The Knudepunkt 2015 Companion Book

Edited by Charles Bo Nielsen & Claus Raasted

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Editors
Charles Bo Nielsen, Claus Raasted

Editorial Assistants
Mo Holkar, Karete Jacobsen Meland

Proofreaders
Stefan Deutsch, Erlend Eidsem Hansen, Elisabeth Solbjerg Kaalund Keller, Dominika Kovacova, Elin Nilsen

Layout
Claus Raasted

Cover Image
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Foreword

"I sat there for an hour or so, immersing in my backstory, imagining how my life was before I become a Nazi Zombie. It was quite a powerful experience, even though there were no other players around. It was a bit of a Turku moment, I guess."

Dracan Dembinski

Larp is a strange beast, as the quote above from this Polish larper shows. There are people who will read those words and think "I have nothing in common with this guy." and others who will feel kinship.

And that's what this book is about. Kinship. At the heart, larp theory and analysis is about creating bridges so we can visit each others' islands of imagination.

Does this sound a bit bizarre to you? Let me explain. After all, that's what a foreword is for, right? Setting the stage.

When and where the first larps were held is a heavily debated subject. One thing is certain, though. When we started meeting each other, we started talking. And in the beginning, some of those talks were fraught with misunderstandings, because we didn't have the same frames of reference.

One of my favorite larp culture stories is about how it took the first three Knudepunkts before a couple of my Finnish and Swedish friends understood that they had vastly different ideas of how characters were created.

In the Finnish tradition of the late 90's characters were ALWAYS created by the organizers - much like today, though the "always" has become a "almost always".

In the Swedish tradition of the time, characters were often created by the players, and some characters were even re-used in different fictional worlds.

The Finns had thought it sounded crazy when the Swedes talked of larps with hundreds of players, and didn't see character creation as a major task. The Swedes didn't understand why the Finns liked the small games.

And all of this due to the fact that there wasn't any clear agreement on what a character was, how one was created or who was in charge of that process.

This was back in 1999, before there were any KP books - and almost before there was any Knudepunkt at all.

Five years later, people talking about characters could have referred to Petri Lankoski's *Character Design Fundamentals for Role-Playing Games* (2004) or maybe Ari-Pekka Lappi's *The Character Interpretation* (2004).

Both were in *Beyond Role and Play - Tools, Toys and Theory for Harnessing the Imagination*, the KP book of 2004.

If one was a bit hip and pretentious, one could refer to Holger Jacobsen's *Developing Character* from *The Book* (2001), which was published by the Norwegian KP2001 organizers.

Now fast-forward ten years and we're in 2015. If I'm discussing larp, I can casually drop references to GNS theory, talk about the virtues of bleed or shake my head at the new, fancy concept of steering (I love steering, since it gives something I've done for many years an easily explainable term).

Oh, you don't know about steering? Well, luckily for you, there are two excellent articles on just that in this book!

And while you might also be unfamiliar with GNS theory (it's a bit old school these days), I can point you to places where you can learn about it. And if you think bleed is an idiotic term, we can discuss it without having to discuss what it means first.

Many larpers feel that the Nordic community is theory-obsessed and should do more larps instead of discussing so much. I couldn't disagree more.

The fact that some people are willing to have discussions means that we can establish a common language, and that language means we can communicate with each other.

And believe me, we've come a LONG way. In my day job I work with larp professionally - mainly doing larps for non-larpers. I can't just tell some potential customers that we're going to run a mafia larp that's 360, dramatist-oriented, heavy on alibi and which uses Ars Amandi, runtime gamemastering and non-diegetic music. Inspired by *The Executive Game*.

Sure, I could say those words, but they wouldn't make sense to the people who want to hire us. But to you and me, some (if not all) of these words mean a lot.

And the reason the words mean a lot is because someone went to the trouble of using them in certain ways, and defined what was meant by them - sometimes taking thorough verbal beatings along the way for not having thought things through.

In the end, expanding not only our toolbox but also our vocabulary is an important part of growing as a hobby, art form, form of media and whatever else we call larp.

That doesn't mean you can't have fun slaying orcs in the woods. It just means that when I tell you at dinner that even orcs can bleed, you can nod knowingly instead of thinking that I'm a bit of a psycho.

Claus Raasted, January 2015

6 levels of substitution
The Behaviour Substitution Model

Lauri Lukka

Introduction

You are gliding over the parquet, in a constant battle over who's in charge. You lock eyes and tighten your grip pulling your partner just a bit closer. Your posture and precise footwork radiate confidence. Other players are holding their breath to see which one gives up the battle first. Actually, there is much more at stake: the dance is a metaphor for a duel. The game *In Fair Verona*, held in Stockholm in 2012, used dancing to simulate aggression and passion.

There are many things that cannot be acted out in a game – and for this reason the behaviours acted out by the player cannot be identical to the behaviour of their character in the game world.

Firstly, the behaviours may be illicit, unethical or dangerous to perform.

Secondly, the behaviour of the character can be simply impossible: sadly, we do not actually have superpowers or control magic.

Thirdly, the player may not have the skills or the knowledge to perform as their character.

Fourth, the player may find it difficult to act out as their character due to a significant discrepancy between the personality, traits and demeanour of the player and the character, or lacking skills or confidence as an actor.

Whatever the reason for the distinction between the actions, we strive to understand them. We have a constant, automatic tendency to seek meaning in other people's behaviour, and we attempt to attribute a cause for it. This requires us to make interpretations about each other.

In order for these interpretations to be valid, we must understand how big a difference there is between the behaviour we observe and that of the character. This article proposes a model of behaviour substitution by which the difference between the behaviours in- and outside of the game can be described hierarchically.

In other words, the model can be used to assess whether a behaviour is simulated, and in what way. The model proposes six categories whose implications are discussed. Finally, it is suggested that this model can also be applied to other genres in which there is a fictional reality.

The Behaviour Substitution Model

The Behavior Substitution Model describes to what extent the actions of the player physically resemble those their character takes. When there is a high similarity between actions, the behaviour of the player is easily and unambiguously interpreted by other people from close and afar. When the behaviours are not similar, they do not physically resemble each other, and they require prior knowledge to interpret.

The model proposes there is a continuum, divided into six categories, between the two extremes (Table 1). On one end, the actions the player and the character take are identical: there is no substitution.

On the other end, the behavior is unrecognizable, impossible to understand and interpret without prior knowledge, or there is no behavior at all.

Level	Description	An Example
No Substitution	The behaviour is nearly equal in the game world and outside of it	Fighting is real
Adaptation	The behaviour is slightly adapted, yet it clearly resembles the one intended	Fighting slowly using safe techniques
Grotesque	The behaviour is changed moderately, it requires effort to be interpreted	Fighting with grossly exaggerated movements
Symbolical	The behaviour is considerably changed, and does not resemble the original behaviour	Fighting is symbolized by dancing
Mechanical	The behaviour is replaced by agreed upon game mechanics, and acted out by the player	Fighting is resolved by a game of rock-paper-scissors or a computer game
Abstract	The behaviour is not acted out, but communicated through other means	The results of a fight are written down on a paper

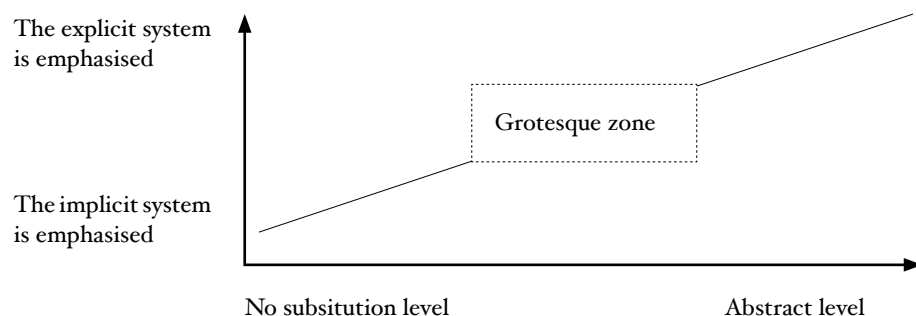Table 1: The Behaviour Substitution Model

Dual Process Theory

To understand the model proposed more thoroughly, it is analysed through dual process theory. According to this theory, we have two complementary information processing systems: an implicit and an explicit one. The first system is very fast, automatic, nonverbal and unconscious. For example, consider your friend pushes a bottle from a table at a party. You instinctively try to catch it mid-air, without any conscious thought.

Your reactions were guided by the implicit system that steered your attention to the object, and your hand to grab it. The explicit system operates in a very different way. It is slower, linked to language, logical, and often involves conscious reasoning. This type of processing happens for instance when we strive to learn something new, or try to figure out how to assemble an Ikea chair.

These two systems work constantly together. When we are writing a letter on a computer, or driving a car, we do not have to pay attention to the individual movements of our hands or feet. Rather, the movements are automatic, guided by our implicit system. At the same time, our explicit system focuses on planning the outline of the text or route.

Not surprisingly, these two systems are active also while during role-playing, and they tie closely to the proposed model: there is a correlation between the two systems. When there is no substitution, the more the implicit system can be used. The further we go toward the abstract end of the model, the more the explicit system comes in to play (Picture 1). This argument is elaborated below by each category.

Picture 1: The Behaviour Substitution Model and the Dual Process Theory

The Six Levels of Substitution

#1: No substitution

On this level, the behaviour of the player is nearly identical to that of their characters' in the game world. No substitution is required because the player is able and wants to physically, emotionally and socially act the behaviour out. Importantly, the player receives immediate, visceral feedback within themselves while acting. This strengthens the immersion: the player feels what their character is feeling.

The behaviours, however, have to occur inside the magic circle of the game. This means that the player views themselves rather as a character in a game world than outside of it. At the same time, other players understand the player has transgressed the line to the game world. This can be communicated through the tone of one's voice, clothing or the physical game space. When this distinction is clear, the behaviour itself is easily, intuitively and swiftly interpreted by the other players.

#2: Adaptation

On this level, the behaviour is slightly adapted to the situation, without compromising its communicative function to the player themselves and others. The player feels as if they are acting out behaviour, and other players often unambiguously understand what the player is doing within the reality of the game.

#3: Grotesque

The behaviour is moderately changed to suit the situation. In comparison to the levels above, the behaviour is clearly a compromise: it is acted out, but it does no longer clearly resemble the action portrayed. Therefore, it can be difficult to interpret, and in the worst cases it is unintentionally comical or embarrassing.

The behaviour may be seen as true within the game reality, yet it seems somehow out of place, unnatural, acted, or false.

The grotesqueness is exaggerated due to the discrepant information received through the two systems. The explicit system is telling the player they are doing one thing, but the information they receive through the implicit system does not support this. For instance, the player may walk but within the game they are running.

Yet, they are not sweating or out of breath. At the same time, the other players struggle to interpret the behaviour. They have to remind themselves about the previously agreed upon rules, forbidding running, to understand the behaviour. Everyone has to invest conscious effort to correct the information received and possibly suppress conflicting physical reactions. This conflict between two levels of information may break or weaken the immersion of the game. Compare this to T-1000 from the *Terminator 2*, or zombies: they are both alive and dead at the same time, a key conflict behind their unnaturalness.

#4: Symbolical substitution

On the symbolical level, the behaviour is given new meanings or it is substituted by another, similar behaviour. In the above mentioned example, tango was used to simulate interaction between two people. The relationship between the behavior and its meaning is no longer completely transparent. Observers oblivious to substitution may see the act as merely intensive dancing, while the players understand a fierce fight is occurring.

This level can be used to give the player skills they do not have or cannot employ.

Further, it can be used to simulate things blatantly impossible using the skills the player already has. The range of behaviours is no longer bound by the player's skills or the physical world. It is important the players receive sufficient practice in the substitution before the game. The more the method is practiced, the easier it is for the players to interpret in the game. Also, the substituting behavior should be something that is not often acted out in the game. For instance, if knocking on the door means casting a spell, some awkward situations may arise.

Even if one behaviour can be substituted by nearly anything, it is not irrelevant at all by which it is replaced – the choice of substitution greatly affects all the players. For example, social interaction can be simulated by a game of tennis, tug of war, or dancing. Each of these communicates differently to the player themselves and to others. Some behaviours can more easily and clearly convey emotions than others. Basically, the more you have options to move about, use your voice and gestures, the better your emotions will be conveyed.

The substitutive behaviour also crucially affects the players acting it out. The more the behavior physically resembles the original, the clearer the implicit connection is. Substituting bull-riding by dancing or pulling a rope does not give the same sort of visceral feedback. When the two behaviours are intuitively connected, they are easy to compare and interpret. Consider again the example of dancing: the tone of the dance, which person leads, and how they hold their hands, is indicative of the relationship to the viewers, the partner, and the player themselves.

The symbolical behavior can also be more allegorical, an extended metaphor. The game I love Ana used group exercises, support and writing rules to reinforce the players' dedication to the cause.

The whole game could be a metaphor in itself. A game could be about walking, a common metaphor for leading one's life. The feeling of walking would give players visceral feedback they could explicitly interpret, making the core of the game. The road would add another layer to the game: the surface, inclination, views and other travelers would be given new meanings.

To sum up, on this level the behavior is interpreted through prior knowledge. When the substituting behavior is physical, and intuitively connected to the behaviour portrayed, it can be used to convey a wide enough range of emotions.

#5: Mechanical substitution

Playing poker in the game world is not a mechanical substitution, but a case of no substitution, while playing poker to determine the winner of a gun fight would be a mechanical substitution. This sort of substitution happens clearly outside the game's reality, and requires rules and explicit explanation. As the name implies, the substitution often includes rolling dice, drawing cards, or comparing values.

This is a fast and clear way to resolve anything from brief interactions to world-changing events, but it can feel light. The substitution underscores that everything within the game world is merely agreed upon, make-believe. This may break the immersion by reminding the player about the rules, which can be a welcome break from intense action.

#6: Abstract substitution

On this level behaviour is no longer required, as it is implied by the consequences. For example, there may be a sheet of paper declaring there is a hovering sphere within the hallway.

This level can be used to introduce players to elements of mystery, or to avoid mechanical substitution. At times, the behavior cannot objectively be deduced from the signifiers, but educated guesses can be thrown around. This lets the players use their imagination and storytelling skills which can result in more vivid and elaborate description than any above. This is especially true for such hard to simulate events such as magic, gross changes in the environment, or communicating events to players not present.

Implications and Conclusions

The six levels described above are already widely used in live action role-playing games. The model can be used to describe individual occurrences of substitutions, the range and the primary level used. It can also be extended beyond games, to genres of arts where there is a fictional world. No substitution is used as a primary level in 360 degree live action role-playing games, historical enactment, and many theatre productions. Adaptation is employed by many live action games, digital music games, and theatre performances. Grotesque level is generally not used as main level, but it is often briefly and unintentionally visited. The symbolic level is used in modern dance, and jeepform or freeform games. Table-top and digital role-playing games often mostly use the mechanical level. The abstract level is used, for instance, in the description of games.

The level of substitution should be chosen based on its overall suitability for the game experience. The designer should carefully choose the techniques and levels of substitution to fit the message of the game, the theme, and the atmosphere. An ill-chosen level may break immersion, while a harmonious one can keep it up for hours. The culture affects the level of substitution. In some countries or subcultures hugging may be a convention, while in other places

it may be frowned upon. The norms of the culture shape not only which behaviours should be substituted and simulated, but also how they are substituted. The more unconventional something is, the more abstract the level of substitution should be. For instance, sex can be such a taboo in some cultures that it can only be indicated indirectly; but in other parts of the world it could be presented symbolically. The level of substitution can often become silent information: new players are unaware of the conventions of the group. Therefore, substitutions should be clearly stated, preferably written down, to assure a pleasant and safe game experience for new and old players alike.

In summary

The Behaviour Substitution Model describes the degree by which the actions of the player correspond to those their character takes within the game world. At times, the behaviour of the player and the character is identical: there is no substitution. In cases when the player is unable to act as their character due to their attributes, limitations of the physical world, or for ethical reasons, the behaviour may be substituted: simulated by something representing it. This can resemble the intended behaviour closely, symbolically or very remotely.

How the behaviour is substituted should be assessed in the light of several factors. Optimally, the behaviour should convey the intended message clearly and richly, it should be physical, and it should be intuitively comparable to the activity portrayed. The result of the behaviour is easily understood by all the participants. In the best cases, the substituted behaviour adds to the game and gives it new depth. The way that something is substituted should be explicitly stated before the game, to ensure it is understood by all the participants.

Behind the larp census
29.751 larpers can't (all) be wrong

Aaron Vanek

On January 10, 2015, 101 days after launching, the first global Larp Census closed to replies. 29,751 responses were logged from 123 different territories in 17 different languages. The data from this survey is freely available via a Creative Commons1 license[1] at LarpCensus.org.

Barring death, dismemberment, or debilitating drunkenness, the total results from each question will be revealed in a presentation at Knudepunkt 2015. This article goes under the covers to expose the motivations, methods, and madness of the squishy humans behind the hard numbers.

The Beginning

At Wyrd Con II[2] (a Southern California interactive storytelling convention) in 2011, I was out at a late dinner with some friends. Mark Mensch, a longtime boffer larper, asked me what I thought was needed to unify live action role players.

Without missing a beat, I laid out my

Three Big Ideas

1 A user-customizable larp map-calendar where people can search for any kind of larp anywhere in the world up to a year in advance.

2 A digital archival repository of larp events—what was run, by whom, when, where, using what system, and any notes or links to further documentation.

3 A larp census to track all larpers around the world.

I actually mentioned #3 first, but it's more dramatic to bury the lead.

I don't know why I said those three things, and I probably had the ideas before I said them, but that was the first time I voiced them aloud.

Regardless, the conversation turned to other matters and never went anywhere. I kept the ideas in the back of my head, however. I repeated them at a workshop session at *Solmukohta 2012*, where Claus Raasted and a few others offered help in making the map-calendar: which has since been created, roughly, by Larping.org and Larpcore.com.

In mid-February, 2013, New Zealander Ryan Paddy and I started communicating via email after he asked the Larp Academia (or International Larp Academia) mailing list for demographic statistics on larpers. He wanted to know if live action role-playing was "popular" and in which countries.

No one on the list had figures beyond their own larp group's roster or a few isolated surveys from years past, e.g., Joe Valenti of *NERO* offered a range from "fifty-thousand to two million." I again floated my census idea and Ryan took the bait. According to Elizabeth Kolbert[3] it is not unusual to find Kiwis with "a cheerful, let's-get-on-with-it manner" that she claims she "eventually came to see as very New Zealand." This is good, because without Ryan, I would still be whining about kooky concepts that nobody builds for me.

We get along well and communication between us, while spotty, has been robust. Ryan edits the English language entry on "LARP" for Wikipedia and has a background in psychology and programming, skills I lacked to get the Census done.

Both of us wanted to know the answers to basic questions about larping worldwide: how big is the community, what are its demographics, how long have people played, what are they playing, and why?

We set out to make the Larp Census a reality.

The Grind

The first choice we faced fell between using a prepared polling system, such as Google's, or develop our own. Ryan said "Google Forms can only receive a limited amount of data (400,000 answers to individual questions); we wanted more. Also, there were several things we wanted to do it that it couldn't have achieved. If it was up to the job I would have been happy to use Google Forms." Thus Ryan did the programming for the Larp Census site.

Next we looked for a website host. We hoped to deliver this baby in an academic institution, but they either didn't reply or replied in the negative, e.g., University of Tampere. We then sought other entities, leading to one of the Big Mistakes (possibly the biggest).

One of the sites I asked to host was Larping.org. They immediately agreed, as they were already considering doing a similar project, but during the negotiation process I withdrew. I worried about protecting the privacy of the respondents and the data.

A massive email list like what the census would generate is gold to larp businesses; but neither Ryan nor I wanted anyone, including us, to make any money off of it. While discussing things with Larping.org, I sent over a first draft of the questions. This boomeranged back, and badly. We cut off talks in mid-April and eventually bought the domain larpcensus.org with money out of our own pockets.

Most of Ryan's and my time was spent designing the questions, which proved surprisingly difficult. First we had to decide what we wanted to know. I felt that a self-identifying larper's location, age, gender, and how long they have been larping gave enough information.

Ryan wanted more info (much more), which I quickly agreed with. We split the census into two parts: the first page of questions asked for only the required info. Everything else was optional. Tough decisions and some generalizations had to be made for each inquiry. Plus, each question was weighed for informational necessity against the time it would take to answer it, as we wanted to avoid a too-long questionnaire.

One thing was asked of us a few times, "What is your hypothesis?" But we had no thesis going in, nothing we hoped to prove. We merely strived to gather as much data as possible and turn it over to others to see if it confirmed or refuted *their* hypotheses. My analogy is that we are farmers harvesting data. It is up to chefs—larp scholars, business folk, and independent researchers—to use what we gather and turn it into dissertations and Power Point presentations.

We sent out two iterations of the motivation questions to a few hundred larpers for comments. The first batch had over 50 questions that we edited to below 30. We also asked as many larp scholars as we could manage (herd like cats) to look over the census and provide feedback. One of the comments we received was that it appeared "too American," something we aggressively trying to avoid. We remained cognizant of the American spelling of words as well as terminology and larp style emphasis. Our goal was to be as broad as possible, to capture something about every kind of larper, straight boffer action to Nordic arthouse and all in between. But this goal, plus the fact that we were talking to larp scholars who stereotypically have a pedantic viewpoint (not anyone at Knudepunkt, of course!), led to some complaints, which I will discuss later.

[1] Creative Commons: http://creativecommons.org
[2] Wyrd Con: www.wyrdcon.com
[3] Kolbert, Elizabeth, "The Big Kill: New Zealand's crusade to rid itself of mammals," The New Yorker, Dec. 22, 2014

Remarkably, Ryan was also setting up the website at the same time. Suddenly in the middle of August 2013, we were blindsided: Larping.org released their own Larp Census[4].

The Larping.org census, in my extremely biased opinion, seemed to be heavily based on the first draft of questions we sent earlier. They used a Google poll form, required respondents' emails, and skewed it to American larpers, e.g., using the U.S. dollar as the only type of currency, and asking a lot of questions that only made sense to campaign players.

I was livid, and immediately began chewing out the new census, until Jordan Gwyther of Larping.org proved to me in a private mail conversation that I had given them permission to create their own and even promised support:

Jordan: On the census/survey, I think we should go our own directions. We'll be launching our own here shortly and will have no problem briefly promoting yours when it is ready. We hope that you will do the same for ours. :)

Aaron: Yes, of course!

D'oh!

They received just under 4,000 replies, and, according to their own admission, over 17,000 complaints[5]—I do believe that is an exaggeration, though. Two weeks after their launch, Ryan and I bought our own domain.

Ultimately, seeing the mistakes they made inspired us to tweak and revise our project and make it as good as we possibly could. We dove back into reiterating questions, testing, revising, etc. We were totally on our own, without any group or organization helping, sponsoring, or overseeing us.

Besides the very generous and dedicated handful of reviewers and translators who worked on the Larp Census, everything else was the work of Ryan and sometimes myself. If you're going to credit anyone, credit Ryan or the other names acknowledged on our FAQ page[5]. If you are going to blame anyone, blame me.

Securing translations was also partially prompted from the Larping.org census. In order to avoid making ours "too American," we introduced alternate currencies and continued that thought into offering the census in different languages. We really wanted to emphasize the global nature of larping. This was irksome because some words have different meanings in different countries. Ryan and I spent at least fifteen Skype minutes debating the definition of "park," which isn't quite the same in New Zealand as it is in America.

After weeks and weeks of iterations—although really it was days of nothing followed by bursts of work and conversation—Ryan finally decided to pull the trigger after most of the translations had arrived.

The Larp Census went live on October 1, 2014, but the big launch occurred October 2, nearly 20 months after we began. What we had wasn't flawless, but it was as good as we were going to get and still have it out in 2014. By the time translations started, the original questions in English were locked—we couldn't change a word without asking all translators to change their versions, an odious task.

Here's a secret: from the beginning I knew we were doomed to fail. There was no way we were going to get every larper on Earth to answer the census or even close to it. But we wanted to get as many as possible. I hoped for 100,000 replies; Ryan, one million.

The Run

Once we publicly announced the census, it almost went viral. Here are the numbers of responses that came in per day for the first week, which made up more than half the total[6]:

10/2/2014	5520
10/3/2014	6564
10/4/2014	1492
10/5/2014	1044
10/6/2014	1637
10/7/2014	1176
10/8/2014	828

I was smugly pleased to know that in two days we got triple the responses the other census garnered after running more than a year. Great numbers for us, but we never came close to these initial daily figures again. The server even crashed for a brief time in those first hours: but it was up and running again soon, thanks to Ryan and, probably, because we never returned to that level of activity.

We didn't have much of a marketing plan, if any. Social media such as Facebook worked best, while the ability to email your friends (once) was hardly used. Ryan and I are both old, so the new-fangled youth methods of communication are lost on us. Plus, we had no budget to do any ad buys—remember, this was just the two of us.

Some translations required minor corrections in the first two weeks, which Ryan repaired with aplomb. We accepted offers to translate the census into Danish, Swedish, Japanese, and Hebrew, though we only completed the first three.

We did give a few interviews on larp sites, and our push was always to larpers and larp groups. I sent press releases to mainstream geek sites like io9, Boing Boing, and Kotaku, but they didn't reply. If only we had associated with *College of Wizardry*.

All things considered the run went well even though we didn't get the amount of responses we hoped for.

The Lessons and Casualties

Irrespective of the data, I learned a few things just from the census existing.

First, there is no way to ever make everyone happy, ever. This should be obvious, but the point was nailed home after we received specific complaints from four people. Two said the census skewed towards boffer combat, and two said it favored theater-style.

It even prompted one newcomer to write, "I'm a little turned off to larping as a consequence of filling out this survey." By making sure every larp style was represented, we shrunk the spotlight on one person's particular larp preference, which, to them, seemed like a slight.

Second, race and racism are not the same in America as other countries. On the first page of the census we asked respondents to self-describe their race or ethnicity. I don't know how it translated out of English, but the question upset a few people. Even asking about race offended them.

On the other hand, for many Americans, to not ask the question would be seen as racially insensitive. Although it appears to be a Catch-22 situation, I hope to repair the issue in subsequent censuses with the phrasing "Please describe your racial and/or ethnic heritage. We understand this question may be offensive to some, and it is not our intention to do so. You can refuse to answer." Or something equivalent.

[4] Larping.org census: http://www.larping.org/census-2013
[5] Larp Census FAQ (English version): http://larpcensus.org/faq/en

[6] Initial week's totals provided by private email correspondence from Ryan Paddy
[7] LARP Haven (closed Facebook group): https://www.facebook.com/groups/336974479739553

Third, and more positively, the census is provoking exactly the kind of discussions and issues we hoped it would. A long thread on LARP Haven[7] spun out of Christopher Amherst's analysis of the preliminary American statistics[8]. The original poster noticed the male-female ratio in the U.S. is roughly 60% - 36% (with about 3% genderfluid or not answering) and wanted to know why more women weren't participating in larps. A boisterous conversation ensued.

Although I am aware of the dangers of relying too much on statistics, especially ones pseudo-scientifically generated, having nearly 30,000 larpers respond to the Larp Census will at least plant a few guideposts toward a deeper understanding about this art, hobby, or sport we enjoy. I am proud to know that our Census will finally provide some factual basis to confirm or refute a few Internet arguments while spawning hundreds more. This, I feel, is a Good Thing.

By the way, we're going to ask if you consider larp to be a sport, hobby, or art in the next version, coming up in about five years.

For more information and to receive the data from the Larp Census, go to LarpCensus.org or find us on Facebook.

Ludography

College of Wizardry: http://www.cowlarp.com

No one on the list had figures beyond their own larp group's roster or a few isolated surveys from years past, e.g., Joe Valenti of NERO offered a range from "fifty-thousand to two million."

[8] Amherst, Christopher Preliminary Analysis of American Larp Census data: https://plus.google.com/u/0/communities/110512238482629192270

Four Backstory Building Games You Can Play Anywhere!

Simple and effective

Peter Woodworth

One of the most difficult – but also most rewarding – parts of larp is coming up with a good character backstory. A sense of a character's past gives great insights into how to play them in the present, for one thing; not to mention, it shines some light on where you may take them in the future. For some people developing a history comes easily, but for many others it's a bit more of a chore, especially if you're new to a particular game. Or maybe it's a one-shot game and you want to develop your characters just a bit more before playing, but don't have time to write out long backstories.

Fortunately, coming up with a fun, interesting backstory (and accompanying character depth) doesn't have to mean nights of staring at a blank sheet of paper, waiting for inspiration to strike. Which is exactly where these games come in. Most of them require little or no preparation, and can be played equally well with friends or strangers.

In fact, they also make excellent "ice breaker" exercises to help players warm up, get in character, and become comfortable with each other before play begins. These games generally presuppose the presence of other players; while most can be reconfigured to be played solitary, I believe all of them are enhanced by group participation.

As far as game runners are concerned, these backstory games also make good pre-game workshop tools. They do not normally require any form of staff supervision; though if you want to cultivate particular elements, or avoid certain topics, you can offer guidelines, or even sit in and moderate play. This can be useful if you're using these as quick exercises before a single-shot game, as you can guide players to creating fairly detailed and well-realized personas very quickly with these games.

1 – The Hell of a Hat Game

What You Need: Costumes and props.

How You Play: Going around in a circle, have each player pick one of their costume or prop pieces. It doesn't have to be a flashy one they might already have stories for, like signature weapons or prominent jewelry – in fact, it's usually better if it's not. Ordinary objects like coats and boots tend to work best, because they're the pieces you might not think about otherwise, but can say very interesting things about a character's day-to-day life.

Once they pick an item, that player must talk about it. The player can say anything she likes, but here are some questions to provoke thought if they get stuck: Where did it come from? How did they get it – buy it, make it, steal it, receive it as a gift? What does it mean to them? What do they like about it? If they don't like it, why do they still keep it? If it was lost or stolen, what would they do to get it back?

If you don't have any particular costume or props – say, because you just came into a game as a walk-on at a convention and didn't prepare anything – you can still play! Simply describe what your character would be wearing, or is wearing in your imagination, as opposed to what you have on in reality. It might be a little tougher to remember all of it, but the point of the game remains the same.

Variations - Eye for Style: If you want to have a different but equally interesting kind of fun, on each player's turn have that player pick a piece from someone else's costuming and props. Tell a story about where the item came from, what that character did to get it, etc. Naturally this doesn't mean the story is automatically "true" – that's for the player in question to decide – but it can certainly reveal a lot about how the other players feel about your character!

Variation - Solo Play: If you want to play the game solitary, take a picture of the costume piece and write a short paragraph or two about it. Post the results to game forums or social media if you want feedback!

2 – The Polaroid Game

What You Need: Nothing except 2+ players.

How to Play: Going around in a circle, each player asks the others to describe a snapshot image of his character, something they imagine might have happened at some point before the character entered play or that happened during downtime. It can be a funny image, a serious image, a mysterious image; any kind of moment at all.

It doesn't have to start off being terribly specific – "I picture your character, bloody, standing over a body while a woman cries out, 'What have you done?'" is in many ways just as useful for this game as something like "I see your character, bloody, standing over Mary's body behind the Northpoint Tavern."

Once the basic image is established, go around to all other player in the group, with each player adding another detail to the picture – "You're bloody, but not wearing your armor or holding a weapon" – until it comes back around to the original player. Hence the name The Polaroid Game, because the details slowly come into focus as the picture develops. The details added don't have to be strictly visual, though, despite the name of the game.

When everyone has had a turn adding to the picture, the player being described makes a final comment and play passes to the next person. Naturally what is described isn't necessarily "true" unless the original player approves it, but it can serve as a good inspiration.

Variation - Topic: Have the person whose turn it is to be described provide a topic or moment she wants the others to imagine. "Tell me about my character's first kill," for instance, or "What did it look like when my heart got broken for the first time?" This is good for helping players who have difficulty coming up with appropriate moments for other people's characters, or for soliciting help with a particular background element with which the player is having trouble.

3 – The Card Game (Larper's Poker)

What You Need: A regular deck of playing cards.

How to Play: Deal one card at random to each player, before moving around to each player in turn. When it is their turn, players must tell a vignette from their character's past.

The kind of story being told depends on the suit of the card selected. Hearts centers on mental health or an emotional relationship of some kind (not necessarily a loving one); Diamonds refers to stories focused on wealth, equipment and other material goods (or lack thereof); Clubs requires a story about a physical challenge, battle, illness or ordeal of some kind; and Spades refers to encounters focused around interaction with setting-specific supernatural or science-fiction elements such as zombies, magic, cyberware, superpowers, monsters, etc.

If your game does not have elements of this kind, Spades becomes a "wild card" category where the player can tell any kind of story they like. You may want to at least roughly define what Spades involves before playing, if it could be unclear in your setting.

Stories should be no longer than five minutes or so, and can be much shorter – a snapshot or moment is fine, as long as it says something interesting about the character. Players are encouraged to stick close to the subject matter of their card's suit, but the categories are pretty broad, so it's OK if there's a little bit of crossover. It's about telling an interesting story, after all.

Variation - Five Card Draw: Each player draws a hand of five cards, and picks a card each round, returning it to the deck when it's played. This gives players more control over the kind of story they feel like telling each round (and time to think about what they'll be telling next), making it easier for new or nervous players.

Variation - Face Value: As normal, except that the stories reflect the values on the cards – lower numbers mean it was more of a minor incident, while higher numbers mean it was more important, and a face card means a player must talk about a particular person who came into their life (or left it) as a result of the story.

Variation - Pass Left: Players draw five cards, but on each player's turn, the person to their left passes them a card to determine what kind of story should be told. After one full round, pass right instead, shuffle seats, or otherwise change the order so that people have new partners for their cards.

Variation - Take Me to the River: Deal each player five cards and go around in a circle, with each player taking a turn. Each round, players play cards from their own hand, but the player must somehow continue the story they've been telling in the previous rounds, even if it is a different suit. So by the end of the game, they will have told one story in five installments, with elements dictated by the cards in hand.

4 – The Mixtape Game

What You Need: A mix CD or music playlist and some way to play it.

How to Play: This game requires a little more preparation than most of the others, but the end result is worth it. Each player contributes several musical tracks to the collective mix or playlist, which is then placed on shuffle (if possible, disable repeated playing of the same track). This game is a good one for long trips to a game or breaks during play, so simply adjust the number of tracks that fits the time.

Play itself is simple – start playing the music, and as each song plays, everyone listens to it and declares either "Play," "Theme," or "Pass." "Play" means that you enjoy the song, but don't necessarily feel it would be a song for your character in particular. "Theme" means that you could see that song as a theme for your character, something you'd put on a personal playlist dedicated to your character. (You can have more than one Theme, and more than one character can call Theme on the same song. It's non-competitive that way.)

"Pass" means that you're just not connecting to the song in relation to the game; it doesn't necessarily mean you think the song is bad, but you're just not feeling it in this context.

If you say "Play" or "Theme," try to add what about it that got your attention – connect it to your backstory, to your impression of your character. Does the beat remind you of the thrill of a battle in your past? Does a line in the lyrics jump out as totally true to your character? Is the tone of the song putting you in the mood for game? Did the music capture a moment in your character's history so perfectly it makes you jump up and down in your seat?

If two players pick Theme, maybe it's because they shared that moment in their past? You don't need to have to be a long, detailed anecdote, just a quick image or moment or impression that it brings up as you think of your character.

Play continues until all tracks have been played. It is perfectly acceptable to ask that a track be repeated, or to return to a track after all tracks have been heard, if players are responding to it strongly and have more stories to tell.

Variations - No Preparations: If you don't have time to put together a playlist or make a CD, or you want to put together a spontaneous session, you can still play! All you need is access to the internet on a device capable of playing music. Simply have each player look up a song online, and when it comes to their turn, they simply play it for the group on their phone or other device. Giving players a few minutes to find the song they want, making sure their device can play it and otherwise prepare is recommended before starting a round; otherwise, players may be distracted looking up songs instead of really listening on other players' turns.

Variation - The Score: Another variation is to treat the music like the score of a film or a television program, the music that is playing in the background to provide atmosphere and emotion. When each song comes on, have each player describe what their character would be doing "onscreen" while that song played, as if they were watching a movie and that was the music for the scene.

5 - Post Game

As players, you are encouraged to take some time after a game is complete to think about the material that was generated during play, perhaps even talk about it with the other players. It's important to remember that while these games are intended to stimulate backstory creation and help flesh out characters, that doesn't mean you must use it, or that you can't alter, edit, or otherwise use what's created as you see fit.

Do not feel bound to keep something as "canon" for your character just because it came up in game, even if the other players really liked it and thought it fit. Even if you wind up using none of it, and take your inspiration in a totally different direction from what came up during play, then great! As long as you have fun making stories, that's what it's all about.

Infinite Firing Squads
The evolution of *The Tribunal*

J. Tuomas Harviainen

I accidentally created a hit, and have ever since been wondering why. I have had success with several mini-larps over the years, such as *A Serpent of Ash* (2006) and *Prayers on a Porcelain Altar* (2007), both of which keep getting the occasional rerun here and there. *The Tribunal*, however, is something else. It has become a viral work that seems to evolve by itself, far beyond my grasp.

Yet, nevertheless, each iteration adds something new. The little game has achieved a Pinocchio effect of its own, and lives a life about which I only hear fragments, in the form of G+ discussions, blog posts, emails and the occasional blog post.

So what exactly happened? It was originally a contest game, part of the first LarpWriter challenge, back in 2010. A game meant for educational purposes: A group of soldiers, waiting for an unjust trial, intended to possibly spark a few key reflections about the mechanics of oppression.

Then, through a couple of convention runs, it started to spread, while still also being run in Belarus, for which it was originally designed. I had received feedback with certain changes to how the game was run being suggested, but due to the educational intent, I was loath to make the recommended changes. I experimented with a few (e.g., an extra character; post-game confessions), but did not add them to the script.

In the mean time, however, others did. As the game script spread, Tribunal was suddenly run by other people much more often than by myself. In some places, it became a tool for symbolic resistance, with characters reaching a uniform goal to do the right thing (and probably die as a result), because the players thought they could not do the same in real life.

In the United States, thanks to the simultaneous contributions of many famous role-playing activists, runs appeared, during which the characters were taken to testify and then returned to the room, with filmed, emotional interrogations, and so forth. Jason Morningstar even made a better-looking version of the game material, which I had kept as a simple text document, for localization.

So what made *The Tribunal* so popular that I have lost both count and track of its runs after #30 or so? Personally, I believe it to be a combination of factors. Part of the success obviously comes from the success itself: the reputation it has as a good larp brings in more players, as do recommendations from well-known larpers. The design structure, too, has a significant impact.

First and foremost, it is a short one-trick pony, easy to organize and play in a convention setting, or a small apartment. The topic is strong enough to (most of the time) carry the interaction and interest of the participants, and the injustice palpable enough. I nevertheless think that the key factor was my sudden idea to create a fable, to name each character after an animal and give them personalities accordingly.

That is a particularly effective way for players to not only create a strong personality from of the short amount of text, but also to remember those of others. For Finnish players, I could have said "This character is Lehto", but for everyone else - and the Finn - saying he is Wolf carries the point much better.

The topic and the character templates together create something that is neither transparent nor secret in design (see e.g., Andresen, 2012). Everyone knows that Cat will be selfish, as Rat probably will too, but no one knows how they will testify.

This produces emergent plot, in which there is no need for steering, just the freedom to talk and to act (see Harviainen, 2012). The same way, game masters do not have to intervene in any way, unless they want to run interrogations during the game.

No scene breaks, no inner monologues - it could be run on a stage as an improvisational theatre piece, with very little instructions needed (and actually has). It has its flaws, I know, which are especially visible if certain roles are played in a passive manner. Strangely, when they occasionally manifest, those flaws seem to inspire people to improve on the work, rather than abandon it,

Finally, I think *The Tribunal* evolves because I did not follow my own advice on writing repeatable larps (Harviainen, 2009): I left the running instructions vague - and thus flexible. So people inspired by the libretto are inspired to experiment with it, rather than to run it by the book. Lucky for me, they are also willing to share the results of those experiments. *Tribunal*, like any healthy child, may have been influenced by its parent, but it is obvious that it has matured into something with a unique life of its own.

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The Tribunal and other free games by the author can be downloaded from http://leavingmundania.com/2014/08/17/j-tuomas-harviainen-larp-collection/

Ingame or offgame?
Towards a typology of frame switching between
in-character and out-of-character

Olga Vorobyeva

For the Moscow and St. Petersburg larp communities, continuous immersion into the game and into the character seems to be the central point of the larp process. Larp rules proclaim continuity of game, and players generally disapprove one's going out of the character while playing. This attitude is, however, more declarative than a reflection of the practice as it can be observed: larpers, even the most experienced, of course, do drop out of character.

I got interested in how people perceive themselves and their co-players dropping out of characters, and have studied this topic for my MA thesis. I have collected a database of 600 cases of frame switching at larp using systematic self-observation and analyzed them from the point of view of Goffman's frame analysis.

The database collected with the help of 15 players has data from 13 larp in which I took part and from some other larp events. I proposed a classification of triggers that cause dropping out of character that reveals some features of this phenomenon. In this paper, I won't dwell on the triggers themselves, but will concentrate on the ways in which larpers switch from in-game to out-of-game frame.

In what follows, a classification of switching types is presented.

The first division is based on the social expression of frame switching: we distinguish between those which are externally expressed and thus become part of social interaction, and those which take place in a participant's mind and get no expression.
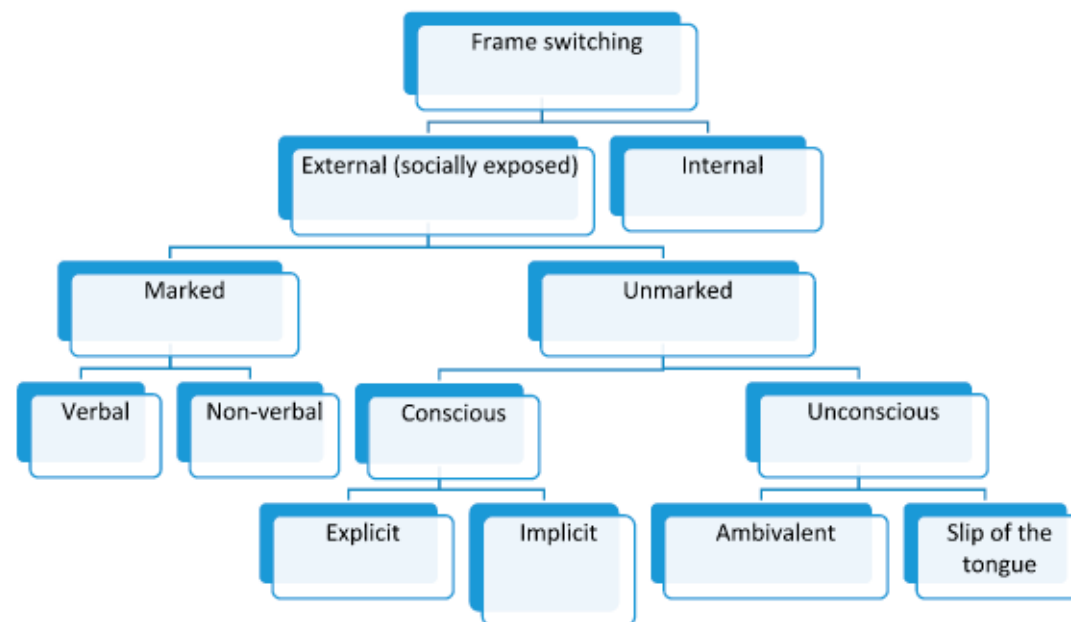
When considered as phenomena of individual consciousness, all frame switchings are first of all "internal" in a sense, like diegesis is a fact of the players' consciousness (Montola 2012).

Meanwhile, the game world is a result of mutually agreed behaviors of the participants. Its creation and maintenance involves coordinated activities, some of which belonging not to the game itself but to its meta-level, and so require frame switching.

Here is an example[1] of *internal switching* that is essentially an inner experience that disturbs immersion and indirectly influences the participant's behavior.

"The First Age": *Sure, there are a lot of reasons why immersion is difficult to reach: for example, playing with close friends makes me think, like, "Oh, it's just my friend Peter wearing a garb!" So I try to avoid playing with them, but it is not always possible.*

External switchings fall into two broad categories: those which comprise a signal to mark frame change and those which are unmarked.

Both types occur systematically, but the latter are usually perceived negatively, whereas the former are regarded more acceptable.

Two kinds of markers are employed to index a frame change, verbal and non-verbal. The Russian *verbal marker* resembles the Western practice of *safewords*: the utterance of a conventional word immediately turns ongoing interaction into out-of-game mode (Brenne 2005).

A safeword is a control device that is used to maintain participants' psychophysiological conditions to inform partners about the sender's current troubles having to do with the everyday world.

In the Russian community, in order to pause the game, either local equivalents of "break" and "cut" are used (literally "out of the game", "in the real world") or real life names of participants or their nicknames are employed for address instead of their characters' names.

The verbal markers appear in case of meta-game disputes, in occasional conversation about events in participants' real life or bodily states, or when asking for pause or help.

It is often uncertainty about partner's physical condition that makes a player turn to out-of-game question, cf.:

"There is a craft": *Somebody noticed blood (real) on my eye: What happened to your eye? Oh, it's a memento about my fail in a combat with a strong monster! It won't heal until I find him again and kill him. Are you serious? (Whispering) And out of play? (Smiling) Everything's OK.*

Non-verbal markers include frame switching signals of various kinds, such as:

Tactile contact: to approach closely, to hug, to take a partner's hand, to take aside. This kind of switching markers are used when the rules of the game world ban these proximating behaviors.

It should be kept in mind that, as far as I can judge from my participant observation at Knutepunkt 2014, Russian larps generally involve less physical contact than the Nordic ones.

Since most Russian larp game worlds represent a variation of hierarchic society with interpersonal etiquette differing from the way people communicate in everyday life, demonstrations of egalitarian and friendly relationship can signal frame switchings.

[1] Examples from my database contain references to game titles marked with bold italic.

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Conventional gestures: hands crossed over the head represent the character's absence from the game world; a gesture like a time-out signal used in sports like basketball and American football is performed to accompany an out-of-character utterance.

Facial expression: winking, "hinting" face, expressive gaze.

Non-verbal characteristics of utterances: lowering the pitch, whispering, prosodic emphasis to index an implicit meaning. Utterances like these often pretend to camouflage the reference to out-of-game things, so as not to break explicitly the magic circle of the game, cf:

Deathly hallows: *Towards the end of the game, during an in-game conversation S. (male) approaches closely to me and asks me while lowering his voice if he can interrupt my playing. I agree. S. asks me to speak to M. (female) who is playing his sister, because she needs a relaxing talk, and his own talk to her has obviously not been enough.*

I call M.'s character, take her hand (my character used to avoid any bodily contact), take her nearer to me, bow to her ear and address to her with her real life name. I ask her whether she wants to speak out-of-game. She agrees eagerly, we enter an empty room together, she expresses her negative emotions connected with playing and participants' behavior. We leave the room and continue playing when we hear noise outside.

In this example, the frame switches are expressed with a range of signals: approaching closer than regular social distance, that is, entering intimate distance, lowering the voice (opposed to what is required for characters' interaction in the game-world), touching, and verbal means (out-of-game name and expression "out of game").

Along with cases where frame switch is explicitly announced, there are some in which the player's speech is recognized by co-players as such, but it is merged with the character's speech without specially marked borders.

Conscious unmarked switchings

Explicit out-of-game utterance is a prototypical case of unmarked and unmasked frame swithing. It usually interrupts diegesis in a rather rude way making participants have to cope with an inappropriate element.

In the following example speaker A unexpectedly shifts from the character's speech to the player's one, mentioning meta-game problems and the game master's nickname that confuses the partner:

"France: the Cold Summer of 1939": *An in-game conversation in a pub:*

A: I am looking for my wife. And I'd like to find Bird.
B: What bird?...
A: Well, Bird, our game master. New players have arrived and are waiting for the check-in.

Implicit switching is an action (utterance, gesture) with a hidden agenda; it looks adequate from the diegetic point of view but contains out-of-game information that is expected to be deduced by recipients. This kind of frame switch is appreciated within the community because it doesn't break the game world and at the same time also adds to playing some extra pleasure to guess the riddle.

Implicit switchings are mostly used for the maintenance of game illusion in case of some slight metagame problems. Here is an example of such case where the problem consists in mistaking an NPC for a player:

"The last submarine": *As usual, something exploded, something is out of order, a service technician is needed. One player looks at a passing NPC and mistakes him for a technician: "We need help in the armory!" I don't want to bother: "No, this technician is not trained enough for that, trust me!" NPC nods and passes by.*

In the following example we can see three modes of referring to out of the game information, one after another:

"To kill a dragon": *We are working in a hospital. We use beakers with special liquids provided by game masters. We should return the beakers to the organizers for refilling. I collect empty beakers and tell to my colleagues:*

(1) I: I'll bring them to the medical depot.
(2) Partner: Where?.. But if they must be brought to orga...
(3) I (Winking, interrupting on purpose): Listen to me: I'll bring them to the medical depot.

In (1), the speaker employs implicit switching: she talks about the medical depot, but actually announces that she is about to go to meet the organizers. This information is to be deduced by her co-player. This is a case of implicit conscious unmarked switch.

In (2), her co-player makes a meta-game statement with no signaling of its out-of-game mode. This is a case of explicit conscious unmarked switch.

In (3), the initial speaker makes an attempt to repair game-world communication, recurring to interruption and to signaling the utterance pragmatics by means of non-verbal sign (wink) and intonation. This is a case of marked switch with non-verbal signaling.

Implicit switching can and often does imply a joke. Obviously, there is a lot of in-game humor in larp, but some of it is based on a second meaning of in-game phrases that thus turn out to refer both to in- and out-of-game things. Such switchings are performed for fun and also contribute to constructing a group identity.

The humor can be built on a common background of young Russians and thus contain allusions to popular movies, songs, or references to historical, current political and social events, or to internet-memes. It can also be a common memory of a group of real life friends, participants of a long larp campaign who have played together many times, or even just a group of those who had taken part in certain episode of a previous larp. Coming to the joke's point is a manifestation of a common identity, cf:

"There is a craft": *Walls in the Main Hall are covered with inscriptions. One of them says: "Even a rat casts charms better than you!"*

Rat is the nickname of the participant who plays the Charms teacher. This is insider knowledge of this particular larp community.

Unconscious unmarked switchings

These are cases when someone makes her co-players drop out of the game frame unwittingly and notices the fact of the switching only from the co-players' reaction.

Ambivalent utterance is not intended by the speaker to have double meaning, but while the speaker has told something in-game, her co-player perceives it as out-of-the-game discourse. The speaker keeps in the game world until she catches the fact that co-player has switched into out-of-game mode.

At first sight an ambivalent phrase looks like an implicit frame switching, but the crucial difference is that here implicit meaning is in the eye of the beholder, it has not been implied intentionally by the speaker.

The frame switch that the speaker has noticed in her co-player's behavior becomes a surprise.

Cues that typically bring about such ambivalence include any statement that can be perceived in both in-game and out-of-game frames, terms that occasionally coincide with concepts from other game worlds and settings, or with participants' names and nicknames that belong to other characters.

In the example below, the first utterance is a case of an ambivalent saying that is perceived as potentially ambiguous, while the joking answer is a case of explicit conscious unmarked frame switch.

*"Western: Deadlands": - I have a headache!
- Do you need opium or painkiller?*

Slip of the tongue is an inadvertent use of a word that is inappropriate to this particular game-world, best exemplified by speech patterns like fillers or swearings that that are ill-suited to the game world, or out-of-game names of co-players or other customary patterns of daily speech.

This kind differs from the previous one in that ambivalent utterance is used by the speaker is an appropriate fact of game world from the speaker's side, and slip of the tongue is ill-suited from any point of view, but is hard to prevent.

An altered state of consciousness may also contribute to slip of the tongue that switch frames: players not fully awaken, under influence, or physically exhausted can easily loose control over their discourse (see below an example: the sender does not even notice his slip until his co-players attract his attention to the case).

"There is a craft": *At night we discuss fighting drills. B. complains how difficult it is to remember the exercises and suddenly says: "When I drive my car, I am sometimes so tired that I stop understanding what is going on…" We gaze at him in horror, but he does not notice our facial expression and goes on. I have to intervene: "What are you saying?" He slaps his forehead and complains in-game that he has lost his line because he is exhausted.*

Conclusion

Our classification of data from the database allowed us to single out relevant features of cases of dropping out of game-world in social interaction. These are: external expression or its absence, presence or absence of signalling, intentional or non-intentional character of switching, explicit or implicit type of reference to out-of-game world, initial perception of switching by the speaker and/or by her co-player, use of speech cliches.

In case of an intentional switch from the game to out-of-the-game frame, a player drops out of character because of some inner or outer reason (need, willing to distract, inappropriate conditions etc.) and makes the switching perceivable to the partners (e.g., in order to receive help, to express displeasure, to maintain group identity, etc.).

In case of unintentional frame switching (ambivalent phrase and slip of the tongue), the author is a "victim" of the effect that her own words produce in her co-players.

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Learning by playing
Larp as a teaching metod

Myriel Balzer & Julia Kurz

"Tell me, and I will forget.
Show me and I may remember.
Involve me, and I will understand."

<div align="right">

Confucius

</div>

The next generation of teachers will be expected to possess a broad spectrum of competencies and skills. They are faced with a seemingly impossible task: today, classroom instruction should teach not only content but also competence. It should be as interdisciplinary as possible and it should take the heterogeneity of students into account. In addition to hard skills, classroom instruction should also teach soft skills. It should encourage and include the use of the learning material in a variety of situations that students will face in the real world. At the same time it should also be problem-oriented, varied and interesting, and sustainable. And of course, it should motivate students to learn!

While it seems as though new teachers are being asked to square the circle, the Danish boarding school Østerskov Efterskole and others like it have demonstrated that this challenge can be met and mastered[1].

How? With *Edularp*.

But just what *is* Edularp?

Edularp

Edularp[2] is live-action roleplaying used to impart pre-determined pedagogical or didactic content.

Why is Edularp ffective? Why do children, high school students, college students, and seminar participants learn better, faster, more sustainably and more easily with Edularp?

Edularp as Game

"The chief art is to make everything that children have to do, sport and play too."

<div align="right">

John Locke

</div>

Firstly, Edularp is always a game. And games are usually fun[3]. Those who have fun learn more easily[4], are more motivated[5], and are more likely to tackle larger challenges without reticence[6]. Additionally, players participating in an Edularp — like players of games in general — often forget that they are actually doing something sensible. For them, fun — often fun as part of a group — is in the foreground[7].

Secondly, in games in general and in Edularps in particular, a kind of secondary reality[8] takes hold. It is a special reality that not only lifts the players out of their complex and often trivial or boring everyday existences for a brief time, but that also delivers them into a new world that is often exciting, epic and comprehensible in ways that the real word is not. While "normal" classroom instruction is often dry, Edularp is usually the highlight of the day. This provides enormous motivation to players[9]. It is simply far more exciting to investigate a murder mystery than to listen to a lecture about chemistry, English or mathematics.

Furthermore, when we play, we are only acting "as if" something were the case. We, and the other players, are only pretending. This results in a kind of sanction-free experimental zone, a safe framework in which we can try out new ways of thinking or behaving, reasoning or feeling — without fear of negative consequences[10]. After all, it is "only" a game.

This is especially true of role-playing games in which we act "as if" we were knights, elves or orcs. But even in games in which we do not slip into obvious game roles, as is the case in alternate reality games (ARGs), we nevertheless do adopt a role in the sense that we act "as if" something were "real" even though we know that it is not.

It could be a bomb from which we recoil in panic and then attempt to defuse with all the seriousness of someone facing a real explosive device. Or it could be a person who we treat with respect because they present themselves as a police officer, even though we know that they are really just an NPC (a non-player character — the game equivalent of an extra in a film).

Participants in games are often less likely to be discouraged by setbacks; indeed, after "failing" they often return to the challenge with even more motivation than before[11].

Edularp: Learning by Doing

"For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them."

<div align="right">

Aristotle

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Furthermore, Edularp is what we refer to as an action-oriented method[12]. That means that participants learn not through flat theories or lecturing from the blackboard but rather that they truly become active in the lesson or subject matter by trying it out themselves, through their own actions. Edularp is, in the truest sense of the word, learning by doing[13].

That means that the participants learn with all their senses. When they viscerally experience the content, when they physically exert themselves, when they smell the appropriate smells and see the appropriate visuals, their entire bodies act as sounding boards both for the experience itself and for their reflections on what they have experienced and learned[14].

————
[1] Cf. Hyltoft, Malik, 2008.
[2] The term Edularp stands for "educational live action role-playing game".
[3] Henriksen (2008) argues for the contrary opinion, according to which learning games neither must nor should be fun.
[4] Cf. Corbeil, 1999, pp. 173.
[5] Cf. Hyltoft, M., 2010, pp. 48.
[6] *Suits* (2005) has even made the overcoming of unnecessary obstacles the core of his definition of games: "Playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles."
[7] Baer, U., 1982.
[8] Authors from different fields have described this alternative reality in a number of different ways, but often mean the same thing or at least a similar thing: the "situation of the second degree" in Brougère, G., 1999, the "frame" in Goffman, E., 1977, pp. 52, the "surplus reality" in Moreno, 1965 or the "magic circle of gameplay" in Huizinga, 1938/1939.
[9] Cf. McGonigal, J., 2012, pp. 119ff.
[10] Cf. van Ameln, F. and Kramer, Josef, 2007, pp. 397; Hyltoft, M., 2010, pp. 45ff; Vester, 1978, pp. 184.
[11] McGonigal, J., 2012, pp. 64ff.
[12] Cf. Balzer, 2009, pp.13.
[13] The expression "learning by doing" comes to us not, as is often claimed, from John Dewey, but rather from the English translation of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, 1985, p. 27f.
[14] Cf. van Ameln, F., Kramer, J., 2007, pp. 393.

With Edularp it is possible to present topics that are typically dry or theoretical in ways that make them accessible to sensible experience or allow them to be expressed in symbolic ways[15]. If, for example, one is on a spaceship and the navigation computer suddenly malfunctions, so that the only way to plot a new course is to solve a differential equation; or if one has to infiltrate and analyze a new cult in order to prevent them from carrying out a terrorist attack; or if one is maltreated by inhumane prison guards[16]; what might have been abstract content is instead placed in a concrete, practical context and takes on tangible relevance.

Thus, participants in an Edularp learn not only with their heads but with their guts, with their emotions, senses, *and* intellects. It is by simultaneously addressing the cognitive and the emotional faculties that the learning content becomes truly relevant and emotionally meaningful to the learner. This means that they can learn more easily and, above all, with greater retention[17].

Edularp in Practice

For several years Edularp has been used professionally around the world to successfully achieve diverse goals in a variety of contexts[18]. But how do those individuals who teach with games in general and with larps in particular obtain their competency?

Until now most "knights of education" have been pedagogues, teachers, trainers, social workers, caretakers, therapists and psychologists who typically stumbled upon the larp hobby in their private lives and who independently recognized the huge didactic and pedagogical potential of live-action role-playing[19] — even in its hobby variant.

They were often pioneers in their fields and had to expend enormous effort to be able to offer their students, patients or participants active learning — live, dynamic and in color.
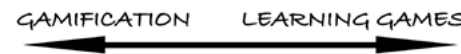
Nearly 35 years after the first known larp[20] we found the time ripe for making it easier for young, interested teaching students to utilize the method. To that end we developed a teaching seminar for the University of Siegen Department of Education.

The goal was not just to inform teaching students about the theoretical advantages of live action role-playing in general and Edularp in particular — in the practical seminar we explicitly concerned ourselves with putting the students in a position to develop and run their own Edularps[21]

Gamification vs. Edularp

In addition to presenting the subject in as practical a manner as possible, our goal was to prepare our students to implement playful learning in real classroom situations in their later careers. Thus our goal was that our students would leave the seminar equipped not only with the theoretical and practical skills to take their children on a two-week "class trip" to Middle Earth, but that they would also be able to employ individual elements of gameplay in their teaching in whatever measure they might find effective and appropriate. That is, that they would be able to use the whole Edularp method as well as smaller elements of games and gameplay.

For this reason we began with an overview of the full breadth of the topic of playful learning, which ranges from *learning games* (including Edularp) on one end to *gamification* on the other.

GAMIFICATION ⟷ LEARNING GAMES

While participants in learning games are normally aware of the fact that they are playing a game[22] and thus entering into a kind of alternative reality, this is not the case with gamification. Rather, gamification simply attaches individual elements of games — like badges or a ranking list — to normal reality[23], or uses game design techniques to modify everyday processes and procedures[24].

The user of a gamified process does not enter into another reality or game world but rather remains fully and completely in the real world. This means that a gamified process is not a game! The goal of gamification is to make everyday processes more interesting, motivating and seemingly more rewarding. A prominent example of gamification is the app *Foursquare*, in which users can share their current locations (a restaurant, an event, etc.) with friends and in so doing be rewarded with badges. Another non-digital example from a time before the term gamification was coined is collecting frequent flyer miles, which American Airlines introduced in the early 1980s[25].

There are also several very successful role models for the use of gamification in the classroom, like the Canadian project *World of Classcraft*[26], which gamifies individual school subjects; or the *Quest to Learn* school in New York City[27], which is run according to a fully gamified teaching plan. The didactic method that we taught to our students in the teaching seminar was explicitly intended to prepare them to utilize the entire spectrum between gamification and comprehensive learning games. Thus, the didactic methods we teach enable our students to not only conduct fully-realized Edularps, but to also include individual quests[28] in their normal teaching, as well as to "gamify" their normal lessons.

[15] Cf. van Ameln, F., Kramer, J., 2007, pp. 392.

[16] The first example (spaceship) is taken from a game from Østerskov Efterskole, the second example (cult) is taken from a game designed by the authors, while the third example comes from "Prisoner for One Day", cf. Aarebrot, E. et al., 2012, pp. 24–29.

[17] Cf. van Ameln, F., Kramer, J., 2007, pp. 395.

[18] Cf. e.g.: http://seekersunlimited.com, http://rollespilsfabrikken.dk, http://osterskov.dk, http://www.waldritter.de or Aarebrot, E., et al., 2012.

[19] Cf. Balzer, 2009.

[20] As the history of larp is often contentious I would like to refer the reader to the English-language Wikipedia article on the topic, which is actively and internationally edited: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/larp

[21] With our draft seminar we were able to obtain a teaching commission from the University of Siegen. After submitting the written application and presenting the concept to the Department of Education a commission selected our proposed seminar for the didactic module in its 2013/2014 winter semester course offerings.

[22] The so-called alternate reality games (ARGs) represent prominent exceptions: players do not necessarily always know if they are really playing a game. Cf. Gosney, J., 2005

[23] Deterding, 2011.

[24] Cf. Werbach, Kevin, https://class.coursera.org/gamification-002/lecture/22.

[25] The customer collects so-called frequent flyer miles with each flight and, if and when they have collected enough, they can then exchange them for prizes, discounts or access to airport lounges. Microsoft's Rob Smith, who gamified the software testing process for Windows 7, provides another example. He managed to transform the normally very difficult and trying process of finding and notifying translation errors in the dialogue boxes into a fun experience for a total of 4,500 voluntary participants among his coworkers. Cf. http://gamification-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Smith.pdf.

[26] For more information see: http://www.classcraft.com/en/#intro.

[27] For more information see: http://q2l.org.

[28] The term "quest" originates in the classical hero's journey (cf. Campbell, 1999), but in contemporary usage in fantasy literature and computer games it means a task or a puzzle.

Our thinking is that by integrating individual game elements in their lessons they can gain experience teaching with games in school and then, bit by bit, take on larger projects.

Playful Learning: Learning in Games | A Practical Seminar

In order to teach the students in our seminar not only the necessary practical competencies for developing and conducting Edularps but also the necessary theoretical knowledge, the seminar was divided into four phases:

1 Theoretical and practical introduction
2 Development of the students' own Edularp
3 Playing the Edularp
4 Reflection phase

The individual phases were divided into a total of ten sessions lasting an average of four hours each. The theoretical and especially the practical presentation of the content was important, but it was also important to impart to the students the knowledge and competencies necessary for successfully developing and realizing projects, like project planning and project management, efficient and sustainable communication within a project, etc.

Another consideration was that the students should work independently after the introductory phase, but that they should not be left to face the structuring of the process on their own.

Phase 1: Theoretical and Practical Introduction

The first phase of the seminar consisted of three sessions. In the first session we introduced the theoretical concept of games, larps, Edularps and alternate reality games (ARGs), as well as the didactic potential of Edularps. Our seminar participants were mostly new to larps, and so we introduced them to the topic by presenting successful examples of Edularps and gamification[29].

In order to impart to our students on a practical level what Edularps are and how it feels to take part in one, in the second session we enacted the four-hour interdisciplinary Edularp "Der Kreuz des Wotans" (Cross of Odin)[30] so that they would participate in one themselves.

For the third session the participants prepared an elevator pitch[31] as a homework assignment. Their task in preparation for the session was to think of a gripping story idea for an Edularp and to sketch out a learning quest and the intended learning content. They then had five minutes each to present their ideas at the start of the session as concisely and compellingly as possible, with the intent of persuading the others of the value of their own story ideas.

The goal of this introduction was that the students would be able to begin the development phase with a pool of ideas, rather than have to be creative "on demand" at the start of the practical phase. Building on the pitches, we then discussed what makes a good story, what elements a good game requires, and how a good learning quest should look.

In the second half of the session we presented the core of the seminar, the so-called game organization document (GOD), with which the students would have to develop and conduct their own Edularp in the subsequent practical phase. (A current version of the GOD can be downloaded from www.phoenixgamedesign.de free of charge.)

Phase 2 and 3: Development and Implementation of the Edularp

Since most of our students had no experience with larps or Edularps, it was important for us to give them a guide for their independent work. It was intended to guide them through the various phases of development, provide them with a concrete timeframe and schedule, and help them as much as possible to avoid overlooking any relevant steps or decisions. The game organization document (GOD) arose from these concerns.

The GOD is a form that asks the game developers to specify and explain all the key criteria for the game. In the course of defining and explaining the parameters specified in the generalized GOD, a specific game design document (GDD) for the Edularp under development begins to take shape bit by bit.

The game organization document is divided into seven categories:

1 Constraints
2 Project planning
3 Learning content
4 Storytelling
5 External setup
6 Game design
7 Documents, materials, props, resources

Category 1: Constraints

The category *Constraints* includes all the requirements that the game absolutely must fulfill and that have already been specified or must be specified before the start of development. They may include conditions specified by third parties as well as requirements set by the developers themselves. They include things like the number as well as type(s) of participants (age, degree of fitness, etc.) and also factors like the resources that are available (e.g. budget or team strength) and the planned development time.

Category 2: Project Planning

The category *Project Planning* covers the composition of the team and the division of labor as well as the schedule, the communication pipelines[32], and plans for documentation and data management.

Category 3: Learning Content

In the category *Learning Content* the developers are asked to define concretely the learning content that is to be conveyed by the game. This is also where the type of learning content (soft skills, hard skills, competences, experience, etc.) is specified. Our teaching students were also required to refer to the school curricula they were using in specific parts of the game.

Category 4: Storytelling

The category *Storytelling* includes all the elements that deal with the game's story. This is where the developers formulate the plot. Its development and progress are delineated on a timeline. This is also where they define the setting, genre and topic of the game and specify the staging and dramaturgical elements.

[29] We selected Østerskov Efterskole's Harry Potter game (cf.: Hyltoft, M. and Holm, J.T., 2009) as an example of a successful Edularp. As an exceptional example of gamification we chose the *Quest to Learn* school (cf. http://q2l.org). As an example of experience-based learning in a larp we selected "Prisoner for a Day" (cf. Aarebrot, E. and Nielsen, M., 2012).

[30] In the Edularp *Der Kreuz des Wotans* players must foil a cult's plans for a terrorist bombing. The Edularp was written by Myriel Balzer, Julia Kurz and Tinke Albach.

[31] An elevator pitch is a very brief and pointed presentation of a project intended to persuade the listener to support it. The name comes from the fact that in an elevator one only has the duration of the ride to win the other party over.

[32] Communication pipelines are the ways in which the various members of a team should communicate with each other.

Category 5: External Setup

In the category *External Setup* the developers are charged with determining all the elements of the game that are not immediate components of the actual game. That means all the elements that take place before the beginning or after the end of the actual game, like pre-workshops, warm-ups, debriefings, the transfer of learning content, the evaluation of the game, and/or pervasive elements[33]. Not every Edularp requires all the elements listed under this category. But it makes sense to consider all the elements and whether or not one's own game requires them.

Category 6: Game Design

The category *Game Design* contains the template for the core of the future game design document. This is where the developers describe and visualize the construction of the game and its degree of linearity. This is where they define the victory conditions and determine whether the game can be won cooperatively or competitively.

They define possible game rules — both regulative rules and constitutive rules, as well as possible rules of irrelevance[34]. They formulate the call to action as well as the intended player motivation, and define points of interest[35]. They determine whether the players take on roles during the game, and who writes them; and they define the game world. In this category the developers explicitly define all the quests that occur in the game, describing their construction, learning goal(s), style, necessary additional knowledge, etc.

Category 7: Documents, Materials, Props, Resources

The final category *Documents, Materials, Props, Resources* determines what items are required for the game. All the texts that the players will have access to before, during or after the game, as well as those required for dealing with players, NPCs and gamemasters (such as in-game contacts or NPC briefings) are also attached here.

This explicit querying of all the important points of the Edularp successfully prevents inexperienced students from overlooking one or more points or failing to give them enough attention. In this seminar we also used the GOD to provide the students with a structured time frame. Thus each of the seven categories had its own deadline, specifying when each unit had to be presented to the instructors in its most-finished version. We thus made it impossible for the students to procrastinate and then attempt to get everything done at the last moment[36].

While relying on the GOD and the deadlines, the students developed their own Edularp as independently as possible over the course of the following five sessions. We were present during the work sessions and instructed the students that they should create a goal-oriented agenda for each session and ensure that they followed it. Upon completion of each point on the agenda, the students briefly presented their results and we gave them feedback. We also intervened in discussions or development processes here and there when they were in danger of heading in the wrong direction, and we were always available for questions. At the end of the practical phase we played through the Edularp with the students step by step a couple of times (on a theoretical level, without the full staging, etc.), checked it together for logic and consistency, and developed answers for worst-case scenarios.

An Edularp of Their Own

The students' Edularp was played on the penultimate session and lasted almost exactly four hours. Our students took on all the relevant duties themselves, with the exception of one NPC role. Two of our students served as gamemasters and four others played NPC roles. They also arranged for a student from the university to play an additional NPC and for six others to take part as players; our students organized their participation independently.

In general the process of conducting their first independently designed Edularp was surprisingly smooth and went impressively according to plan. Their tightly-planned schedule functioned very well, and the players managed to work through the entire plot by approx. 5:30 pm (the plan called for it to finish between 5:20 and 5:45 pm). We only intervened once, at the request of both gamemasters, and guided their players back to the right path with a spontaneous NPC improvisation.

Otherwise we simply observed the entire run-through — while making ourselves available for consultation in case of uncertainty on the part of the gamemasters and NPCs — and we tried to avoid getting involved as much as possible.

The game design document for their Edularp — which describes the story and design of the game, etc. — can be downloaded from the author's website (www.phoenixgamedesign.de) free of charge.

The Reflection Phase

In the last session we all sat together and discussed the seminar in general as well as the students' Edularp In the course of the seminar we had our students fill out numerous reflection questionnaires regarding the seminar, the GOD and the initial Edularp that we conducted for them: our students also had their own players fill out reflection questionnaires regarding their own larp.

Edularp and Back Again

In principle it can be said that the seminar was a complete success. However, with the benefit of hindsight and feedback there are also some things that we would surely do differently in a future session. We have thus drastically shortened the theoretical portion of the first session for future seminars based on the students' feedback. Naturally, those students who have no experience with larps must first be properly introduced to the topic.

But the ability to absorb information, especially in the course of a four-hour session, is limited and the primary emphasis of the seminar is on practice rather than theory. According to the students it was the Edularp that they played in the second session that really awakened their interest and their desire to try it out themselves. The examples of successful Edularps in the first session were less important.

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[33] Cf. Montola, Stenros, Waern, 2009.
[34] Regulative rules are those that we typically refer to as the rules of the game. Constitutive rules, as the name suggests, constitute the game and, for example, define roles and specify key rules or victory conditions. The rules of irrelevance state that certain objects or facts should be ignored and thus allow the actual gamespace to exist (cf. Denker and Ballstaedt, 1976, pp. 58).
[35] In this context, a point of interest is the next "point" on which the player should focus. For instance, finding the key to a locked door.
[36] Experienced planners need not adhere to the order in the GOD, though it will often make sense to do so. And of course, it is not possible to work out all the points separately from each other.

Many of them wrote in their reflection questionnaires that it was only through their own participation that they really understood what an Edularp is. Many found the theoretical portion "unimportant" for the independent game development that followed. In the reflection questionnaires the game development process using the GOD was generally described positively, even though the responses did draw attention to a few stumbling blocks.

The students had particular trouble with the Learning Content category, which they felt appeared too early in the GOD. They would have preferred to specify the learning content in the course of developing the quest. However, since teachers must work according to prescribed curricula, we consciously chose this particular sequence to better reflect the realities of the job.

The students also had trouble with the new terminology. Although at the beginning of the practical phase we went over the GOD with them in detail and explained all the terminology in detail, the meaning of individual terms was nonetheless quickly forgotten because they were not documented. Today we would thus distribute a sort of glossary along with the game organization document.

The majority of the students wrote in the questionnaire that the Project Planning category was especially helpful. At the same time, they noted that they only gradually came to understand the importance of well-structured and explicit project management.

In our opinion the most central element of the success of the seminar was the game organization document and the clear scheduling requirements it prescribed for the individual tasks.

Additionally, it was important that the students were required to work in an organized and structured manner, and that they received guidance in doing so. The regular reflection and feedback rounds helped identify and confirm good ideas while rooting out as early as possible ideas that fell outside the scope of the Edularp.

Thus, participants in an Edularp learn not only with their heads but with their guts, with their emotions, senses, and intellects.

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Looking at you
Larp, documentation and being watched

Juhana Pettersson

So far, Nordic larp has produced two games that have become international news stories that all kinds of sites cannibalize and copy from each other: the Danish 2013 rerun of *Panopticorp*, and the Polish-Danish Harry Potter game *College of Wizardry*. In both cases, the attention was fueled by solid documentation and good video from the game.

In both cases, your private larp experience of co-creating and having fun with your friends suddenly had an audience literally in the millions. Even if only as a glimpse in a video on the website of the Daily Mail.

If you don't document games, they become forgotten ephemera that will live on only in the memories of the participants. If you do document and publish, private experiences can become public in increasingly impressive ways.

The documentary filmmakers Cosmic Joke were present at *College of Wizardry*. Participants reported after the game that the game was changed and people played differently because of the cameras. Video footage and good photos are essential for fueling mass media coverage, but they also influence the game as it is being played.

Secret Larp

Identlos was a Finnish larp held in Helsinki on the 26th of October, 2014. It was organized by Jamie MacDonald and Petri Leinonen. The larp was about identity in the modern surveillance society. One of my most interesting experiences as a player was leaving my cell phone home.

The last time I was without my cell phone was in the spring of 2013. It fell on the sidewalk and the screen cracked. The superfast, express repair took an hour. An hour I had to spend phoneless. The time before that was in 2009.

I was in North Korea for a week, and left my phone and other electronics in a strongbox at a hotel in Beijing.

I never forget my phone. I get jittery if I have to be without something to do for longer than three minutes. When I have my phone with me, I'm completely trackable to any surveillance entities or curious phone company employees who might be interested. The phone can be used to listen to me remotely. Its list of contacts is a straightforward run through of everyone I associate with.

Because of all this, going to *Identlos* was a no-brainer for me. It was a game about some of the most pressing issues of our time. It was also an interesting contribution to the discussion going on in the Nordic larp scene concerning documentation. *Identlos* wasn't a secret game in the sense that it was hard to find out about it. It was advertised for potential players. Rather, all documentation during the event was forbidden. No photos, no video. Because of this, it's secret in the sense that it's hard for a person who wasn't there to find out how it was. This is part of the design of the game.

Meta

In *Identlos*, most of the characters had escaped the surveillance networks of modern society, or wanted to do so. To do this, they had to leave behind most of the electronic niceties of the world we live in: social media, cell phones, massive media access.

During the larp, the characters in the organization called *Identlos* did not have their phones with them, or credit cards or similar items connected to a network. Because of this, the players had to do without as well. We had to pay cash if we wanted to go to the bar.

Despite the ban on documentation, apparently even radical anti-surveillance games are subject to the demands of the outside world. The game was held as part of the arts festival *Mad House Helsinki*. A photographer unconnected to the larp set up shop directly outside the main game area, separated from the action only by a curtain. We ran past him all the time, and many chose to participate in his portrait project, including myself. Considering the theme and the rules of *Identlos*, his presence seemed supremely ironic.

Technically, his presence wasn't against the rules, since he wasn't in the game area. To the best of my knowledge, the ban on photo documentation of in-game action held.

As a player, I couldn't but help noticing that this also changes the power dynamics of how we talk about the game afterwards. Centrally-controlled photo policy and documentation is a useful tool for organizers who wish to influence the life their game has after it's over. In the case of *Identlos*, no such tool exists. The only records are the words of the players and the impressions of the organizers.

On Display

Baltic Warriors: Helsinki was probably the opposite of *Identlos* when it comes to documentation and how exposed the players were to outside view. It was the first in a projected series of larps under the wider *Baltic Warriors* transmedia project. The principal design of the game was by Mike Pohjola. I did additional design and practical production.

The game was played in the center of Helsinki in an outdoor cafe area on the 30th of August, 2014 in the middle of a Saturday afternoon.

The characters were politicians, lobbyists and activists talking about ecological issues related to the Baltic Sea, unaware of a zombie threat that would soon emerge.

The public could just walk into the game area. The game was documented in the photos of random passerby, by journalists we had invited, and by our own documentation team. In short, it was total documentation anarchy. A picture from our game could be anywhere, and we had little control over it.

In *Baltic Warriors*, this maximalist attitude towards documentation was mandated by the political nature of the project and the demands of making a game in this particular location with these particular partners. In future games, we will probably experiment with different kinds of photo and privacy policies, depending on the individual demands of each game.

Our lax attitude towards being in public was criticized by some players after the game, especially regarding the political speeches that characters made on stage. Since the setting was contemporary and the issues real, larp could easily be mistaken for reality. At least until the zombies attacked. *Baltic Warriors: Helsinki* demonstrated that privacy and control over documentation are dealbreakers for many players. I have heard from many people who were fascinated by the project, but decided not to participate in what was essentially a public performance.

You Have to Write

Nowadays it's not enough to play in a larp. You also have to write a 30.000 character essay about it, with original thoughts and profound reflection.

Halat hisar was a political game. As organizers, we wanted to use it to get media attention for issues in Palestine, in addition to creating a meaningful game experience. The political side of the project made documentation a no-brainer. While the game itself would be played in a secluded location away from the public, it would be photographed. There would be video. After the game, we published a documentation book and a short documentary film.

Our photographers Tuomas Puikkonen and Katri Lassila did excellent work documenting the game, but individual player experiences are essential for any true effort to understand what happened. That requires some effort on part of the players.

I spent a lot of time after *Halat hisar* hounding our players into writing about the game and appearing on camera talking about it. Because of its political content, *Halat hisar* might be an extreme case, but ordinary ambitious Nordic games have these demands too. As a participant, you have the artwork lodged inside your brain after the game is over. For history to know what happened, that experience has to be drilled out.

Of course, when the documentation effort is led by an organizer, like with *Halat hisar*, its content is also controlled by the organizers. As the person mainly responsible for the documentation, I tried to be honest, but all documentation entails choices of what to include and what to leave out.

Documentation always has an angle and a perspective: What to shoot during the game? Whom to ask to get something written material about it? What to include in edited versions of the material, such as books and films?

The Danish larp *KAPO* is an example of a game where the documentation was a player-led process. The documentation book published for the game was curated by a player, and though the organizers supplied photos and some words for it, they had no control over it.

This is a great thing to happen to a game, but personal experience suggests that normally, a documentation effort has to be led pretty aggressively for it to happen. The motivation to do this tends to default to the organizers.

So here's the question: Is writing about your experience, appearing in photos and on video, part of the responsibility of playing in a game? Do you as the player have to accept the task of framing and expressing your inner processes for the consumption of a wider, non-playing audience?

Reach

In *Identlos*, I played a successful indie game designer apparently modeled after someone like *Minecraft*'s Markus Persson. I had escaped normal society because of the amount of hate among videogame fans. I lived in the secluded and small *Identlos* settlement, still making games but with a much smaller audience and less resources than before. I was happy with this.

In some ways, the difference between what my character had left behind and what he had now was similar to experiences from my own life. I have personally felt the difference by making television for mass audiences and making larp for a small scene.

Getting into character, I thought about how it would feel like to go from an audience of millions to an audience of hundreds. In some ways, the change would be small: You would still get your best feedback and comments from your friends. At the same time, it was hard to see how it wouldn't be disappointing. Having a mass audience means you get to be part of the conversation on a wider level. You matter. Of course, making games for a limited audience means you still matter to those people. But scale is seductive.

Scale is a classic problem of larp design. Given the extremely personal nature of larp, how to scale it up? How to reach a mass audience? These questions are further complicated by issues of safety and privacy. In *Identlos*, my character had chosen safety over reaching a mass audience. He had limited his horizons because he didn't want to live in a world with no privacy. It was an interesting dichotomy, because usually in modern political discourse safety is presented as the result of obliterating privacy. The larp argued the opposite, or at least complicated the issue.

Memory

Due to the lack of photos, *Identlos* only exists in the memory of its participants. Since there has not been any text-based documentation either, the story of what the game was is left to the underground of folklore in the player community.

When I started larping in the mid-Nineties, this was normal for all larps. There was very little documentation, even photos. Nowadays, it seems to me there's photos from most larps, at least to some extent. What would have been normal in 1995 is experimental now that it was done by *Identlos* in 2014.

That's a facile statement, of course, since Identlos's choices were informed by a larger political and theoretical apparatus about issues of privacy. Still, the result can be the same: *Identlos* can join the legions of games that will not be remembered. Does it matter if it's by design or not, if the end result is the same?

In terms of penetration into larp culture, my most influential game was probably *Luminescence*, which I organized with Mike Pohjola. I still see jokes about flour games in the most surprising places. It seems to me that the idea of the game, the "flour larp", has become a meme of sorts, divorced from the original context. I suspect something similar happens when games like *Panopticorp* and *College of Wizardry* go through the distorting lens of global mass media.

With political games like *Baltic Warriors* and *Halat hisar*, the goal is to change the world. Documentation and publicity are necessary parts of the project. But *Identlos* is a political game too. It's just that it prioritizes its art over its politics, and makes us ask the question:

Who are we larping for?

Now That We've Walked The Walk…

Some additions to the larp vocabulary

Bjørn Flindt Temte

Introduction

Larp is traditionally participatory in nature. Fortunately, there's been a great introspective and analytical tradition accompanying the continuing push against the evermoving boundaries of what's possible and what's been attempted. Yet it seems that our vocabulary has not grown at the same rate as the artform itself.

This article will attempt to cover some of the recent strides towards enriching that vocabulary. It presents the findings of several projects each exploring the nature of larp by investigating how the play and narrative experience change when mediated through computer/larp hybrids. These projects have investigated the interactive digital narrative academic literature, and have come away with a range of terms and concepts directly applicable to larp.

It is my hope that this article will both provide the community with an enriched vocabulary for conversing about our artform, and an expanded analytical toolbox for designing and researching larps.

Before jumping into the murky waters of terminology, let's first ensure that we're on the same riverbank. There's been many endeavours to define role-playing, and I'd like to add my voice to the cacophony. But it's my hope that by refining and combining the current definition attempts, we can turn the cacophony into a choir instead.

Can't you see I'm role-playing?

Based on my experience with the different forms of role-playing, the definitions of Hitchens & Drachen[1], Arjoranta[2] and Montola[3], as well as the results from my thesis projects[4,5,6], I would argue that there are a number of different processes to what we are currently calling role-playing:

Textoring(Lit: weaver): Exploring the potential story evolution possibilities, I.e. the story-space[7], and consequently manufacturing a personal, curated story-subspace instance, focused on the nodes deemed favourable to an engaging story evolution.

Auctoring(Lit: authoring, acting, originator): (Re)defining the character itself, including personality traits and background. This is both done as part of the initial character creation process, performed by either the player or an author, and at runtime by the player and possibly also the GM.

Ductoring(Lit: guiding, leading, commanding): Determining the appropriate actions/utterances for the character in the given situation. Performed at runtime, with some ductoring taking place during character creation regarding background events.

Rectoring(Lit: ruling, directing, mastering): Directing the story through the actions/utterances of the character. Only at runtime, arguably some planning during initial character creation.

Cantoring(Lit: acting, playing, poet): Portraying/acting out the character physically, including body movements, tone of voice, facial gestures etc. Only at runtime. While one could argue that cantoring may be contemplated prior to runtime, in order to best get a sense of the character's physical mannerisms, I would label such contemplations as auctoring. However, it is quite common for role-players to explore the mental exercise of imagining their character in various situations, and so a degree of overlap is theoretically possible.

Quod-core

With these processes as a foundation, it's now possible to formulate a new definition of Role-Playing:

*A type of **Pretence-Play** where **Participants interact**, often through **rules**, with a **diegetic world** through the continuous **ductoring** and possibly **cantoring**, **rectoring** and **auctoring**, of **distinct characters**, thus **collaboratively** co-**textoring** an **emergent**, **ephemeral narrative**.*

The core of role-playing is thus, in the presented definition, not the playing of a role per se. Rather, it's the ductoring of the character(s) you control, the continuous process of evaluating the appropriate and relevant actions for the character and situation, that is the heart of our artform. Whether you then describe or act out the chosen action(s) is of lesser importance, and covered by the definition as well. One would argue that ductoring could also happen e.g. when you read a book or watch a movie. I completely agree, and posit that these examples are also to a large extent role-playing, the only major difference being the degree of interactivity offered by the medium.

Basing media interaction on reader-response theory, the definition also takes this into account through mentioning 'participants interacting with'.

However, ductoring doesn't say anything about whether you actually act upon these evaluations. You may be ductoring with/by yourself in a cupboard for 12 hours, without ever moving or saying anything. When larping, a more important concept is thus to which degree you're acting on behalf of your character or yourself. I define this as the degree of herosproxy.

When exhibiting a low degree of herosproxy, you're essentially playing and acting as yourself in the given situations, with little regard for your player character's motivations and personality. Reversely, a high degree of herosproxy signifies both a large amount of ductoring, and that said ductoring is being reflected and acted upon. Therefore, herosproxy is the most relevant real-world measure of role-playing.

What IDS brought along…

I'd now like to present some of the terminology that the interactive digital storytelling academic community has developed for better understanding and researching their, and to a large extent our, field.

Aarseth[8] divides narrative elements into Kernels and Satellites, kernels being story elements/events which define the story, and satellites being elements/events without which the story would still be recognisable. Clearly, this distinction does not take into account the ephemerality of role-playing stories, but it still gives us terms to distinguish between primary and secondary events/elements. Likewise, one could argue that a larpwright should focus on kernels, letting the satellites happen on their own.

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[1] Hitchens, M., & Drachen, A. (2008). The many faces of role-playing games. International journal of role-playing, 1(1), 3-21.
[2] Arjoranta, J. (2011). Defining Role-Playing Games as Language-Games. International journal of role-playing, 1(2), 3-17.
[3] Montola, M., 2008. The invisible rules of role-playing. The social framework of role-playing process. International journal of role-playing, 1(1), pp.22–36
[4] Temte, B. F. (2014). I, Herosmaton? Unpublished Master Thesis, Department of Architecture, Design and Media Technology, Section of Medialogy, Aalborg University Copenhagen. Supervisors: Bruni, L.E. & Eladhari, M.
[5] Temte, B. F., & Schoenau-Fog, H. (2012). Coffee tables and cryo chambers: a comparison of user experience and diegetic time between traditional and virtual environment-based roleplaying game scenarios. In Interactive Storytelling (pp. 102-113). Springer Berlin Heidelberg.
[6] Temte, B. F. (2011). Project Restless Sleep - An Experimental Framework for Investigating the Change in User Experience of Roleplaying Games in Virtual Environments. Unpublished Bachelor Thesis, Department of Architecture, Design and Media Technology, Section of Medialogy, Aalborg University Copenhagen. Supervisor: Schoenau-Fog, H.
[7] The complete set of potential story evolutions for the story in its current state

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[8] Aarseth, E. (2012, May). A narrative theory of games. In Proceedings of the international conference on the foundations of digital Games (pp. 129-133). ACM.
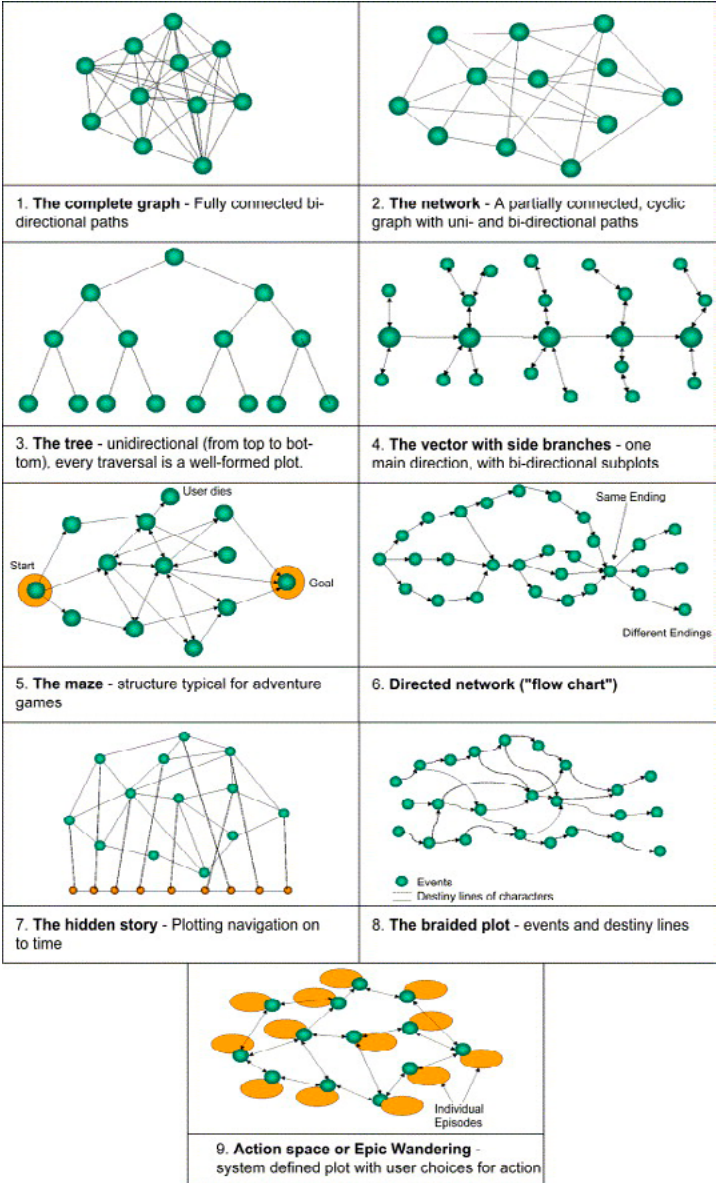
Figure 1: Ryan's 9 interactive narrative structures[9]. Illustrations from [10]

[9] Ryan, M. L. (2001). Narrative as virtual reality. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

[10] Temte, B.F., Aabom, H.T., Bevensee, S.H., Boisen, K.A.D., & Olsen, M.P. (2013). Aporia: Codename Still Lake Valley - Exploring the Merge of Game-play and Narrative through Multiplayer Cooperation and Storytelling. Unpublished project report, Department of Architecture, Design and Media Technology, Section of Medialogy, Aalborg University Copenhagen. Supervisor: Bruni, L.E.

[11] Ryan, M. L. (2008). Interactive narrative, plot types, and interpersonal relations. In Interactive Storytelling (pp. 6-13). Springer Berlin Heidelberg.

[12] Theune, M., Linssen, J., & Alofs, T. (2013). Acting, Playing, or Talking about the Story: An Annotation Scheme for Communication during Interactive Digital Storytelling. In Interactive Storytelling (pp. 132-143). Springer International Publishing.

Ryan[9] presents nine different interactive narrative structures, along with their individual characteristics, with a tenth added by myself[4], this being 'Instigating Event with Conflict-laden Characters'. The nine original can be seen on figure 1.

I have yet to come up with a suitable illustration for Instigating Event with Conflict-laden Characters. The ten structures can work as tools for designing and framing conversations about larp structures as well.

Ryan[11] also proposes two different types of immersion in interactive narratives, these being ludic and narrative immersion. She also distinguishes between spatial, temporal and emotional narrative immersion.

Additionally, Ryan suggests three distinct types of plot in interactive stories, with each plot type primarily suitable for a specific narrative immersion:

- *Epic:* Focuses on the struggle of the individual to survive in a hostile world - Spatial Immersion

- *Dramatic:* The evolution of a network of human relations - Emotional Immersion

- *Epistemic:* The desire to solve a mystery - Temporal Immersion (components of which are curiosity, surprise and suspense).

We're also given a tool for categorising player actions/utterances, where Theune, Linnsen and Alofs[12] construct a scheme:

This works very well for categorising e.g. player utterances when analysing larp play (see[4]).

Reference				
		Story	**Game**	**Reality**
Perspective	**Character**	**CS:** In-character utterances and imitations	**CG:** In-character references to game elements	**CR:** In-character references to events or objects outside play
	Player	**PLS:** Action suggestions and proposals referring to the story	**PLG:** Communication about game aspects	**PLR:** Including real-life events or objects in the game frame
	Person	**PES:** Observations about events that happened in the story	**PEG:** Observations about the interface, opinions about the game	**PER:** Communications about events or objects outside play

Figure 2: Theune, Linnsen and Alofs PxR annotation scheme[12]. Illustration from [4]

Mine, my own, my propositions

In[5], I define Diegetic Adherence to be the degree to which diegetic time equals real time, i.e. whether the larp is running on a 1:1 time, or e.g. features flashbacks/slow motion. This term can both be used for describing/discussing/designing larps, and for analytic purposes.

Hulk, meet Spock

I also here propose two non-opposed play styles/attributes; Cerebral and Embodied. The distinction here is whether the player seeks out the intellectual challenge(s) or instead strives to be physically/emotionally affected by the larp/situation. Cerebral gamists thus enjoy the intellectual challenge of a mystery or tactical battle, whereas embodied gamists thrive on e.g. the adrenaline response of the battle itself. Embodied immersionists aim for becoming their character, whereas cerebral immersionists are more akin to simulationists, aiming instead for experiencing being in the diegetic world.

Dramaticists with a cerebral focus, enjoy shaping the story and influencing/ experiencing its flow and aesthetics, whereas embodied dramaticists instead seek the emotional response from entering the story. I do not see these terms as necessarily being directly in opposition however. Larps/situations where you're both intellectually and emotionally engrossed are easily imagined.

Exploding the Player Character

In[4], I define the ALHFa-PAV categorisation (pronounced Alpha-Paw |ˈalfə-pɔː) as a way of dividing and discussing the components of a player character:

Avatar: Physical manifestation of person in another reality. Navigational and ludic focus in games. In larps, the avatar is ourselves.

Locus: The visual appearance of a particular avatar. How we look, with costume, makeup, expression and props.

Herosmaton: The specific contents of the person schema of a player character, including personality traits, goals, background etc.

Facies: The countenance/appearance of a particular herosmaton. How the herosmaton looks inside the imagined diegesis.

Player Character: The combined avatar, locus, herosmaton and facies, along with its more ludic characteristics, e.g. strength score, hit points etc., and the actions available to it, defined below as Ago and Vis.

Ago: The verbs available to the particular PC, such as run, jump, shoot etc.

Vis: The ludic stats associated with the PC, such as hit points, strength score etc.

It's my hope that our community may adopt some or all of the terms, hereby easing the joint communication and understanding of the player character elements.

Picking nits

There is little doubt that bleed as a larp term and concept is both relevant and real (for a given definition of real).

But given the pre-existing uses and meanings associated with bleed as a term outside the role-playing community, and the fact that I'm a nerd when it comes to terms/classifications, I would propose to rename the concept Flusentio (in/ex) [Lit: Flow/bleed of feelings]. Influsentio would thus be emotions, characteristics and/ or opinions flowing/bleeding from player to character, with Exflusentio denoting flowing/ bleeding from character to player.

Concerning Genres

Usually, when discussing larps, we refer to the genre as based on those of Hollywood movies. The Danish larp theorist Jacob Nielsen proposes that we instead/ additionally adopt the vocabulary of the art world as a way of discussing our works and the intentions of the authors.

For instance, playing a social realism drama expressionistically will yield a very different playthrough than the exact same larp played abstractly, impressionistically or post-modern. Therefore, I strongly encourage you read Jacob Nielsen's thought-provoking article on styles in larp in this book.

I hope that the usefulness and relevance of these terms are clear, and encourage further debates about and expansions of our shared vocabulary. I also hope that the term-nado I've just unleashed has either blown you away, or at least ruffled your feathers enough that a productive debate will ensue, at whichever decibel level you prefer.

On Publicity and Privacy
Or "How do you do your documentation?"

Jamie MacDonald

In 2014, I conducted a survey about attitudes towards photography and video in larp. I got nearly 500 responses from many different countries, and while I would love to publish the full results here, they're a bit long for the scope of this KP book. The numbers are available at www.ars-amandi.se instead, and they're really quite interesting, so I suggest you take a look if you're organising or photographing anytime soon. What I will do here is outline some of the different arguments and thought processes concerning the way we play and the way we document.

Images and the nature of larp

For good, bad, or ugly, we've all been photographed in larps. Someone has managed to catch that moment where your costume looked brilliant and you're screaming at someone, and damned if you don't look like a movie star. As organisers, we've also probably felt the crushing stupidity of not having recorded anything at a larp, and about three months later finding out that nobody cares about our larp if there aren't pics.

We take images, share images, store images, publish images, broadcast images, and print images, in both still and moving form. So we should talk about images in larp.

Particularly in larp, because as it happens, larps are semi-private (and sometimes transgressive) events. One feature of larp that allows us to play some very interesting things is that the larp is a contained and (ideally) safe space, both physically and temporally.

Our collective understanding seems to be that transgressive play is at times fun and desired, so we make it possible through a space that is contingent - it only exists here and now, and in the context of a game. You might even wonder whether larp is safe so it *can* include transgression, or if larp became transgressive because it was "safe".

The contingency of a larp is an important feature for many kinds of play, but also for many kinds of people.

What one player considers transgressive may be less remarkable to another player, and this may simply be a matter of life experience or taste, but can also relate to one's situation in real life. A schoolteacher may want to play a murderer; a politician might want to play a coked-up rockstar; a person in a committed relationship may want to play a fantasy romance; a judge might want to play a slave owner. Larp can offer some freedom of expression and play not only for transgressive or illegal acts, but it offers this to people whose real-world lives impose restrictions on what they're publicly allowed to consider "fun".

We like to ask "what if" our world had different norms - for violence, sexuality, social structure, or pretty much anything else we can imagine. I, for one, am an artist and frankly can be photographed doing pretty much anything and it will only help me.

But I have seen people do things in larps that, if taken out of context, would ruin their career. I have seen people *standing next* to other players who were doing things that, if photographed, could ruin that person's career. A *third* of the survey respondents reported that some in-game photos could cause trouble for them.

(Speaking of standing next to someone, one of the reasons why Facebook's own facial recognition software is more accurate than the CIA's is because Facebook knows who you know, and recognises who you're likely to be standing next to.

Just a fun fact for anyone who thinks that not tagging people by name on Facebook is sufficient to protect anonymity.)

Larp, as we have been doing it, is not a public performance; everyone present is complicit in the course of action and has both interest and agency in where the story goes. When you sign up, you might have a ballpark idea of what you'd like to do and what kind of activities you'll indulge in, but I think most players would agree that if you knew beforehand exactly what was going to happen, there would be no point to larping at all.

Combine this with larp's famous *alibi* for indulging in things we can't do in real life, and this makes most players *likely* to do or say things that they can't vet beforehand, and which might not be palatable if taken out of context - in part because the whole point of the larp was to create a context that would not be possible or morally defensible to live out in our real lives. This makes organisers responsible for at least some degree of privacy.

It's not exactly a completely private event, either: we trust others - some of them near-strangers - with our play. We work towards building this trust in person. And yet, we trust people who are potentially *hostile* with our images. Images do a great deal of violence to the safeness of a larp. They bring something from within the frame of the larp, outside that frame. They are objects that expand the agreed safe space in a way that is not predictable.

They have the potential to expand it very far geographically as well as temporally, and they very quickly collapse the context. They take a private-ish event and bring it into public consumption.

One recent example of this is the Czech larp *Hell on Wheels*, the first few runs of which included players who darkened their skin to play characters of African descent. This was largely unremarkable - until photographs reached the larp community in the United States, where putting dark makeup on white skin to play a black person is inescapably racist and very offensive indeed.

The ensuing conversation saw accusations of racism towards the Czechs, imperialism toward the Americans, and rather a lot of publicity for the larp in a way that the Czech organisers likely never even considered.

Was the dialogue useful? Hard to say. On one hand, it often takes an outsider to an in-group to point out where your blind spots are. On the other, can the piece be condemned on the strength of its images alone, without hearing how the topic was handled in-game? Expect this issue to show up again:

72% of respondents said they're okay with photos of themselves playing a different social group, class, or culture.

The public image of larp

It's curious that photographs from a larp get taken out of context so quickly – it almost seems as though people are *waiting* to find something. But perhaps that's human nature. A photograph of the larp only recalls the event for someone who was actually there; for anyone else, the context stands only on the weight of what is visible in the picture.

The public does not (yet) understand larpers to be like actors. If Brad Pitt plays a Nazi, we all understand that Brad Pitt is a very cool guy for playing such a hardcore character; in interviews he can even discuss the humanity and interestingness of that role, and we will still understand Brad Pitt to be a pretty cool guy. However, Prince Harry dressing up as a Nazi to go to a costume party is apparently a problem, because for some reason the public feels that it sends an ambiguous message as to how he feels about Nazis; after all, he dressed up as one for fun.

Larpers seem to fall somewhat more on the Prince Harry side at the moment. If you are photographed playing a person dying of AIDS, or wearing blackface, the photograph does not in itself convey any information as to whether this photograph was cultural production (i.e. art) or "fun", and the overwhelming impression seems to be that you will give off an air of endorsement. And then there's the Daily Mail (see below):

Ironically, headlines like this one are exactly why photographs and videos from larps are also needed. The popular view of larps (sorry, 'LARPS'), which to this day retains the hint of Satanism it's enjoyed since the 1980s, is one in which a bunch of well-meaning but sadly broken people get together in the woods and push each other psychologically until they can't tell what's real anymore.

Then someone dies, and it's the plot of a blockbuster movie.

It's not exactly Trivial Pursuit: Bizarre Danish role-playing game where players go 50 HOURS straight pretending to be coke-snorting advertising executives

- Game called PanoptiCorp is designed to be the most intense role-play ever
- 40 gamers play advert execs, going without sleep or breaking character
- One gamer said she had a breakdown after she couldn't leave the game

By AARON SHARP

PUBLISHED: 16:35 GMT, 19 October 2013 | UPDATED: 10:49 GMT, 20 October 2013

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A group of role-playing gamers locked themselves in an office for 50 hours pretending to be drug addled advertising executives, in a bizarre experiment which left one having a breakdown.

The game, called **PanoptiCorp**, was played by 40 men and women in Denmark this year and was filmed as part of an insight into the world of Live Action Role Playing enthusiasts, or 'LARPS'.

They gathered in a Copenhagen studio in June, where they pretended to be colleagues at an advertising agency for two days straight.

SCROLL DOWN FOR VIDEO

What to record, when, why, and how

There will always be a misrepresented "popular view" for those who are outsiders of any activity, just as there is one for contemporary art ("My six year old could've painted that") or sport ("Team sports are just a sublimation of the war impulse"). All of these are created by a combination of images and ignorance. Larp could benefit from having more images in the public – good images, attached to positive advocacy.

Interestingly, Cosmic Joke's teaser and 18 min. documentary about *College of Wizardry* (2014) seemed to attract the "right" kind of press: admiration for a job well done, cool costumes and setting, and respect for the sheer crazy guts to put 120-200 people (depending on which article you read) in a castle for 2-5 days (depending on which article you read) to play as Harry Potter/ in Hogwarts/in the Potterverse/in the Polandverse (depending on which article you read).

It appears to be the first single larp to get global media attention – and what's more, positive media attention. The trailer and teaser combined had over one million hits on YouTube, among them Warner Brothers execs who had a few words to say about intellectual property – but that's another essay entirely.

It should be noted that even the "wtf-type" attention garnered by the documentation of *Panopticorp* (2013) also caught the eye of people internationally who were interested in running the game; so clearly larpers know how to read between the lines of the Daily Mail. It seems that video documentation in particular is useful for getting media attention, and media attention is, we assume, good for the larp scene. It is certainly helpful for getting venues, financing, and interest for one's next big project.

It's quite clear that players love photographs of themselves and their friends; particularly in the 48-or-so hours directly after a larp, players cry out for the visual proof that tells them yes, they were really there and they looked beautiful with all that snot running all over their faces after all their friends died and they had a desolate epiphany about their own existence. Most of us are guilty as charged here.

No organiser I spoke to would dream of letting a larp go unphotographed. For grant money, for pitches, for clout, for academic research, for being able to contribute to the ongoing creation of the Nordic larp canon, evidence is simply essential. It's participation.

Video is a bit more fraught. Most respondents are okay with or enthusiastic about video so long as they know beforehand that it's going to be there. My biggest beef here is that video crews and larpers aren't used to each other – the boom operator will put a mic in the middle of a scene, and half of the larpers will shut up because it suddenly feels like filming a TV show and they don't want to mess it up, or they'll move out of the shot because they don't want to be on camera. Video crews can literally alter the plot this way.

But either way, larp documentation is here to stay. So I'll finish up with a little bit of advocacy and again invite you to check out the survey.

Should I have in-game photographs? Yes, in general. People love them. If you want to be a bit sensitive and avoid affecting play, only photograph public scenes - or have your photographers playing characters, so we can interact with them, pose for them, or tell them to go away.

Should I have off-game photographs? Even better. A surprising number of people (67%) reported they were willing to re-create scenes afterwards for the purposes of photography. I would love to see an organiser design for this - it's opt-in, and to anyone who wasn't there, it's not likely to make a lick of difference. Also, players are often quite happy with one or two decent character portraits.

When should my photo and video plans be communicated to the players? Before sign-up. A quarter of respondents reported they'd been photographed in-game without knowing there would be cameras present. The same amount agreed that we need photography policies as part of the sign-up process.

How many photographs do I need for documentation? I think there's such a thing as too many photographs. If you want to make a film, go make a film. If you want to make a larp, for goodness' sake leave players alone and let them play.

Should my photographers and video crew be in- or off-game? Respondents slightly favour in-game, by a factor of about 20%.

Can I photograph sensitive scenes? Ask your players. Maybe agree that interrogations or sex scenes won't be photographed. Don't assume everyone has the same common sense. Players (60%) reported their immersion gets really interrupted by the presence of a camera in a tough scene.

Is it the player's responsibility to tell a photographer to go away? Tricky. Some players will not want to go off-game to do this. Some will be playing characters of low agency, and this can affect the agency they take as a player.

Can I use hidden video cameras or GoPros to be less intrusive? Merlin's Beard, no. Unless you've communicated it to your players and they either know where the cameras are, or they are totally okay with playing with hidden cameras, don't do this. Always allow players to review hidden camera footage.

Can I post to Instagram during run-time? No. Unless it's part of your design, no no no.

Do players really need to vet pictures before they're published? It's a pain in the ass, but it's their face you're using, and you might not know what's okay for them. It's polite to do so.

But I want to do a larp where photography is part of the meta/rules/world! Of course! Most players (78%) would love to play something where photography works as a game mechanic.

Photos and videos have the power to delight us, make our larps better, improve the scene and help us convince outsiders to take us seriously. Because of the nature of what we sometimes do together, photos and videos - and even just the act of taking them - have the power to violate the trust we place in each other. Larp is not a public performance - 69% of you agreed with this statement. It's up to us to find ways to keep our hobby dangerous while we show it to the world.

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Painting larp
Using art terms for clarity

Jacob Nielsen

When I design scenarios, I try to use the terminology from the Nordic larp discourse. But many of thes styles "available" confuse me and my players instead of clarifying what the larps are actually about.

One of the problems is that many styles are defined by what they are not, instead of what they are. Because of this, I would like to introduce a new way of thinking about larp terminology. The hope is to make my design choices clearer and open my mind to new ways of designing larp.

I chose terminology from visual art, since that's (also) about taking something intangible and turning it into something concrete.

First we need to unmuddle the picture as we know it today. This means that I will try to use only only the necessary terminology that we know from roleplaying today.

In art we talk about form, media, style and genre to define the work of art. These are the definitions I will go through and try to convert into terminologies that can be used for larp (and roleplaying in general).

Form and media

An artform is defined by its shape or artistic expression, which often is defined by its media.

Examples of different kinds of shapes in visual art: painting, sculptures, crafts, photography, film and architecture.

Roleplaying doesn't have shapes, but is defined by its artistic expressions of interaction. At one end of the spectrum, we find tabletop RPGs, and at the other we find larp. In the middle we find a lot of more or less recognized bastard children; freeform, semi-larp, etc.

Style

The style of art depending on the artform. As mentioned before, I will refer to visual art, but to make it even more concrete, I'm referring to styles of paintings in this and the subsequent section.

The style is a way to frame the art. For an artform as roleplaying the style makes the expression more understandable. To exemplify I'll go through some painting styles.

Naturalism and realism seem similar to many, but have their differences. Where realism tries to capture the reality as it is, naturalism beautifies reality. It's legal to remove or add something from a naturalist picture. This would be prohibited in realism. Also, realism usually focuses on the harsher aspects of life.

Realism in roleplaying consists of simulations of reality. An example on a scenario which tried to achieve this is the danish larp *U-359* from 2004. The larp took place in an actual (decomisioned) submarine. Not only were historical reproduction uniforms included in the participants package, the organizers also clearly stated that the larp would be more simulation than drama.

Naturalism in roleplaying focuses on the good experience instead of the authenticity.

A naturalist larp might be a historical depiction of a rural medieval village (like the larp *Brakowitz* from 1998 did); but one where everyone cared a bit more and where everything was a bit more rosy (unlike in Brakowitz, where things were horrible).

Impressionism in roleplaying is where the simulation is comprised to make the important part of the game stand clear.

An example is the danish larp *Uden Guds Nåde* from 2009. The important elements were lighted with stage lighting and the rest of the game area was darkened when not in focus.

In cubism the artist describes an object or scene from multiple perspective at once.

Cubism roleplaying uses different perspectives simultaneously that are later combined so that each player gets an experience of several viewpoints.

An example is be the Danish freeform game *Circus Without Boundaries* from 2013. Here, the main mechanic is that each scene has one or more main characer(s) and several supporting players. The main character(s) can only talk, and must be moved around by the supporting players as lifesize dolls.

The physical position shows the thoughts of the main characters where the dialog is what the characters actually are doing. A scene could be that the main characters are doing the dishes, and the supporting players change their positions so that one of the main characters tries to strangle the other one.

Expressionism is about recognizable feelings, and not reality.

The larp *White Dead* from 2012 was designed for Black Box play. In the game the players are pioneers climbing a mountain, but the climb is too harsh, and they die one after each another until nobody is left. The players can only make special mechanic movements that make it hard to move. They can only speak incomprehensible sounds, but when a character dies, the player shifts to playing the soul of the pioneer, and can now move freely and help the pioneers left to die. Since there is no dialogue, the experience and context is constructed in the heads of the players; in a very personal way.

There are many styles of art out there, and it's not like I have definite answers. Some art styles can be compared with roleplaying and can be useful to us - others can't.

Hopefully some of these art styles will inspire us to make new kinds of larps, just like Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque invented Cubism.

Genre

To round off, a few words on genre. In paintings the genre defines the theme of the picture. It can be landscapes, portraits etc.

These are unaffiliated of the style or form. In roleplaying we normally use literary genres to describe the game. These are normally fine to use, but can give problems regarding sandbox-games. The genre is often confused with style because its rarely these are split in literature. In art we have seen both naturalist and cubist landscape in a painting, but what about a cubist fantasy larp in roleplaying?

What can you imagine?

Do it!

Processing political larps
Framing larp experiences with strong agendas

Kaisa Kangas

"Thanks to it I turned my communist friend into a patriot. And I realized who I really am." This is how a respondent, according to Mochocki (2012), described the Polish tabletop role-playing game *Dzikie Pola* ("Wild Planes") in an online survey. The game was set in a period of Polish history dating to 1569 - 1795, and it apparently spawned a vibrant larp scene dedicated to re-enactment.

The era is referred to as the Sarmatian period, and Mochocki appears to see it as a golden past central to all Polish culture. He gives the quote in a positive tone, to portray the "liminal quality" of the experience of "sarmatization" that the players had when living a nationalist construction in the games and related activities.

In larp, the asymmetric power relation between the "authors" and the "audience" seems to manifest more concretely than, say, in cinema. One (but by no means the only) difference is that film spectators rarely discuss their experience with the directors.

However, the contact between organizers and players does not usually end when a larp does. Much of the "sarmatization" described by Mochocki happened outside the actual game events. Often larp organizers have an active role in post-game discussions, which can change the player experience after the game.

In *System Danmarc* (2005), a game set in a cyberpunk future, the players experienced living in a slum. At the end of the game, they were shown a documentary where real-life Danish prostitutes, drug addicts, homeless people, researchers and social workers talked about social exclusion and inequality. It turned out that there were people in Copenhagen already living the future dystopia.

According to Munthe-Kaas (2010), one player described the film as follows:

I was ready to cry watching it. I wanted to help all those people. Because my character was that way, only now the filter was gone, and it was me wanting to help.

Munthe-Kaas writes:

Generally the ending was received very well and many participants afterwards mentioned the film as a central part of their experience. On the other hand, some participants found the ending to be manipulative and politically colored.

A different example is provided by *De tusen rosornas väg* (2000) ("Road of the Thousand Roses"). It was a medieval fantasy larp about a war between two nations. On one side, the players sang battle songs provided by the organizers, which created a strong patriotic feeling. At the end of the game, the organizers revealed that the songs were in fact translated from the Hitler Jugend songbook and that many other aspects of the game fiction were also adopted from Nazi Germany.

Apparently, some of the participants were quite upset by the announcement. But many also said they had come to a whole new understanding of Nazi Germany. (Englund, 2013, p. 44; see also Fatland, 2011)

In both cases, revealing the connection to reality reframed the larp experience. Perhaps the players felt that the fiction they had collectively created was taken away from them. We met a similar phenomenon with our game *Halat hisar* (2013). It was set in a fictional occupied Finland that mirrored real-world Palestine. The players knew this beforehand, but some of them were troubled by the way the correspondence to reality was treated in post-game discussions.

One player brought up the feeling of not being in control of her/his experience anymore.

One aspect that made the game feel real and intense was that we had Palestinian players. Their presence served as a reminder that the occupation really existed. After the game, many players wanted to know which parts of the fiction were based on reality and which were made up. Upon their request, I wrote a text that clarified the connections and provided references. We put it up on the website. According to some players, this greatly helped the processing.

Games without agenda?

It is sometimes argued that larps should not have a political agenda or that political topics should be treated in a "neutral" manner. However, every text is written and every larp is designed from some kind of a political perspective. Selecting a topic is already a political choice. When something is referred to as "neutral", it is usually because it reflects the default assumptions in the society.

There have been some larps about the Finnish civil war of 1918. To my knowledge, the most recent one was *Viena 1918* (2014) ("Viena Karelia 1918"). The head organizer, Mikko Heimola (2014) wrote that he wanted to equally portray both parties of the conflict as farcical, oppressive, and stupid. However, this is a political choice as much as presenting one side as better than the other would have been.

Games can be political even when they don't seem to be. What if the organizers of *De tusen rosornas väg* had never told the players that the songs came from Hitler Jugend, so that they would have been left to believe the game was a harmless fantasy adventure?

The game would still have been political, just in a different, rather frightening way. Now imagine that the songs were not direct translations from the Hitler Jugend songbook, but had similar themes. Imagine they were really written by the organizers. Imagine that the organizers had never read the Hitler Jugend songbook and were unaware of any connections.

Doesn't the case of *De tusen rosornas väg* demonstrate that the Hitler Jugend songs embodied something that is rather commonplace in "harmless" fantasy? If there had been elements that felt out of place or disturbing, would the players have been so surprised after the game?

Thinking through the post-game discussion When designing games, the organizers should take into account that they can affect player experience even after the game, in particular if there is a strong connection to reality. Debrief is often viewed as part of the design. Maybe post-game discussions should be seen in similar light, especially as online groups provide a means to continue collective processing for an extended period of time.

Organizing larps is stressful. When making *Halat hisar*, we did not give much thought to what would happen beyond the afterparty. The game turned out more intense than we had dared to hope, so we created a Facebook group for the players to process their experience. The game was an emotional experience for us organizers as well, and in the beginning, I thought I could freely express myself in the group the same way the players did.

I quickly realized this was a mistake. As an organizer, I was in a position of power and I could not discuss with the players on an equal footing. My posts were interpreted differently, and things I said could be seen as attempts to reframe player experiences.

Some players felt that participating in the game had forced a political agenda on them in the eyes of the organizers and other players. They felt that everyone in the group was assumed to be, in the words of one player, "a pro-Palestinian activist".

Now that I read the posts again after a year of distance, I am almost surprised at how little controversy there was. Nevertheless, the discussions made me emotional at the time. To correct my mistake, I decided to refrain from commenting as best as I could. Sometimes I did not even dare to "like" comments of others because I didn't want to steer the discussion.

However, trying to stay away from all political discussion was a mistake, too. It's a good idea to give the players space to think for themselves and not to flood them with explanations and information. But nothing happens in a void. There is a political context outside the online group, and it, too, affects the discussion.

Sometimes it is the organizers' responsibility to take a stand. For instance, some players criticized *Halat hisar* for being "one-sided".

We made the choice to take the viewpoint of the occupied because the oppressors and the oppressed are not two equal sides. To present them so is to take the side of the stronger party, the oppressors. Some of the members of the processing group were Palestinians who live their daily lives under occupation. Taking this into consideration, I feel that it would have been my responsibility to point out the real-world power imbalance that we wished to tackle by concentrating on the experience of the oppressed.

In summary, as a part of the design process, larp organizers should think about how they will take part in post-game discussions. A player debrief group is not a debrief group for the organizers, who should be conscious about their positions of power.

It is important to leave the players the freedom to discuss the game content. However, real-world political context and the diversity of players should also be taken into account, and the organizers have the responsibility to moderate when needed.

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Safe words
And how to use them

Nathan Hook

Introduction

Many larps have adopted *safe words*, as a form of meta-communication between players (rather than between characters). While in normal interaction it is sometimes possible to read non-verbal clues of fear or distress, the embodied nature of larp means there is no way to distinguish whether signs of fear or discomfort comes from the character or from the player, hence the need for a meta-level of communication.

Exact words vary, but a two-level system is in widespread use in the Nordic countries:

Brake is an indication that play is on or near someone's limits. Play can continue without openly stepping out of character, but should not get more intense, should progress slowly or move in a different direction. For example, if used in an interrogation scene, the interrogator might switch to a different approach, or decide to let the prisoner dwell on their situation.

Cut is an indication to immediately break character and resolve the situation. Play might be restarted once the situation has been resolved.

British larps have traditionally had a single-level safe word of *Man Down*. While not explicitly limited, this is usually explained as being a way to stop physical action to handle possible injuries.

There has been increasing recognition in recent years that there are issues with the use of safe words. This article will discuss these issues and possible approaches to address them.

Awareness and surprise

Consider the following example diegetic situation: As part of an interrogation scene, one character intends to throw a bucket of cold water over another character.

In order to safe-word appropriately, the receiving person needs to be aware of what is about to happen. If the interrogator threatens them with the act verbally or makes a show of slowly moving the bucket towards them where they can see it, this informs the character and player of what is about to happen. If the interrogator surprises them from behind with the bucket of water, then they have not had the opportunity to safe-word.

This *telegraphing process* is an important part of the meta-communication, yet can usually be carried out via in-game acts. Like all communication, it is not perfect – a receiving player may be distracted and not notice what the interrogator felt was a clear indication, or may have assumed the water would be at least room temperature and not cooled with ice. However, as long as play escalates gradually, the player of the victim can at least prevent further escalation even if the cold water was slightly more 'hardcore' than the player was expecting.

In a scene where the in-game balance of power is more equal, one clear and viable form of telegraphing is to reverse the active party: one character invites or tells the other person to perform the action, which ensures their awareness. To use a simple example, offering a hand for a handshake invites the other person to shake hands, making physical contact. Again this not a certain means of communication; a player from a non-contact larp tradition may do so expecting a non-contact representation of a handshake.

Normalised interaction and absolute limits

For situations which need surprise, the concept of *normalised interaction* comes in. These are forms of interaction rendered normal for the play space, agreed upon by entering it. For example, a boxing ring has different normal interaction to everyday life, and entering a match in that space indicates acceptance of those interactions.

By playing a larp with airsoft or foam weapons, players consent to be hit with approved weapons in the approved way, including by surprise; while safe words still apply, telegraphing is not required. Such actions are within the normalised interaction of the larp.

As part of defining normal interaction, there should also be defined *absolute limits*. These are distinct from individual player's personal limits, being something forbidden even if consented to within the play space.

This may be because of being regarded as beyond the limits of bystanders and potential witnesses, even if all directly involved consent. For example, many British larps do not allow nudity. Absolute limits can also cover mention of certain topics. For example, the British festival larp *The Gathering* bans mention of arson and god(s).

Defining and communicating the normal interaction and absolute limits should be part of the larp design. While it is impossible to cover all interactions, covering the expected ones that are likely in the setting/ premise (e.g. a court intrigue larp will have different likely interactions to a prison larp) is normally sufficient, and gives general guidance for other eventualities.

To return to the previous example, an absolute limit that ice would not be used in torture scenes would give the victim player an assurance this would not be case, which might therefore mean they decide not to use a safe word. Alternatively an absolute limit might have been set that real water would not be used at all (the bucket being empty, off-game), with a meta-technique that they should react as if the bucket is full.

It is possible to have more subtle absolute limits that can vary within the play space. To use a real example from Dragonbane, fighting with wooden practice swords is beyond the absolute limits of a boffer larp. However, if a character freely enters into a duel where it's clear such weapons are being used, their player accepts the new normalised interaction.

Actual use of safe words

Safe words are generally not used as often as they should be. Reasons for this might include:

- Using a safe word is breaking character, and in the case of a Cut, stops play completely. This goes against the core premise of many larp traditions (but not scene-based play).

- A desire to be seen as 'hardcore,' and a wider player culture that glorifies being 'hardcore;' a fear of being thought of as weak, 'boring,' or being stigmatised for safe-wording. Related to this, the perception of blame being attached to someone for creating play that resulted in the use of a safe word can deter a person from using it.

- Being caught up in the experience. For example, if someone has a phobia triggered, the condition may prevent the clarity of thought to use a safe word.

One practical problem with safe words is a failure of others to hear them in some situations, such as with loud music or when wearing masks.

It has been argued that harm has already been done when a safe word is used. This is a flawed position because:

- A player may successfully use a safe word before the harm is caused (e.g. before the water bucket is thrown).

- Even if this is the case, the safe word prevents further harm.

- When dealing with potential trauma, it is important how the situation is handled in the short-term afterwards, to shape how the experience is processed into a life narrative. A safe word which allows the situation to be well handled can make the difference between a 'briefly unpleasant' experience and a 'traumatic' experience.

Some possible approaches to address these issues:

- One rule of thumb to convey in briefing is the principle: 'if you are thinking that maybe you will need to safe word, the answer is already yes.'

- If the larp includes scene cuts or 'fade to black,' make it clear anyone can call this when they feel appropriate. Cutting a scene in this way is effectively a more discreet version of using a cut safe word, but can be positioned as being done for drama.

- The use of a 'double tap' or 'double squeeze' as an alternative way to convey a brake. This overcomes the loud noise problem. It also allows one person to very discretely convey a brake to one other; some people may be more confident to safe word this way rather than speaking out loud, especially in front of a crowd.

- A meta-communication word that invites (but does not require) others to escalate a scene. This helps normalise the use of meta-communication words; After using a meta-word to escalate a scene, it may be easier to use another meta-word to brake a scene.

- An 'are you ok?' meta-communication pair of words (or repeated word) that checks if another player is ok. This might be used if a character displays a fit, seizure or panic attack, to establish if it is in-game or off-game. This empowers another player to initiate the meta-communication.

- Avoid glorifying being 'hardcore' in the wider discourse around larp. Be clear that placing one's own limits at a certain position is simply different, not better or worse. Stress this narrative when discussing such topics.

- Avoid any notion of blame or guilt being attached to the use of safe words: neither to those that use safe words, nor to the other players whose play led to them being used. Feeling that blame or guilt will be assigned to either party discourages players from using safe words and from having the confidence to test their limits.

- Avoid imprisonment/restraint situations, unless an essential part of play. This gives players the option to simply leave as their characters, as an alternative to using a safe word. For example, two characters discussing a certain topic might be distressing for a third player even if not directed at them. The player of the third character might be reluctant to safe-word, but can simply move away.

- Planting a pre-arranged situation where a respected player uses a safe word, to demonstrate it and establish it as normalised interaction for players.

- Explicitly practice using safe words in pre-game workshops. Like other meta-techniques, this can feel false using it out of context, but it may still be worth doing.

Post safe word

Some thought should be given to what happens when a cut word is actually used; comparable to having an accident plan in case of an injury.

Firstly, make sure to stop play. Have everyone who hears the safe word repeat it to make sure it is heard. Anyone sufficiently far away to still not hear it can be considered sufficiently removed from the situation to continue play. This increases the chances everyone hears it and makes the act of safe-wording feel like a group act rather than individual act.

Secondly, make the situation safe. The person who safe-worded has the option to explain what prompted it. Even if play has stopped, the cause (e.g. a phobia trigger or allergen) may still need to be dealt with. There is no obligation to do so if they don't want to explain their reason. Depending on the context, a brief general check for health & safety issues (e.g. trip hazards, fire risks) in the area can also be sensible at this point.

Thirdly, congratulations. This makes it clear the player was right to safe-word; doing so shows all involved are playing with material personally strong for them, and doing so responsibly. Immediate praise is a good way to encourage use of safe words in the future. In a large group scene this might take the form of applause, in a smaller scene this might be a simple handshake and verbal praise. The organiser should lead on this and invite others to follow.

'Safe word scenes' should thus be framed in a positive light.

The longer-term issue of when to resume play needs to be considered, but is situation dependent and beyond the scope of this article.

Summary

The crucial point to take away is that stating what safe words are in a pre-game briefing is not itself sufficient. Some points to reflect on:

- Consider how best to present safe word techniques.

- Consider what variants can be used to better support their use.

- Define the normalised interactions and absolute limits.

- Avoid in general discourse both glorifying 'hardcore' play and assigning blame or guilt to scenes that involve safe words.

- Have a post-safe-word plan.

Steering For Immersion in Five Nordic larps
A new understanding of eläytyminen

Mike Pohjola

The concept of character immersion has been a cornerstone of Nordic larp discussion for fifteen years. I was surprised by how much the concept of steering introduced last year brought to my understanding of character immersion ("eläytyminen"). In this essay I look at five specific experiences with steering towards immersion, some successful, some not.

More specifically, I have usually tried to steer towards immersing in cathartic emotional experiences experiences through my character. Most often this has come through experiencing Saturnine melancholy.

The chacter immersion definition I work with here is this one:

"Immersion is the player assuming the identity of the character by pretending to believe their identity only consists of the diegetic roles." (Pohjola, 2004)

In *The Art of Steering* (2015, Montola, Saitta, Stenros), which is in this volume, steering is defined like like this:

Steering is the process in which a player influences the behavior of her character for non-diegetic reasons.

That is, out-of-character motivations guide the character in some direction. In my case, the out-of-character motivation is that of delving deeper in the character, and guiding the character towards experiencing strong emotions.

Saturnine melancholy

When watching movies, I'm most typically moved to tears when the scene deals with generations passing, time moving on, sons becoming fathers, mothers becoming grandmothers, hints of new babies eventually becoming unrecognized names on graves.

I've heard this feeling is called "Saturnine melancholy", as in melancholy related to time; from the Roman time god Saturn who eats his own son.

Scenes like the one in *The Thirteenth Warrior*, where the vikings going to battle recite: "Lo there do I see the line of my people, back to the beginning. Lo, they do call me, they bid me take my place among them."

Or the wedding scene in *Fiddle on the Roof*, where they sing Sunrise, Sunset: "Is this the little girl I carried? / Is this the little boy at play? / I don't remember growing older. / When did they?"

Why I am particularly prone to Saturnine melancholy is perhaps a topic for another essay. But I have experienced it enough times to know to steer for it.

Käpälämäki X – Kesäyö

The *Käpälämäki* series is a Harry Potter larp series set at the uncanonical Finnish magic school Käpälämäki. I attended the tenth episode.

My character was Severi Saraste, a bureaucrat from a well known family of dark magic users. He wanted nothing to do with his family, but knew his job and connections depended on them.

Severi's job in the larp was to be part of a Ministry envoy overseeing the Käpälämäki school and to make sure the Pureblood kids in the school had everything they needed.

During the course of the larp, Severi and some students were imprisoned by Aurors (magic police) because of their ties to a secret cabal of pureblood extremists.

After a few hours the students were released. Neither Saraste nor the conspirator students had said anything. The immersion was mostly to the situation of being in a damp cellar, being interrogated, trying not to be found out. Exciting, but not exactly cathartic.

Saraste was moved to the attic and left alone to ponder upon his actions.

After a while of sitting alone in the attic, I noticed my thoughts started to drift away from the larp, into matters of real-life work, family, art, food, and so on. I was running out of inner monologue for my character! I had to steer my larp ship out of these low shoals into the high seas of immersion! But I had no chart.

I pulled out my Finnish-style lengthy character description detailing Severi's childhood, contacts, plots, background, dilemmas, tasks, everything. I figured I would have hours to sit alone, so I read it with care.

"Severi only has two choices, neither of which are appealing: he can leave the pureblood extremists and gain freedom but lose everything else, or continue as before, and remain a prisoner of his community."

But wait... Was he actually offered a third choice now? Come clean to the Aurors, and rat out his whole family? They would go to prison and have no power over Severi Saraste or his career anymore. But did Severi have it in him?

This was just the sort of emotional hook I was hoping to find by re-reading the character description. It provided the lengthy alone time with the perfect inner monologue. Severi stared out the window, thinking about what to do. On the one hand, this, on the other hand, that...

And then the in-game radio started playing a sad wizarding jazz song downstairs. Severi could just hear the melodramatic tone, and then the tears came. After I had enough of crying, Severi demanded to see the Aurors again.

"I wish to change my statement."
"In what way?"
"I want to confess."

After that the game took a whole new direction for myself and for many other players, including the Aurors and the other conspirators.

I had not planned for this in any way, and neither had the character writer Lissu Ervasti. But by chance, steering, and character immersion, I received the full Aristotelian experience. First, an insoluble dilemma (act one), getting into trouble because of it (act two), then a recognition of some inner truth (anagnorisis), and a complete turn of direction (peripeteia), resulting in an outcome that at first would have seemed impossible (act three). (See also Pohjola, 2003)

The immersive experience would have been just as strong without the turning point, but in this case it happened to serve as fuel for more game content.

Monitor Celestra

Monitor Celestra was a big Swedish larp set in the world of the reimagined TV series *Battlestar Galactica*. The larp was set in the time of the pilot episode, where almost all mankind has just been destroyed by the Cylon machines. Only a handful of spaceships survived and formed a fleet, which included both the military museum ship Galactica, political ship Colonial One, and the research vessel Celestra.

I played the surgeon on board the Celestra, Dr. P. Albert. (The larp was played three times, and all characters were non-gendered. I named myself Pavel.)

The written character mostly consisted of group briefs, like "Cultural Affiliation: Tauron," "Group: Celestra Crew," "Subgroup: Medical Staff," and "Other Affiliations: Cylon Sympathizers."

Before the group briefs I had a small chapter summarizing my character as a Cylon loving doctor. Then at the bottom of the description this "Cylon loving doctor" idea was extrapolated and imbued with playing directions, and out-of-character duties (such as determining the severity of wounds and illnesses).

The "Cylon loving doctor" might seem like a fun character to play, but in the actual larp, the understandable lack of cylons and limited space for medical practice made this almost irrelevant. So I was left with very little of the pre-made material being useful.

We were told to flesh out the characters ourselves, as is quite often the case in Swedish and Danish larps. In Finnish larps the larp design is communicated mostly through the characters, so the "make your own character" style seems strange even for me after a decade and a half of larping abroad.

In this case we were given a forum, and told to develop inter-character relations there. Fine.

I fleshed out my character by giving him a wife and family on one of the planets that was destroyed. I made Dr. Pavel Albert a long-haired hippie with a California drawl in his speech to very clearly mark him a civilian and thus contrast him further with the military personnel I knew would be manning the Celestra at some point.

I decided P. Albert had worked on the Celestra to pay his med school loans, but was now almost done with it, and would get to return to Tauron next week. And I developed some low-key relationships with other players, but unfortunately nothing that would become truly essential in the larp. And, assuming this was a sandbox type larp, I decided the character would try to take over the ship from the eventual military occupation, if push came to shove.

Like the "Cylon loving doctor" description, all of these, too, became void in the course of the larp. I ended up having to do a lot of impromptu steering in order to get something out of the larp.

The aftermath of humanity being destroyed would have been perfect material for character immersion, and even Saturnine melancholy: I am the last member of my family. My wife has just died. My parents had died. 99.99+ % of humanity has died. But during the course of the game (as of the TV pilot), we would be given new hope of a secret thirteenth colony of mankind: Earth.

Unfortunately most of this emotional potential was made void by the heavy emphasis on action plots, and the breaks in the game.

The plot model Brute Force Larp Design is discussed in the article *The Blockbuster Formula* (2015, Fatland & Montola).

The game was divided into four acts, with a break between each. Sometimes the break was short, at other times we would leave the location for the hostel. There was always a time leap for the characters. Fine. But the dramatic structure that works for television, does not always work for larps: the big information with the potential emotional impact ("Earth exists!") was always delivered at the very end of the act. Meaning that we never got to play characters reacting to them.

Similar problems prevented focus on the "everyone you knew is dead" aspect of the setting.

There were plots elements in the larp, too. Is the ship controlled by the original civilian crew or the military visitors? What side is the Presidential representative on? Does Celestra contact the Cylon ship or the refugee ship? Do we have Cylons onboard?

I do not know how well these "main plots" worked in other runs of the larp, but in the second one that I attended, the whole system was unfortunately broken (see also *The Blockbuster Formula*). A bunch of players who had contributed to the larp via crowdfunding and made the whole thing possible were promised a "special plot," which turned out to be that they were all members of a secret spy organization.

Their characters were then divided into various groups in high positions, meaning they essentially controlled most of the main plots. During the course of the larp I realized it was not built like the sandbox I expected, and the main plots seemed strangely impenetrable.

What was left was more like an amusement park, and I started steering in that direction to get some enjoyment out of it.

It worked like this: Dr. Pavel Albert went to a location, event or person (such as the AI lab, the bridge, the mutiny, the murder, the Presidential Aide, or the Cylon prisoner), and interacted with everyone as much as possible.

When the situation had exhausted its dramatic potential, he went to a new location. This was most apparent when interacting with GM-played supporting characters, such as the Cylon prisoner. Eventually dialogue with the prisoner started to repeat itself, like talking to non-player characters in a video game.

These emergency steering maneuvers eventually lead to meaningful, emotional content, too, as Dr. Albert, the Presidential Aide (played in a wonderfully enabling manner by Christopher Sandberg), and a few others started hatching a plan to steal a shuttle and flee from Celestra together.

Halat hisar

Halat hisar was set in an alternate reality where the Palestinian situation had happened in Finland. The fictional Ugric people had been given parts of Finland, and had conquered even more. All Finns lived under occupation in "East Bank" (corresponding to West Bank) or the Åland Islands (corresponding to Gaza Strip). It was played in Parkano in November 15–17, 2013, and organized by a Palestinian-Finnish team.

The larp was set at the Finnish University of Helsinki, in divided Helsinki. My character Tuomas Kallo, described as "The Conflicted Realist," was running for the head of the student council as one of the Social Democratic Liberation Party ("Fatah") candidates. Other parties were the Party of Christ ("Hamas"), Pan-Nordic Liberation Front, and the Socialist Resistance Front.

My dramatic function was explained in the character description: "You represent the establishment, and through you, maybe the radical roots of today's ruling party can be seen." In this reading I was essentially a younger, Finnish version of Mahmoud Abbas, the President of the Palestinian Authority.

Early on in the larp soldiers from the Ugric Defense Forces occupied the university and placed it under curfew. Students and faculty were arrested, interrogated and tortured. During the larp rumors started spreading that my character was somehow in league with the UDF, perhaps giving them information. It was impossible to refute such accusations, but they essentially cost Tuomas Kallo the election and some friendships.

The big turning point, and cause of emotional turmoil for Tuomas Kallo was a student demonstration against the UDF soldiers. I took the megaphone and lead the group in singing nationalist songs. Some people yelled slogans, others threw stones.

The other megaphone was held by a fellow candidate, the Socialist Marie Isola (played by Jamie MacDonald). She was the de facto leader of the demonstration, and got into a shouting match with one of the soldiers.

Things got aggressive, and the UDF soldier shot Marie.

Somebody called the ambulance, which drove towards the demonstration, but was held by the soldiers at the road block, and then forbidden to get close to the bleeding student. When the medical professionals eventually got to Marie, she was already dead. After the larp we found out this was all pre-written by the organizers.

Marie's death was such a blow that it effectively ended the demonstration. We went back to the university building, everyone full of emotions: sadness, shock, bitterness, anger, fear...

I was ready to let the emotions wash over me. It was time to steer towards Saturnine melancholy!

For that, I found the perfect Turku-style location for solitary immersion: a lookout tower with a very small room on the top, and in every direction windows to the blackness that is Finnish November. There was even one chair there. Just one, as if it was designed for being alone. Perhaps it was.

I stared out the window into the dramatic darkness, seeing soldiers marching on the campus. How horrible...

Had I chosen the right path? Would we avenge Marie? Would we hold a vigil for her? Should I be more radical? What would my father have done, had he not been killed by UDF soldiers? Perfect Saturnine melancholic material for emotional immersion.

But then I, the player, remembered something! This larp used the Black Box technique, and I had decided to try that. I imagined the emotional potential triggered by Marie's death would be prime material for Black Boxing, so I took the wheel, made a quick U turn, and walked the stairs down to the Black Box room.

Unfortunately the Black Box was taken. Many players had scenes to play with Marie: flashback, dreams, "what could have beens", and so on. Marie's player would soon play something else, so all this had to be done now. Mohamad Rabah, the Game Master in charge of the Black Box, asked me to wait.

This called for complex steering: I had to hold on to the emotional potential but not tap into it. To do this, I walked around the building trying to avoid any contact with others who might inflict me with dialogue or plots that would dilute the emotional potential.

Eventually I made it to the Black Box and played a dream sequence where Mohamad played Tuomas Kallo's father. After plenty of "What would you do, dad?" and "My son, you already know what you have to do" we concluded the scene. I found it difficult to fully utilize the emotional potential I had come in with, perhaps because I lacked mechanisms for steering Mohamad, or because Mohamad had some other aim with the Black Box scene.

Some time after the Black Box scene we held a small memorial event for Marie. We raised the Finnish flag, sung some sad songs about how we join our ancestors in Heaven and one day, we, too, will fade from memory. That was what finally made Tuomas Kallo (and me) cry.

KoiKoi

KoiKoi was a larp about stone-age hunter-gatherers played in Norway on July 1 – 5, 2014. The larp was played in numerous Scandinavian languages, and us Finns played strangers from a neighboring tribe who had become humans, that is, members of this tribe. My character Duskregn was a loincloth-wearing warrior married into the Bear Family.

The larp was only a little about any single character's individual dilemmas and dramas, and quite a lot about the society going about its business. Children becoming men, women and nuk, young men and women traded to other families to bear new children, and the old dying and being remembered. It should have been a perfect opportunity for some Saturnine melancholy, but somehow I never got there.

All the instances of transformation were ritualized, which made perfect sense for the larp and could easily have added to the atmosphere. So we had a ManRit for children becoming men, a KvinnRit for children becoming women, a NukRit for children becoming nuk, a DödsRit for old people dying, a MinnsRit for remembering those who had died after the previous KoiKoi meeting, and several family rites for leaving one family and joining another. Some families even had washing rites and such.

Between all those rituals and the getting ready for them, the content of my larp was mostly about hanging with my family, sleeping with people from other families, and dancing and telling stories in the big tent-like house.

In a modern-day larp I would have brought a book for my character to read during downtime. In this case, the storytelling took that part.

I listened to stories, performed in stories, and told stories of my own. As a professional writer coming up with stories is something I enjoy doing, and I am quite experienced at it. Unfortunately I ended up steering too much into coming up with stories for others to hear, instead of steering for getting everything out of whatever situation I was in.

Most of the time I didn't realize this was a problem, until after the larp. But after the MinnsRit where we remembered the dead, and everybody told stories about their loved ones, I was disappointed to not have really felt it.

All the elements were there: generations passing, everyone having lost their loved ones, us becoming aware of our mortality and of the fact that others will eventually take our place and tell stories of us. We even had a few ancestors (nuks with masks) watching us. It should have been a cry-fest for me, but it was not.

During the MinnsRit I spent too much brain-power on trying to come up with a story to tell. I was a recent addition to the AnKoi, but maybe I'd killed one of them earlier when I was still a Stranger. That might be a powerful, emotional twist. But who, and how? And why did they only die now? Or are there actually too many stories, and it's getting kind of boring, and it takes too long to get through the mandatory memories without me adding new ones?

What I should have done is steer for experiencing this full on, seeing us in the millennial line of people coming there to hear memories, share memories, and become memories. It is possible that due to my character's outsider and barely developed past, I lacked points in which to attach such emotions.

At times during the larp I felt not as my character but only as myself as a hunter-gatherer. Then I tried to figure out a more complex personality or back-story for my character. Maybe I was a spy from the strange tribe who was examining this tribe for weaknesses to exploit.

One of the designers of *KoiKoi*, Eirik Fatland, has spoken about how Aragorn in the Prancing Pony would be a horrible character, since he would have no connection to any of the other characters, or the plots amongst the other visitors. But he would have an inner monologue Fatland parodizes as

"I am Aragorn, I am so cool. I am Aragorn, I am so cool…" (Fatland, 2014).

An inner monologue of that kind would have been preferable to having no inner monologue at all.

For me *KoiKoi* was a very powerful experience and an excellent larp, but in this sense a failure in steering for emotional immersion.

College of Wizardry

College of Wizardry was a Danish-Polish larp played November 13 – 16, 2014, at Czocha Castle in Poland. The larp was set at a magic university in *Harry Potter* world, almost twenty years after the books.

I played Bombastus Bane, Professor of Dark Arts. Defence Against the Dark Arts, I mean. Essentially the Snape of Czocha. The professor characters were more or less created by the players themselves, but the organizers were quick to react to our ideas about contacts and plots.

Bane's whole family (mother, father, wife) had been in the wizard prison Azkaban since the war portrayed in the books. Bane's wife had been pregnant at the time of imprisonment, and had given birth to their son Vladimir in prison. Vladimir had grown up in Azkaban surrounded by Dementors and criminals.

Friday at lunch Bane received a letter informing him that his wife had passed away at Azkaban. I realized this is prime material for heavy emotions washing over me, and immediately steered towards this. I left the dining room for the Dark Forest in order to wallow in these emotions alone. Very Turku School. While I was in the Dark Forest, I realized the playing style of this larp would actually benefit from me making this as public as possible, and decided to make a steering turnabout.

I returned to the dining hall to attack the Auror Bane assumed to be responsible for killing his wife. The private emotion became a public spectacle. Essentially this meant that I suppressed the emotional potential in the death of Bane's wife, and created a dramatic scene instead. A scene, which would later on bring more emotional potential to be explored.

When the immediate conflict was resolved the Auror took Bane to a private location, and explained what had happened.

"Professor Bane, your wife didn't die naturally. She was killed."

"By whom?"
"By your son Vladimir."

Horrible news for Bane, but great material for emotional immersion! He was very distraught, but didn't cry his heart out, yet.

What finally broke Bane's heart (and mine) was the Sorting Ceremony on the evening of that day. Looking at all the new juniors walking to their houses, and being cheered, Bane suddenly realised Vladimir was nineteen, and this year he would have been a junior.

My thoughts briefly touched on this idea while observing the Sorting. It immediately triggered a strong, sad emotion. The kind of emotion one normally steers away from in real life. But a larp is a safe space for experiencing them, so I steered right into it. One never knows what one finds when exploring these subconscious emotional triggers, but in this case, my larp ship crashed into an island of gold!

I started thinking that if Vladimir hadn't grown up in Azkaban he would have been sorted into House Faust, and Bane would have been so proud. Or sorted into some other house, and Bane would have had petty arguments with his son.

And Vladimir would be so excited about all those student crushes and initiation rituals and all the ordinary life of the nineteen-year-old wizard. Which would never happen.

And maybe his mother Miranda would have been there on the balcony with Bane watching him. Which would never happen.

I cried in and off for an hour about this, first looking down at the ceremony, then afterwards when a student witch took Bane aside and he poured his heart out to her.

Even though the larp *College of Wizardry* itself was far from tragic or sad, it provided the backdrop for a great experience of cathartic Saturnine melancholy.

Conclusion

Steering is a very useful way for a player to analyze their behavior after the larp. By understanding the idea behind steering, the player can also realize when they are doing it during the larp, and it can make it steering easier, and more fruitful.

Steering does not need to happen in speech or actions, it can also happen inside the player, guiding for more interesting thoughts.

I have given five examples of trying to steer towards emotional experiences within character immersion. Some of them were successful, some not: and in the case of *Celestra*, I had to abandon that goal mid-game, and steer for something else.

Only the two last larps mentioned (*KoiKoi* and *College of Wizardry*) happened after the introduction of the concept of steering. The concept allowed me to better understand even the larps I had played before it: but in the case of *College of Wizardry*, I remember actively thinking about steering as I was doing it.

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The Art of Steering
Bringing the Player and the Character Back Together

Markus Montola, Jaakko Stenros & Eleanor Saitta

The rhetorics of Nordic larp often imply that roleplayers play in an intuitive fashion guided by the character, rarely or never contemplating their actions during the game. In reality, however, we are often keenly aware of what we are doing as our characters and why. This paper explores the practice of making in-character decisions based on off-game reasons – also known as steering.

In discussions about roleplaying, there is a tendency to treat the character as an entity separate from the player. While we need some kind of separation to understand the contextual difference of killing an orc and adjusting a name-tag, this separation also obscures some important processes of roleplaying. As the participants in a larp enact their characters, the choices they make as characters are not always driven by diegetic (in-game) motivation. The rhetorics of immersion, character and coherence would have us believe that characters in roleplaying games, at least when played by "good" roleplayers, do not let extra-diegetic motivation invade the game world.

In the actual practice of roleplaying however, player motivations seep into the game constantly. The player of a tyrant might choose to play in a more benevolent style when interacting with beginners, or a vampire character might leave an interesting scene because the player needs to find the restroom. These are basic examples of steering, of doing things in a game due to the player's reasons – rather than the character's.

While the idea of steering complicates some ideals of what players 'should' do, we consider it a critical player skill in most larps. We hope that by naming it, we can provide players with a useful tool to discuss their craft.

We define steering as follows:

Steering is the process in which a player influences the behavior of her character for non-diegetic reasons.

In other words, while the player's character is an entity within a game world, the behavior of a steering player is motivated by reasons outside the game world. To manage this contradiction, steering players almost always attempt to maintain the semblance of coherence in their character's behavior.

Specifically, players attempt to ensure that characters maintain the *outward appearance of coherence* for the character's actions, from the perspective of other characters first and other players second. In other words, a player who is steering strives to maintain the illusion that the actions of her character make sense as a whole.

Whenever possible, players also attempt to maintain the *internal coherence* of their understanding of the character. In the above example of the vampire player looking for a restroom, the player undoubtedly fails to preserve internal coherence, but she still seeks to maintain the outward appearance of coherence for other players.

Steering is often subtle and nuanced. As an example, the player of a prison guard might be considering whether her character should pursue a love interest or fulfil her character's guard duties. In deciding that pursuing the love interest will make for a better game, she subtly decides to heed the pull of the romantic interest more strongly, maintaining her internal coherence while actually influencing her play based on a non-diegetic decision on how to generate better play.

By definition, steering is always intentional. Thus, you can never steer by accident, and it requires conscious choice and effort. The behavior in the above example would not have counted as steering if the player was just deeply focused in the romantic affair and would have never considered the effect on the larger game before deserting her post. Instead, she consciously evaluated the impact of her actions, and then acted towards deepening the romance. This can happen quickly and semi-consciously so that the player can stay in the emotional flow that inspired the choice – but it is still a marked moment the player can identify afterwards. Of course, we do steering decisions so often and so quickly that we often forget about them before the larp is over.

Steering can be used to create good or bad play. Usually such definitions depend on the play culture and the overall dynamics of the game: In a gamist aesthetic, playing to win can be seen as acceptable, while in games focusing on a play to lose aesthetic, the players are expected to steer towards failure. Steering can even be immoral or unethical, for example if a player uses her character as a pretense for stalking another player.

Not all character actions result from steering – only those actions intended to guide the character to a specific effect for reasons that exist outside of the character's conception of the world. At a minimum, we consider the reflexes and unconscious reactions of the player as external to steering. An example of the difficulty of establishing a line between steering and not-steering is player attraction toward other players: If a character's choice to pursue a romance is influenced by the desire of the player it could be seen as steering – but only if the player is aware of this.

It is also important to note that steering is something one does to one's own character. There is by definition no such thing as 'steering others'. However, through steering her own character, the player can also change the way others are playing and influence the direction of the larp as a whole. Indeed, that is often the goal.

Dual Consciousness

We believe that knowing how to steer properly is one of the most important player skills.

Since steering breaks down the division between the player and the character and exposes the moment-to-moment reality of play, it is a useful tool in taking a brutally honest look at what happens in the practice of larp.

Most of the time during larp runtime, players have the *dual consciousness* of looking at the event both as diegetic, and as non-diegetic, as play and as non-play. This dual consciousness, or *bisociation*, informs most of their actions. It is an important part of playing and games; standing with one foot within the border of play and another outside it can not only be powerful, but also instructive.

Viewing something both as play and as non-play not only teaches the viewer about the thing she is looking at, but about the overall structure. This helps in understanding the socially constructed nature of reality as a whole, but specifically it helps in understanding how a game functions. This competence at reading situations on multiple levels is a skill that can be developed in play and applied when steering.

Steering Examples

Practical
Physical needs. Food, sleep, warmth, etc. **Looking for someone.** Searching for another player to play a scene or to get the car keys. **Documentation.** Posing for or avoiding a camera. Filming in characer. **Logistics.** Entering hostile territory because that is where the toilet is. **Physical safety.** Not running in the pitch-black forest even when your pursuers do.
Smooth Play
Coherence. Preserving the external coherence, even at the expense of your internal coherence. **Legibility.** Overplaying emotions to make sure they are conveyed to other players. **Gamemastering and fateplay.** Pushing the game towards some direction as required by larp design. **Retrospective rationalization.** Smoothing over the plot holes of earlier bad steering. **Post-hoc player vetting**. Mitigating the perceived damage to the game caused by a 'bad' player. **Theme**. Accepting that vampires are real in two minutes.
Aesthetic Ideals
Narrativism and dramatism. Making a better story for yourself or others. **Gamism.** Winning conflicts, gathering power. **Immersionism.** Avoiding heavy game mechanics that might detract from character immersion. **Bleed.** Seeking maximally intense emotional impact. **360° illusion.** Avoiding the sight of the parking lot in fantasy games. **Play to lose.** Sharing secrets loudly for eavesdroppers to hear them.
Personal Experience
Boredom. Looking for stuff to do. Picking up fights. **Staying in game.** Not leaving the haunted mansion even when two people are dead. **Relevance.** Getting closer to the perceived core of the game, or seeking more agency. **Overcoming disabling design.** Deciding that your character wants to become a revolutionary only after you realize that most characters only talk to revolutionaries. **Avoiding the same-old.** Not rebelling against the tyrant in two games in a row. **Attraction.** Getting to play with skilled or cool players. **Player status.** Doing things likely to increase one's status as a player. **Shame**. Not wanting to do or to be seen doing certain things, even as a character.
Ethical and Unethical
Consent. Observing a slow-down safeword such as "yellow" or "brems". **Trust.** Creating a safe situation in which to play demanding scenes. **Inclusiveness.** Including characters that have nothing to do at that moment. **Harassment**. Using the larp to stalk another player. **Revenge.** Killing your character because you killed mine in an earlier game.

There is nothing mysterious about this process. It simply means that a player is able to see at the same time both the cheerful friend who gave her a lift to the larp wearing old army surplus clothes, and the frightful commander of the space station her character could never approach. Both of these things are true at the same time. Recognizing the difference between the diegetic and the non-diegetic is the difference roleplaying is built upon. However, that separation is not actual, but rather one made in interpretation.

The idea that one realm, the non-diegetic, is allowed to influence the other realm, the diegetic, may seem wrong, even immoral. Indeed, the idea of steering may seem like anathema to roleplaying. Is not the key tenet of roleplaying the idea of portraying a fictional being in a fictional setting – without the petty motivations a player may have outside roleplaying? Yet steering is not a bad or an undesirable thing to do. In fact, many players steer almost all the time when they are playing. The diegetic world of fantasy never maps completely on the physical world, nor does the body of the player completely become that of the character. The draw of larp is that it is not-real and that it feels real.

Steering and Immersionism

The concept of steering – and the criticism of motivations originating with the player – emerge from a tradition that values *character immersion* as an ideal. Immersion is perhaps most frequently defined as moments when player forgets herself – when the dual consciousness of simultaneously being a player and a character fades away and player only focuses on being her character. This experience has been characterized, for example, as the *player pretending to believe* that she is her character (Pohjola 2004) and as *bracketing* the everyday self (Fine 1983).

It has been compared to ideas such as *flow* (Hopeametsä 2008) and *wilful suspension of disbelief* (Pohjola 2004).

In the *Manifesto of the Turku School*, Mike Pohjola (2000) argued that character immersion should be seen as the ideal aesthetic of the larp. But with an ideology that forbids dual consciousness comes some baggage – it prohibits steering:

Sometimes it might be fun to do something that is not in strict accordance with the character, but – unless the GM has specifically asked you to do so – THAT IS FORBIDDEN.

(Pohjola 2000.)

The psychological idealism focused on immersion has faded since the turn of the millennium. It is now commonly acknowledged in the Nordic larp discourse that even when player's focus is on her character she still does not become the character. The idea that someone could use character immersion as a moral justification for punching another player in the face would universally be found ridiculous.

But even as full character immersion has been found impossible, this rhetoric of *playing true to the character* has persisted. The dogma of character fidelity can be seen whenever players discuss whether it is realistic that the king fell in love with the peasant girl, or whether it was credible that mortal enemies joined forces in order to win the war against orcs.

However, as the player cannot psychologically transform into her character, the problem of Pohjola's statement is that it is impossible to determine which actions are in "strict accordance with the character". Even as a player, one can determine several credible courses of action for almost any situation the character can be in.

This uncertainty and ambiguity about what would be fitting for a character is what makes steering possible. If there was always one right choice for a character to make, steering would be meaningless. It is this very uncertainty that is the site for steering – the minute choices a character makes. Steering is rarely about making major life choices and often about pushing a discussion gently in a new direction.

Indeed, the skill in question is not entirely dissimilar to the skills one needs when steering conversation away from difficult topics in an everyday social situation like a polite chat with colleagues over coffee. When you understand that you have a potentially inappropriate joke that is perfect for the situation, you still decide whether or not to tell it. Sometimes that decision may be done very quickly, subtly, or half-unconsciously.

The strict reading of immersionism presented above appears to be incompatible with the idea of steering. However, contemporary immersionists do not argue that character immersion is an overwhelming and persistent state. Rather, it is seen as an *aesthetic ideal* and a goal to strive for when playing.

From this perspective, we actually argue that some amount of steering is even a *requirement* for immersionist play. The immersionist player seeks to ignore and forget the fact she is larping while doing so. This wilful suspension of disbelief requires the player to maintain internal coherence of her character: It might be hard to forget yourself and become a medieval queen if you are standing on the balcony with the clear view to the parking lot. Getting a powerful immersionist experience of committing a tragic suicide is more likely if you consciously choose to commit one.

Or, as Pohjola (2011, see also his paper in this book) wrote himself years later:

Whenever we see interesting developments that will enhance our story, our experience and our character immersion, we have to jump at the chance to engage with them. Otherwise we're not doing anyone any favors. In a larp you should be your own game master and help your own character immersion by building a better game for yourself.

The reason why the idea of steering is sometimes seen to be at odds with *The Manifesto of the Turku School* is probably historical. It was written at a time when player motivations were seen to be influencing Finnish roleplaying too much.

Although it was a response to *Dogma 99* (Fatland & Winård 1999), it was actually directed against gamism (steering to win), dramatism (steering to create interesting scenes and stories), and bad roleplaying (for example, steering on the expense of coherence).

The idea of steering shows how rare moments of real immersion and flow are. By lifting the dogmatic ways of talking about the play experience tinted with the idea of immersion, it helps account for many of the actions a player takes during runtime. By shifting emphasis from the ideals of playing to the actual practice it illuminates what we really do while roleplaying.

Designing for Steering

The idea that larps contain characters that are there to direct the play is as old as larping itself. This is what the non-player characters and other gamemaster controlled actors have been doing since the beginning of larping (cf. Stenros 2013). However, player characters have done this since the beginning as well – even if it was not always directly discussed.

Explicit steering instructions have been a part of the tradition of Nordic larps at least since the emergence of *fateplay* (see Fatland 2005), a style of making larps where players are given some instructions on how to behave in certain situations – the character Claudius, for example, was fated to die in the larp *Hamlet* (2002).

More recently, larps such as *The Monitor Celestra* (2013) have introduced the idea of having large amounts of characters with pervasive and persistent steering duties. In the *Celestra*, which featured strict naval and military hierarchies, higher-ranking officers were expected to generate play for their subordinates. For example, the commanding officer of the Colonial Navy was instructed as follows:

As the Major in charge, your foremost duty is to act as a gamemaster for bridge and CIC personnel, generating interesting play and putting flavor into the tasks of running the ship [...] Always keep in mind that your job isn't to be an effective Major, but to be a good player/game master, and enable interesting action for others.

(Character material, The Monitor Celestra.)

While all players had similar duties, the higher the character was in a hierarchy, the stronger the expectation of steering was. This was of course a practical solution: By having the Major to steer hard the game masters could alter the course of the entire larp, as she could use her diegetic authority to impact the game for all her subordinates, shielding them from the need to steer.

This mechanic worked rather well for members of those hierarchies, especially compared to older and more selfish playstyles (see Fatland & Montola in this book for a detailed discussion).

Although the top brass was expected to steer the most, *Celestra* explicitly encouraged following the philosophy of *play to lose*, which basically expects everyone to steer in the larp. The following play instruction was given under the heading "Rules" in the briefing materials:

You are expected to play to lose, prettily. In a game where experiencing the journey is the whole point, winning is moronic. Losing, on the other hand, is dramatic and cool since it puts a spin on the story and contributes to emotional impact.

(The Monitor Celestra Briefing.)

These games have established a new steering norm along the ones such as gamism, dramatism, immersionism and bleed: In these games, players are expected to steer in order to play to lose. This anti-gamist stance can arguably contribute to many other play aesthetics, as it "puts a spin on the story" for dramatists and "contributes to emotional impact" for immersionists and bleedhunters.

Obligatory and Heavy Steering

Sometimes it is every larper's obligation to steer. Barring some unusual arrangement, roleplayers share an almost universal implicit obligation to *steer for coherence*. Different game styles have different conceptions of what coherence is, yet internal logic of some kind is valued in all larp cultures.

In some roleplaying games, especially larger larps with less-tightly organized plots, what would be seen as a significant coherence conflict in another game may be glossed over by all players concerned as they acknowledge tacitly that a conflict has occurred by choosing not to fix it, as it would require too much work on the part of disparate groups of players.

In other games, often smaller or more tightly plotted, it would be seen as a serious problem for such a breach of coherence to occur to start with, requiring either heavy steering by all parties to fix immediately or possibly (in some play cultures) a break of play so the 'truth' of the situation can be decided directly by the players off-game. Usually, when coherence cannot be achieved by steering, the next solution is to ignore the problem; to steer play away from the mess.

Two examples can help clarify this. In long-running campaigns the character arcs can become increasingly improbable. Like in soap operas and superhero comics, certain ancient acts may be de-emphasized by those character's players.

In larps this works particularly well, as no one can go back in time three years to check and nitpick what actually and specifically happened. In larps that use them, mechanics like experience points can also shift balances between masters and apprentices or parents and children, if players put in different amounts of play time.

Another example comes from the second run of *The Monitor Celestra*, where at one point the key to the hyperdrive was stolen, and a dozen characters got involved in recovering it from the characters who used it as leverage in a negotiation. Problems arose because the game organizers held that no such key existed, as some player had improvised it up. As the characters raced to solve the issue the gamemasters ignored it; as far as they were concerned, this plot did not exist.

The game masters could still not solve the problem simply by issuing a decree, because too many characters were involved with the key.

In the end the issue was solved twice in the game – once very rapidly due to game master pressure and again by some characters not being aware of the first time – and only then were all the characters able to move on. No equifinal understanding on *what actually* happened can be produced.

When characters are forced to steer hard, it causes wider ripples in the play. Specifically, one player steering hard may leave another player confused about the steerer's character's identity, her relationship with the second player's character, or the events of the larp. This is sometimes unavoidable, especially when a player is forced to steer in a character-breaking way. This is a specific kind of game incoherence associated with steering that many players, especially heavily immersionist players, may consider unacceptable.

Steering can be characterized as *character-breaking steering* when the player cannot maintain her internal sense of coherence. For example, if the player is executing a game master directive that is important for the larger plot of a game but finds their character has moved away from the gamemasters' expectations of who they would be when the instructions were originally specified, they will need to steer their character to ensure they fulfill their obligations to the game, but will do so knowing that this action does not make sense for the character.

Likewise, a player may realize part-way through a game that they have played themselves into a corner, and if they wish to continue playing or return to the main plot of the game, they will have to simply reinvent part of their character. While to be character-breaking, this shift need only be incoherent to the player, when done poorly (or under extreme circumstances) it will often result in the character also appearing incoherent to other players.

In order to repair the disruption created by heavy steering, players sometimes engage in *retroactive rationalization*, wherein they decide on the thus far unvoiced rationale for choices they have already made to maintain the appearance of coherence. For instance, a player who forgot their character's sidearm may later steer, deciding that their character was feeling especially secure that morning, and thought they would not need it.

If the player discovers that this will cause a coherence problem with other players expectations, they may engage in *retroactive rationalization retconning* – if they have not already told the other players, they can changing their prior retroactive rationalization. In this example, the player might decide that instead of being supremely confident, their sidearm was actually stolen, allowing them to integrate with a game mood of suspicion and paranoia.

The roleplay agreement (Sihvonen 1997), the social contract that participants treat the player and the character as separate entities and refrain from making judgement about one based on the other, is a cornerstone of roleplaying. Without it establishing trust amongst players to also engage in anti-social behaviors, like playing a villain, can be hard. The concept of steering does not obliterate the roleplay agreement. However, it needs to be modified; the separation need not be between player and character, but diegesis and non-play. Indeed, it is the character that acts as an alibi for steering. The player can choose what she wants to do or what best fits the larp, and as long as it somehow makes sense in relation to the facts of the character thus far established, it is acceptable.

Conclusion

Sensitivity to other players – knowing when and how to steer – is a key player skill. A considerate player can create play for others, pace drama, include others players, support beginners, and avoid hogging plots and secrets. A good larper steers in a nuanced way that is invisible to other players and does not damage the coherence of play. Steering is not a bad thing to do in a game, and most of us steer much of the time while we are playing.

Just like good steering contributes to the game, refusal to steer can detract from it. If one player does not steer, her fellow players may be forced to steer even harder to sustain the game. It is not rare to encounter a selfish player in a larp with a preference to avoid steering who expects other players to accommodate her playstyle. The other players may end up steering hard to maintain play and allow her to preserve the immersive flow instead of caring about the overall game.

Steering is a skill and not all players are good at it. Steering coherently and reliably requires thinking and performing simultaneously on two, three, or more levels while maintaining an accurate model of both the perceptions of both other characters and their players.

Players holding on to an ideal of playing entirely without dual consciousness may even argue that the expectation of steering ruins their game. Steering is perceived by some players as distancing them from their character. In part, the degree of distance perceived may relate to how quickly players are able to slip between different levels of play.

It is not necessarily the case that more intense emotional experiences require less movement between levels of player consideration, but this appears to be true for some players. Some players and some game contracts may consider steering to be cheating, as in those contexts, only diegetic concerns are considered to be acceptable as motivations for player choices. We believe that such contracts are often self-deceptive, and that acknowledgement of the role of steering in play is critical to designing for character immersion in the context of a coherent, functional game.

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Ludography

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Steering is the process in which a player influences the behavior of her character for non-diegetic reasons.

The Blockbuster Formula
Brute Force Design in *The Monitor Celestra*
and *College of Wizardry*

Eirik Fatland & Markus Montola

2013 and 2014 may be remembered as the conception of the Nordic blockbuster larp. Two ambitious larps – *The Monitor Celestra* in Sweden and *College of Wizardry* in Poland – succeeded in attracting an unprecedented level of international attention from media and players. They did so, in part, by advertising their inspiration from established fictional worlds with large fan followings (*Battlestar Galactica* and *Harry Potter* respectively), and by the choice of spectacular and eye-grabbing locations: a naval destroyer turned spaceship, and a castle made into a wizarding college.

Both productions were created by large teams: *Celestra* boasted a team of 85 people, while *College of Wizardry* had a team of 20 organizers and helpers, plus 33 NPC players. Although they were partially run by professional larpmakers, they were both non-profit games[1]. A ticket to *College of Wizardry* cost €180 and a ticket to *Celestra* twice as much, but they both provided players with room and board, as well as some costuming, yielding good value for money. The 32-hour *Celestra* was run three times for a total of 389 players, with plans for remakes. *College of Wizardry,* capitalizing on the success of the initial 138-player run, sold out tickets to the 2015 re-run in minutes.

However, this is not a story about production. Neither massive production teams, enthusiastic players, nor spectacular locations are by themselves enough to create a successful larp. This is a story about the design model the *Celestra* team happened upon in their effort to produce a large larp on a rushed schedule – a model that mixed recent innovations from experimental and progressive Nordic larps back into the tried-and-true approach we will call *brute force design*. This is a story of how that model was further refined at *College of Wizardry,* and about how these larps may even set the new norm in how to create action-packed fast-paced larp entertainment for mature audiences.

Brute Force Design

Before the progressive Nordic tradition of larp, there was brute force design. Nobody, of course, called it that – they called it "organizing larp". We are proposing this name retroactively to describe an approach to designing larps that we often encountered in our own scenes the 90s, and still recognize in many of the larps produced in other traditions.

At a typical brute force larp, designers will use a plethora of techniques to drive conflict and mystery, such as:

- Characters are split into groups with *conflicting agendas* (orcs want to kill elves)

- There are *subgroups inside groups* (the elvish general wants to attack head-first to show bravery, while the king favors a stealthy approach)

- There are *power hierarchies* (the general commands the officers who command the soldiers)

- There are *secrets*, which players can discover, hoard, and trade (the general is a traitor plotting to kill the king)

- There are *puzzles* that can be solved (assemble a torn-up treasure map)

- Runtime game mastering is conducted by triggering *events*, introducing *surprises*, and inserting *messenger* characters (an NPC scout enters the tent of the king, informing that a horde of undead is approaching the camp)

The key characteristic of brute force isn't that it uses any one of the techniques in this list, but that it uses a *lot* of them simultaneously.

Rather than the *less is more* approach common in the last decade of Nordic larp design, the brute designer will embrace quantity over quality and insist that, in fact, *more is more*. The results of that are unpredictable and chaotic, but seldom boring. Some of the conflicts and puzzles might be completely forgotten, while others command centre-stage. The larp exemplified above might end in a battle of four armies, the discovery of an ancient treasure, an elvish civil war, or all of these at the same time.

In addition to the philosophy of more is more, a typical brute force design combines the diegetic social structure of *colliding power hierarchies*, and the dramatic structure built around *discovery of hidden narrative*, with the assumption that players will *play to win*.

Colliding Power Hierarchies

In a power hierarchy, the higher ranks have the right to command the lower ranks, and expect their orders – within limits – to be followed. Power hierarchies are overt: everyone knows who the boss is. Both these features distinguish power hierarchies from more subtle *status hierarchies* typically ignored by brute force designers, which describe who is socially dominant, who is allocated more attention, and whose voice is more respected.

Power hierarchies make for easy roleplaying. Neither the givers nor receivers of orders should be in any doubt as to how to perform their character's social role. They also come with clear affordances for dramatic tension: the potential for rebellion is implicit in every tyranny, and every weak leader invites intrigue for succession.

To make things more interesting, though, the brute designer will rarely settle for just one power hierarchy. Instead, games are built around the contested relationships of multiple groups. The simplest possible collision is between two hierarchies pursuing mutually exclusive goals: both the orcs and the elves are looking for the ring of power, but only one side can have it.

More complex collisions happen when characters are given allegiance to more than one hierarchy (i.e. both family and close friends), or when some allegiances are secret and aim to subvert the visible hierarchy.

These collisions serve to furnish the larp with conflict, but they also provide characters with dramatic choices: to serve country or ideology, friend or family.

Discovery of Hidden Narrative

Brute force designs will usually distribute clues and puzzle pieces throughout the game, but they aim to be more than simple treasure hunts. The clues spread through character backgrounds and *introduced* by NPCs will often combine to reveal *backstory*, the diegetic myths of the past that preceded the larp, and that often impart important further clues on how to win it; for example, by revealing the true motivations of other characters. Buried items combine to form game-changing weapons, or devices that reveal even more of the backstory.

In this way, the larp designer tries to fit the players' experiences into a larger diegetic narrative, one that began long before the larp, and which is meant to give the unfolding of the larp meaning in the context of that larger narrative.

[1] While none of the CoW organizers got paid for their efforts, some Celestra organizers got a small payment.
[2] As many participants of the spectacular art festival / forgettable larp Futuredrome (2002) are probably aware.

Playing to Win

The structures of colliding hierarchies and puzzle - solving implicitly invite participants to *play to win*. After all, outside of roleplaying, puzzles are usually meant to be solved and games about conflict are usually played for the thrill and challenge of seeking victory.

When the brute designer can assume that players will try to reach their goals within a limited set of strategic choices, their behaviour becomes comparatively easy to give direction: the designer only needs to dictate goals and rewards for each individual or group, thereby defining what constitutes "winning" for them, and manage their resources and strategic alternatives.

Playing to win, which is the core of *gamism* (see Kim 1998), usually requires the players to compromise between roleplay and gameplay. A player may try to achieve a coherent and true-to-genre portrayal of their character, complete with personal flaws that would hinder the character in conflicts of the larp. But the moment the player faces a strategically important decision, those flaws and attitudes are often discarded in order to achieve victory.

Ups and Downs of Brute Force

Playing to win is the default expectation of most people approaching a game, while power hierarchies make for the clearest possible social roles and relationships, and the existence of secret hierarchies and solvable puzzles match Hollywood genres such as the murder mystery, the spy story, and the supernatural thriller. For this reason, brute force larps tend to be easy to play and require little explanation.

The brute force approach easily brings about a string of great scenes and powerful moments for the players.

It is also resilient against mistakes; a malfunctioning plot will be overtaken by a functional one. Finally, the sheer amount of content – more is more – usually leaves each player with plenty of options for what to do next.

The key word, though, is "usually": the chaos of brute force design provides no guarantees – of anything. And implicit in the model are also a number of dangers.

First of all, players in a brute force larp easily get overrun by a *plot train*. Secretly digging for treasure in the forest? Too bad. The elves just attacked, and the forest is the battleground. Adrenaline-pumped and ready to fight the final battle?

A pity; the generals just declared a truce in order to to pursue the hunt for hidden treasure. The emergent narrative of one group can easily disable the play of another group; crisis and conflict in particular trump subtler themes.

With power hierarchies comes the risk of *plot monopolization*: the characters at the top, if they play their cards strategically and sensibly, tend to sniff out and take control of the business of their underlings. Plot for the underlings is tricky to begin with: two kings are easier to write than twenty soldiers, and the designer's attention – biased by a lifetime of exposure to film and literature – is often attracted to the former.

With the atmosphere of secrecy that hidden narrative and potential traitors tend to produce, the monopolized plots tend to become opaque, known only to leaders and their trusted advisors. At their worst, brute force designs provide great entertainment for the handful of players with high-ranking characters, at the expense of all the other players.

As mentioned, playing to win often leads players to sacrifice character coherence when encountering strategic choices. Increasing the number of plots further fragments the experience: the fisherman's wife no longer has a function when the larp turns to battle against the orcs.

When overrun by a competing plot train, the player will need to reinterpret their character as someone different, someone who actually has a role to play in the plot. Brute force larps, while they often yield memorable scenes, also generate moments of frustration as players need to internally renegotiate their characters while steering[3] around plots and colliding allegiances.

Players do not always accept such compromises. At any given brute force larp of the 1990s, you would find individuals who approached the larp with other ideals than playing to win, culminating in manifestoes such as *Dogma 99* (Fatland & Wingård 1999) and the *Manifesto of the Turku School* (Pohjola 2000) that confronted gamist play from different perspectives.

Dogma 99 prohibited backstory, secrecy, main plots, main characters and "superficial" action – in other words: hidden narrative and colliding hierarchies. The Turku Manifesto insisted that players should approach roleplaying with no other goal than to immerse in character, dispensing with goals such as playing to win, and implied that a coherent and self-consistent simulation, free of narrative direction, should be the goal of larp designers.

Subsequent innovations in the Nordic larp discourse have served to emphasize, facilitate, and focus on those other ideals, from perfectly coherent simulation to faithfulness to the genre and narrative arcs.

These newer arthaus larps have emphasized relationships over conflict, implicit status over explicit power, life in the trenches over the adrenaline of the battlefield. They have evolved techniques such as workshopping, blackbox scenes and inner monologues to broaden the expression and to help players develop characters deeper.

Some have surrounded their players with a fully immersive *360° illusion* (Koljonen 2007) made of impeccable physical representations and simulated access to outside world, while others have done away with physical illusion entirely and used empty rooms with stage lights, symbolic props and non-diegetic music.

Surveying the state of the Nordic larp discourse at 2012, it appears that brute force had fallen entirely out of fashion in this progressive scene.

Brute Force in The Monitor Celestra

The Monitor Celestra was a larp set in the world of *Battlestar Galactica*. It was played on the Halland-class destroyer HMS *Småland*, built in 1951. The game was created around the vision of playing space drama within a beautiful self-enclosed environment of 360° illusion in the spirit of the classic Swedish larps *Carolus Rex* (1999) and *Hamlet* (2002).

The organizers went to great lengths turning the museum ship into a decommissioned Monitor-class vessel commandeered for military use in the aftermath of the fall of the Twelve Colonies of Kobol. Most notably, the larp featured a system of control terminals for navigating through the galaxy, communicating with other vessels, and fighting space battles.

[3] See The Art of Steering by Montola, Stenros & Saitta in this book.

During the first act, the Celestra found herself stranded in deep space, separated – perhaps irrevocably – from the remainder of humanity, pursued by the vast firepower of the enemy Cylons, with onboard society deeply fractured.

At the first glance, the *Celestra* design bears resemblance to a typical brute force larp. *Celestra* featured at least a dozen colliding power hierarchies ranging from Colonial Navy to the civilian crew of the vessel, from the Vergis corporation to organized crime factions. The larp was set in the immediate aftermath of the destruction of human civilization, so which of these hierarchies would command the allegiance of any one character was anyone's guess.

The game masters had prepared surprises, such as Cylon infiltrators, and occasionally brought in non-player characters to stir the pot. There were hidden narratives to be discovered by piecing together clues and asking NPCs the right questions.

For example, the players could figure out the origin story of the three Cylon models, determining whether they were friend or enemy, and learn to understand the holographic ghosts that haunted the ship. Clearly, the philosophy of more is more was at work.

However, *The Monitor Celestra* added several elements to the concoction. While not all design choices worked out equally well, we can discern a new model of larp design in the combination of the ones that did.

While these additions were mostly tried-and-true design solutions, the way they fit together and complemented each other was new and unique, with the potential to improve significantly on the brute force design model.

Playing to Lose

Most importantly, the *Celestra* team subverted the brute force tradition by insisting that all participants *play to lose*. The players were instructed in detail on how to avoid winning the larp, and were obliged to follow that instruction: in fact *The Monitor Celestra* Briefing document distributed to players proclaimed that "playing to win is for asshats anyway".

Although *Celestra* may have been the first Nordic larp to explicitly tell players to play to lose, the idea goes back at least to Keith Johnstone's (1979) work on improvisational theatre. At previous Nordic larps focused on oppression or tragedy, such as *Hamlet*, the necessity of playing to lose did not need to be articulated: these larps did not make any sense if approached with a gamist mentality.

Celestra also subverted gamism at its holy of holies, with gun rules emphasizing responsibility and drama over fairness and challenge:

A gun controls a room until another gun is pulled. […] The rule is simple: they get what they want, whereupon the gun is holstered or otherwise removed from play. It's the responsibility of the whole room involved to play up the lethality of the situation […] When the gun wielder has gotten what she wanted, it is her responsibility to get the gun out of play – by running away (good luck with that), holstering the gun, dropping it and surrendering, or stand down in some other way […] You can never stop someone brandishing a gun from getting what she wants, except by pulling another gun. The second gun now trumps the first.

(The Monitor Celestra Briefing.)

Breaking Up Plot Monopoly

In addition to asking that participants play to lose, *Celestra* featured widespread *player duties*[4]. The scientist characters were instructed to share secrets late in the game for dramatic impact, or to introduce other characters to HoloBand equipment used to create diegetic black box scenes in the style of the *Caprica* TV series.

Civilian journalists were instructed to gather information, to keep everyone posted, and to activate civilians by providing them with news to play on. Corporate middle management had player duties to keep the game dynamic by repeatedly gaining the trust of one of the factions and then switching sides or staging coups.

Most of the player duties served to break up plot monopolies and emphasized playing to lose: to have characters reveal secrets they strategically should have kept to themselves, to involve and inform others of their agendas and back story.

While in a typical brute force larp, power hierarchies end up serving the players on the top, *Celestra* sought to make them serve the players at the bottom. The tops of the hierarchies received extensive player duties, encouraging them to funnel plot downwards in the hierarchy and make choices leading to better roleplay, rather than making strategically smart decisions.

Being a cog in the machine provides the player with a social role and game content, even when it means running errands or monitoring a comms terminal. By building an elaborate 360° illusion, with technology simulating a fully functional spaceship, such tasks could be set up to give nominally bottom-tier characters agency and relevance.

Being in charge of the comms terminal meant that the messenger could withhold or sell crucial information, and the engineers in the reactor could shut off power to other parts of the ship at a whim. Even when they chose to obey orders to the letter, these characters were exercising agency.

In terms of play experience, though, not all errands are equal. Especially in the first run, some players noticed that tasks such as standing guard alone made for poor play experience.

Playing a leader in this kind of an environment and guiding the experience of subordinates is akin to game mastering without the overview that the actual game masters enjoy: highly dependent not just on player skillset but also on the information provided by the organizers. In the second run leaders were instructed to make people always work in pairs.

Especially after this change, the players at the bottom of the hierarchy had better experiences of *Celestra* than the players left entirely outside one: It was much better to play a crewman in the engine room than a refugee without a place.

[4] In Celestra they were called "out of character duties", but we chose to simplify the expression.

The Power of Established World Material

In brute force games, players sometimes have an incoherent understanding of how to behave in the game. This pertains to things such as acting style (should every sentence uttered by elf queens sound like a fateful prophecy) and to diegetic culture (how should an elf scout salute his queen).

Being based on two television shows, *Celestra* got both the acting style and the diegetic culture almost for free – very few changes were made to the established world material, so everyone could have an equal understanding on how the world worked. Both players and designers drew on the characteristic narrative patterns of *Galactica*, such as the ever-present conflict between civilian and military leadership.

Another way of controlling players' stylistic choices is through employing an act structure. An act structure, inspired by theatrical storytelling, divides a larp into temporal chunks with explicitly different play style instructions and even conflict rules. Act structures and player duties have been used in some form in Nordic larps since the late 90s, but *Celestra* may have been the first to combine these with brute force design elements.

The four acts took the game from collaboration against the common Cylon enemy to space exploration, internal conflict, and finally the critical moments that would decide the fates of the Celestra and everyone inside. In the fashion of the 2002 larp *Hamlet*, player characters could only die in the last act – and indeed, the conflicts inside the ship escalated steadily so that characters dropped like flies in the final hours.

The Celestra Model and The Monitor Celestra

Celestra went a long way in reworking brute force design. By using established world material and slicing the larp into acts with clear purpose, player confusion was reduced and the risk of plot trains going stray was lowered. By asking participants to play to lose and distributing player duties, the tendency towards plot monopolization could be counteracted.

A thorough and technology-assisted 360° illusion made the world more coherent, gave agency to the lower rungs of the hierarchies, and made the *Celestra* a spectacular aesthetic journey.

In short, this was the secret sauce of *The Monitor Celestra*:

Brute force + play to lose + player duties + act structure + 360° illusion + established world material.

We'll call this The Celestra model, although it should be noted that this is the model we, as critics and participants, discern in the functional and mutually dependent parts of the design. For example, some techniques employed in *Celestra* have been intentionally omitted: the larp featured phantom players, diegetic blackbox scenes and verbally roleplayed Viper battles, which were not essential to the overall structure discussed in here. Thus it is not necessarily the model conceived of by the design team.

How did it work? Amongst the *Celestra* participants we find those who, two years after the event, cherish the time spent on the *Småland* as the greatest cultural experience of their life. But we also find players who left in rage and frustration long before the game had ended, and are still certain that was the right decision[6].

While these extremes are both unusual outcomes of a larp, they are not contradictory: a larp design may work differently for different players, depending on many factors such as the character they play, their personal preferences in larp design, their personal preparation and so on.

The players celebrating the larp, who are in the majority, will remember it as an important milestone in Nordic larp history – in terms of costuming, scenography, gameplay, technology and design – and as an action-packed, adventurous and emotional journey in an interactive 360° environment.

However, the critical voices are also clear. Some of the worst experiences were had by players who attended the first run, and were caused by errors that were fixed – in part due to constructive feedback from those players – for the second run. But there were also negative experiences reported at the second and third runs.

The impressive complexity of the design, with dependencies between collapsing hierarchies, individuals, and computer systems, made the game very fragile. For example, in the first run the seemingly minor problem of a lack of an instruction manual for the systems – one document amongst hundreds – had game-ruining consequences for many players.

In the second run of the game, it was very hard for players to distinguish fact from fiction in the rumour mill going on inside the game, and solidly determine whether Cylons had actually infected the onboard computers or not. Replicating the clockwork operation of a full battleship with complicated social roles, social groupings and spatial designs was an amazing experience when it worked, but it was highly vulnerable to the disruptive chaos of a brute force design.

While recognizing this, we think it is equally important to recognize that *Celestra* is celebrated as a major achievement and life-changing event by many players. That many of its production and design choices, such as the unsurpassed quality of organizer-provided costuming or the interaction with mysterious phantoms, were executed perfectly. And that by daring to innovate on such a large scale, *The Monitor Celestra* set the stage for future larps that could iron out the kinks in its groundbreaking approach.

Robust Adventure in College of Wizardry

College of Wizardry was a larp inspired by the *Harry Potter* fiction, played in the 13th century Czocha castle in southwestern Poland. The game ran uninterrupted for 52 hours, portraying the first days of the school year at the Czocha College of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The game was a combination of school routines (teaching classes, pranking other Houses to lose points, snitching about pranksters) and adventure (sneaking around the basement, fighting Death Eaters, handing out detention for such activities), culminating in a grand opening ball.

In the spirit of the 360° illusion, the Czocha castle served as a perfect environment for this game: not only is Zamek Czocha a fully furnished castle, but it is also a remarkably Potteresque one: it features a cellar for Potions classes, a tower for Divination, a dungeon for Defence Against the Dark Arts, and large dining halls for common dinners. It even comes with secret passages hidden behind bookshelves and panels. To perfect the illusion, the organizers handed out robes and ties that were the required parts of the school uniform, while the players brought in loads of small props, such as notebooks, trinkets, and wands with LEDs to light the tunnels.

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[6] Eirik Fatland played a Vergis corporation scientist, Markus Montola played the faction leader of the Colonial Navy. Due to the complexity of the larp, these vantage points only covered a fraction of the game: As Montola headed one hierarchy and Fatland was subject to another, the experience of not being a part of one remains underrepresented in this text. Both authors played in the second run of the game.

Even with no physical combat, *CoW* was a larp for all senses, where you actually drank wine with frat boys in the common room, actually wrote an essay with a faux quill, and actually sneaked quietly in order to avoid janitors after curfew[7].

According to Claus Raasted, the figurehead of *College of Wizardry*, some of the design was directly inspired by *The Monitor Celestra*:

The school setting made it especially easy to utilize this [kind of design]. Teacher/student interaction, house rivalries, bloodline conflicts, former school cliques, junior/sophomore/senior conflicts, etc. The list goes on and on, and all of these structures were good at producing emergent narrative and interesting stories. If you weren't interested in doing one specific area of play, there were always five more you could dive into.

(Claus Raasted, personal communication.)

Since the organizers knew they would have an international and varied audience, *College of Wizardry* was intentionally designed to be hard to break: according to Raasted, a key component was to disconnect game design from character design, which gave the organizers a lot of flexibility. Once you have a fully functional school larp with all the appropriate structures in place, the larp is going to work regardless of individual students and teachers[8].

The academic schedule was a perfect example of a design element that was *hard to break*. No matter what kind of a student or professor your character was, for most of the time the school schedule answered the question of what to do in the game.

Lectures, meals, and club meetings would largely proceed no matter what else happened. Good work catching that Azkaban escapee, ten points for your House, now attend your Divination class before you lose them. The academic schedule interwoven with an act structure provided both game content and an arc of escalation and de-escalation, which worked well as a broader framework for emergent stories. Due to the laissez-faire attitude towards characters, the solid backbone of established world material, and everyone playing to lose, *College of Wizardry* could adopt a strict policy of *your character not ours*, a policy which would break most games, but made this one more robust:

The first rule of characters for College of Wizardry is that you can change the character if you don't like it. [...] If the character is a troublemaker with a heart of gold, but you'd rather play a cowardly snitch who's obsessed with the rules, then we'll change it. The only thing it needs is ideas from you on what you'd rather play instead, and together we'll make it work.

(College of Wizardry player instructions.)

This allowed the organizers to max out player agency: players were explicitly instructed that changes pertaining to diegetic facts were allowed even while the game was running. The message was clear: you traveled all the way to Czocha for a 52-hour larp; if it doesn't work for you, change it. And if you can't change it yourself, the game masters will help you.

The hard to break principle also showed up in other areas of the game. As staff players were given player duties, if perhaps not as explicitly as in *Celestra*, the students were liberated to do whatever they liked, as the carefully cast professors would eventually contain any player-created crisis.

The magic system was made hard to break by basing it on the principle of playing to lose: whenever a spell was cast on a character, the target player would ultimately decide the effects of the spell, meaning that student duels would always end in one of the players choosing to lose.

The only exceptions were that no-one could die before the final act, and that the staff would always win magical conflicts with students. While *Celestra* had a main plotline to resolve that players were able to impact and to a certain extent break, *CoW* eschewed one altogether.

The staff players adopted even more practices to open up student play. For instance, the organizers suggested that the professors should accept every excuse to skip class, which provided the student players the freedom to swap classes, to go adventuring, or even to take a much-needed nap.

While in *Celestra* most characters belonged to power hierarchies, in *College of Wizardry*, every player character was a part of them. In that sense, the equation was very simple as the game only featured three kinds of player characters: students, professors, and a very few members of the janitorial staff[10]. Even the characters who did not belong to secret societies or student Houses were a part of the broader school hierarchy. This structure largely eliminated the outsider caste, giving everyone a part in the community. Indeed, according to the evaluation survey it appears that *College of Wizardry* worked best for the students, then for the professors, and worst for the less integrated janitorial staff.

The power hierarchy was also very wide and interchangeable: While the ship hierarchies of *Celestra* could only have one captain and one first mate at the top tiers, the professors were largely interchangeable in the school hierarchy. This took some pressure off their players, lessened the need to find a particular player during the game, and mitigated the risk of a central player being unable to play.

The *College of Wizardry* design was made possible very much due to the genre and the fiction of the game: the topsy-turvy *Harry Potter* fiction is forgiving and easy-going, practically the very opposite of the military and naval hierarchies of Celestra. It does not matter if a professor appears a little silly when leaving alchemical ingredients to be easily stolen, or when accepting a spurious excuse for not showing up for class.

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[7] Players' contribution to the larp was considerable: for example, Liselle Angelique Krog Awwal made more than a thousand props for the game, Christopher Sandberg organized the professor players to produce a 200-page schoolbook, and Staffan Rosenberg created the Potions laboratory with hundreds of ingredients, tools and recipes. As player-created content was integrated to organizer materials, it is not easy to retrospectively say which parts were in the game "by design", and which ones should be considered "player contributions" external to the design itself.

[8] In Celestra, a similar approach was used in the sense that many character descriptions spent vast majority of text to describe the social structures and out of character function of the character, and very few paragraphs on descriptions of personality, or personal goals. As a major difference, CoW explicitly permitted players to radically work on their characters.

[9] Unlike most games with act structures, CoW was played continuously. Diegetic events signified act changes.

[10] While the Celestra had very few non-player characters, College of Wizardry had a cadre of them, ranging from ever-present ghosts and visiting Aurors to monsters residing in the nearby forest. The non-player experiences are excluded from this analysis, since there was no uniform NPC experience due to the difference of those roles.

Indeed, several professors played to lose by drinking a potion that made everything appear wonderful to them – even the fact that their wonderfully talented students conjured up spirits of the dead and dabbled in unforgivable curses. By removing themselves from the conflict equation, they provided play for people below them in the power hierarchy – such as the group of Auror students left to deal with the issue[11].

This design, combined with the brilliant 360° illusion of the Czocha castle and the very significant contributions of several players, made the players give the larp rave reviews. Out of the 112 respondents to the evaluation survey, 91% totally or somewhat agreed with the statement "I had a great game", and an astounding 74% of the respondents agreed with "College of Wizardry was my best larp ever".

The implication of these overwhelmingly positive numbers is not that this was a perfect larp, but that by building on the *Celestra*, *CoW* discovered a formula for blockbuster larp: a brute force larp of adventure and escapism, guaranteed to win popular appreciation. The jury is out on whether the new formula can be applied outside the world of *Harry Potter*, as the disorganized fictional setting of young adult Bildungsroman was an essential part of making it hard to break.

The next, clear step towards improving the formula will be the addition of workshops for character relationships and group dynamics. Indeed, even though the *Celestra* was already criticized for leaving social relationship development to players' own internet discussions, *College of Wizardry* still used the same approach. As a result, the majority of players responding to the evaluation survey expressed their desire for on-site character relationship workshops before the game.

Both of these games would have greatly benefited from just a few hours spent efficiently building relationships and dynamics, and indeed the *CoW* team will utilize them in the second run of the game.

The Terrific, Terrible Blockbuster Formula

From the late 90s onwards, larp in the Nordic countries (and, increasingly, internationally) has undergone a revolutionary pace of development. By rejecting brute force designs in favour of structural and stylistic innovation, larpwrights have shown that larp can deal with complex and mature themes – from the fraught psychology of intimate relationships to the politics of the Cold War and the social dynamics of the AIDS crisis. The Celestra model combines the traditional brute force larp with inventions from arthaus larp to great effect – perhaps a bit like the Hollywood blockbuster appropriated techniques from popular vaudeville theatre and from experimentalists such as Sergei Eisenstein or Fritz Lang. In other words: this is a *blockbuster formula* for Nordic larp.

The attempts of *Celestra* and *CoW* to deal with contemporary politics, such as nationalism and discrimination, were peripheral compared to the action-packed, sometimes thrilling and sometimes comedic events generated by the brute structure. In this regard, these larps were faithful to *Battlestar Galactica* and *Harry Potter* that inspired them. While even action movies can find the time to portray compressed emotional and romantic content, in blockbuster larps intimate and serene moments are always in danger of being hit by a stray plot. There might be an unsolvable problem in how to serve the bottom ranks of power hierarchies with enough brute game content without pushing the leaders to steer constantly with both hands full of plot.

While the formula can be improved with techniques such as character relationship workshops, some problems are likely to prove unsolvable: most importantly, the chaotic arrival of competing plot trains is likely to plague these games in the long run.

These risks are inseparable from the sense of action and agency produced by such designs, and must be accepted as such by players and organizers. After all, the blockbuster formula is a formula for an action movie or an HBO drama, not a formula for an accurate documentary or a subtly nuanced performance.

Acknowledgements

A number of players and organizers of *The Monitor Celestra* and *College of Wizardry* gave their opinion on this paper prior to publication. Although we did not follow all their suggestions, those discussions significantly improved this text. Above all, however, we are grateful to the teams that organized these two larps.

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[11] The Design Document instructed the staff to stay on the sidelines during the grand opening ball when conflicts started to escalate. However, they were not offered a ready solution on how to do this, and it is debatable whether this instruction was intended as a binding dictate or merely a helpful suggestion.

[12] Players attending their first larp were excluded from this figure.

The D-M creative
agenda model
An axis instead of a pyramid

Nathan Hook

Introduction

In an RPG or larp context, the term creative agenda refers to the reason for engaging in the playful activity. That different players (and the same players at different times) have a wide variety of creative agendas is well established, as is that those agendas influence play. There have been previous attempts to develop models of different creative agendas such as the Threefold model (Bøckman, 2003). While intended to be design tools, these models are often used to refer to different types of players.

Conceptual models are wrong, in that they imperfectly model a complex world. That is true for models of the physical world (e.g. modelling weather patterns) and even more true for models that include people. The question to ask is not whether the model is right or not, but whether the model is a useful tool for some purpose: typically, whether it has predictive power. Many previous models have failed to incorporate the presence of creative agendas which are not focused on the play itself, such as playing for wider social purposes.

This article proposes a new model based on an axial system, intended to be used as a design tool to enable a designer to identify and focus on supporting particular creative agendas, and to explicitly state them in the presentation to the players.

It may also be of use to debug an existing design, to improve its focus; and as a means to communicate to potential players which creative agendas are supported. Clear and explicit communication can avoid issues caused by a mismatch between the creative agenda the larp is intended to support and that favoured by the players, and issues from a mismatch between creative agendas of different players (e.g. immersionists not taking the dramatically appropriate action, narrativists breaking the internal logic of the setting).

The D-M model

The D-M model understands different creative agendas as different areas within a conceptual space defined by two axes:

- Microcosm to Macrocosm (shown as the X axis). A position on this axis indicates a focus tending towards either the individual or the world, both the wider social world and the physical world.

- Diegetic to non-Diegetic. (shown as the Y axis). A position on this axis indicates a focus tending towards, or away from, the fictional setting.

Named after the two axes, I term this the D-M creative agenda model.

Non-Diegetic	
Meta-Diegetic	
Diegetic	
Microcosm	Macrocosm

Figure 1: The D-M model shown graphically:

In this context:

Diegetic refers to motives which are themselves within the fictional setting.

Meta-Diegetic refers to motives that are themselves outside the fiction, but focused on influencing the fiction.

Non-diegetic refers to motives both outside the fiction and not particularly focused on it. Non-diegetic agendas still affect the diegesis – the player still plays a character within the fiction, so influences it by being there (whether by action or inaction) – but influencing it is not their focus.

There are then six different regions in this conceptual space which represent different approaches: (from bottom to top, left to right)

Microcosm - Diegetic. The player's agenda is focused on their own experience within their fiction. They seek to become the character, to think and act as their character would within it. An example of this style is the Turku Manifesto. (Pohjola, 2000)

Macrocosm - Diegetic. The player's agenda is to explore the fictional setting. They might reflect on how different systems (economic, political, social, metaphysical, etc.) operate within the fiction, how cultural upbringing has shaped their character's worldview, and so on; and attempt to accurately represent them. Outwardly this can appear similar to the previous position, but it differs in that it includes third-person rather than first-person thinking. For a further discussion of this distinction, see Hook (2012).

Microcosm - Meta-Diegetic. The player's agenda is focused on guiding the fiction to the desired outcome for themselves. Typically this involves their character 'winning' by achieving their predefined goal states.

Macrocosm - Meta-Diegetic. The player's agenda is focused on guiding the fiction as a whole to their desired outcomes. Typically this involves creating a strong narrative or drama, which may include conscious or unconscious use of dramatic elements or narrative arc principles.

Microcosm – Non-Diegetic. The player's agenda is focused on personal development outside the fiction. Examples include playing for physical exercise, to practice skills, or for escapism for real world concerns.

Macrocosm – Non-Diegetic. The player's agenda is focused on social interaction and relationships unrelated to the fiction. Examples include playing to spend time with existing friends, to acquire new friends, or because the play is a part of study, employment or research activity.

A player's creative agenda is not fixed, even within the same event. It gradually shifts as play develops.

Existing concepts positioned within the D-M model

This article will now show how some existing larp concepts fit into and can be better understood by use of this model.

Montola et al.'s (2015) term *steering* can be understood in terms of this model as referring to all agendas above the X-axis on this diegetic model; all agendas that lead the player to manipulate the diegesis for reasons outside of diegesis. This model can be seen then as a more nuanced approach to understanding steering.

Playing to lose is a weakly-defined term, but can be understood as located as a Microcosm - Meta-Diegetic agenda. The player is still attempting to influence the diegesis to bring about their predefined goal state; it's essentially the opposite side of the same coin as a Gamist creative agenda.

Edularps can be seen as a form of larps designed to support particular microcosm - non-diegetic creative agendas, such as players gaining knowledge and/or skills.

The deliberate use of 'transparency' and 'meta-techniques' can be seen as design choices that particularly support meta-diegetic creative agendas.

Hook (2012) introduced a distinction between *character immersion* (immersion into the character as a complex unique individual) and *situation immersion* (immersion into the situation and role of the character, such as that of a guard or prisoner). Both of these can be understood as located in the Microcosm – Diegetic space, with 'situation immersion' located closer to the Macrocosm than 'character immersion.'

The *gamist fallacy* is a term for gamist players justifying their in-game behaviour by an immersionist position. E.g. 'Trying to win is what my character would do.' It is a fallacy, as real people do not usually play the 'game of life' effectively. In this model, this fallacy can be understood more clearly as a failure (either in perception, or in external discourse) to properly distinguish different positions on the diegetic (Y) axis; that is, confusing meta-diegetic aims as diegetic ones.

This model helps understand why narrativism (playing for a strong story) and Turkuist immersionism (playing to become the character) are inherently opposed – they contrast on both axes.

Thus, it's easier for a gamist (someone playing to win) to use immersionist discourse (as per the gamist fallacy) than a narrativist. Narrativism is conceptually closer to gamism (both are trying to manipulate the diegesis to achieve an off-game desired resolution) and to simulationism (both are thinking in the third person about the wider diegetic setting) than it is to immersionism.

The model itself does not make any value judgements between different agendas, simply recognising they exist. It can be used to compare and contrast different design styles. For example, the 'Vi åker Jeep' design rhetoric focuses on supporting the Meta-Diegetic - Macrocosm level among players.

Conclusion

The D-M model offers a new way to be conscious of and to discuss different creative agendas by explicitly defining two distinct axes upon which different agendas are positioned. It more clearly articulates the relationship between diegetic, meta-diegetic and non-diegetic techniques. It is a tool to enable focused design, clear communication to participants, and a shared agenda between participants.

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The Golden Cobra Challenge:
Amateur-Friendly Pervasive Freeform Design

Evan Torner, Whitney "Strix" Beltrán,
Emily Care Boss & Jason Morningstar

I. The Birth of the Golden Snake

Once upon a time – actually, at *GenCon 2014* in Indianapolis, USA – several of us discovered a design problem for live freeform games. For the last five years, the independent role-playing game scene here in North America has run an expanding series of crowdsourced events under the banner of *Games on Demand*. Players show up shortly before the convention slot, choose an available game from a menu, and then sit down with the event facilitator to play. This year, we introduced *Larps on Demand*, a branch of *Games on Demand* with its own room at *Origins* and *GenCon*, and that is where we encountered our problem.

The problem is as follows: *GenCon* and *Origins* are both massive conventions full of interesting things and people to see. As such, few attendees want to make intensive four-hour time commitments in this context, and thus we watched as the two-hour *Larps on Demand* events filled up, while the four-hour events did not and were cancelled. In response, facilitators began to split their four-hour events in two, and running larps in public spaces to attract visibility.

In our post-GenCon debrief, we decided that established live freeform games that lasted two hours such as J. Tuomas Harviainen's *The Tribunal* required too many players, whereas a flexible game like Håken Lid and Ole Peder Giæver's *The Hirelings* required too much time, and Lizzie Stark's *The Curse* required intimate space that was at a premium in a large convention setting. What were we to do?

Thus the Golden Cobra Challenge[1] for October 2014 was born. We would solve this live freeform problem by considering it as a set of design constraints in itself. Scrappy pervasive freeforms were what we needed. Therefore, the game submissions had to:

- Be playable from start to finish in two hours or less, facilitated by people who were not the designer him/herself.
- Be playable by a variable but small number of participants, ideally a wide range like 2–8.
- Be playable in a public space, like an open lounge in a busy hallway.
- Optional: Use the ingredients Chord, Light, Solution, Bear and Minute.

We advertised it as a "friendly contest open to anyone interested in writing and playing freeform games," and even provided a much-utilized mentor program for freeform designers who wanted to bounce their ideas off a partner. We would award prizes in categories corresponding with our design needs: Most Convention-Ready, Most Appealing to Newcomers, Cleverest Design, and Game We're Most Eager to Play. That being said, the prize for each category was that the game would be run at least once at *Metatopia* in November 2014.

II. The Baddest-Ass Snakes in the Jungle

What came of it? Over 50 freeform submissions poured in from around the world, addressing the design constraints with verve and creativity. Designers and theorists once again debated definitions of "freeform," while others saw fit to troll the contest with unmarked submissions (e.g. *Vampire Death Party* by A. Nohn Knee-Mus). As the judges volunteering our time, we could only scramble to keep up with the breadth of entries submitted by experienced and novice designers alike. In fact, the contest itself served as a sort of "permission and validation engine" for people who did not consider themselves designers – even for those beset with imposter syndrome – to create live freeforms.

New designers were most welcome. As Wendy Gorman, co-designer (with David Hertz and Heather Silsbee) of *Still Life*, commented:

"I was shocked and delighted [by winning a Golden Cobra], and could not have been more pleased to see something of mine played by people who are well respected in the field of game design, especially since I am not a game designer, and have never considered that I could become one."

Two hours, a public space, and a flexible player number meant that a short set of easy-to-communicate rules proved the best design strategy. Because few veteran designers had much experience in addressing the constraints, the playing field proved more level than in other RPG design contests. After all, we preferred to cultivate a broad community that would produce more games, rather than promoting exclusivity and competition among creators. Mentoring during the contest and rewarding the winning designs with actual play appeared the best ways to nurture such a community of play.

The hard-selected winners of the contest came from a pool of the weird, wacky and dramatic. Some entries in this pool included *Active Shooter* by Tim Hutchings, a serious freeform dealing with the school shooter phenomenon; *Snow* by Agata Lubańska, about an explosive family situation in a snowed-in car; *Keymaster* by J Li, a ritual of creating fictional identities; and *If I Were President* by James Stuart, which enacts a surreal presidential debate in the far future. Contest winners often adhered closest to the given constraints. *Still Life*, a game about relationships between rocks, positions players as inanimate objects being moved around by elemental forces in a public space.

Group Date by Sara Williamson embraces chaos, with the same date between two people being played out simultaneously by multiple groups. *Glitch Iteration* by Jackson Tegu explores fragmented computer memory and has players directly experience their surroundings as unstable simulations. Finally, *Unheroes* by Joanna Piancastelli deals with a group of superheroes who have altered reality to cover up a terrible mistake and must now make a critical decision. Many of the games would perform well in busy *GenCon* hallways in Indianapolis, as they did in the Metatopia hall.

III. The Golden Cobra Hand Signal

Live freeform in the United States has a history of being behind closed doors and opaque for newcomers. The Golden Cobra Challenge sought to amend that culture and, at the very least, create a stable of new games to try out at *Games on Demand* in *GenCon 2015* and other conventions. But what it also produced – besides innovative new sets of rules and role-playing scenarios – was a quasi-new social phenomenon: role-players out in public playing games designed for public interference. Emerging from *Metatopia*, the Golden Cobra Hand Signal – putting one's elbow in one's hand and forming a snake face with the other hand – lets others know that, while you may be out in a park or hallway, you are actually also in the middle of playing a game and a role.

Games like *Still Life* encourage outsiders to affect and interact with these players, but the outside world may still not necessarily understand what they are doing. As these drop-in-friendly live freeforms spread and mutate, we hope to see more of these arcane gestures coming to a convention near you.

There is no Nordic larp
And yet we all know what it means

Stefan Deutsch

"Nordic larp is like porn. I know it when I see it."[1]

10 years ago, when first attending the Knutpunkt conference in Norway, I was humbled by stories about Hamlet, 1942 and other great games. Here, there were people actually stretching the definition of what "larp" means. It was an awesome, mind blowing experience for sure. There were a lot of talks about the larps that were influenced by the KP tradition and vice versa. There was no good term for these games, so usually the rather cumbersome "games in the KP/SK tradition" was used.

When in 2010, Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola published the book Nordic Larp documenting 30 larps belonging to this tradition, they effectively coined the term. It had been used before, but never with such a brand recognition. Still, there was no clear definition what "Nordic larp" actually means.

In discussions, one of the main points is if the term is meant geographically or not. The Nordic Larp Wiki greets its visitors with the following words:

"Nordic-style larp, or Nordic Larp, is a term used to describe a tradition of larp game design that emerged in the Nordic countries."

So far, so good. Is it a geographical description then? "Nordic" seems to imply this and the Nordic Larp Wiki certainly defines it this way:

"Nordic-style larp is traditionally different from larp in other parts of the world[...]"[2]

In 2012, Juhana Pettersson writes in "States of Play" (already subtitled as "Nordic Larp around the world"):

"Nordic Larp is not the same as the larps played in the Nordic countries. Indeed, most Nordic larps are not part of the Nordic Larp design movement. This leads to the bizarre situation where the Nordic Larp movement can enter into dialogue with Finnish larp the same way it can be in dialogue with Russian larp."

"Nowadays, the truly new stuff comes from all those Italians, Germans and Americans who have taken some of the ideas of Nordic Larp and made them part of their own artistic practice. Thankfully, instead of just assimilating stuff from us, they're sending ideas back, becoming the new creative frontier of Nordic Larp."

So the definition from the Wiki is not very useful since there are

a) Larps in this tradition which are not from Nordic countries
b) Larps in Nordic countries not belonging to this tradition

So why is it still called Nordic? What's so Nordic about Nordic larp? Maybe it is the origin of the movement. In his Nordic Larp Talk 2013, Jaakko Stenros tries to define "a" Nordic larp this way:

"A larp that is influenced by the Nordic larp tradition or contributes to the ongoing Nordic larp discourse. This definition may seem disappointing, or even like a cop out."[3]

Not only a cop out, but also recursive. Thus it is not very helpful if we want to get closer to the actual meaning of the term. Furthermore he continues:

"Nordic larp is not a set of instructions. It is not even a coherent design philosophy. It is a movement."

Well, well - it's also not a coherent design philosophy. At least that definition empowers anybody to define their own style as Nordic. And where is the nodal point of this movement? It is, in fact, the Nodal Point conference - Knudepunkt/ Knutpunkt/Knutpunkt/Solmukohta.

Next, there is Jaakko Stenros' version of a brand definition for the "Nordic larp tradition":

"A tradition that views larp as a valid form of expression, worthy of debate, analysis and continuous experimentation, which emerged around the Knutepunkt convention."

We are back to the KP/SK tradition. Not much Nordic left here though, because this tradition (r)evolves around the conferences and for at least ten years they have certainly not been entirely Nordic (in geographical terms) anymore and not the creative frontier (according to Juhana Pettersson above). Somehow we are getting nowhere. Let's try a different approach.

The book *The Foundation Stone of Nordic Larp*[4] was written to give a sort of "kickstart" into the Nordic larp tradition, collecting important articles from the now 20+ books published around the Knudepunkt conference. It describes Nordic larp this way:

"The Nordic larp community differs from larp culture in other places. [...] And yes, that's right, there are other kinds of larps played in Scandinavia; the Nordic larp community is a specific and by now reasonably well-defined subset."

So, first sentence: kind of geographic. Let's imagine the movement is what the author implies as a "place", because the last sentence of the paragraph is clear about the term being non-geographic. Let's try to define the term in other ways. Also from the above paragraph:

"It spends more time telling stories that emphasize naturalistic emotion, it emphasizes collective, rather than competitive storytelling, and it takes its stories fairly seriously much of the time [...]"

Jaakko Stenros' Nordic Larp Talk also mentions some of these characteristics:

"It typically values thematic coherence, continuous illusion, action and immersion, while keeping the larp co-creative and its production noncommercial. Workshops and debriefs are common."

These are characteristics which undoubtedly are part of the tradition we are talking about. The Nordic Larp Wiki supports this approach as well:

"[...]Here are a few examples of aims and ideals that are typical for this unique gaming scene:"

If we accept the Nordic Larp wiki as a PR instrument, this is certainly cool, but as a reference about what Nordic larp actually means, this is maybe slightly too much self-adulation. Let's have a closer look at these characteristics and ideals:

[1] Adaption of a quote by United States Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart (1964)
[2] http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Nordic_Larp
[3] "What does Nordic Larp mean?", Jaakko Stenros, Nordic Larp Talks 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mL_qvBaxV5k

[4] The Foundation Stone of Nordic Larp, 2014, Edited by Eleanor Saitta, Marie Holm-Andersen & Jon Back

"Immersion. Nordic larpers want to feel like they are "really there". This includes creating a truly convincing illusion of physically being in a medieval village/on a spaceship/WWII bunker, playing a character that is very close to your own physical appearance, as well as focusing on getting under the character's skin to 'feel their feelings'. Dreaming in character at night is seen by some nordic larpers as a sign of an appropriate level of immersion."

Not only is this definition of immersion mixing in 360° for good measure, the sentence about the "truly convincing illusion of physically being [there]" is also not very Nordic (at least from my personal experience) even though some games are now trying to do exactly that. The second part talking more about actual immersion could be considered very Nordic, if you like.

'Collaboration. Nordic-style larp is about creating an exciting and emotionally affecting story together, not measuring your strength. There is no winning, and many players intentionally let their characters fail in their objectives to create more interesting stories."

This might actually be one of the better indicators for a "Nordic larp", but then, there's plenty of examples from other game traditions where this is used as well - but maybe not the other way around. Maybe it is required, but not sufficient?

"Artistic vision. Many Nordic games are intended as more than entertainment — they make artistic or even political statements. The goal in these games is to affect the players long term, to perhaps change the way they see themselves or how they act in society."

Artistic vision is hard to define, as is a political statement, but there's certainly a divide between pure "entertainment" and "serious" games. But then, aren't the ones without a political statement artistic in their own unique way? And what about the Nordic games which are not intended as more than entertainment?

There's certainly a lot of elements which are considered part of this tradition, but are they unique? Is "bleed", "immersion", "alibi" really Nordic? Are pre-game workshops, 360°, black box and debriefings?

Furthermore, what is often described as "Nordic larp", evolves with every game and every discussion about this tradition. Fifteen years ago, no game would use bleed or alibi or 360° in their descriptions (since the terms didn't really exist) and even mechanisms, but still they were and are considered part of this tradition.

One could argue the way Merleau-Ponty does and say that while many of these are often present, none needs to be to make it a Nordic larp. The question cannot be solved this way.

Furthermore, when we used black box style mechanisms in 2000-2003 in the Insomnia series of games in Germany, were they "Nordic"? Did the workshops, debriefings, game acts and use of "cut", "brems" and "escalate" mechanisms for The Living Dead (2010) make it "Nordic"?

There's a simple answer: no. But the reason for that is not that they were not played in the Nordic countries or organized by people from there. The simple reason is that they did not add to the discourse, in one case because we hadn't heard about KP yet, in the other case because we didn't bother to do so.

This needs to change. I don't think it actually matters where ideas were first tried out and who made it popular, but we need to tell people what we do and show it to them in a meaningful way if we want to be part of the movement.

"In the end, while we may rage and debate whether Nordic larp actually isn't all that special, reality is that it is. And let's use that for our advantage instead of trying to nitpick."[5]

- Claus Raasted

Conclusion

I truly believe there is something special about the kind of games we create. I also do think that creating a term like "Nordic Larp" was a masterstroke of Knudepunkt/Knutepunkt/Knutpunkt/Solmukohta propaganda.

And this is what I'm going to do[6]: Nordic larp. No matter where I am or where I come from. It's where I've been heading all my larping life and I don't really care how we call it as long as we know what it means. I believe we do.

Because if we can't agree upon what Nordic larp means, others will form their own slightly worrying conclusions:

„Meanwhile, in Europe, some people were already making a living from LARPing and stretching its art in interesting directions. Claus Raasted [sic], for example, fused parlor role-play with very serious topics, such as acting out couples' therapy to pretend to grieve for a dead child. The genre spread through the region and became known as Nordic LARP."[7]

Nobody really can tell you what Nordic larp actually is, but who cares as long as Claus Raasted is the godfather of Nordic LARP?

[5] Claus Raasted, January 14 2015 in a private conversation on Facebook

[6] And maybe edit that page in the Nordic Larp Wiki and remove that ridiculous geographic reference.
[7] Olivia Simone, tabletmag.com, Sep 2 2014 getting more facts wrong than right in this "definition" of the term.

Workshop practice
A functional workshop structure method

Mo Holkar

The pre-game workshop tradition in Nordic larp is mostly oral, with little written material. People take part in workshops as players, then borrow and develop ideas from those experiences to construct workshops for their own larps. So I thought it might be useful to put together a method which looks at some of the different intentions and purposes that workshop activities can have, to help designers think about and plan their workshops more systematically.

The table below lists and categorizes workshop activities that I use in my own practice, or that I will use if I run a larp that requires them. The sequence of the table is the sequence in which I use these activities: ie. first working on the players themselves, then working with them on their characters; start with warmup, move on to impro basics if required, and so on. There may be requirements to move back and forth (eg. perhaps a re-warmup will be needed partway through, or meta-techniques may be practised again in-character), but this is the general direction.

In practice you may use workshop activities that have more than one purpose: this may be desirable both for conciseness and for helping to reinforce the activity impact upon players. For example, flashback scenes can be used to calibrate players' understanding of relationships with each other. Teaching a particular technique could also serve as a trust exercise.

I've given an example activity for each aim, but of course there are many different ways of achieving all of them: some will be more appropriate for some larps than for others; and you'll have your own favourites. The useful Workshop Handbook site[1] has a categorized collection of activities which give plenty more examples.

A few of the items talk about 'calibration'. This is a very important larp-preparation concept, introduced by Martin Nielsen (2014)[2]. The short definition is: "all participants adjust their interpretation of a phenomenon, so that all participants have more or less the same interpretation." (Where I take "phenomenon" to mean something like: an aspect of the culture being portrayed/experienced in the larp.)

The pre-game workshop tradition in Nordic larp is mostly oral, with little written material.

[1] http://workshophandbook.wordpress.com/
[2] Nielsen, M (2014). 'Culture Calibration in Pre-larp Workshops'. http://nordiclarp.org/2014/04/23/culture-calibration-in-pre-larp-workshops/

Focus on	Category	Detail	Purpose	Should you include this?	Example
Players	Introduction		Welcome players and inform them about the game	Yes	Intro to what is to come
	Workshop	Practicalities	Make players feel happy and relaxed about the workshop ahead of them	Yes	Site issues, break times
		Structure and purpose	Explain what will happen during the workshop, and why	Yes, unless you want players to be innocent of what's about to happen	Timings and descriptions of workshop elements
	Warmup		Energize, disinhibit	Yes: judge how much of it is needed, depending on how unwarm/inhibited they are	Jump in, jump out[3]
	Impro basics		Familiarize players with improvisa-tion	Yes: useful to get minds moving, even if players are already familiar with impro	Yes, and…[4]
	Group	Physicality	Get players accustomed to physical contact	Not needed in a no-contact game	Fingertips[5]
		Trust	Get players to trust each other	Yes, if it involves contact and/or is emotionally intense	Fall and catch[6]
	Pratical	Out-of-game	Explain out-of-game requirements	Yes, if these are unusual	Schedule, sleeping arrangements, food, travel, etc
		Expectations of play	Explain what sort of play designers are expecting from players	Yes, if this isn't obvious, and isn't intended to be discovered during play	If cinematic grand gestures are desired, whether to play to lose, whether secrets are closed or open…
		Skills	Teach/practise a skill	Only if the game requires unusual skills that not all players will have	Dancing the tango, stage fighting
	Game mechanics	Safety	Familiarize players with safewords and safety policy	Always needed*	Cut and Brake[7]
		Rules/system	Explain rules and system (if any)	If these are simple (or familiar), can just be a brief outline	Counting blows in combat
		Techniques	Teach/practice a technique	If any non-intuitive techniques are present	Alien greeting ritual
		Meta-techniques	Teach/practise a meta-technique	If meta-techniques are being used	Ping the glass[8]
Characters	Calibration	Mutual understanding of game world	Ensure players share each other's, and GMs', understanding of what the game world is like	Maybe not needed if game setting is very familiar	Discussion and scenes
		Mutual understanding of relationships	Ensure players share understanding of what their characters' relationships with other characters are like	Most needed when characters have been predesigned (by GMs or by players). Otherwise this will happen in the steps below	Discussion and scenes
	Character creation	From players' own ideas of what will fit into the game world	Players create characters under GMs' direction	Not needed if GMs or players have already designed the characters, wholly or partly	Explanation and facilitation
		Around a GM-designed skeleton	Players flesh out characters based on what GMs have given them, or what they've already designed themselves	Needed if GMs or players have only designed sketch/skeleton characters	Prelude
		Practical	Application of character-creation system/rules	If there are such rules	Explanation and examples
		Role exploration / definition	Developing player understanding of what their character will be doing in the game	Unless this is obvious, or players are to find it out for themselves during the game	Discursive or with scenes
	Character relationships	Building	Evolving relationships by agreement between players	Unless the characters are unknown to each other	Ball of yarn[9]
		Rehearsing	Acting out those relationships, to practise the feelings involved		Scenes
		Background filling-in	Playing out important past scenes to fill in details of the relationship		Hot seat
	Take-off		Transition players into the larp	If you want to help players 'get into the game'	Group meditation or ritual, see Slow take-off[10]

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[3] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k6bHltjIYzE
[4] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qe2a3ppacUk
[5] http://improvencyclopedia.org/games/Fingertips.html
[6] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XAgGY5uCWtU
[7] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JE4P5AvfL48
[8] http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Monologue
[9] http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Ball_of_Yarn
[10] http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Slow_take-off

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* Safety exercises aren't always included in workshops; indeed they're quite rare in some larping cultures. But I personally feel that there should always be at least a minimum safety brief.

Details

Spelling each of these out in more detail:

Meta – the frame through which players enter the workshop and the game. Welcome them, check off names if appropriate, tell everyone what the game is that they're about to play, tell them that now they are in the pre-game workshop.

Practicalities – those useful things players need to know so they can be comfortable in the space. Where are the bathrooms, where are the exits, can they eat and drink, how long will the workshop and the game last, will there be breaks… etc.

Structure and purpose – explain why this game is preceded by a workshop, and what will be achieved during it. You may want to go into detail about the workshop activities – more likely, you'll just give a general picture. (Or you may want to keep the activities secret for now, so the players aren't expecting them.)

Warmup – important to get players relaxed, disinhibited, and moving freely. There are lots of great warmup exercises, such as Penguins and flamingos, Human knot, Jump in jump out, Shake hands… Choose exercises that are appropriate for your number of players and for the space that you're using.

Impro basics – simple exercises to reinforce (or to introduce, if your players are new to this) the basic improvisation tools of Yes, and…, Not blocking, and so on.

Physicality – this may be important if the game requires physical contact, but your players are unaccustomed to it in their larp tradition, or are strangers to each other. The exercises should familiarize them with each other's touch, proximity and presence. This doesn't need to be any more intense than it will be in the larp itself.

Trust – particularly useful in emotionally intense games. If you can help players become comfortable entrusting themselves to each other's care, it'll make opening up emotionally that much easier.

Out-of-game – this won't always be required, particularly if you're going straight from the workshop into the game. But if you need to explain practicalities of travel, food, sleeping etc relating to the game, now is the time to do it.

Expectations of play – you may prefer to let these emerge naturally, of course, or to let players infer them from the material. But if you're expecting a particular style or mode of play – for example, if the game's intended as a farcical satire in which nothing makes sense; or if players are to act with grand, exaggerated gestures to communicate their emotions; or you expect them to act like hardened criminals who behave as if their every move is under watch – tell them so, and explain that you will be showing them how to do it later in the workshop.

Skills – some games may require the players to use out-of-game skills that they do not (yet) themselves have. If dancing is an important part of the game, you may need to teach them how to dance appropriately, and so on.

Safety – go through the safety policy and practice of the game, and act out examples where that'll be helpful. Cut, Brake, 'The door is open', Traffic lights, Lines and veils – whatever you're using. You need to make sure that the players are familiar and comfortable with the safety techniques, and (ideally) that they won't hesitate to use them – or to interpret other players' using them – during the course of the game.

Rules and system – where present. For example, in a combat larp, there may be rules about how many blows will cause injury or death. Or if there's non-WYSIWYG magic, players may need to be told how to interpret its commands. Explain and practise until they are familiar. Techniques – this covers unnatural things that players may have to do during the game for some (non-meta) purpose.

So, for example, suppose your game features a fantasy culture who traditionally greet each other by clasping each others' forearms between their backs. You want the players to learn this manoeuvre and to practice it until it comes as easily to them as it does to the characters that they're playing.

Meta-techniques – techniques that are 'meta', ie. that operate outside the game reality and allow players to communicate directly (rather than as their characters) in some way. Maybe you want players to be able to deliver an internal monologue of their character's current thoughts: they will need to learn the meta-technique that triggers it, such as standing in a designated part of the room, or having their glass pinged by another player.

Mutual understanding of game world -- very important if the setting is not a familiar one. If players have differing internal assumptions about how the world works or of facts about it, that can cause problems in the game. This element of calibration is best carried out by discussion, followed by improvised scenes using the established knowledge. The GMs should provide guidance and suggestions.

Mutual understanding of relationships – if characters are already designed, the players need to make sure that they and the people with whom they have relationships (of any kind) have a shared understanding of what those relationships are and how they work. This is best done by discussion, and again can be followed by improvised scenes acting out the relationship (for the more important ones).

Creating characters from players' own ideas – in some games, the players will invent their characters wholly, within the workshop. The GMs will have to explain how to do this, and facilitate the process.

Around a GM-designed skeleton – in other games, players may have been given a skeleton character that they fill out themselves. If you have time, one nice way of doing this is with a 'prelude' – a one-on-one GMed scene in which the player is led through decisions and statements about their character that combine to flesh it out fully and satisfyingly.

Practical – if there's any system or rules (or numbers of any kind) applicable to character creation, GMs need to explain them and help players apply them.

Role exploration and definition – if the character is to play a particular narrative role in the game (eg. captain of the ship, mysterious stranger, disruptive toddler, Prussian spy) then GMs may need to brief the player on how to fulfil those duties.

Building character relationships – allow the players to mutually establish their characters' attitudes towards, and history with, each other – where this is appropriate for the game. GMs might shape this strongly or leave it to the players: different activities will be appropriate.

Rehearsing those relationships – for newly-established material and also where characters have been designed in advance (by GMs or players) and players haven't previously had the chance to explore them. A combination of discussion and playing out interpersonal scenes is generally effective.

Background filling-in – it may be desirable to add richness to players' understanding of each other's characters by the public provision of detail. Hot seat is a straightforward activity that allows players to question one another.

Take-off – you may wish to help the players get 'into character' so they don't have to leap straight into the game (although that can work too: see Flying start[11]). This might perhaps be a formal exercise where they assume their characters, or a quiet meditative space for them to do so privately or as a group.

The larper's burden

Take up the larper's burden, Send forth the best ye roll
Go bind your mind to exile, And gladly pay the toll;
To guide the Muggles forward, To show the way ahead
Your worlds to bring to others, All growing from your head

Take up the larper's burden, Never again to hide,
To fight the threat of boredom, To combat hate and pride;
By free and frank creation, A hundred times the joy
Of passive junk consumption, Imagination as your toy.

Take up the larper's burden, The savage wars of thought
Call out the filth and badness, Forgive the foes you fought;
And when you find them different, Strike down the will to fight
For fiction has no limits, No wrong and no more right

Take up the larpers's burden, No tear to leave unshed,
But cry and laugh together, And prove play is not dead;
The craft ye shall be sharing, The knowledge free for all
Your critics never-ending, In culture's angsty brawl

Take up the larper's burden, And remember why you do
The faithful to inspire, The rest to slowly woo;
So even as you stand there, Bloody but unbowed
You try to give them passion, And free them from the crowd

Take up the larper's burden, And forget all petty fear
For we shall change the planet, Conquer it year by year;
Now choose the path of wisdom, Of fantasy and dream
And go create some futures, That are not what they seem

Take up the larper's burden, Devour the bluest pill
They say evil can't be broken, We say it slowly will;
Show off your love and kindness, Keep apathy at bay
Remind the world that people, Are people when they play

Claus Raasted, September 2014

Thank you for reading.
Thank you for caring.

"The companion of an evening, and the companion for life, require very different qualifications."

- Samuel Richardson