thoughts on how you as a player should approach your characters, not to tell the story the organ-

isers envisaged, but to make the characters your own and through that create the most amount of game.

### *You are not an actor*

Larp is not acting, there is not a tightly written script you have to read out aloud where every part of your character's journey is dependent on you staying entirely true to your character. Larps are (mostly) dynamic and flexible, stories and actions are (mostly) improvised. For your character to always function in this exercise of mass improvisation, your character needs to be flexible as well.

### *We wrote the character for you!*

Now, when I advise you to only stick to the character for as long as it works, it is not because I want you to disregard the tireless work of character writers, but because the designers wrote the character for you to have a good experience. Be aware of when it stops working, when you start crying not due to: “talking about your sister's suicide while peeling potatoes in the mud”<sup>1</sup> but be-

1 (Thank you Karolina and Stina) Knudepunkt TV video: A journey in to Swedish larping”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TyrLndFJBfs>

cause you as a player feel stuck. You have very likely been there yourself; the character just did not make sense, either for you or with the direction that the larp had taken your character. Realise and adapt.

When I sat in the organiser room of CoW and *Fairweather Manor*, I met players crying their eyes out because they didn't know what to do, they were simply unable to act out their character and have a good experience at the same time. This is a moment to "CUT," "BRAKE," and "STOP." Take a deep breath and sit down, and ask yourself: "What do I as a player want to experience at this larp, why did I come here in the first place?" When you have figured that out, try figuring out how to get there.

My advice is always to consider this before going to a larp. Spend time acknowledging why you want to play a specific larp and a specific type of character, to adapt your expectations to when you meet the larp. If you do not know what you want, then try something you would find enjoyable in other larps—being it eating cakes or drowning people in a lake (I'm not here to judge). Do it. Just do it. After you have done it as your character, try and rationalise why: "I just did this, what the fuck just happened?" This also happens in the real world, sometimes we just do something stupid we never wanted to do, and then afterwards we try to rationalise it. It works perfectly fine in real life, so it can in larp too. Real people don't consider every-

thing they do: they do stuff. Often it takes a while before they realise why they did it. This is a perfect excuse to change directions for your character at a larp. Use it.

### *Contradictions are interesting*

You see it all the time in real life, and in fiction. When someone contradicts their own beliefs or actions, it can make for interesting storytelling. So whenever you ask yourself: "What would my character do?" also ask: "What would my character never do?" Then ask yourself as a player, what would be the most interesting story? The protective knight that lost his temper and beat up the beggar on the street, the thief that returned the stolen goods, the doctor who ended up killing his patient, the enemies who suddenly became best friends? Sometimes playing against stereotypes can provide better stories and more intense experiences than playing a character as written.

### *Just like falling in love*

Think of it as falling in love. Sometimes we just do stupid shit for love. That is your motivation. Now ask yourself, what or who is it that your character loves? Then do that stupid unthinkable thing to get closer to it. "My character do not fall in love," well maybe you just did anyway? Or maybe you did something stupid to protect someone? Love is the perfect illogical explanation for lots of potential play. Again, obviously

be mindful of your co-players, never use spontaneous love as an excuse to stalk someone you as a player like out-of-character. Use it to start new interaction and if you feel stuck with no direction for your character.

### *"I suddenly remember all about this trauma from my past?"*

Remember your 1-10 pages of character is not a full life story. People who have written diaries as teenagers has hundreds of pages of dribble and if you read it all, there would still be more teenage angst to go. Maybe there was something that wasn't mentioned in your character? Like in real life, you also suddenly remember something from your past, that gets triggered. This could also happen to your character. Be creative and don't panic, there is almost always a way to get a back into a larp and mold a poor experience into a great experience. I have dozens of boring or just poor larp experiences, where I went out-of-character and went for a walk to reconsider my options, sometimes asking real life friends at the larp for help. If they are your friends, they would prefer you tell them of your struggles, than just try and brush it off, even if you interrupt five minutes of their weekend larp. Who knows, maybe they are also confused and together you can solve each other's lackluster experience.

### *Sharing is caring*

This brings us to yet another approach. Instead of thinking about what you as a player

want, think about what you could do to enhance the experience of others. If someone else looks bored, try to play with them. It might so happen that they then do the same for you when you get bored. Maybe someone is trying to keep a secret? Expose it to everyone, see what happens. Maybe someone else wants to be beaten or wants to win, let them, others will mimic your collaborative play. Look outwards and become a playmaker for others. The best stories are created together and sometimes you can get a great experience yourself by delivering one for someone else. Maybe you can deliver someone's poems or collect their taxes, maybe someone is sitting with too much to do and you can lift part of that burden. You might break ranks a bit or upset norms in the setting, but if someone is struggling with their position anyway, their experience might already suck, so breaking a bit of the immersion of hierarchy is often the lesser of two evils.

### *Reinventing the wheel*

I am not trying to reinvent the wheel, *steering* was a term introduced a few years ago at Knudepunkt. I strongly recommend you read: *The art of steering* by Markus Montola, Eleanor Saitta and Jaakko Stenros (2015). What I advocate is to actively steer your character. Take charge of your experience. It is even more important today, where you have likely gone to a larp in a foreign country that cost a fortune. Try one or more of the techniques I suggested

above and if you're in doubt, always come and ask the organisers, they might not know everything, but they could have a good idea on how you could adapt your character.

### *Going out-of-character*

There is a lot of debate about whether or not it is okay to leave character. In the 90s, it was clearly considered the biggest achievement to stay in character as long as humanly possible. Today, things are changing, while immersion is still an important goal, we want to be more aware about consent and opting in / opting out. For you to be able to play with informed consent and be able to opt out, you need to on some level to feel comfortable with stepping out-of-character and asking your co-players "is this okay?" as well as saying: "NO!" (or "Yellow Penguin," if that is the agreed safeword).

Nordic larps often have safewords as a default, and creating comfortable off-game awareness can be done in different ways, which I am not going to go into in this article. What I can say is that when it works, it is usually quite easy to fall back into character, surprisingly easy in fact, at least in my experience, whenever someone takes you off-game. We always think that immersion is slowly being built up. I would argue it can be kickstarted. Think of when you watch a powerful movie, some movies take you right into the action with a single chord or one camera shot. I have experienced the same in larp. If you have doubts, go off-

game and ask, and then agree on a way to reboot the scene and do it.

### *Kickstarting immersion*

There are many techniques you can use to kickstart immersion, most of which are inspired by methods from theatre and may require a bit of practice. At *Fairweather Manor*, playing the role of the butler required the player—Daniel Sundström—to go into the off-game room to get updates about the programme for the larp. Each time Sundström entered, he would do a specific modern hand gesture (Going out-of-character) and when stepping back into the larp he would stand up straight and take a deep breath as if he was about to jump into a swimming pool (Going into character.) What he did was giving physical signals to his body, when going from off- to in-game. I recommend you find a distinct physical trait for your character, which you stop doing if you go out-of-character and restart doing as you try to immerse yourself. It can be a specific voice, a way to fold your hands, a tipping with your fingers, favouring one leg—you see it in movies all the time, the really immersive character have these physical traits that completely changes the actor.

The Actor Daniel Day-Lewis is famous for the way he changes his physicality. If you watch a few of his movies in a row, you will notice that he almost always changes his jaw position when he acts to help with accents and changing his facial structure. I'm not saying you

need to be an Oscar level performer to larp, but let yourself be inspired by it.

Generally what you want is very clear physical behaviour transformation and have some odd physical action while going out-of-character, making it clear for your mind and body, that you are leaving the magic circle.

Another approach is setting a scene. Every player involved should agree, off-game, on who starts the conversation and then you jump in. It is best to pick a scene that is powerful and can get your adrenaline going, like a fight, running or going onto stage to perform. Demanding immediate action from your character turns the focus away from your “off-game self,” you focus on the task instead of your own thoughts. Basically, you want to distract your mind, it is a bit like trying to fall asleep, if you think too much about it, it only becomes harder.

Lastly, music. If you are running a black box larp I strongly recommend using music or lights to signal immersion. Just like in a movie, using our senses can trigger us to get into character, out-of-character, or evoke emotional responses which are often a great distraction from off-game thoughts. This is also why black box larps can be so powerful in just one hour of play. It can get as intense in one hour as a weekend in a castle. Because just like a castle evokes emotional responses by having the smell, the feel and the look right—a well designed black box larp can play with your senses to empower immersion.

*We can negotiate violence, why not characters?*

At the Swedish border school larp about bullying, *Lindängen* (Elofsson and Lundkvist, 2016), my biggest regret was the scene I did not cut. It was a scene where one character was group

pressured into slapping another character. It was a powerful scene, but the player doing the slapping was only giving “fake slaps” as the crowd shouted: “Hit harder,” “hit harder.” I could see the group pressure bleeding over from the character to the player as well. Fortunately, the player stood firm and did not escalate, but after the scene ended I realised that I should have said cut, stopped the scene and let us find a way to play up the intensity of the fake beating rather than playing it down.

We make these realisations when it comes to scenes being too violent or intimate, and we agree to change them without blinking. We should give our characters the same courtesy. If something isn’t working, go off and agree with your co-players or organisers how to improve it. Worst case, you ruin one good scene but you save an entire larp experience.

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## Response to Charles B. Nielsen

I agree with many of the suggestions Charles B. Nielsen makes in *Loyalty to Character*. It is true that larps do not follow a script, that even if you write a character for a certain player, that player may pull out at the last minute. What sounds like fun play for a character writer may not be fun for the person playing the part, and any game may take an unexpected turn. As a larp designer, it is therefore tempting to go down Nielsen's route, to say: "your character is your own, make of it what you will." But does this approach make for a better larp? Or a better experience for the players?

From a designer's perspective, this open approach to character writing seems to work best for loosely designed, sandbox style games. When you have a specific story in mind, with a set of characters and relations, every player cannot change as much of their character as they want. Take a murder mystery, for example. In order for the drama to be intense, each character must have a connection to the victim and a reason to want them dead. The players may not know who the victim will be before the game starts, so if you allow each of them to change whichever part of their character they want, the mystery may fall to pieces on day one.

There is beauty in a carefully crafted plot where snippets from a character description comes into play during a game, where each character plays a small part in a larger story. Although most larps do not—and arguably should not—run on rails, there is a particular joy in being surprised at a twist in a story you did not know you were an integral part of. Giving players complete control over the characters requires game designers to either craft plots that are independent from characters—which is a great loss, if you ask me—or to design games that are played with open cards so that every player knows the ramifications of any change they make. This second approach removes the opportunity to surprise players by in-game turns of events. By releasing control of character creation, the designers leave it to players to build their own stories, plots and relation networks to a much larger degree than in a more tightly designed game. This will naturally favour those players who enjoy and are adept at building and sustaining such networks and who enjoy building their own stories, rather than reacting dynamically to unexpected events.

In addition, it is a known truth that left to our own devices, players have a tendency to repeat the same tropes. A player with a penchant for drama will almost always end up bleeding, broken and crying alone in the dark. A player who loves experiencing the rise to power might turn even a mild-mannered romantic into a power-hungry, machiavellian mastermind. I'm not saying that this doesn't happen when players are asked to play parts as written, or even that changing characters is a bad thing, but complete freedom means that there's no external push to try something new. Larping offers such opportunities to try on new roles and experiences, but sometimes you need to be offered a part you did not know you would enjoy playing in order to experience

it. If you always get to build your character, you might subconsciously end up playing the same game over and over.

I'm not against character steering. Sometimes it is necessary to step out of a game and change direction. The shortfalls in Nielsen's approach is that it limits the types of stories game designers can tell, and that it removes the external push for players to try something new. In Nielsen's games, I suspect many of the players will end up telling the same story over and over and, more importantly, that the stories they tell will be player-written and player-controlled.

Nielsen is right when he writes that "the idea to take a character sheet and change as much of it as you want is alien to many larpers and it requires a shift in both player mentality, and in larp design." I am just not sure if this shift is the right choice for every player and every game. Any larp designer wanting to employ Nielsen's character design needs to be aware of the knock on limitations in terms of the game they can write, and any player going to such a game needs to be aware that by owning their character's past, they also need to own that character's future.

Charles Bo Nielsen

## Reply to Martine Svanevik

First thing I will address is the point of freedom for a murder mystery larp.

First of all I would look at the design and see how I could work around it. I would argue it is to fragile a larp design if it can fall about from characters making change. The best mystery larp I ever played was "*Sankt Elisabeth*," which was a haunted hospital, where we had to explore the rooms for clues and hints. The main antagonist of the larp was revealed through the larp and not through the background story of the characters. The stuff you shouldn't change was the actual clues in the hospital. The characters all had relations to people who had died at the haunted hospital, but these relations was build up through play with NPC ghosts of former patients. The true brilliance came from the design being so steady, I and another player was 45 minutes late to the larp and got a shorter briefing and got introduced later to the larp, but it didn't effect the experience that much, because we still got to explore through the hospital to find clues and meet up old patients.

Had we had super tightly written characters, with a near scripts like part of story bits we needed to reveal from our backstory to the other characters, all sorts of things could have gone wrong and often does in horror/psychological thriller larps.

Long answer short: Challenge yourself as a designer and work around it. Make a horror larp, not horror movie.

Martine Svanevik points out there are two solutions if there are not carefully crafted character plots. Either independent plots with no direct ties to characters or a transparent design, so everyone can share and follow the changes they do. I had a great conversation about the claiming that transparent design leaves no room for surprise in the larp with a Russian larp designer Di Villiers about this at GNiales. It is all about getting that “aha! moment”—which for Svanevik and Di Villiers is when a intricate string of neatly folded surprises are revealed. But the “aha! moment” also happens in a very open transparent larp. In a open design larp you put out lots of ideas and plan with your co-players, when suddenly you create the great larp moments, you only put out as dreams, not by a well planned and playout script, but by everyone coming together and playing each other up to reach those strong immersive moments we all play larp for. The payoff for feeling that you as a player achieved greatness is just as rewarding if not more as getting it served on a silver platter.

“Reacting dynamically to unexpected events” I would say is quite an romanticisation of railroaded larps. While I will acknowledge that it is a goal that is often achieved, I also often end up in a situation where it feels to be constructed or that I can see it coming before it happens. With a more natural story developed through play during the larp, you actually have no idea where the larp will take you. But with a railroaded experience—and especially if you know the creators—you start to realise the patterns, even more so if you are also a designer yourself.

Then Svanevik brings up: “players have a tendency to repeat the same tropes.” This I believe to be a very valid critique. Because it is very true that with little external control, we will end up falling back to default ideas and positions, pursue the story we think we want, rather than the story someone else might have in store for us. So if you design your larp with much player freedom in mind or you play a larp like this, be aware of the tropes and challenge yourself to rethink your ideas and not go with the first and the best thing that pops into mind. And as organisers help player creativity along, through workshops, preparing for the larp, teach them something new about society, culture or play styles, so they get new impressions they can get inspired by.

As a larp designer you should help your players see the potential of your larp and together go beyond and above, what would be possible if only one part did all the creative work.

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# Moment-based Story Design

Ian Thomas

*"I believe it was the late Rosalind Russell who gave this wisdom to a young actor: 'Do you know what makes a movie work? Moments. Give the audience half a dozen moments they can remember, and they'll leave the theater happy.' I think she was right. And if you're lucky enough to write a movie with half a dozen moments, make damn sure they belong to the star."*  
(William Goldman, *Adventures in the Screen Trade*, 1983)

## WAR STORIES

Why are we in this business of creating stories for people to play? What do we, as creators, get out of the experience of running games? Why do we do it? I get a kick out of knowing that the players have gone through intense emotional experiences. How do I know whether we've achieved that? I use a simple measure. I listen to what I call *war stories*.<sup>1</sup>

It's something that's obvious in hindsight. Every time you get a bunch of larpers together

to socialise, out come the war stories; tales of things that happened at events to them, or to their friends, or at another event that they heard about once. "That bit when the demon appeared ..." "And then, my God, I was running from that thing, I've never been so scared ..." "The look on her face when she realised the truth!"

Most of those stories have been provoked by moments of intense experience, of intense emotion: fear, shock, hilarity, love, freezing cold weather, sleep deprivation, utter disbelief. These people have been put through the mill, and these stories are the resulting moments that stood out to them, memories that will live on in their heads forever, stories they want to share. And so they share them. Many become iconic, and are passed on second or third hand.

This isn't solely restricted to larp, of course—it's the sort of conversation that happens when film-lovers get together to discuss "the bit where Hulk punched Thor!" or "when Bruce Willis realises the truth!" These stories bind people to-

gether in pubs, or on forums, or at book clubs. A need to share the things that really affected them, that etched those experiences into their minds.

It's only in recent years that I've come to the realisation that such *froth*<sup>2</sup> is my primary measure of a successful game. But in starting to analyse the phenomenon, I realise that it's how our team at Crooked House<sup>3</sup> has always approached shaping stories. We write larps by coming up with moments that we hope the players will talk about afterwards, and we've been doing that for years. It's something we evolved entirely accidentally, with no in-depth analysis of what we were doing.

## BACKGROUND

Historically, the core of our team has been very focused on set-piece moments. This is because we have people who work in set design, stunts, pyrotechnics and props for films; we do our best to make best use of those talents. The art & stunt department always have *gags* they want to try, no matter the genre.

1 My brother, who works in TV and film, reminds me that these are known in TV as "watercooler moments" i.e. where, in the workplace, people will cluster around a watercooler discussing last night's episode.

2 Used in UK larp circles to mean excessive outpourings of excited conversation about an event you've played, an event you're going to, a game system, or really anything about larp at all. An umbrella is advised.

3 A long-running UK larp organisation that runs high-budget one-off events with lots of special effects.



*The scene. Grym Photography*

And we've always tackled games as an exercise in genre. When we ran a gore-based horror event, we did our best to push the boundaries of taste and decency and to cover a whole range of tropes that players would recognise, but would have never encountered before in larp. Similarly, on running a pulp action-adventure, we made certain to pack it full of red lines drawn across maps, toms half-buried in sand, ridiculous accents, and traps involving lots of creepy-crawlies.

We write and run one-off events. We knew our pulp adventure was probably going to be the last one we'd ever run, so we packed it full of as much pulp as we could find, as we wouldn't get another chance.

### THE WRITING PROCESS

So we get together with a rough idea of theme and setting, and a long list of experiences we'd like the players to have. These could be set piece stunts, gags, or special effects; atmospheric where we generate a certain mood; small interpersonal moments; several hours of continuous unrelenting horror. They could be ideas for rules. They could also be material for pre-event, to set the scene. At this point many of the ideas will be only partially formed. For example, our list might include "have to deal with a confined space," "there should be a moment where all the lights go out," "a scene where the antagonist lays bare every character's

deepest secret" or "we could do that trick with a Ouija board and magnets."

Then, through brainstorming sessions, we identify a few key moments and solidify them, making them the tent-poles of our game timeline.

With our tent-pole moments in place, the shape of our event starts to emerge, as do the themes, and the story itself. This is the stage at which we may reject ideas from our list outright, as we find they don't suit the story or the theme or the mood. Eventually we'll have a firmed up set of key experiences and a rough idea of when they might happen.

If we were creating a story for a book or a film—and we've used this system for that—then

the story would be essentially linear. One key moment would play out after another, and the viewer would have no options to change that, no choices to make. Our tent-pole moments would always happen in the same order.

With larp, we could run our games in that way, but there's a danger of "railroading" the players—making them feel as if their actions have no effect on the story, as if it's being told to them rather than as if they're part of creating it.

Our games are somewhere between linear and totally free. We are certain of several fixed moments that will happen no matter what, and we know roughly when they'll happen, but we leave a lot of space for flexibility with other moments and the order in which they might play out. This is critical not only for the dramatic flow of the story—for example, during these few hours the players shouldn't be overly stressed or challenged, but right here we need a climax—but is also critical for the art department, so they know in what order they need to get sets built or rebuilt and stunts and effects rigged. We have a rough idea of the window of time in which a particular moment can be experienced.

Note that there's no guarantee a moment will happen. We give the players the opportunity to take part in a particular scene, gag or event at specific points. All we're doing is providing opportunity. Those opportunities may not be taken in the way we expect, or may

not be taken at all. And, honestly, we cheat. In some cases we make the players believe they've made their own timeline choices, but we've secretly railroaded them. I give an example of that later on in this article.

We'll do several brainstorming passes filling in the blanks. Normally I go away and write a treatment of the flow of the game as if it were a story, because this irons out inconsistencies and brings up all sorts of issues we haven't thought of—it also shoots down ideas that we thought seemed amazing at 3am.

And then we'll simply repeat, talking through the game again and again, picking apart each moment and polishing it until—hopefully—it shines, making sure the story is consistent, making sure our supporting cast fit in where they should, and layering theme and mood into everything we can. When we're done, some of the things we've come up with will be concrete set-piece-like moments. Others will be ongoing opportunities for players to generate moments themselves. Both are equally important, and I'll give examples of the design of each.

#### **A MOMENT DESIGN EXAMPLE: THE JUMP**

It's 3am. You haven't slept for two days now. There are strange things happening in this mansion. You're upstairs in your bedroom, in bed with your partner, but the lights are on; you're both too scared to

turn them off.

There's something about this room. When you came in, you noticed the wedding pictures of the young couple, and the photos of their baby daughter. You know it's a daughter, because the crib is still here, beside the bed; the name Gwendolyn hangs on a wooden plaque at the end of it. You turned the photos face down, because you realised who they were; the young couple who died here years ago. You've read the newspaper reports, and heard the family stories. You've found letters: receipts, bills, final demands.

And you've heard things. A baby crying, although you couldn't find the source. A man and a woman arguing, muffled, through the wall; something about money. And, twice now, a gunshot, somewhere outside through the corridor. You've never found where it came from... although there was blood on the bathroom floor.

And now, tonight, you hear the gunshot again. And the baby starts crying outside your door. A girl screams. And the door flies open. There stands the young mother, dressed in black, the baby bundled under her arm. She's in tears, make-up running. In her right hand she brandishes a revolver. She runs into your room and turns around, frantically warning away her pursuers. Except there aren't any pursuers; the doorway is empty—but she can clearly see them. She runs to the window, still waving the gun; opens the window; and throws the baby out.

At this point, you, the player—because you are a player, and this is a moment in a live-action game that you've been taking part in for the last few days, having taken on the role of a 1950s character—might realise something. If you've got enough detachment from the terror of the moment, if you can draw yourself back, you can think "Ah. I get it. I understand what's going on. The baby's clearly not real. It's all fine. It's just a play, a scene, a trick. I don't need to panic."

At which point the young woman jumps out of the window.

When you've recovered yourself enough to get to the window and look out, there's nothing below; no baby, no woman, nothing at all.

We started this one with a simple request from our stunt team. "We want someone to jump out of a first floor window and disappear. And we don't want the players to know how we did it."

This was for our event *God Rest Ye Merry* (Thomas and Thomas et al., 2015), a Christmas ghost story set in the 1950s. The house, a rambling old mansion set on Dartmoor, was perfect for our needs, and on our site visit we scoped out the perfect window.

So, from a writing perspective, we knew that our stunt-woman Kiera Gould would be the one who jumped. And it made perfect sense that, for a ghost story, the disappearance would be due to ghostly goings-on. It follows, then, that this must have been how some-

one died. And that the players would see this as if it were a vision—it would be a haunting. To make it extra-scary, we would have them seeing it late at night.

The first concern came from the stunt team. The window Kiera would be jumping from was a bedroom window, and we expected two players to be in bed asleep. What was to stop the players leaping out of bed and interrupting the stunt, ruining the gag? We came to the conclusion that we'd put a barrier between the bed and the window, and settled on a baby's crib, since there was one in a nearby room. We would fix it to the floor.

This immediately led to story. The woman who had died had a baby. So who was she, and what happened to the baby?

Someone came up with the genius idea that Kiera should come in, distraught, with the baby under her arm—a dummy, obviously—and should throw the baby out of the window first. Not only would it add to the horror, it would mean there would be a moment where the players thought that the baby-throwing was the whole gag, and, internally, they'd relax—just as Kiera jumped.

"Wait," said the stunt team. "If there's a baby involved now, they'll work extra-hard to interrupt the stunt. Can we introduce some other barrier?"

So—why was the girl distraught? Well, we decided, she'd just shot her husband, and now, filled with regret, was going to commit suicide. So

we would give her a revolver. The scene would start out in the corridor, with the sound of a revolver firing and a scream. Now, as the girl ran into the room, she would be brandishing the revolver, "accidentally" waving it towards the players—who she, being a ghost, couldn't see. This acts as a psychological barrier to anyone wanting to get involved; a gun being waved in their face.

An interesting facet of our barriers—the crib and the gun and, in fact, the mood we've engendered up to this point—is that we've almost certainly shut down the player's desire or ability to stop the girl jumping but, crucially, they think it's their own choice. They will think they're unable to act through their own fear, rather than through our railroading or design.

So there was the basis of the stunt. On top of that, we built up and layered story—the room was filled with mementos from the young couple's marriage; elsewhere in the house you could find evidence of the husband's debts and excessive gambling habit; newspaper clippings reported their deaths; family stories told of the tragedy; a wooden plaque on the crib named the baby Gwendolyn. And sometimes, if you listened carefully, you could hear a couple arguing, muffled, through the wall.

From a very basic moment idea, we now had a chunk of story, a very visceral moment, that was wound into the fabric of the house and the event and which fitted our themes. We

knew roughly when it would happen—around 3am Saturday night.

Oh yes. The girl vanished completely, as did the baby, when you looked out the window. Despite the long drop below. How did we do that? We'll leave that to your imagination.

### A MOMENT DESIGN EXAMPLE: PULP LANGUAGES

Now something from the other end of the spectrum—a rule specifically introduced to allow the players to spontaneously generate their own memorable moments.

For our 1930s pulp action adventure *Captain Dick Britton and the Voice of the Seraph* (Thomas and Thomas et al., 2006), we'd decided that multiple languages would be a fun feature of the game, as we had an international cast of characters. However, very few of the players involved spoke multiple languages. How could we deal with this?

Well, we could adopt ridiculous accents. So if you spoke, say, with a French accent, it would be assumed you were speaking French. But if we did this, it meant that we wouldn't be fitting into the pulp stereotype; in pulp, Germans need to sound stereotypically German, Americans need to sound stereotypically American and so on when speaking English.

So we dreamed up a very simple system. Any sentence

that was supposed to represent French would be prefixed with the keywords "Zut alors!" Any sentence that was supposed to represent German would be prefixed with "Achtung!" "Effendi!" for Arabic. And so on. Terribly stereotypical, but pulp is stereotypical, and we were erring on the side of comedy.

Adding to that, we came up with a very simple system of written languages. Anything in red would be Arabic; green would be German; blue French and so forth.

This was introduced as a rule to our players. The key reason for including this was very simple—to allow them to create moments where the players OOC entirely understood what was going on, but, for comedy purposes, their characters would not. I call this sort of technique *Seeding Opportunity*—providing fertile ground for moments to happen in.

This would only work in this style of game. For a deeply serious game based on secrets and lies, the OOC/IC divide simply wouldn't work. But for our purposes, it worked brilliantly.

Here I'll cite an anecdote from one of our cast, Harry Harrold:

*So when my bazaar salesman started a line with "Effendi"—the English-speaking customer couldn't understand a word, but the spy who was posing as a translator could, and the conversation went*

*something like:*

*Customer: "How much is this statuette? It looks jolly ancient"*

*Spy: "Effendi: How much for this?"*

*My salesman: "Effendi: I don't know, my uncle's mother in law's family makes them by the dozen, how much will the idiot pay? Tell him it's tenth dynasty ... I'll cut you in."*

*Spy: "He says it's very valuable. Tenth dynasty."*

*Customer: "I say, marvelous ..."*

*You see where it's going. The customer's player knowing exactly what I was saying, and the simple delight of three people performing their little hearts out to an audience of—oh, I dunno, maybe half a dozen at the time? It carried on for a while in the same vein. I've lost count of the number of times I've told that story.*

**(Harry Harrold, *The Hole In My Tooth*, 2016)**

Pay close attention to that last line. "I've lost count of the number of times I've told that story." We've achieved our outcome—the desire to create a war story that players would tell and retell.

So, with our Jump stunt, we were introducing a specific moment. With this language rule, we were introducing the

possibility for the players to create their own moments.<sup>4</sup> We've found the mix of these techniques extremely successful.

### OTHER MEDIA

I've talked solely about larp here. But since we started working this way, I've applied these techniques successfully to writing films, books, and in particular to computer games. Each medium has its own rules and styles, and by doing this you don't need to eschew standard dramatic structure—but, in the same way as with larp, thinking about what your audience will take away is a great starting point for building your story.

### CONCLUSION

It's my contention—and experience—that if you work this way, if you concentrate on the highs and lows, on provoking war stories, you'll have a memorable game.

It almost doesn't matter what goes between those moments, so long as it makes some sort of sense. Honestly. I know that sounds crazy, but most people have terribly fuzzy memories and the bits they didn't enjoy or found bland

fade away, leaving the bits that excited them.

Sure, the quality of your whole piece will be vastly improved by good joining-of-the-dots, but to turn it on its head, if you don't have those memorable moments, you have nothing. I've lost count of the number of movies I've seen or books I've read that I can't recall anything about a couple of months later. But people in pubs still talk about the time we had a WWI tank, ten years later.<sup>5</sup>

*Ghosting. Grym Photography*



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4 Okay, okay. Some moments we helped them create. For example, the minefield with a large sign—in green—reading "Achtung! Mines!" Which came into its own when it was crossed by a small group of players who could read it perfectly well, but none of their characters knew German...

5 We didn't. It was two sides of a tank faked up out of plywood + paint with a couple of pilots inside and some carefully positioned pyrotechnics, so that when a puff of smoke came out of the barrel, a piece of the ground exploded. But we still hear about "that game where they had a real tank."

# Curious Pastimes

*Designing and developing narrative for a large player group in an enduring live role-playing campaign game.*

Emmylou Laird

*“A game is a (designed or emerging) system of rules, goals and opposition, which has as its primary purpose to allow people to engage with it for paratelic reasons, while agreeing that the actions performed are re-signified.”*

(Waern, 2012)

Live role-playing is about playing a character, developing said character through interaction and experience, and through this experience building up a story where each player's character is the protagonist in their own narrative. Shared interactions, experiences and moments of dramatic tension bring richness to the lives of characters and their players.

I remember watching a television programme on the BBC called *Blue Peter*<sup>1</sup> when I was quite, quite little; the presenters visited and played *Treasure Trap*<sup>2</sup> at Peckforton Castle in April 1983. At the time it was the most compelling thing I'd ever seen, grown-up people dressing up to tell stories and play games just like I did. Watching the footage now is still just as charming.

If *Treasure Trap* was the first, today there are a vast variety of live role-playing activities, from small and intimate scenarios to large festival games with hundreds or thousands of participants. *Curious Pastimes* is one such festival or “fest” system; beginning in August 1996, the game has just celebrated its 20th year of telling stories. Throughout that time the main game has run across three to six events per year, not to mention a large number of player organised events. Featuring recurring characters, interplay between plots, and repercussions from previous actions many years before, some players have attended every event for two decades! The game takes place within a loose pseudo-medieval/fantasy setting and the gameplay is focused around the interactions between the player

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<sup>1</sup> A magazine style television programme that a lot of British children watched in the 1980s.

<sup>2</sup> Widely considered to be the first live role-playing game in Britain.

characters and the world, including large-scale battles and skirmishes using latex weapons, solving problems, and saving the world on a regular basis. Events typically involve between 400 and 900 participants belonging to a number of factions<sup>3</sup> and groups with distinctive themes and ideals.

Telling stories at a game of this size requires several things; players who are willing to enter the magic circle of the world and its inhabitants; coherent and appropriate rules to govern the world effectively and make sure that there is consistency and parity for all participants; and most importantly, a committed and kick-ass staff team who ensures the safety, security and enjoyment of the participants, writes and runs the complex and interconnected narratives that allow opportunities to be heroes (and villains!), and administrates character progression and development.

At *Curious Pastimes*, players initially choose from a set amount of skill points to design the type of character they wish to play. A large part of the game is the development of said characters via their interaction with the world and the story they make within it. This character progression occurs via extra skills gained through experience, e.g. the ability to use a particular weapon, and also through learning and experimentation, e.g. inventing or creating a potion to counter a particular adversary. This advancement allows individual characters to shape their own narrative and destiny, evolving their role within their own story. The opportunity for individual choice about personal character advancement allows a player to be fully immersed in the game. The plot of the game provides further development, e.g. characters may be cursed in a particular way such as being required to destroy unnatural beings or blessed with abilities such as immunity to mind effects or being able to resist being knocked over or gaining extra physical

strength, thus providing development for a character through the actions of playing the game.

The part of the staff team that focuses on the narrative of the game (and that is by no means the only team, lots of the worthy and necessary functions are outside of the game itself) is organised into several distinct but equally valuable areas:

- Permanent NPCs who facilitate skill use and character development as well as having information about the plot and the world and very definite opinions on what's going on in it.
- Faction based permanent NPCs who write plots and stories focused on their own intricate and established faction identities and backgrounds while also fulfilling the roles of in-character leaders, participating in the game alongside the players, needing to be rescued or convinced of the right course of action, involving characters in the story, gloriously battling and sometimes providing the bittersweet experiences of losing a commander.
- A game team made up of referees, a monster crew and the head of plot who writes plot about world events and runs sweeping story arcs referring to decades of history and maintaining consistent, complex, interlinked plot that is adaptable to the actions of the game players.

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3 Nations or principalities usually resident in one territory/area of the game world.



Besides this amazing team of hardworking individuals, one of the other key strengths of the narrative at *Curious Pastimes* is the robust, practiced and considered process for developing and delivering plot at a game:

1. Plot ideas are written as documents including a plot arc for several events detailing the aims and objectives of protagonists and antagonists and any particular relevant items or non-player characters.
2. Prior to each event, a plot meeting is held (attended by any interested members of game staff) where new plots are presented and current plots are updated. There is usually some debate.
3. Plot is then submitted for approval to the head of plot and the game directors, it is also sometimes referred to a specific group who make recommendations about the cosmology of the game world. At the same time as plot documents are submitted for approval, a plot owner also submits any number of encounters for their plot for a particular event detailing the particular occurrences, character names, statistics and relevant answers to queries relating to effects such as those of character skills or abilities.
4. Approved plot is amalgamated onto a timetable for each event, detailing who will play a particular non-player character or monster group and when. At *Curious Pastimes*, players volunteer some of their game time to play adversaries for the other players, groups of monsters or non-player characters, so a timetable according to factions is also compiled at this time.
5. At an event, the head of plot assigns encounters according to the timetable and manages feedback for these to be delivered back to the individual plot owners during or after the event as required.

The whole procedure above is carried out for several plotlines for each faction (there are 8) and also any number of world plotlines, so there is quite a lot going on at any one time!

In amongst this myriad of plot and encounters, it is important not to forget what is arguably the most important aspect of the game; the characters of it's players and their place within the world. Providing agency to make decisions and mistakes, to shape the world and to affect outcomes is probably the primary concern of the whole game team. A number of strategies to promote agency (defined here as actions or interventions causing effect) are in place, e.g.:

- A resolved and fully discoverable cosmology to allow characters to learn the way the world works and thus develop strategies or plans within a consistent set of rules.
- Ensuring the aims and objectives of all plot related characters and adversaries are realised or at least seriously considered ahead of time, allowing the empowerment of plot writers and those playing non-player characters to respond to situations and reveal pertinent information or take in character actions as needed. This is in large part due to the plot approval process detailed above that helps to provide a more seamless delivery and a more immersive state of play. It should be noted that non-player characters do not have fixed reactions or outcomes, rather that in the “fleshing out” described they are able to respond to situations with consideration to their personality, thus facilitating a more realistic and believable outcome. Decisions and reactions are included in feedback to plot owners, and a plot becomes richer for this freedom available to non-player characters.
- Practical solutions such as providing information at the location of an object or objective so players can discover how their character's skills and abilities, e.g.

spells, might interact with a particular item or phenomenon.

- Players interact with the world as well as its denizens and the recent introduction noted above of written information at the point of encountering an obstacle or artefact with relation to any abilities and effects has afforded players the choice to develop their own ideas/conclusions without the need to get a referee.

Another recent development in the game has been to move towards a plot driven campaign referring to the capture of territories. The players have made decisions in-character based on information gleaned through investigation and interactions about where they would like to go for future events, even better than just delivering real choice for characters to affect the shape of the game, this has also driven significant conflict based roleplay around making those choices.

All of the processes and strategies considered above contribute to an immersive world for player characters, real choice is encouraged, and via careful and meticulous planning and elegant deployment of rules, these choices are consistent and afford a sense of realism to the game, allowing characters to be the narrators of their own individual diegetic experience. Everyone has the opportunity to be the protagonist in their own story.

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**[killed darling]**

**At Kapo we had a plan to build a big Justice figure with a broken scale. I think it got cut because we ran out of time. Oh, and Kapo was originally designed for 250 players, but when we didn't sell that many tickets we realised that the game could actually benefit from not having that many players. We ended with 107.**

**[Juliane]**

**live**

ms

*ative effect on your character until cured.”  
(Forsaken game guide, 2015)*

### **MECHANICS TO AID IN STORYTELLING**

During the game design and writing process we looked at games we'd attended over the years such as *Treasure Trap* (Durham University, 1983-), *Lorien Trust*, *Maelstrom* (Pennington et al., 2004–2012), *Shadow Wars* (2006-), *Odyssey* (Pennington et al., 2010–2016) and *Project Ragnorok* (Reid and Edwards et al., 2013-2015) Alongside this we did some research on other existing games and concepts using Nordic models such as *College of Wizardry* (Nielsen and Dembinski et al. 2014) *Just a Little Lovin'* (Edland and Grasmø, 2011) etc.

**[future of larp]**

**I think it will be just like it is now just on a larger scale.**

**[Alf, 14 years]**

**[character moment]**

**“I'm fine.” I waited for more tears to fall but there was nothing left inside me. What a fool I'd been to think I could save anyone. “I did this to myself.”**

**[Laura West /Story,  
The Solution]**

The whole procedure above is carried out for several plotlines for each faction (there are 8) and also any number of world plotlines. There is quite a lot going on at any one time.

In amongst this myriad of plot and encounters, it is important not to forget what is arguably the most important aspect of the game: the characters of its players and their place within the world. Providing agency to make decisions and mistakes, to shape the world and to affect outcomes is probably the primary concern of the whole game team. A number of strategies to promote agency (defined here as actions or interventions causing effect) are in place, e.g.:

- A resolved and fully discoverable cosmology to allow characters to learn the way the world works and thus develop strategies or plans within a consistent set of rules.
- Ensuring the aims and objectives of all plot related characters and adver-

**[character moment]**

***“Why is the medic bleeding?”***

***“Contrary to popular belief us medics are not invincible, our skills don’t protect us from bullets.”***

**[Yegoro. Nexus 6—international run]**

**[killed darling]**

***Monologue rule when tending to wounds. I love the concept, but players tended to forget to use it, and in the end the need for a streamlined design made me drop it. The idea was to have the medic and wounded make a monologue when tending to the wound. “I don’t want to die blahblahblah” and “I’m running out of meds, this***

***one is probably the last one I can save,” that kind of thing.***

***I like this idea because it makes the scene important and adds an opportunity for player-level drama. A bit like sex in “Just a Little Lovin’,” maybe? But alas we’ll never know.***

**[JC]**

# Will to Live

Rob Williams

## SETTING THE SCENE

*Forsaken* (Dabill and Williams, 2015-) is a larp campaign which tells the tale of everyday people striving to survive and grow in the face of a modern day Biblical apocalypse. It is set in the United Kingdom. Characters find themselves moving from place to place, always hunted by the corpses of humanity now possessed and animated by some outside sinister force. The game is intended to explore their relationships between the characters as they battle on against the odds.

To create this feeling of constant threat and dread, the game relies on elements of traditional UK larp such as a dedicated violence mechanic and death count.<sup>1</sup> These are then blended with some mechanics we have modified specifically for *Forsaken*.

In this article the *will to live* mechanic will be discussed in some detail including the intention behind its use.

*“The strength of the human spirit can carry you through almost any situation, for each of your character’s loved ones, best friends or family who is safe and alive your character receives a single will to live point. If your character passes their death count then they can use one of these points to prevent their death. Once used the point cannot be used again until the next event or by some other in-game method of restoring it.*

*In almost all cases your character won’t pull through unscathed and will suffer from some sort of trauma which has a neg-*

*ative effect on your character until cured.”*  
(*Forsaken game guide*, 2015)

## MECHANICS TO AID IN STORYTELLING

During the game design and writing process we looked at games we’d attended over the years such as *Treasure Trap* (Durham University, 1983-), *Lorien Trust*, *Maelstrom* (Pennington et al., 2004—2012), *Shadow Wars* (2006-), *Odyssey* (Pennington et al., 2010—2016) and *Project Ragnorok* (Reid and Edwards et al., 2013-2015) Alongside this we did some research on other existing games and concepts using Nordic models such as *College of Wizardry* (Nielsen and Dembinski et al. 2014) *Just a Little Lovin’* (Edland and Grasmø, 2011) etc. and *World Went Dark*<sup>2</sup> (Walker and Bruce, 2015) to broaden our scope. This research primarily consisted of reading player guides, reviews and discussing the events with people who had attended them. In many instances there seemed to be two drastic contrasting ideas presented to us:

Zero to low mechanics, where they often are only present to regulate violent encounters. For example in some of the games from the Nordic tradition where the player was responsible for how their characters are affected by the environment.

At the other extreme there are very thorough and/or complex rules where almost all of the actions a player can take to affect the game world are regulated. In the UK this covers the traditional system of hit points (how many times a character can be

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1 The death count is effectively the time it takes for a character to die from their injuries, in this instance it is 300 seconds, which is very standard for UK games. During this time a character is incapacitated but can call out for help or in agony, crawl to help and stagger slowly. If struck again a character will fall unconscious, dying silently in the dirt.

2 Which was in development at this stage.

struck before dying) and use of calls to identify specific kinds of damage such as strike down.<sup>3</sup>The world we had written was one of sorrow and hardship as “everyday” characters struggled during a modern day biblical apocalypse. Our focus was on the characters relationships with each other, rather than the end of the world. Thus any mechanics written into the game needed to support the story of humanity’s final days. We wanted characters to experience feelings of fear and apprehension.

As the characters would be in constant danger, without aid readily available—all resources, including food and medical supplies in the game are scarce by design—this meant characters dying during the game had become a matter of when and not if.

Our concern was that players would quickly become desensitised to character death. It would quickly have made building relationships futile and less rewarding for them if characters died every hour. Realising this was, in a way, a breakthrough moment in the design of the *will to live* mechanic. Players would need a support mechanism to tell their story of survival against the odds, within the setting. It needed to be a form of collaboration between how we as writers saw character survival, but with enough room for players to put their own twist on it.

*“In the event that a character is about to pass their death count then they can tear open a suitable Will to Live laminate they have on their person. Once torn open the character is no longer dying however will suffer from some form of trauma effect which should be roleplayed at all times until cured. This laminate will have a description of any injury or problem suffered along with an optimal method of curing it.”*

*(Forsaken game guide, 2015)*

Knowing who all the characters are, what expertise they have and what equipment or supplies will be available at an event, allows

us to tailor the injuries and problems found in the *will to live* instructions. They can be relatively minor inconveniences—such as bruising, aches and pains—or more complex problems which can result in characters requiring major surgery to repair a punctured lung.

*Will to live* requires players to think fast, come up with a plan and roleplay a suitable solution often under stressful conditions, whilst a player counts down to character death.

During character creation all players must identify one or two other characters being played at the event who their character cares about for one reason or another. For each character identified the player is given a *will to live* laminate.

This can be used as long as the character named on the laminate lives; this adds another layer of concern for the player as it creates a bond between the players as well as the characters. So the mechanic requires a certain level of cooperation for long term character survival. It is intended that this bleed between out-of-character and in character will generate more intense emotions and feelings when either are in danger.

## **A PLAYER’S PERSPECTIVE ON A SCENE FROM EVENT ONE**

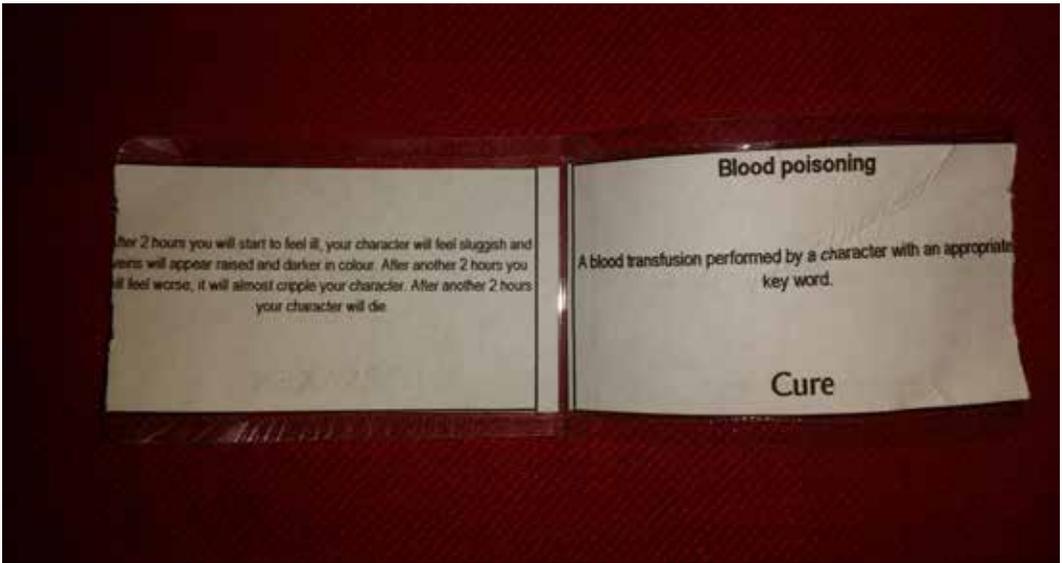
In their tattered bloodstained clothes, the faithful characters had gathered in the dwindling light. The campfire roared and the sceptical amongst the group watched from a safe distance. In this new age where the dead stalked the living, faith has power and now they had to unleash it to save their friend.

In this instance, a character had attempted to perform a kind of magical rite, this rite caused her soul to become tainted. Her body slowly freezing from this taint, the others feared for her life and decided to use their faith to drive the taint from her soul before it would be too late.

Together they combined their collective

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3 Denotes a blow knocking a character off their feet.



Above: a “will-to-live” laminate. Below: *The Ritual* in action. Photographer: Rob Williams

faith and common belief in the goodness of humanity and the power of God. Louder and louder they prayed and chanted until something snapped within them. They risked their own souls, and the sacrifice had been made. The taint was removed and their friend was saved, but a backlash surged through the characters—this would kill them instantly.

One by one we (the organisers) subtly asked the players involved to open their *will to live* instruction laminates.



*“The opening of this will to live laminate was my first interaction with the game mechanic, I appreciated that the cause for it was my fault. Reading and processing the instructions led to a moment of panic, and then thinking about how best to play the effects being described.”*

The character perspective became one of mortality and impending death, not being sure at the time why it had happened.

*“From an out-of-character perspective I was aware that the skills required to save me were not necessarily present within the camp, this forced Alex and Jon to find alternatives creating a huge boost to the game experience.”<sup>4</sup>*

*“Considering the roleplay produced in this instance for multiple parties (myself, Alex and Jon initially then the many others who took an active part in the surgery) it was*

4 In this case, the other players mentioned realised they did not have the skills to save their friend. In desperation, they connected a handheld radio to a nearby metal flag pole to boost its signal. Once in place, they radioed out on the plot frequency asking for help. This allows us as a plot team to collaborate via radio, after a very quick reactive planning meeting, a character with surgical knowledge miles away replied. Sat hidden in a bush out of player view, we were able to give step by step instructions on saving the character’s life.

*some of the hardest, and most immersive role play that I've been involved in ever. Being told by the game organisers that my character would be fine was a relief and playing out the initial recovery was easy as I was genuinely exhausted."*

## A WRITER'S PERSPECTIVE

The mechanic has generated an ongoing number of unexpected collaborative scenes that have brought the harsh realities of the game world to life. These little laminated instructions have provided a starting point for micro stories which players can expand on and collaborate together.

These short scenes—such as the improvised surgery scene described above—have added dramatic and intense moments for both players and organisers. Legends have been born in game, such as the helicopter pilot shot with a shotgun and who should have died in front of his friends. His *will to live* laminate instruction was a close shave which read “After a brief period of unconsciousness you come around with minor scratches and bruising.”

Unknown to us he had a Ritz cracker box under his jacket with the character roster written on it and used to make sure everyone was accounted for each night. Away from the other players, he poked small holes and dents in the box to represent the slowed pellets which would have killed him under normal circumstance. He still has that cracker box, and as far as we know it is still worn under his jacket.

The unique text found in each laminate provides a level of support for the players to draw other characters into their story. Whether they choose to witness, help or hinder their fellow survivor each player and character will walk away with stories to recount and wisdom to pass on.

In the UK there has been a steady shift away from laminated instructions in many parts of the community who consider them to be overly complex or immersion breaking, but for us they have had the advantage that they have created a point of reference and

support for players with varying levels of larp experience. They aren't complex and, rather than breaking immersion, they help draw players deeper into our imaginary world. Will it work for every game? Probably not, each designer and writer needs to consider the style, themes, stories and emotions they want their game to produce.

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*[character moment]*

***Lying crying on a hard floor, blood seeping from a wound, fearing death, but even greater is the fear of being left all alone. A hand in yours.***

***[Milena Sedláčková, Legion: A Siberian Story]***

*[character moment]*

***I love her. She loves me. But we hurt each other. This is the last time I'll ever kiss her.***

***[Dawn, Just a Little Lovin']***

## **Text, Context**

### **Text, Context and authorship**

er

Anton Chekhov. In the same way that Stanislavskian given circumstances analysis enables us to mine the text of the play for contextual details of place, time and character, a system analysis approach, laying out a picture of the environment of a large estate in provincial Russia, the active entities within this environment (including family members, friends, servants and creditors), the attributes of these entities, and their internal relations, would yield very similar results.

Although there are clear commonalities between given circumstances analysis in drama and system analysis as a basis for game

narratives whereas dramas like Chekhov's play have pre-authored stories that are linear, with fixed outcomes. I want to argue, however, that fictional narratives, whether they are narratives of game play or drama, are always fundamentally composed from the substance of the contexts which the game designer or dramatic author have provided.

In the field of game studies, theorist and designer Jesper Juul has compellingly argued that although we experience games as play narratives (or a story that unfolds as we play) the game narrative could not occur without the designed system of rules and affordances given to the players as the context for action within the magic circle (Juul, 2005). In the study of drama, the argument for context as the fundament of narrative is harder to make. To a large extent, this might be attributed to the fact that we carry a history of storytelling, from Greek civilisation onwards, that is overwhelmingly linear and

*some of the hardest, and most immersive role play that I've been involved in ever. Being told by the game organisers that my character would be fine was a relief and playing out the initial recovery was easy as I was genuinely exhausted."*

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These short scenes—such as the improvised surgery scene described above—have added dramatic and intense moments for both players and organisers. Legends have been born in game, such as the helicopter pilot shot with a shotgun and who should have died in front of his friends. His *will to live*

**[character moment]**

***The doctor discarded rationalism forever as the trench-coated gas-masked ghost floated through the acrid fog down the corridor towards him.***

**[Dr. Vincent Fairchild,  
God Rest Ye Merry]**

**[character moment]**

***He called me up in front of the whole school. I knew there could be only one reason, to ridicule me. But he was a professor and I had no choice.***

**[Ebba, Lindangen  
International Boarding  
School]**

**[future of larp]**

***I think it will have a lot more technology involved in it and more energy put into the settings and stories.***

**[Andreas, 24 years]**

# Context, Context, Context

## Narrative design in larp as context authorship

Jamie Harper

Once upon a time, WHEN the earth was flat, there was a land WHERE everything was dark; a land inhabited by someone WHO...

This typical opening sentence of a fairytale illustrates something fundamental to 99% of all stories. They start off with a place, at a particular point of time and feature characters who drive the dramatic action.

In his pioneering work on acting for theatre, Konstantin Stanislavsky identified these three components of context as being fundamental in approaching a dramatic scenario: Where is the action happening? When is it happening? Who are the characters involved? By asking these three basic questions, the actor or player could discover the “given circumstances” or the essential contextual details of the scenario in question, in preparation for taking action within the dramatic story world (Stanislavsky, 1936).

Despite the fact that Stanislavsky was seeking to apply given circumstances analysis as preparation for acting in theatre, there are striking similarities between this process and the process of system analysis which is of central importance to the work of many game designers. Game studies theorists Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman borrow from social scientist Stephen Littlejohn to define a system as a set of interrelated parts that combine to form a complex whole and identify four core aspects of a system: the component entities, the attributes of these component entities, the relationships between them and the environment in which they are located (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003).

Dramatic scenarios, like games, can be analysed as systems. Let us imagine, for example, that we want to conduct a system analysis of *The Cherry Orchard* (1978) by Stanislavsky’s contemporary, the playwright

Anton Chekhov. In the same way that Stanislavskian given circumstances analysis enables us to mine the text of the play for contextual details of place, time and character, a system analysis approach, laying out a picture of the environment of a large estate in provincial Russia, the active entities within this environment (including family members, friends, servants and creditors), the attributes of these entities, and their internal relations, would yield very similar results.

Although there are clear commonalities between given circumstances analysis in drama and system analysis as a basis for game design, it could be argued that the similarities end there, and that our understanding of games and drama must subsequently diverge, since games have uncertain emergent narratives whereas dramas like Chekhov’s play have pre-authored stories that are linear, with fixed outcomes. I want to argue, however, that fictional narratives, whether they are narratives of game play or drama, are always fundamentally composed from the substance of the contexts which the game designer or dramatic author have provided.

In the field of game studies, theorist and designer Jesper Juul has compellingly argued that although we experience games as play narratives (or a story that unfolds as we play) the game narrative could not occur without the designed system of rules and affordances given to the players as the context for action within the magic circle (Juul, 2005). In the study of drama, the argument for context as the fundament of narrative is harder to make. To a large extent, this might be attributed to the fact that we carry a history of storytelling, from Greek civilisation onwards, that is overwhelmingly linear and

concerned with pre-determined narrative outcomes that are controlled by the singular voice of the author.

In *Theatre of the Oppressed*, a seminal book on the liberating potential of participatory drama, the theatre practitioner Augusto Boal delivers a blistering analysis of how communal storytelling was effectively corralled by the development of theatrical performance in ancient Greece. He begins by describing how a group of working Athenians, freed from the constraints of the working day, would gather together in a flexible social gathering space and lift a collective, improvised “song in the open air.” Then, a figure of authority came to control and organise this song in the shape of a chorus whose words and deeds would be homogenised and fixed. Next, one actor, Thespis, stepped out of line and spoke out of turn, giving rise to the role of the protagonist or the “player of the first part.” Ironically, though, despite the fact that the protagonist was originally a revolutionary figure of protest and dissent, over time, thinkers such as Aristotle have brought the protagonist under control, shaping stories with a singular focus on the inevitable fate of this single character (Boal, 1979).

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle sets out an ideology of storytelling which is explicitly oppressive because it establishes the notion of fate, in which pre-determined outcomes in the life of a tragically flawed protagonist are played out in order to warn spectators against the dangers of transgressive action (Boal, 1979). Participatory dramatists such as Boal have reacted to the coercive vision of rhetorical storytelling advocated by Aristotle, creating scenarios in which participants can break out of oppressive contexts and achieve divergent narrative outcomes. Whereas Boal’s practice was typically concerned with playing short, self-contained scenarios and interrogating the life possibilities for protagonist figures within these scenarios (Boal, 1979), the nordic larp tradition has created larger social structures in which many players can collaboratively forge broad pluralities of story outcomes for multiple characters.

Although nordic larp has largely broken free of the restrictive focus on the protag-

onist, arguably, larp designers remain quite linear in their approach to narrative design. Most typically, they will employ an Act structure with a series of predetermined events that reframe each new stage of play, providing a new set of contextual circumstances that alter the way in which the characters will take action within the drama.

For example, in *Brudpris* (Dahlberg and Linder, 2013.), the highly acclaimed larp about a repressive patriarchal society, several rites of passage, such as becoming a man or getting married, provide useful contextual changes to re-shape what characters feel enabled to do. After becoming a man, a male character might feel able to physically discipline his younger sister, for instance. Similarly, after getting married, the social status of a male character is substantially boosted, depending on the extent to which he has taken on the burden of a troublesome wife, which will usually earn him considerable respect from other men.

Clearly, these events create interesting new contexts for play, but arguably the narrative design of the larp remains linear in the sense that the story of how this society progresses will invariably proceed as planned, with boys becoming men, girls becoming women, marriages occurring and new children being born. This fatalistic social determinism is fundamental to the design of *Brudpris*; the patriarchal culture at the heart of the larp is not meant to change. But, in the event that a designer is creating a larp that offers space for radical societal change, it is likely to be desirable for a broader, more non-linear palette of potential narrative events to be created and selectively enacted, depending on which way the wind is blowing, politically. So rather than thinking of a design that presents a quantitatively fixed linear sequence of events with qualitative flexibility in how these events are enacted, I would like to propose a concept of narrative design for larp that sits in more of a circular shape with a range of possible narrative events at different points of the compass, enabling the direction of narrative travel to move, metaphorically speaking, to the North, South, East or West in response to

the state of play.

To provide an example, my larp, *The Lowland Clearances* (Harper and Hay, 2016), a piece about industrial development in 19<sup>th</sup> century London employed a systemic frame in the form of six pre-authored narrative events which could be triggered in response to variations of the game state. If characters chose to prioritise economic development, a railway would be built. If characters chose to prioritise public health, a sewerage system would be introduced. Both of these events, if enacted, would subsequently alter the contextual circumstances of play with benefits for some characters and costs for others, creating new states of play in the lives of each individual character, according to the imaginative response of players to new contextual circumstances. Essentially, this design enabled the combination of emergent player-driven micro-narratives, alongside the development of a flexible macro-narrative of urban transformation, prepared by the designers.

As I have previously mentioned, ludologist Jesper Juul gives a useful description of the balance between considering games as systems and games as narratives of play. Juul offers the distinction between games of emergence which typically focus on systems as the substance of play, with a vast space of possibility owing to the myriad possible game states that could emerge from the combination of simple rules, as opposed to games of progression, which tend to be more focused on the delivery of a fictional narrative, with units of pre-authored story being enacted as the player completes a highly controlled series of tasks that the designer requires them to fulfil in order for the story to be told (Juul, 2005).

Juul is clearly presenting a rhetorical argument that system based games of emergence are richer and more complex than story based games of progression that offer a limited space of possible action for players. What he fails to sufficiently recognise, however, is that it is arguably possible to combine systemic emergence with fictional narrative progression. My argument is that narrative progression can be delivered, not through

an authored sequence of events, but from an authored palette of systemic game states that can be selectively triggered by the facilitator (or game-master) in response to the combined actions of players, driving the enactment of new events in the personal stories of individual characters. In other words, new systemic states (or given circumstances) with new rules, provide new affordances and new forms of human capital for players to deploy on behalf of their characters, leading to new narratives that continue to be open-ended narratives of emergence, not narrowly defined narratives of progression.

The central idea of this article, that narrative design in larp is about creating contexts that enable rich and complex stories to emerge (rather than planning linear sequences of events) applies equally to the participants of the larp as well as the designers. With an increasing emphasis on player-led narrative co-creation, many larp designs offer transitional off-game spaces or meta techniques through which players can imagine new contexts for play, calibrate these contexts with fellow players and re-enter a re-contextualised story world. In *Just a Little Lovin'* (Edland and Grasmø, 2011), the renowned larp about the first years of the AIDS epidemic in the New York gay scene, the narrative structure of year-long story world intervals in the breaks between Acts, and the practical provision of generous amounts of off-game time to create the imagined story of interim periods between one 4<sup>th</sup> of July and the next, provides a strong example of how collaborative, co-creative context authorship can work if the players choose to avail themselves of the opportunities offered.

I would argue, however, that the efficacy of this participant co-authorship depends on whether players place their focus on designing and calibrating narrative contexts or narrative outcomes. If players negotiate outcomes for their characters, necessarily they will bring the play back into Aristotelian linearity of pre-ordained sequences of events, with the coercive consequence that other players will be required to dutifully facilitate a desired outcome for another player rather than maintaining a focus on their outcomes

that their character desires. By contrast, if players negotiate shared and detailed understandings of new contexts in each Act and enter new phases of play without fixed ideas about story outcomes, they will remain free to pursue the needs of their characters and generate open-ended emergent narratives.

Once upon a time, when the earth was flat, there was a land where everything was dark, a land inhabited by someone who wanted to live as much as anyone else...

...and this ought to be enough of a context to begin a story that could travel in any direction: North, South, East or West.

At a certain point, perhaps the characters in this story stop and look around, and agree that the stars are telling them something: that maybe the earth isn't flat...

...and this ought to be enough of a new context to begin new threads of story that could go in almost any direction. North, South, East....

Once upon a time, when the earth was round, there was a land with only a little light, inhabited by someone who wanted to live as much as anyone else...

...and so it continues...

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# LARP TOURISM

## A look into the future

Claus Raasted

### WHERE ARE WE GOING?

We all struggle with that question on a personal level, but I think it's safe to say that many people in the (now much more than just Nordic) nordic larp scene(s) have wondered about what the next years will bring. We're currently living in something of a Golden Age for international nordic inspired larps.

Impressive larps have been made for many years, but blockbuster larps are a rather recent phenomenon. The term was coined by Markus Montola and Eirik Fatland in their KP2015 article (The blockbuster formula, 2015) about *Monitor Celestra* (Summanen and Walch et al., 2013) and *College of Wizardry* (Nielsen, Dembinski and Raasted et al., 2014-) and since then, quite a few larps have started to call themselves "blockbuster larps."

While not following the strict design formula laid out by Fatland and Montola, there's a clear trend at work here. The so-called blockbuster (almost) all have a high production value, minimal simulation rules, excellent documentation and are aimed at an international audience.

### THE BLOCKBUSTERS ARE HERE TO STAY

What started out with *Monitor Celestra* and *College of Wizardry*, has since been joined by *Black Friday* (Amantini and Busti et al., 2014 & 2016), *Convention of Thorns* (Raasted et al., 2016), *Last Voyage of the Demeter* (Deutch, 2016), *Fairweather Manor* (Boruta, Raasted and Nielsen et al., 2015), *Hell on Wheels* (Appl, Dulka and Zeman et al., 2013), *Inside Hamlet* (Ericsson, Pedersen and Koljonen, 2015), *Legion* (Pešta and Wagner et al., 2015), *New World Magischola* ("NWM") (Brown and Morrow, 2016), and *The Witcher School* (Maj, Siolo and Kaleta et al., 2013-). Besides these, there are without a doubt some that I don't

know about, have forgotten or haven't counted, but which still belong on the list.

Another thing that all of these larps have in common is that they are examples of larp tourism; larps designed as a tourist experience, with participants travelling to the host country, playing the larp, and then travelling back. *NWM* is a bit of an exception to this rule, as the player base was overwhelmingly (but not completely) American, but since the United States is such a big country, the tourist angle is still the same—just domestic, instead of international.

### LARP TOURISM IS ON THE RISE

We're going to see more of this. As we grow older, gain access to more resources (both monetary, social and cultural), we're going to be willing to go farther and spend more on the experiences that matter to us. Larp is still 99% local, but the growth of an international community of travelling larpers is definitely happening. More and more are jumping on planes and choosing larps that are far from home, but close to the heart.

This trend is going to continue. Most of us privileged Westerners have several (or many!) tourist experiences under our belt by the time we reach adulthood, and the mental step that is required to include "larp tourism" along with "destination tourism," "event tourism," etc. is not large at all. Most of us have travelled for skiing vacations, camping trips, city visits, or suchlike. Now we're travelling for larps. And we like it.

### A NEW FORM OF GATEWAY DRUG

One thing that most of the new breed—the blockbusters—have been good at, is appealing to a non-larp audience. Because they're spectacular looking, well-documented productions, it's easy for the casual outsider to see videos and photos

and go “Wow...”

Larps are ephemeral; once they're done, they're gone. But the pictures and videos remain, and while there's a whole can of worms waiting behind the statement “Good-looking larps are easier to sell,” it's pretty clear that people who see a video from *Hell on Wheels* or *The Witcher School* have a tendency to be pretty damn impressed.

For most, that just translates into polite (but often real) interest, but for some, it's exactly what's needed to get them to sign up for their first larp experience. For this reason, if nothing else, the blockbuster larps are good for our communities, because they are excellent at bringing in first-timers. *The Witcher School* has some impressive numbers on how many people not only come back to a 2nd or 3rd experience, but also how many who go on to try out other larps. 80%, according to Bartek Ziolo from the *Witcher School* crew (Ziolo, 2016). Truly staggering!

### AMBASSADORS TO THE WORLD

Another thing the blockbusters and their offspring are good at, is providing stunning documentation. Great photos and professional quality videos not only make for good marketing for these larps, they also make for good marketing for larp in general. If we're going to rid ourselves of the outdated “Lightning Bolt” image, then showing off some of the wild stuff we're doing is a good way to do it. Of course, the goal is to have a nuanced understanding of what larp is, but baby steps are still steps.

And it works. As a personal anecdote, my mother played her first larp in 2016. For many years, she's been aware of what I do and has supported it, but never understood the appeal. Then, in early 2016, she saw the 20 min *Fairweather Manor* documentary on YouTube, and was captivated. Suddenly, she saw a larp that she could (maybe!) see herself in. Some nudging and

a lot of talks later, she took the leap and travelled to *Fairweather Manor 3*, where she played an Irish lady.

Before she left on the bus, she told me that she now understood why this was what I'd chosen to do with my life. It wasn't that she is now a die-hard larper—and I don't think she ever will be—but that one glimpse into the larping world meant that she now had a completely different insight into what larp is and why it can be so powerful. Would I ever have gotten her to play in one of the school-based fantasy larps I organised in the 90's? Never. But a trip to a glorious manor and a time jump to England in 1917? With pleasure.

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Not everyone wants to produce larps for an international audience. Not all larps should be (comparatively) expensive and visually spectacular. There's nothing wrong with doing things the way they've always been done, and I'm not trying to make the case that international blockbuster larps are inherently “better” or “more worthy” than local larp campaigns. However, I think that we should applaud the pioneers who keep pushing the boundaries for what's possible.

Some of this is of course my personal agenda speaking—organising big, international larps, is not only something I'm passionate about, it also helps pay my bills. But it's also because I genuinely believe that these projects (whether my name is on them or not) help spread larp to a general population that doesn't even know that it wants this. So whether you as a larper have any interest in these larps or not, I advise you to support their existence.

Because the blockbuster larps are not only here to stay. They're here to grow our hobby.

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# Tensions Between Transmedia Fandom and Live-Action Role-Play

Edwin Dashwood

Larp is a medium that helps fans explore their subjective understandings of the story world around us. Meanwhile, large story franchises -- the Marvel Universe, the Potterverse, the Star Wars Expanded Universe, etc. -- both steadily add content to their universes and also canonise this content in a franchise or adjacent franchise. This means that fans rapidly build competence and familiarity with the m

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*[killed darling]*

*We wanted our first larp to end with everyone passing through a burning gate to another world. With actual fire. Turns out our budget only covered a small bang and a flash of smoke.*

*[Martine]*

*[character moment]*

*Edwin's world fell away as he helped the woman he loved sacrifice her ability to ever love in exchange for the knowledge she was his twin sister.*

*[Edwin Dashwood, College of Wizardry 7]*

**[character moment]**

***From afar, I watch them on the bridge in the lamplight. Watch as he breaks her heart on my command. Am I a bad person? ... No. Fuck that half-blood.***

**[Auror Caitlin O'Doherty, College of Wizardry 1]**

**[character moment]**

***Finneas McQuillen hugged her, after he had beaten her rather unfairly at the Dueling Club tournament and erased his memories of her fears and secrets—as well as the memory of the spell that could reveal them.***

**[Michele Renaut, College of Wizardry 6]**

**[character moment]**

***“Two dementors, one wand? What are you going to do now, little boy?”***  
***\*pulls out second wand\****  
***“Amateur Hour is over.”***

**[M. Troxler, College of Wizardry 3]**

# Tensions Between Transmedia Fandom and Live-Action Role-Play

Evan Torner

Larp is a medium that helps us co-create intricate shared fictions through subjective understandings of the story world around us. Meanwhile, large story franchises -- the Marvel Universe, the Potterverse, the Star Wars Expanded Universe, etc. -- both steadily add content to their story universes and also canonise (and copyright) this content. Larping in a franchise or adjacent to a franchise means that players can rapidly build competence and familiarity with the material. Yet franchises encourage fans to establish canons and traditions that occasionally contradict the flexibility of the larp medium. This essay addresses tensions related to larps that aspire to create larger story universes and/or draw on the fandom related to larger franchises. I argue that larp organisers and designers must attend to how their events interact with fandom behaviours, especially the impulse to 1) canonise specific practices, characters, and events, and 2) manufacture second-order knowledge and products related to the game. Both fan practices, while in many cases beneficial to the larp, have the potential to unintentionally supplant designer principles and goals. It will be helpful for us to figure out how to wield this double-edged sword of mass culture for larps in the future.

## TRANSMEDIA AND FRANCHISES

In our current socio-historical moment, immersive story worlds connected to billion-dollar global franchises such as the Potterverse let us live and breathe the fiction thanks to those dollars purchasing *ubiquity* and *high-quality design*. By “ubiquity,” I mean that it becomes hard to avoid knowing at least something about a particular franchise, given that the material is everywhere and being discussed by a critical mass of people. By “high-quality design,” I mean that the money involved has given the universe an undeniable “look” that becomes part and parcel to its brand and affordances. Design has re-asserted its authority in the corporate world (Rhodes, 2015), as franchises abide by the truism that *Harry Potter* isn’t the same without robes and wands or *Star Wars* isn’t the same without lightsabers and Death Stars. Merchandising then ensures such objects can be purchased on the open market. These franchises engage us precisely because they catch our attention, provide an easily accessible basis of the premise (i.e., *Harry Potter* is about wizards trying to get through school while also investigating Voldemort’s potential return), and can be found everywhere. The last point would deem them “transmedia.”

Transmedia, or the instantiation and narration of events in a story world across multiple media platforms, pervade today’s globalised society. Coined by Henry Jenkins in his widely cited book *Convergence Culture* (2006), “transmedia” describes a climate of media production in which franchises seed fan participation: “The circulation of media content—across different media systems, competing media economies, and national borders—depends heavily on consumers’ active participation” (Jenkins 3). These consumers, or “fans,” are prompted to seek more information about and connect the dots between the content of a *G.I. Joe* movie, a *G.I. Joe* comic book, and a *G.I. Joe* action figure. The business model is simple: get a niche audience to emotionally invest in your content on at least one platform, and then support these devoted fans as they promote

this fictional universe and consume related products. Much as we would like to dismiss transmedia as purely cynical, however, the fan practices of promotion and consumption cultivated by the business model (and transmedia’s ease of accessibility) affect our storytelling practices in fundamental ways.

Arran Gare (2016) has argued recently that most of our societal rewards now stem from a “dematerialised economy,” and that our *habitus*, our whole way of life, encourages us to divorce ourselves from reality as much as possible. Fans spend huge portions of their lives laboring on behalf of immersive story worlds, largely uncompensated for their efforts (De Kosnik, 2013). Fans write fan fiction (“fanfic”) about their favourite characters, much of which is readable for free on <http://archiveofourown.org> or Tumblr. They crowdsource and maintain Wikis and “story bibles” that are then referenced by the producers of the content, who are in turn pressured to keep continuity with previous “facts” in the story worlds. Pierre Lévy observes that this “circuit” formed between authors, readers, spectators, producers, creators and interpreters blurs the distinction between them all, as they each work to support the others (Lévy, quoted in Jenkins, 2006, 95). In the end, genre fiction and transmedia story worlds guide us to a pleasurable divorce from reality: they give us clear characters to follow, a language to communicate, and a pre-established set of expectations about the world that give us easy entry into a complex fictional world. When transmedia spreads to *larp* as a platform, however, the complexity of that world, its corresponding fandom, and the practices that fandom engenders all strain against the possibilities that *larp* affords.

*Larp* is above all an *ephemeral* medium, heavily reliant on the narrative and social emergence that happens when you get actual humans together in a space (Montola, 2012). The first-person audience (Sandberg, 2004) of the form ensures that each player experience within a *larp* is radically subjective, may not correspond with agreed-upon “facts” about the world, and is not readily reproducible. Yet we also have within us the

impulse to make larp a *canonical* medium, i.e. one that builds worlds with their own intricate history and weight. Although the 360° illusion so popular in larp theory is but a myth -- “a complete environment alone does not generate better role-playing” (Koljonen, 2007) -- the guiding principle that one should larp in a well-conceived, deeply structured aesthetic world is endemic to most larp cultures.

We have a couple of practices that we regularly use to establish “world facts” in our ephemeral medium. We articulate them in large PDFs and books, writing dozens or even hundreds of pages of text normally not readily available during role-play that we hope some people have committed to memory. We create visual media, physical artefacts, fictional maps, acoustic environments -- anything to give players a foothold on what the fictional world would look, feel, and sound like. We also form small groups on social media and strategise. In *Inside Hamlet* (Ericsson, Pedersen and Koljonen, 2015), for example, I was given the character of Colonel Perdue, commander of the Stormguard. Given that we wanted to make them “seem real,” we had a 4-person Facebook group in which we co-created fictional aspects of the Stormguard that were to come up during play, including our own insignia patches and musical anthem. These aspects formed part of what Moyra Turkington calls our “socket” (Turkington, 2006), or the “place where people plug themselves into a game and give and take their focus and energy to and from.” We invested, and received returns on that investment. We gladly invented this ephemera to secure our character immersion and help others with theirs, but we also did not expect for this material to survive the run: it was for the Stormguard’s use in Run 1, and we let the Stormguard in Run 2 come up with its own material. We assumed that none of our own world building should impose any further on other runs as a matter of etiquette, that our fictional “facts” would remain an artefact of our play, rather than as aspects of the game that future players must attend to.

The act of “attending to” anything in a larp is not neutral. As J Li and Jason Morn-

ingstar (2016) recently argue it costs player energy and cognitive load to keep the fiction in focus. “Players need their working memory to fictionalize,” they write. “Structure plot so that each person only has 4-5 things to keep track of” (19). The same could be said of a story world. If I need to know off the top of my head that engineers are categorically unable to revive the ship’s computer, or even the name of that one CoW House with the unspeakable drinks (Sendivogius), then I am often committing working memory to internalise that information. If a fact about a game is recorded on some Facebook thread or some fan Wiki and I cannot readily access it in character, there is a question as to whether or not that ephemera will even exist in the duration of the larp. Transmedia from major franchises actually *help* us secure more fiction in our brains, as we have engaged with that story universe before and have more of its nuances stored in our long-term memory. Yet much of that readily-available fiction vanishes when creating even a re-skinned version of a franchise: new words must be remembered, new fictional events attended to, and new casts of characters with their own personalities met and judged. If a larper has to keep a “story bible” in their head as they try to navigate to find food in a place unfamiliar to the player while also navigating their complex relationship with a half-hydra, chances are that the story universe information will be forgotten.

#### **THE CASE OF THE WIZARDRY-VERSE AND THE MAGIMUNDI**

In 2014, the wildly successful Polish-Danish blockbuster larp *College of Wizardry* (Nielsen, Dembinski and Raasted et al., 2014) took the larp community by storm with its high concept and low bar for entry: players get to play wizards in a *Harry Potter*-esque school for several days in Czocha Castle, co-creating immersive fiction as they compete for the coveted House Cup. The “-esque” suffix in “*Harry Potter*-esque” is important. The organisers had to attend to Warner Brothers’ request to separate their story universe from that of the famous wizard school series due

to copyright following the first 3 runs (CoW1-3). The transition from the Potterverse to the *College of Wizardry*-verse for CoW4 and on (or, for that matter, the Magimundi for the American adaptation *New World Magischola* (NWM, Brown and Morrow, 2016) proved a model lesson in filing the serial numbers off of a well-known franchise. “Muggles” became “mundanes,” Hogwarts was wiped off the map, and suddenly *necromancy* took on an increasingly central role as a story device.

On the one hand, a player from CoW1 in the fan-expanded Potterverse reported that having all the names, creatures, places, and events already established in the world as canon “[made] it possible to play almost without preparation and without having to remember background text, if only you knew your HP.” On the other hand, players of the post-Potterverse CoW and NWM runs remarked how much space had been established for them. Peter Svensson writes that “the emphasis on diversity and acceptance is something where NWM [and CoW] shone. I’m a gay man. The *Harry Potter* books could only hint at the existence of people like me. But NWM firmly established that this is a world where I exist. Where people like me are and have been part of the historical record.” The framing of our fictional lives matters. Content and expectations around the immersive story world let players know what is and isn’t possible to see happen during play.

Nevertheless, fan culture also sets expectations, with CoW and NWM taking centre stage as larps adapted from the propositions of the larger Potterverse. One fandom expectation example is the concept of the OTP (One True Pairing), a term from fanfic meaning one’s emotional commitment to 2 franchise characters being destined to be together. In Harry Potter, for example, popular OTPs include Sirius Black and Prof. Snape, Harry and Hermione, and so forth. This is fine in fanfic, but becomes an issue when

one as a player wishes to have an OTP-type experience in a larp. At the end of CoW and NWM, there is a dance that involves characters showing up in pairs or groups. Players who privately reported expecting something resembling a OTP experience were often sorely disappointed that the relationship did not go the way they (as a player) had imagined it, and were unable to fateplay<sup>1</sup> or “play to lose”<sup>2</sup> as a means of controlling the situation. Larps promise living out one’s fantasies, but the expectations that come with those fantasies must be managed around the natural emergence within the game. Fandom does not necessarily prepare us for this.

Another example from CoW and NWM involved canonisation. During a pre-game video call with NPCs from a previous run who would participate in my run of NWM, I mentioned in passing that I might be able to step in and do some music at the dance, in keeping with organiser expectations for us to use the affordances of the playspace. One former NPC was shocked: “But... but... DJ Dizzywands!” they stammered, thinking it inconceivable that anyone but the designated NPC whom they enjoyed from a previous run could possibly help run the dance. Although DJ Dizzywands -- played by Austin Shepard in a smashing wizard’s cloak -- did not exist in any of the game materials, he had become canonised as part of the NWM experience. The same could be said of the canonisation of Derek Herrera as Chancellor Fortinbras in the latter 3 runs of NWM in 2016. Herrera, who had done the costumes for NWM, had been serving as “registrar” in Run 1, but then stepped up to the chancellor role for the latter 3 runs. In doing so, he became iconic and immortalised in many pieces of fan art, memes, and in-jokes that secured that player as the classic chancellor, despite this role serving primarily a functionary role in the larp. The NPC players across runs had unintentionally become “fans” of the game and were patrolling decisions not

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1 [http://fate.laiv.org/fate/en\\_fate\\_ef.htm](http://fate.laiv.org/fate/en_fate_ef.htm)

2 [https://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Playing\\_to\\_Lose](https://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Playing_to_Lose)

made explicit by the designers.

Finally, both *CoW* and *NWM* are exploring the marketing of merchandise, as one does with a franchise: control of one's product across platforms creates multiple financial outlets for fans to show their support. The problem arises when the making and marketing of merchandise confuses relevant information about the game with fandom. A *NWM* player lamented to me about the constant upselling of the game through products such as T-shirts, wands, and supplemental world materials, such that one of their friends dropped out of the game "when the 'game' became no longer apparent amidst a marketing machine." Second-order products, such as fan art or homemade merchandise, suddenly fall into the gray area of having to be "endorsed" or not by the larp, and can help further canonisation of specific aspects of the game that may or may not remotely resemble someone else's first-person audience experience. While larp is a means of expression and a catalyst for other forms of expression, expressing oneself through material means about a larp also has transmedia fan assumptions underlying it.

## RESPONSES TO TRANSMEDIA

Larp communities have been responding to franchises for decades, and in various ways inventing interesting strategies to the dilemmas around fandom. To escape the tyrannical ubiquity of J.R.R. Tolkien-esque fantasy worlds, for example, Mike Pohjola created what he calls "folk fantasy" to re-localise and re-nationalise globalised transmedia products. "Could we retell our own myths and say something relevant to our time?" he asks (Pohjola p. 51). *Täällä Kirjokannen alla* (2011) was a larp derived from specifically Finnish folk legends, which ultimately served as a means of reinvigorating a local storytelling culture. In this capacity, neither overt, garish nationalism nor fandom serves as a proper response to the material:

larpers had to negotiate their own national myths and the fact that deep, immersive story universes ultimately came from somewhere, while also being cautious against the exclusionary idea that these folk legends are "superior" to others. The larp embraced specificity over ubiquity, and emergent qualities of these narratives rather than relying on fandom and franchise familiarity to drive play. Eliot Wieslander's *Mellan himmel och hav* (2002) and the Danish team behind *Totem* (Schønnemann Andreasen and Thurøe et al., 2007) both heavily relied on workshops and co-present co-creation<sup>3</sup> to formulate ways to make science-fiction stories and stories of indigenous societies respectively neither cliché nor too abstract for the players to grasp.

One can also turn to rules and regulation as part of the design. The common practice of using social media groups to structure in-game relations can also prompt player-characters to start play via post and even prompt the organisers to moderate or intervene such play. Having a clear policy about pre-game play and the in-game larp consequences allows organisers to not have to attend to every piece of fanfic or "what-if" scenario created by the players. Establishing that no single player has rights over a specific character in the fiction is also important: these characters are roles, not canonical figures, unless designed that way. Merchandise should above all serve play or memories of play, and memes and merchandise that point to specific moments in-game should generally have the run title (*NWM2*, *CoW4*, *Inside Hamlet Run 2*, etc.) somehow associated with it, so as not to create the impression that this is an eternal moment of the "classic" version of the game. Better still, organisers can connect multiple images of the same character or comparable situation across multiple runs, so as to engage with the dynamic of cosplay, in which one celebrates the labor of performance across multiple different representations of emergence (Scott, 2015). Such

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3 i.e., players actually in the space working through their characters, rather than on social media

strategies assist prospective players in imagining themselves into their roles, rather than championing and canonising the ephemeral acts of the past players.

## CONCLUSION

Although franchise story worlds function through ubiquity and high-quality design, most larps do not. Our internal fictions, however cool, largely dissipate beyond war stories and actual-play reports. Few know our larp worlds, and fewer still keep track of all their details. This is fine, for it removes the pressure to establish anything we've done beyond the ephemerality of *play*. However, as we lay down track in our story worlds, we should be mindful of our impulses to canonise the configuration and results of our play across multiple runs of a game not designated a campaign. Canonisation creates more laws, facts, and general overhead for other players to deal with later on, and it serves to cheapen future experiences by according social capital only to those who played the "classic" earlier runs. Especially in a climate in which Kickstarters and global simultaneous ticket release dates determine who gets into which larps, the players who had the benefit of a fast Internet connection should not get to pre-determine storyworld aspects of the game for other runs beyond what the organisers and designers have already established. Each larp run in a non-campaign larp benefits from its "reset" switch. Furthermore, fan-created ephemera about the game can comment on it and its world, but should not be confused with the material of the larp itself, which remains yet-to-be-determined.

As larp moves into becoming a platform for well-worn fan properties -- albeit re-invented without the burden of their original franchise -- we must now figure out the contradictory balance between being a good fan and a good larper. A good fan knows the story world inside and out, perhaps contributing their own small portion of it in keeping with the general spirit of the fiction. A good larper knows that the rules, design, objects, and setting of a larp are but playthings for their imagination and the co-creative space

of their fellow players. They understand the intent and spirit of a component, and use it for emergent play as it develops. A good fan, however, also speculates and chooses favourites from among the various fictional options available. A good larper, at least for the time being, leaves much up to chance encounters in play, leading sometimes to bittersweet results after months of preparation. Pre-playing as the good fan can sabotage the good larper; the vast storyworld overhead becoming instead a ballast as pre-game role-playing and the established canon of previous runs take on more importance than an individual run itself. Moreover, seeing certain players as the only ones able to inhabit the "classic" versions of characters inhibits the emergent properties of a larp's design in favour of establishing a rarefied high court of "key" larpers and their social politics. Merchandising of franchise-related materials pulls in much-needed revenue, but also puts fetish objects at the centre of organiser attention, the proverbial act of "selling the T-shirt" perhaps overtaking the event itself.

Now: much of this argumentation could constitute my overly precious attempt to preserve some particular larp aesthetic in the face of imminent commercialisation, such as through Disney's impending licensed Star Wars larp attractions or expansions of the Wizarding World of *Harry Potter* at Universal Studios, but I find the corporation cooptation of the larp artform much less a threat than the colonisation of our minds by fandom. Larp is a medium through which we can say anything we want, provided negotiation with the design, the organisers, and one's co-players. We must therefore be agentic and proactive with respect to our designs, adopting Bjarke Pedersen's (2016) ethos that not only is design everything, but that what we call "tradition" is its opposite. When we unintentionally encourage players to use fandom interests to patrol other players, then that is, indeed, the fandom tradition sneaking into our larp design. Whatever Jedi Knights or their analogues happen to do or be in our larps, they must follow the design of the larp first and the dictates of the franchise second. Whatever strict adapta-

tion one wants to make of the *Doctor Who* universe, the larp should include the points of departure in its initial write-up, lest competing fandoms overtake the preparation and implementation of the game. Whatever character you thought you played well in one run of the larp, the next person will have an entirely different interpretation and that will be perfectly fine. As we calibrate our

play with each other, let us know that our impulses to create fan Wikis, fanfic, speculation about what characters will and won't do, fan-favourite actors and portrayals, and second-order merchandise have an overall effect on the larp in question and larp culture in general. Worldbuilding is an act we can undertake together, but let us recognise our fellow players first before the franchise.

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# Meanwhile in the South

Andrea Giovannucci

Translation by Wendy Columbo

Despite being deeply rooted in the minds of players and organisers across the world, nordic larp as a concept has never had a clear and definite formulation. In his talk *What does "Nordic Larp" Mean?* (Stenros, 2014). Jaakko Stenros has pointed out different and in some measure conflicting definitions by which a larp is commonly considered Nordic, while Stephan Deutsch has revealed the difficulty of finding a single definition for the genre in his article *There Is No Nordic Larp—And Yet We All Know What It Means* (Deutsch, 2016). Whether such indeterminacy played a positive or negative role is unimportant since nordic larp has become such a popular reference point for players to the extent that it's almost impossible to trace back all the routes through which it propagated throughout central and southern Europe. What's unassailable is that such an original approach to larp has been largely recognised and has opened up new spaces of debate about the identity and resources of similar methods.

## The Manifestos

The recent attention to the theoretical aspects of modern larp has promoted the publication of various manifestos whose importance was timely recognised by Tuomas Harviainen in his article *The Manifesto Manifesto* (Harviainen, 2010). Beside signalling a renovated interest in the question of possible approaches to larp, these declarations of intent express years of experience in game designing: in some cases the outcome is a sort of syncretic blend of nordic larp echoes and original features, in other it's about completely different approaches which openly oppose some of the most promi-

nent principles of the Nordic style.

So why the need to set new paradigms and definitions? Why is it that some gaming associations don't recognise themselves in nordic larp and feel the urge to rethink some basic issues? As an example, the authors of the *Content Larp Manifesto* firmly detach themselves from the Nordic tradition:

*"While the final form of individual content larps can resemble that of some works of the Nordic scene, the design principles used to achieve that form are based on a different ideological and cultural framework. We therefore do not want to be seen as a part of the Nordic larp movement, although we fully respect it and see it as an interesting form and a valid source of inspiration." (Appl and Buchtik et al., [date unknown])*

Larp is a cultural product, conceived, designed and realised as a significant container and content. Because of its very nature a live action role-playing game, like other human activities, is profoundly influenced by cultural variables depending not only on a specific historical and social context but also on the personal education of its writers.

A brief survey on the history of the arts clarifies how relevant is the cultural climate in which authors are formed and operate. Just imagine: Picasso, Basquiat, Rivera, Fellini, Dickens. It's no different for larp writers. Each artistic project derives from a specific cultural environment.

What is recently emerging across Europe are sheer attempts to make official something which has been there for years in thoughts and actions but not in words; as a matter of fact most of the authors who drafted and promoted the new manifestos have years of game



*Photo of a group called The Seekers from the larp 1630 by Chaos League. Photograph: D. Bergonzi*

designing expertise and extensive larp writing baggage to communicate and share. This is the main difference with historical avant-garde movements whose acts were often culturally antagonistic and planned to shock:

*“We see content larp as a historically separate and relatively coherent movement. The individual works that belong in this category are primarily inspired by other, preceding content larps and only secondarily by other impulses.” (Appl and Buchtik et al., [date unknown])*

Nordic larp expressed maturity and analytical ability since its inception. These same qualities are now beginning to emerge in other

gaming situations. Sometimes the keynote is continuity as in the Post-progressive Larping Manifesto which blossomed directly from the debate and exchange generated by nordic larp performances:

*“We, the undersigned larp writers, witnessing and actively taking part in the development of larps, see how much they owe to progressive larping. Not rejecting the legacy of the Nordic larp scene, with its valuable methods and solutions, we also see its shortcomings.” (Bartczak and Dembinski et al., [date unknown])*



*New Atlantis - The Migration. Photographer: D. Bergonzi*

## Southern Way

*Southern Way*, the manifesto published by Chaos League in 2016 stresses the uniqueness and originality of non-nordic larps, thus opening up new spaces for debate in the attempt to establish a common theoretical background. Chaos League's *memorandum* acknowledges larps designed and played in central and southern Europe which, although different in some ways, share some common core elements.

The Nordic style was fundamentally important in the development of the Larp. We have established parallel paths, yet our origins, both geographic and cultural, distinguish us. A Dionysian spirit has always animated us. Our travelling companions are: madness, fire, and passion; the corporeal, the non-functional and non-regulated, the invasiveness, the politically incorrect. We have no superiority to show off, that is simply the way we are. And thus we want to encounter the world.

This manifesto concerns Larp and how to play, it intercepts trends and evolutions. It is the result of many years of work and creativity: it is our proposal to the Larp scene. Rather than a closed story, a party or an ideology, it is a platform, a developing consciousness. It is freely derived from the *New Italian Epic Manifesto* (Wu Ming 1, 2008) because we identify ourselves in some of its key orientations and believe that Larps are a form of art in all effects. It's not about theory, it's about praxis, program, and vision. Anyone who shares its principles, anyone who wishes to organise Larps according to this Manifesto is welcome, we will be fellow travellers. It is time to write new shared, conscious and profound narratives. (Chaos League, 2016)

*Southern Way / New Italian Larp* was born out of the idea of comparing the larp with other narrative forms and its original intent derives directly from the informal art movement *New*

*Italian Epic* by Wu Ming Foundation. In 2008, in a speech held at McGill University in Montréal, Canada, Wu Ming 1 proposed the definition to describe a body of literary works (commonly called “nebula” in Italy as to indicate “unidentified narrative objects”) which tell stories in different narrative forms despite having a common feeling—the same cultural reference—at the base.

The lectures given in Canada and in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> later came to be included in an essay entitled *New Italian Epic. Memorandum 1993-2008: narrative, oblique gaze, return to the future* where he actually gives a more clear definition of the term. The authors of some of the most influential literary works of recent years recognise themselves in the *New Italian Epic* as a profound and vibrant cultural project. Among them we find: the Wu Ming Foundation (Q, Altai, *Manituana*, 54) Valerio Evangelisti (The Eymerich Series), and Roberto Saviano (Gomorra).

Chaos League’s manifesto *Southern Way* shares and supports some of the basic principles of the *New Italian Epic* aptly adapted to the specific narrative form of the larp, and for this it was recently endorsed by Wu Ming 1. Here follow some of its essential points:

### 1. Play Unsafely

Reality is potentially dangerous, that’s why we spend our lives developing routines and building fortresses, habits, univocal mindsets. Larps can test these self-imposed boundaries, can carry out an attack on our comfort zones. They represent acts of negotiation because they address and question our shortcomings; they besiege our strongholds. We don’t play to seek confirmations but to come out in the open. Experience the abyss, the diversity. Stand on the edge. Be what we are (not).

### 2. In Playing We Trust

We firmly believe that there should be an unbiased and mutual trust between organisers and players. We ask players to rely completely on the organisers’ care without prejudice or diffidence, even when their actions require secrecy or mystery. We don’t look for contracts to sign but for ever evolving relationships. There’s only one shared interest: the success of the game, nothing else.

### 3. No Customers Allowed

Larp is not cinema, neither is it theatre. It is not a show you can watch sitting comfortably on your chair. No one will entertain you, there’s no passive audience, only co-authors. Don’t look for the drive outside of you, don’t wait for something to happen, be the very stone which starts the avalanche. The logic “I pay so I demand” has no place here; here we’re all equal partners, no one’s a client. The more you give to the game, the more the game will give back to you. Larp isn’t and mustn’t be a gala dinner.

### 4. Don’t Keep Cool and Dry

We want to create “unidentified playing objects,” put the accent on the hybridisation and experimentation of genres and narrative techniques. Larp is an expanding galaxy. Not only do we believe that Larp can tackle any subject, but we also believe it can do so with the most diverse means. We want to hybridise with literature, music, theatre, visual arts and the new media. We want to harness the allegorical power of narratives, without obligations and without honouring any orthodoxy.

### 5. Just Play

Playing doesn’t mean winning, playing

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1 Wu Ming 1 also toured some North American colleges such as the MIT, Cambridge and Massachussetts.

doesn't mean losing. Playing means playing. As children we know well the implication of this word but in a world where everything revolves around productivity it is difficult to keep the memory alive. We have nothing to produce, nothing to prove, no one to please or to account for. We only want to play.

## 6. Playing as Art

Larp is a form of art. It has to do with existence and is ontologically connected with the human race. Larp is the Apollonian and Dionysian, is a mask and vertigo, heterotopia, situated utopia. It's here and now, an unmediated elsewhere. Larping puts everyone in front of their emotions, in front of the act of creation, in front of the experience of the self and of the Other. We believe in Larp as a vanguard, as an antagonist form of experiences, as a spontaneous and collective artistic expression. This doesn't mean that all Larps are art.

As Organiser I commit myself to:

### a. Respecting the ethics of narration

Telling stories is a powerful act which requires great responsibility. We know the value of stories and the necessary effort to live them. We know many have come before us and others will follow, we consciously want to contribute to the undertaking. We are ethically committed not to abuse the trust players put in us and not to use narration dishonestly.

### b. Preserving the political awareness of playing

It is the duty of those who organise the game to be conscious of the power in decision making, and to interact with people profoundly. To be aware that choosing to play in our society has a precise political value. Playing can be an antagonistic act. It's about choosing

a creative gesture that will impact the things that surround us.

Larp is a voluntary and collective act, alternative to the industry of mass-entertainment. The player is a vibrant and co-acting individual, energy that wants to play a part in the project.

### c. Choosing to tell stories with a rich allegorical value

It is the duty of those who organise the game to select and design stories that have rich and deep implications. The meaning of Larp is found in the reciprocal relationship between form and content, and these aspects need to be constantly renewed. Stories have a structural value, they are what makes us human. Choosing the right stories means orientating towards the present, pointing one's weapons at a target, choosing a battlefield. The need to narrate generates the Larp, not the other way round.

*Southern Way Manifesto* especially pinpoints what the majority of larps not inspired by the Nordic style deem crucial: namely, the focus on the story.

*5) A content larp offers a prepared, dramatically strong story. Both the larp's overarching story and the individual characters' stories have pre-scripted arches, twists and key themes in a content larp. The form prefers this pre-designed and interconnected structure to open improvisation or a pure simulation of a life in a different reality. (Appl and Buchtik et al., [date unknown])*

A group of Spanish larpwriters, *La mirada del Gorgone*, write in their blog:

*Some years ago, some Spanish people began to participate and read about nordic Larps. The richness they've brought with themselves has changed a lot the Spanish larp scene. Some organisations, as Gorgona, have incorporated some of the characteristic*

features of them. But for me, it's not only copying the style or the safe rules... but to create a whole range of new styles, enriched by our own larp scene tradition. One of these traits is the strong narrative content and the rich stories provided by the larp writers. It is not an exclusive thing about our larps, but also in other southern traditions as French.<sup>2</sup> (Machancoses, 2016)

Although much attention is given to characters' personal issues and background, French romanesque larpwriters too appraise the importance of the main story as a framework.

*Romanesque means that the events or the characters are wonderful as in a novel, especially novels with incredible stories, wonders and adventures, like the novels of*

*Alexandre Dumas, Robert Louis Stevenson or Walter Scott. It often means also that there are romantic stories between the characters.* (Choupaut, 2013)

A feature which also seems to unite most of the above-mentioned larping traditions is some scepticism about political correctness and overall compliance with comfort zones.

Non-nordic larps tend to be more invasive both from a physical and a psychological point of view: for example the use of safewords is rarely applied, or the idea of comfort zones and "protected" game experience is seldom supported in favour, instead, of what point one of *Southern Way* describes as the "Play Unsafely" game mode. Briefly, we are talking about concepts of invasiveness, unrestrained corporeality, recklessly uninhibited and orgiastic

2 Like romanesque larp; which Gorgona larps has a lot in common with and Italy, as Southern Way



*The Legend of Parsifal - The Knights dorm. Photographer: A. Buccella*

spirit, tendency to overthrowing rules and social conventions (gender, political identity and so forth) which make the most of these larps. As Roger Caillois put it, Southern Way styles have incorporated the *ilinx*, the *Dionysian*, into their ludic traditions. (Caillois, 1961)

Nietzsche uses the two contradictory categories of Apollonian and Dionysian in one of his most famous works *Die Geburt der Tragödie* [*The Birth of Tragedy from The Spirit of Music*](1872) in which he speaks about the art form closest to larp: the theatre.

According to the German philosopher, the Apollonian spirit represents order and harmony of form, while the Dionysian is formless euphoria and enthusiastic excitement: from their encounter the extraordinary vitality of Greek tragedy was born. In the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles the enthusiastic acceptance of life expressed through creative euphoria and sensual passion (Dionysian element) and the attempt to solve and overcome chaos through clear and harmonic forms (Apollonian element) miraculously combine in undisturbed balance. Yet, Nietzsche believed that such “miracle” was short-lived: indeed, as early as Socrates, in Greek culture the Apollonian attitude—the desire to represent the tragic reality of life with its sorrows, absurdities and nonsense as an ordered, rational, and meaningful affair—prevailed.

## Atlantis—A southern way larp

Southern Way style larps played so far are many and diverse, all organised by several groups and gaming societies across Europe: what stories do they tell, then? And what are their narrative techniques? A well known case study is *New Atlantis* (Chaos League, 2013) to which I gave my contribution as organiser. In it, 80 players interpreted survivors of a serious water crises which changed the world

forever. Characters were created together with the organisers thanks to a specific toolbox through which—depending on the options selected—features and background were defined. In the first part of the game characters communicated with each other through a fully working web radio station while broadcasted news informed about the world situation. This communication lasted until the complete shutdown of all technological resources that marked the end of the civilization as we know it.

This phase lasted about two weeks: players became reporters of the end of the world, and by communicating with the rest of the web community, by sharing personal stories and by bonding with each other, all contributed in the creation of the overall setting. This part of shared narrative was free and open to all: indeed, almost two hundred players participated online. After the shutdown, the online game ended and the actual on-site live game began. Based on a final real-world water crisis and on the relationship between man and natural resources, *New Atlantis* tells an intimate story, one of dramatic desperation and human hope. A 360° degrees illusion inspired by the atmospheres of the novel *The Road* (McCarthy, 2006) and by the post-apocalyptic genre in general. It's the story of a community rising from its ashes which tries to resist and stay united in a dangerous and hostile world.

- **Play unsafely:** Based on the concept of total immersion, *New Atlantis* will have no interruptions so to offer a true WYSIWYG<sup>3</sup> experience. The game approach aims at sheer realism, without written regulation or safe words, therefore players will be guided only by their natural sensitivity and by the flow of narrative. The shortage of water and food will be the main trigger of the game: players will have to toil to over-

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3 What You See Is What You Get

come difficulties and fulfil basic needs. Although the game deals with very intense themes and present hard-core situations, it can be essentially played by anyone as long as they're willing to push themselves beyond their limits. Only so we can build together a story that leaves a mark.

- **No customers allowed:** *New Atlantis* is specifically designed for proactive players who enjoy playing with others, who feed and nurture the game at any time. So interact with the other players, live your story. React to stimuli but above all create new ones.
- **Just Play:** *New Atlantis* is neither a “play to win” nor a “play to lose” larp. All you have to do is play honestly. Live your character and be truthful to yourself. Let your emotions be your compass, just follow them without thinking about the outside world, put them into play with the other players. Become your character.
- **Playing as an art:** In *New Atlantis* we explore issues which will affect the way we see the world. The power of the game will give us a chance to think upon some central topics: What makes us human? What does it mean to live in a community? How fragile is our world? Our ecosystem?

In conclusion, gaming cultures close to the Southern Way approach are recently coming out through the publication of manifestos which symbolise the need for self-determination and the will to separate themselves from the nordic larp tradition, while still recognising its authority and historical preeminence. The emergence of such different approaches and styles may be a great occasion for the international larp scene above all because they represent decades of original and specific larp design experience. Through each manifesto

an important heritage is made available for everyone willing to take part in an intercultural dialogue among larp designers and players who wish to enrich their personal experience by experimenting with new larping forms. After all the Apollonian and the Dionysian need constant balancing to complete each other, to develop a truly effective debate, and to create exceptional works to make us dream.

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## Ludography

Chaos League, *New Atlantis*, Italy: Chaos League. 2014

# Tell Us a Story

Ian Andrews

Stories are at the beating heart of human nature. Our lives and cultures are shaped to greater or lesser degree by the myths that run through our histories and shared spaces; the stories we are told as children, mould us in ways that are often subtle and unrecognised.

Our group identities and our understanding of what it is to be a protagonist, to be a villain, to undergo a trial, to go on Campbell's hero's journey—these are all to some degree defined by our tales, our legends, our sagas both ancient and modern. Shakespeare, the Eddas, *Beowulf*, the *Mabinogion* and the *Matter of Britain*, *The Odyssey*, *Iliad* and *Aeneid*, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, the *Sagas*—the list goes on and on. These are the fuel that fires our cultural and narrative imaginations.

Our ancient myth cycles aren't the only things that qualify either; there's plenty of Campbell in *Star Wars*, and modern storytelling from *Lord of the Rings*, through *Babylon 5* to *Lost*, *The Wire*, *Game of Thrones* and *Breaking Bad* fill exactly the same space. Flickering image, ancient manuscript, treasured book or storyteller demanding attention with a barked *Hwæt!*—it's all the same root.

For many of us, the journey into larp as a pursuit was driven by a fascination with these stories; with a desire to enact them, to recreate them or to tell them anew, one step sideways.

But as larp has evolved and changed into the experience it is now, so it has explored new, often very personal, ways of telling stories. Sometimes these stories are individual, dark travelogues through the human soul that never exist anywhere but inside the head of the person experiencing them; sometimes they are public, huge events with high stakes and dramatic consequences. Most, in truth, exist somewhere between the extremes. But whether we recognise them as such or not, each vector through the body of a narrative is, in and of itself, a story.

The value of a story in larp terms isn't measured by scope or size, but in **how much it matters to those who experience it**. It is about the journey, not necessarily the destination.

The concept of telling a story—an experience outside our own lives—is to me inherent in larp. But then, as many people will tell you with an indulgent roll of their eyes, I am an unashamed evangelical narrator and

I view larp primarily through that lens.

Your mileage, of course, may vary. But even if you disagree with that as a starting point, indulge me a little and...

...let me tell you a story.

## What's the Difference between Story and Narrative?

Recent “event” television like *Westworld* (Nolan and Joy, 2016) and the end of *Odyssey LRP* (Pennington and White et al., 2010—2016) in the UK have prompted me to do a lot of thinking about the place of story and narrative structure in environments like live games, larps and thematically similar experiences like Secret Cinema or Punchdrunk's *Drowned Man* or *Masque of the Red Death*.

There is a trend in the UK to treat “story-driven” as a negative in large larps; to perceive it as a straitjacket or somehow inherently opposed to “player agency.” Simon Brind will no doubt have a lot more to say on the topic of combat narratology elsewhere, but for me running a story room live to the principles of combat narratology and the supremacy of player agency provided one of the most challenging, and rewarding, experiences in thirty-plus years of larp organising. One of the things we did with *Odyssey LRP* was to try and square that circle—to create a series of events with an onion mystery box plot but still be prepared to adapt on the fly based on player agency—to be prepared to bend, shatter and rebuild the specific story based on the actions our players took on the field while still keeping true to the overall drive of the narrative.

Sounds bonkers when written down plainly like that, doesn't it?

You'll note I made a specific choice of words there—local story, versus overarching narrative. I think there is a difference between the two; stories are personal, they belong to a player or group of players and are largely controlled by those players. They interact with the larp—with the background, the mechanics, the overarching game environment—but are not per se defined by it.

Narrative, on the other hand, is the world story.

There are many kinds of narrative; there is the monolithic kind where everything at the end must be the same as it is at the beginning; a background typified by older large scale fest larps in the UK, or by serialised television such as early *Star Trek*. No matter what happens during the event/episode, a giant reset button usually returns everything to more or less the right place before the end. There is the arc, where there is a world journey from A to F stopping at various letters in between, but the order may not be specified, and the participants in the narrative may have scope to change it. And there is the sandbox—a popular model in current UK fests—where an environment is set in motion which, if not poked, prodded or interacted with, will continue in steady state.

There are many other combinations, hybrids and variations on these

themes—modern RPG videogame design speaks extensively to this point, and I would recommend anyone to pursue the writing on this topic of Alexis Kennedy,<sup>1</sup> formerly of Failbetter Games, or of Ian Thomas<sup>2</sup> of Frictional Games (who in the clip linked below rightly puts the boot into one of my earlier projects for associated sins).

With promenade theatre,<sup>3</sup> the participant's story is minimally interactive; they are observers and very occasional participants in a series of interconnected tableaux. Their freedom to explore the vast environment and to string together their own experience of the multiple interlocking narrative threads and cycles, though, makes each participant's journey a unique story; nobody ever sees the same thing the same way twice. Felix Barrett, Punchdrunk's Artistic Director, has a lot of interesting stuff to say about design and narrative.<sup>4</sup>

Most larps<sup>5</sup> will, inherently, have a narrative of some form—or the absence of an overt narrative will in and of itself become a narrative. Following on from that, most larps which have a narrative will, inherently, create stories from the path a given participant takes through the narrative, bringing their own biases, attitudes, decision-making and collisions to the mixture.

For me this is the core of the participant experience of larp storytelling—the personal journey, informed by the world and complicated by the other participants and forces at play.

## Tyrants and Facilitators

In any kind of larp environment where the narrative is not purely mechanical, someone behind the scenes has to make decisions about the direction it takes, and how it responds to the paths and actions participants take through it (even if that decision is not to react).

The temptations inherent in this role are manifold. It's very easy to “impose” the “correct” story outcomes on a narrative when you are con-

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1 <http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2016-06-18-spoiler-alert-game-endings-are-harder-than-you-think>

2 <https://youtu.be/P3XsdapJUos>

3 Such as Punchdrunk or Secret Cinema

4 <https://youtu.be/6ktpesoQMZo>

5 BROAD GENERALISATION WARNING! I speak here of my own experience which largely involves the UK larp and freeform game scene and some of the more popular games on the continent. There are always exceptions to any rule and I have heard of conceptual larps where there is no narrative to the experience. I still think participating in such an experience would give you one hell of a story to tell, though...

trolling the larp environment. Equally it's very possible to make bad decisions, fuelled by not enough sleep and too much coffee, that start cascades of unintended consequences many of which may be injurious to the experience of the participants. It's easy to be a Robert Ford, stretching the *Westworld* analogy, and view a narrative as a world entirely at the whim of the petty and vengeful god we have become.

In my experience, this makes for a bad larp experience for those on the receiving end of the megalomania<sup>6</sup> and seldom ends well for anyone—UK larp has been prone to this kind of thing for a long time and it is, I think, where the idea that “story-led game = bad” comes from in the UK.

Narrative, and indeed story, doesn't have to be balanced or affectable to be engaging, as long as it obeys the rules of the narrative world. For some, the slow build of a long battle against initially insurmountable odds is where it's at; others find the patience and delicate maneuvering such requires tedious. And some still revel in competing against the unconquerable; the entire ethos of the *Call of Cthulhu* tabletop role-playing game is small victories snatched against the oncoming darkness.

Some of our best narrative at *Odyssey* revolved around the conflicts between mortals and godlike powers, where traditional larp solutions were ineffective and unavailable; some of them took twelve events to fully resolve but were all the better for their pacing.

This is a judgement call; sometimes the speed of evolution of an arc narrative needs to be judged against the personalities and play styles of the participants and amended as appropriate; or at the very least, the initial communications about the larp need to make its style and nature clear enough for those unlikely to enjoy it to make an informed decision.

Some stories are tragedies and some participants come to larps looking for the destructive and tragic in their stories. Not everyone wants to be a hero, and some people just want to watch the world burn. Some people seek mysteries and revelations; some high action four-colour heroics, some just want a dark corner to sob in and a good reason to do so.

All of these are equally valid, no matter if you as the narrative manager can't see their purpose or trajectory—that doesn't matter. It's the player's journey through the narrative, not yours.

A flexible narrative should be able to accommodate, manage and facilitate all of these story outcomes—ideally by using each participant's story as a tool to influence another participant's story—without it looking like there's been any intervention behind the scenes at all.

Ideally, anyone managing narrative in the back office should endeavor

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6 It stands to be clarified that I am not suggesting that all game organisers are egomaniacs (though based on the evidence, nobody is likely to successfully sue...) but that with great power comes great responsibility, temptation can be a powerful thing, the road to hell is paved with good intentions, and while power corrupts, absolute power is of course completely safe in my hands...

our to have systems of communication in place that allow them to react to participant activity in or close to real time—spies, cameras, word of mouth reports from crew—there are many available tools. But equally, there need to be a set of hard rules in place limiting the way that the narrative can react; the world needs rules of engagement and the narrative team above all others must be bound by those rules of engagement. The metaphysics of your narrative must be consistent and must bind you as a storyteller as much as they bind participants' characters. And beyond the on-game metaphysics, you should endeavour to have metagame principles that are just as solid.

While such principles will vary from situation to situation, we found a few that stayed constant all the way through *Odyssey*: “Just because it’s funny doesn’t make it good story,” “Always first ask how does this make good game on the field,” “If a briefed NPC is set a task or role, can the task or role be better placed in player hands?” and “Always ask how can the players affect or disrupt this thread?”

Like Gromit in *The Wrong Trousers*, your role is to frantically lay consistent railway track in front of the careening storyline that both fits the landscape and the whim of the participant, and to do it so fast and seamlessly that nobody notices it wasn’t there all the time.

And to do that while not breaking the rules of the world, while respecting competing or conflicting stories and the agency of the players involved in them, while staying true insofar as you can to the overall arc of the narrative, and all the while keeping in mind the goal is to make a great experience for all involved.

So no pressure then.

Facilitate, don’t impose, and always respect the decisions a participant makes, even if—especially if—it screws up your lovely storytelling.

## Win By Losing, and Know An Ending When You See One

Endings are the hardest thing to do right. Sometimes, in larps, survival is a goal in and of itself and one of the key achievements that getting to the end of a game can bring. But stories is, they have a beginning, a middle and an end, whereas a narrative may not necessarily conform to the same rules.

I am a firm believer that in any experience of playing a character one should follow that self-same story trajectory. There comes a point in the experience of playing a character where the story comes to a natural end, be it dramatic, elegiac, tragic, triumphal or whatever else may bring the tale to a close.

For me, embracing the end of a story is the most important part of it, even if it means saying goodbye to a character or situation that I have really enjoyed playing. Our ends define us as much as, if not more than, our deeds.

This ties into, and in some ways is an evolution of, the concept of play-to-lose or win by losing; UK larp can sometimes be a very zero-sum game, where one side triumphs over another in a conflict driven by game mechanics or simulationist forces. Or, indeed, by narrative. The win-by-losing ethos more common in European games has not taken hold as strongly in the UK fest larp scene, though there are strong shoots of it emerging.

This is not to say that you should deliberately avoid the opportunity for a happy ending or a heroic victory if the circumstances permit—you should absolutely drive for that if you can. But it shouldn't be the only possible option on the table for a successful story experience.

By approaching such situations with a mind to embodying a trope or creating a great story arc for yourself (and those around you), the narrative, the stories that touch it, the experiences of the people participating—all of these things are elevated.

Thinking back over the last few years of larp and especially the last year of *Odyssey*, the things I remember, the war stories I take away, are those about deaths and endings, about the impact the end of one person's story had on dozens of others, about the occasions that people threw themselves in the way of the fate intended for another and took the metaphorical bullet.

Equally, I'm aware of others who, having for one reason or another missed or declined their own moment of perfect exit, found themselves just coasting on, not finding a way back into the foreground or the narrative, and becoming once-famous spectators.

As with all such things, there are exceptions; people who manage to reinvent their stories twice or three times, or who manage to transition from being protagonists of their own stories to active but not primary participants in those of others. But these are rare.

In real terms, the story doesn't end—it's just that a participant no longer actively experiences it. The impact carries on, and feeds, alters and nurtures other stories, other paths through the narrative. My sense of satisfaction from watching the impact that a character's end has on those who remain is often the definitive moment of the experience. There is more than one way to change a world, and sometimes the most powerful levers of all are those you set in motion with the end of your own personal story.

## Tell Your Story

At the end of *Odyssey*, in the dying hours of the last game, the spectators in the Arena took to a new chant—"Tell Your Story," over and over. It struck me then we'd succeeded in our goal: people had built their own legends about the characters they played, had defined their own stories and arcs through the narrative and had created a shared experience that would stand in years to come when people told their war stories around a fire or over a drink.

The key there is we'd helped people tell their own stories; not imposed

one on them. We'd let people choose their own paths, and tried as best we could to facilitate them. *Odyssey*, to paraphrase Harry Harrold's infamous mission statement, had become an engine for players to create their own myths and legends, rather than just retelling ours.

This story ends here. *Odyssey* is over, and our grand experiment with combat narratology and live responsive narrative was largely, I think, a success.

The next story? Well, these things take time, and this has been a long project that has eaten a decade of hard work. But stories have to be told. There's always a new adventure just around the corner if you are bold enough to walk out of your front door.

For now, enjoy the narrative of this book, and perhaps, make your own story of it...

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Simon Brind

## Response to Ian Andrews

Stories have been told for longer than we have been telling them in larps, whether you think that was 1981, 1914, 1578, in Classical Greece, or people from prehistory using cave paintings as a meta technique.

I approach playing larp from a slightly different angle to Ian; I'm an immersionist with narrativist tendencies, and a bleed junkie. But when it comes to writing and running larps we've ended up in much the same place via a mixture of happenstance and evangelism and arguments. We still disagree fundamentally about the definitions of story and narrative; this makes our arguments all the more complicated to follow. For clarity, here are my arbitrary definitions about the difference between Plot, Story, and Narrative.

Plot: the larp writers plan for what is going to happen in the larp

Story: what is actually happening during game time

Narrative: events that have taken place and are being described after the fact

Combat Narratology is the process of shaping Story under pressure. The idea is to let individual players have agency to affect the plot and change the story in real time. In order to be able to do this effectively, I think there are five steps you need to follow:

### 1) STOP WORLD BUILDING

The novelist and critic Mike Harrison has quite a lot to say about world building. He argues that it “numbs the reader’s ability to fulfil their part of the bargain, because it believes that it has to do everything around here if anything is going to get done”

You can scrap most of the world building and replace it with metaphysics (see below.) World building is self-indulgent.<sup>1</sup> It takes a vast amount of effort to produce content that only a very few people will ever read and no one will remember; by taking away the opportunity for players to co-create your game world you are reducing their ability to interact with it.

Stephen King said something similar about character creation: “The most important things to remember about back story are that (a) everyone has a history and (b) most of it isn't very interesting.”

You don't actually need to know the details of the world—only the rules by which it operates—and then you apply the same rules to the players and the plot writers, and you apply it evenly, and you apply it consistently.

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1 I love world building, by the way, I am guilty of persistent and wilful nerdism.

## 2) KNOW YOUR METAPHYSICS

The metaphysics is the inherent logic of the game world you create.

In order to allow player agency, as a writer/organiser you need to understand that logic, cause and effect need to make sense.

Now really the difference between world building and metaphysics is the level of detail involved and the visibility of that detail.

For example:

In the UK larp *Odyssey*<sup>2</sup>—it was set in the ancient world—we had magic, we also had the gods of various nations. There were published rules for players to cast magic, sure, but we took the time to define what the gods were, how they came about, their limits, and how their magic and the magic of players worked together. We understood the true nature of the game universe. We did not publish this information. Players actually discovered and inferred a lot of it for themselves during the run of the game.

As writers of plot, the metaphysics is useful because it shapes how the story works. It gave *Odyssey* limits to divine powers and that drove a narrative consistency; things didn't happen arbitrarily; they made logical sense. Based on the feedback received after the games, when players tried something and it failed, their assumptions tended to be in-game (“What did we do wrong?”) rather than out of game (“the organisers railroaded this plot.”)

This applies to fantasy games, it applies to dystopian or science fiction settings, it applies to horror games, it applies to games set in the real world if they contain elements of magic or the supernatural.

## 3) DESIGN YOUR PLOT WITHOUT A CRITICAL PATH

When the players do something unexpected, which I have heard described before as “when something goes wrong,” it is really very easy to put the plot back on track “railroading,” the story is not difficult. We are outside of the game, we can think of half a dozen reasons why a particular set of actions would not work, or why they would work in a way that had no material impact. You can do it in a way that players don't even notice, if you want to.

There is nothing wrong with giving your players the illusion of agency if that is what you want to do. But it takes effort. It is like telling lies. Once you do it, you have to keep on doing it or you will be found out.

Letting go is a design choice. If your game is loaded with “set pieces” like elephants, or explosions, or anything that is effectively a cut scene, or which relies on events that must run at certain times in order to further other parts of the plot, then you risk blowing budget, or losing parts of the game. If you plan to let go, then don't write a game on rails.

## 4) TELL THE PLAYERS HOW TO GET THEIR ACTIONS “SEEN”

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2 *Odyssey* ran for thirteen events over a six year period for 300-500 players, it has just finished.

It is all very well deciding to allow players to have agency to affect your plot, but you can't assume that they will know how to interact with your off-game mechanics. It might be common knowledge that a player can meander up to the NPC bunker to tell them something, or you might have referees walking around. But do not assume that your players know your way of operating<sup>3</sup>

With *The Washing of Three Tides*, a game from 2001 that broke all of the rules of UK fest larp, we inserted characters into the game whose job it was to report back to us what the players wanted to do without them knowing. So when a group of players set off to explore the ruined castle the organisers had enough notice to prepare scenography and cast. But the players were unaware that we knew what they were doing. At no point did any of them have to go off-game, and as far as they were concerned, wherever they went, whatever they did, the game was waiting for them.

For larger games I am not certain this approach scales up, so you need to find and publish an alternative mechanism for ensuring that player action is seen and acknowledged. Whether that is as simple as telling you “we want to do X” or having watching NPCs in the game who report back, make sure your players know HOW to have their actions noticed and then you can act upon them. This is the key to making agency work at scale; sometimes you don't need to know that they have done the thing, but when you do need to know ... you really need to know.

Of course reported action is unreliable. Larpers—players or NPCs—have an in-character view of what is going on or what they think is going on, which means anything you are told or anything you think they are planning, is wrong. This is okay. I think this is probably the most important thing I am going to state here. Chaos, Confusion, and Mayhem are your friends; they bring conflict and change. And conflict and change are at the heart of the very best stories.

## 5) ENSURE EVERYONE HAS EQUAL AGENCY

Let your players and NPCs play by the same rules. By which I mean give them equal agency to affect the plot and equal agency to play the game. Make no distinction between them in play. Sometimes I have heard NPCs say “I would have done X if I had been a player,” No. No! Everybody plays.

There are some players who will take a particular joy in messing with your plot. I'd not go so far as to define a new addition to the GNS<sup>4</sup> model, but these “villains” do seem to derive their pleasure from playing the sorts of characters who will mess with your plot. This is not a deliberately destructive on their part; it is just an extreme form of creativity. Remember—equal agency—if they do something totally off the wall, but

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3 It took me three College of Wizardry games before I properly worked out how to get stuff to happen.

4 <http://www.indie-rpgs.com/articles/1/>

it makes metaphysical sense, then go with it. It will make story, it will make game.<sup>5</sup>

What we learned from this—from a design point of view—is that you might want to review your plot with a villain’s hat on. For any piece of plot, magical item, technological puzzle, or whatever, we’d ask ourselves “What would a villain do with this?” The intention here is not to close loopholes or to shut down player agency, but to start looking at the plot from different angles, for a writer to think like a player.

### COMBAT NARRATOLOGY

It is ram on the second night of a story-driven larp. You are a writer and organiser. You will have had very little sleep; you have skipped a meal or two; you may be de-hydrated, or even half-crazy around the edges. Basically you are in Bat Country. At this point someone will come running into the NPC Bunker to deliver a message that begins “You’ll never believe what the players have done?!”

This is the moment when combat narratology kicks in. You need to construct a response to the player action. You will be writing a new story in real time. Something that might have taken you months to construct is broken and now you have minutes to come up with something new.

This is the bit I love the best. Constructing a plot under pressure. You need to understand how stories work. The best way to learn how to do this is to read a lot, to watch a lot of films, to write a lot, and then to trust your instincts.

The process is the same as for the initial plot design—follow the metaphysics, be consistent, enable agency

### “TRUST THE STORY”

Because stories seem to seek the path of least resistance towards an ending; it is in their nature. Player agency enables this, and the resulting narratives can be both beautiful and spectacular.

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5 At Odyssey we threw away two events worth of plot for one of our nations when a particularly prolific villain wrote the name of the ruler of the nation into the book of the names of the dead on a quest to the underworld. We’d not expected them to do that, but it was brilliant, so we went with it.

Ian Andrews

## Reply to Simon Brind

We don't really disagree on anything, so much as we have slightly differing perspectives, so I will keep this brief..

I love arguing semantics better than almost anything in the whole world, but for the moment I am just going to agree to disagree on our definitions; Simon's lexicon is oriented toward his theories on narratology and that's what he discusses in his comments so in that context they are more relevant than mine.

Setting our definitions aside for a moment though, this is a succinct and clear description (more succinct than mine, but then I have always been notably wordy) of what we tried to do with combat narratology at *Odyssey* (Pennington and White et al., 2010-2016), and there are a few key points in here I want to emphasise or qualify further.

I am ambivalent about Simon's opposition to worldbuilding—I can certainly see his argument but I don't think it's as black-and-white as he suggests. A degree of worldbuilding can inform the players and support the development of the overarching metaphysics. But like mustard, too much can drown everything else and just leave you with a thick, inedible sandwich that makes your eyes water.

Thousands of pages of intricate backstory are not a good game actuation device. A few well-placed documents, clearly written and stuffed full of intriguing hooks for participants to hang their dreams and hopes on—that's different.

As with everything else, a little restraint and a less-is-more approach here can in my view be better than either an absolutist avoidance or a tsunami of data.

I cannot underscore enough the absence of a critical path being vital to being able to create a responsive and living narrative. I have nothing to add to this point save three thick black underlines and five exclamation marks.

Simon's point around explaining how players get their actions "seen" speaks, for me, to a broader point around being open and honest about what you are trying to achieve. Some mechanics and metaphysics should be shrouded in mystery to be explored through the medium of the experience, and some, most explicitly, should not. For me "how to interact with the larp's levers" is something that should be upfront and explicit, not just for the good of the storytelling process but for the quality of overall experience of the participants. Not every larp is for everyone—and that's OK.

Lastly though, the point Simon makes which sings to me most is about equal agency. Equality of agency is vital, but it is not the same as "fair" or "level playing field" or "game balance" or any of those concepts. The agency provided to some characters in the narrative may appear to be more overt given power dynamics, but there are many ways of managing this; *Black Friday* (Amanti and Busti et al., 2014 & 2016) excelled at this specific balancing act between its' various player factions while appearing to do exactly the opposite.

To provide every single participant with an equal chance to shift the narrative (my definition), to tell their own story (my definition) with as little constraint as possible within the explicitly cited framework of the larp—that’s a laudable goal, but a bloody difficult one to pull off on any large scale.

Our final event crew t-shirts for *Odyssey*<sup>1</sup> carried a simple motto across the shoulders and it’s one that I try to write to.

“Never trust the storyteller. Always trust the story.”

It’s good advice. I wouldn’t trust us either.

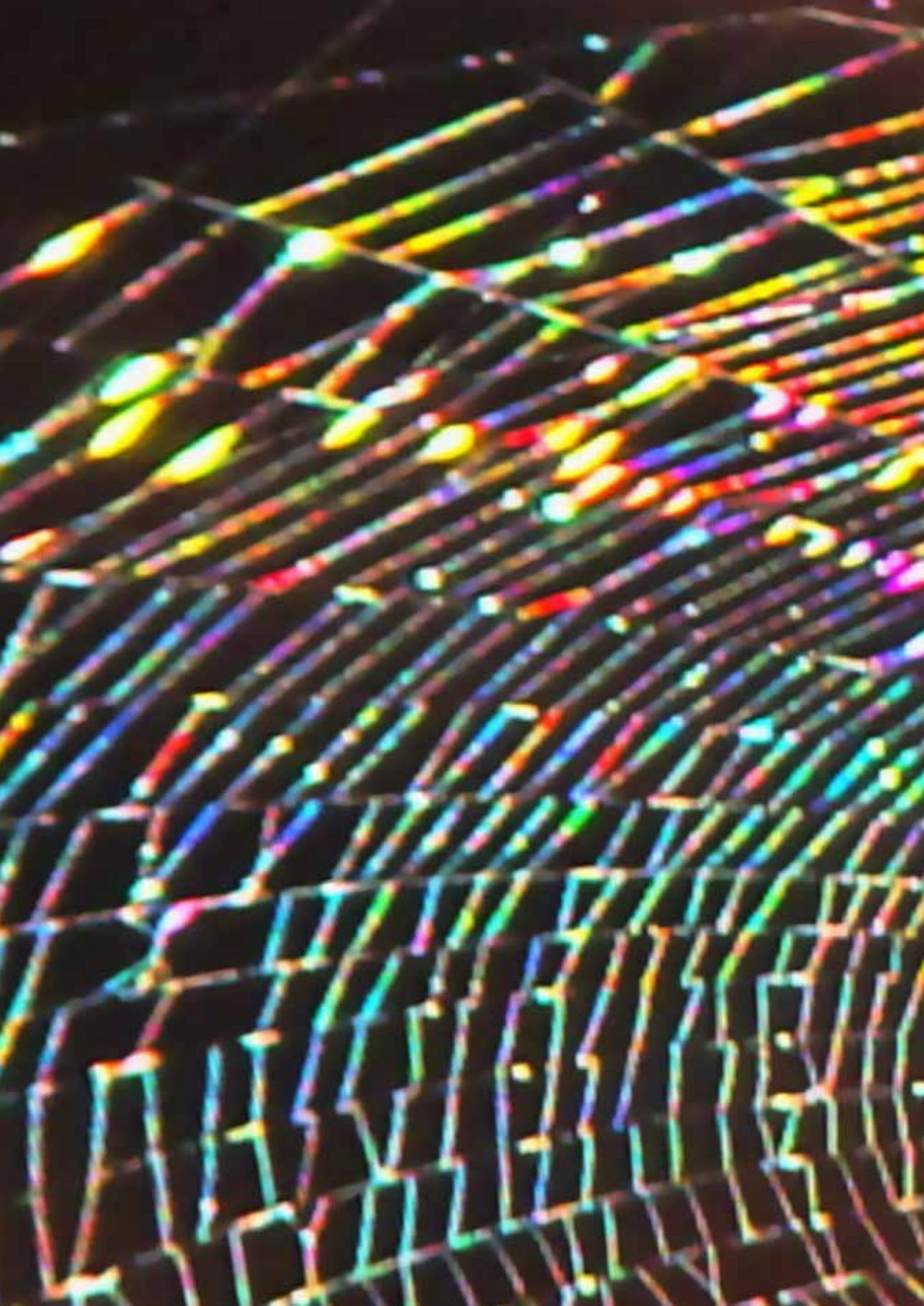
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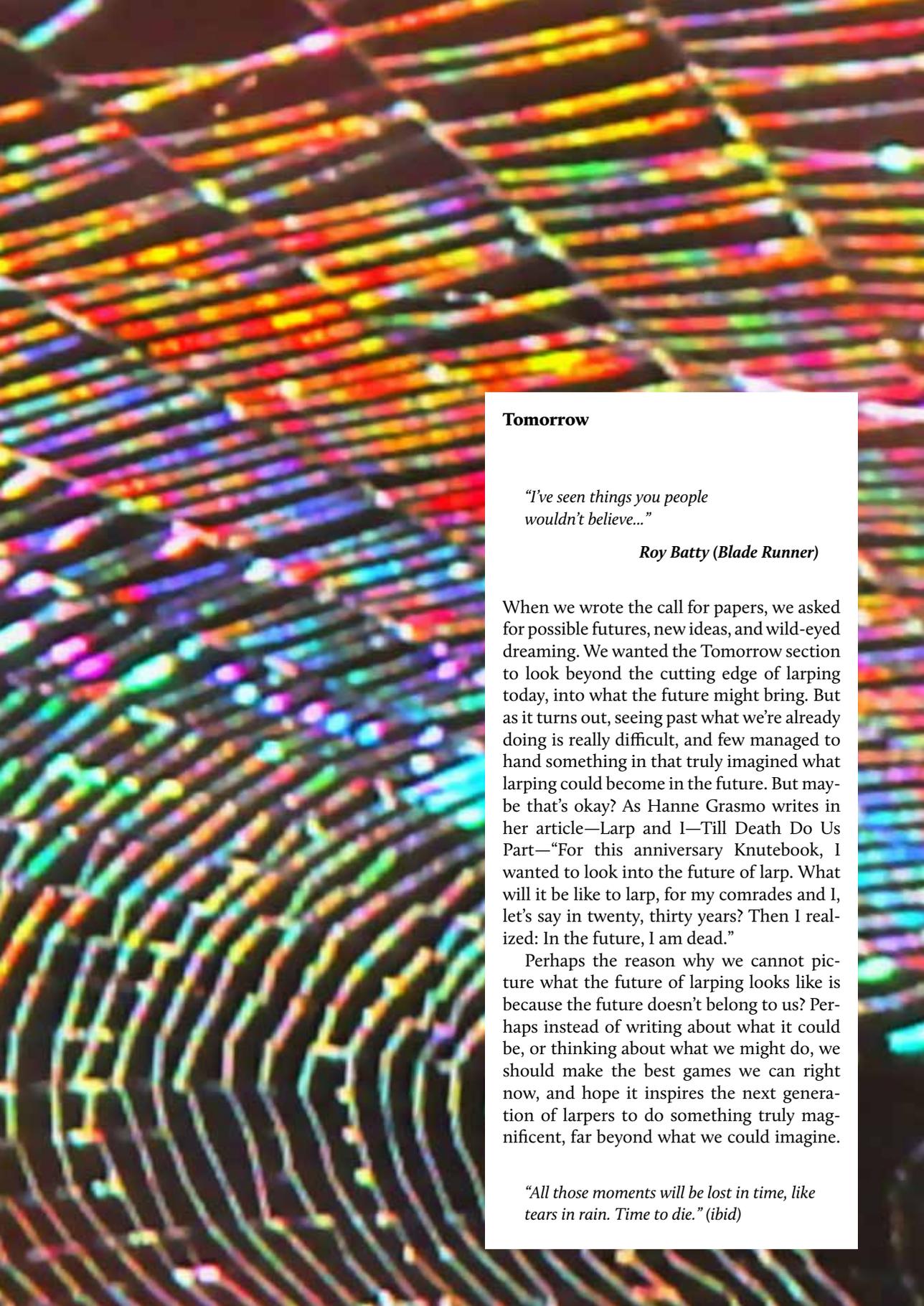
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1 Red shirts, of course, for few had died so frequently in the service of exposition as we





## Tomorrow

*"I've seen things you people  
wouldn't believe..."*

*Roy Batty (Blade Runner)*

When we wrote the call for papers, we asked for possible futures, new ideas, and wild-eyed dreaming. We wanted the Tomorrow section to look beyond the cutting edge of larping today, into what the future might bring. But as it turns out, seeing past what we're already doing is really difficult, and few managed to hand something in that truly imagined what larping could become in the future. But maybe that's okay? As Hanne Grasmo writes in her article—Larp and I—Till Death Do Us Part—"For this anniversary Knutebook, I wanted to look into the future of larp. What will it be like to larp, for my comrades and I, let's say in twenty, thirty years? Then I realized: In the future, I am dead."

Perhaps the reason why we cannot picture what the future of larping looks like is because the future doesn't belong to us? Perhaps instead of writing about what it could be, or thinking about what we might do, we should make the best games we can right now, and hope it inspires the next generation of larpers to do something truly magnificent, far beyond what we could imagine.

*"All those moments will be lost in time, like  
tears in rain. Time to die." (ibid)*

# On Ripping Off and Selling Out

Eirik Fatland

**SOMETIMES, BABIES GET** thrown out with the bathwater, and no one notices.

That is, until someone comes along who remembers that there had in fact been a baby, and a beautiful one at that, and writes a rant about baby-murderers.

Which is what you are about to read.

What baby-murdering? Well, consider the “nordic larps” that we have celebrated at Knutepunkt for the last couple of years. Amongst them we find:

- A Battlestar Galactica rip-off in a Swedish Naval destroyer (*The Monitor Celestra*, 2013)
- Harry Potter rip-offs at a castle in Poland (*College of Wizardry*, 2014-)
- Downton Abbey rip-offs at a castle in Poland (*Fairweather Manor*, 2015-)
- A re-run of a re-design of a rip-off of the world’s most popular theatre play, at a castle (*Inside Hamlet*, 2015)
- The fact that a 90s American Anne Rice rip-off was obtained by Swedes (*Vampire: the Masquerade*, 1991-)
- Rip-offs of that rip-off being run in Helsinki, New Orleans, and Berlin (*End of the Line*, 2016)
- And also ... at a castle in Poland. (*Convention of Thorns*, 2016)

Was it always like this? Nope. Just take a look at the 25 larps documented in the book *Nordic Larp* (Montola and Stenros, 2010). Not only are most of those larps unique, impossible to market with the formula “X as a larp” or “based on popular thing Y.” Few even have a recognisable *genre*.

This is the baby I am talking about: originality.

It’s not just that originality—obviously—is no longer valued as much as it was. It’s that the notion of ripping off some popular literary or cinematic work in order to sell a larp has—in a short span of time—come to be seen as *good practice*. After all, you might say: by tapping into existing

fandoms it brings new people to larp, and spreads the ways of nordic larp to a wider world. It earns us mentions in global (i.e. Anglo-American) media, and opens doors in Hollywood and Silicon Valley. Maybe, you say, we shouldn't be so snooty, or so amateurish, as to think that our own ideas and stories would be preferable to those of franchises enjoyed by hundreds of millions of real, ordinary people across the planet. Besides, you might point out, collapsing these very different things (tricky adaptations, derivative works, simple fan fictions) into the single word "rip-off" is hardly accurate.

Maybe you say such things. In which case, I'd have to answer that:

- a. You are absolutely, 100 %, correct and;
- b. Fuck you.

## Originality matters

Originality matters because it is hard. To create a larp out of ideas that are entirely your own, or those of your community, requires more skill and thought and fine-tuning than to adapt some already famous franchise. Even if all other things were equal, we should hold the original work in higher regard than we hold the adaptation. If we don't, then *big brand* adaptations will out-compete the original works. Which is a thing that actually, by some measures, is already happening. And where will that leave us in the long run?

Originality also matters because it forces honesty. It draws from and reveals the personalities of its creators; makes visible their ideas about life, morality, how people work. That makes us—larpwrights, play designers—vulnerable. If we design a fiction where women players have much less agency than male players, we can't say "Tolkien made me do it." If we make a larp that systematically turns player communities into cesspools of interpersonal conflict and distrust (Yes, *Mind's Eye Theatre*, I'm looking at you) we can't shrug it off as "well, the tabletop version doesn't do that."

Which brings us to *values*. They're everywhere. Hidden in the stories we tell, the things we do. Transmitted from generation to generation largely by storytelling and example. Star Wars teaches us that there are good guys and bad guys, that it's OK to massacre millions of bad guys—otherwise they'll use their *weapons of mass destruction*—and that if a woman says "no" she actually means "yes," at least if you are Han Solo. Harry Potter teaches us some of the same, but also that your inherent goodness or badness is largely a matter of genetic inheritance: born a Malfoy, always a Malfoy. Entertaining—yes. But morally shallow, ignorant of how humans actually work.

But aren't these just standard storytelling tropes? Sure, in Hollywood storytelling, the storytelling of the Anglo-American entertainment indus-

try. Which is not the same as, you know, actual storytelling.

## Do stories matter?

Larps don't tell stories—players do. But larps are filled to the brim with the basic elements of story: character, motivation, conflict, allusion, tension, transition. The designer never provides all of these elements. Once you start improvising, you do what you do in real life: you fill out the blanks with bits and pieces of behaviour from your own memories. Not just what you have experienced first-hand, but also from the stories you have consumed. It's bloody obvious, once you start looking. And once we begin looking at improvisation through this lens—observing where our ideas and behaviours come from, and realising how often they come from the fiction we have consumed—we begin grasping the impact of storytelling.

Stories give us options and models for how to behave, thereby shaping our behaviour, thereby shaping the flow of history. Stories are also where we, as a society, go to think. Many of our most powerful stories (*Oedipus Rex*, *A Doll's House*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Trainspotting*) highlight the contradictions of their era and society, constructing situations where those values just don't add up, pushing us to resolve those contradictions.

For society to be able to progress we must have new and novel thoughts, hence new and novel stories, and we must have many different ones so that they can collide and combine and dissolve into new realisations. Which is how creativity works. That applies doubly to larp, where this mixing and merging occurs in real-time. And it is pretty much the exact opposite of the risk-averse mindset of Hollywood cinema or Young Adult publishing: constantly polishing antiquated formulas in order to *improve shareholder value*.

The trouble with with rip-offs isn't just their lack of originality and authenticity, but also which properties larp designers choose to rip off, and the way that such fan productions tend to reinforce the power of those properties. *Big brand* storytelling is advertising that you pay to watch. The Disney Corporation (which includes Pixar, Lucasfilm and Marvel), Warner Brothers (Harry Potter), and the other vampire squids of culture make most of their cash not from storytelling but from owning the rights to the stories that they have shoved down our throats. Merchandise, amusement parks, spin-offs, tie-ins, transmedia. In their wake, we find sweatshops, draconic copyright regimes, and generations of children trained to believe that happiness and companionship are things you get by purchasing the right brands. Dolls and action figures, SUVs and the autumn fashion.

We are a species of 7 billion individuals, speaking 1200 different languages, organised into some 160 different states, with a recorded history of ten thousand years and a canon of millions of myths and stories embodying alternative perspectives on what it means to be human, what it entails to do good. And this whole diversity of thought and creativity is right now being exterminated by a handful of Anglo-American corpora-

tions with their armies of marketers and lawyers. As thoroughly as we are destroying the biosphere, one species at the time, we are destroying the languages and mythologies and storytelling traditions of our own species.

In this context there is no nuance, no middle ground, and no way for a larp designer to avoid picking sides: You either strengthen the corporate hegemony by retelling their stories, or you resist it by telling stories of your own.

## We used to be cool

Now, if you don't get this, if this kind of analysis seems alien to you, you won't get nordic larp. Not really. Because this is where we came from. The Oslo larp scene, for example, kicked off in 1989 with the usual "hey—I wonder if you could do *Dungeons & Dragons* 'live?'" But immediately after that, the founding mothers and fathers of the tradition started localising: That isn't a "pouch," the old Norwegian word is "taske." Ditch the "orcs," we have this folklore creature called "vetter," let's use them instead. And what's up with all those rules and tables—do we actually need them? Let's try without. Hey! It worked! And by the way, I drew this map of an imaginary world full of the stuff we think is cool, as opposed to the stuff they think is cool across the Atlantic. Also, Vikings. Can we set our next larp there instead of in Greyhawk or Middle-Earth? And how do we get "plot" to work with 80 players? Should we ask Gary Gygax? Nah. Better figure it out for ourselves.

Because that's what you did, back when radical cultural analysis was alive and kicking in the Scandinavian mainstream. You made things your own, and you made your own things. And so there was nordic larp.

The Knutepunkt tradition, focused on thought and theory and experiment and originality, is often described as an opposite of the "traditional" larp of the forest and the fantasy. But it isn't. It's a continuation. Whether in medieval cloaks or black turtlenecks, Scandinavian larpers preferred to do things their own way. The exact same people, attitudes, way of working, that established the Nordic fantasy traditions also brought us the experiment, the arthaus larp, modern live role-playing. This transition is so seamless, and the transmission of ideas back and forth between "mainstream" and "arthaus" is so continuous, that even today—and especially in the traditions of the Norwegian and Swedish heartlands—the distinction doesn't always make a whole lot of sense.

Still, the larps made in the Knutepunkt tradition lacked one ingredient that the mainstream fantasy traditions had: popularity. Especially in the first decade of the Knutepunkt network, we had a well-deserved reputation for elitism and obscurantism. I suppose one couldn't expect much else of a group of people barely out of their teens, convinced that we were onto something so revolutionary that no adult or mere roleplayer could

possibly understand it. Even as people grew wiser and humbler, though, our authentic creative voices continued to tend towards misery, producing larps that probed deeper and deeper into the darkness of the world and the human condition. Difficult themes and niche works are of course healthy parts of any creative movement, but they do not sustain it. By the late oos, our numbers were dwindling. So when *The Monitor Celestra* and *College Of Wizardry* arrived, they were welcomed with open arms, including by me—a notorious author of the obscure and miserable. Finally something to energise the network. Something big. Something *popular!*

But this is where the baby got washed out with the bathwater. Yes, any larp movement that wants to survive must be able to produce works that people actually want to play. But ripping off works that have already been made popular by the Anglo-American industry is only one, cheap, way to achieve that. For examples of larps that are both authentic and popular, we need look no further than the broad fantasy larp traditions: tens of thousands of people every year portraying characters and cultures of their own making.

## Now where?

Thankfully, the rip-offs I mentioned initially are only about half of the larps and events celebrated and discussed in recent years. The other half are events that are decidedly original: the multiple reruns of queer and documentarian *Just a Little Loving*, the multi-city environmentalist zombie saga *Baltic Warriors*(2015), truly innovative *Before we Wake*(2015), clever dissections of gender and power in *Brudpris*(2013), *Lindängens Riksinternat*(2013 & 2014), *Suffragett*(2014), *It's a Man's World*(2015), the hedonism of *Pan*(2013) and *Baphomet*(2015), and the realism of *Halat hisar*(2013), to mention just a few examples. And then there's the black box larping scene which has recently come into its own, supported by at least five recurring festivals in the Nordic-Baltic region, sustaining brilliant new artists and works and ways of doing larp. The original tradition of inter-nordic larp design is, for the time being, alive and well.

But I wouldn't be ranting like this if I didn't think we were facing an actual challenge. That challenge is not that rip-offs exist—don't get me wrong: we can co-exist, and learn interesting things from them, it's just as the rip-off larps have learned a *lot* from the nordic discourse of thoughtful and original works. No—the threat isn't the existence of rip-offs, but that their cult is dominating the conversation in the very same rooms that were once built to host a fragile network of larpers who cared about thoughtful originality. It's time to take those rooms back.

I no longer attend derivative works. This rant will be the last time I reference them in writing.

Because. Originality. Fucking. Matters.

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# LARP IN THE YEAR 2037

Christopher Amherst

**IN 2017, WE** live in a world where our mobile phones have more processing power at our fingertips than the first electronic general-purpose computer (ENIAC) did in a building 70 years ago. A world where an Oculus virtual reality headset costs \$599.00 and a trip to Mars via SpaceX is possible by 2026 (Allen, 2014).

On this 20th anniversary of Knutepunkt, what possible futures await larp in the year 2037?

With this essay, I will theorise on a few “what ifs” 20 years from now, such as:

- Safety Workshop for Non-Terran Environments
- Debriefing from Virtual Reality Larps
- Edularp for Artificial Intelligence
- Storytelling Trends in 2037
- Other Futures?

## Safety Workshop for non-Terran environments

Welcome!

For those of you who attended Dziobak-Shendi's *Chronicles of Barsoom*,<sup>1</sup> this workshop will be very familiar.

For those of you joining us from *Dystopia Rising: Phobos*,<sup>2</sup> this workshop will be a new experience.

Before we begin, let me emphasise the following larp on Mars rule: "Self Care Still Comes First!"

Unlike larps on Earth, we face a number of unique challenges here on Mars. We don't always know how the low gravity, distance from Earth, or the habitat atmosphere will affect you physically or emotionally. Puffy face-bird leg-syndrome (Wikipedia, 2016a), space motion sickness (Wiki-

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1 Dziobak-Shendi Larp Studios, *Chronicles of Barsoom*, 04/09-2036. Author's Note: This was one of the most anticipated blockbuster larps in 2036. In spite of some critics saying "It's no *College of Wizardry*," it sold out within 120 seconds, proving that players will go to Mars to play a story set on Mars.

2 Eschaton Media, *Dystopia Rising: Phobos*, 06/10-2035. Eschaton Media, *Dystopia Rising: The Moon*, 01/02-2036. Author's Note: *Dystopia Rising's Phobos* is the latest chapter of the highly successful *Dystopia Rising* larp network. This chapter follows the successful launch of *Dystopia Rising: The Moon*. An annual event called *Don't Fear the Reavers* for the two chapters has been suggested.

pedia, 2016b), or the Red Planet blues are not uncommon (Lee, 2013). So, at all times during our time together, please remember to take care of your needs first and maintain clear communication with your “Safety Buddy.”<sup>3</sup>

Speaking of safety buddy, for all activities in the habitat, we are required to review the standard habitat safety protocol:

Before you participate in any activity in the habitat, you are required to designate a fellow participant as a safety buddy.

Outside of our habitat, Mars’ atmosphere is 95 % CO<sub>2</sub>, the air pressure is equal to breathing at an altitude of 38 kilometers (3x higher than the typical cruising altitude of a commercial airliner) and the average surface temperature is negative 60 C° (Sharp, 2012).

In the event of sandstorms, meteor showers, or a breach in habitat containment, alarms will activate in the habitat. Depending on the location, severity, and imminence of the event, you and your safety buddy will be:

- a. directed to the central hub or closest shelter (via lighted paths).
- b. directed to the nearest emergency exosuits and evacuate to the closest available rover.
- c. directed to the nearest emergency exosuits and shelter in place within this module.

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3 Author’s Note: Inspired by NASA’s Space Flight Safety posters featuring a cartoon beagle named Snoopy. The Mars Consortium developed a space flight awareness orientation video called “Your Safety Buddy—Snoopy’s Guide to Mars” featuring Snoopy and Woodstock encountering various hazards on Mars.

For the original inspiration, ask your personal avatar to pull the following citation:

NASA, “Silver Snoopy Award,” 2016-02-01, <https://www.nasa.gov/directorates/heo/sfa/aac/silver-snoopy-award>

Let me emphasise this, at all times:

1. Know where your safety buddy is located.
2. Know where your nearest exit is located.
3. Know where the closest emergency exosuit is located.

Please take 60 seconds to locate these and then we'll move onto our ice-breaker "Hot Potato on Mars!"

## Debriefing from Virtual Reality Larp

When we talk about debriefing from a larp, we consider the notion of returning back to the real world or readjusting to reality. Setting aside the debate about whether participating in a larp through the use of virtual reality technology via full body haptic feedback or cranial stimulation is still a larp, how do we readjust our concept of debriefing when returning to the real world is quite literal?

A sample debrief for fully immersive virtual reality larp experiences may include the following:

As we continue de-roleing, we will continue the return process through an optional guided meditation designed to resync your mind and body to your physical surroundings.

To facilitate this return, we will restore your senses to the real world, one at a time—starting with sight, then touch, and finishing with sound. As part of your pre-workshop activities to this larp, you were asked to create a theme-fitting meal—that meal will finish the self-guided part of our debrief by reconnecting you to smell and taste. For sight, we will start by switching off the visual inputs. At any time between now and the end of this meditation, you are welcome to disconnect. We will begin the meditation in 30 seconds.

Let's begin –

- Please sit or lay down in a comfortable position. We will start with the sense of sight.

- Close your eyes for 30 seconds.

**30 seconds pass.**

- Remove your goggles/visor/headset.
- Take your hands and rub them together until they feel warm.
- Place your palms over just your eyes, completely covering them.
- Focus on the darkness for 5 minutes.

**5 minutes pass.**

- Take your hands away from your eyes.
- Slowly open your eyes.
- Let your eyes find an object far away from you.
- Look at that object for 30 seconds, observe its shape and colour.

**30 seconds pass.**

- Good. You are now beginning to be reconnected to your sight. As you go about your day, pay attention to the brightness, darkness, and colours around you. Focus on how you see the world.
- Now, please take a couple of minutes to find a comfortable place to stand or sit. We will move on to the sense of touch.

**2 minutes pass.**

- We will be switching off the haptic inputs and feedback.

- Look at and examine your hands and arms.
- If you are wearing a full body haptic, use this time to slowly remove the gloves and sleeves from your hands and arms.

**3 minutes pass.**

- Take your right hand and massage your left hand for 30 seconds.

**30 seconds pass.**

- Take your left hand and massage your right hand for 30 seconds.

**30 seconds pass**

- Take both of your hands and massage your forearms for 30 seconds.

**30 seconds pass.**

- Look at your hands as you do the massage and focus on that physical feeling for 2 minutes.

**2 minutes pass.**

- Look at and examine your torso and legs.
- If you are wearing a full body haptic, use this time to finish taking off the haptic suit.

**3 minutes pass.**

- What is the temperature of the room you are in? Is it warm? Is it cool? Focus on that feeling of hot or cold for 2 minutes.

**2 minutes pass.**

- Take both of your hands and massage your legs from your toes to your hips, start with your left and then your right.
- Look at your legs as you do the massage and focus on

#### **4 minutes pass**

- Good. You are now beginning to be reconnected to your sense of touch. As you go about your day, pay attention to the temperature, the moving air, and how the world feels around you.
- Now, please activate the interval alarm programming with text messages and find a comfortable place to lay down. We will end with the sense of sound.

#### **2 minutes pass**

- We will switching off the audio inputs. Please look at text messages for instruction starting now.

Pause your breathing and remove your headset.

Exhale. For 2 minutes, Listen to the silence around you, your breathing, and your heartbeat.

#### **2 minutes pass**

For 2 minutes, Listen to the surrounding sounds of where you live, focus on the sounds that remind you of home.

#### **2 minutes pass**

For 2 minutes, whisper and repeat the following phrase: "My name is [your name]. This is my voice, this is my body, and this is my home."

#### **2 minutes pass**

For 1 minute, speak and repeat the following phrase: "My name is [your name]. This is my voice, this is my body, and this is my home."

#### **60 seconds pass**

For 1 minute, shout and repeat the following phrase: "My name is [your name]. This is my voice, this is my body, and this is my home."

### 60 seconds pass

Good. You are now beginning to be reconnected to your sense of sound. As you go about your day, pay attention to the volume, timbre, and tone of the world around you.

This ends our meditation—remember to have your post-game meal, hydrate, and check in with your de-roleing partner or debriefing buddy.

## Edularp for Artificial Intelligence

Human beings are estimated to have on average 86 billion neurons (Randerson, 2012)—the brain comprises a majority of those nerve cells. Our brain at its most basic level is just processing information from various sources and executing operations based on that information. Some of those operations are baked into our biological “hardware,” others are not—we learn them through passive or active learning, occasionally receiving positive or negative feedback.

For artificial intelligences, there are a number of similar frameworks for learning. One style is Reinforcement learning (Sutton and Barto, 2005), where the automated agent learns to optimise their actions to yield the greatest reward for a given situation. Another is supervised learning, where the agent learns through an external supervisor (usually a person) by way of examples.

More recent trends include using game theory to encourage individualised automated agents to collaborate toward overarching system or societal goals (Future of Life, 2016) (instead of individual optimisation).

## How does edularp fit in?

The benefit of edularp (Balzer and Kurz, 2015) is, in general, learning through experience or play within an environment where new approaches can be tried without real world sanctions. This type of learning is most beneficial to the types of artificial intelligence, such as automated customer support / knowledge agents that already learn through supervised learning methodologies.

So, imagine a virtual classroom in the year 2037 -

The scenario: A devastating earthquake has created a humanitarian crisis in a neighbouring country.

The audience—20 virtual agents from different sectors, organisations, and agencies.

The non-player characters: 40—60 human actors, portraying a range of refugees in need of assistance.

### **Scenario start**

News Broadcast: “An earthquake measuring 8.0 on the Richter scale has devastated the port city of Simulacra, located near the borders of Norway and Sweden.”

### **Scenario instructions**

4. Activate the access stations for the virtual agents.
5. Cue 5 Norwegian NPCs to the triage area.
6. Wait for the virtual agents to adapt, cue 10 Swedish NPCs to the triage area.
7. As the agents start to adapt, cue the following:  
News Broadcast: “Following the earthquake, we are getting reports of a radiation leak at a nuclear reactor close to the epicentre. In light of this information, authorities have expanded the evacuation zone.”

8. Cue 10 Danish NPCs, 5 English NPCs, 10 Norwegian NPCs, 10 Swedish NPCs, and 10 Finnish NPCs to the triage area.
9. As virtual agents start identifying collaborative strategies to translate, aggregate, and share information across systems—cue a Radiation Alarm in the triage facility.

### **Scenario finish**

With the radiation alarm, give the virtual agents 15 minutes to implement a strategy and framework to triaging refugees, identifying their own resource needs, protecting their systems in light of potential radiation, and providing collaborative assistance to the diverse needs of the refugee NPCs.

Regardless of whether the framework is fully developed or implemented—end the scenario after those 15 minutes have concluded and ask the virtual agents to meet in the virtual conference room for a debriefing and review session.

## **STORYTELLING TRENDS IN 2037**

So, what are the latest storytelling trends in 2037?

- **Innovation in Space:** With larpwrights working with microgravity environments, larps are taking advantage of multi-axial spaces to tell stories such as *Dante's Divine Comedy* (in upper, middle, and lower staged spaces) or explore literally what a character is thinking versus what a character is saying.
- **Larps within larps:** With access to virtual environments and real world locales, larpwrights are exploring expansive storyverses taking place in one space and intersecting another. Some larps are piggybacking on notion of personal avatars to create affordances between the virtual world and the real world.

- **Location, Location, Location:** Old school sci-fi blockbusters are now the new nostalgia. With the success of *Chronicles of Barsoom*, larpwrights are planting stakes in the ground for stories based on *Dune* or *Flash Gordon*, integrating the gamification into space tourism. Rumours are flying about whether the next Dziobak-Shendi Studios production may involve lightsabers, starfighters, and droids. Will they break the box and run the first interplanetary blockbuster larp?

#### Other futures?

Returning back to 2017—what other trends could we see in the near future that may impact 2037?

- **Larp goes global**—Larp as a storytelling medium is crossing borders, cultures, and languages. Expect to see blockbuster larps, larp design conferences, and international larp festivals in the Arab world, Africa, East Asia, and Oceania.
- **Larp goes political**—With the increased idea that story is perception, larp has the potential to become a greater tool for prototyping political systems, political organisations, and political change. Larp has always told stories about alternate realities and the societies that form within them, would it be surprising to see those tools cross into reality?
- **Larp goes personal**—We've talked about the benefits of *bleed in* and *bleed out*, the transformational qualities of larp in the personal lives of players, and the therapeutical value of role-playing. So what happens when we reduce the idea of larp down to a single person? Could larp be a new tool in a therapist's toolkit? Could larp innovate couples' counselling where each partner learns something of value by role-playing the other person?

In 2016, my hope is that in 20 years, we can truly talk about an international or global larp scene and storytelling within the live and virtual space as a powerful tool for change and commentary.

That as a community, we collaborate on overcoming and dismantling the systemic and structural obstacles to participating in the medium, both to players and organisers, regardless of whether they are on Earth or travelling the stars. That we grow and encourage our local and regional communities by fostering and mentoring the future storytellers, both young and old, human and artificial.

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# Thinking Outside the Black Box

How to transform a black box scenario into a 360° experience

Eva Wei & Rosalind Göthberg

The nordic larp scene has, for a long time, been very isolationist when it comes to getting to know other than the larp style one got introduced to when one started larping. The frivolous sandbox larpers have no idea what a meta technique is, and the abstract chamber larpers frown upon the thought of sewing their own costumes. The social realistic larpers could not stand the thought of respawns during a game, and the vampire larpers could not care less about what their hand gestures are called in some academic larp article. Lately, thanks to the increasing communication between proponents of different larp styles, the larp formats have begun to integrate with each other. Larpers have started to explore

new styles and formats out of their comfort zone. In order to further integrate the many different larp styles, we started the *Beyond the Barricades*-project as an experiment to tell a single story—the story of some young student revolutionaries in the June rebellion in Paris 1832—in several larp formats.

## Background

Translating the same story from one format to another is not a new phenomenon. The cultural sector has practiced this art for ages, converting for example books into movies and graphic novels into musicals. Not only is this a very lucrative business model, since every new

format tend to attract a new group of fans, but it is also a way to tell a story so that its message reaches as many as possible. As with all cultural works, some of the transformations have been more successful than others. One can never be sure that every story fits every media format, but many stories fit surprisingly well in several. Clearly, the format transformation is a phenomenon that is here to stay.

It was not a coincidence that we chose the story of the June rebellion for this project. First of all, it is an exciting historical event with a relatable story. In a larp community more political than ever, many larpers can relate to these political hotheads and their dreams of creating a better future, making the event a great foundation for creating a good story,

Furthermore, this story has been told in several media formats already. Victor Hugo published his fictional novel *Les Misérables* (Hugo, 1982) about this occurrence as early as in 1862. It is now considered one of the most successful novels of the 19th century. This novel has spawned numerous adaptations in several cultural formats, including adaptations for the stage, television, film and last but may-be most famous, a musical adaption with the same name as the novel, written by Schönberg et al in 1980. While researching the history as well as the fiction, we realised that this was a moving story no matter what format it was told in. We also realised that this story moved us in different ways depending on in what format we experienced it. As one probably would have guessed, there were benefits and drawbacks with all of these formats.

A natural consequence with translating a historical event that has already been told in several media formats into a larp is that our participants already have their own vision of the story. They will have their preconceptions and expectations and will most probably compare the larp with the book, the movie, the musical or whatever adaptation they might have read or watched. As a larp designer, it is very important to try to foresee as many of these expectations as possible. If one has dili-

gently done one's homework, it is possible to use some of these expectations to intensify the larp experience and to predict the larpers' reactions to some of the events, should these be compatible with your vision. More importantly, one should make sure that the elements of the larp which are not compatible with the larpers' expectations are clearly conveyed to them in an early stage of the game. For example, we did not want our players to burst into song during the game, which was bound to happen since most of our participants have seen and enjoyed the musical version of *Les Misérables* (Schönberg et al, 1980). Therefore, we made sure that we reiterated this several times during the workshop, thus minimising the possibility of this actually happening in game.

## Planning

Our intention with the *Beyond the Barricades*-project was never just to settle with a black box game. We wanted to spread the story of the June rebellion, making it reach as many players as possible, as well as to challenge ourselves as larp designers. Therefore, we took on the challenge of creating one larp in several formats.

First and foremost, the brainstorming sessions looked somewhat different than when planning an ordinary larp. All ideas were saved and sorted into different categories. Some ideas that would not work for a black box larp could easily fit into for example a 360° larp, and vice versa. A 360° larp is a larp format where the fictional illusion is 360 degrees, i.e. all around you, in order to make the physical experience as complete as possible. In one way, one could say that several larps were planned simultaneously.

Out of pure logistic reasons, we decided to start out with the black box version. Since the planning processes for the different formats were parallel, we could easily snatch some ideas from the other iterations and put into our black box game. Therefore, the black box



*Ghost of the fallen friends' technique. Photo: Eva Wei.*

game ended up with a lot of influences from the 360° version as well as from the (not yet realised) musical version of the larp. For a black box larp, *Beyond the Barricades* was littered with techniques that are mostly reserved for other larp formats. As we had already started to gather props and items for the 360° game, we decided to include these in the black box version. Some of our NPC players also agreed to join in to add further flavour to the game and for the final scene in one game, we even recruited twenty-something convention goers to act as NPCs to spice up the ending. These props and helpers gave us an interesting flavour to the game, but are not mandatory in order to run the game. If someone would like to set up a stripped down black box version of the larp, we have provided a list in the script where all the mandatory props are stated. The

props not stated as mandatory are just optional add-ons in order for us to play around with our scenario, as well as to enhance the experience of the current player group.

This also worked both ways. When it was time to organise the 360° larp, we decided to pick some of our favourite meta techniques from the black box game, kick them up a notch and throw them into the 360° version. One example is the meta technique we call the *ghosts of the fallen friends*, which works as follows: If one of the characters died or left the game, the player of that character got the opportunity to put on a ribbon and go back into the game as a variety of the shadowing meta technique with an specific feeling or agenda to convey. In the black box version, we equipped every role with an equivalent ghost agenda, which either could be something the character truly believed in (e.g. idealism) or a feeling that the character left behind once it was gone (e.g. despair). In the 360°-version, we amped up the visuals of the ghost technique and simply made the players play their own characters who after their deaths come back to haunt their living friends. The remaining living characters perceived the ghosts as thoughts in their minds or memories of their fallen friends, but could not actually see them. The players were also free to interact with the ghosts on a meta level, but diegetically, the ghosts could neither be seen nor heard by the characters.

Some of the techniques worked just as well in both formats. For example, we used the same prologue and epilogue, had the same colour scheme (red, white and blue) to set the tone of the game and the same injury escalation for both the black box and the 360°-larp.

## Transforming a well known story into a larp

*Beyond the barricades* did not only go through the transformation from one larp format to another. As mentioned above, the story has already been transformed from a historical event into a book, from book into movie and

not to mention a musical. In the making of the larp, we had to take all of these factors into account.

### **From a historical event**

In order to translate a historical event into a larp, some considerations have to be made. Unless historical accuracy is one of the key elements (it was not for us) you need to decide, and thoroughly communicate to the players, in what ways the game will stay true to history. You also have to consider which alternations you as an organiser want to make and what the players will have the artistic freedom to make up themselves. For us, the historical facts were used to frame the game. The background was built on the actual events that took place in Paris in June 1832 and we decided that the sto-

ry would end in the same way the revolution did. That meant that we had a fixed ending which the players had no possibility to change. Within this framework, however, they had the power to play out their own personal story as they saw fit. Furthermore, they had the freedom to do whatever they wanted as long as it did not interfere with the general rules of the game during the larp, and in both formats they were encouraged to invent random factual snippets as they went along without the fear of being historically inaccurate. We also decided not to set a high standard when it came to costume and equipment for the 360° version. Anything “1800-ish” was good enough for us. This made it possible for the theatrical larper to focus on forming relationships without feeling bad for ruining the aesthetics, whereas



those who wanted to sew an entire 1830's attire were free to do so.

### **From fiction**

The fact that the story of the June rebellion has been told to millions of people through the different versions of *Les Misérables* was also something we could not ignore. Many of those who wanted to play the game did so because they already had a close relation to the story. They were not alone in their love for the fictional adaptations. Our love of the musical was our main source of inspiration for creating the game in the first place.

Here too, there were a lot of aspects we needed to reflect upon. First of all, the story had to be compressed into and focused on the parts that we were interested in telling, i.e. what happened behind the barricades from the moment the revolutionaries started the rebellion, until it all ended with the uprising being crushed by the national guard. The rest of the story of *Les Misérables* (Hugo, 1862 and Schönberg et al, 1980) was in some ways used as an inspiration, but nothing the larp revolved around. One thing we did keep was the overall narrative and the dramatic curve. The larp pretty much follows parts of the book and the musical to the letter and its three acts were from the beginning inspired by three musical numbers. In time, these musical numbers developed into the three themes of "idealism," "doubt" and "hard choices," which became the main themes the three acts evolve around in its final formats.

Furthermore, we had to make sure that we had enough interesting characters. Going from a few main figures portrayed in the original versions to 10 player characters in the black box version, and later 40 in the 360°larp, was a challenge. The characters had to be equally important with equal amounts of complexity and their own narratives. We needed to radicalise them a bit and make them less passive for them to work as larp characters. We also needed to make sure that there was a balance

between conflict and common ground to create a playable group dynamic.

Creating playable and dynamic characters for the 360° larp was indeed one of our toughest challenges in the transformation process. A few of our characters were more or less taken straight out of the original story, but most of them we made up from scratch. To facilitate the transformation process, we started out with writing eleven core groups. A core group is basically a group consisting of 3-5 characters with a strong, but not necessarily positive, connection to each other. Each core group had a distinct theme, a direction to play towards and some relationships to some of the other core groups. Then we created characters belonging to these core groups, which more or less fit into the group's stereotype. Every character in the core group had pre-written relationships with all the other characters in the core group. We also added some relationships outside of the core group in order to tie the whole ensemble closer together into an unit. This way, we created a web of relationships full of conflicts, but yet maintained the fundament of friendship, alliance and a strive towards a common goal which was the key to success for our larp.

We took advantage of some of the iconic visuals from the different adaptations to make the story relatable. Even in the black box game, which otherwise tends to use props quite sparsely, we used old looking pistols, flags in red, white and blue and all players got to wear a french cockade during the game. These props were very helpful in order to make the players understand our vision and get into the right mood. The props also served as an inspiration to the players in order to come up with something to do during the slower parts of the game.

Something else a lot of people associate *Les Misérables* (Schönberg et al, 1980) with is of course the music, an aspect that we implemented differently in the two versions. In the black box game we had background music playing all throughout the game, changing

with the mood of every act. For the 360° larp, we wanted the players to actually be able to sing, (but to avoid songs from the musical) so we had songs specifically written for the larp that we used as much as we could. The songs and the lyrics were sent out to the players before the game so that they could listen to them beforehand. We also had a singing workshop before the game, as well as helpers who knew the songs who walked around the larp singing and humming them in order to fully incorporate them into play.

### Transition from one larp type to another

When transforming a story from one format to another, you need to consider which parts from the original format that will work for the new one and which parts that will need to change. The same goes for the transitions between larp types. What game elements can be kept? What will work with some changes? Is there something that will not work at all and are what new elements need to be introduced? It is also important to remember that it will never be the same game. Some things will work better than others and some things will not work at all. Different players will also have different opinions about the versions, in accordance to their own personal preferences. People who have played the game in several formats will compare them to each other, just as they would compare a book and a movie telling the same story. This type of comparison is in itself a very interesting analysis of not just the actual game, but also the different larp forms in general.

### Advantages and disadvantages

There are many advantages and disadvantages with different larp formats. In this section, we will describe the ones that we encountered while organising our black box scenario as well

as the 360° larp.

Initially, it is only natural that a 24 hours 360° larp with forty participants requires a massive amount of logistics compared to a 1,5 hours long black box game for ten players. To start out small had a great advantage in regards to trying out a concept. Several larp designers have done this before us in different iterations. Recent examples of this is the black box larp *Heder och olika sätt att jävlas*<sup>1</sup> (Elofsson and Melkersson Lundkvist, 2013) which was an independent pre-larp to the 360° larp *Lindängens Riksinternat [Lindängen boarding school]* (Elofsson and Melkersson Lundkvist, 2013) and the black box larp *Debt and deliverance* (Gamero, Stenler and Strand, 2014), which was set in the same dystopian future as the 360° larp *Last Will* (Gamero, Stenler and Strand, 2014). Since we wanted to focus on trying out the story, it felt natural to start out with the black box version to minimise the amount of logistical effort. It is way easier to find ten friends to try out your concept for some hours than to construct an entire scenography and convince forty-something friends to join you in a makeshift village far away from civilisation.

Furthermore, different formats creates different demands. Some of the design elements which we kept more or less exactly as they were in the black box version turned out very different when introduced to another context.

One of the most obvious differences was of course the visual aspect. The black box version is built to be played at festivals where the players are not expected to wear any particular costumes. The room looks nothing like the place where we imagine the story to take place and props were used sparsely. The 360° version was, as the term itself implies, more visual. We had a location with a number of small, wooden houses and narrow alleys that we built a barricade around. A lot of work was put into props and there were costume requirements for the players. Our goal was simply to create

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1 English: Honour and different ways to fuck people up.

an environment that, with some imagination, could resemble what it might have looked like in Paris 1832. Even though the 360° larp definitely had the advantage of being more visually immersive, it also presented us with a whole new sets of challenges. The black box version of the barricade, which consisted of a few tables and chairs, would not be enough in a 360° environment. We had to build not one, but two barricades big enough to cut off the area in a sufficient way, realistic enough to work with the visual standards we set up for ourselves, and stable enough to actually be able to climb on and fight around.

The fighting scenes were another thing we had to develop a lot. In the black box they were played out with a few guns and sometimes some latex makeshift weapons (like stones and cudgels). However, when the player group expanded and the fights were supposed to be longer and more realistic, some changes needed to be made. Luckily, we were blessed with a squad of amazing NPC:s and helpers who pulled all stops and filled the place with smoke grenades, custom made rifles, and even a cannon for the big finale.

One of our greatest challenges was to tell the same story in 24 hours as we had told in 1,5 hours. Although the black box larp contained time jumps, which meant that the dramatic curve of both games was the same, there were still a lot more hours of larping that needed to be filled with interesting things for the larpers to do and play on. The intensity of a black box scenario is not only a huge advantage in our particular case, but with the short larp format overall. It was a lot of hard work to transfer the game's intensity to a longer game. We did our best to infuse the characters with relationships, political and personal goals, conflicts, dreams and fears. On top of that, we provided a group of NPC:s on set offering everything from moral decreasing speeches to outright attacks. Despite our efforts, the 360° game still had some downtime for many of the players.

However, longer play time was not only a disadvantage. It also meant that we, as well as

the participants, had the possibility to expand and deepen some parts of the game. One such example was the characters that we now could transform from short, stereotypical roles with a few relationships into much more complex and living characters. The new characters did not only get a more developed background and personality, they also got a core group and a social context to belong to and at least five pre-written relationships.

It was interesting to see how some of the game techniques evolved when the players got more time to play around with them. One example was the technique called the *ghost of the fallen friends*, which was mentioned above. In the black box scenario, these have always been played as traditional shadows. When put into a 360° environment however, they turned into a much more complex "ghost character." They went beyond the "whisper stuff into the other player's ears"-thing and created actual scenes of their own; singing, crying, running through the whole play area while loudly laughing and even re-enacting their own death scenes.

Another example was the letters we provided in both the black box scenario as well as in the 360° game. In the black box game, the letters was a minor thing we threw in to create a sense of an outside world and to provide some extra motivation. We wrote a few letters that were delivered to some of the characters halfway through the game. In these, their families informed them of how the revolution happening inside the barricades affected the outside world. For the 360° game we let the players write letters of their own and send them out from the barricades, letters which an organiser, helper or an NPC responded to and sent back in. This was supposed to be a small feature, a way to give the characters' story some more spice and depth. This however, grew more than we had expected. All done and said, around 150 letters had been sent back and forth. The organisers and the helpers had to spend a huge amount of time writing these, but it also turned out to be a very practical way

to get some insight into where the different characters were in their stories.

## Conclusions

There are a lot of conclusions that can be made from our experience with transforming a larp from one format to another. We will, in this section, present some tips, which can be applied to any larp designing process, but was specifically useful during our work in larp format transformation.

**Start small.** If you have an idea in mind which you would like to realise in several larp formats, start with the one which requires the least effort. We decided to start out with a black box scenario before doing a 360° game, but in the end, it is all about what you are comfortable with. An option could be to test out different aspects of the game in different contexts. Why not try out the story you want to tell with your tabletop role playing group and some meta techniques with your local improv class before setting up a black box game? The more time you get to try out your ideas, the better will your games become, so the more you try, the better.

**Never kill your darlings.** A design choice that might not fit your current larp format could bring great benefits to another. Write all your ideas down and return to them from time to time, especially at the beginning of a new project. Sooner or later they could probably be used to improve another incarnation of your game.

**Trust your players.** Your players are an infinite source of inspiration. They will take your story, your techniques and your ideas and twist them in the most unimaginable ways and directions. Some of them will be great, and others less so. Create a game where the players have the opportunity to play with the tools that you have provided. Watch them closely as they play around with the tools you have given them. If they do something great, incorporate it in your game. If not, maybe they will do something else that will work in another larp format?

**Lend, borrow and steal shamelessly.** Boffer will work just as well in a black box as it does in a forest and hand gestures used for vampiric disciplines could easily be modified into a supernatural meta technique made specifically for your game. Why limit yourself to only borrow from other larp styles? We used light and sound inspired by stage performances and some workshops used in the world of improv as well. Think outside the box and you will be greatly rewarded.

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*[character moment]*

**The starry night was cold and the men's low singing rose from the tent. Her choice was made: She would buy free the slave from the Jarl. At any cost.**

**[Ava Hennel, Zeit der Legenden]**

## Use and Narrativism

### Aesthetics

Mann Hamming

stated here would also be appropriate to lay down on freeform games, black box games and other similar genres. It might be less the case for more traditional tabletop role-playing games, which are not the main subject of this paper, but feel free to lay down the same thoughts on these games if it provides you with meaningful insight.

### GNS-Theory

The GNS-theory has been described and discussed at length already, so here we will just give a brief outline of it based on Bøckmark 2003, Kim 2008, since it plays a part in the discussion of this article. GNS is based

*[character moment]*

**Battlestar Pegasus had arrived, we were about to evacuate. I sent the civilians to their death: "Please wait in the Mess, we will evacuate you shortly."**

**[Specialist Roger Eddison, Projekt Exodus]**

by the use of the following ideal ways of interacting with the game.

- Gamism is expressed by competition among participants and not just their characters. Where the real people behind the characters seek to win or make the others lose.
- Simulationism is expressed by the players being greatly concerned with the internal logic and experiential consistency of the exploration of their roles. We also call this immersion.
- Narrativism is expressed by the creation, via role-playing, of a story with a recognisable theme. The players see themselves as co-authors and focus on the overall story above the goals of their character or the consistency of the character.

for definition.

to get some insight into where the different characters were in their stories.

## Conclusions

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***[character moment]***

***I screamed through closed lips, the smell of my own blood driving adrenaline through my veins. Too late, I realised my mistake; this girl could really kill me.***

***[Ksenia Volkov, College of Wizardry 5]***

***[character moment]***

***I'd left to find her captured, executed, dead. They took me back in chains and tears. Said I was a traitor, deserved to die, never reborn. Like her.***

***[Celeste, Krigshjärta V]***

***[character moment]***

***Am I going crazy? Is he? He doesn't MEAN to be violent, he's a good guy. I look out of the window. On a tiny pyre in the snow I glimpse my slowly burning shoes. "Now she cannot walk away."***

***[Frida/Annabel, PAN]***

# Beyond Playing to Lose and Narrativism

## Playing for aesthetics

Jeppe & Maria Bergmann Hamming

### *Introduction*

In the larp community, we often discuss what kind of experiences we are looking for in a game. We talk about ideals of behaviour during larp as a way of aligning how we design our scenarios and play our games. We talk about whether we are trying to tell a story, playing a game that can be won, and whether we are playing characters in a consistent and immersive way, as described in the Three way model over 10 years ago (Bøckman 2003; Kim 2008).

We have in the nordic larp scene also been operating within the concept of “playing to lose,” where the ideal for the participant in larp games is to seek better drama by playing to lose as in opposition to playing to win.

In this article, we propose an alternative way to view the experience of larping, both as a designer and participant. We propose that we should seek not to design for either of the three GNS-principles<sup>1</sup> within a playing to lose idiom, but instead we should seek to design and play for authentic aesthetic experiences.

In the article, we will argue that larp’s contribution as an art form is to be found in this approach. We believe larp can contribute in enriching us with truly great experiences and take a unique position in the domain of art and entertainment, if we move beyond the GNS-way of approaching larp.

### *Larp*

This article discusses live action role-playing (larp) as understood as games where the participants physically act out actions of one or more characters that they play. Everything

stated here would also be appropriate to lay down on freeform games, black box games and other similar genres. It might be less the case for more traditional tabletop role-playing games, which are not the main subject of this paper, but feel free to lay down the same thoughts on these games if it provides you with meaningful insight.

### *GNS-Theory*

The GNS-theory has been described and discussed at length already, so here we will just give a brief outline of it based on Bøckman 2003, Kim 2008, since it plays a part in the discussion of this article. GNS is based on the Three way/Threefold model, with some slight variations, and it seeks to describe how players interact within larps or other RPGs by the use of the following ideal ways of interacting with the game.

- Gamism is expressed by competition among participants and not just their characters. Where the real people behind the characters seek to win or make the others lose.
- Simulationism is expressed by the players being greatly concerned with the internal logic and experiential consistency of the exploration of their roles. We also call this immersion.
- Narrativism is expressed by the creation, via role-playing, of a story with a recognisable theme. The players see themselves as co-authors and focus on the overall story above the goals of their character or the consistency of the character.

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1 Gamism, Simulationism or Narrativism. See further down for definition.

This does not mean that a person or a game has to be 100 % gamist, but that participants could follow strategies that have a weight towards one of these three directions. Likewise, the game could be designed to underline one of these ways of playing. In reality, we often see some participants having a focus on immersing in their characters, while others are focusing on the overall narrative.

### *Playing to lose*

The playing to lose idiom is a part of what we usually call the nordic larp tradition, where the ideal is to seek to play for the best dramatic solution in favour of winning the game. It could be seen as a narrativist approach and statement against a gamistic playstyle.

### *Art, authenticity and aesthetics*

The German cultural critic Walter Benjamin presented in 1936 in a famous essay called *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Benjamin 1968) how we could see the role of art in a time of mass media and mass communication.

Benjamin argued that art had shifted and changed with the modern times and modern ways of producing and reproducing art, and we therefore needed to revisit how we understand art and the role of art. He states that the techniques of reproduction (as for example music is reproduced in recordings, movies are reproduced on film, images are reproduced through printing) and the concept of authenticity is central in understanding what was happening to art. As Benjamin wrote:

*“Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.” (Benjamin 1968)*

The understanding of authenticity in this context is somewhat different from what we usually understand by the term authentic. As Grayson and Martinec (2004) argues, we will normally understand authenticity as either indexicality or iconicity. Indexicality refer-

ring to whether the experience, concept or thing at hand is in fact the true original, and iconicity to whether it looks like what it tries to give an authentic experience of being. So something indexical authentic, like an original document, could be iconically not authentic, if time has changed it so much that it does not any longer look like the document would originally have looked.

Benjamin’s concept of authenticity could be seen as indexicality, but in the context of art the question is not so much whether it is the historical original experience, concept or thing, but rather whether it is something that is not only a work of art, but is also unique in time and space.

Now, one could ask why it is even relevant to discuss whether something is unique in time and space when it comes to art and larp. To understand this, we need to look at why Benjamin discusses the question of authenticity at all.

In the 30s we saw the real power of mass communication for the first time, the proto example is the propaganda of the German Nazi regime, but it was with radio and television mass communication really moved in on politics, art, consumption—in all parts of our lives we were met with mass communication. And if we skip forward to modern days, it is truer than ever. We watch the same movies all over the world, we read the same books, we listen to the same music. Unsurprisingly, the issue of the consequences of this remain, and we find the same question of the impact of this hypermediated reality in the works of Baudrillard (1994)—we as humans end up finding ourselves in a world of signs referring other signs but losing their connection to what they signify, what is actually real.

In *Negative Dialectics* (Adorno 1973) Adorno works with the problem of subjectivism and objectivism. The problem is that science, art—actually all knowledge production—has fallen in the trap of either idealism or positivism. That we either concern ourselves only with the concepts of things, with the language and metaphysics—you could call this the hyperreal aspect of knowledge to use Baudrillard’s terms—or we concern our-

selves only with what we believe to be the objective state of things. Philosophy since Hegel had believed that it was possible to synthesise these two aspects, with the continuing improvement of our knowledge and understanding of the world.

Adorno argues that the subjective and objective can never fully be the same. The objective world is made up of instances of events, people and things that are unique in space and time, but the concepts of our subjective understanding of the world seek to understand them through abstract and general terms. Therefore, we will always have a discrepancy between the two and we should seek to see and acknowledge these differences, since they are sources of a better understanding of the world. We should let the objective world set itself through and break our subjective understandings of the world—shattering some of the hyperreal.

And towards this goal, aesthetics have a central role. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972) Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the history of mankind is also the history of how we have tried to dominate nature, or the objective world, through the use of concepts. We try to create identity between our subjective concepts about the world and the actual world. This causes an alienation within the modern human, that we have difficulties relating to this world, and we end up believing that we are in control of things that we do not really control.

Adorno and Horkheimer give us an example of a beautiful tree in bloom, and how when we see this tree it is something unique and beautiful in time and space. But as we signify it by calling it a tree, or a tree in bloom, or no matter how many words we use, we reduce it from its full unique splendour to something that is not the same, but we insist that it is.

When art is only reproduction it involuntarily upholds an identity of the concepts with something that it is not. We end up consuming art that is but references to references, as described by Baudrillard, and thus we do not get experiences that show us the shortcomings of our concepts and language and redefines how we understand the

world around us. Adorno, Horkheimer and Benjamin are really saying that we need art that creates authentic aesthetic experiences that do what the wonderful tree in bloom does—stops us from being caught up in our concepts, seeing trees as only manifestations of a concept, and instead see that this tree's splendour can never truly be identified. The concept of tree is non-identical to the reality of this specific tree. Through authentic aesthetic experiences we can challenge the subjective and achieve a different kind of experience.

And this is exactly the role of art in the view of Adorno, Horkheimer and Benjamin. That art can instead on one hand utilise aesthetics, concepts and symbols that reference meaning from our subjective understanding of the world, and at the same time situate itself uniquely in time and space. This causes the concepts to be juxtaposed with objective instances of reality, that will give an experience of negative dialectics, moving our understanding of the objective and the subjective. And this is what we in the scope of this article understand as authentic aesthetic experiences.

### *Aesthetics and GNS-theory*

So how do authentic aesthetic experiences relate to larp and to GNS-theory? We believe that larp holds a unique potential in this area and that unlocking this potential is best done by not thinking in GNS-terms, but in terms of aesthetics instead.

The unique potential of larp in regards to authentic experiences is that the larp experience truly is an event that is unique in both space and time. We all probably had the experience of going to a concert with an artist whose music we listened to for years and getting a much bigger experience at the concert. This arises from a set of circumstances like:

- The rituals around the concert
- The preparations we do that build anticipation
- The exact songs the artist chooses to perform

- How the artist performs on the day
- Who we are at the concert with
- If something special happens, like a guest appearance or something random

All these things build this event up to be something unique in time and space and not just a record you could put on any other day.

The cinema has a lot less chance of being something truly memorable. The movie might be, but unless the movie experience is tied to somebody special you went there with, we will wager that you can't place great cinema movie experiences nearly as well as you can place and remember your great concert experiences.

Theatre has some of the same qualities as the cinema, but when you go watch a play, it will be actors you might not know, and they might do something special that evening, or perhaps alter the scenography of the play to reinterpret the play and give it relevance in the current historical context.

When going to a concert or in the theatre, the music or the lines might also be delivered in such a special and beautiful way that they will forever imprint themselves in your mind. We think most people have had these experiences, where the aesthetics of the experience are so breathtaking that you cannot identify the event with what you expected. It is not just another run of Hamlet. You saw the exact play where the great monologue was delivered in a way that you could not keep yourself from crying. This happens with movies as well, that you have very beautiful experiences, but the ephemeral experiences, where you see something and then it is forever gone, has the basis of forming much greater impact.

In larp, we have the perfect frame for setting these kind of experiences. Every larp is by design new every time. Different stories will form, different things will be said, characters will be interpreted differently making each run of a larp a set of unique experiences. Even when we rerun larps, as is done with for example *College of Wizardry* that, as this is written, is running for the ninth and

tenth time, or *Hell on Wheels* that has run six times, or the many freeform games from for example Fastaval that are played perhaps fifteen times during the convention and played again and again at other conventions. And still if you brought all the players from all the runs together, they would have had unique experiences. Even when we make games contain historical characters or historical events that we know of, they will be something different every time, giving new experiences, but at the same time working with a lot of the same concepts as the other runs of the game. In this way, the ideas we have around some concept, whether it is romantic love as in Romeo and Juliet or it is the events that unfolded unleashing the First World War or something entirely different, we as participants have our own unique experience.

When we discuss our experience with others we discover the differences and the similarities—forcing us to think about our experiences. It is exactly here we find larp's true contribution as art. Larp has the potential of creating aesthetic experiences that are unique in time and space. And to do this again and again. With all the same tools that theatre, music or literature has at hand, but with an added potential for these unique experiences where the stories and characters take you places you had not imagined when the game started. Of course literature, theatre, cinema, sculptural art and all the other arts produce unique experiences. In, for example, your specific reading of a book, you have your own unique experience and interpretation but this still has a lot less levels of freedom than a larp has when it comes to making the fiction and the participant come together and form an experience.

On the other hand, larp does not in any way have the same possibility of ensuring that the sound of the music is just precisely right, or the wording of a line is delivered in just the right way. This is the nature of larp, that it gives freedom to produce something truly unique but at the same time if too much freedom is given it might ruin the aesthetics of the experiences by the story or the characters not coming together in a meaningful way.

And what we are really trying to do when we operate within a GNS-theory paradigm is to use these three ways of understanding what is happening during a larp to navigate our experiences. We propose that instead of thinking in terms of winning, immersing in the character, or getting the overall story right, that we aim towards creating authentic aesthetic scenes. If we focus too hard on the narrative, we tend to reproduce our ideas of how the story should go. We are falling in the trap of idealism, as Adorno would put it. The narrativist approach would have a tendency to recreate the stereotypical stories we know from movies and books and in that way lose connection with the authentic part of the situation. On the other hand, immersing in the character might work in exactly the same way, where we get lost in our idea of how the character would act instead of seizing the possibilities that the meeting between character and narrative gives us. The writings on steering in *The Knudepunkt 2015 Companion Book* (Nielsen and Raasted, 2015) has pointed out the 100 % immersive experience isn't really a practical reality.

In regards to gamism we should not think in terms of whether it is right or wrong to win or lose, but instead in terms of what could create a great scene. Actually, the gamist parts of RPG has created very good tools for creating exactly what we are trying to motivate for in this article. The great thing about dice in RPG-games is in fact the possibility of introducing something random, that pushes the story in new direction and creates epic moments of high and low. This is why we remember those moments where the die came out as a twenty, and something epic happened, or as a one and something surprisingly bad happened. Certainly, the dice often get in the way of creating the great scenes, when the super villain dies to early or a character that is supposed to appear competent keeps on failing in everything. Which is why we should of course not copy it directly from classical RPG to freeform or larp, but only be inspired in what it can do for us to have moments of something random, where something we did not plan happened and it turned the entire story around and made for

a much greater scene than we had been able to think up before the game.

### *Designing and playing for aesthetics— Or how we do larp magic*

These authentic aesthetic experiences are what we sometimes have called larp magic. The moment when something magically happens that makes perfect sense in the game but we never thought up front would happen. When two unlikely characters fall in love, or the husband turns up at just the right moment to find the infidel couple, or it turns out that you can be saved from a terrible predicament and nobody knew, not even your saviour, that this was in fact possible, but all of a sudden all the right people came together.

All of us who have experienced these moments know that they are really what we breathe and long for. It is these moments that we end up talking about afterwards, where we feel that something unique happened that we could not have played out with a manuscript or read in a book.

Here we will outline some simple guidelines we use for creating these experiences both as designers and participants:

1. Larp needs degrees of freedom
2. Larp needs the excitement of the unknown
3. Larp needs beauty
4. Larpers need to breathe and dive

### *Larp needs degrees of freedom*

We hold the following as our central design idiom: We believe that larp lives off of freedom for the participants and for the story to move and shift. Without freedom, we do not get the authentic experiences, we just get a reproduction of ideas. You can suffocate a larp or a larper, and therefore we believe that you should never tie both story and characters down. When we do this, we move into the land of theatre, and in reality larpers are typically not great actors but great co-creators. When playing, we as larpers should strive to not decide up front what should

happen in detail and we should not discuss scenes in such great detail that we kill them. If we insist on remaining true to characters or a story we have decided up front, we rob ourselves of authentic experiences.

#### *Larp needs the excitement of the unknown*

Following the above line of argument, the great authentic scenes often come from having participants who do not know each other upfront meet each other. We have different ideas of beautiful stories, and we have different ways of enacting them, and when bringing participants who do not know each other together, we introduce a tension that has the potential of taking the stories and characters to new places. This should be moderated by clear communication about expectations, and is in our experience best with a mixture of people who know each other up front and people who do not know each other. Also we believe that we should not hold back from concerns about whether what we are doing in a larp perfectly fits the characters and the narrative up until now. As in real life, our characters can do things that might not make sense or that we can't defend consistently, but it ends up creating a beautiful scene and we can always figure out later why it made sense. Real life tends to work in the same way.

#### *Larp needs beauty*

Beauty is quite an extensive subject, and the question of aesthetics in larp has been discussed in detail by for example Stenros (2013). What we aim for here is that we don't only want to create random and unique scenes, we want to create memorable scenes that surprise us and show us that humans and stories can unfold in surprising ways. At the same time, we want the experience to be somewhat consistent. This is not an excuse to not design the details of the experience, as when we go to a concert, we need the atmosphere, the mood, the visuals and the music played to come together. This connects to everything from scenography over music, costumes, the language we use, how we play, and how we make the story come together in the end. We will not cover all these sub-

jects in detail here and you might not use all these effects in your larp, but a larp should be a beautiful experience and it should provide the frame for letting wonderful scenes emerge.

A part of this is also removing the ugly. Ugly is not only things that disturb the fictional setting but also off-game negotiation. When playing long larps, we should take time to make sure that everybody is on the same page as described below, but we should strive never to negotiate scenes during the larp. Our experience is that as soon as we start discussing what would be good scenes to do next, we kill the larp. This happens because we move away from the land of seizing the larp magic and instead try to convince others from a subjective point of view. It ends up causing some to feel that they are not heard, and that the scene will just be a dull theatre scene since we already have decided everything. Well-designed larps provide ways of very quick negotiation, if any.

#### *Larpers need to breathe and dive*

To actually make beautiful scenes happen, we believe that it is very beneficial for both larp and larpers, especially in games of more than just a few hours, to breathe and dive. By this we mean that instead of trying to decide up front what should happen in the full story unfolding over several days, or try to get so much into character that we can uphold it for days, we should instead set out to aim for some scenes we think could be interesting. We might have talked about them up front, or come up with the idea on our own. Then we try to immerse into these scenes, dive as far down as we can, feel and act on what makes sense and what could be fun, and then resurface and breathe. Consider where it would be great to go and if we can set the next great scenes up on our own, then dive back in and live them out. We aim for moments or perhaps even hours of immersion, then briefly think about where the narrative is going and what opportunities have arisen in the game, seize them and see where they take us. By not deciding too much up front, we leave space for the game to take us places we couldn't imagine, and by steering and

forcing ourselves to reflect, we make sure that we don't get lost in the characters or the story but focus on creating great moments instead.

This approach is from our point of view radically different from narrativism, immersion, and playing to lose. It is about playing for the great scenes and seizing the moments.

Playing to lose can in fact be very hurtful for the game, since first of all we should, as we have argued, not decide our story arc up front but let it have room to live. When too many strive to lose we end up hurting the game, just as we can hurt the game if we insist on winning. But it is definitely okay for your character to win, if that is what ended up making sense as the game played out. We know that the playing to lose term has been important towards moving the larp community in direction of focusing not only on our own experience but now we believe time has come to focus on doing great moments instead of losing.

### *Larp as emancipatory art*

This article has hopefully shown a theoretical fundament and normative vision for where we want to take larp, and where it in some cases already is. We believe that larp has an emancipatory potential as art. Emancipatory in the sense that it can potentially create the frames for making the subjective and objective challenge each other, it makes great and unique experiences possible. And these experiences can challenge the way we understand ourselves, history and the motivations of others. This article has provided some tools for designing for this and participating in these experiences. We hope that this will inspire you to either create the frame for authentic aesthetic experiences for your participants or to create them yourself as a participant. We also believe that in this time of more mass media production than ever, that we as larp artists can create experiences that make people reconnect with something authentic. This is not just a mission to create great experiences for ourselves and others, but also helping us and others be present in the now in a world where we very

often are present on a multitude of communication channels and bombarded by a thousand different messages. We want larp to be the tool to make us more present than ever in the now.

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# An Invitation to Dance

Lorenzo Trenti

## Dancing on the edge of mainstream

When I was a kid in the 80s, several of the hobbies and interests I shared with friends of mine were, to say the least, delicate matters. Being into tabletop role-playing games was considered, by some, an unsocial activity: there was something strange if you gathered with other teens and told stories together. As in the US and other nations, in Italy—where I live—RPGs had their share of critiques and libels, even from detractors who barely knew what they were talking about. RPGs were supposed to turn away young people from reality and even encourage suicides.<sup>1</sup>

Comics were successful in sales but not really considered part of a cultural system. Fantasy and sci-fi were read a lot, but by a niche of readers, and equally ignored by the majority. Larps came later, but were similar to tabletop role-playing games in public awareness: the fact that at the weekends you dress as a barely acceptable replica of an elf, and go into the woods to fight your friends with foam swords, was not something you'd tell anyone on a first date. You'd probably want to reveal your hobbies to your love interest only when you were sure they wouldn't think you were nuts.

Thirty years later, things have changed considerably. The movie industry is home to

a war without quarter between franchises—Marvel Cinematic Universe versus DC, Star Wars versus Star Trek, Harry Potter versus The Hobbit, just to name a few. Many of these franchises come from comics or genre fiction adaptations. As for role-playing games, tabletop games are definitely played by a niche, while more and more spend a lot of time on MMORPGS and computer games.

What about larp? The hobby grows in numbers and it's receiving more and more public awareness. Positive public awareness, I mean. All around the world, it's common to find blockbuster larps made with high production values and professionally organised.

And ... I wasn't ready. Looking in retrospect, I just wasn't ready for all of that. Suddenly, all the hobbies of my childhood have become mainstream.

"Mainstream" is, of course, a slippery word that can have many meanings. In this context it sums the fact that larp is no longer something mysterious that you always need to explain when it pops into a conversation. The average person already knows, more or less, what you're talking about. Probably he or she has never taken part in a live action role-playing game, but surely has a friend or a colleague who's into this sort of thing. And, most importantly, the average person thinks that larp sounds a bit bizarre but surely cool.

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.gdr2.org](http://www.gdr2.org). Author's own directory. In Italian.

Of course, I'm generalising. But still, I wasn't ready to be cool.

## Dancing on someone else's soil

One of the things that strikes me most about the time we're living in is the fact that the industry is more and more taking possession of our fictional worlds. Today, if you are a company and you have a property—be it *Game of Thrones* or *The Hunger Games*—you need to look at it as a means to make money, and lots of it. These “fictional franchises,” from a capitalistic point of view, must become the source of multimillionaire income, and to reach this goal they have to spread everywhere, occupying the largest part of space in our minds, hearts, language and daily routine. Characters and stories must be recognisable and appear in movies, books, comics, costumes, posters, t-shirts, toys, coffee mugs, keychains and, of course, games.

This colonisation affects our collective imagination and has consequences on the larps we play and write. When you want to organise a larp, it's easier if you describe it as an event set in a specific fictional world. If that world is famous enough, you won't need a lot of time to explain the world's premises, its mood and its social rules to the players. It's a useful shortcut that lets you skip this part and concentrate on other elements of the game.

You can stick to the weak version of the statement: “this larp is inspired by the novels of J. K. Rowling; if you'll take part in the game you'll have the chance to experience situations very similar to those of her characters.” Or the hard one: “this is a larp in the magical world of Harry Potter and we'll play characters taken from the book.”

Of course, if you aim at a little larp played by just you and your friends, both versions work exquisitely well. However, if you're planning to organise a blockbuster larp with high production values and to publicly market it to

attract players, you're basically bound to the weak version. If you don't, the consequence could be that a team of lawyers will be sent to your door by a big corporation to sue you for copyright infringement. Luckily, companies can copyright only names, characters and brands, and—at least 'til today—they can't cover moods or atmospheres. It's easy to play in a copyrighted setting with just the serial numbers scratched off. If you're clever, it's just a matter of subliminal allusions that you need to send to your players.

Even if you don't plan to design a larp in a fictional franchise, our collective imagination is shaped by what we read, watch and experience. You can describe your medical larp “in the style of *Grey's anatomy*” and expect players to behave in some way, and this way will be very different than what you'd get in a larp that portrays itself as “a surreal comedy like *Scrubs*.”

Is this dependence good? Is it bad? It is somewhat inescapable, and so it must be handled with care and, most important, awareness. It's a fact that we put together our tales starting from other stories. We manipulate the existent, disassembling and reassembling characters and situations, and this is not something new that we do thanks to wikis—it dates back to the first stories in human history told around a campfire. So it's good as long as we use other stories as bricks; it's not if with those bricks are used to build not a trampoline for our own creativity but a prison.

Another important aspect is that now, millennia later, there's something different. The importance of a tale, or a character, is not determined by its capacity of being meaningful to a community of people. The persistence of a story may come directly from some marketing department, which has the duty to create characters and situations that can be sold and monetised. A superhero might get a new costume, not because of a turning point in his personal story as chosen by a comic writer, but because the merchandising needs a more var-

ied offer of plastic action figures.

The industrialisation of storytelling is very similar to the industrialisation of food production. The latter is a good thing if it allows more people to have a decent meal every day and raise children; it is not good if it makes unhealthy food, creates false needs and bad habits, and loses sight of its purpose for commercial reasons.

In the context of larps, we are faced with very similar choices. We can delve into the funny side of the entertainment industry, and get ideas to make our own original, nourishing events; or we can just passively adhere to stories that other chose for us, and become no more than a passive audience. I'm not implying that a larp set in a franchised world is inherently bad while one in an original setting is inherently good, though. I'm just pointing out that it's time to resist massification. The risk of transforming our own games into an oblivious tool for someone else's marketing is always present. Especially now that larps and games are becoming mainstream and recognisable, now that they are cool, we should always be aware of what's at stake. We must consider that we, as a community of designers, have a collective responsibility to make meaningful larps for our society.

## Dancing in proximity

If you think about it, larp is a strange new media made with old techniques. It doesn't rely on technological advancements and it could have been played in ancient times. In fact, we have historical evidence that something similar to larp was indeed played centuries ago (Stark, 2012).

Being able to write character sheets and contact players with the aid of modern technology is of course useful, and you can employ with great profit new materials to make foam weapons that are both realistic and completely safe. None of those things are, however, strictly mandatory to have a larp, and the same can

be said about lighting and special effects, apps for smartphones, and so on.

We can, and will, have technological advancements in larps, but that's the how we will play them, that won't alter why larps are fun and engaging. We play larps because they allow us to live stories and situations in a 1:1 scale, on a greater resolution than the most advanced screen. Larps put us in contact with other people on a physical, mental and social level. Larps let us make experiences that intertwine with real life and real emotions.

As of today, there's something that larp can give us and we couldn't find anywhere else: it's proximity. In a world where travels and media have virtually deleted (or strongly weakened) the concept of distance, we still stick to playing with real people, real bodies, and in real situations. In doing that, we are re-appropriating human contact. It is authentic and maybe a bit unexpected.

In the past times we invented trains, cars, planes and motorways that let us cover great distances in a very short time. But still humans feel the need to walk to places, go trekking in the woods, experience the joy of reaching the top of a mountain with their own effort and fatigue. And, guess what? Walking is also more healthy, and makes us feel good on multiple levels. Science says that if you don't make regular physical exercise, you risk a lot of serious illnesses.

It's the same with larps. We have to keep in mind that we are making our own entertainment. That's an important part of life, for us and for all the people in our proximity, and we can't just let big companies have full control over it. Playing larps is a creative act of resistance.

## But resistance against what?

In the last years, the concept of gamification is getting more and more relevant in a lot of different contexts (economy, politics, etc.). Gamification is often defined as "using game elements outside of a game environment."

(Detering, 2012) The concept is starting to have its critical analysis, and the most surprising thing that is being said about it, particularly from a gamer's point of view, is that gamification isn't always a good thing.

The risk here is not that we're putting fun into boring things like jobs, but that we're trying to overly optimise processes—and by doing that we spoil them of their authentic feeling.

This is how Matteo Bittanti, famed Italian researcher, argues about this topic.

*“Gamification promises autonomy, emancipation, fun and full self-fulfillment by way of playful activities, but still reduces the individual to a mere vector of the dominant ideology... Jane McGonigal asserts that game deletes every distinction between work and free time, redeeming the individual and making him autonomous, creative and participatory. But in reality this heavily-bureaucratised machinery tends to accentuate the subordinate condition of the subject, enslaving him to a technocratic system. A possible antidote to the neo-bureaucratisation of daily life... is spontaneous playing. Not gamification, but its opposite: a playful activity, free from rules, prizes and competition...” (Bittanti, 2016)*

What's the type of playing we have in mind? What are the games (larps and not only larps) that can achieve authenticity?

*“The logic behind playing [...] is very similar to that of a gift. As in the gift, in playing there's a detour from the logic of mercantile equivalence [...] Playing doesn't happen outside of the realm of commodities [...] It can work only as internal detour to the same, irreversible process of commodification [...] It establishes a different potentiality of meaning by using the same materials and the same energies fielded by the commodification process [...] Like the gift, playing gives birth to something—something unexpected, a free addition.” (Carmagnola, 2006)*

Playing as an act of creative resistance, playing in the same logic of a gift made to others around us, makes the world less centred on money transactions and more on people. That being said, as larps are becoming mainstream and recognisable, they're also more and more a possible source of income for someone. And that's a good thing: if a lot of people get paid for producing good larps, there will be more good larps around. Maybe there's also room for a larp to become part of a transmedial property—a media between other media, like a franchised event.

The line here isn't merely between professional organisations that make money with larps and no-profit, little amateurish larps. It's what we will make of our own games. Are we going to design games that are still meaningful? Please note, I'm not talking about blatant civic themes. It doesn't necessarily have to be a larp about refugees or the condition of minorities: a good classical fantasy larp can equally tell us something about humans. Just keep in mind all the important things that we can give each other with this hobby, and let's go on together shaping the brightest future for larp.

Just keep dancing.

*Sposi, amici, al ballo! al gioco!  
Alle mine date foco!  
(Spouses and sweethearts, to dancing  
and playing!  
And let's have some fireworks!)  
Le nozze di Figaro, Act IV, Scene 12.*

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**[character moment]**

***You are my favourite apprentice. Go survive the Grass Trials. You have no choice anyway.***

**[Maiko, Witcher School, 1st plot thread, 3rd act]**

**[character moment]**

***Her last words to the one who left her to die alone; to her brother: "I really don't hate you, you know." She pulls the trigger. BAM. It's over.***

**[Sod (Soot), Sunshine Facility]**

art, installations and so on. This definition is connected to art history and a specific art community. Another definition of art includes a much broader range of disciplines such as traditional theatre, movies, street art and many other practices that share a goal of entertaining or creating meaningful experiences transcending everyday life.

The meaning of the term "art" is continuously being discussed. Today, there is no clear definition of what qualifies as art (Svendsen 2003, p. 20). What is important today might no longer be the question "What is art?" but "What is good art?" (Svendsen, p. 95)

Not all art is good art. Framing something as art is not a way of elevating it, it is a way of getting it interpreted in a specific way. Context matters for how we perceive our experiences. Placing your work within an art context probably won't add value or importance but it is a way to frame your creation and communicate your intentions. It is the difference between painting a wall blue because it is a nice colour and painting it blue with a specific intention on the difference between

should perceive your work.

My best definition of art so far is that it is a matter of context and intention. If you intend to make art, this is what you will make. Whether it is good art or not is an entirely different matter and if no one besides you recognises your creation as being art, it might not matter what you call it.

Creating good or meaningful experiences through art is a matter of skill for the artist and of the personal preferences for the individual spectator. And if you work within the more established art world, contextualising your work in relation to past and present artworks and artistic practices, is also part of the parameters on which your work will be interpreted.

### **The art world**

While it might be fair to say that art is for everyone and we each are entitled to our own definitions, art is also a profession and an institution. The art world is the people

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## *[future of larp]*

***I think larp will split more into two directions. One of art, focused more on artistic expression of the author than the players' experience—and the other being exact opposite. Commercial product to complement computer games, augmented/virtual reality games and your generic "events." So instead of renting a Tesla for a two hour drive, or arranging***

## *[character moment]*

***It's time to leave. My job is done. God, I want to be one of them! An activist. They can't know. My world is a different one. I'm not an artist. "Maria, I was thinking, we need a press contact." OK. Play it cool now... "But I... OK."***

***[Maria Rank ,  
The Artists]***

***a cave diving experience, you will go to a larp. These will become more shallow, focused on replayability, low barrier of entrance (money), profitability and scalability. The larp as we know/knew it between 1990-2010 (let's say) will disappear completely.***

***[Petr, 34 years]***

# Art and Larp

Nina Runa Essendrop

## INTRODUCTION

I am writing this article because I have, for some years, experimented with pieces that in different ways combine art and larp. I have been exploring this through my own work, but especially by collaborating with artists and being a helper or player in their pieces. It is an amazing field to work in with lots of experiences to explore. This article is about the possibilities and challenges I see in combining art and larp. I want to provide some relevant thoughts, theories and to share experiences usable for others who want to work with art and larp.

I am basing this article partly on my own experience and collaborations with artists, partly on conversations with generous artist friends and partly on art theory and the knowledge I got from studying theatre, dance and performance at university.

I will start this article with some art theory, focusing on the qualities in art which, for me, makes art meaningful to experience. This leads up to a part about the differences and similarities between larp and art. Then I will give some examples and thoughts on the different ways to combine larp and art. Finally I will share some experiences concerning larp presented as art, and the different ways to including an audience in larp.

## WHAT IS ART

"Art" can be perceived as a broad term covering a wide range of human activities which have to do with creative and aesthetic manifestations. The term is connected to a long history of art with changing definitions and characteristics differentiating it from other fields such as science or philosophy.

Some think of art as "fine arts," which traditionally only included paintings, sculpting, architecture and maybe music, but now is broadly the kind of art that is shown at galleries, including live art, performance, video

art, installations and so on. This definition is connected to art history and a specific art community. Another definition of art includes a much broader range of disciplines such as traditional theatre, movies, street art and many other practices that share a goal of entertaining or creating meaningful experiences transcending everyday life.

The meaning of the term "art" is continuously being discussed. Today, there is no clear definition of what qualifies as art (Svendsen, 2003, p. 20). What is important today might no longer be the question "What is art?" but "What is good art?" (Svendsen, p. 95)

Not all art is good art. Framing something as art is not a way of elevating it, it is a way of getting it interpreted in a specific way. Context matters for how we perceive our experiences. Placing your work within an art context probably won't add value or importance, but it is a way to frame your creation and to communicate your intentions. It is the difference between painting a wall blue because it is a nice colour and painting it blue with an artistic intention, or the difference between framing your actions as theatre or as historical reenactment. It says something about why you do as you do and how spectators should perceive your work.

My best definition of art so far is that it is a matter of context and intention. If you intend to make art, this is what you will make. Whether it is good art or not is an entirely different matter and if no one besides you recognise your creation as being art, it might not matter what you call it.

Creating good or meaningful experiences through art is a matter of skill for the artist and of the personal preferences for the individual spectator. And if you work within a more established art world, contextualising your work in relation to past and present artworks and artistic practises, is also part of the parameters on which your work will be interpreted.

## The art world

While it might be fair to say that art is for everyone and we each are entitled to our own definitions, art is also a profession and an institution. The art world is the people

and institutions who work with art. There are professional artists within different disciplines, more or less highly skilled at their trait. These artists, together with curators, critics and collectors, have a big say in defining contemporary art, because they are the ones creating, financing and exhibiting the art pieces. The art world can validate something as being art, but more importantly, there are a lot of people there, who have knowledge of and a sensibility towards art and aesthetics. The art world has—through a long art history—developed tools and terms for working with and understanding their field of practice.

### **Art disciplines**

Some disciplines such as painting, theatre, music, dance and sculpting are often associated with art. Each of these disciplines have their own ways of creating an artistic output, although the different art disciplines often overlap in contemporary art.

Not everything created within these disciplines are necessarily art. You can make a drawing to show someone the way, and you seldom judge children's paintings by the same criteria as paintings seen in a gallery. Dance can definitely be art, but you can also dance for social reasons.

Some of the art disciplines within which artists have used playable larps as art-pieces are: performance, participatory theatre, installation, film and dance.

### **Art characteristics**

There are some specific qualities in art, which differentiate art from everyday life and from other kinds of ideas, actions or objects. When framing something as art, the artist changes the way this something is perceived. Framing something as art places it within a specific sphere, where it gets interpreted as art and attributed with the kind of qualities we associate with art (Svendsen, p. 95). In the following, I will highlight some qualities which I find important or meaningful in art.

#### ***Artist intention meeting audience experience.***

Art can be defined as the intention and creation of the artist meeting the audience who

experiences and interprets it (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 20). This definition emphasises both the skill/work of the artist and the experience of the audience. If you go into a gallery and see an art piece consisting of a white table with a black dot, it is fair to wonder what the artist is trying to say with this piece of art. What is the intention? Why does the table have the form and the colour it has? Why is there a dot? You might reach a conclusion which is meaningful to you and you may or may not have the interpretation that the artist intended. Or you might just take in the experience of the table with the dot, feeling which emotions it creates in you or which associations you get from it. But whether you get the intention or not, knowing that someone has created the table and the dot as a piece of art will add an extra dimension to the perception of the table.

#### ***Being sensitive towards a media.***

I think it is with art as with most other fields, that skillfulness comes from knowing and being sensitive towards the media you work with. The skill required to make good art varies in different art disciplines. A skillful painter might have a good sense of colours, brush strokes, texture of painting and how to meaningfully combine different shapes. A good choreographer might be sensitive towards the combination of rhythm, timing, spacial relations and bodily expressions. And an artist working with conceptual art might be sensitive towards the framing, placing and naming of everyday objects to get a specific point across.

#### ***Art as a way to explore different aspects of human experience***

*“The common point between all the things that we include within the umbrella term of “works of art” lies in their ability to produce a sense of human existence (and point to possible trajectories) within this chaos called reality” (Bourriaud, p. 53).*

Art can be perceived as a way to explore different aspects of our human existence. It can suggest new ways of thinking about or experiencing objects, situations or abstract

themes. Almost all art pieces have something they want to communicate. It can be everything from new ways of interacting, new insight in our own feelings or reactions, new ways to build societies, new experiences, or known experiences framed in a new way. Art can broaden our horizons in a lot of ways. It can reach beyond the things we normally take for granted, make everyday objects beautiful, or make us rethink the way we use our bodies or senses or perceive other people.

### *Interstice, other rules than everyday life*

Art is usually seen as something which differs from real life and this makes it a good context for exploring ideas or experiences which falls outside our normal way of perceiving or experiencing ourselves, others and the world around us. Curator and art theorist Nicolas Bourriaud describes this parallel space created by art as an interstice (p. 16). The interstice is creating an alibi to act or think differently, because it is somewhat secluded from everyday life and we can therefore believe that what happens there won't influence our normal reality.

Art is not judged on the premises of truthfully portraying reality and that gives a huge freedom to work created in the domain of art. You can paint a picture of a tree and exaggerate specific qualities to give the picture the mood, theme or expression you wish, without being untrue to how the tree really looks, because art can freely use images or associations to make its points.

### *Bodily, intuitive meaningfulness*

*"Most people turn to art not just because of its entertainment value, but precisely because it is meaningful and because it helps us understand our human condition."*

*(Johnson, 2007, p. 208)*

Good art for me is most of all, meaningful. This does not necessarily mean that it makes logical sense, but that it touches something in the audience, enables them to reflect or to see things differently. Art often operates on another level than logic, it uses sensory tools, associations and the intuitive connec-

tions between words, colours, tone, rhythm, intensity or other elements which influences us in other ways than logical arguments. Art for me is the meaningful connection of felt and sensed qualities. It is a way to explore the human experience, using other and more intuitive tools than rational thought and logic.

## **ART AND LARP**

It is easy to argue why larp can be seen as an art form. Larp has a lot in common with art disciplines such as theatre and performance. So much so, that they can be hard to distinguish. Just like art, larp is an excellent tool for exploring different aspects of our human condition. Larp and art also have in common that they work as social interstices, providing an alibi to behave or perceive in different ways than in what we call "reality." But in my experiences, the design priorities, the purpose and the parameters on which to judge larp and art often differs. An amazingly designed larp might be a meaningless or irrelevant art piece, which is fair, because most larps are not designed to make good art, they are designed to provide good larping experiences. I think larp can make excellent art, if this is what you design for. Most larps definitely have artistic qualities, but to meaningfully be called art, they should be recognised and interpreted as art, and this is not what most larps aim for.

The larping community is in the privileged position of being an independent media. We can keep on developing the media in all kinds of directions and we can combine it with all sort of fields; art, politics, education, therapy or self-actualisation. Labelling all larp as art would take away some of this freedom and it would make it harder to discuss the use of art in larp, the use of larp in art, and the possibility to create pieces that are simultaneously larp and art.

### **Art in larp:**

As a larp designer there is a lot of inspiration to get from different art fields. I have used a lot of exercises, theories and tools from physical theatre and dance, but I believe that any art discipline could provide inspira-

tion. It is not only the concrete tools from different art disciplines that can be used in larp design. The qualities or strategies in art creation can also be utilised.

A quality in art that I find very inspiring is the intuitive meaningfulness that art can create, which is brought on by the combination of different, more or less abstract sensory elements. A good painting is not only good because of the motive but also because of the way the motive is brought forth. This includes the colours, the brush strokes, the style, the angle, the shapes, the size, the framing, the name and the associations, moods or feelings that these together evoke in the spectator. And it is the same in other art disciplines. The different parts of the art piece should not only be thought through and well delivered, they should also be combined with an artistic sensitivity, making a meaningful whole of the different parts. How these elements are combined is not necessarily a logical process, the sense that they make together can be intuitive and

felt rather than explainable and logically understood. The audience gets the point not by having it explained to them, but by experiencing the art piece.

I think this way of designing can be very exciting to use in larp. A larp consists of a lot of elements, and combining these to create intuitive connections that enable the participants to interpret them together as a meaningful whole, can create good larping experiences. As can a larp that focusses on sensory elements or bodily meaning.

### **Larp in art:**

Larp has many things to offer in the context of art.

Larp can create a framework that allows the participant to explore what it is like to be someone else, to create new societies or to feel, think or perceive in new ways, by actually living through these experiences. Larp can create living worlds and embody situations, exploring all kinds of themes in an experienced (not just intellectually under-



*Photo from the exhibition "Invisible Objects." Interviews with larpers in character as members as a fictional subculture is running in loop. Photographer: Tomas Sjkovgaard / Kristoffer Ørum*

stood) way. The larp community has developed tools for designing experiences, interactions and co-created stories and we have developed a terminology to talk about our design strategies and the larping experience.

Larps can be run as art-pieces, but larps can also provide tools for generating material for art-pieces. An example is Danish artist Kristoffer Ørum who in 2016 conducted a larp workshop to develop a fictional subculture for the show "Invisible Objects." The workshop drew on both the larpers' experiences as members of a "real-life" larp subculture, the conventions of which allows its members to act outside of the norms of society and their "in-game" ability to collaboratively improvise and build alternative world views. The end result was a semi-documentary film where participants in the workshop were interviewed in character as part of the fictional subculture. The workshop did not result in a larp, but rather an artwork that was created using tools and strategies inspired by larp.

#### **Larp as art:**

"Larp as art" means pieces that are playable larps presented in the context of art and perceived as an art-piece. The people experiencing a finished artwork are often called audience or spectators. In this article, I will use the term "audience" for the people who are meant to experience the larp as an art-piece. The audience can be the ones playing the larp, but they can also get the experience by spectating or interacting with a larp which is played by larpers focusing on their own larping experience. Experiencing art and larp can be closely related, but it can also be very different, and it often comes with different expectations.

Placing the larp within an art-frame instead of a larp frame changes something about the perception of the piece. The art-like experiences gets highlighted. It can be awesome (both as a larper and as a designer) to have an audience, either influencing or spectating.

When creating pieces which are intended to simultaneously be perceived as larp and art, you should be aware that you are cre-

ating both an art-piece and a larp, and that the design of these might demand different skills or strategies. Even when the audience is playing the larp, you are creating something which should work on the premises of both art and larp, because the audience will probably expect to experience art and might not even know what a larping experience is.

One of the difficulties of working in between larp and art, is that it can be hard to describe these experiences. Larping with an audience is still new to most larpers, and participating in or watching larp is new for most non-larpers.

### **AUDIENCES IN LARP**

There are different ways to include an audience in a larp. The audience can spectate (as in traditional theatre and dance), they can influence the larp (as is sometimes the case in participatory theatre or performance) or they can play the larp, as larpers normally do. The design strategies and what you have to pay attention to differs depending on the way the audience is involved. In the following, I will describe some of my experiences working with audiences in larp, both as a designer, a spectator/audience member and as a larper larping with an audience.

#### **Audience as spectators:**

I find that larp can be very watchable. Watching a larp has different qualities than watching for example theatre or dance. It is the joy of seeing larpers immersed in their experiences, performing intense and honest actions, which may or may not make sense to me as a spectator, but which are obviously meaningful for the larpers. The knowledge that they are larping for themselves, being true in the situation, and not performing for me, makes it feel like I am with them in a private moment and it makes me invest in their situation even though I might not fully understand what is going on.

One of the challenges in designing larp with a spectating audience is to create a situation where the larpers don't perform even though they are being watched. A way to do this, is to help the larper embrace the

presence of the audience. In my experience, larping with an audience can be very enjoyable and add something to the larping experience.

It can be nice to be seen, especially when larping. As larpers we have the alibi of the character and can always immerse or dig deeper into the situation if the outside presence becomes too much. We don't have the obligation to constantly be aware of the audience. In a well designed piece, the audience is not judging our larping on the premise of "acting," the audience is with us through our experience, following us and thereby validating our actions and experiences, because even our lonely moments are shared with someone else.

Knowing that our actions are being perceived as part of an art-piece and will probably be interpreted as extra meaningful because they are seen in the context of the whole piece, changes something about the larping experience. Also, being part of an art piece provides an alibi. There is an artistic vision that we are all part of and the responsibility for this vision is on the artist, not (normally) on the larpers. We can immerse and feel, not just for our own sake, but for the sake of the piece.

All larps are not necessarily watchable. Most larps are not meant to be. Designing a watchable larp requires that the audience is presented with the situation of the larp so they know what to look for and/or that the larp is design in a way which lets the larpers act, move, react and interact in a way which fits an aesthetic vision. The intuitive combination of abstract elements, which is found in art, is a possible design strategy when designing watchable larps. It can be effectful to let the spectators themselves combine the movement of the individual and grouped larpers with the light, music and other elements in the larp.

An example of a larp designed for a spectating audience is *The Zeigarnik Effect* by artist Brody Condon (2015). The larp was basically a therapy session in an abstract reality, conducted by a weird Alien Intelligence (AI) in the shape of a sculpture. We were eight players, playing for two days, getting filmed

simultaneously by two cameras, which allowed the action to be watched from two angles all the time. The film was first live streamed as part of the opening days of the nearby Nordic Biennial of Contemporary Art in Moss (Norway) and afterward a slightly edited version was continuously shown at the exhibition.

One of the great things about the larp was that the player-urge to perform was dealt with inside the larp. The therapy session involved a focus on presence and authenticity. The AI would call people out for performing or not being real, making it an integrated part of the fiction. The abstract setting, the focus on honesty and emotions, and the fact that the artist/designer was playing the role as the AI and thereby could influence the pace, actions, intensity and interactions going on, was part of creating the aesthetics he wanted from the larping, as well as an intense and interesting play for us as larpers.



*Photo from "Ziegnarik Effect." The larp is being filmed simultaneously by two cameras. On the right: a character touching the AI. On the left: a character imitating the AI. Photographer: Brody Condon.*

### **Audience participating:**

Another way of including an audience in larp, is to give them the full larping experience by letting them play the larp themselves.

Larping is quite different from spectating or "just" interacting with a piece. It requires opting into and preferably contributing to the fiction or situation. When an audience is used as spectatorship or low levels of participation, the larping experience needs to be presented to them in a way which either lets them understand the value of these experiences or allows them to keep some of

the elements they normally enjoy, such as an aesthetic experience or a meaningful vision being conveyed. It also helps to have the experience presented to them in a way which is close enough to what they are used to, to allow them to feel safe when engaging in the larping experience.

To have a strong aesthetic focus, a vision and an artistic framing in the larp design, is an inspirational challenge.

Having your larp interpreted as an art-piece is exciting, because it enforces and allows you to think about and design the larp in different ways than when designing for a larp context. Audiences are more used to being handed an experience than to co-create it like we do in larp. The artist's intention is generally more present in art than in larp, and the responsibility for the audience experience weighs more heavily on the artist than on the designer designing for larpers. This because an audience can't be expected to know how to create their own play, they need clearer instructions or less responsibility. But it is very satisfying to present audiences with experiences they were not expecting or even thought were possible.

An example of a larp played by an audience is *The Eighth Palace*, which I am currently working on together with artist César Alvarez. The piece is more or less designed as a larp, but framed as a participatory theatre piece. The audience plays "Beings Who Have Yet to Emerge." They are guided through different stages, slowly getting their senses awakened and learning how to talk, interact and understand themselves. The larp is run by actors from a script. It has been tested a number of times with a partly non-larping audience, latest in a theatre in New York. The non-larping participants have had responses ranging from "mind blown" to "not getting it, at all." In a theatre context, the level of participation required to larp and the immersive experience this opens for, is new.

Using theatre elements such as actors and a script makes it easier to collaborate with the theatre world and to be understood by theatre audiences. César is a musician and playwright and his artistic sensibility and knowledge of how to create good art expe-

riences helps us to live up to audience expectations. In order to provide the theatre audience with a larping experience, we are designing a larp in a theatre frame providing a guided larping experience with focus on sensory elements and coherent and interesting aesthetics.



*Photo from a test run of "Eighth Palace" in New York. Blindfolded audience members are gently being led into the space where they begin their journey as "Beings Who Have Yet to Emerge."*

*Photographer: César Alvarez*

### **Audience interacting:**

Larp seems to me an obvious media for audience interaction, because the audience can actually influence the actions and experiences of the larpers in meaningful ways without the audience themselves fully entering into the fiction. A larp seldom has a planned outcome. The actions are improvised within a frame and influenced by elements from inside and outside of the fiction, such as light, sound, instructions or meta techniques. The audience interactions can be one of these elements in the larp design, influencing the larpers' experiences in more or less essential ways.

One of the interesting challenges in designing for an audience interacting with the larp without actually playing it, is to let the audience participate on their own terms, maintaining the possibility for spectatorship while at the same time being allowed a meaningful function in the larp. It is important that the audience knows how and on which premises to interact and that they can withdraw without ruining the larp. The audience needs clear instructions so they have the alibi to interact without being afraid of doing anything wrong.

The possible spectatorship requires a framing of the larp which gives the audience enough information to understand or interpret the larpers' actions in a meaningful way. And the aesthetic dimension should be prioritised to create a coherent experience for the audience as well as the larpers.

Another challenge in audience participatory larp is that the interactions should be meaningful for the larpers as well as for the audience, otherwise it destroys the larping experience. The audience's interactions could be part of the fiction or have specific functions in the larp and should preferably add something positive to the larping experience.

Interacting with an audience is not necessarily something every larper would like, which is completely fair. But when it works, these experiences can have a lot of good qualities for the larping experience. For instance, with a spectating audience comes the joy of being seen and followed. It is a great joy when you as a larping larper encounter an audience member who is genuinely touched. It can be really awkward to interact with an audience, but it can also be very beautiful to experience.

There is something interesting in the interaction between larpers and audience members, because it can be created in a way that is beneficial for both parts and because it can make the reality of the audience meet the larping fiction or frame.

An example of audience participatory larp is *The Fragile Life of Souls Gone Missing* (2015), a larp I originally designed for the Copenhagen Culture Night, and which has since been

run three times in different iterations. The players play lost souls who live in separate, made up worlds and can only see each other or interact under special circumstances. The audience gets 3-4 specific ways of interacting with the players, like writing messages for them, interacting through objects, or showing themselves to the players without being able to talk or touch. When the audience is not actively choosing to interact, they are invisible to the characters and can spectate.



*Photo from "The Fragile Life of Souls Gone Missing" at The Storytelling Festival in Oslo. An audience member is interacting with a lost soul through a paper umbrella. Photographer: Li Xin*

## CONCLUSION

Whether something is larp or art is mostly a matter of the intention of the piece, and the frame in which it is presented.

It is useful to be aware of the differences between larp and art if you want to create a larp which is presented in an art context. When creating larp as art you are simultaneously designing for two different contexts and potentially two different experiences. Larp and art generally has different traditions, approaches and priorities when creating their work and they have different parameters for how to interpret and judge it. Having the knowledge of and sensitivity towards both fields, either by own experience or good collaborators, is a huge advantage. And it is exactly because larp and art in some ways work on different premises, that they have a lot to offer each other and can create meaningful experiences when combined.

I think that larps can meaningfully be combined with all kinds of artistic disciplines, and be presented in an art-context, for an audience, in ways that create exciting experiences for larpers as well as for an audience. But to do this well, you have to design for it.

Developing the skills to combine larp and art takes time (as acquiring new skills always does). There is a lot of underlying assumptions within both a larp and an art community, which might not be immediately visi-

ble, but which still affect the way we think about and perceive our work. I hope that as we keep exploring how to combine larp and art and as "larp as art" pieces becomes more common, we will develop a stronger sensitivity, new tools and a language to explain and discuss these experiences, both within the larp community and within the art world.

Thank you to all the people who have helped me with this article. I really appreciate it!

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# Larp and I— Till Death Do Us Part

Hanne Grasmo

*What kind of stories do we tell when we are afraid to die?* With this question on her mind, Hanne Grasmo peeks decades into the future of larp, where she gets to see a glimpse of her own life, and death.

**I HAVE LARPED** half my life. I have tried to quit several times, but I am still drawn back to the mysteries, to the emotions, to the creations of stories and alternate lives. At last I have settled the thought that I will probably larp for the rest of my life.

For this anniversary Knutebook, I wanted to look into the future of larp. What will it be like to larp, for my comrades and I, let's say in twenty, thirty years? Then I realised: In the future, I am dead.

In my own larp creations I have been obsessed with death and dying. *Just a Little Lovin'* ((JaLL) Edland and Grasmo, 2011) was, for me, a lot more about the fear of death, than about sex, friendship and the 80s. That's why I wrote it, that's why I played it. The reason: I'm scared (to death) by the thought of my own exit from life.

Now, death plays a part in most larps. We kill the monsters, slaughter our enemies and assassinate kings. You can meet your own destiny as well, die and get a new character (or sometimes not). Even funerals have been a huge part of my nordic larp experience over the last 25 years.

One of the best funeral scenes I have played was in *Haromet* (Dalen, Edland and Wiese-Hansen, 1998), a 1001-night Arabic low-fantasy larp outside Bergen. When someone died, everyone, friend or enemy, had to gather around the

newly filled grave to tell stories about the one who passed away. Not just stories, but more important, we had to say all the bad thoughts we ever had about that person, the more gruesome the better. If you hid even a flicker of hate, that might be the reason that person would haunt you. I, as a young hot wife in the Harem, shouted out all my hatred of the bitchy First Wife laying there, so still in her open grave. As the player struggled to keep a straight face at the litany of harsh words, she eased out of her character.

For us, then, this was a game, something we played. Not a story about death to make you meet your fear of The Final Stop. Not like the time I died in the 80s (*JaLL*, 2015), when the lid of the coffin snapped my world away and Hank the Janitor met the total darkness while my friend Sky—played by my daughter Tyra—cried his heart out.

### STORIES ABOUT GROWING OLD, INTO DEATH

It's not just me. In the future, we're all dead. Do we reflect this in our stories?

I know there have been old people dying in our games, of disease, of aging and natural passing. But what stories do we tell to meet the fear of our own death?

*Old & Wise* (Bosch, 2014) lets you to take a glimpse into the future that awaits us all ... being old. A larp about losing control over your bodily functions and your surroundings. In this larp you will play an elderly person living in an elderly home. While drinking coffee, talking and playing games, time slips through your fingers." That's the way this Dutch chamber larp is presented to the player. It's about the fear of losing your world, bit by bit. In the game *Dementia* (Sandquist, 2014) which takes place during a day at a home for elderly, a whole life span can take place. The game asks who we are when our memories leave us. In the game *Fallen Stars* (Nielsen, Herning and Müller et al., 2010) it is the world around us that loses its memory: As an old artifact from a flea market you will at the end of the game be forgotten.

Maybe this game showcases our biggest fear for our future: that of losing our identity. We do not fear Death in it-

self, Hell is cancelled, but we fear losing our stories.

Most of the games about getting old, sick and dying are black box larps or short scenarios. I suppose that's because we really do not want to dig too deep into that kind of emotion? Another short game about an old folks home is *Dødens gang på Avedø* (Pedersen, 2014) where death turns the pensioners into slow-moving "zombies." In my experience, we often tend to play the old characters in our games with humor and distance—or with zombies. In the future, I guess more of us will play them with deadly seriousness. Let me tell you why:

Before I started writing this essay there wasn't a single soul I knew in the nordic larp community who had died of old age. But now he is dead, the first one of us, the grand old man with the hat, Elge Larsson. Bless his memory.

He died of cancer. I think of one larp meta technique which might express my visions of this way to wither away, disappearing. The homosexual man dying in the black box tragedy "*Om sanningen skal fram*"<sup>1</sup> had to lay still at the floor surrounded by friends, nurses, family, or just meta-players. We all pushed the patient to the floor with both hands. He is sick, crying for help, doesn't want to die, can't move. One by one, slowly, slowly, ever so slowly, we release the pressure, removing our hands. When the last hand is lifted, the one on the top of his head, he dies.

The designers who wrote all the larps I have mentioned are still young, and the majority of the players were too young to feel the breath of death behind their back. I know of only a handful of active nordic larpers over the age of 60. So why write about death? Is it because it makes the stories dramatic or poetic, or do they feel, like me, that death is such a harsh part of life, so we just have to play our fears away? In the future, I, and all my larp friends, will be pensioners. Will it still work to use larp as escapism? Or will we use larp to process the reality of not living any more?

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1 Roughly translated to "If the truth have to come out."

## TO KEEP DEATH AT BAY

I guess senior larping will be the first step towards the end of my larp career. Today, larping can be about fleeing from stress of work and relationships. In the future, I will need larp more and more to forget how quickly my train is rushing towards the final stop.

As we, the pioneer organisers, grow grey (at least beneath our rainbow-coloured mohawks,) it might be harder for us to design and produce game ourselves. I pray that the younger generations will feel the duty and pleasure to organise “honorary games” for us, the old larpers. In this way you can contribute to keep my death at bay.

Can we do even more with larp than to shut out the reality of the Grim Reaper? I hope that we can make games that help us deal with the fear. My goal in life has always been to die sated. But I am afraid I’ll never reach a point where I can say that I’m ready to let go.

I tried out my thoughts about the afterlife at the larp *Limbo* (Edland, 2006), a game in which every player had died and were offered tickets to the next worlds—be it reincarnation, heaven, or the endless void. I saw this game as an opportunity to conquer my fear of being dead. Each player got to decide what the character’s moment of death had been. I decided that I’d caught my sister in bed with my boyfriend, and had shot my sister—who I loved more than anything on this earth—in the heart, my boyfriend between the legs and myself in the head. Before the game started, I had prepared to choose to pass on, but when the one and only “ticket back to life” was offered, I didn’t hesitate for a second, even if the life I would wake up to was the worst imaginable.

I think I need more training, through larp, to let go, to leave it all behind. I want to immerse myself in the act of dying, to experience my own happy, divine and sad funerals.

## LOTTERY OF DEATH

In the end, are we all children, playing out the things we are afraid of? Or are we, like the Freemasons who place each

new member in a pitch black coffin, inventing rites and rituals to get a taste of our own death and possible rebirth? Is the key to appreciating life the knowledge that it is going to end? My father was a Freemason, and his words have rung in my ears since the age of twelve: Memento Mori, remember your death.

Our intention with *JaLL* (2011) was to interrogate and explore our innate fear of death. In the meta hour between acts, we designed our techniques specifically to increase tension and make the players frightened of what might happen. Spoiler alert: If you haven't played the game, but intend on playing it, do not read the next three paragraphs.

What is more triggering than a sudden death? We wanted to keep who died unpredictable, so we added the Lottery. Everyone had to put at least one ticket in the Hat of the Angels. The more partners you had been with, the more tickets you put in the hat. Ten names were drawn, ten shivering people had to stand up and follow the angels into an unknown ritual of fear. One by one, to the sound of a funeral dirge, they passed five coffins with open lids. A funeral program was placed on each pillow. In the loving memory of... And a name. If you saw your name on the pillow, you had to lie down and wait for the funeral directors to arrive with the lids.

The last time I played *JaLL* (2015) it was my name on the pillow. I lay there, stiff with fear in my coffin, acutely aware of the rise and fall of my chest as I watched the bright summer sky above. I knew we wouldn't all die, only the ones whose lids were closed. The second it turned pitch black I refused to understand. Could it really be true? Was Hank—my character and buddy for four years—dead? Then the tears, then the peaceful silence, then the funeral procession. I felt the silence and emptiness, and I remember thinking "so this was dying? Not so bad after all." Then I heard my real life daughter's character begin to sob and the sound reminded me of my own very real fear of the end.

But lucky for me, I got to experience the enormous relief of opening my eyes on the same bright day. I got to watch the birds, the sky, the wind in the trees. Larp over, I am alive!!!

## DEAD BY LARP

I imagine that in the close future there will be larp funerals, designed by the one who is dead. Then you can be laid to rest as an Egyptian Priestess from year 2000 b.c, or like a mafia boss. Do you think this is farfetched, that death is something we should respect too much to play with? There was actually a suggestion last year of making a “funeral gathering” (gravøl) for Elge Larsson, so he could experience his own funeral before he passed. These days, people are making destination weddings with a taste of larp and fantasy. Why not go all the way? Make your funeral a larp.<sup>2</sup>

Maybe I should start now, so that I can be prepared? To ease my pain, my fear of death, come play with me on the day I die! The nurse can call my old larp friends for a pop-up-larp. I can die a Queen, or a King, in an old fashioned historical game, but most likely, when I am going to die, maybe 20-30 years from now, we would probably mix larp with AR (augmented reality). AR and other kinds of virtual reality would be awesome for old and sick people, since movement is troublesome. It will be more advanced and immersionist and 360 than nowadays tabletops, for sure.

I will give you the Last Scene: from the hospice, hours before I pass. I envision my sortie will be in retro future, playing Star Wars GO with with Eirik Fatland, Elin Nilsen and Claus Raasted (yes, I chose some old larper friends, I guess many of you know). The nurse has messaged them to gather for The Grasmo Finale.

I am of course the hero, Han Solo. With my eyes I move my character around the room, while laying motionless in bed. The nurses and doctors are set to look like storm-troopers, but they don't know they are playing with us. Two soldiers in my room now, I use my gunner to keep them at bay. They are disrupting my meaningful conversation with

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<sup>2</sup> The Danes and Americans would maybe also find opportunities to sell it to rich Arabs.

R2D2 (Claus Raasted) about how we will construct a brand new world at a distant planet, a place for year-round larping.

R2D2 makes his sweet mechanical sounds, and manages to mute the soldiers, but they are still annoyingly close, and when I shoot them down, there is continuously two new ones appearing. But here comes C3PO to rescue (played by Eirik Fatland), crashing through the glass door. I finally kick one of the soldiers out through the open door when, suddenly, a dark figure emerges: Darth Vader (Elin Nilsen), just two metres away. With one cut of his laser sword, he takes off C3PO's head. He turns to me. My head's next, my heart beats frantically. But he doesn't kill me, not yet.

Darth Vader kneels by my bed, takes his helmet off, and I recognize the player; I see Elin's compassionate eyes, filled with tears: "You will be missed, Hanne. Thank you for playing along, all these years," and the last thing I see before all play is gone forever, is Darth Vader killing Han Solo—me.

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**LET'S LARP THIS!**

—the roadtrip that spawned Knutepunkt

*written by Grethe Strand  
told by Hanne Grasmø*

and

**LARP AND I—  
Til Death Do Us Part**

*Hanne Grasmø*

“For this anniversary Knutebook, I wanted to look into the future of larp. What will it be like to larp, for my comrades and I, let’s say in twenty, thirty years? Then I realized: In the future, I am dead.”

—*Hanne Grasmø*

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# Biographies

## Editors

**Martine Svanevik** is a fiction, larp, and games writer. Her work has featured in both AAA games and indie productions, short story anthologies, Knutebooks, and other academic publications. She's been playing and making larps since 1999.

She claims to have been a good Marxist once. The only proof of this is a little known method for creating larps collectively, where each creates according to their ability and plays according to their needs.

She lives in Oslo, Norway, owns her own house, a car, and has recently pushed out a baby; despite this she remains a non-conformist and a rebel.

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**Linn Carin Stenvig Andreassen** is in her daily life a librarian, teaching information literacy. Despite her profession, she hasn't read books for joy in years, so when she's not editing books no one will read, she plays computer games, enjoys comics, and crushes people at boardgames.

Starting her larp career with classic fantasy in the early 00s, more interested in costumes than in emotions, she recently returned after an 8 year break. Once back, she found herself in love with the free-spirited soul of black box larp. Though having created no official larp of her own (yet), she has organised quite a few others to be played over the last three years, under the organiser-group Blackbox Deichman.

Living in Oslo, Norway, she is always available to talk about larp, feminism, politics and Star Wars pick up lines. Except for when she's not.

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**Simon Brind** is a soulless curmudgeon of the highest order, who hates fun. He is a PhD candidate at the Digital Cultures Research Centre, UWE, UK. He is researching moments of narrative crisis in participatory fiction. He has been playing and writing larps since 1985.

As a player, he is an immersionist with narrativist tendencies and a bleed junkie. He once played a larp with a happy ending and is still struggling to come to terms with the experience.

His best friend maintains that he best summed himself up during a phone call when he interrupted

to exclaim "I must stop and tie my shoelaces, otherwise I will fall and die."

As a writer, he believes in the primacy of player agency. He is a combat narratologist, a poet, and a madman.

He lives in London, England.

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**Elin Nilsen** is an Oslo based larp designer and larper. Her imagination works better while asleep, and she posts way too much about her dreams on Facebook. She is more interested in people and relations than in theory, and her wasted education in the history of religions resulted in her manically loving India.

In 1998, she attended her first larp, so scared that she didn't say a word for the full three days. Fortunately, she didn't give up and is now an established larp and freeform designer who also organises conferences, writes articles for books and the web, does character work for other people's larps and was one of the editors of *Larps from the Factory* (2013).

She used to be part of the travelling circus of nordic larpers, but these days she's simply too broke. Nobody knows that her middle name is Kristine. Until now.

**Grethe Sofie Bulterud Strand** is easily spotted in a crowd by her loud laugh. She prefers shorter larps in dark rooms and weekend larps in scout cabins less than a 40 minute drive from her home. Her larping adventures started in a low fantasy larp in 2003. Rituals in a cave, polyester, and a solar eclipse during the larp got her hooked.

She prefers creating larps in teams and has been fortunate enough to work on a wide range of larps dealing with everything from political negotiations, pirate adventures, cold war, the death penalty to a six year old girl's birthday party. Being a teacher at the Larpwriter Summer School for three years has taught her a lot more about the art of larping and she loves being completely owned by former students.

Silence, clean air, and a starry sky convinced her to live just outside Oslo, Norway.

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## Writers

**Muriel Algayres** is a historian, teacher and game designer from France. She's been involved in larp creation for twelve years, mostly as a front person for the French style romanesque genre, and as a creator of educational games. Her latest game as of 2016, Harem Son Saat, was the first international larp played in France. She professes a great interest for larp theory, and building bridges between cultures. She also loves singing and dancing.

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**Christopher Amherst** is a player and larpwright from Rochester, NY – by way of Massachusetts, DC, and Minnesota. His adaptation of the Russian freeform *The Prison* was presented at the Game Play 2015 festival at the Brick Theatre. He has written and organised scenarios at Intercon, Wyrddcon, Consequences (UK), Dreamation/Dexcon, and Knutepunkt.

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**Ian Andrews** is a Scots expat of indeterminate age. He has been involved with organising UK larps of various shapes and sizes since the late 1980s. He is not sorry, and he would do it again too.

He is an unashamed narrativist, a proponent of combat narratology, and is currently working on the structure of his next big larp for 2018. He runs larps, chamber games and experiences under the Carcosa Freelance banner.

He lives in Yorkshire (which he describes as “like Scotland but warmer”) with his husband Tony and two small hairless cats, Ozymandias and Nefertari.

Blog: <http://in.carcosa.co.uk/>

**Charlotte Ashby** is a writer and lecturer based in London. She has been larping since 2015 when a Norwegian friend promised her wizards and crying alone in the dark. She has not been disappointed.

**Blaz Branc** entrepreneur, sociologist with specialisation in human resources management, trainer and lecturer. He's worked with domestic and international organisations like Porsche, Hewlett-Packard, Samsung, Toshiba, KD Funds, Si.mobil, Austrian

airlines, Atlantic group, Belupo, etc.

Blaz leads a double professional life: one of marketer and one of business consultant and educator of adults. He focuses on start-up programs, innovative product development, product communication and soft skills needed to assemble and run a great team.

In recent years, Blaz has been using gamification and game design in his work as a practitioner and trainer. A few recent projects:

From inspiration to innovation, a fully gamified business conference on innovation (Ljubljana, Slovenia), recognised as an innovation by the Slovenian forum of Innovation 2014 (world's first fully gamified educational business event); *Dust over Assling city*, a stakeholder management LARP, with Ziga Novak (Ljubljana, Slovenia); *7 samurai*, a fully gamified assessment center, run as a LARP, with Ziga Novak

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**Alma Elofsson** is a Swedish larp designer, organiser and larper who has larped since 2008 and discovered Nordic game design in 2010. She is a self-taught game designer since 2009, which initially resulted in both more and less successful fantasy larps.

Today, Elofsson prefers to create serious larps, with her most recent production being *Lindängen International* (2016) together with Mimmi Lundkvist. Her productions often include focus on workshops, communication, and the meta technique “shadows.” As a complement to heavier weekend productions, she writes short, silly freeform scenarios. As a player, she loves games in historical settings and a fair game design towards all participants regardless of character.

Elofsson lives in Gothenburg and studies HR.

**Nina Runa Essendrop** is a Danish larp designer with a masters degree in theatre, dance and performance studies. She has a strong focus on movement, sensory experiences and the meaning of physical action.

Nina is an active player in the Nordic Larp community. She has designed and produced black box larps, freeform games, large scale larps and larp festivals and she has collaborated with artists in both Europe and New York.

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**Eirik Fatland** is one of the “old farts” who have influenced and been influenced by the inter-nordic larp conversation since its beginning in 1997. He is known as a designer of dark, ambitious larps with political themes (*Europa, Inside:Outside*, and *PanoptiCorp*), strongly narrative and occasionally comedic larps (*Moiras Vev, Marcellos Kjeller, What Happened at Lanzarote*), and as a theorist and educator of larp design. He is in possession of a Norwegian passport and a Master of Arts degree from the University of Art and Design Helsinki.

**Andrea Giovannucci** is an actor, writer and game designer, one of the founding members of Chaos League, and one of the authors of the Southern Way / New Italian Larp manifesto. A researcher on games and experienced player, he graduated with honours with a thesis on the history of larp in Italy and received a PhD in History with a thesis on games and society in the nineteenth century. He has written and published profusely and has held many conferences on larp. He is currently a research fellow at the University Alma Mater Studiorum of Bologna and one of the organisers of *Play Larp* (an international Larp festival in Modena, Italy). He is the author of larps such as: *New Atlantis, 1630, The Legend of Percival, Everyone has a Secret* and many more.

**Rosalind Göthberg** is a Swedish larpwright and a political science student with a solid theatre background. She annually performs and produces plays with her own theatre society. She loves mixing larp and theatre, creating aesthetic, emotional larps with a strong story to tell.

**Hanne Grasso**, (b. 1966), sociologist, pedagogue, theatre instructor, and ritual maker. Wrote *Laiv—levende rollespill* (1998, Gyldendal), founded *Knutepunkt* (1997), designed *Sosialfemokratiet* (1999), *Amerika* (2001), *Just a Little Lovin'* (2011), *Kink & Coffee* (2013), and *ArtLarpArt* (2016).

**Jepp Bergmann Hamming** (b. 1984) is a Danish sociologist, larper and scenario writer. As a sociologist, he has worked mainly with critical theory, organisational theory and statistical methodology.

He has been larping since 1998 and has organised big fantasy games, roleplaying conventions and written several larps. Over the years, Jepp has moved from the larp scene into chamber larping,

but retained the methodology of larp.

When not doing larps, Jepp works in the intersection between media, advertisement and IT as Head of Analysis and Dialogue Marketing in one of Denmark's largest advertising agencies, Nørgård Mikkelsen.

Jepp has, together with his wife Maria Bergmann Hamming, written freeform scenarios that have been played in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Lithuania, Germany, England, Czech Republic, USA, France, Italy and Belarus.

**Maria Bergmann Hamming** (b. 1978) is a Danish larper and scenario writer. She has studied religion and Danish language and is an elementary school teacher.

Maria has been larping since 1996 and has organised several larp scenarios, campaigns, conventions and written several freeform games. Maria has a background in the world of theatre and has her focus on how to make larping a dramatic experience.

She has worked with education and larping for many years. Both as a teacher at evening school for young people, teaching them how to produce both characters and gear for larping and organising larps for young people. She has also worked at a community centre using roleplaying as the primary pedagogical tool.

Maria has, together with her husband Jepp Bergmann Hamming, written freeform scenarios that have been played in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Lithuania, Germany, England, Czech Republic, USA, France, Italy and Belarus.

**Harry Harold** is a product manager and user-experience designer for Neontribe, a web development company.

He is also a larper. He plays, designs and runs live action roleplaying games. He's been involved with games by Profound Decisions for 12 years. He wrote for their game, *Empire*, helped design *Odyssey* and helped to run their game *Maelstrom*. Before that, he helped run the Viper faction for the Lorien Trust for 8 years, which involved running smaller larps for the faction under the banner of Earthworks Manchester and Stab in the Back. Way back in the day he helped run a linear system called Overkill, which ran from around 1983 to 1995.

He blogs about larp at [www.larpx.com](http://www.larpx.com)

**Jamie Harper** is a theatre director and drama researcher based in London. He is a previous winner of the JMK Directors' Award, the National Theatre Cohen Bursary, and is also a recipient of a Winston Churchill Trust Travelling Fellowship, which enabled him to research the intersection of drama and games at the University of Miami. He was a participant in the 2015 Larpwriter Summer School and the January 2016 Larpory and has designed and organised several larps including *The Lowland Clearances*, at Camden People's Theatre, London, in January 2016, *Washing Machine* at Blackbox CPH in September 2016, and *Alibi* (in collaboration with Mark Durkan) at Project Arts Centre in Dublin in December 2016. He is also currently undertaking a practice-based PhD project on the merger of games and drama at Newcastle University.

**J. Tuomas Harviainen** is a Finnish game studies, information, and business sciences researcher who occasionally still designs larps. He has contributed to the Knutepunkt books every year. He does not get to attend larps as often as he would like these days.

**Hélène Henry** is a video game producer at Ubisoft. She has also worked as an editor, author and passionate participant on tabletop roleplaying games, wargames and larps for more than 15 years. One rule to link them all: collaborative storytelling. Based on those experiences and insights, she works at casting bridges between these fields to keep exploring new ways of building, living and sharing stories.

**Mo Holkar** is a UK-based larp designer, organiser, and writer about larp. He is an editor at <https://nordiclarp.org>, and an organiser of design group The Game Kitchen and larp festival The Smoke. His recent chamber larp design and co-design credits include *It's Just a Stage*, *The Baby Club*, *The Life of Mermaids*, *Heroes*, *Real Men*, and *These Are the Days of Our Lives*.

He blogs about games at <http://blog.ukg.co.uk>

**Tadeu Rodrigues luama** is a Master in Communication and Culture by the eponymous Program at the University of Sorocaba, Brazil, with a PROSUP/CAPES scholarship. Member of the NAMI (Mediatic Narratives) Research Group, also at University of Sorocaba.

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**Simo Järvelä** is a cognitive scientist specialising in emotions and psychophysiological games research. He has also miscellaneous academic forays into neuroeconomics, meditation in virtual environments, and stress under extreme conditions. In addition to 30 years of role-playing and 20 years of larping, he has also organised larp campaigns *Neonhämärä*, *Tonnin stiflat*, and *OnnenTehdas* in recent years. In his free time, when he is not playing punk blues, he is on a mission to combine theoretical academic thinking and practical larp design.

**Kaisa Kangas** has been making larps for more than 20 years. She was one of the main organisers and fiction lead for the first run of the Palestinian Finnish larp *Halat hisar* in 2013 and the main organiser of the second run in 2016. She has also been involved in designing and running educational larps at the University of Arts Helsinki. She is an editor of the 2016 Solmubooks *Larp Politics* and *Larp Realia*. She holds a B.A. in Japanese Studies and a Ph.D. in mathematical logic.

**Maryia Karachun** is a Belarusian larp designer and organiser. She was a participant at Larpwriter Summer School (LWSS) 2013 and was a speaker and facilitator at LWSS 2015, 2016. She has also been a part of the speakers and facilitators team at Larpory since 2015. Maria is one of the organisers of Minsk Larp Festival. As her day job, she works as a university teacher in Minsk, Belarus.

**Yauheni Karachun** is a Belarusian larp designer and organiser. He has been part of a team of speakers and facilitators at Larpwriter Summer School 2015, 2016 and Larpory 2015, 2016. Yauheni is also one of the organisers of Minsk Larp Festival. Currently he is working as a university teacher in Minsk, Belarus.

**Shoshana Kessock** is a writer and game designer, co-founder of Phoenix Outlaw Productions and staff writer for the 7th Sea tabletop roleplaying line by John Wick Presents. She is the author of games like *Dangers Untold*, *SERVICE*, *Keeping The Candles Lit*, *For Here Our Sister Lies*, *The Last Ten Minutes*, *Blood on the Trail*, *No Exit*, and *Welcome To ReaperCon*, as well as contributing writer on several larp and tabletop RPG products. When she isn't writing, pub-

lishing and organising games, she writes academic papers, fiction, comics, screenplays, and a fiction podcast, and speaks publicly about inclusivity in game spaces. She hails from Jersey City, NJ.

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**Emmylou Laird** makes games and costumes. She is a director of Curious Pastimes Ltd., one of the largest live games companies in the UK, as well as working with Mandala LRP, and on several independent projects. She also loves to play as many games as possible. She is a freelance costume and props designer and maker, and runs a costume and textiles pathway of an art foundation course.

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**Mimmi Lundkvist** is a Swedish larper and game designer mostly known for the larp Lindängens Riksinternat/Lindängen International, which is a larp about bullying in a fictional Swedish boarding school. She has tried most larp genres and loves everything from fantasy war larps to abstract black box scenarios. Outside the larp scene, she works as a mathematics teacher and loves excel sheets and statistics, so when organising, the administrative parts often land on her table.

**Karete Jacobsen Meland** is currently doing her internship as a clinical psychologist in Oslo, as well as finishing her thesis on physical touch in therapy. She has been larping for the past ten years, and has slowly gotten more involved with also creating larps and organising larp festivals and conferences—and now she also works part-time with Alibier, developing and running workshops and educational larps. In 2016, she was a speaker at the Larpwriter Summer School and the Larporatory in Lithuania, giving lectures about debriefing and paralarp-design. She's really fond of the brain, talking about human emotions, and of our fear of being abandoned.

**Charles Bo Nielsen** has a BA in Sociology and works with volunteers in his job at Café Retro, using his skills from larp organising and playing larp in his everyday work. He is co-founder of *Fairweather Manor* and *College of Wizardry*, but stepped down from the team to focus on other projects and work. He loves teaching about larp and spreading the nordic larp gospel. He is an on-call-hero for Black Box Horsens, shadow general for Fastaval, technician for Blackbox CPH and always ready for new challenges. His main

focus in larp design is co-creation, which is well described in a comment from his latest larp, *Space Explorers*, stating: "We showed up for the larp, and got tricked into making a larp for him, but it was really fun."

**Carl Nordblom** is a postman by day and designer by night. He came for the historic crafts but has more or less traded his handmade iron for the will to make people cry and feel. Carl has studied Participatory Storytelling at Stockholm Academy of Dramatic Arts and worked for Lajvverkstaden with several projects.

When he doesn't larp he shares long meandering conversations on life, what it is to be human and how to imitate it.

**Mo Mo (Morgan) O'Brien** is a Canadian larper and YouTube personality. Making videos about the basics of larp, games she's both played and created, tutorials, and more, she's gained a following of over 70,000 subscribers and over 5 million views on her channel. Her YouTube adventures have taken her across the world, and landed her cameos in web series, guesting on other channels, and even featured in a popular candy commercial.

**Matt Pennington** has been running larps for twenty years—the last fourteen of them as a full time professional. He specialises in large campaign games built to allow thousands of players to play together at the event, in a sandbox environment, and designed to exploit the opportunities that those kind of massively populated events create. He lives with his partner—the patron saint of non-larping girlfriends—and a seven-year-old daughter who thinks it's normal for her dad to own five hundred orc masks. Like all live roleplaying organisers, he is constantly frustrated by having to run the game he wanted to play.

**Juhana Pettersson** is a Finnish larp and game designer. His best known larps are *Luminescence*, *Halat hisar* and *End of the Line*. He has published two roleplaying games, *Valley of Eternity* and *Tsernobyl, rakastettuni* and his first novel is *Sokerisamurai*.

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**Mike Pohjola** is a Finnish novelist, transmedia developer, game designer and entrepreneur. He has founded two media companies that together have won an International Emmy Award, two Interactive Rockies, and a Prix Europa. He has graduated as a

Master of Arts in Screenwriting from Aalto University, where his master's thesis dealt with participatory storytelling in Classical Greece. He is also the designer and author of *Age of the Tempest*—a tabletop roleplaying game aimed at kids and beginners.

Pohjola is a frequent speaker at media, fantasy, anime, and roleplaying conferences around the world including Poland, France, United States, Norway, Germany, and Italy. His topics include participation, transmedia, the roots of postmodern storytelling in prehistoric rituals, using games to change the world, and almost driving his wife insane with a birthday game that turned into a human experiment.

**Claus Raasted** (b. 1979) has a business card that says "Larp Guru" and is only moderately ashamed of it. He is best known for his work on international blockbuster larps like *College of Wizardry*, *Fair-weather Manor* and *Convention of Thorns*, but has been an active part of the nordic larp scene since the early 00's. He is one of the leaders of the larp documentation wave, and has over 20 books on larp to his name. These days, he splits his time between working on larps in Polish castles, spreading the larp-as-tourism gospel, and trying to bring larp to Abu Dhabi. He also has a past in reality TV, but these days, who hasn't?

**Olga Rudak** is a Belarusian larp designer and an active member of the local larp community. She has been part of a team of speakers at the Larpwriter Summer School since 2015. Olga is also one of the organisers of the Minsk Larp Festival. Currently, she is working at the Minsk International Film Festival and is teaching Swedish at the Swedish Center in Minsk.

**Siri Sandquist** is a larp designer and kitchen volunteer who started cooking for larger groups as a student. Her first experience organising a larp kitchen was *Lindängen* in 2013 (a larp about mob mentality, tradition and penalism in a modern-day boarding school) where she met Rosalind and it was kitchen magic at first glance. She has since then cooked food at: *Lindängen 2*, *Lindängen 3*, *Tre Kronor 2*, *Tre Kronor 3*, *Made in Hessbrand*, *Dusk of Gods*, *It's a Man's World*, *Last Will*, *Sigridsdotter 1*, *Sigridsdotter 2*, and *Beyond the Barricades*.

**John Shockley**: Decades of playing, crewing, writing and running larps have taught John that he knows

nothing; He is still as full of surprise and delight at the antics of his fellow larpers as he ever was. He has, clearly, never let that get in the way of endless pontificating about the hobby, and is known to hold forth about it at the slightest provocation. Outside of gaming, he is busy raising a new larper, writing unfinished fiction and hooning around the UK in various fast cars (although not all at the same time).

**Nastassia Sinitsyna** is a Belarusian larp organiser and larp designer. She participated in the Larpwriter Summer School in 2013 and was a facilitator in 2015 and 2016. She has also been a part of the team that organises the Minsk Larp Festival and Minsk Larp Marathon. When not organising or writing larps, she works as a teacher of English and Korean.

**Agata Świstak** is a feminist, leader, and larp organiser. By day, she works as a volunteer coordinator, facilitating blockbuster events like *College of Wizardry* and the *Larp Design Conference* at Polish castles. She focuses on building co-creative communities, where everyone can participate and learn how to make larps by doing. By night, she dresses up as Super-Dziobak and tries to spread this knowledge. She runs workshops and lectures devoted to the practical side of organising (logistics, coordination, prototyping), designs games, and strives to do as much globetrotting larping as she can.

**Ian Thomas** is a video games writer, designer and coder. He's worked in interactive television, education, puppet-making, publishing, and the games industry, where he's helped bring to life recent titles such as Frictional Games' *SOMA*, *The Bunker*, and a wide variety of others, from *LittleBigPlanet* to the LEGO games. He's written Napoleonic zombie movies, children's books about Cthulhu, interactive fiction, and card games. Most of his time is spent running Talespinners, a story-for-games company that helps games studios with narrative.

Ian started larping in 1990, was one of the founders of the long-running Cuckoo's Nest system in Glasgow, helped run a faction for the Lorien Trust, led one of the writing teams for *Profound Decisions' Empire*, and with his friends and partner has run a number of ridiculously high-production-value events under the banner of Crooked House.

**Evan Torner** (Ph.D. University of Massachusetts Amherst) is an Assistant Professor of German Studies at the University of Cincinnati. Though his

primary research focus is on East German cinema and science fiction, Torner has maintained an active presence in the role-playing game scene as a player, designer, and researcher. He co-edited *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing* with William J. White, and is currently an editor for *Analog Game Studies*. He co-founded the Golden Cobra contest, and has written numerous freeform larp scenarios.

**Lorenzo Trenti** (b. 1977) is a journalist, gamer and game author. He works in communication and media in Italy. He is one of the founders of the *Flying Circus manifesto* ([www.flyingcircus.it](http://www.flyingcircus.it)). He has written, organised and studied RPGs and larps as a form of contemporary storytelling.

**Olga Vorobyeva** is a Ph.D. student at the European University in St. Petersburg, Russia. She is one of the few academic researchers of larp in Russia as well as the co-editor of the bilingual Russian-English anthology *Nordic-Russian Larp Dialog* (2015). She was the Russian producer of the international larp project *Baltic Warriors*, and organiser of the first academic larp conference in Russia, Social Studies of Live-Action Role-Playing Games, St. Petersburg, 2016.

Olga defended her masters thesis on frame

switching in Russian larps in 2014. Her current Ph.D. work focuses on larpers' bodies and embodiment as well as their characters. Olga presents the results of her research at role-playing conventions in Russian and abroad (e.g. Knutepunkt), and writes and translates articles about larp.

**Eva Wei** is a Swedish larpwright, lawyer and lecturer. She is mostly known for her close-knitted larps about current subjects and her work for equality. When not larping, she practices historical European martial arts, plays escape rooms and has a great interest in disc jockeying.

**Monika Weißenfels** lives and works in Cologne, Germany. She looks back on 30 years on earth, of which the last 7 have been dedicated to larp in various genres, forms and communities. To her deep regret, only the last of these years have been enriched with international larp experiences. She works fiercely on catching up.

Coming from an academic background with a degree in German literature and being blessed with an ever overactive imagination, she has always been

fascinated by telling, understanding and unraveling stories. She spends her professional life online, where content and technology (and therefore structure) are inherently connected. Not so much unlike larp design, the author assumes.

She has published several articles in the German larp-magazine *LarpZeit*, co-coordinates a 100 people strong larp group, and is currently part of a team designing her first weekend larp.

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**Josefin Westborg** is a larper and designer who has larped since 2001. With a background in game design and pedagogy, Josefin is one of the founders of LarpVerkstad, a company that works with larp as a cultural form and an educational tool. When not working full time with edularp, she loves to play board games and go to larps with a high bleed potential.

**Rob Williams** is currently working towards establishing an events and larp organisation in the UK with his partner Helen Dabill. He started playing at the age of 16 and has since written and helped run several games before launching the first Broken Dreams project *Forsaken* in 2015. He currently resides in London, England between travelling all over the UK for his day job.

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# Designers' Note

Putting our bodies ahead of us, ahead of our minds, maintaining a distance,

Guarantee(d) continued relevance :  
*laid down in the medieval age with all the stops along the way*

then you said you'd break my arm

~~more like paradise lost~~  
*scales fall, fast forward, slow-mo,*

A cart drawn by two oxen is near a crane,

The infinite player lives horizontally.

Disorientation is a brick,

It is the days after the revelations.

an infinite dream.

You know that the sun is not setting.

/  
*That's so funny. The ethics don't fade they develop.*

*the house seems small and empty,*

, dog feelings,

low bandwidth, high fidelity, transclusion subverts, world building, tea garden easy to feel buy me in, sell me short!

Trying to reproduce the world. What's really unthinkable these days?

# Acknowledgements

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Twenty years of nordic larp, nordic larpers, and everyone who has cried, alone, in the dark for the sake of entertainment or enlightenment.

Thank you all!

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