

Anatomy of Larp Thoughts: a breathing corpus

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Dedication



A hand is holding a camera with a black Xaboo flash attachment. The flash has the brand name 'xaboo' printed on its top surface. The background is a soft, out-of-focus bokeh of warm, golden-yellow and light blue tones, suggesting an indoor setting with ambient lighting. The camera body is dark, and the hand is positioned on the right side, gripping the camera.

xaboo

We have scattered in this journal a handful of Kai's photographs.
The larps and organisers are all credited in the back of this book.

On January 13, 2025, Nordic Larp lost a beloved member of our community.

Kai Simon Fredriksen was more than a larper, larp photographer, artist, and community builder—he was a friend, a storyteller and a chronicler. He was an extraordinary human being. His passing strikes at the heart of our community, leaving a void that cannot be filled.

For over a decade, the Norwegian Kai Simon documented our world through his lens, capturing not just the look of our larps, but their very essence. His photographs spoke of intensity, wonder, and transformation—of the magic that happens when we step into new skins and live new stories. He elevated our stories to something epic. He made us fierce, luminous, and extraordinary. Many of us feel the best photo ever taken of us has been shot by him. Even though he shot our characters, in the photos we see our true selves.

Beyond his artistic talent, Kai Simon was a pillar of our community. He believed that larp photography was both art and a service to the community, and he mastered both. As a creative colleague, he was dedicated, flexible and endlessly supportive. He nurtured others, making spaces safer and guiding a new generation of larp photographers.

As a friend, he was kind and thoughtful, wise yet playful. He had the gift of deep conversation and the simple warmth of a good hug. Even in frustration, he never turned against people—only against the unfairness of the world.

The last larp he photographed was Helicon, by myself and Katrine Wind. We talked, we embraced, we told him how much he meant to us and to the whole community. We never imagined that just eight days later, he would take his own life.

Kai Simon's style was unmistakable. He had a masterful way with light and shadow. He often spoke of the loneliness of the photographer—watching everything, yet staying in the shadows. We did not understand how deep and dark his own shadows had become.

His absence is immeasurable. But through his art, his kindness, and the countless people he touched, Kai Simon Fredriksen will live on.

Maria Pettersson
Friend and co-organiser

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Foreword

The making of this journal,
with KP 2025 “Superheroes”

Nadja Lipsyc, coordinator of the journal

This peer-edited journal was brought to life by the joined efforts of about 67 contributors: dedicated graphic contributors, authors, editors, reviewers, proofreaders, Discord helpers, coordinators, etc. Authors in particular were asked to also contribute as editor or reviewers, creating a basis to spread the heavy editorial workload that comes with a KP publication.

Involving such a vast amount of people came out of necessity: too few of us had enough availability or interest to fully carry the KP book team. Instead of renouncing a publication as it has happened in the past, I asked for mass help. Or rather; I asked that we displace the responsibility of this publication from a team of volunteers to the general community.

This is in line with the vision shared among this year's KP organising team: should it be on the conference or on the journal side, we want Knutepunkt to feel like a co-creation rather than a service. We want to encourage autonomy and initiative within our community, now and in the future, and move towards a more breathable and sustainable relationship with volunteering. By sharing responsibility, we also want to invite richer experiences, where more of us propose, create, take charge, perhaps returning to what larp was originally – a fully collaborative effort.

Other than discussing how we do volunteering and participation, I also wish for our community to discuss this lesser interest in the KP publication and what role it has in our culture and community. Many of these questions are connected: how amateur versus how professional should our events and publications be? Who gets compensated or sponsored for their work, or skills, or time? The way we organize our events and manage our publications

indirectly answers these questions, but perhaps could we use some direct address?

The editorial process around this journal was improvised and imperfect. It did not solve the problems of overworking a few volunteers, it did not solve the question of contributors autonomy, and it demonstrated some of the shortcomings we can imagine in a community-managed publication. However, it was an instructive and transparent step towards more self-management, it led to some organisational and graphic creativity and, most importantly, it kept the KP publication alive when no one, not even me, had the time to fully commit to it.

The next page is a glimpse at the personal perspective of three pillars that made KP and the journal possible this year:

Anne Serup Grove, who has been leading the graphic work, layouting and printing of the journal, but also lead graphics in 4 other KP books,

& Katrin Førde and Thomas Frederick Hozman Tollefsen, the conference head organizers, who have been leading the KP ship for the two last Norwegian KP.

Anne Serup Grove, coordinator of the graphic team

From a graphic point of view, making a book of this kind requires an ad hoc troubleshooting approach that creates a space well suited for self-taught creatives and nonprofessional visual designers. It's a playground to explore how we communicate and support our thoughts through visual means. This has importance too. Not only for those who find this kind of work interesting, but for the authors.

Just like printing a book is important. It solidifies the huge amount of intellectual work they've put into it. You can feel it - it's weight, it's format. You can interact with it differently than you can with a digital publication.

Art, particularly community-based art, is created in collaboration between non-professionals and professionals. With the KP publication, we are working with professional printers, which does involve meeting certain technical requirements. While publication experience does make this collaboration easier, they are still the professionals and we are still a heterogeneous community. This does not minimise the amount of work we're all putting in this big project. It is chaotic and complex beyond most publications, because of the diversity of contributors and their varied background, both in terms of experience, culture and language.

The fact that it's a big project isn't something that's holding us in our community back, but if we want to keep it a playground and make space for those with no or less professional experience (not to mention make it overall more sustainable to volunteer one's time and effort) we have to allot more time for them to do the work. This means starting the book process earlier than we have previously, and involving printers and graphic contributors before the authors start writing. Make it an integral part of the process instead of an added feature at the end. It only seems to be an insurmountable task because we start so late.

Katrin Førde,
head organiser of KP 2025

Our vision for this year's Knutepunkt is a less professionalized event. We want organizing KP/SK to be something many people feel like they can do on top of a full job and a full life. You don't need

a perfect plan before you can do something, and no one should expect the end result to be perfect either. We pull on the strength of numbers to make a community event made by the community and not just by a handful of people.

As leaders our vision has been to give direction to the efforts, get people started and help them stay on the path, so we are all going the same way. The threshold for making mistakes has been low. We'd rather have people try something and make mistakes and adjustments on the way, than never setting their ideas into action.

Nadja as the coordinator of the KP journal has embodied the spirit of this year's KP. Early in the process she scaled down the plan to match the available resources and motivations. The fact that so many people have contributed in the process, speaks to the fact that many people want to do a part of the work, but not pull the entire load. Together with a team of impressive graphic contributors (Maren, Yanya, Kerstin, Cosmo, Anne) they have created this glorious collection of ideas from the community.

Thomas Frederick Hozman Tollefsen, head organiser of KP 2025

“Jesus Christ was innocent too,’ said Svejik, ‘and all the same they crucified him. No one anywhere has ever worried about a man being innocent. Maul halten und weiter dienen - as they used to tell us in the army. That’s the best and finest thing of all.” - Jaroslav Hašek, The Good Soldier Švejk

You might find it strange that I jam in this quote to talk about this year’s theme (or maybe you’re partial to early 20th century Czech

anarchist writers). Larp as an activity is ethereal. It is something that can only be experienced by participating in it. We might take pictures or film it, but what is captured isn't what larp is, in the same way that looking at a book's cover isn't the same as reading the book. Larp is completely and fully participatory, it's something we do together, something that we co-create in the moment. We wanted to bring that back to Knutepunkt, for the festival to be something that happens through the co-creative participation of all the people who are part of the festival. The festival has always been run by volunteer members of the community, for the community. It has grown and evolved over the years but co-creation and volunteering has always been at the core. This year we brought it back to the forefront, by extending volunteering to all those attending (which was also essential to be able to make the festival, if you're more partial to cold hard facts).

Using the language of the theologians, pride is the absence of love. Love, in this frame, is the sacrificing of ourselves for the other. This requires putting ourselves second or last so that the other can be put first. Such acts of self-sacrifice, of dying so that others might live, are possible for humble souls only. Pride, the absence of humility, puts ourselves first. It sacrifices others to the self. Co-creation can thus be seen as humble love, at personal and group level. And that I think is heroic. If nothing else, it's a humbling experience getting to work closely with so many heroic people putting others before themselves to create. This has truly been a privilege to be able to be a part of.

Chapter descriptions

How to read this journal?

For all larpers, larp thoughts are manifold.

They come from larp, through larp, arise within larp, or around larp, they often leap across larp and the rest of the world; they showcase a living, complex relationality to a living, complex practice.

20 years after the KP book “Dissecting Larp”, this publication stitches together a body of heartfelt realisations, handy advice, growling gut-feelings and focused, cerebral studies that activates our chimeric relationship to larp.

In her article in this volume, Elin Dalstål (59) suggests that designers and players should practice pacing in order to maximise the emotional intensity of a larp. I will suggest the same here: try to move between voices and styles. Move through these anatomical regions; from the invitation to change activated in Nerves, to the journey of the Eyes, across larp and larp-like fields.

You can also frontload your experience, as Katrine Wind recommends in her piece (15), by going straight into an intense read. In this case, consider the Otherbody chapter with its disruptive thoughts (366), or the Thorax chapter (226) with its personal and intimate insights.

For a classic taste of KP book excellence, head straight for the Hands pages, which might inspire you to make some more larps, go for the Forehead chapter, which will activate your analytical mind, or dive deep with Simon Brind in the Marrow of larp thoughts (426), following his extensive study of the failure modes in character writing.

Finally, for further discussion on how to make larp more comfortable and gratifying processes for all volunteers involved, glide all the way to the Skin chapter (326), which collects thoughts on our community.

1 Hands

For larp (know-how)

Practical larp-making thoughts situated in the hands. Learn about frontloading your larp design, creating costume guides, pacing for emotional impact, tailoring content for young larpers, and the dreams and needs around creating a larp school.

2 Forehead

About larp (reflections)

Analytical larp thoughts situated in the forehead. Reflect on the use of History in larp, the prosocial act of crime in larp, break-down the different production models of larp, consider the part of spectacle of larp, and reflect on the different frames to talk about larp motivation.

3 Left eye & Right eye

Beside larp & Across the worlds (we look)

Bridging larp thoughts, situated in the eyes. Gaze at larp created for museums, but also at larp-like experiences at the Star Wars hotel, peek at larp as embodied art, and look at bleed before larp.

4 Thorax

Inside larp (personal accounts) and through larp (learnings)

Personal larp thoughts situated in the thorax. Feel into the relationship between intimate stories and larp, into grieving in and through larp, relate to the learnings from bleed, or the inner explorations that come from playing on faith.

5 Nerves

Towards (aspirations)

Aspirational larp thoughts situated in the nerves. Fustigate the lack of larp critique, but also question our ways of designing and organizing in times of climate crisis, and the conception of radically trans-inclusive larps.

6 Skin

Around larp (community)

Surrounding larp thoughts situated in the skin. Question yourself on the use and abuse of compliment threads, on the motivations behind volunteering, and the ways to nurture and credit practical and administrative contributors.

7 Otherbody

Beyond larp (disruptions)

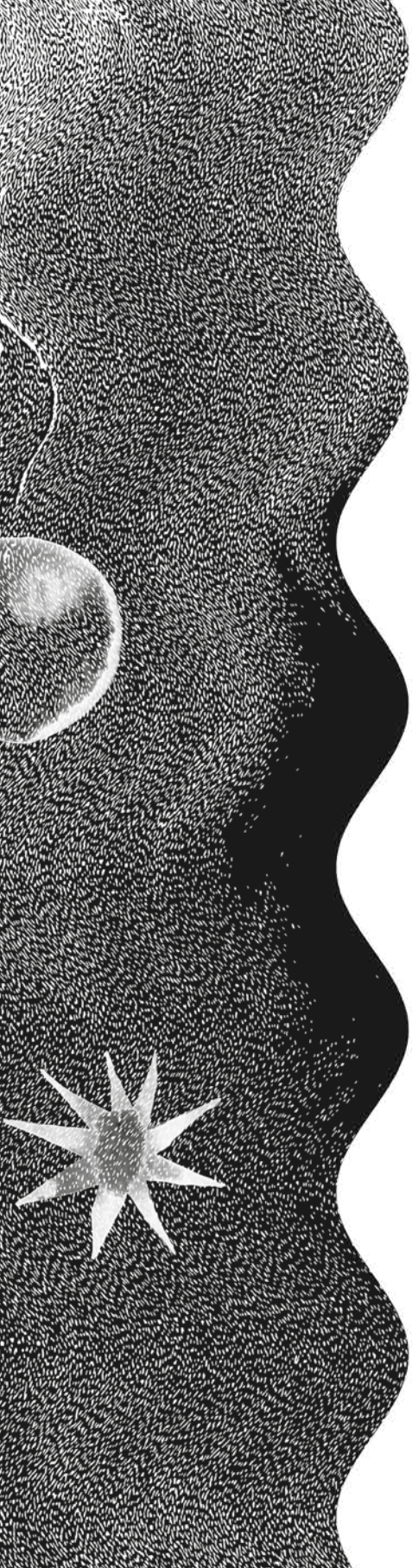
Disruptive thoughts that expand beyond the larp body. Explore your relation to roleplay as a relation with a creature, discover the thoughts behind facilitating larps for digital bodies, consider writing larps for speculation rather than production, and reflect on the reading of larps as cultural artifacts.

8 Marrow

Within larp thoughts (investigations)

Inquisitive larp thoughts situated in the marrow. Study the literature around roleplaying for neurospicy participants and analyse the many modes of failure in writing characters.





hands

For larps (know-how)

Katrine Wind

Katrine has designed the international larps *Daemon* and *Spoils of War* as well as co-designed *Helicon* and a number of Danish speaking larps. She sometimes organises under the organisational name Narrators Inc.

She is a political scientist currently working as head of Digitalization & Analysis at a Danish NGO with a focus on leadership and methodology.

River Rafting Design

Let's get right into the action! Literally. Because "River Rafting" is a larp design methodology to help catapult larpers into play without a slow start. The purpose of this design model is to help the players experience more moments of emotional impact as well as to increase intensity and meaningful experiences throughout the whole duration of the larp.

I am a strong believer in the idea that when we act, we experience. *River Rafting* design helps the players to act immediately. This article is a further development of the design concept of frontloading¹ and covers pre-larp design, workshops and the pacing of the larp. It will explore how to do it intentionally and why designing for *River Rafting* can enhance the larp experience for your players. I will use perspectives from the three larps *Spoils of War* (Wind, 2018-), *Daemon* (Wind, 2021-) and *Helicon* (Pettersson and Wind, 2024-) to provide specific examples.

What are we trying to solve?

I have often noticed that most of the meaningful scenes on an individual level clump together at the end of a larp, but that the emotional impact of these often turns to disillusion when witnessing or participating in a cascade of dramatic scenes/deaths/reveals in the last hours. This phenomenon, Alexander Bakkensen has called "The Twilight Avalanche". I usually feel too numb to react to yet another person screaming or crying by then.

¹ The idea of frontloading appeared in my realm of design thoughts in 2016 when Alexander Bakkensen and I were designing the Danish larp *Victorious* which I later made an iteration of to become the international larp *Spoils of War*. It is a bespoke larp inspired by *A Song of Ice and Fire*, *The Tudors* and several other similar sources. I have also later tested and developed the concept further, based on the thoughts we had together back then. We talked about it in the 2018 version of the Danish role-play convention Forum in the talk: "Toolbox of drama designers" which was repeated at Knudepunkt 2019.

This experience regularly contrasts with the first few hours of a larp involving mostly polite introductions and surface-level interactions like saying “greetings” and small talk for hours. In some cases, there is not a lot of emotional impact during the middle of the experience either, and often I don’t feel I have the tools to push the experience along as a player.

I think a number of design choices are supporting the slow start and place (too much) emphasis on the end of larps. One of these is if written character drama/conflicts/dilemmas are not very complex or have just one big scene in them. Another issue can be creating a setting that only provides an interesting framework late in the larp, or that builds up to a “Big Plot Ending”. This kind of ending is sometimes introduced late in the runtime, overshadowing previously built up character conflicts and tensions. It could be “end of the world”, “we are suddenly being invaded”, “we all have to die” etc. While such grand conclusions can be effective, they are not always consciously integrated into the rest of the larp’s structure. It can be frustrating as an individual player if such an ending isn’t tied meaningfully into the story of your character. A “big bang” finale can even leave players wondering what could have been if the larp had started with this level of intensity. In fact, the larp might have been a lot more interesting if it started with its ending as its beginning.

Furthermore, many players will, no matter the quality of the written setting and character, instinctively save the most interesting parts of a relation and the character until very late in a larp, playing towards a resolution only at the end unless you provide tools for them to do otherwise. We also miss the opportunity to help the players effectively use these tools to create early impact play this specific larp if workshops are not spent on practicing key mechanics and relationships. Often, on-location workshops will contain long briefings with repetition of the website instead. This approach means that players are not ready to get the full potential for emo-





tional impact out of the written content right from the beginning. How they use the tools is up to the players, but if we don't coach on how to unlock the usefulness of the mechanics in this specific larp, the players will spend a lot of the in-game time learning how to use the tools, or – worse – never use them at all.

Lastly, many larps have a pacing that structurally supports very few and late points of emotional impact with minimal structure and set-up during the early and middle part. A slow start can make it harder to connect with the experience, relations and character early on.

All of these factors (low playability of characters/setting, poor practicing of mechanics and backloaded pacing) encourage players to save secrets or conflicts until the very last hours of the larp. Let us name this common combination of design choices the “Waterfall²” method since it creates a slow start, a quiet flow of the boat on a broad river and a dramatic finish.

What we want instead of a waterfall is a more turbulent flow of the water within the themes of the larp. This doesn't mean full intensity all the time. If we want many wavetops (experiences of emotional impact), we also need slower paced periods. But fluctuations are hard to achieve if you are already on a low point of pacing at the beginning of the larp, as this is also the time when you are practicing enacting the character in the setting and using the mechanics. If we don't make the early rapids coming from pacing powerful enough for the players, there is a tendency that the larp experience itself will be backloaded.

What is River Rafting design?

River Rafting is a design philosophy that supports a turbulent flow of the larp experience with many opportunities of emotional impact from the beginning of the larp and throughout. I chose this

² Not to be confused with the waterfall method in project management.

term because river rafting starts slowly for a short time (pre-game and workshops) and then you hit a lot of rapids right away as well as during the rest of the trip (beginning of the larp until the end). We want to throw the boat around early and for the whole duration of the larp to offer an alternative to a *Waterfall* experience. If there are more rapids and more opportunities for movement, it is less important if some of it doesn't result in a lot of impact.

In this maritime analogy, the larper's experience of drama and emotional impact is the boat being moved. The characters, setting and mechanics are the paddles, life vests, ropes to other boats and other tools that the larper can use to make their own boat and the boats of others move at different paces down the river, and to create rapids for each other from many different angles at once. The workshops need to focus on teaching players to use these tools.

But since it takes time to learn to use the tools, early rapids must be created by providing a narrow river and intentionally plotted obstacles (frontloaded pacing/structure). Later, the river broadens and we design fewer obstacles to create rapids, but by then the

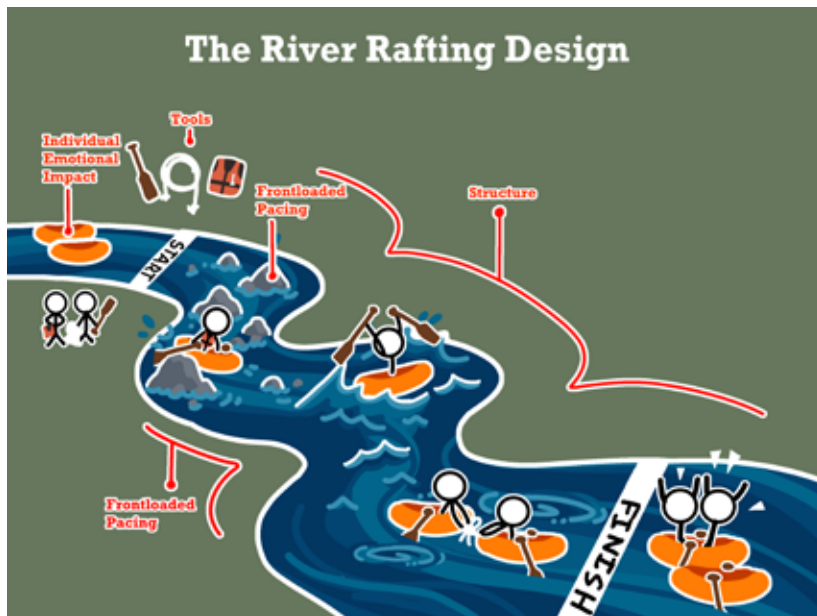


Fig 1 - Illustration of River Rafting Design

players use the setting, characters and mechanics to make their own and each others' boats move in a meaningful way.

As designers, we have three arenas where we can significantly influence the potential for emotional impact of our provided material: Highly playable characters/setting, mechanics and workshops, and pacing/structure³.

What you want to achieve by this is to help the players get going right away, keep and vary intensity and take the interplay between the overall arc and the arc of the individual player into account.

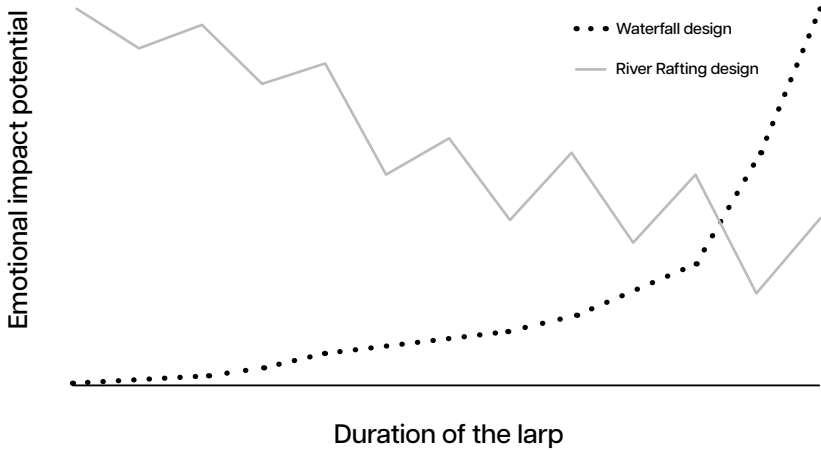
So the three key elements of *River Rafting* design are:

1. **Highly playable characters and setting:** Focus on crafting characters and a setting that encourages immediate action. Emphasize extensive and complex character relations and highly playable dynamics. Please notice that I don't say "long character backgrounds" or "as many pages of lore as possible". It is about the volume and complexity of highly playable content.
2. **Mechanics and workshops:** Provide a few key mechanics for the players to create impact. Workshops should ideally quickly go from instructional briefings to a more tool based and practice heavy approach where players practice core mechanics of the larp, embrace important themes and actively play on character relationships early in the larp. Encourage the players to dive into conflicts and dynamics from the outset – and keep reminding them. Make a safe environment to help players to be brave. Additional workshops in act breaks can support this.
3. **Early impact pacing:** Start the larp with compelling events or tense scenarios, supported by a lot of designed structure and tense content in the very early parts of the larp.

³ I realise a lot of things influence a player's experience: Co-player chemistry, off-game mood, room design, communication style of organisers and crew, feeling of safety, physical needs being met etc. But the focus of this article is purely on how to provide tools for the players to get the biggest emotional impact out of your writing and structure.

Below is an illustration of how I perceive each design approach's attempt to structurally influence emotional impact throughout the runtime of a larp.

Fig 2: Emotional Impact Potential from the Design



The wavytops in *River Rafting design* don't have to be at exactly these points of the larp. The later spikes symbolise how structured content and potentially mid-game workshops etc. can make extra rapids. However, the expectation is that the potential of provided content and structure to help create meaningful emotional impact is much less later in the larp because the players have practiced the characters, relations and mechanics and create the rapids themselves by then.

Please note that the illustration is not a visualisation of the individual player experience. Many players will experience climaxes at the end of the larp, and that is great. The point is *also* having a lot of potential emotional impacts earlier - the aim is to increase the volume and frequency, not just to move the curve.

I will go through the three different aspects of *River Rafting* design in detail and with examples below.

Setting and Characters

If you write a setting and characters for your players, you are already frontloading this part of the design to some degree. Well done! Sending out characters as well as facilitating workshops are the gentle start that can teach the players how to use the paddle and steer with the tools they have been given. This means that when you start the larp, the players are already in the water, can create movement in the boat and feel brave and ready to do so.

But what is necessary for a specifically *River Rafting* design is for you to provide an engaging setting right at the end of an *interesting time* which creates a setup and something to talk about. You also need complex, highly playable characters containing dilemmas that will lead to more drama while dealing with them. The intention is to provide all players with a springboard for their personal stories supported by an engaging narrative framework.

Spoils of War opens with this *engaging setting*; the interesting part to play is happening right now⁴. We are at the very end of a brutal civil war. The characters have already experienced the horrors of it, but the emotional impact hasn't fully hit them yet. The players know that their characters are either on the losing or the winning side, and that the war will end early in the larp. They don't spend time playing the lead-up to the war or competing over who will win. Because all the characters will be in a state of turmoil with many options for the aftermath, the setting gives us something recent and impactful to play on right away. Furthermore, the characters contain complex relations with slights, dilemmas, heartbreaks, love, despair and uplifting camaraderie happening right now, combined with shared history from before the war.

⁴ The idea for the setting was originally created together with Alexander Bakken for the Danish larps *Victorious 1* and *2* in 2016 and 2017.

Another example which illustrates the design principles regarding characters and setting is *Helicon* (Maria Pettersson and Katrine Wind, 2024)⁵. *Helicon* is a larp about a group of artists, scientists and leaders who have captured the Muses of old to keep all of the inspiration in the world for themselves. The larp is based around dyadic play where the couple has a deep relation with each other. Some of the Muses want to be there or are even emotionally in power, and this setting of ambivalent slavery is relevant to every single player. It is significant and interesting to have *Helicon* play out at exactly this point of time in the setting, since it is time for the yearly binding ritual to keep the Muses caught.

To give plenty of content to play with on a character level, the humans (the Inspired) have fifteen years of complex history together. Also, the Muses are thousands of years old, they are all siblings and they have significant relationships with one another. As the Muses have been prisoners for fifteen years, there are also extensive relations across the two groups: Characters are lovers or ex-lovers; many of the Muses have stolen artists from each other over the years; some are currently best of friends with their captors etc. Thus, you have dilemmas all across the base of characters as well as with your dyadic partner.

A misinterpretation of the frontloading concept, in my opinion, is writing extensive characters but where the most interesting content is in the past (or in the future after the larp). Why would you write that a conflict or dilemma is already dealt with or easily resolved, unless it has led to an even more interesting conflict?

⁵ Maria Pettersson and I had no conversations about the term *River Rafting* design in the design process of *Helicon*, and she cannot be held accountable for any of my theoretical descriptions of the perspective as I hadn't conceptualised my design preferences in this way at the time. We completely agreed on the need for complex/highly playable characters and setting - and we have an equal part in the design of all aspects of *Helicon* itself. But the description of what I perceive we did when looking back and any criticism of the conceptualisation thereof is completely on my own account.

We have to give players the opportunity to have the most meaningful experiences while they are in play. Therefore, I am not advocating for long characters. Instead, I recommend putting in a lot of playable content in the provided material *no matter the length of the text*. This could be complex, unresolved conflicts, established and significant relations, challenges to the character, dilemmas, goals etc.

A great way to help players be ready for *River Rafting* is providing the setting and character material a long time before the larp. That also entails the pacing structure and schedule as well as other forms of expectation management that helps them structure their own experience no matter which degree of transparency you want for what actually happens in the larp. For example: Do you expect the players to talk to co-players before the larp or will you allow time for that on location? Do they sleep off-game? What will they physically do with their bodies and spend their time on during this larp? When is a good time to take a break?

Workshops and Mechanics

Setting and characters take time to learn to use. I often find that organisers underestimate the value of structured time for people to talk with co-players about their relations during the workshop time as a means to enable players to use the material right away. If you provide a highly playable setting and characters, the players will do wonders for themselves to be ready to play intensely right from the outset of the larp, if they just have time to talk with each other. Talking about their relations and maybe even trying out flashback scenes is also practicing to use the written material before the larp instead of practicing and finding each other when the larp has already started. No matter how many online meetings you have for calibration before a larp, I find that players meeting each other just before the larp is where they have the best opportunity to find each other and create the trust it takes to play bravely together - and be ready to do so. This is more valuable for the emotional impact of

their experience than more instructional briefing about the setting. Furthermore, I suggest that you introduce one or a few core mechanics to support the experience you want the players to have, and to practice them during workshops. This enables the players with more tools to move their boat and the boat of others. Structured practice of the tools given to the players is an excellent way to help them get going from the start of the larp. If you don't do this, most of your opportunity as a designer to meaningfully influence the emotional impact on the individual player experience (before the larp) will rely on just the characters and setting.

For the workshops, I encourage not providing information pieces and practicing mechanics until they are needed. If you have act breaks, and a tool is not used before act 3, then wait to provide this information until it is necessary. If you have a debriefing, don't instruct about that at the beginning of the larp.

A mechanic that I use in several of the larps I am involved in is *Dinner Warfare* (Wind, 2024). It is a way of designing meaningful mealtime situations and using seating plans to create subtle but strong emotional pressure based on specific relations. But I introduce it differently for each larp depending on the purpose and importance of the tool. I use it extensively in *Daemon* and provide off-game instructions before the larp as well as an in-game alibi that has to do with classicism to stay in the seats of the horrible seating plan. It is a less prominent mechanic in other larps I am involved in and therefore not introduced as thoroughly.

Instruction and Coaching

As a larp runner you have to consider when to give instructions and when to let the players practice tools themselves in a more coaching style of leadership. While I strongly emphasize the value of the latter, there is no shame in being instructive: "You must use this mechanic in the game". The coaching approach is letting players know that the rest is up to them: "You decide what to do within

the framework”. This will help them be more comfortable using them from the beginning of the larp by practicing. A combination of the suggestions above is illustrated in *Spoils of War*.

The players know before the larp which side has won or lost, but the characters don't. The first night starts with the siege of the last standing castle. The losing side has been caught inside for three months but hasn't quite given up yet. It is hard to start right in the middle of a siege and be ready to react to what it has been like being at a standstill for three months. Everybody is frustrated.

We try to explain it briefly at first and underline that the frustration is a specific mechanic for the very beginning of the larp (instruction), and then we lead the players into the game by making a “frustration workshop” where we play the same scene three times (coaching). First, it is at the beginning of the siege: The losing side has plenty of hope and food and the winning side is patient. Then we jump a month and the players are prompted to escalate how annoying it is being around the same people and that food is scarce. Finally, we play the same scene where three months have passed and everyone is desperate. The scenes only take about five minutes each, but it underlines the feeling we start the larp with. After the last scene, the intro song plays and the larp begins with this exact feeling of frustration. Almost right away there is an inspection of prisoners of war where the two sides meet, which means that the players are more ready to play the emotional rapid of seeing their loved ones but not being able to save them from imprisonment than if they just started cold.

It is almost impossible not to have some degree of briefing with instructions when you start the workshops, but I encourage going from instruction to coaching as soon as possible.

Mechanics take time to learn

In *Daemon*, the core vision is experiencing being two people who together portray one character. *Daemon* is inspired by the trilogy

His Dark Materials by Philip Pullman (1995-2000) where humans live with their soul outside of their body in the form of an animal. Daemons are the expression of the inner lives of the characters and the human and daemon can't move very far away from each other.

It might seem like an obvious mechanic that one player is portraying the human itself and the other is portraying the inner life of the character. But if I was mostly interested in the universe or characters of the books instead of the human-daemon relation, I could have decided mechanics-wise that the players just have a toy animal on their shoulder and then play in the setting. However, I wanted to make a larp where you could experience dyadic play in a way where you together portray one character.

The other core mechanic I chose to support the vision is that the player can't go more than two meters from their dyadic partner the whole in-game playtime, which requires immense attention to what your partner is doing.

Dyadic play is a new way of larping for most people - and if they didn't play *Daemon* before, they probably never had to play this physically close to another player for such a long time before. We also have to practice how the daemon player acts on a continuum from underlining and mirroring what the player of the human is portraying to showing what is really going on inside or between two humans when they interact. So in the workshop I explain briefly about the bond, and we then practice it extensively. I have seen players struggle with the mechanics during *Daemon* despite extensively trying it out - my workshops were not enough. The players spent too much time worrying about the mechanics and moving too far away from each other/not mirroring enough instead of focussing on the character and what was happening around them. What has really helped in later iterations is saying to the players in the instructional part of the workshops right before the first act of *Daemon* that the first night will be clunky. I tell them that I realise that even though we have practiced the mechanic,

we have to try it out during the first night before we know how we want to play it with our partner and in our dyad together towards others, and then we calibrate before act two. I find that verbally validating the fact that the key mechanic takes time to learn has made some larpers braver – especially when it is a tool not usually used in other larps. I have witnessed this bravery helping players to bring out interesting content from very early on in the larp in later runs of *Daemon*.

But if prewritten characters, setting, mechanics and workshops – no matter the quality – were enough to achieve rapids in the river in the beginning of the larp, more larps would feel like a *River Rafting* experience instead of feeling slow and backloaded.

For *Daemon*, the physical closeness is a good example of a mechanic that becomes much more impactful later in the larp when they have had time to get used to it. I often hear people forgetting right after the larp that they don't have to stay within two metres of their dyadic partner anymore. But it is obvious that the players benefit from something else to create opportunities for emotional impact until the mechanics work for them and they have a feeling for their characters. What is lacking is a strategy for pacing. As mentioned before, I think that more larps would structurally support emotional impact early if they had a frontloaded pacing.

Pacing

As a designer, you have the best opportunity to provide a meaningful overall structure early in a larp. Later and by the end of the larp, most players will have been practicing, utilising and developing the character drama, setting and mechanics, making overall pacing and structured content much more irrelevant – or at worst – meaningless. By then, the main part of the emotional impact should come from the larpers themselves, the co-players and utilisation of the mechanics. *River Rafting* design encourages establishing a high intensity start-

ing point pacing-wise for the players to react to and talk about as well as more structured content in the first parts of the larp – to create “the narrow river and the first rapid”. Structured and intense openings help to actualise the tools and encourage players to take action early because their boat is already moving. We learn even more from our first actions in a larp than in the workshops about utilising the characters, setting and the mechanics. But if nothing pushes us to act, it is harder to convert this to meaningful experiences, and the emotional impact is also postponed.

The opening of the larp does not have to be the same for all players but should in general tie into the themes and core experiences as well as be relevant to the individuals.

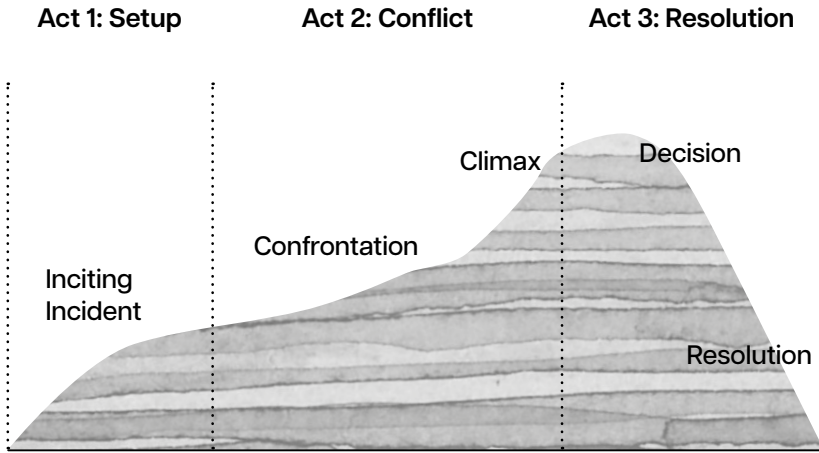
It is not an original idea to start *in mediās rēs*. It is just not very prevalent in larp designs in my opinion. Or at least the opening scene is often not meaningful for the individuals or coherent with overarching themes, in the way the *River Rafting* design suggests. This leads me to what I think really happens when “backloaded” pacing is the choice in so many larps following the *Waterfall* design model and why I don’t want to design like that.

Backloaded Pacing

Pacing in larps often mirrors the “Hollywood model” of storytelling.

The “we start slow and everything only climaxes in the end, and something even more interesting happens at the end of or after the larp” structure outlines schematically the progress of a classical “good story” split into (usually three) different acts. It makes sense that we consciously or otherwise use this structure in our medium: It’s how we usually see stories unfold in the content we consume. Here are a few examples of the classical Hollywood model. I would argue that often larp pacings (not necessarily the individual experiences) will stop at the climax.

Fig 3: Classical Narrative Arc (Hollywood Model) 3 Act Structure



Images source: <http://jorgenboge.wikidot.com/hollywood-model>

In video games, there are examples of a very similar pacing curve:

Fig 4: Pacing Curve Example for some Video Games

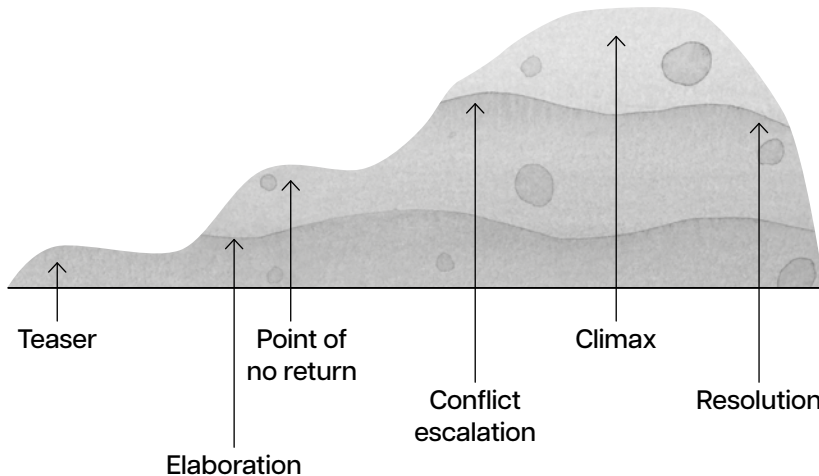


Image Source: <http://game-research.com/index.php/articles/no-medium-is-an-island-an-essay-on-the-video-game-and-its-cultural-neighborhood/>

I think the Hollywood model is fine. It can be a good way to tell a story – why else would so many pieces be structured like that? Movies, video games, plays etc. can benefit greatly from this approach, because when you have a predetermined outcome you can structure the whole experience around this pacing. However, at larps, pacing needs to accommodate the double-layered structure: The overall story arc and the individual character arcs. So you can't make this structure work for a majority of the players just by making a larp end in a certain way or culminating everything in the overarching arc in the end.

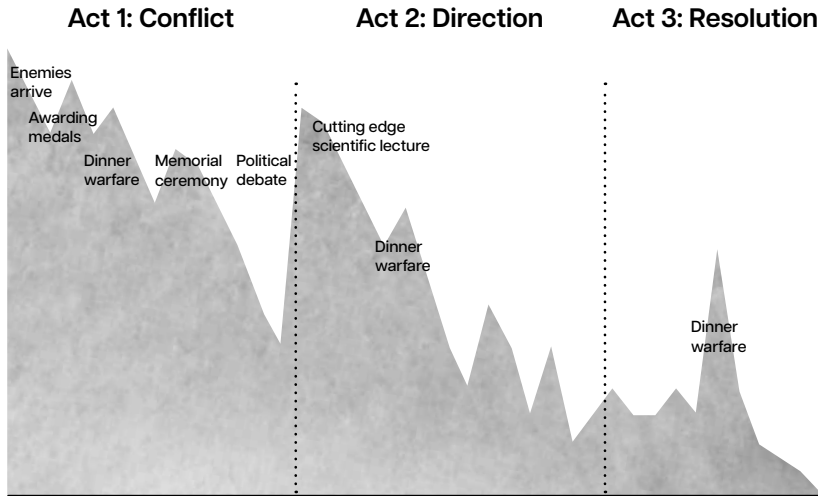
Even for the pop culture pieces that start out in media res, my point would be that this rarely accounts for all individual characters – it's mostly for the overall story. Because of the improvisational nature of larp, since we have so many moving pieces and because we care about every individual player's experience, the backloaded pacing or Hollywood model is less applicable to larp if you want more emotional impact for the individual.

With *River Rafting* design, you can more easily design for the players to be hit by so many different waves and rapids on their path down the narrow river that they have had enough meaningful experiences along the way, so that it doesn't matter if their ending is a waterfall, a whirlpool or a quiet stretch of river – none of the players will have their whole experience be dependent on the ending.

***Daemon* as a pacing example**

Below is an example of how the pacing for the overall larp works for *Daemon* (Katrine Wind, 2021-). This is not *the* model of *River Rafting* pacing design. That can take a lot of different forms – this is just the general visualisation of the pacing in a larp with a lot of structure and planned events in the beginning more than in the end.

Fig 5: River Rafting Pacing in *Daemon*



In *Daemon*, the setting is the aftermath of a war where we have just killed God. The characters themselves are centered around themes like creating meaning, victory/defeat, grief/relief and building a new future. A lot of the characters are already gathered in the castle of one of the nobles on the winning side (facilitator character). The guests are there to celebrate the war heroes, mourn the fallen and exploit the opportunity created from the fall of a controlling theocracy to experiment with scientific projects that have up until now been illegal. But the theocratic power has thrown one last bomb of a biological weapon in the form of a powder that affects the bond between human and daemon (a core mechanic of the larp).

The opening scene creates a sense of urgency and immediate possibility for the players to take action, as enemies and people with complex relations to the guests originally invited for the celebration are evacuated to and quarantined in the castle. They have just been hit by the powder. These people are soldiers from the war, former fiancées, traitors and other people whose relations are significant, complex and problematic to the original guests. The

scientists present immediately need to start working on helping those affected.

The next structured event comes almost right away when the hostess and an original guest continue to award medals to people who have killed family members of the newly arrived characters' families. Very soon after this, everybody is thrown into an excruciating three course dinner where they have to endure each other but have a lot to talk about from the workshops, characters and starting scene. The social structures as well as the urgency of the powder situation force the *adversaries* to be around each other (see *Dinner warfare, Wind 2024*).

The peak in the third act is again a reflection on a *Dinner Warfare* scene, but it is disruptive in the pacing as the hostess creates a last, unhinged seating plan fuelled by a retaliation where she surrounds herself with other peoples' daemons. They are placed almost too far away from their humans to make it physically uncomfortable to be at dinner and stay polite. For a larp to be designed for "front-loading" as part of *River Rafting* design, this would not be necessary as the concept focuses more on the first part of the larp, but the structured spike in intensity is a design choice for other reasons than overall pacing.

In the pacing overview from *Daemon*, you also find another tool. The act structure cuts up the pacing in three, and I choose to put in off-game breaks between the acts to allow more opportunities for me as a designer to add structured content in the beginning of act 2 as well as have more workshop time which enables me to make more rapids. I deem that it is not necessary with an intense start scene for the beginning of act 3, as the mechanics and characters drive the emotional impact almost solely by then.

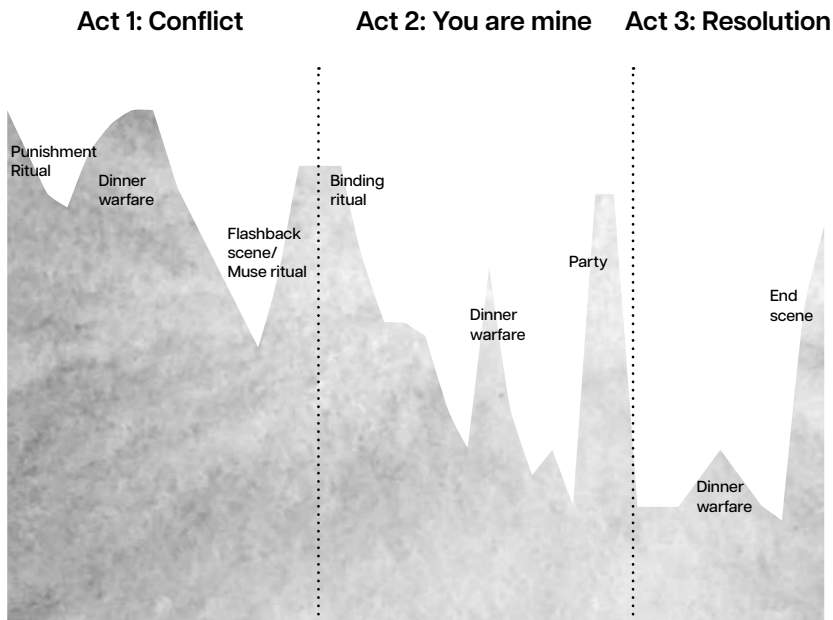
For *River Rafting* design, you don't have to have a quiet ending as a player. Don't be fooled by the fizzling out of structured content in

the third act of *Daemon*. This refers only to the larp pacing itself – for some players it will still be the most dramatic part of the larp. But by not pressuring structured content into the end, in my experience, it will help avoid some of the “Twilight Avalanche.”

You can still facilitate a dramatic ending

Maria Pettersson and I decided to make a structured ending of *Helicon* (2024-) with focus on a highly dramatic situation, even though I still consider it a “frontloaded” larp which follows the principles of *River Rafting esign*. We wanted to include a specific end scene where a choice is required, shifting certain dynamics. However, the key element for me that makes this ending meaningful for each individual is that they have influence over their own arc in relation to this scene. We also provide the tool that each player can be informed of the ending and the choice that they will face (transparency) during the final act break, or they can choose to be surprised.

Fig 6: River Rafting Pacing in Helicon larp
(designed with Maria Pettersson)



However, I still consider the opening scene and structured content in the beginning of *Helicon* to be much more significant design aspects to the players' experience of emotional impact as they set the tone of the larp and help the players to get into the characters and mechanics right away.

Already in the character descriptions, an intro scene is added where the players have to act on their relations. It is described how last night, the Muses tried to escape and failed. To establish the uneven power dynamic that is so central to the larp, *Helicon* begins with a ritualised, common punishment scene for this slight with each couple focussing on each other, and the significance of this intro scene is already emphasized in each individual character. Bowman describes this scene and its significance to kick off the larp in her article about *Helicon* (Bowman, 2024). Since ritualistic content is very important to the experience, we practise the rituals in the workshops. In this case, the Inspired have practiced this specific Punishment Ritual but the Muse players don't know what is going to happen. All of the individuals and couples have a huge stake in this scene, no matter if the Muse was an instigator of the escape attempt or urged along by their siblings. Thus, the event is meaningful to each individual character (and hopefully player) when we start with high drama.

This is another point of *River Rafting Design*. I don't advocate just throwing in *any* action scene or dramatic beginning to kick off the larp in a frontloaded manner. The intro scene should emphasise the themes of the larp and be relevant to the players. Something can be meaningful and dramatic without being loud.

During the Larp

Once the larp is running, you obviously have to execute the plan for events and structure which can take a lot of work. You might even be able to make little adjustments in your design plan if you see a need for it during a pre-planned event. You learn a lot from

rerunning larps, and there have been plenty of pacing events that have not worked as intended in larps I have been involved in.

Despite our intention to make *Dinner Warfare* a mechanic all the way through *Helicon*, Maria Pettersson and I decided during the first run to loosen our plan so the seating was only very tense for everyone on the first night. We had planned to do it for all three meals, but we decided for the two other in-game meals to just provide the opportunity for players off-game to wish for people to sit with or not sit with. We didn't deem it necessary to place the rest of the players to create the most possible tension as other structured content was more impactful in the later part of the experience. Granting player wishes for seating plans is the most advanced version of *Dinner Warfare*, and we still deemed that the mechanic served a purpose enough to not scrap it completely even though we adjusted our plan.

Act changes with off-game breaks are your greatest chance of affecting the larp significantly as a designer later in the larp. Act break calibrations can for example be helpful to catapult the players into the new part of the larp. Many players will do this themselves with individual relations, act breaks or not, which is wonderful, but structuring time for it can be a helpful tool for some to ask something from the group. This works best in smaller or medium sized larps or in smaller groups.

For *Daemon* (28 players) and *Spoils of War* (58 players), I do a calibration round in each act break where I ask if anyone needs something generalized from the group. Either you say that you don't need anything or you can for example ask for: "*Could someone oppress me about my class*" or "*I need someone to have more quiet conversations with*". Then I will ask if someone can see themselves doing this, and usually some other players are happy to help provide this type of play. I specify that you should only raise your hand if you are really going to commit to it so the player asking actually gets

what they need. Chances are that when I try to make people accountable and three raise their hand to help, at least one of them will actually cast the rope from their boat to their co-player's.

You can also choose to provide a new workshop piece or a significant and possibly dramatic event in the beginning of a new act. In *Daemon*, act two starts with a cutting edge science presentation with shocking discoveries with all characters present. After this, there are spikes in the pacing but the larp includes less and less content that I design because the impact of the individual character arcs take over. I also signify this with my facilitator character being less and less important and prevalent to create pressure.

Final Remarks

River Rafting design can help create a more engaging and dynamic player experience from the very beginning of a larp with a higher chance of many moments of emotional impact instead of very few towards the end. By designing highly playable characters and setting, focussing workshops on practicing the tools you provide and designing your pacing for immediate action, you empower players to experience and create more emotional impact.

Whether you choose to put more content in the beginning of the experience or not, I encourage you to consider how pacing can shape your larp and communicate these design intentions to players. Even if you don't want your larp to follow the *River Rafting* design methodology, you can help your players by making your choices clear. That will enable them to better structure their larp experience and engage with your vision more effectively.

Happy designing!

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Kerstin Örtberg Anne Serup Grove

Kerstin Örtberg (b. 1976) is a Swedish larper, reenactor, costume geek, and fashion designer. She was assistant producer for *The Solution* (2016) and has held talks at KP/SK and written several articles, all with a focus on costuming.

Anne Grove is a Danish larper and ethnographic designer by trade. In recent years, Anne has focussed on inclusive costuming and larp related publications. She has been involved in the making of several KP-books including this one.

The Costume Guide

Some tools, a paradox and
an accidental manifesto

We set out to *not* write a how-to article as we've done many times before, and in the process stumbled into a manifesto while exploring the possibilities and limitations of costume guides. In an attempt to build the foundation for a more tangible conversation, with the hope that it creates a basis for a theoretical discourse, we have tried taking the initial steps exploring not only the *what* but also the *how* and *why* of costume guides.

A costume guide has the potential to serve as a key part of the larp designer's aesthetic vision alongside website, characters and other participant material. Whereas themed layouts and visual elements, be they photographic or pictorial, add flair and a sense of concept, the costume guide offers a more physical/direct way into embodying those concepts. In other words: it is a tool. It is however not merely one tool, it is multiple — or at the very least has the potential to be.

In this article we draw on existing costume guides from a variety of events, most of them from Northern European. The events are either historic or they have a specific aesthetic or setting. Most of them are larps, but some are larp-related events such as themed conventions or balls. The costume guides have been collected through reaching out to larp community groups on Facebook and our private network. We requested positive examples and things that the contributors wanted to highlight, as opposed to where a guide had failed. For the sake of clarity we are using 'costume guide' or just 'guide' as a catch-all. Other terms in the material we have looked through are *style guides*, *clothing guides* and simply *costumes*.

The complexity of several tools

The format of a costume guide contains complexity that can be taken advantage of. It will always be a conscious choice to make

a guide, but the usefulness and quality can be heightened by first setting the intention and making a framework that goes deeper. But to use it intentionally requires awareness of the possibilities it entails and allows. It requires knowledge of what it can be and a clarity of the purposes the designer wants it to serve, beyond superficial aesthetic information.

Two obvious tools

To the participant, the costume guide is a tool to be used when creating costumes. To the designer it is a tool to convey how they wish their design choices should manifest in costume form. It is world-building together, but not simultaneously. The guide is a communication channel between the two design processes.

To the designer, the aim is to support the participant in navigating the decision-making process of sourcing their costume, be it from their own stash, or through borrowing, renting, thrifting, purchasing or making. To the participant, the aim is to create and embody the physical appearance of a character within the aesthetic vision of the designer.

An often overlooked third tool

A costume guide can be created at the tail end of event design, and there is nothing wrong with this. However this overlooks the potential usefulness of starting the creation process of the costume guide when the event design is taking place. If started while the event is being designed, it allows the designers to use it as a tool to embed other and deeper aesthetic purposes. This allows for deeper design than solely clothing characters.

What stands to be gained by using a costume guide as a tool early in the design process is an even stronger overall aesthetic result. Details might show up in the creation process that support the in-

spiration material, themes and envisioned aesthetics. Intertwining the two makes it easier to identify these details and in turn communicate them in a manner that makes it easier for the participant to grasp and convey in their costumes. The end result becomes more cohesive, both visually and experience wise. It will impact the overall participant experience and stand out in the documentation material.



An example of this is when Bjørn-Morten, part of the design duo behind *Sunkissed Affairs*, in an early design meeting voiced “I want to be able to take photos that look like paintings. Krøyer but in the 1920s.” This led to a strong emphasis on overarching color schemes¹ tied into the landscape the larp was played in, removing it somewhat from the original inspiration material, the Danish tv series *Badehotellet* (En.: Seaside Hotel). Foto: Bjørn-Morten Gundersen.

¹ As opposed to group colors.

The Paradox

Being a key element in the shared creation of the designer and participant, the costume guide puts a lot of pressure on both ends. The crucial job of the designer is to convey the relevant design choices in an understandable and inspiring way, making it inclusive and approachable to the participant. At the successful end of the spectrum this means catering to different participant skill levels, in costuming as well as comprehension of the material. To the participant, the pressure is in the form of expectations to live up to, set by the presence of the guide, no matter how inclusive it may be. It is worth noting that omitting addressing the costume expectations by deciding to not have a costume guide at all or to simply say “everything is allowed” will not result in the absence of anxiety. It can worsen it. A participant can be supported through the emotional process by a well made costume guide, but it can never remove the anxiety completely. This is the paradox of a costume guide.

On challenges and bridging the gaps

Where a costume guide goes from a good source of information to a useful tool is when it contains information, e.g. about a historic era, *and* offers suggestions and support on how to achieve the aesthetic vision. Where a costume guide becomes even better is when it bridges the gap between the explicit and implicit knowledge (information on a historic era, suggestions and support) to tacit knowledge. An example of tacit knowledge in the context of costume making is the skill of combining the information of the guide with the personality traits of a character and conveying those nu-

ances in the costume². This is not a skill all participants can be expected to possess. For those who have gained the skill already, it is easy to forget that it is indeed an acquired skill. This goes both for participants, and in this context more importantly, designers. Not addressing and bridging the knowledge gap can create higher barriers for new and less experienced participants³ to take part in the event.⁴ No matter the circumstances it can be overwhelming and bewildering to receive and be expected to use a costume guide.

Expectation management

“I really like that the text is centered on players and their costumes, rather than on the fashion of the era. It focuses on achievable things, and I think it sets good expectations for minimum requirements while giving people with bigger ambitions useful advice.”
Susanne Vejdemo, on Suffragette

It is important to acknowledge the bar set by a costume guide and what effects it has on a participant: it is a manifestation of the overall expectations of the participant’s contribution to the scenography. No matter how successfully it lowers the barrier of entry this fact stands and can add to performance anxiety. It makes the guide itself a form of expectation management, that through its supportive means, not only with words and images but also layout and more structural measures, extends a hand to the newcomers, be they new to the aesthetic style, the historic era or larp in gene-

2 It is not simply a matter of copying the image material: there are e.g. layers to a costume that communicate characteristics and socio-economic signifiers: Kerstin Örtberg and Anne Serup Grove (2020): Fake It and Make It. In Eleanor Saitta, Johanna Koljonen, Jukka Särkijärvi, Anne Serup Grove, Pauliina Männistö, & Mia Makkonen (eds.). What Do We Do When We Play? Helsinki; Solmukohta 2020.

3 Or an otherwise experienced participant, who is venturing into a new genre or era.

4 A note should be made here that being an experienced participant in another setting venturing into a new one - in effect going from master to novice - brings its own set of challenges.

ral. It is not simply a matter of combining words and images, but how it is done.

		
<p>Quilted jumps (tip: you can use a densely quilted blanket or the like to make them)</p> <p>Very accurate</p>	<p>An unquilted bodice/waistcoat made of stiff fabric. It should still flatten out the bust.</p> <p>Works</p>	<p>Bodices with details that are very specific to other eras</p> <p>Avoid</p>

In many of the costume guides for Atropos' events you will find this format, showing the participant what "Very accurate / works / avoid" looks like, using simple layout and combining text and images to illustrate in multiple ways. This particular example is from Nocturne.

"I really liked the costume guide for Love and Duty because it shows what perfect looks like, what good enough looks like, and (importantly) what bad looks like."

Elina Gouliou

"[...] I generally like when it's divided into three categories: 1. OK/good enough. 2. Great/strive for this. 3. Avoid/don't use this."

Maria Rodén

Levels of information

A simple supportive theoretical grip a designer can use is to be mindful of always having words and images work in tandem. An image with an accompanying description of why it was chosen and which detail(s) to notice will not only show what the designers are looking for, it will also provide context for any other visual elements, as it opens up the implicit knowledge to the participant. If the image is presented without accompanying words, its success in conveying the desired information relies on the participants' knowledge.

THE BELT

Every elf should have a brown or black belt. The bigger the belt buckle, the more well off your character is. Remember to add a pouch for your papers and tools.

<https://no.pinterest.com/pin/541839398918012980/>



Alternately, get a tool belt, because nothing says "worker" like a tool belt. And you will have ample room for your papers and other knickknacks.

Look how nice this tool belt is:



He is definitely going to meet his quota!

<https://no.pinterest.com/pin/541839398918012972/>



Example from Midwinter of how pictures, layout, text and the description of the symbolism behind them are succinctly combined in layered levels of information.

Information can furthermore be reiterated in different forms. Aside from text and pictures this can be bullet points, diagrams, illustrations as well as different media, like image platforms or digital and broadcast media⁵. One example is the music video Kimera Artist Collective made for the larp *Disgraceful Proposals*⁶. Having a multitude of different forms and formats will support memory retention of the information, making it easier to recall when making decisions be it in the thrift store, online shopping or during project planning.

⁵ To be most useful these formats also require a framework to change the participants mindset from simply consuming to using it.

⁶ <https://disgracefulproposals.wordpress.com/>

Mages
Inspiration: <https://www.pinterest.de/graylight2142/mages/>

Mages prefer long coats often embellished with individual paintings or led signs and stand-up collars to cover their **magic linings**. As a mage player, several things are **required** of you:

Wearing a registration plaque
 All registered mages will receive a plaque marking them as such. This will be provided by us.

UV Makeup
 Mages have patterns of naturally occurring **blue** lines on their skin that contain a certain signature symbol. You will get your magic symbol from the organizers. The makeup must be UV reactive so that it glows brightly when exposed to UV light.

! You must have lines including your symbol in **blue** UV paint.

A UV light source
 For the magic mechanics in the game, you will need to be able to **shine UV light** on your makeup or on other players. For this you will need a light source, this can be anything from a simple UV torch to a fancy integrated light into a glove.

Specific colors
Colors and Magic:
 We use UV responsive (fluorescent) colors to **signal magic**, therefore **Accorded** and **Mages** have patterns on their skin which they will illuminate with a UV lamp while casting a spell.

Riffer also have UV responsive (fluorescent) colors as spots or tattoos, but these will only glow in certain situations or areas during the game.

There is a limited range of UV reactive colors, only use the **allowed** colors for your character type.



Colors and Light
 For all **Humans** and **Androids**, you can use all colors available to you, considering the style and color schemes of your faction (details in the next chapter).

Important: Do not use UV reactive colors on purpose - these colors are **reserved for magic users** and **officers**. Some fabrics are UV responsive don't bother about that and use what you have.

Under NO Circumstances are you allowed to use an UV light source in your location or on your character, if you are not an **Accorded** or **Mage**, or the tattoo studio.

Throughout the costume guide for Graylight 2142, each in-game group's visual identifiers are explained. Towards the end of the guide this is summed up using both text and a diagram.

Inclusivity and accessibility

It is not only a matter of having different iterations that speaks to different challenges, skills, knowledge levels and forms of memory retention. A vital part of supporting the participant is also to understand the challenges that come with clothing a body, both practically and visually.

“I liked Asema Alkujuuri’s costume guide. It was very clear about everything, listed things to avoid and things to include, and covered everything from shoes to tattoos. It was also practical: how warm the venue gets, how much time will be spent outside, etc. [...]”

Mirka Oinonen

Some aesthetics, and most historic eras, have very specific body ideals or tend to only depict certain body types. By widening the visual representation and addressing how to create the expected silhouette on different bodies, the performance anxiety for both a newer and more experienced participant can be lowered. It will never be removed but a supportive costume guide can have a big

impact on how the participant feels both in the process of making and while wearing the costume.

I wrote down several costumes guides and as a plus-size person, I have always try to add illustrations or historical pictures of plus size inspirations. Also, sometimes organisers do not realise that the "shape" they except for uniforms or mandatory costume is not exactly a easy fit for biggers larpers and it can make people uncomfortable, so I always add a "even if the fashion is supposed to be loose, if you want sometimes tighter or wear a corset, go ahead, we want you to feel gorgeous."

Cora la Rousse

These are two examples, but there are of course many other aspects that can influence the accessibility of an event in terms of costumes, and therefore the costume guide.

Summing up, a costume guide is in the end one or more tools: a design tool, a communication channel and a decision-making tool. It is made for the participant but its usefulness is not limited to the participant. It has the potential to be a meaningful tool in its own right.

(An accidental) Costume Guide Manifesto

When creating material on costumes you should follow these principles. They will inform the creation process, serving as a design tool in itself, and what you include, what you exclude and how you communicate the content. Understanding that the costume guide is a communication channel between you, the designer, and your participant is paramount to making a useful guide.

The making of a costume guide is an integral part of the event design process and must not be relegated to its aftermath. It is a tool of visual worldbuilding and should be included from the beginning.

It must merge the event design with the costumes: Color, texture, cut, and proportions should all tie into the themes of the game. The overall aesthetic experience of the larp depends on it, both during and, in the documentation material, after.

A costume guide is a tool for participants to interact with the event ahead of time. It will enable the participant to begin the process of embodying the physicality of the event, therefore the costume guide must narrow down the focus of the designed aesthetic. Specifically for character-centered events, a costume serves as a vehicle for contextual character information. If the guide is for such an event, it must inspire and support the participant to use their costume as such.

The guide must consider accessibility and inclusiveness on multiple levels. At the very least the designer must approach it with humility and understanding for the challenges that come with clothing bodies.

The aim of a costume guide must be to lower the barriers of entry. Therefore, a costume guide must cater to different levels of mastery, but always accommodate the novice more than the master. Where a master will skim a costume guide, be able to sort through the information fast and know what to look for elsewhere, a novice will rely heavily on the contents and be tied to it.

The key takeaways must be repeated to support information processing and aid in memory retention. Costume information, especially historical, is complex, making it paramount that the key information is edited with simplicity in mind, avoiding superfluous text. The reader must be able to put the guide away and still retain the knowledge it contains.

This also means the content must be conveyed and repeated in multiple ways. It must be a combination of ways and modalities to achieve a higher degree of inclusiveness. Examples are the hierarchical “must know, need to know, nice(/fun) to know”, a variety of text elements such short and long form text, synthesis and summaries, bullet points, visuals such as illustrations, images, tables and diagrams and other forms such as text and image documents, pinterest boards and media like movies, series and YouTube videos.

Ludography

Asema Alkujuuri, Elli Ojaniemi and team,
2024

Belgrave Square, Stichting Obscuros, 2025

Club Inferno, Atropos, 2024

Disgraceful Proposals, Kimera Artist
Collective, 2022

Dollars & Nobles, Maren Sofie Løfsgård &
Torunn Lea Igeland, 2023

Fragment of Novel, Atropos, 2024

Graylight 2142, Fractured Reality Studios,
2023

Lord of Lies, Atropos, 2021

Love & Duty, Atropos and Lu Larpová,
2023

Lund 1920, Lund Spelfestival & Ditte
Kröner, 2024

Midwinter (Costume guide from 1st run),
Avalon, 2020

Nocturne, Emilia Korhonen and Petra
Katarina, 2023

Pleasing Women, Julia Greip & Siri
Sandquist, 2022

Suffragette, Susanne Vejdemo & Siri
Sandquist, 2014

Sunkissed Affairs, Mads Havshøj & Bjørn-
Morten Gundersen, 2024

The Forbidden History, Atropos, 2018.



Elin Dalstål

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<https://boldandvulnerable.wordpress.com/>

Emotionally pacing for larps

How to get the best rollercoaster ride

We larp because we want intense emotional experiences. We want to shiver with fear, cry over tragedies, give in to the rage, and laugh with joy. Yet such feelings are not sustainable without crashing afterwards. Intense emotions might come in waves, but they leave exhaustion in their wake.

In contrast to those feelings we also need less intense, more subtle feelings. Worry, annoyance, companionship or gentleness for example. Less intense feelings offer just as rich play experiences and are needed to contrast and complement the more intense emotional spectra.

In addition we need emotional downtime, to reflect, recover, and rest - particularly during a longer larp -, as larping is emotionally, mentally and sometimes physically demanding. This enables players to have the energy to really engage with the story.

This article is about how you both as a player and organizer can plan and execute your larp for maximal emotional impact as well as emotional sustainability. So how do you do it?

My suggestion is that you draw a squiggly line, but we will get to that later.

How intense do you want the larp?

First, consider how emotionally intense you want the larp. As a designer this is a big choice that will affect all players, choose baseline intensity fit the overall design but be aware that there will be player both above and below whatever baseline you chose. When you make this choice as a player, you make it in relationship to whatever baseline the larp design aim for. Some larps are low-key by nature, and some larps strive for the most intense experience possible. No matter what, I think all larps benefit from some va-

riation in intensity. Even a low-key experience about baking bread needs some variation, even if it is just an acknowledgement that some stages of baking bread are more stressful than others.

It is easy to imagine that “more intense = better”, as if larp was an extreme sport about always climbing the tallest mountain possible. It is not. Sometimes you might want to climb a tall mountain, but sometimes you just want to go on an easy hike and enjoy nature, and sometimes you might want to visit a specific site. Striving for maximal intensity is a valid agenda, but only one among many.

Decide what you want for the larp you are going to, or the larp you are designing. What mix of height and low intensity play do you want? What range of experiences would make you happy? This might be a bit hard to think about, so let me help you.

Four levels of intensity

One way to think about this is dividing the emotional intensity into four rough levels, and that is how I am going to talk about it for the rest of the article. This scale is not absolute but relative to the playstyle at the larp. At a very low-key bread baking larp “high intensity” might mean harsh words being spoken, while at a super dramatic save the world larp it might mean the possible end of humanity.

High intensity

These are the most intense scenes. If a character is angry they are as angry as they get, if they are sad they are a heartbroken mess, and if they are happy their joy couldn't be greater. The absolute highs and lows. What this looks like might differ, as we as people express and experience emotions differently. But this might be weeping uncontrollably over your fathers lifeless body, or the rage

primal scream of rage and betrayal betrayal or absolute fucking panicked horror.

Mid intensity

In this one emotions and activity level might be a bit heightened, for example your character might be pissed off they are not raging. A character might be curious but not desperate in their search for knowledge, for example. Much of a larp might be happening on this level, because many of us want to spend most of our play at this level.

Low intensity

Here things are even more chill. There will be emotions, but the emotions are not pressing. Here you find characters that are relaxed, or a bit thoughtful, or “meh”, or displeased about something. A lot of meaningful play can be found here in the form of deep and meaningful conversations. They are just not emotionally intense.

Recovery

At this level players are actively resting. Eiter in character, or out of character. It might mean having a nap, doing some task like chopping firewood or going on a walk to clear their head. Or doing some very low key relaxing play, for example I had wonderful scenes laying half dosing in a tent next to my in game companions listening to musicians play. Some players might need to go out of character (at least mentally) to disengage from the feelings of their character to recover, either because they can't fully relax in character or because what is going on in character is too intense to allow them to relax. As a designer you don't always plan for this level, because this is something the player must choose to do for it to happen. But you can communicate to players when they have a chance to rest without missing out. It might be something as simple as communicating “after meals there will be a bit of a lull, so if you need to rest or go out of character it is a good time to do so”.

Check out other media

One way to help you with this analysis is to watch a movie, especially a movie with a lot of intense feelings and try to keep track of the emotional tension in the scenes play out. You will see that the emotional intensity comes in waves. Even a horror movie that is all about causing intense feelings will have low intensity scenes interlaced with the more tense one as contrast and to not exhaust the watcher emotionally and make them disengage. Try to identify where on the scale different scenes fall.

Length of the larp

Secondly, consider the length of the larp. The shorter a larp is, the less of an issue emotional sustainability is. All larps can benefit from giving some thought to emotional pacing, but a short larp faces less risk of exhausting the players. For an 1-2 hour larp many of us can maintain maximum intensity and come out on the other side of it without ever having to pull on the brakes. You probably won't need to recover emotionally during the larp because the experiences will be over soon and the natural ebb and flow of the game will offer enough micro pauses in itself.

The longer a larp gets, the more you have to think about emotional sustainability. Already at a 3-5 hour larp you probably need some variation in the intensity of play, because very few of us can keep playing the same level of emotional intensity for hours. We want and we need some variation at this point.

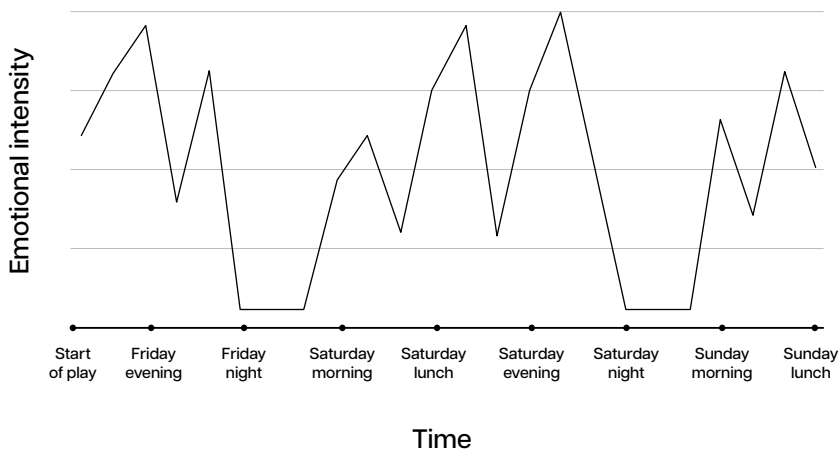
Anything longer than that, especially multi-day events, larps need an emotional pacing to create the best possible experience. We will want high intensity, mid intensity and low intensity scenes and some chances to recover to be able to best engage with the story.

Draw a squiggly line

Thirdly, draw a squiggly line. Do it before the larp as a player, or during the design stage as a designer. Divide a paper into two axes. One is time, and one is intensity. On the intensity scale divide it into four zones. High intensity, mid intensity, low intensity and recovery. Then map out the larp roughly.

You are striving for waves of intensity. Ebb and flow. The map should look like a mountain landscape with peaks and valleys, where you switch between the different zones (high, mid, low and recovery) and don't stay all the time in one zone. Like this for example:

Intensity of play



As an organizer

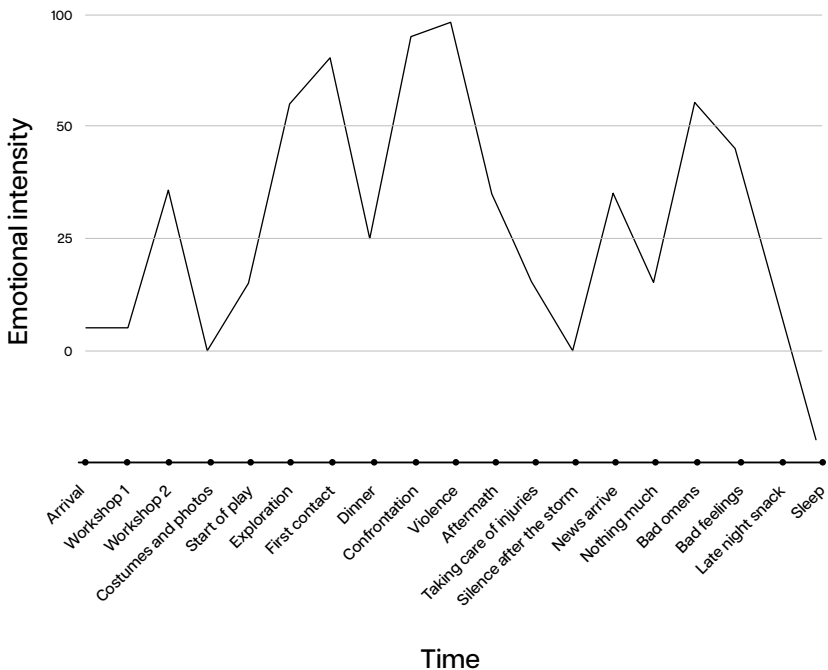
Depending on the style of larp it might be possible to make a very detailed outline or a very rough one. For a sandbox larp, where you have a lot of factions acting independently, it can be very hard to guess what and when things are going to happen both as a player and

as an organizer. Just make a rough guess based on what you know. It is helpful to plan around meals, as their timing is something you generally know. Often you can make an educated guess at the meal's intensity as well. (Breakfast is usually a low intensity meal while a banquet with entertainment might be a high intensity scene.)

On the other end of the spectrum you can, as an organizer, plan the curve almost down to the minute, if you have a lot of planned events and probable outcomes. Here I zoomed in on the Friday in the previous example to show what a very detailed curve might look like, dividing the two big waves into even smaller ones.

If you have a different group of characters at a larp that will have very different larp experience with different timings, draw separate curves for those groups and see how they play out.

Friday



Of course, whatever line you draw, it won't work out that way. There will be delays and things happening out of sync. Every individual player will on top of that follow their own dramatic curve due to all the small events and interaction that make up a larp. Also they will find different things emotionally intense. That is natural. Going through the trouble of having drawn this squiggly line will help you troubleshoot your larp design and create at least a rough plan for the pacing.

Try to pace the low intensity scene so that if the players want to withdraw to rest they can do so at those occasions without missing out on much.

As a player

When you are a player, there are usually a lot of unknowns. You might have no idea what the organizers or your co-players are planning. I still think it is best that you draw a squiggly line to make a rough game plan. For example, try to kick off strong on Friday, round off with some calmer play late at night, head to bed, start out strong Saturday morning, try to find some time to rest on Saturday afternoon, go hard again until you head to bed and go for low or mid intensity play on Sunday because you have a long drive home.

That is still a plan that might help you get the best possible experience out of the larp. If you made a plan you can also figure out if there is anything you want to communicate with your coplayers. In this example you might want to tell them that you plan to take it a bit easy on Sunday because you have a long drive home, so the big dramatic confrontation might happen on Saturday evening instead.

Gameplan!



Go for variety

While we larp it can be tempting to just go for the high drama, the high intensity all the time both as designer and as players.. Chasing the next high until we run off a cliff or into a wall. Unless the larp is very short, don't do it. Be a boring adult and pace yourself. Remember that less intense play is just as meaningful and rewarding. It is not always the most dramatic scenes that are the best ones. On top of that you need some less intense scenes to give meaning and contrast to the dramatic scenes. Unless you establish your character's relationship by having scenes where you just hang out and talk about nonsense, your friend's dramatic death won't mean as much to you if it happens later. The low-key scenes are instrumental to give the high intensity scenes meaning.

At the same time others have a tendency to hold back. Always staying at low-mid intensity, playing it safe and never getting into the strong feeling also means that they are missing out. Having a squiggly line plan can help some players actually go for more intense play without being afraid of crashing afterwards.

Either way, pace yourself and go for variety in the emotional intensity.

Abandon the squiggly line!

Lastly, no plan survives contact with the enemy. Once play starts, throw your carefully made plan out of the window, or at least revise it. You never know how things are going to play out during a larp.

Revise your plan and create a new squiggly line. As a player, if you had low intensity play, jump at the next chance to up the intensity. If you had very intense play, seek out something more low key or go have some rest. Feel your energy levels and plan ahead.

As an organizer feel out the pacing of the game. If things just unexpectedly exploded, then create space for more low key play. If there has been a long lull, see if you can turn up the heat.

Closing words

Pace yourself and pace your design. Intense emotional experiences become more available to you and more sustainable if you have variety to the intensity of your play, both as a designer and as an individual player. Enjoy the whole intensity range, low intensity scenes can be just as beautiful and captivating as high intensity scenes.

Draw a squiggly line to create a plan for the larp, and abandon your squiggly line when it doesn't work out but still try to pace your play based on the new circumstances.

I hope this mindset helps. Pace your larps however works for you, because variety in how we design and play larps is just as important as any other type of variety.

Frederikke Sofie Bech Høyer

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Design for young adult players

The relevance of designing for hope,
agency and inclusion

As larp communities evolve, it becomes increasingly important to consider how we include young adults (12-18 years old) in our communities and at our larps. This article explores how larp designers can design larps that span generations and include young adults as co-creators and peers in the design and play processes. The article's approach is practice-based, utilized at *Østerskov Efterskole* as well as at our mythical fantasy larp campaign *Fladlandssagaen* (Denmark 2006-, Eng. *The Flatland Saga*), which means that its tools and insights are created in a Danish context. The article touches upon themes such as accessibility, connections, workshops, hopeful narratives, and presents practical strategies to empower young adult (and new) players and provide safe spaces for self-exploration. It emphasizes the relevance of designing for hope, agency, and inclusion for young adult players as well as integrating and respecting popular young adult tropes and themes.

A young adult-only scenario or an intergenerational larp

The first step in the process is to determine whether the larp you are designing is targeted towards young adult players only, targeted to young adult players with the possibility for other age groups to participate, or if it is intended as part of an intergenerational larp, for example including children, teens, and adults. Different formats offer different advantages, and all have merit - being aware of this from the outset will clarify your needs as an organizer.

Larps for young adults only can be comforting and empowering. To play alongside peers at a similar level creates a safe space wherein they can explore and be braver than they would normally be. In addition it builds a strong bond with peers they can mirror. Playing in an intergenerational larp can help build relationships across age groups, expand one's perspectives on life and forge an understanding of hopes and dreams for the future no matter

what the participant's age is. Regardless of the format, when designing a larp with young adult participants in mind it can be an advantage to include a co-organizer or consultant who is a young adult themselves to make sure their experiences and perspectives are included in the design of the larp. Your format and the age gap among players will need to be considered when you help your players calibrate, understanding their responsibility in relation to each other, together with your larp's themes and meta-techniques.

Off-game accessibility

When you have chosen your format, it is important to reflect upon how to make it possible for youths to participate in your larp, both economically and practically; young adults typically have less spending power than adults with stable income and they usually have less experience with the practical aspects of attending a larp, such as coordinating transport and costume. If possible, try to find ways to make the larp accessible for low-income players. This could for example take the form of lower ticket prices for specific target groups, or easily accessible (or low requirement) costumes. You can also have a designated person who is visible and easy to contact if they have any practical questions or problems, or design your larp so that every group has an experienced player who has the offgame responsibility to coordinate the group and its members; just make sure they know how to give space and agency to the group's young adults.

You should also take the implicit knowledge one gains from earlier larp experiences into account when designing and communicating with young adults. Some in the target group might be just entering the community, and it can be challenging to find information and navigate the scene without connections who have knowledge of how larps are structured. Here it can be beneficial to consider whether you communicate on the appropriate social platforms,

whether there are social connections you can engage with to help spread information about the larp, and whether the materials you develop are presented in language that is both accessible and relevant to young adults. If you have an age limit for the larp, make it clear why the limit is set where it is, whether exceptions or accommodation are possible, and what expectations exist for the young adults in relation to other age groups. For instance, do they have additional responsibilities toward children in the game, or are there types of play they are not allowed to join because they are intended for adults?

Familiarise yourself with the player group

When designing a larp aimed at young adults, especially if you are not part of that age group, it is often beneficial to immerse yourself in media, stories, and life experiences that resonate with them. This helps you to understand the narrative conventions, themes, and tropes they are familiar with. If you are unsure where to begin, the best step is to find someone within the age group and ask for their guidance to get started. This could be a family member, a student, a friend's child, or someone from your local community. Ask them questions about which media they consume, which social media they are on (and how they work) and how they prefer to be part of a story when they larp, and let them provide examples from their own life.

Creating meaningful narratives

An essential part of developing a young adult larp is crafting the narratives so that it is clear and transparent what the stories are about, which outcomes the players can experience when they interact with them, and how they can follow the plotlines. Surprises and unexpected revelations are of course welcome, but it is crucial

that players feel they can trust the designers - that they will not be tricked or exposed if they fail to understand something, especially when the designers are from outside the target audience. This is particularly important because designers often hold greater social power and influence within our communities.

Some designers favor larps that teach young adults about life's darker sides: about the political challenges of our world, injustice, and how one can do everything right and still lose. While it is undoubtedly important to engage with and learn about the realities of our world - especially issues like the climate crisis, famine, wars, and systemic injustices, most of the young adults I design with and for are already acutely aware of how much darkness exists. Many of them feel a profound sense of helplessness, believing there is little they can do to make a difference. As designers, it is not enough to simply highlight the darkness. We have a responsibility to design in a way that conveys hope, that creates spaces of possibility, that demonstrates how even small actions can hold value in a larger context, especially when we design with and for young adults. Of course, we can use dark narratives and themes in our designs, but then we should balance it with aspects and plotlines that show that factors like age, gender, or background need not be barriers to making an impact, give the young adults self-confidence, teach them how to handle real-life situations and give them trust that they can make a real change in the real world. Therefore, we have a duty to design for hope and agency.

Themes, characters, and relations through workshops

Often, our larps end up revolving around themes such as identity, self-discovery, tension between duty and freedom, relationships and responsibilities, together with social and ethical dilemmas. Essentially these are all themes involving choices and changes

that the young adults in our community like to explore. These themes challenge players to reflect on morality and consequences, allowing their characters to win or lose something meaningful without any real-world repercussions for the player. For some, larps with these themes become a mirror, a transformative experience in which they can see themselves more clearly, and then use their experiences as guidelines for the direction of their lives. Especially if you include a debriefing wherein the players can reflect, by themselves and collectively, upon the shared experience of the larp.

When we use these themes, one of our recurring tropes involves young adult characters who see the world as it really is, not as they are told it is, and who strive to challenge authorities to change the status quo or the adults' pessimistic worldview. This provides an alibi to practice speaking up, standing one's ground, collaborating, and forging paths forward.

In addition, we write characters for young adults in which they act as protectors, leaders, explorers, healers, teachers, or gatherers; the characters have clear goals and believe they can influence the world around them together. These characters are connected to qualities like empathy, wisdom, strength, ingenuity, courage, and hope, giving players agency and opportunity to influence the larp and its outcomes without being hindered by their age or existing knowledge. We give their characters something to stand up for, even when all seems dark. This gives them an alibi for action, something to fight for.

To support this, we focus heavily on workshops aimed at building strong relationships between the player characters. Every character is integrated into multiple group dynamics to ensure they have several connections if one set of relationships fails to generate meaningful play. Furthermore, we typically create four core relationships: one with a best friend, one with a nemesis, one sharing a common dream, and one sharing a common fear. This layered

approach ensures characters are deeply embedded in the world, with clear, impactful roles that empower young players to explore and affect the story meaningfully.

Thoughtful use of clichés in your design

Some seasoned larpers speak negatively about clichés and stereotypes, not because they did not at first enjoy them, but because they have seen them repeated across numerous larps and therefore end up dismissing them as a sign of “lazy design”. While the frustration of encountering a trope or narrative element you have experienced many times before is understandable, I find that clichés hold value and have their merit as design tools. I’m not advocating for their exclusive use, but thoughtful clichés that are incorporated and embedded in your design do have their worth. Why? Clichés create an accessible and recognizable entry point for players to step into and explore the larp, by making it easy to decode the structure, story, and roles through shared cultural references among designers and players (even though there are different clichés in different cultures and age groups). They can work like a gateway into the larp and immersion by giving players predetermined patterns of actions, role developments and opportunity spaces that players know from other media. They can use these in the larp without doubting whether they are playing “correctly” or fearing being judged by the rest of the players.

Through the familiarity of the cliché, players have a safe platform from which they can choose to follow, challenge, or even break the stereotype when they feel ready. Overall, clichés can help free up the player’s mental energy so they can use it on engaging with the larp and getting to know the rest of the players, as well as working on being confident in the medium itself. When designed right, clichés give new players access while older players can be reminded of their first encounter with them and experience the bittersweet

nostalgia of reunion. Clichés you use should be empowering, intriguing, slightly quirky, or familiar, and used to develop the characters, narratives, and experiences you offer. Avoid those that do not align with the larp’s ideals and values, ensuring you do not compromise your vision by recycling harmful stereotypes that maintain toxic beliefs and behaviours.

Clear activities, groups, and functions

Clear activities with tangible consequences and rewards serve as fallback options for those inexperienced players who may feel less confident, are overwhelmed by choices, or lack energy to take active initiative in the larp. These could include puzzles, smaller quests, brief blackbox scenes, or other elements that still support the goals of their groups and characters but require less initiative and larp know-how. We use this in our designs because many experience fluctuating energy levels and even though they deeply want to be part of the play, they have not yet developed larp endurance to play a full day of larp without breaks. Well-defined activities make it easier to navigate those situations, since they are just as meaningful and helpful for the rest of the team if one decides to influence the plots, develop relationships with others, immerse themselves in their character’s inner emotions or to take a break. To support this, when a player has an in-game responsibility, they share it with at least one other player. This way, one can take a break without feeling guilty about the possibility that it hinders the rest of the play. Important responsibilities often have a non-player character (often shortened as NPC) attached, in case both players need to take a break or need to reflect upon what the next right move is, so the players know that someone has their backs if they find themselves in deep water.

In some larps it can be a great option to use role models as clear examples of how to play and portray roles, showing the players what to do. If you have two or more opposing factions, it works

well when the adult role models clearly show how one could choose to play. This works best if you train the role models to switch between standing behind the participants, giving them the confidence to take center stage, and taking center stage themselves to drive the story forward when the players need guidance. It is often interesting to let the role models disappear during the larp, losing their power or giving the important positions to the players. For example, the mayor could be forced by the players to arrange a new election and lose, or the leader of one clan could die in an attack from another, so the young ones need to step up and take charge.

To make sure that the young adult players feel real freedom to choose their larp experience and take needed breaks, we articulate clear expectations, objectives and success criteria as a framework for them to play and navigate in. We measure success in initiative and participation, based on *the good enough attempt* rather than focusing on *the perfect performance with the right in-game outcome*. For example, it would be enough to take part in a ritual, opposed to running one, or to dare to act politically in front of the others, as opposed to ending up as the mayor.

To emphasize this, we design our stories so that the characters only face consequences in-game that their players understand off-game. If the players somehow do not understand the consequences when played out, we make time, space and alibi to reflect and to help them with what they can do next, if needed. These framings are crucial, as without them some feel pressured to prove themselves to others to feel validated, or out of fear of not being welcome at a larp again.

The best way to help the participants when their energy levels fluctuate and they need a break, is to not make a big deal out of it and just give them time to get to a place where they are able to rejoin the larp. A designated break room is a good way to explicitly communicate that it is okay to take a break during the larp.

Players may, rightfully or not, worry that taking too many or long breaks can result in them losing touch with the narrative of the larp. To remedy this problem it may be beneficial to structure the larp in acts with clear endings and beginnings, possibly with planned breaks in between so that players as well as organizers can recharge. These bookend scenes can then be used to summarize the act, and ensure that everyone is on the same page, as well as provide a natural point at which to rejoin the action!

Let us start the talk

There is a gap between children's and adult larps. To bridge this gap and seriously work on the integration of young adults in larp communities, it is crucial to take their experiences seriously and make them feel involved as teenagers. To do so, we must take active steps to include the next generation by initiating dialogue, and that includes having some difficult discussions about the communities we have built. Some of the questions we should ask ourselves and each other are:

- Could we lower the age limit of an event from 18 to 16?
- Could our larp events include less alcohol?
- Is it necessary to include this adult-oriented theme?
- How do we talk to and about young larpers?
- How do we address the topics, themes, and narratives that captivate younger audiences without ridiculing them or being dismissive of their fascination?
- Which themes can young adults and adults explore together? Which are adult only themes, and which themes can youth play on without adults?
- How do you communicate with young adults so they feel involved, being at eye level with the rest of the play and being respected as human beings?

Healthy, growing, and stable communities require ongoing integration of young and new people who, with passion and vibrant energy, feel at home among the older and more experienced players, and who dare to both be a part of the communities and to challenge the pre-existing canon so we can evolve together.

We have a responsibility to make it easy and safe for young (and new) people to become part of our community, and we have the power to make it happen. To include these new larpers we must design for hope and agency, using larp to tell stories that make them confident that they have a voice to be heard and choices to make in this world.

Editor

Elin Dalstål.

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Gijs van Bilsen, Laura op de Beke, Maya B. Hindsberg, Mathias Oliver Lykke Christensen, Paul Sinding, and Rasmus Lyngkjær.

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Asta Hansen, Artemis Torfing, Eva Fernandes, Frida I. L. Grøfte, Nicolai Lindh, and Sam Hvolris.

Ludography

Fladlandssagaen (2024): Denmark. The organizer team of Fladlandssaga.

Tin Soldiers (2024): Denmark. The Blackbox Project Liminal.

We The Lost (2024). Denmark. Østerskov Efterskole's study trip scenario.

Østerskov Efterskole (2024): Denmark. The Larp School, Østerskov Efterskole.

Marijke Van Hauwaert

I have been larping nationally and internationally since 2016, and started crewing at the same time - as caterer, hospitality, website builder, to name a few. You can read more about the larp school I am building at <https://noorderlichtschool.wixsite.com/home>. Find my contact info at the bottom of the page!

How to Start a Larp School

Edu-larp is hip. The Østerskov school is getting some excellent results. Other projects like Larpifiers and Live Action Learning are growing and becoming more visible, both in the world of larpers and non-larpers. Entire conferences and books are established focusing solely on learning through larping and the list of resources has been steadily growing for a while. How and why this has happened will not be the focus of this article - but if you are convinced of the merits of educational roleplay, then you and I have that in common.

What could a larp school look like?

I feel that a larp school can exist in many different forms. As long as you are teaching and students are learning, you are already halfway there. In my personal case, getting a bunch of children through the turbulent mill that is the Belgian high school education system, while helping them develop as human beings is the basic mission. Making that fun and motivational so that at the end of the ride they turn out a better version of themselves is the highest possible goal to aim for.

At a larp school, students will be encouraged (but never forced) to dress up, or alter a part of themselves, to feel immediately more immersed in that week's theme. A proper stock room with outfits, props, larp safe weapons will help them attain that.

After school, I hope to inspire many of them to join one or more extracurricular activities. These could range from "regular" hobbies such as making music or writing together, to boardgames, TTRPGs, miniature wargames, basically anything fun and nerdy you can think of. The school should be a safe haven for teenagers wanting to explore something else besides what is generally offered in after school hobbies.

School should never be just a place to learn information. Students spend so much time there, developing themselves throughout some of their most turbulent years. Cliche as it may sound, I would love for the school to be a second home for all those in need of a place to be their own selves, nerds, misfits, however they feel. The beauty of larp is its ability to unite and make people connect in totally unexpected ways.

Of course there will be parents and students who feel that school should not be about running around and playing dress-up. A school like this will not be for everyone - and that is fine. Boiling down the information for all sorts of prospective students and their guardians and translating larp to people who have never even heard of larp before might be the biggest challenge in this entire adventure of building a larp school. Gradually, the story will shape itself, and with the right community the story will take the shape it needs to. Statistics from other projects already show the many merits of edu-larp and related projects - but digging deeper into those would take me too far, for now.

How to start?

It's the easiest thing in the world, really, you just find a bunch of people with an overflow of passion and creativity, throw them in a room filled with whiteboards, props, and costumes, leave them alone for a while, and voila. Out comes a larp school. If only it were that simple... Okay, imagine you could steer it a bit more. Observing what teachers come up with is a lot of fun, but some structure might be nice. Guidelines and focus could help turn it into something bigger - into an actual school system.

An excellent way to larpify the system is to combine all the lesson plans for one week, and have some sort of main theme running through the entire school. This way, I would use a regular Belgian

curriculum, but with larp integrated, running through the courses like a central thread. From Monday morning until Friday evening, students will be immersed in themes such as the fall of the Roman Empire, presidential elections, flying a spaceship back to Earth, and so on. Each week a new thread will be added to the tapestry of their secondary education. Through premade lesson plans that will absolutely need to be adapted as the week progresses (because the students, being the good larpers they are, will definitely ask the right questions to mess up the entire game plan), immersion will take over everything.

Every Monday should start with a briefing, workshops, guidelines on what's expected that week. Who is in charge of this week's idea, where to go with questions, everything will need to be clear just like in any other larp. Every Friday afternoon will be reserved for a wholesome (or other!) ending of the larp, debriefing, workshops as needed, formal and informal discussions about what the larp was like for everyone involved. The backbone of a larp week will be similar to what it would look like for a "real" larp, to maintain the structure.

Becoming human

So what is the end goal? In the end, because of certain national regulations, the students need to learn their curriculum - which will ultimately be the focus, but more running softly in the background.

Through immersive weeks, students learn to explore parts of themselves that they would hesitate or maybe not try at all in real life. Maybe they want to try being the Big Bad Evil Person, or try romancing someone, or becoming the president of a country - but without the repercussions of trying and possibly failing at these objectives in real life. Through well-guided workshops and cali-

brations, as well as more stories and scenes than in a weekend larp, students will need to really think about and discuss their boundaries. Emotional safety will always be available, like it would be in any other school, but with more specific, larp-related guidance. The next week, they move on to a new project, and become someone else. By immersing themselves into certain characters and trying out various characteristics, the students can fit different puzzle pieces into their developing minds. They can see which aspects they would like to keep, and which they want to discard.

In the end, all we want is to help them become human - by which I mean, find their own version of humanity. Functional adults, members of society, who can go on and try to find their place to participate in the rest of the world. To help them find themselves and to make them stronger and more confident overall is the basic idea and highest possible goal we could wish for. In the Østerskov documentary, the students talk about how much they have learned about themselves and how each of their roles have helped them grow. I feel this is the highest compliment you could give any larp organizer or crewmember, and the same goes for teachers.

Teachers

Speaking of the teachers - having a well-oiled machine of people I can only describe as showrunners is essential to a larp school. Both larping and non-larping teachers will work closely together and learn to combine teaching and larp in specially tailored seminars. The core of this larp school's success will be how well the teachers translate the material into coherent hours, days, weeks, and years. Lesson plans do not just pop into being on their own, and in this setting they will work even more closely together to form coherent structures throughout the different weeks.

This is possibly the part I am most looking forward to. Weekly brainstorms and seeing their passion come to life is the dream of any school principal. Creating magic together and maybe being a little immersed in the weekly common thread too, would hopefully be as amazing as I am picturing it in my head. Not to glorify the Østerskov school too much (although I cannot praise them enough), but the teachers' passion there is absolutely palpable. An amazing set of devoted teachers changes the entire school, which is undoubtedly beneficial for both the students and the teachers themselves.

Thanks

Thank you to all the wonderful people at Østerskov Efterskole for all the insights and talks we had, formal and informal, and allowing me an intricate look into your school system and lives. Also a heartfelt thank you to a whole bunch of people who I won't name in detail for all our valuable discussions and debates. If I ever figure out how to start a larp school, it will be thanks to you.





forehead

About larpo (reflections)

Mo Holkar **Laura Wood**

Mo Holkar is a British larp designer and organizer. He is part of the Larps on Location design collective, and former organizer of The Smoke and The Game Kitchen. He is a member of the editorial board of nordiclarp.org, and numerous of his articles have been published there, in KP-books, and elsewhere.

Laura Wood is a British larp designer and organizer, interested in transformative play, consent and community building. They designed several chamber larps that ran throughout Europe, including 'Here Comes a Candle', 'Inside' and 'The Vision'. They are part of the Larps on Location design collective and lead the safety team for The Smoke.

Performance and Audience in Larp

Definitions – what is meant by ‘performance’ and ‘audience’

Many artforms have a distinction between ‘performer(s)’ and ‘audience’. The performer(s) enact the artform, and the audience members witness it as an experience. In arts such as theatre, there is (usually) a formal distinction between those people who are giving the performance, and those people who are being part of the audience. Generally, the audience are passive: art may happen within them, and may be affected by their reaction to the performance, but they are not usually actively contributing to it.

In larp, though, there is rarely a performer/audience distinction for the duration of the larp: it is thought of as an artform where these terms are not relevant. In this article, however, we will argue that there are times when we might be closer to performing while larping; and times when we might be closer to an audience role.

We aren’t suggesting that these are permanent states that participants may be in throughout the larp. It may be something that happens briefly during a short scene: the role of performer or audience may be with a given larper only for a short time, and they may be in both roles at different times during the larp.

What has been said about larp, performance, and audience?

Michael Such (2016) sees theatre as a special case of larp, in which performance and audience are present:

“[T]heatre is a larp with a specific set of roles. These are split into those defined as ‘the performers’ and ‘the audience.’ The audience is a role because there are certain things they should not do such as walk on stage or talk. Having an audience role means two big things — that the experience is for the audience and the audience watches the performers.”
(Such, 2016)

Other commentators are more forthright about the absence of these roles in larp:

“Live-action role-playing, then, just removes the passive spectator from the equation, so that all participants are performing simultaneously. It is improvisational and not just performed for an audience...” (Emma, 2013)

“In all larps there’s an expectation of a high level of participation and interactivity. Larp ‘customers’ are active players, not audience members.” (Stenros and Sturrock, 2024)

It seems clear that from the larp side and also from the theatre/performing arts side, people draw this distinction of function: larp does not have performers and audience, and that is what makes it different from the other related arts.

But is that true?

Our argument is that during much larp activity there will be times when one or more participants are ‘performing’, and others may be de facto ‘audience’ to them.

Note that we’re not talking here about when one or more *characters* are performing to *characters* who are diegetically their audience – for example, playing music, singing, giving a sermon or a speech, performing an in-game play. That situation may happen to fall under our argument, but we have a different canvas.

Rather, we are considering the broad case when a participant carries out an action in the larp with the consideration that other participants will be witnessing them. This may be conscious steering – “I’m about to do a cool thing, I will do it in a place where there are other people who will be able to see it happen” – or more at a subconscious level – “My character seems to be naturally gravitating towards a bunch of other people before doing the next inte-

resting-to-watch thing on their journey” – but either way, during that action, one person is doing something watchable, and other people are watching.

And perhaps, at a later stage, the roles will be reversed: you are watching someone else’s cool action, as a de facto audience to their de facto performance. At most larps, participants will be moving fluidly into and out of these roles during the natural course of play.

We say that this should be considered as a performance/audience dynamic, even if it’s not the same clear-cut and ongoing separation of roles that are present in theatre.

How performance and audience operate in larp

As noted above, we aren’t in this article discussing diegetic performance during larp; nor are we considering ‘larps with an audience’ which are deliberately designed to have observers. When we talk about performance here, we are considering actions or scenes of the larp that are played for the benefit of being viewed by other participants, for a non-diegetic reason. This may be with the aim of conveying something about the character played, or to introduce a dramatic element into a scene: with a level of intentionality. An example might be an argument between two characters, played out in public so as to convey information about their relationship and about the matter under dispute, and to express drama, to other participants who are present. If it had been played out in private, the argument might have taken quite a different form.

Someone being observed during a larp is not necessarily performing: however, someone acting in a way which encourages others to watch and respond may be considered as performing, even if in practice no-one actually is watching. For example, in many larps a

death scene in a public place could be considered a performance, if the setting was chosen to draw attention. A death scene that happens to be played out in a public place because of venue layout, or because of the way that the scene evolved, might not be considered a performance, because the protagonist may have had no such intention: they were constrained to play the scene that way. Therefore, we need to consider that there are different levels of ‘performativity’ possible.

Conversely, participants who are currently observing a particular larper with the intention of watching or possibly reacting, but who aren’t playing an active role in the scene or don’t have particular reason to be involved in it, may be considered as an audience. For example, a number of players might be an audience to the public death scene, passively watching it unfold, even when their characters might not have a reason to be particularly interested. If they are interested in it, they might still be considered as an audience, but they are more likely to want to react in some way. Or, the larp design might mandate participants to witness a particular scene, and might import constraints on what they are allowed to do while watching it. So, we also need to consider that there are a range of different levels of audience passivity.

‘Passivity’, here, can also vary considerably. Two participants might be silently and motionlessly watching the same scene playing out, but one is just casually spectating, while the other is deeply emotionally involved and experiencing intense internal play. So, a low level of passivity for the audience doesn’t mean just the power to disrupt the scene or to impose one’s own direction upon it. It is a broad spectrum of agency which can take many different forms.



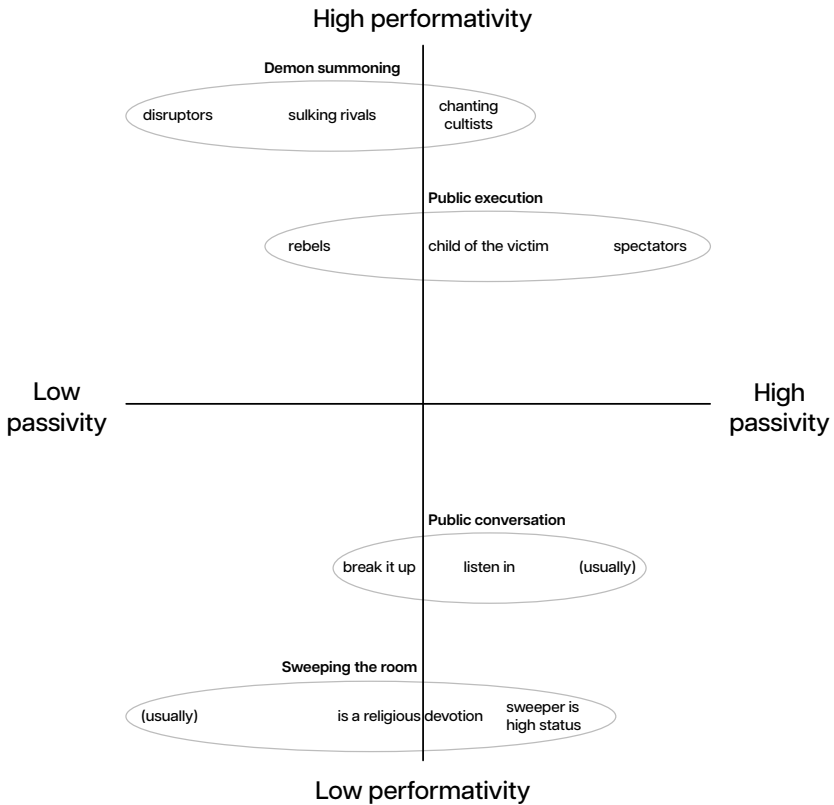
The two scales

We suggest two scales which a participant can be considered to be on, in different places throughout the run time of a larp.

The **performativity scale** is about intention or value in being seen while your character is performing a particular action. For example, if someone is deeply immersed in a character who is sweeping a room as a mundane part of their daily life, and would be acting just the same if they were alone, then they would probably be low on the performativity scale. Someone playing a cult leader about to lead the cult in summoning a demon at the climax of a larp centred around a cult summoning a demon will probably be at the higher end.

The **passivity scale** considers how much agency the participants witnessing the scene have. If the audience has lots of agency to act and interrupt then they will be quite low on the passivity scale. If they are intended to be passive observers then they will be quite high.

There is not a direct correlation between the two scales – it is not always the case that the more performative the action is, the more passive the audience must be. For example, a character performing a mundane part of their daily life may not in practice be very interruptible (eg. if they are performing an act of religious devotion, if they are performing a task of importance to the community, if they are a very high status character). Equally, there may be many participants who wish to interrupt the demon summoning, maybe because their character wants to summon a different demon, or because they want to be cult leader, or for any other reason: so at least some of the other participants in that scene might be quite low on the passivity scale. Also, the audience may be ‘playing to lift’ the performing larper in a more or less passive way.



Examples

- **Demon summoning** - high performativity for the cult leader and anyone else directly involved in the ritual. High passivity for people who are just watching and waiting; lower passivity for people who might be resentfully wishing that they were the cult leader; lowest passivity for people who are going to unexpectedly summon a different demon into the circle.
- **Sweeping the room** as a mundane daily action - low performativity. Probably low passivity for most other people, as they can readily interrupt it. But maybe higher passivity as discussed above.
- **Public execution** - high performativity for the monarch, the executioner, and the victim. High passivity for someone ca-

sually spectating; still quite high for someone who is seeing it as a demonstration of the power of the king, but doesn't feel particularly moved one way or another. In the middle, the child of the victim, who has internal play around the execution and is probably also playing externally (deliberately not showing emotions, or acting as if they support the monarch, or supporting family, etc. They can't stop the action or diegetically leave the scene but they can act within it.) Then at the low-passivity end, the rebel faction who are planning to disrupt the execution and overthrow the king.

- **Public conversation** between two characters - low performativity if carried out at normal volume. Most likely high passivity, because by default others are not going to involve themselves in it. But some may want to listen in (less passive); and others may want to intervene, or to break it up (low passivity).

Conclusion

We are rarely entirely immersed all the time: and, while steering, we often think about what it is that we are conveying to co-players. We want to be aware of what we are portraying more widely about our character; we want to find a good time and place to interject something dramatic; or, we want to ensure that we don't leave co-players at the high end of the passivity scale for longer than is interesting.

When we larp, some of the time we are in a performing role, and some of the time in an audience role. And that is ok! It's the same in real life, after all. We shouldn't see this as larp falling short of an aesthetic ideal in which such concepts don't apply. Larp doesn't have to be 'better' than theatre etc in this way.

Acknowledging that some of the time we are watching others, with a greater or lesser degree of passivity – and some of the time we are putting ourselves on show, with a greater or lesser degree of performativity – doesn't at all detract from larp's collaborative characteristics, or from its distinction from other forms. And perhaps retaining an awareness of the role of performance and audience in larp, rather than being in denial of it, will help us to make meaningful choices and so to enjoy larp even more.

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Siri Sandquist

Siri Sandquist has a master in Archaeology from Stockholm University and a Mlit in Viking and Celtic archaeology from Glasgow university. She has actively organised larps in historical settings since 2014 and has a special interest when it comes to women's narrative, queer experiences through history, and gender theory.

Making History

Use of history in a larp context
as a mirror of our own society

Aim

In this article I will explore how historical larps are a part of the use of history¹, and look at how conscious this is with the organisers in choices like setting, adaptation and mood of the larp experience. What can we say about our current world based on what kind of fictionalized history we embody through historical larps?

My hypothesis is that whether it is a conscious design choice or not, the choice of time period and the adaptations made to historical accuracy in order to make larps playable and enjoyable, can tell us something about our own present values and cultural expression. I believe that by examining our current time we can perhaps predict the kind of setting and interpretation of historical larp that will draw the most interest, and vice versa. That we through analysing the choices of historical interpretation and embodiment we can see trends that are present in our current society.

I will examine a few different historical larps and the reasoning behind the choices of these settings, as well as reflect over the historical periods they depict, and the way these might reflect present day challenges.

Use of history

History is a living breathing thing and it changes with how we interact with it, what we choose to talk about, highlight, or ignore. In historical and archaeological contexts it is well known that our interpretation of the past is influenced by our own time.

¹ Use of history is the english translation of a swedish academic term, *historiebruk*. It means the way we have used history and the way we talk about historical periods in different ways through the years based on our own societal norms and agendas.

The old saying “*winners write the history*” relates to the same effect. We tell the stories that make sense to us. Sometimes on purpose as propaganda and sometimes without even realising it ourselves, too influenced by our own values, and ideas of the world. When we make historical larps I believe they are not only a way to delve into a different historical context, but that they are also a mirror of the present.

The Barum woman

The Barum Woman, a famous skeletal burial found in southern Sweden in the 1930s and dated to 7500 BCE, illustrates how interpretations of ancient remains evolve with societal norms. The skeleton, discovered seated in its grave with an elk bone (a tool for gathering) and an arrow near the shoulder, is one of the oldest at Stockholm’s Historical Museum.

In the 1930s the skeleton was classified as male due to the presence of the arrow, reflecting the biases of the time that created a very binary view of masculinity and femininity. In the 1970s, during Sweden’s rise as a leader in gender equality, a new osteological analysis revealed that the skeleton belonged to a woman - with grooves in the pelvis suggesting she had given birth up to eight times. This reclassification mirrored the era’s focus on highlighting women’s roles through gender theory.

Today, the skeleton is tentatively identified as female, but true to the postmodern theories of the time it is left open for discussion as a visitor. Did this person identify as a woman? Did binary gender concepts even exist in their culture? Moreover, the pelvic grooves, once tied to childbirth, are now known to occur in athletes, raising questions about whether the individual gave birth or was simply physically active like most people 9000 years ago. Each interpretation had seemed perfectly reasonable at the time but can be seen as clearly influenced by the present time politics and values seen in a historical context.

So what does this mean when it comes to historical larps?

When we make a larp it is, as with any artistic practice, a mirror of ourselves. The subject matter of the larp and the setting and fiction will be influenced by what we find interesting, entertaining, or important. The way we design the larp will be shaped by our own values and norms, whether we actively try to do so or not.

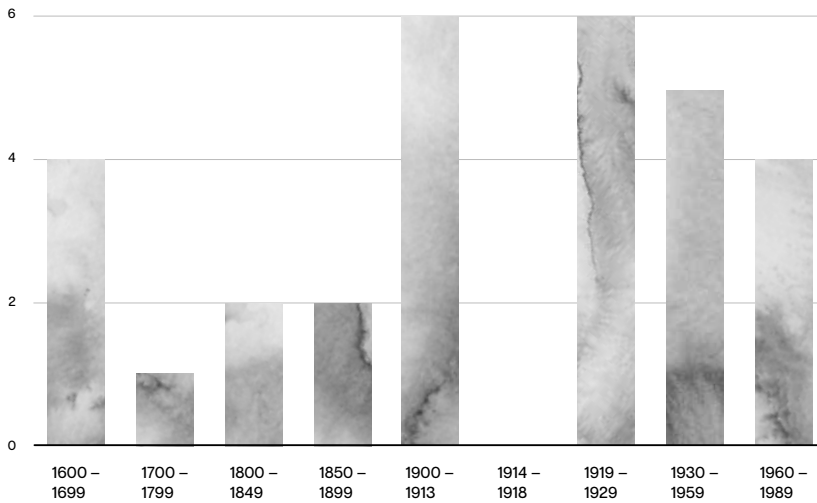
Within the nordic larp scene there is a tradition of addressing moral dilemmas or societal challenges through the medium of larp. This means that when we make a historic larp with a different set of values or cultural norms, we often contrast that experience against our own lived experience. We can tell the same story in two very different ways and thereby highlight different things in that historical context and our own.

Think of the difference between Regency larps such as *Social Season* (Dombrowski event UG et al.2023,2024), where everyone can get a happy ending, and *Love & Duty* (Atropos, Larpóva 2023,2024), which is marketed as a grimdark regency where no one gets a happy ending. Both of these larps are about courtship in early 1810's English society. One leans into romance, and the other one into social constraints of the time. The same history is told in two different ways, with different aims in mind. Our choices influence what version of history we explore.

What intrigued me was whether we could learn anything about our own society from the different versions of history that have been portrayed within the Nordic larp community in the last couple of years. Does it say anything about us as players and organisers? What stories do we gravitate towards and why?

I decided on what larps to focus on by asking the broad question, "What historical larp in the nordic tradition do you know of that has run the last three years?" in the facebook group *Larpers BFFs*. 44 larps, fell within the criteria, and were pitched by 40 different

people. Many of the same larps were mentioned several times and I tried to keep the scope relatively narrow. I suggest it is still indicative of current trends in the nordic larp scene.



As you can see there is a big overrepresentation of larps set between 1900 and 1929. If we were to split that into each decade we are looking at 2 in the 1900s, 4 in the 1910's and 6 in the 1920's.

For the purpose of this article I have chosen to divide this cluster in pre and post first world war, meaning the most popular periods are the 1600's with four larps, early 20th century prewar with six larps and the 20's and 30's with eight larps. I then interviewed three organising teams, each representing one of the three periods.

Case 1: 1600's

Snapphaneland was a larp designed by Swedes and run in Sweden, taking place in the 1670's. Snapphane was the derogatory (and sometimes celebratory) term for partisans, during the 17th century in what is now southern Sweden, who were fighting the Swedish troops in the pursuit of going back to being a part of Denmark.

The war between Denmark and Sweden was just one in many, in a long history of armed conflicts between the two nations that led to huge suffering and blood shed. The 1600's was a time of great change in Europe and the western world. With Lutheran christianity taking over more and more power from the catholic church, great wars tearing the continent apart, and the terrible witch trials spreading fear and distrust among the population, it was a bloody time to be alive.

However, at least in Sweden it was also a time of positive changes when it came to infrastructure. Women's informal power was quite big (up until they were burnt for being witches. Something that most likely was related in some ways), the postal service was being introduced, and other new bureaucratic systems put in place.

The organisers Alma Elofsson Edgar, Mimmi Lundqvist, and Rosalind Göthberg are a part of the larp organisation Bröd & Skådespel. Alma and Mimmi both grew up in the part of Sweden where Snapphanar were active, giving them a personal connection to the subject, and Rosalind is interested in the historical period.

When asked why they chose to set the larp during the 1670's, they explained that the late 1600s also was an exciting historical period to explore, since it is as far back as you can go and still recognize traces of modern Sweden culture (names of villages, institutions, religion, traditions etc). This makes it easier for the participant to relate to the characters and their circumstances, something they find is key when making historical larps. At the same time it is far enough back that the practical needs to make the experience are doable. It can be run in a medieval village for example, which would be harder to do with a 19th century larp. Most importantly, they had an interest in the specific historical period and wanted to explore this part of the shared history between Denmark and Sweden.

The relationship between Sweden and Denmark is long and bloody, and this period was one of the famous periods of conflict between the two countries. The guerilla warfare was relentless and the crimes against civilians on both sides of the conflict harrowing. It is a time period that – at least in my own Swedish history education – was not given much space in school. Because of this, the larp is a way to explore both humanity in times of terror and conflict, and the similarities in Danish and Swedish culture and history.

To make Snappheland playable for the participants they chose to stay as close as they could to historical accuracy when it came to gender roles, values and culture. How successful that was is better judged by a historian focused on the 17th century than myself. The important thing here is their aspiration, which in this case was to try and stay as close to the real lived experiences of the people in 17th Century southern Sweden as possible. They did however make certain changes in order to make the larp more playable and accessible to the players. One example (since the larp took place during war time) was that they chose some battles to highlight in the material for the players, instead of naming every single battle that might have influenced the characters historically. As a player you could of course research more, but by cherry picking some battles that would be relevant for the character's, the organisers narrowed down the knowledge needed to take part of the experience.

Case 2: 1910's, pre-war

Maria Østerby Elleby

Organizer of Sensommervisen – a feel good larp (2020) and Midvintermørket – a feel gloom larp (2023) Both set in a 1910-1911-belle epoque boheme-esque setting.

Maria works as a historian in her day job, and explains that she often is struck by how, at least to her personal experience, some larps claim to be historically accurate larps, but seem to be modern-day interpretations, and highly romanticized, versions of history. She in no way disagrees with the practice, but wonders

why people seem to rather brand their larp as historical than historically inspired.

She chose the era between 1880-1914 because “the golden years” represented a time in history which is often glorified and romanticized. Maria wanted to design larps based around these romantic notions about the past. Both the overly positive sides in *Sensommervisen* and the romanticizing of the dark sides of it with *Midvintermørket*.

Both larps were based on the artist communities of the era. Especially the Danish *Skagensmalere*, a collective of mostly Danish painters. For *Sensommervisen*, it was based on the many famous paintings depicting beautiful summers at the beach, highlighting the happiness of children, the soft light, and peace of nature. For many Danes these paintings and artists represent a specific flavour of harmony and idyllic fantasy about the years before World War 1. Huge improvements were made technologically with the introduction of modern inventions such as telegraphs, electricity, phones and radios. The new century was seen as the beginning of a brighter and better future, political movements for equality (of more or less violent nature), and a hopeful and positive aspiration that was halted by the Great War as it broke out in 1914.

She wanted *Midvintermørket* to show the equally romanticized version of the “starving artist” venturing abroad to pursue their art. Especially to Paris to be a part of the *bohème* movement. She wanted it to be a gloomy experience without being full of tragedy. She wanted it to be the “power fantasy” version of the 1910s - the light and the dark. Maria also mentioned that she ran *Sensommervisen* in the late summer of 2020, after the first six months of Covid, when everyone was starved for both larp and for hope. After playing several larps with dark and heavy themes, she wanted to find out if she could design a meaningful larp experience without touching extreme violence or hardcore taboos.

In *Sensommervisen*, because it was meant to glorify the period and play up the historical fictionalized version of a golden era, she purposefully made sure to design the characters in a way where gender, sexuality and race was not given any importance or space. The larp was meant to be a feel-good experience. In *Midvintermørket*, she did highlight gender and class differences much more in both the characters and during the briefing. However, the aim was always to be historically inspired and not to be historically correct. She wanted the experience of feeling like either a hopeful or disillusioned artist to be much more front and centre, rather than feeling like you lived in the 1910's. When it came to race: That was not included as a playable theme in *Midvintermørket* either. She felt like she does not have the lived experiences for including it as a theme in an ethical way, and would, if she wanted to include it in future larps, need to collaborate with a person of colour. Besides this she also wanted to focus on the Danish art scene and budding nationalism. Some Swedish characters were included, highlighting both the close connections between the countries and the linguistic and cultural difference between the two countries. But the focus was placed on nationality and not race.

Maria's answer to the choice of setting was pragmatic. She was already knowledgeable about the period. With clear aesthetics that was not too hard to recreate for the larpers, and a well defined sub-culture of artists so players could always fall back on creating art.

After successfully making the feel-good version of the setting, Maria felt the need to also create the other side of the story. She now wanted to embrace the gloom, without slipping into full on dark depravity. She purposefully left out some themes, like sexual violence and incest, as they were not what she wanted the players to explore. Everyone should have an equal chance to be destitute and gloomy, but there should be the promise of hope.

In *Sensommervisen*, there had been this melancholic underlining

vibe (“everything’s amazing and warm in summer, but soon the autumn and winter will come”) so she tried to make it “the same, but opposite” with Midvintermørket (“everything is cold and horrible and starving, but surely the winter must end eventually and spring will come again!”)

Case 3: 1920’s, post-war

Sunkissed Affairs was a larp set in the 1920’s at a seaside resort circling the guests and staff at a hotel during summer season.

It was to be a light hearted experience at its core, but with plenty of personal drama to delve into. Just like the Belle époque and the 1910’s the 1920’s was a time with a strong positive energy. The end of the great war to end all wars, kicked off a period of liberation, women gaining the vote in several countries, the Weimar period creating an artistic and culturally thriving space where queer people could self-express more openly than ever before, and there was a general positive view of the future. The period is often called the Roaring 20’s due to the live fast, die young ideals of the young and rich of the time.

The larp was designed to be a slice of life event, where drama of course occurred, but where there was supposed to be a life for the characters after the larp ended as well. The focus was not high stake drama as much as a more lighthearted tale of people meeting on vacation, choices being made, and lives being lived.

When asked why they chose the period, they replied that it fit the type of people they wanted to portray and how they wanted the costumes to look, especially at the beach. Since it was mostly an aesthetic choice and the event focused on a mood rather than historical accuracy they made quite a lot of changes to the values and norms represented at the larp, to make sure that all characters had similar agency for play. That meant the female characters had more freedom than they normally would have had in that

time. The fiction of the game was queer friendly, and the boundaries between classes were less strict. All of these changes were there to make the experience more light hearted for the players.

When asked if they thought of any modern day parallels to their own themes, they replied that they did, but not very much. Instead their focus was a fun and enjoyable larp. There were of course some parallels, but none were intentional. In this way it differs from the changes made in the examples of Case nr 2. There changes were made to create two different romanticised images of the same time and community, here the changes were made to create a fun playable surface for modern people in an aesthetic setting of the past.

Reflections

It is clear from these few examples that the aim of the organisers and the choices in the design are very different. In the case of Snapphaneland there was a focus on telling a certain story based in a certain historical context, and there the historical accuracy also felt more important to the organisers.

Whereas in Sunkissed Affairs, the focus was much more on entertainment, for lack of a better word, and more liberties were taken with the historical accuracy in order to provide the agency and the ability for any player to tell their story; the setting was more of a wrapping for the stories they wanted to tell.

In Sensommervisen and Midvintermørket on the other hand the same period was explored by the same organiser and designer in two very different manners aiming at different romanticised fictionalised versions of the same historical and cultural group. This is a brilliant example of how malleable history is: From our ways to speak about it and how differently we can tell the same story,

highlighting different experiences, moods and narratives within the same historical framework.

I argue that there is a reason we are drawn to these periods and these settings beyond aesthetic. That we as organisers and players in the Nordic Larp community clearly gravitate towards certain themes and time periods. I believe it is interesting to question what in these time periods it is that resonates with us and why. Whilst there may not be enough data to make any clear conclusions, I believe we can see the hunger for a happier reality in *Sensommervisen* and *Sunkissed* affairs, particularly as *Sensommervisen* was played the first time Denmark opened up after lock down in September 2020.

In the same way, *Snapphaneland* is a healing experience for the participants, exploring the history of two of the countries that have been at war with each other throughout history. It was not too long ago that the jokes within the international larp community between Danes and Swedes were laced with poison. Sometimes still is, yet the larp in question, played in Danish and Swedish, focused on the atrocities of wars and the community of civilians plagued by them. It is an impactful way to process a common history. I believe many participants cannot help but use it as a reflection on the inhumanity of any military conflict. The way two countries in conflict can heal in a time where military conflicts have been dominating the news a small glimmer of hope in itself.

At the same time, we see through Maria's two versions of the same period how the designer's choices in how to tell the story will change the version of history we reflect. So perhaps the question is not so much what time period we focus on as what version of that time period we feel a need to explore?

Conclusion

Whether a time period is chosen for its aesthetics, historical significance, or other reasons, I believe we can see echoes of our own world in the choices of subject and historical setting. We always look for pattern recognition as human beings, so perhaps it is as much what we choose to see, as it is a conscious or subconscious choice from the organisers. No matter why a time period is chosen, we will find what resonates with us and draw parallels to our own lived experiences.

I hope this article will provoke a debate around how we use historical narratives, and make designers more aware of how and why they use history and change history to gain different kinds of effects and build different kinds of experiences.

The medium of larp is one of the most powerful there is when it comes to reimagining a historical period, because we can workshop and prepare every single player in a different way to help them highlight their little slice of history. Yet no matter how much we workshop historical accuracy in cultural expression, the players will bring their modern values into an experience. It is unavoidable, even if we choose to try to act differently, helped along by workshops and information before the larp. The same goes for larp designers. No matter how much we research, we will never actually know what history was like. Even as a person with extensive knowledge of the historical period, we always make changes to make the experience playable and meaningful in regards to our vision of what we want our players to experience.

Use of History is rarely a conscious choice. As scientists and researchers we always strive for the true interpretation, and not until later can we fully see how influenced our interpretation was by the society we lived in, as highlighted by the example of the Barum woman. At the same time most of the organisers I interviewed had

no agenda of commenting on our present time in the choice of setting. Still I believe we can see reasons for why the time periods that are trending in the Nordic larp canon are popular, that go beyond easy costumes or a good aesthetic.

In a time with political unrest in large parts of the world and a radicalization in politics, many people feel fear for where the society is heading. I believe we can see this reflected in a larger interest for larps set in periods more flavoured by hope than distress. With less focus on “misery tourism” in the nordic scene than before the pandemic. We can also see similarities between the 1910’s (being the period before the First World War), and the 1920’s (being the period before the 1930’s economical crisis and the Second World War), as periods filled with joy and hope as well as the knowledge of harsher times closing in. A situation that perhaps resonates with our current feeling in society. And perhaps the choice of the 17th century, a period of strong oppressive political and religious movement and violent wars, is a way for us to explore humanity under pressure through the lens of history. Still these chosen periods have not been picked on the basis of a conscious need of reflecting over our present day.

The important takeaway from this analysis is perhaps not what we can see about our own times based on the larps we are choosing to run and play, but rather the opposite: How can I as a designer be mindful of what choices I make in my design? - Make your use of history an informed choice rather than something that happens automatically!

I hope this discussion and reflection over use of History in larp will inspire designers of larps set in historical periods to take a more conscious approach as to how they are using history in telling their stories, and why they make the choices they do. That way, it can be a mindful tool to enhance the experiences rather than something that just happens by coincidence.

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The Prosocial Act of Larp Crime, and Some Thoughts on Odysseus

Author's Note: The essay below is a design thinkpiece that contains many evidence-free assertions about player behavior. This anecdotal information has been gathered from a lifetime of gamemastering and larp organizing. Your own experience and data may vary, and I welcome rebuttals with those differences in hand.

Larp is a medium of relation. We invent relationships and then spur them along, so that they flow somewhat messily between participants, and then we see what happens. However, if we ask players to keep secrets on behalf of their characters, then they will *also* endeavor to do so. The unfortunate default state of a character with a slate full of secrets is silence: A player will tell others nothing, lest they risk everything. What's the motivation to do otherwise? Despite a healthy play-to-lose culture in European larp circles, the default relation of a player to their own character is often their conflation of goals: "If my character succeeds, I succeed." Even if we were to say "I should behave as my character would in this situation," it will not necessarily arrive at a dramatically interesting and relevant story outcome. As a medium of relation, larp relies on inter-player trust and re-calibration of one's goals as a game proceeds. This poses to us a dilemma: How do we make a story element that involves secrets and betrayal, such as crime, while maintaining players' trust in each other? How do we offer the wish fulfillment of crime fiction, while also responding to the practicalities of "doing crime" during the larp? Trust lies at the center of the maze.

Trust is admittedly the foundation on which our old child's game of "cops and robbers" rests, at least in the North American context. Our local rules of "cops and robbers" were trivial: robbers run away from and hide from the cops, who put the robbers in a "jail" area. The robbers can break out of jail if another robber touches the jail or the robber, freeing them, whereas the cops win once all the robbers are in the jail. But without a fairly robust baseline of trust and consent, none of these rules work. The robbers could

flee the game area, making the cops' victory condition impossible, or they could simply not comply with being marched to jail, forcing multiple cops to restrain them, as in real life. The spirit of play underlying the rules is of equal or greater importance to the rules themselves (Stenros and Montola 2024). Put a different way, Mo Holkar (2024) writes "Leader characters may be described as being mercurial and unpredictable, even whimsical – but the player who is in a role that provides or controls the play of others, can never be those things." Trust in others helps us make enjoyable bad decisions together.

Fictional crime in genre larps is a high-trust, prosocial affair. Both secrecy *and* exposure can ruin a crime plot, so we don't design them very well. For crime even to matter in the larp, there first needs to exist characters or systems that might care and visit consequences on the transgressing character. In the larp *The Future Is Straight* (2021), for example, players live in a homophobic environment, but the larp refuses to call out or punish transgression. No consequence, no crime, and the larp instead turns to other matters. By contrast, the law of the Masquerade in the *Vampire: the Masquerade* (1991) larp franchise, in which vampires are forbidden to reveal their true nature to humans, offers both in-game punishment (breaking the Masquerade is often punished with a character being stripped of their social status or standing) and out-of-game consequences (the character becomes a pariah and is shunned, affecting a player's experience) if the Masquerade is broken. As a player committing fictional crimes in a larp, I need to trust both organizers and fellow players will offer me an appropriate combined reaction that lets me feel the consequences — giving the crime narrative weight — without removing my ability to adequately participate in the larp. Crime is prosocial, because criminals rely on others to commit the deed *and* to treat them with player empathy when they are caught. Given the rise of *jubensha* murder-mystery scenarios across East Asia (Shuo, Rouyu, and Hartyáandi 2022) and the ongoing commitment to "transgressive" scenario

play such as *Forbidden History* (2018) or *Velvet Noir* (2019) — both larps about hidden societies and their criminal breaking of taboos — facing this paradox sooner rather than later feels productive.

Two additional factors complicate the larp form of “cops and robbers.” The first is that we rely primarily on *genre fiction* to frame what larp crime is and should feel like: mystery novels, swashbuckler and heist movies, and action-adventure games. Genre fiction often has little basis in social reality. Crime in real life is, statistically speaking, largely an unpunished white-collar paperwork phenomenon or an overt punishment of anyone who is poor. By contrast, genre fiction features the debonair thieves of *Ocean’s Eleven* (1960, 2001), the criminal masterminds of the *Dr. Mabuse* (1922) films, the poetic hitmen of *Pulp Fiction* (1995), and the smugglers with hearts of gold of *Star Wars* (1977). Not only do these genre fiction types have little basis in reality, but they are also difficult to successfully implement as active archetypes within a larp. The second factor is that the structure of crime itself — drug running, theft, racketeering, smuggling, even murder — requires a fully functional network of social relations and something of a working economy, because organized crime relies on money and extortion to come across as convincing. This necessitates a great web of secrets; a web which a single bored larp participant can often unravel in a spectacularly uninteresting way through a few words shared. Neither the larp nor the genre fiction nor even the real-life crime template are dignified through an unspectacular snitch.

When a larpwright creates criminal backstories or in-larp crimes, they are also creating the potential conditions for ostracization and social abandonment of one or more player-characters. How do the non-criminal player-characters treat those who have been caught doing and/or found guilty of doing crimes? “Larp magic” (Rönnåsen 2022), or co-creative design for successful human interactions, may permit larpers to come up with a whole legal system on the fly, but generally a standard genre larp will execu-

te mob justice in an unfair and ugly fashion, potentially replicating real-world prejudices if the player is a woman, an immigrant, and/or non-white. Players who *aren't* playing criminals may very well hinge their whole characters on a sense of law and justice, meaning that even a single, unpunished criminal walking free in a larp reminds them of their character's failure. We live in an unjust world, so it is understandable that many players attempt to impose order on our fantasy micro-worlds. By the same token, a player character whose criminal past is blown wide open 30 minutes into an 8-hour secrets-and-powers larp — the “default” larp design of adding hidden character information and character special abilities to a larp design (Budin 2015) — may then *also* attract a type of player who insists that those criminal player-characters stay in larp jail for the remaining 7.5 hours. By the standards of our international larp community, this is bad design. Crime characters may have victimized or are victimizing others, but they also are quite vulnerable to becoming victims themselves, in that larp requires player characters to inhabit the same physical space and react to evolving states of hidden information, including accusations of criminal activity.

To recap: Crime characters are usually inspired by genre fiction, but larp doesn't operate according to genre fiction's rules of narrative and information revelation. Moreover, doing crime *in* the larp as an active story element requires building (or having built) a high-trust social network with vulnerabilities that likely set up these genre-fiction crime characters to *fail*, which means that the choice to play a criminal is more a willingness to deal with the shitty in-larp consequences of one's past and present actions than it is to play a proper cat-and-mouse game with the authorities, the essence of great crime fiction. In larp “cops and robbers,” the robber's best strategy is silence, perhaps defining the larp's content through its structured absence, and the cop's best strategy is the absolute domination and subjugation of the robber. Both best strategies shut down play.





Crime backstories and criminal subplots are thus *structurally* built to fail in most genre-fiction larps. They are difficult to get right and incentives simply don't line up properly. Great player efforts at building an archetypal crime family are more often punished than rewarded, but no crime plot is very entertaining without the thrill and consequences of being caught. For an individual player with a crime or two in their character's backstory, they can at least savor the feeling of having a secret. If that character has a host of crimes, however, they are now a "criminal" and much more subject to the laws of genre fiction and sociological projection. We all can identify with having one skeleton in the closet; it's much more unfathomable to us all when we make all of that a lifestyle. A shared crime between more than one player-character is a criminal conspiracy and now requires a different social apparatus to handle it. Much of this needs to be taken into account, but such consideration is infrequent. Instead, the standard secrets-and-powers framework ensures the silence and relative lack of activity from criminal characters. The risks are otherwise too high.

I was recently given a strong impetus to think through all of these factors when I participated in the writing team for the 2024 runs of *Odysseus*, the famous Finnish larp that converted a Helsinki school into a spaceship set for 3 fifty-hour space dramas. As a clockwork larp (Montola 2024), each individual section of the larp is intended to affect the other: the bridge game impacts the fighter pilots, who are then injured in battle and sent to medbay, while the engineers fix the battle scars and the science team deciphers their next coordinates from mysterious artifacts retrieved by the marines. There is, however, a whole criminal subplot as well. A nefarious crime family has infiltrated the ship and also stands to benefit amidst the chaos and confusion of the renewed Machine War. I took up the task of writing the "Criminal Activities on ESS *Odysseus*" document.

I had received reports from both the *Odysseus* design team and players from the 2019 run that the criminal subplot had not functioned as intended, largely for reasons I have already articulated above. Characters in *Odysseus* need to be positioned to have to make terrible decisions, many of which will have ripple effects throughout the clockwork. However, criminals have zero formal position within the clockwork, except as a highly unstable conspiracy with concealed plotline information. Player characters have little to no personal reason to reveal their secrets, and therefore most do not, despite the fact that criminal consequences will help drive the storylines and moral quandaries of all the other PCs. In addition, with no money economy in the game whatsoever, any further criminal activity on the ship has to balance on a precarious network of favors that gets quickly drowned out by the rolling crises endemic to the larp. Furthermore, *Odysseus* contains a jail cell as this massive opportunity for jail play, but we would need to steer to make sure it was frequently emptied out, so multiple characters could use it in play and jailed characters would still be able to experience the rest of the larp.

My response was to break the content down into 3 areas: (1) the fictional framework needed to interpret what crime *is* on *Odysseus*, (2) the meta-level understanding of what a criminal character's story arc *might* look like, and (3) what players should actually do in the larp as criminals. If we are concerned with the "aesthetics of action" (Stenros 2013) of crime, then the most important thing a character that considers themselves a "criminal" can do is, of course, more crime during the larp. On *Odysseus*, listed activities were hacking, election rigging, stealing, concealing stolen items, selling drugs or blackmarket items, blackmailing others, hurting others, and avoiding being caught for crimes, past and present. Articulating the activities was one prosocial strategy: one needs for players to imagine actually doing these things, and such an imaginary is frequently necessary before a player will even take a possible risk with their character. Criminal characters would

have to, in real time, do “criminal interviews” on fellow characters: sizing up their boundaries and the potential to commit a crime against them. While breaking these activities into tasks may have made criminal activities *clearer* to the players, they may not have been any easier to implement in play. Again: the lack of money in *Odysseus* made things difficult, as a bribe for someone to look the other way or to be included in the criminal conspiracy was not forthcoming, and the alternatives — threats, blackmail, favors — had little proper leverage within the clockwork game.

Another prosocial design act is to give criminals a broader identity, organization, or purpose. Do the characters belong to a shared crime family? Are they revolutionaries? Are they from the privileged ruling class? Crime is necessarily collaborative, but the easiest path in larp after keeping quiet is to casually reveal all of the activities to the authorities. A shared group identity protects against that impulse, as in real life. With an invented past and invented traditions, crime is suddenly more than a mere activity, but also an identity that provides greater opportunities for role-play and meaning-making. In *Odysseus*, the two criminal organizations are the *Zodiac Web* and the *Gray Scorpio*, the former being a for-hire crime family and the other being a revolutionary terrorist group. For *Odysseus* runs 2 and 3, we created little spider-logo calling cards to leave at crime sites or otherwise signal membership in the web. Having a literal physical badge pointing to crimes helped with the *secrets* problem, since now other players could pursue investigations whenever they would find a mysterious slip of paper with a spider on it. However, the web also had its own hierarchies and past, which then directly led to who was able to authorize a criminal action and for what purpose. These traditions made criminal activities by the Zodiac Web seem more like “who these characters were,” rather than “what they happen to do.”

Yet another prosocial design act would be enhanced player transparency, including quick means of scene negotiation and safety

metatechniques. Blowing secrets and transgressing will not only move the plotline along, but will also result in direct consequences for the criminals without many alternate play options beyond “You will be in jail for the rest of the larp” or “We will put you on trial.” Trials, hearings, and imprisonment offer excellent role-play scenarios, but should also incorporate rapid means of checking in on players and seeing what they want will avoid the law-and-order defaults of mob justice and insistent retribution. On *Odysseus*, a useful solution devised by the team was a fictional “ankle monitor,” which both shows that a criminal has been punished while also allowing the player to continue to maneuver through the larp space. Now the fictional jail cell could be free, but the rest of the *Odysseus* crew could convey their disdain for the ankle-monitor-wearing criminal in their midst.

As we further the boundaries of larp discourse beyond the economy of player secrets and cops-and-robbers stereotypes, it is important for any prospective larp design team to at least ask themselves the question of what criminal backstories or activities are *doing* in the larp itself. What does it look like in the diegesis? What meta-level player expectations come with it? What activities should PCs attempt to achieve certain outcomes? Will the larp appropriately calibrate any consequences or punishment to suit player experience? Designing crime with discipline lets us support the players in exploring darker themes and richer experiences, and without the real-world consequences.

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Sam Barta

Sam Barta has an extensive theater background, and has been teaching in Canada and Australia over 29 years; all grades (1-12) and subjects. His Doctorate looked at the efficacy of a collaborative, interactive written roleplay he developed for teaching literacy. Currently, he is in the 4th year of a PhD researching how larp motivates and engages participants.

What Do Adult Participants Get Out of Larp?

A qualitative survey based on
SWORDCRAFT Australia

The purpose of this qualitative survey study was to discover the perceived benefits for adults participating in Live Action Role-Play (larp) games or events. The study builds on and contributes to work in creativity theory, Self-Determination Theory, and student engagement theory. The constructs from these salient theories include autonomy, collaboration, perceived competence, and emotional, behavioral and cognitive engagement. Knowing the answers to what motivates adults to spend time, money, and emotional energy on a game seemingly not valued, may provide insights into developing roleplay further as pedagogy beyond recreation.

The context: SWORDCRAFT Australia

Australia has over thirty-seven larp groups throughout the country. The Australian larp community “Swordcraft” is the largest larp community in Australia, boasting the largest medieval battle game and live action roleplay events. Set in the medieval “Warhammer Fantasy Universe” (originally a board game), it follows the storyline of the Border Lands. Their website describes the game as follows:

“Our battles boast the involvement of hundreds of people in large scale field and forest battles, sieges and skirmishes.... we fight with authentic-looking foam weapons and real steel armour, chain maille, leather, and high-quality costumes... Swordcraft hosts weekly battle games across Australia.”

The Swordcraft website describes week-long “Quests” that happen annually. The event brings larpers and merchants from all over Australia to “roleplay, eat, drink, and battle.”

Swordcraft began in 2011 and is a well-established not-for-profit organisation that seeks to “develop an inclusive community”. Leadership positions include president, treasurer, secretary and

founders. Other positions include logistics and new player training, community liaison compliance, quest event organizer and head martial. Additionally, you have officers for rules and equipment, community engagement, public relations and media liaison. There are ten chapters of Swordcraft in Australia, including Brisbane, Melbourne and South Australia.

Swordcraft is set in one world involving battles in the medieval Warhammer universe. Participants' characters are inspired from the vast list created for the board game and Swordcraft battles take place in field settings across Australia. Despite its obvious differences with Nordic larp, what I wanted to study is rooted in collaboration among players and organizers, something universal to larp.

Methods: An Open-ended Online Survey

Swordcraft agreed to sponsor my research survey on their websites¹. A total of 58 respondents completed the survey over a six month period. The survey consisted of four questions, with no limit to the length of responses allowed:

1. What factors influenced your decision to join a larp group?
2. List, describe, explain the different benefits you get from participating in larp.
3. List, describe, explain the different challenges you face participating in larp.
4. What would you like others to know about participating in larp?

¹ The research used a Qualtrics online survey that ensured the ethical requirements were met: all respondents had to indicate that they were 18 years of age or older before beginning the survey, and all survey respondents were anonymous. All data collected is securely stored at James Cook University in Townsville, Australia.

The questions were open-ended, because I wanted to investigate larp as a lived human experience. Self-reflexivity and references to personal experiences were the primary sources. I recognized and respected the participants' subjective meaning contained within their statements. I chose this approach, because roleplaying and game-playing itself involves constructing subjective meaning.

Theoretical frame: Creativity, Autonomy and Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Education and training platforms are increasingly calling for the development of critical skills, which Lisa Gjeddes identifies as “creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, and communication” (Gjeddes 2013, 90).

During this study, I was interested in looking at creativity as developed through social environments that foster “autonomy” (Manucci, Orazi, and de Valck 2021, 650). As defined by Blumenfeld, Kempler and Krajcik (2006), “autonomy” is experienced when the social context of the activity affords adults with a sense of psychological freedom and perceived choice over one's own actions. Sam Bolton, who also wrote about *Swordcraft*, makes clear that the basic requirements for creativity, namely collaboration and autonomy, are key in larp:

“There is a shared sense of creation, a constant reinforcement that your imagination means something to the collective. *Swordcraft* promotes collaboration and asks you to immerse yourself not only in a roughly medieval fantasy world of epic battle and adventure, but in a much richer community of like-minded participants, working toward the same vision” (Bolton 2013, 36).”

In my research, I have combined these references to the frame

of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which is a macro theory of human motivation. There, autonomy, perceived competence, and relatedness are identified as psychological needs innate to the individual, and fulfilling these needs facilitates intrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci 2000). As Finnish scholar Tuomas Harvianen notes, there is much speculation on player motivation. While most studies use a predetermined list of motivators², Bienia allowed participants to add their own (Bienia 2013). Bienia then found that “Support” was an added motivator from 44 individuals, “...stressing the motivation of supporting other players and the game”. This notion of “support” speaks to the construct “perceived competence” in SDT theory, making it a motivator but also part of the constructs of relatedness (collaboration) and autonomy, which are key to developing “creativity” in creativity theory.

Research questions

Respondents to the survey do not point to autonomy and perceived competence: Autonomy is built into the larp experience, and participation happens through the supportive larp network, enabling feelings of competence. To keep my theoretical frame at the center of this study, I used three main questions when analyzing the larp participants’ open-ended survey responses:

What indicators of the constructs of engagement (emotional, behavioral, and cognitive) are reported by larp survey respondents?
What indicators of the constructs of autonomy, collaboration, and perceived competence are reported by larp survey respondents?
Will the qualitative data be corroborated by the quantitative data?
The validity of inferences arising from research findings will be strengthened through this analysis, showing magnitude (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, and Hanson 2003).

² See McDiarmid (2011), Stark (2012), and Yee (2012).

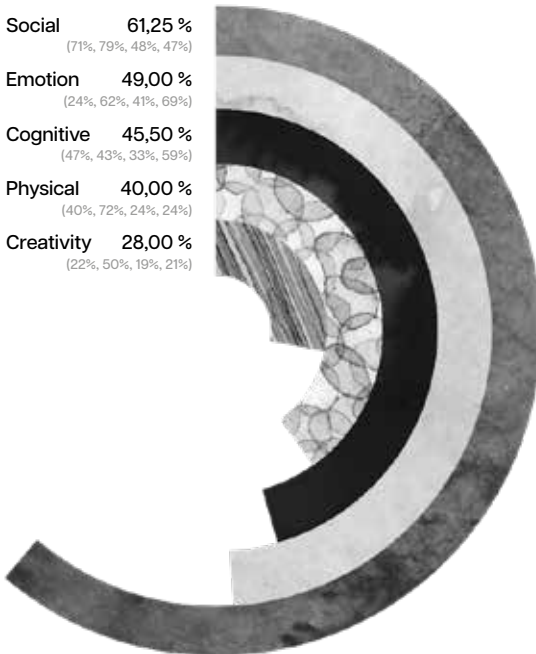
Methodology

I used deductive thematic analysis, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative approaches, aligning with content analysis to assess the magnitude of responses. The frequency of responses indicating an identified construct are shown as percentages. For example, if a question has 46 “social indicating” responses out of 58 participants, the percentage or strength of that response is 79%. I also averaged the responses for each construct over the four questions. Some responses to individual questions pointed to more than one engagement construct. Tabulations were made for each engagement construct for each question.

I included quotations for some of the responses which can illustrate motivating factors and key types of engagement. Sample responses are indicative of the most commonly represented.

Average

Social	61,25 %
	(71%, 79%, 48%, 47%)
Emotion	49,00 %
	(24%, 62%, 41%, 69%)
Cognitive	45,50 %
	(47%, 43%, 33%, 59%)
Physical	40,00 %
	(40%, 72%, 24%, 24%)
Creativity	28,00 %
	(22%, 50%, 19%, 21%)

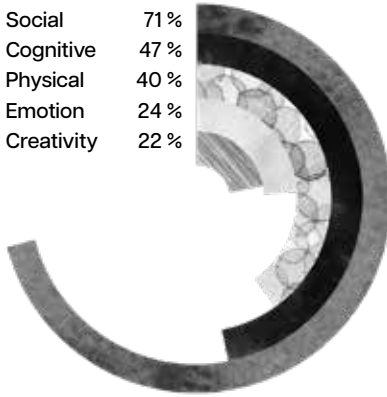


Data Analysis: What Resonated Most in the Four Question Responses

Although larp provides emotional, cognitive and physical engagement, and although larpers enjoy the creativity of developing their character and kit, what stands out most is the social benefits.

Question 1:

What factors influenced your decision to join a larp group?

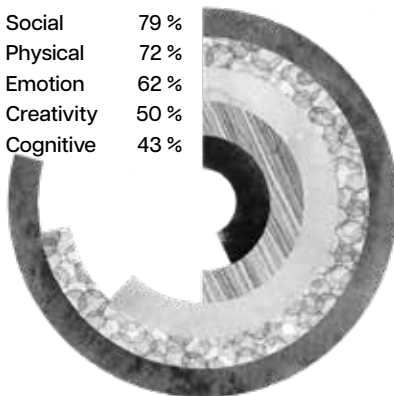


Quotes from the respondents

- 
 "Find friends with similar hobbies and interests to me"... "Now, 7 years later I've made lifelong friends"
- 
 "Interests in fantasy storytelling"... "interest in historical martial arts"
- 
 "a physical element of battle games, active hobby"... "recreational activity"
- 
 "My enjoyment of cosplay, dnd and fantasy"... "Fun activities, escape, pop culture enjoyment"
- 
 "immersing myself into a new activity"... "roleplay, costume crafting"

Question 2:

List, describe, explain the different benefits you get from participating in larp.

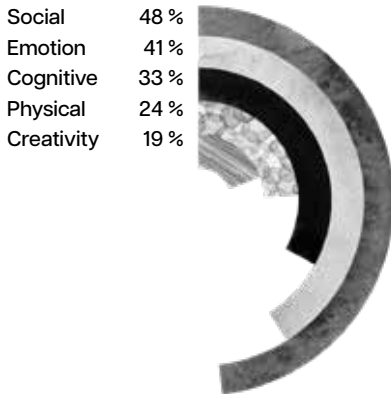


Quotes from the respondents

- 
 "I have met a huge group of people with common interests and made many new friends"... "Having this amazing and friendly community to be a part of, socialization"
- 
 "fitness"... "it is really good exercise, physical health"
- 
 "I discovered a new confidence in myself, stress levels have gone down"
- 
 "drives me to be creative in my costuming and characterisation, it pushes me to try new things"
- 
 "skill gain, increased confidence, organizational skills"... "Practice skills like leadership and critical thinking"

Question 3:

List, describe, explain the different challenges you face participating in larp.

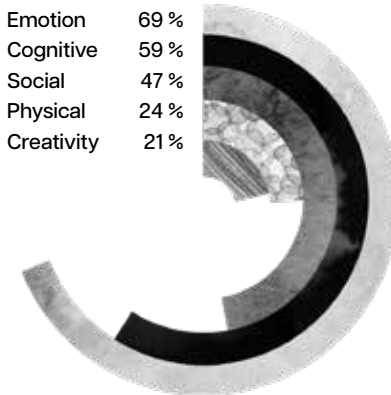


Quotes from the respondents

- “Mostly social issues”...“with any community there are some bad eggs”
- “people anxiety, fear of judgement, burn out”
- “communication a challenge sometimes”...“role playing can be very hard”
- “combat, fighting, injuries”
- “my limited skills at making clothing is sometimes at odds when trying to recreate an historical or fantasy outfit”

Question 4:

What would you like others to know about participating in larp?



Quotes from the respondents

- “It’s bloody fun”...“it can be a very engaging and rewarding hobby”
- “learn new skills in a community with a wide range of skills, knowledge, and passions”
- “that there is a broad range of people that participate, we have teachers, plumbers, electricians, it really is its own little community”
- “There is competitiveness, adrenalin, fighting, physical combat”
- “recreating costumes to fit the era”... “immersion”

Note: While the survey shows that social motivation is central to larpers, larp also suffers from negative stereotypes that, in turn, can impact participants’ social status. However, when questioned about these negative stereotypes, the respondents further advocated for larp as an opportunity to be part of a community and do something fun.

Reflections

In my teaching career I found roleplay to be an extremely effective way to learn, both in live simulations and writing in role. Similarly, larp-like simulations, both physical and virtual, are employed in a wide range of settings including the military, various workplaces, and higher education. The constructs embedded in the larp experience showcase the power of roleplaying beyond leisure. Larp benefits are seen as especially important for the development of “21st century skills” such as creativity, social and interpersonal skills etc. Larps are being used to enable people to engage with history, heritage, and culture. Larp can be instrumental in creating positive change for communities through raising awareness and generating solutions and possible interventions.

McDiarmid, who also studied the motivations, benefits, and challenges facing larpers, urged further research in this area with a call to “compare larp motivations internationally” (McDiarmid 2011, 102). My study’s findings regarding the motivations of Australian larpers and how they are engaged by the activity aims to contribute to this dialogue with Nordic larp researchers. Of particular interest to me is McDiarmid’s assertion, “With the rise of mobile computing and augmented reality technology, more possibilities for different ways of larping arise” (McDiarmid 2011, 102), predicting further interesting comparisons between traditions of larping and player’s motivation.

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Production Models of Nordic Larp

How do you put together a Nordic larp? By now, this larp tradition has had enough history that distinct production models have had time to emerge. Even though Nordic larp is characterized by bespoke design where each larp is planned from the ground up instead of following a set of established rules, there are recurring design choices, best practices in workshops and practical lessons learned over decades of making larps.

It is important to note that this article is about production models, not design models. Here, production refers to the realities of making the larp happen: How to organize the work, find a venue, choose how long it will last, feed the participants, and so on. It's based on the recognition that while the content of Nordic larp varies wildly, the number of viable production templates is much smaller. For example, the blockbuster (Montola 2015) and clockwork (Montola 2024) models represent design patterns, each of which can be realized through a number of the production models described here.

Each of these production models is a template. It's easy to find all sorts of exceptions, but here my goal has been to focus on commonalities and trends. The goal here is not to present a normative system of larp but rather attempt to describe how larps have been organized within the Nordic larp sphere.

This list is by no means exhaustive. It's a certainty that particularly beyond the world of Nordic larp, there are many more successful production models that can be leveraged for the organizing of good larps. Rather, this is an attempt to start the work of systematizing the different models we use for producing larp by focusing on Nordic larp as a case study. Still, from considering the various production models,

I've concluded that coming up with new design ideas is a lot easier than coming up with new production models.

It's my hope that this categorization helps designers find the best model for their needs, and perhaps also come up with entirely new models or variants.

Blackbox Larp

Short, intense, and abstract, the blackbox larp tends to cast aside the classic Nordic larp ideal of the 360 illusion. The 'blackbox' in the name of the production model refers to the black box of a theatre space, painted like that to make working with lights easier. Here, I use it to refer to any smaller larp that's designed to run in a dedicated space where some theatrical effects are possible, whether it's really a theater space or not.

Venue: The natural venue of the blackbox larp is the blackbox larp festival, such as Blackbox CPH or Grenselandet. These festivals benefit from being able to use venues designed for theater and performance, so that different larps can be run in the same space the same way a stage can feature different performances.

Duration: The typical blackbox larp is four to six hours long, the duration often calibrated to fit the schedule of a larp festival.

Participants: Blackbox larps tend to have 4-20 participants. **Team:** The clear boundaries and simple production environment of the blackbox larp mean that it's possible to run them solo. The demands of running workshops, playing supporting characters, creating scenography and so on may require expanding the team.

Accommodations: Participants handle their own accommodations.

Food: Food and drink may be part of the design but are not otherwise expected.

Scenography: Blackbox larp opens up the scenographical potential of a theater space. You can run a blackbox larp with just a few chairs or do something more elaborate, such as video projection or tape on the floor to mark different spaces. In many blackbox spaces, there are significant possibilities for the use of light and sound, as that's what such spaces are designed for.

Design Considerations: Blackbox larp works best for clearly defined, sharp and intense experiences where all participants are part of the same social situation. Go in, go hard, go out.

Examples: Seaside Prison is a blackbox larp about life in Gaza before the genocide. White Death is a nonverbal, movement-based blackbox larp.

Castle Larp

Typically characterized by the use of a single, impressive venue featuring hotel services, castle larp was made famous by the College of Wizardry series. These larps are big productions, characterized by a maximalist approach to larp organizing. They're also a major driver of the trend where larp becomes destination tourism, as the venue itself is such a significant draw.

Venue: A big, impressive venue acts as a draw for participants and doubles as the accommodations as well. Although a castle in Poland is the iconic example, you could do this in other locations which fulfill the criteria. An ordinary hotel does not fulfill the criteria, as it doesn't carry the larp visually or in terms of atmosphere.

Duration: Typically a long weekend.

Participants: The number of participants is limited by how many beds there are at the venue, often in the 80-120 range.

Team: A big venue accommodates a large number of players which in turn often requires a lot of organizers to keep the larp running. In the classic examples of castle larp, some of this work is pushed over to the players, for example by featuring teacher characters who carry a lot of the larp's content.

Accommodations: The players sleep at the venue, which often has hotel-quality accommodations.

Food: Typically handled by the restaurant services of the venue.

Scenography: A good, impressive venue comes with a lot of readymade scenography, leaving the organizers to embellish what's already there.

Design Considerations: Castle larp often goes hand in hand with the blockbuster approach to larp, where the idea is to provide as many entertaining options as possible and have the participants navigate the jungle of choices according to their taste. This may be because the very geography of these venues often causes the larp to fragment into a number of smaller, distinct experiences. In addition, castles often pose accessibility issues for certain players, which should be accounted for in a larp's spatial design.

Examples: College of Wizardry is a long-running series of wizard school larps. Miskatonic University is a larp set in the titular university, inspired by the works of H.P. Lovecraft.

Party Larp

At its most basic, the production of a party larp greatly resembles the production of a party, with the added layers of

characters, workshops and the other elements of larp design. Typical components are music, dancing and having fun the same as you do when you go out, only in the fictional context of a larp.

Venue: Party larps benefit enormously from the fact that there are many venues available for parties. These same locations can also be used for party larps.

Duration: One night.

Participants: Party larps require a minimum number of participants to get the social dynamics going, typically something like 40-50 players. They can scale up to 80 or 90 participants, beyond which maintaining a single fictional frame becomes difficult.

Team: In terms of physical production, party larp can function with a small organizer team particularly if the venue takes care of staffing the bar. Potential tasks include booking a DJ, manning the door and running lights.

Accommodations: None needed.

Food: The players feed themselves. Often, there's a bar, although it's subject to local legislation. At End of the Line in Helsinki, we ended up giving out beer to participants for free because we couldn't sell it.

Scenography: You can do as much or as little as you wish, the same as when decorating for a non-larp party. Many party venues can be rented ready-made so scenography is a question of adding to an already existing base.

Design Considerations: In many ways, the physical environment of a party larp is not ideal for high-resolution larping. Loud music and lights mean that nuanced social interactions are more difficult, replaced by emergent party play facilitated by the larp's alibi. The fundamental design engine driving party larps is the way the fiction justifies party behavior more outrageous and impulsive than we'd be comfortable with as ourselves.

Examples: End of the Line is a Vampire: The Masquerade larp about an illegal rave where the hunters become the hunted and vice versa. In 3 AM Forever, the fae move secretly among the guests at the opening night party of a small experimental theater.

Scenographic Spectacle

You can build your alternative world from the ground up. If you need a spaceship, build a spaceship. Sometimes you have an impressive existing venue, such as a battleship, which you can convert into a spaceship with extensive scenography. Larps in this mode are physical spectacles where the world of the fiction is right there in front of your eyes.

Venue: For this type of larp, the venue is usually just a blank space where to build. Warehouse spaces, or simply empty big rooms have been used successfully. A school can also be remade to look totally different. Sometimes the venue provides an aesthetic baseline, which is then elaborated with extensive construction.

Duration: Typically, exploring the physical environment is part of the fun. The scenography carries some of the larp's design load, meaning that it can be longer. Often, the feeling of simply inhabiting a different world is part of the fun. Example cases tend to range from a single day to a long weekend.

Participants: The number of participants is determined by how big the spectacle is. A small, intimate environment may carry only ten players, while a huge mega-production can have a hundred or more.

Team: These are often the larps with the biggest teams, sometimes reaching hundreds of people working to make the event happen. Physical construction becomes an important part of the production and something you have to allocate





time for. You may wish to rent the venue days, weeks or even months in advance so your team has time to build. That said, a scenography-focused larp doesn't have to be huge and a small team can build something cool for a limited number of players.

Accommodations: Participants may sleep onsite or at separate accommodations. A city venue makes it possible for players to sleep in hotels while sometimes it's better to give them beds onsite.

Food: A larger-scale larp may require a kitchen team to feed the players while in a smaller larp located in a city, the players can take care of their own food.

Scenography: This model of larp lives and dies on its scenography. It doesn't have to be massively expensive, but it does have to bring significant value to the larp. Genres such as science fiction benefit particularly from scenography because it makes it possible to make a fantastical fictional environment into a physical reality.

Design Considerations: Technology fails. The intersection between technology and the player experience is a common failure point which needs to be stress tested. Using prototypes can be cool because you can have bespoke features, but the problem is that they're temperamental. Using off-the-shelf tech solutions may be less glamorous but more dependable.

Examples: Some of the best known Nordic larps were made with this model, in addition to some impressive larps from adjacent larp cultures. The massive Finnish scifi larp *Odysseus* involved converting a school into a spaceship and the Swedish larp *The Monitor Celestra* did the same to a Navy destroyer. The scifi larp *Proteus*, based on the roleplaying game *Sotakarjut*, was played in a decommissioned military aviation school converted into a ground station on a foreign planet, complete with a training mission built in an airplane hangar.

Single Location Weekend Larp

This is the workhorse of Nordic larp. Get your players onto a bus, drive them to a location, get them to engage in intense larp action and release them on Sunday morning. A playerbase big enough to create emergent play and small enough that any individual player can grasp it in its entirety.

Venue: Venues outside cities have the advantage that players are freed from distractions. Important considerations are the number of beds available and the quality of the kitchen. Typical venues include manors and estates repurposed for tourism.

Duration: A weekend, for example from Thursday to Sunday.

Participants: 30-50 participants is ideal for dynamics to emerge without risking fragmenting the larp into sub-larps.

Team: The size of the team required can vary a lot. Sometimes just a single person is able to run a larp like this, while other productions might have a crew of ten. Running workshops, building scenography and staffing the kitchen all require team members.

Accommodations: The players sleep on-site, often in hotel-quality accommodations.

Food: Food is served either by the venue or by kitchen staff organized by the larp.

Scenography: Often it's possible to run a larp with minimal scenography because the venue comes ready-made. If the larp is set in a luxurious castle and that's just what you have rented, you don't have to worry about extra work. With a good venue, you can focus on scenographical accents and details instead of heavy lifting. Focusing on designing lights and the soundscape can produce great results because you have a lot of control over the physical environment.

Design Considerations: Physical separation from ordinary

life, an ensemble that's big but not too big and a venue where you don't have to worry about outsiders, all contribute to intense larp dynamics. This is a great production model if you wish to create conditions for emergent larp magic and really let preparatory work such as character writing and workshops carry the load. You can define the player experience to a high degree which paradoxically also brings player freedom. If you can rely on subtle design, you don't have to be overt in pushing the players.

Examples: Baphomet is a larp about a cult coming together to perform rituals which summon into being something more than they bargained for. Gothic details the famous night when the Romantic poets told each other horror stories at the Villa Diodati, leading Mary Shelley to write *Frankenstein*. Redemption is about salvation and sin among a religious sect in the last days of the Czarist regime.

Urban Larp

Also sometimes called pervasive larp, urban larp threads the larp experience into a modern cityscape so that you can walk the streets, meet other characters and visit various locations in character. It benefits from the fact that a modern city is a readymade backdrop of considerable verisimilitude.

Venue: Typically, urban larps feature a number of venues in a city. You can larp on the streets or in these dedicated locations. Some urban larps also designate venues that are not exclusive to the larp, for example bars that are also open to their ordinary clientele. The range of potential venues varies widely, from private apartments to churches, nightclubs and corporate offices.

Duration: The in-game duration of an urban larp is often a

single day, although a lot of variation exists. One possibility is to hold workshops the previous day.

Participants: There can be enormous variety in the number of participants an urban larp may accommodate. Three characters on a pub crawl can be an urban larp, as can be a 200 participant spectacle with a dozen venues.

Team: A small urban larp can be run by just a single organizer, leveraging the city and its many affordances for all the practicalities from food to freely available locations. Conversely, if you get ambitious in your plans, featuring a large number of private venues requires organizers to take care of them, open doors, talk to players, communicate with venue staff and so on.

Accommodations: The participants handle their own accommodations. Sometimes the organizers suggest a specific hotel or even negotiate a reduced rate.

Food: The participants largely feed themselves using the many amenities of the city. Some venues may feature food and drink as part of the larp's design.

Scenography: Ideally, as many of the locations as possible can be rented ready-made so scenography can focus on special effects.

Design Considerations: Urban larp has both tremendous advantages and drawbacks. Handling a large number of venues can be difficult and bystanders may cause unforeseen issues. On the upside, the feeling of a living world created by playing in an actual real environment is hard to beat.

Examples: Allegiance is a larp about diplomacy, politics and spying in a cold war environment. It was organized in central Skien, Norway, specifically because much of the architecture of the city was from that era. Tuhannen viillon kuolema (Death By a Thousand Cuts) simulated a class society in Helsinki in the days leading up to a climate catastrophe.

Other Models

Other models for Nordic larp include the following:

Art Larp: These larps vary widely in shape and form and are defined by being created in an art context, often with art funding or together with an art institution. They are often subjected to production goals other than simply creating a larp experience for the participants. Such goals may include presenting a museum collection in a new light or producing visual material for a separate artwork.

Convention Larp: Roleplaying game and related conventions sometimes include larp in their program, providing a platform and an audience. Typical advantages are ease of production, but typically such larps have to be presented in a modest space such as a classroom with limited visual frills.

Nordic Forest Fantasy: What more do you need for a fantasy larp than a forest? Players bring their own camping gear and sometimes also their own food. The game may run for a day, a weekend or even longer.

Political Simulation: Various parliaments and other political institutions in the Nordics and elsewhere have run simulations where participants, such as school children, take on the roles of government officials. The goal is to learn how these institutions work. Some are more larplike and others less.

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Ludography

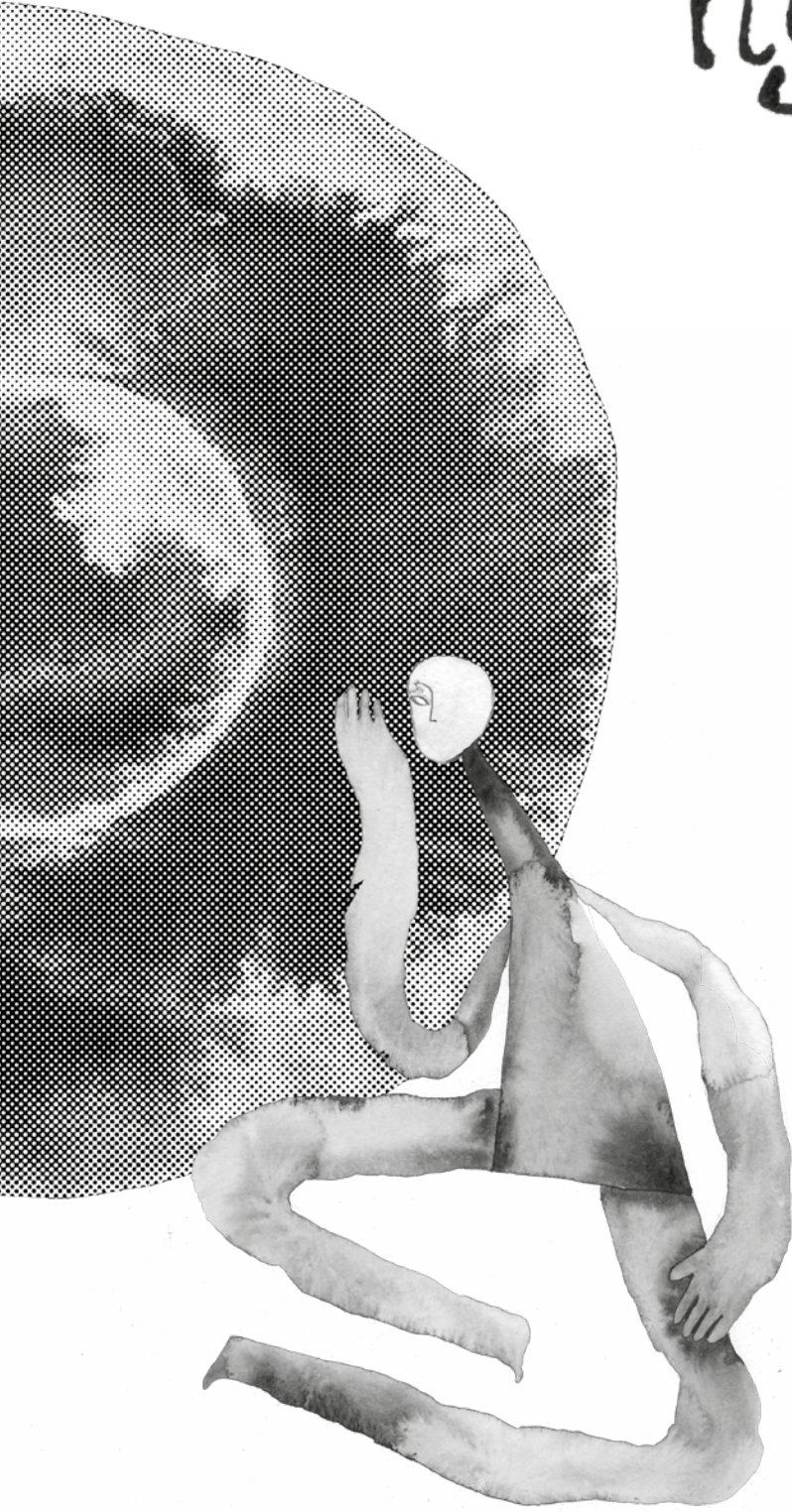
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left eye



Beside larp

right eye



Across the worlds
(we look)

Mátyás Hartyándi

Mátyás Hartyándi is a psychodramatist, business consultant, power skill trainer, and a member of the International Simulation and Gaming Association. He researches human resource development and roleplay-based experiential learning methods at the Corvinus University of Budapest. He published the first Hungarian academic paper on analog RPGs, and translated many larps into Hungarian.

Bleed Before it was Cool

Early descriptions of dissimulative pretense, their unintended effects, and their impact on the evolution of roleplaying

Dissimulation: Adopting roles to conceal true intentions, from politeness to deception.

As the term *roleplaying* expanded beyond its theatrical roots, it embarked on a fascinating journey of transformation. European sources from the 18th and 19th centuries describe phenomena occurring during, or as a result of roleplaying, that we might now recognize as *bleed*. But what was the historical context of these cases, and what lessons can they offer for our understanding of roleplaying today?

Bleed, a concept first introduced by Emily Care Boss (2007), refers to the way emotions, thoughts, or experiences can spill over between a character and the player; flowing either from the character into the player or vice versa (Hugaas, 2024). After immersion, bleed is likely the most talked-about aspect of larping (Jeepen, 2007; Montola, 2010; Montola, 2011; Bowman, 2013; Kemper, 2017; Leonard and Thurman, 2018; Hugaas, 2019). This happens because the line between social reality and pretense is naturally blurred (Järvelä 2019). When we larp, our minds cannot fully separate the experience from reality, as we are actively thinking, physically embodying, and socially co-creating these moments (Kapitany et al., 2022).

This article is part of an ongoing Hungarian research line (Turi & Hartyándi, 2022; Turi & Hartyándi, 2023; upcoming) that investigates how the concept and notion of roleplaying is evolving through the centuries, instead of projecting the contemporary notion of larp into past or adjacent activities (Hartyándi, 2024).

The etymology of roleplaying and its early usages

The word *rôle* is of French origin, originally referring to the scroll

(Latin *rotula*, English *roll*) that contained an actor's lines and written instructions for a theatrical performance. From this, it later acquired its figurative meaning of *role*. Since actors perform their roles on stage, the phrase 'to play a role' is undoubtedly very old, with documented usage by Diderot, Goethe, and Schiller in the 18th century.

If actors play roles on stage, could it be that we are also playing roles in our lives? Shakespeare's famous monologue in *As You Like It* (1623) — "*All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players*" — expresses not a groundbreaking insight into social behavior (Goffman, 1959), but rather a popular cliché of the time, likely tracing its roots back to Roman times (Garber, 2008). Nevertheless, humans are undeniably social roleplayers (Moreno, 1943).

In this linguistic and historical context, both the term 'roleplaying' itself, and its usage in the sense of dissimulation, originally emerged in German. Dissimulation involves taking on roles to present an image contrary to one's true feelings or intentions (Corsini et al., 1963). This can range from simple acts of politeness to elaborate uses, such as deception in scams or espionage.

Fake it till you make it

Justus Möser, a humble yet proactive giant, was a polyhistor and statesman of the small state of Osnabrück in today's Lower Saxony. In his *Patriotische Phantasien* (1776), a compilation of previous newspaper essays addressing various societal-political issues relevant to Osnabrück, he sought to inspire a sense of civic responsibility through concise but playful and dramatic prose. One notable piece is likely one of the earliest sources to use the phrase 'playing a role' (*eine Rolle spielen*) to describe a dissimulation.

In this story, a married couple (the narrator and her husband)

receive unexpected guests in the countryside. Feeling annoyed and unprepared, they decide to pretend to be the most charming hosts despite their initial frustration. As the narrator assesses: “*In that very moment, our guests arrived, and we began playing our roles so brilliantly that the good people were utterly delighted.*” (Möser, 1776, p. 370.)

This strategy is not only successful towards the guests. Unintentionally, after a quarter an hour, the pretense leads to genuine joy for the hosts, transforming their moods and fostering an atmosphere of mutual warmth and enjoyment. By making a polite effort to appear attentive, the hosts quickly became so themselves, as their attitude *bled* through the pretense.

As the title (‘A proven remedy for a bad mood, shared by a lady in the countryside’) shows, Möser often used fictional correspondence’ in this case, presenting the piece as a letter from a rural woman, offering practical advice on overcoming melancholy. This story is particularly intriguing, as it represents an early example of *emotional bleed*, showcasing a timeless self-help strategy: intentionally using dissimulation to influence and improve one’s mood through *bleed*. Yet, the records suggest that this practice went beyond such innocent uses of pretense.

Getting caught up in one’s own act

Half a century later, writer Karl Leberecht Immermann (1839) reimagined Rudolf Erich Raspe’s famous *Baron Münchhausen* adventures, combining the baron’s fictional tall tales with sharp commentary on contemporary society. One chapter in Immermann’s version includes the reversed phrase of ‘roleplaying’ (*Rollenspiel*), possibly for the very first time in written German, and details its psychological effects.

The story unfolds in the crumbling castle of Schnick-Schnack-Schnurr where the eccentric hosts turn against their guest, Baron Münchhausen, who pretends to suffer from chronic sleeping to escape accountability. Interestingly, the often exaggerating and flamboyant baron is not the story's biggest pretender. He prompts his servant, Karl Buttervogel, to impersonate Prince von Hechelkram to gain influence, and Emerentia, the host's romantic daughter, falls for the ruse. As a twist, Münchhausen covertly exposes Karl's act, and the disillusioned young woman remarks that the servant "had identified with the role through continuous roleplaying" (*ein fortwährendes Rollespielen mit der Rolle identifiziert*, Immermann, 1839, p. 229).

Immermann describes Karl's gradual immersion into his assumed role. Initially portrayed as a thoroughly practical character, he adopts noble mannerisms and grows increasingly confident in his act, thriving in his role, but slowly becomes frustrated by the constraints of his deception. Not only does Karl maintain the pretense, but he gradually inhabits the role; altering his behavior, attitude, and life expectations to such an extent that even outsiders, like the disappointed Emerentia, notice the transformation. This blurring of the line between pretense and social reality prompts Emerentia to question how sustained deception can shape identity. The story could be interpreted as an example of *bleed* that extends beyond emotions, influencing deeper levels of personality.

Alone in the circle

It may be mere coincidence, but it is worth noting that in both stories we are in a German-speaking area, in the fictional countryside, and the narrator reflects on the roleplaying from a female identity. What might be even more important is that compared to theatre and larp, these pretenses are not transparent and reciprocal, but dissimulative and *pervasive* (Montola, 2012) occurrences.

Generally speaking, both in theater and larp, pretend play is created by integrating two aspects. First, we behave *as if* we were in a different setting and situation; in other words, we are simulating an environment. Moreover, we are behaving *as if* we were other persons, so we roleplay characters. These two aspects create a complex pretense, regardless of whether there is an audience, sets, costumes, etc. The two examples discussed above are probably the first to mention the terms *playing a role* and *roleplaying* in a German context where setting-simulation is absent and the magical circle of play is not transparent; only one party pretends for dissimulative purposes.

Interestingly, these early cases not only exemplify dissimulation but also illustrate its unintended consequences. In Möser's 18th-century essay, *playing a role* secretly leads to *emotional bleed* in the pretenders, while in Immermann's 19th-century tale, dissimulative *roleplaying* goes even deeper. Could it be that *bleed* was particularly prevalent in both cases because the roles were not transparent, demanding the pretenders to perform with great effort and credibility—taking it more seriously than within the more permissive framework of playfulness? If we are alone within the magical circle of pretense, could we be more profoundly affected by it?

Later developments

As the notion of *playing a role* had escaped the walls of the theatre, it did not stop at these dissimulative interpretations, but gradually became increasingly abstract. Just as the notion of *bleed* can be extended to include any crossover between character and player, so too could the idea of *playing a role*. In its most derived meaning, as a synonym for 'to have an effect or impact,' it regularly appeared in late 18th-century German texts (e.g. Werthes, 1791) and was also evident in many examples in English and French.

Later, in the form of 'rôle playing', the reversed phrase entered English texts; first only in terms of children's pretend play and its connection to identity development (Groos, 1901). From a psychological point of view, children roleplaying is inherently tied to *bleed*. Its primary function is imitating, practicing, and rehearsing; in other words, adopting new behaviours and experiences through playful experimentation (Kapitany et al, 2023).

But as we have seen from the two cases, adults are also affected by pretense. This is why the term *roleplayer* (Rollenspieler) first appeared in the works of Jacob L. Moreno (1924), who viewed social roles not as rigid constraints but as opportunities for spontaneity, experimenting with their utilization. Searching for the origins of larp, theorists often trace larp back to Moreno through an unbroken chain of influence, referring to him as the 'father of roleplaying' (Fatland, 2014; 2016). As demonstrated in this article, Moreno did not invent the term *roleplaying* in either German or English; however, he was likely the first to integrate what larpers now call *bleed* into his developmental methods for adults (Moreno, 1943). Ironically, this generative aspect of roleplaying was first demonstrated by fictional writings about dissimulative pretense.

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Nina Mutik
Vili Myrsky Nissinen

We are two Finnish professional artists who use larp as our medium. We have created instruction-based performances such as Finding Tom (2020), Inner Domain (2024), and Fenezar! (2024) Most of our participants have not been larpers and our pieces have been run in varied contexts including Pride events, art events, art galleries, queer event spaces, and larp conferences. We mainly work with queer history.

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Larp As Embodied Art

This article describes our artistic practice and design principles focusing on the bodily experience. First, we theorize what we are doing and then give a practical overview of some of our pieces.

We have worked mainly in the Finnish art field as an artistic duo. As artists, we look at larp from a slightly different angle, and there is no perfect word for our approach. Our interdisciplinary artistic works are not quite like larps are usually understood. We call them instruction-based performances, built around short directed scenes emphasizing a particular theme or experience. Embodily design often plays a big role in our pieces, both in creation and the final piece.



Vili and Nina on one of the actual sites where a coven did rituals working on a larp about them. Photo: Vili Myrsky Nissinen 2024

What we mean by embodied art

Larp is the art of experience, but not all larps are embodied art. For us, embodied art is art created by researching bodily experiences

and trying to find ways to replicate them for the participants. Embodied art designs the bodily experience directly.

Larp designers often focus on fiction, information, and physical objects to create an immersive setting, skipping thinking about the participants' bodies beyond keeping them safe and accommodating basic physical needs like food and sleep. Larp designers expect emotions and experiences to emerge from the information and setting they have created, and many times they do. But, larp is first and foremost experienced through the participants' bodies, and what happens in the participants' bodies creates the piece. In larp, participants strive for certain emotions, narratives, and human experiences. All things humans start from our body and senses. The bodily experience can be designed; bodies guided and prompted towards the emotions we aim to create to support our narrative. We as creators believe that body-focused design is a very direct and reliable way to achieve the experience larp designers want to create and that it significantly accommodates participants in achieving it.

The body as a design tool

Our pieces in the art scene are mostly based on the history of queers and other oppressed. For us, a crucial part of doing background research on certain groups or events is recreating their footsteps and actions using our bodies to understand what they were doing. We aim to understand how the events felt in the bodies of the people whose stories we are telling. This is crucial for us to tell their tale respectfully and in the right tone.

For example as preparations for *Fenezar!* (2024), a larp about a working-class witch coven that radicalized and did horrific acts in 1930s Helsinki, we visited two of the coven's actual ritual sites and did spells there based on their rituals. The other ritual site is not easy to reach, as it is far away from the center of Helsinki and



Doing rituals at the actual wellspring the coven used to create Fenezar!

Photo: Nina Mutik 2024

in the middle of an overgrown grove. But it was important for us to follow down the witches' road to the sacred wellspring and sink an offering there, just as the coven did. We got a glimpse of what they might have felt during the exhausting trip and while practising their magic and this bodily experience we tried to transfer directly into the piece we created.

After bodily experimenting and researching, we verbalize what our bodies experienced and figure out how to translate those experiences into exercises and meta techniques so that our participants can safely get the right feeling. In test runs, we try out these exercises and evolve them when needed. If test runners express that they felt the feelings we aimed for, it is a sign that our body-based exercises are working and that the design is reaching its final form.

Experiencing the right bodily reactions and emotions is a power-

ful tool for the participants to understand the tale we are telling. We, as creators, don't find larp an unpredictable and uncontrollable medium like many larp designers do, and we think this is because of our focus on bodily experience. Embodied design can do miracles in finding the core of the piece and giving the players the tools to reach it.

Easy things to design from the body perspective

We think the bare minimum of bodily design all larp creators should do is to check that your participants' bodily experience is not against aimed content. For example, being cold or hungry makes it hard to feel like you're in a comedy, or being on a tight schedule and in a hurry makes it hard to drop into the feeling of being in a slow-paced slice of life experience, or uncomfortable and complicated costumes may make it impossible to engage in a free form dance improvisation larp. Make sure your participants can easily engage in the emotions you want them to feel and that their bodies will not be against it by design.

Examples of bodily design from our pieces

In this section, we will give several practical examples of how we have used our bodies as design tools, and how this has been transformed into exercises or meta techniques and the experience replicated in the actual piece.

Finding Tom (2020) tells the story of **Tom of Finland's** (1920-91) art's effect and meaning on the freedom fight of Finnish gay men of his time. We researched a lot on how it was being a gay man between 1940 and 70s in Helsinki. In Finland, homosexual acts were a crime until 1971 and homosexuality was classified as a disease until 1981. Homosexuality was a shame and not a lifestyle



In Inner Domain players draw together on the floor. Photo: Nina Mutik 2024

choice or an identity, but rather a heavy burden. Gay men mostly met at parks, finding contacts for sex in secret. After reading history and documentation from those times and interviewing researchers and gay men, we went to the actual cruising sites and followed Tom of Finland's routes. We re-enacted finding company in the shadows of the parks and tried to embody the fear of getting caught, the shame of being ill this way, the strong sexual urge, and the short relief of relieving the symptoms. We immersed ourselves in the stories we found and tried to feel how being torn between sexual need and shame under heavy oppression felt.

To embody the shame of being gay and the pressing feeling of hiding your true self we created a prop that we call *the oppression jacket*, a relative to a straitjacket. It is a trench coat with straps sewn into them over the chest and stomach. The straps can be pulled tight so that it is a bit hard to breathe. The *oppression jacket* does not restrain the participants' movement but gives a pressing feeling around the chest and stomach. Each participant wears one during the larp. The jacket represents the feeling of shame, fear and being oppressed and at the start of the piece the participants

have the jackets closed, the collars pulled up to hide their faces and the straps pulled as tight as they are still comfortable with. As the piece progresses and the characters start slowly finding community and identity, the jacket's straps gradually loosen and open, until the jackets are dropped off and left behind completely as the characters go into Finland's first Pride parade. The *oppression jacket* has gotten a lot of thanks from participants as they help get into the right emotions. They are both great metaphors and cause parts of the right emotions directly in the participants' bodies.

Inner Domain (2024) tells the story of an all-female esoteric group gathered around the Swedish artist Hilma af Klint at the start of the 20th century. These women used theosophy and spirituality to create a safe space for women to break gender norms and to explore same-sex romance and sexuality in a time when women's roles and possibilities in society were extremely narrow. We picked one method from their rituals, automatic drawing, to be the center of our piece. Drawing together, close to each other on the floor, guided by the spirits allows exploring things that can not be voiced in another way. Communication through touching creates a wordless way to experience the sensual and fragile erotic tension and emotional relationships we were looking for. The touches while drawing could be gentle, shy, brave, flirty, or even violent. All the character communication in the piece happens only through touching and drawing, there is no talking. During the workshops, participants go through a series of touching exercises, so that it is easy and safe to touch and communicate wordlessly during the larp. This piece has also received a lot of thanks and has surprised it's participants on how safe it felt to engage and how intense narratives they lived through in such a short time.

Part of *Fenezar!*'s design aims to imagine how it was to be poor, suffering from illness, pain, and hunger and existing with no hope of finding anything better, all added to the shame of being poor as it was considered being your fault by authorities. Endless meaningless physical labor that leads to nothing permanent became the

core of this experience. In the larp, we give players some carpet rag to crochet with their fingers as they sit around a table over empty plates and talk. After each act, we unravel the crocheting, and they have to start the same roll of rag from the start again. The constant crocheting also physically narrowed down what they could do, so the meaningless work was restricting them in play. Our participants felt the frustration and the repetitiveness of manual labor well through this tool. In *Fenezar!* we also discuss radicalization. As the coven does rituals and magic to improve their situation in life and nothing happens, the magical acts become more and more severe to keep up the hope that things will improve, and these people have agency in their lives. To embody this we created props based on actual sacrifices the coven sank into the well-spring, and they become physically heavier and larger as the story progresses. Carrying your more and more extreme deeds was concretely heavier and harder. This had a direct emotional impact on participants they found easy to engage with.

These are some examples of how to affect player bodies directly as a medium for the larp to create the emotions and narrative you are aiming for. These tools can not be invented without experiencing the emotions or events you're trying to tell with your own body or without testing and iterating with test participants.

Adrian Hon

Adrian Hon is a game designer, author, and former CEO and founder of Six to Start. At Six to Start, Adrian co-created *Zombies, Run!*, led the design of *Marvel Move*, won Best of Show at SXSW, and worked on multiple projects with Disney Imagineering. Other works include the *Perplex City ARG*; *You've Been Played*, a critique of gamification; and the novel *A History of the Future in 100 Objects*. He writes at mssv.net and is Associate Artist at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh.

Star Wars: Galactic Starcruiser

The Blockbuster to End All Blockbusters

The Star Wars: Galactic Starcruiser, popularly known as the “Star Wars hotel”, was a live action experience in Walt Disney World, Florida. Over the course of 40 hours, hundreds of guests (Disney’s term for visitors or players) picked sides between the heroic Resistance and the evil First Order, taking on missions from spies, smugglers, and soldiers. Basically, it’s a romantic drama – *Casablanca* in space.

The Starcruiser opened to great fanfare in March 2022 as one of the most ambitious permanent “immersive” experiences ever made. Initial reviews were generally positive, but coverage was dominated by its price – as much as \$6000 for a cabin holding up to four or five people, far more than traditional cruises or theme park stays. Many people couldn’t understand how it could justify such a high price. Eighteen months later, the Starcruiser closed for reasons that are still not fully known. In 2024, after the closure, YouTuber Jenny Nicholson described her poor experience in a four hour video¹ that attracted over ten million views. The video and the closure established a widespread narrative of the Starcruiser as a cynical, unmitigated disaster.

When I learned of the Starcruiser’s impending closure, I rushed to book a ticket for one of the final “sailings” in the summer of 2023. As an augmented reality and alternate reality game designer, I was keen to see it with my own eyes. Based on that visit and my subsequent research, I believe the Starcruiser is more interesting than a simple folly. It has many parallels to larps – especially high price, deeply immersive 360^{o2} blockbuster larps such as *Odysseus* (inspired by *Battlestar Galactica*), *Conscience* (*Westworld*), and *Eclipse* (*Arrival/Interstellar*) – with many innovative and impressive

1 Jenny Nicholson, “The Spectacular Failure of the Star Wars Hotel,” May 19, 2024, Jenny Nicholson, YouTube, 4:05:38, <https://youtu.be/T0CpOYZZZW4>.

2 Johanna Koljonen, “eye-witness to the illusion: an essay on the impossibility of 360° role-playing,” in *Lifelike (Knudepunkt 2007)*, ed. Jesper Donnis, Morten Gade, Line Thorup (*Knudepunkt 2007, 2007*), 175.

aspects that are worth studying. At the same time, its confusing marketing raised unrealistic expectations and exacerbated flaws like poor onboarding.

This article explores the contrasts between the Starcruiser and larps, such as its lack of workshops and training; highly realistic player tasks; spaces for relaxation and guest-to-guest interaction; app-based NPC interactions; and its profit-based commercial nature. This will include observations of the experience, its technical achievements, and my encounters with other players. Finally, it will explore the Starcruiser's financials, confusing marketing, and the circumstances surrounding its closure. The Starcruiser represents a harbinger of the future for all blockbuster larps, whether made by volunteers or billion dollar corporations.

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Disney has long experimented with role playing. Early Disneyland rides were designed from the perspective of protagonists, meaning guests on the Snow White attraction or Mr. Toad's Wild Ride saw neither Snow White nor Mr. Toad – they were the characters³. This was later changed due to the confusion it caused, but the interest in role play remained. The cancelled Disney's America theme park, intended to open in 1998, would have included Civil War battle re-enactments⁴; Bob Weis, Senior Vice President, said, "We want to make you a Civil War soldier. We want to make you feel what it was like to be a slave or what it was like to escape through the Underground Railroad," arguing the park couldn't present a rose-tinted view of America.

Less controversially, guests would later be chosen to play roles in a re-enactment of Beauty and the Beast, and new Star Wars and

3 Leslie Iwerks, "Chapter 2: The Happiest Place on Earth," in *The Imagineering Story: The Official Biography of Walt Disney Imagineering* (Disney Editions, 2022).

4 Iwerks, "Chapter 16: The Battle of Disney's America," *The Imagineering Story*.



Playing Sabacc in the Sublight lounge bar

Marvel attractions in the parks have emphasised making guests “part of the stories being told, to give them a role other than passive view”, such as using web slingers to fight alongside Spider-Man. These examples afford comparatively little agency to guests, but the direction of travel is clear.

Along with researching escape rooms and immersive theatre, senior Disney Imagineers - the workers responsible for the company’s theme parks and attractions - have been playing Nordic Larp for years. A number of Imagineers were on the Monitor Celestra in 2013, and Sara Thacher, a senior Imagineer who worked on the Starcruiser, attended the College of Wizardry twice. “A big ‘Aha!’ moment for me there was just being in a castle, in a wizard robe, having a cup of tea, and having this alibi, this reason to be there,” she told *The New Yorker*⁵. In the Starcruiser, guests have a full

⁵ Neima Jahromi, “LARPing Goes to Disney World,” *New Yorker*, May 23, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/05/30/larping-goes-to-disney-world>.

light Lounge bar also provides an alibi to relax with a card game of Sabacc.

These explicit links make it possible to view the Starcruiser through the lens of larp. Given the Starcruiser's use of schedules and NPCs and its lack of boffer-style combat, the best parallel may be Eastern European larp like the College of Wizardry. Scott Trowbridge, another senior Imagineer, noted that some larps "can be intense experiences, and that is probably not what we want to offer to our mainstream audience," indicating a reluctance to give players the intense emotional experiences that often characterise Nordic larp.

The biggest argument against the Starcruiser being a larp, let alone a Nordic Larp, is that it provides precisely zero training or workshops for guests in how to role play. Guests are not given or suggested characters or character archetypes to play; instead, they arrive on the Starcruiser – a cruise ship for interstellar tourists – as naive passengers from Earth, playing themselves, with their own alibi to ask basic questions about the Star Wars universe. Some guests did create their own characters and backstory, and performers would play along, within reason: claiming to be Darth Vader wouldn't work.

Rather than train guests how to participate, I've been told that the Starcruiser's professional "NPC" performers were trained to "meet people where they are", which is to say, interact with guests and encourage them to participate to the extent they appear comfortable to do so, whether simply through eye contact or by dialogue. No doubt there are financial and practical reasons behind this, too: workshops were not automatically welcomed in Nordic Larp and it's safe to assume the Starcruiser's guests would be similarly sceptical toward a multi-hour introductory workshop.

During my visit to the Starcruiser in July 2023, I noticed two prob-

lems with the zero-training philosophy. The first was that for some guests, “where they are” was in their cabin, away from any opportunity for anyone to engage them. The second was that despite the impressive number of performers, there were too few to engage every guest in the first few hours.

While loitering in the lobby shortly after boarding on the first day, I saw two young guests watching as others talked to a First Order performer. They were wearing impressive, custom-made costumes and were clearly keen to participate, but didn’t know how. Even a brief workshop might have given them the confidence, but their approach to the dark side would have to wait.



The bridge of the Starcruiser

Given how its designers evidently steered away from Nordic Larp’s fundamental tenets, it’s wrong to view the Starcruiser as a literal larp. Rather, it’s better to view it as a hybrid form, at the far end of larp, not merely at the far (less involved) end of role playing, but also at the far end of physical scale and technological complexity.

No imagination was necessary on the Starcruiser: the engineering bay was packed with ducts and pipes and cables to be fixed, the bridge bordered by a vast panoramic view of space, and the Sub-light Lounge's bar atmosphere was suffused in the perfect combination of luxury and intrigue. All views of outer space on the bridge and through cabin "portholes" were synchronised in real time. In formal terms, every effort was made to make appearances and tasks indexical⁶ rather than iconic or symbolic.

The Starcruiser was presented to guests as an interstellar luxury cruise. The idea of a cruise felt discordant with how the Star Wars universe has been popularly depicted – we don't see Luke Skywalker embark on a cruise, but we do see Harry Potter going to classes in Hogwarts – but it provided a reason to structure guests' time like a real cruise; one hour might be dedicated to lightsaber training, and another to Sabacc lessons. This is not unusual amongst Nordic Larp; *Odysseus* has been described as a "clockwork larp", running on a strict schedule of hyperspace jumps, and the College of Wizardry and various magic schools have scheduled classes. The Content Larp Manifesto⁷ also describes Czech larps (e.g. Legion⁸) that use timed and pre-written scenes in the service of dramatic stories. Indeed, a planned and predictable experience is what some larpers desire⁹, perhaps at the cost of openness and serendipity.

6 Jaakko Stenros, Eleanor Saitta, Markus Montola, "The General Problem of Indexicality in Larp Design," in *Liminal Encounters: Evolving Discourse in Nordic and Nordic Inspired Larp*, ed. Kaisa Kangas, Jonne Arjoranta, Ruska Kevätkoski (Ropecon ry, 2024), 64.

7 "Content larp manifesto", accessed December 19, 2024, <https://manifest.larpy.cz/en/>.

8 "Legion: Siberian Story – LARP by Rolling," accessed December 19, 2024, <https://legion.rolling.cz>.

9 Anni Tolvanen, "A Full House Trumps a Dance Card," lecture, September 9, 2022, posted September 11, 2022, by Nordic Larp Talks, YouTube, 24:01, https://youtu.be/SPWCXf_LrSs.

Performer movements were, if anything, even more tightly scheduled. Earpieces conveyed timing cues so they knew when to move on for an “accidental” confrontation in a hallway. In retrospect, performers’ ability to improvise dialogue with guests to fill the precise amount of time before their next move was remarkable.

Where the Starcruiser appears to depart from Nordic Larp is that guests were incapable of influencing the major beats and ultimate outcome of the story. No matter what guests did, there was always a confrontation between the ship’s captain and a First Order officer during dinner. Chewbacca always escaped from confinement, and Rey always made it on board – and yet guests felt crucial to the story because we were actively relaying secret messages and distracting Stormtroopers.

Caught up in the excitement, it was easy to forget our lack of agency to dramatically change events. This was not surprising given the source material’s spectacular nature. Odysseus’ play instructions also elevated discipline over agency: the larp was “designed to be a tunnel not a sandbox... this is not a game to be hacked, won or overachieved.” However, the absence of meaningful deliberation was most notable during the conclusion, which reminded everyone that in the final analysis, the Star Wars universe remains dominated by superpowered Force users – in this case, Rey and Kylo Ren battling on a balcony – rather than one where passengers gets a vote.

Talking to other guests wasn’t a necessary part of the Starcruiser experience. It was encouraged, but the endless scheduled activities and optional quests (see below) meant it was less of a priority in terms of creating entertainment and drama. I quickly abandoned my attempts at role playing a morally ambiguous scientist after a couple of conversations went nowhere. However, NPC performers worked hard to engage guests. A lovelorn musician who needed relationship advice would ask children for help writing songs, while a Han Solo-esque scoundrel NPC recounted his exploits to guests in the bar. Some guests played along, talking about their

own exploits or poking holes in his stories. One guest demonstrated his homemade droid collection in the lobby. Many had become friends on previous voyages or via forums, which inevitably felt a touch exclusionary, but their costuming and role playing-adjacent attitude helped enrich the Starcruiser's atmosphere.

None of these activities "mattered" in terms of changing the plot or ultimate fate of characters, but they were enjoyable and gave



Lt. Croy, flanked by stormtroopers

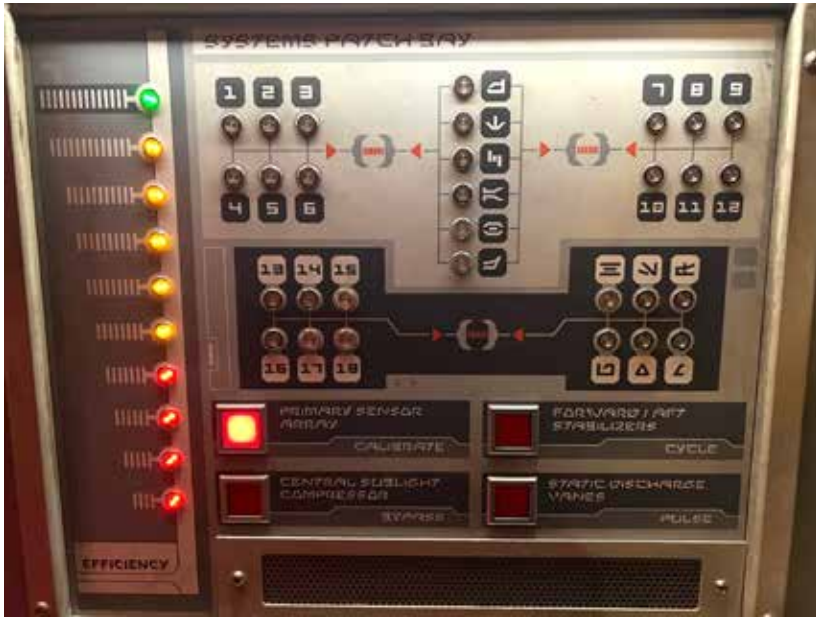
meaning to guests' own stories. It was as if the sheer quantity of performers and length of the experience partly made up for the lack of workshops - most guests who didn't know how to interact at the beginning could learn by watching, their initial discomfort long forgotten by the end. Since performers were trained to memorise guests' names, it was common to be asked for an update on your activities by Resistance or First Order agents while on your way to dinner.

What many accounts fail to convey is how much of the Starcruiser experience was driven digitally. Every guest had access to a Datapad smartphone app with which they could talk to NPCs - the very same NPCs walking around the ship. In classic video game RPG fashion, guests could respond to messages with 1-3 prewritten options of varying levels of curiosity and enthusiasm. More unusually, not only could you lie to NPCs by giving them incorrect information, you could outright betray them.

On my first mission for Lt. Croy, a First Order officer, I was tasked with hacking into a physical console to find the ship's logs. I discovered the Starcruiser had diverted its itinerary on previous cruises to supply Resistance bases with weapons; I was able to copy the logs to my Datapad, but I could have deleted or overwritten them. Because I am a boring role player, I sent the logs to Croy, but I don't doubt that betraying him would've had lasting consequences through the branching story, perhaps introducing me to Resistance members.

As more NPCs introduced themselves on the Datapad, barely a moment passed between invitations to sabotage the ship's systems, hack the computers, search for contraband, or smuggle on board an agent - all of which involved physically walking to the engineering bay or cargo hold to connecting wires and scan codes, with NPCs instantly "knowing" when I'd completed my task. It was deeply impressive technology that worked flawlessly

for me, a gold-plated version of the busywork seen in other sci-fi blockbuster larps like *Odysseus'* RFID-powered HANSCA¹⁰ smartphone app. Another digital experience was delivered by the video comm link in my cabin, where droids would periodically call asking for help to aid or stymie the resistance. This worked



A highly indexical puzzle in the engineering bay

wholly via voice recognition and was surprisingly funny. It goes without saying that all of these tasks and experiences were fundamentally “single player”, in the sense that co-operating with other guests was unnecessary - a marked difference to *Odysseus*.

The technical complexity of the *Starcruiser* is likely the reason why some guests suffered major issues around the launch period in early 2022 wherein their Datapad didn't steer them toward interesting activities. Other accounts suggest these problems were largely fixed within weeks or months, but the damage had been

¹⁰ James Bloodworth, “*Odysseus 2024 / A Retrospective*,” *Critical Path*, September 2, 2024, <https://criticalpathsite.wordpress.com/2024/09/02/odysseus-2024-a-retrospective/>.

done: critics¹¹ then and now incorrectly believed the technical issues were permanent, like a rollercoaster whose tracks couldn't be moved rather than a video game that could be updated over time.

The cost of tickets to the Starcruiser also fuelled the notion that it was a cynical ploy to rip off guests. Depending on the timing of a visit, it was possible to spend as much as \$6000 (€5500) for single person staying in their own cabin - an astronomical amount compared to other attractions. However, if four people shared a cabin, as is common in larps and on cruises, each person might only \$1200 (€1100). There is no way to make €1100 sound cheap, but it's comparable to the cost of blockbuster larps; my ticket to Eclipse this year will cost €875 (including a shared room in a 3 star hotel). The fact that I met so many repeat visitors, most of whom were staying three or four to a cabin, indicated they felt it was good value. Caro Murphy, Immersive Experience Director for the Starcruiser, revealed¹² it achieved a 91% guest satisfaction score, supposedly the highest rating in the history of any Disney attraction. Starcruiser fans have organised conventions¹³, created podcasts, and made movies.

The closure of the Starcruiser may seem to contradict this argument, or at least suggest it was not popular or profitable enough. It's too soon to know Disney's real reasons, but Kathryn Yu has noted that most analyses fail to take into account wider corporate circumstances. In 2023, Disney faced an activist shareholder battle;

11 Charlie Hall, "Disney's Star Wars hotel Galactic Starcruiser was torpedoed by bad app design," *Polygon*, May 28, 2024, <https://www.polygon.com/star-wars/24166456/disney-star-wars-hotel-video-galactic-starcruiser-jenny-nicholson-bad-app>.

12 Caro Murphy, "Reacting to a reaction," *Caro Murphy*, May 30, 2024, <https://www.polygon.com/star-wars/24166456/disney-star-wars-hotel-video-galactic-starcruiser-jenny-nicholson-bad-app>.

13 "Halcy-Con | A 2-Day Galactic Starcruiser Superfans Event," Halcy-Con, archived September 12, 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240912154545/https://halcy-con.com/>.

in a bid to raise free cash, returning CEO Bob Iger promised to cut \$5.5 billion in costs, quickly selling off TV shows and eliminating 7000 jobs¹⁴. Closing the Starcruiser effectively unlocked hundreds of millions of dollars via accelerated depreciation¹⁵, a move that may have been hastened by the imminent phasing out of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act's "bonus depreciation".

Regardless, it's undeniable that the Starcruiser had an uneven launch and was poorly understood. I can't help but think the Starcruiser would have been more successful, or at least made more sense as an expensive multi-day attraction, had the setup been that guests were secret agents merely pretending to be guests on an interstellar cruise. As much as the conceit of being naive cruise passengers provided structure and alibi in the absence of a workshop, it also made the entire experience appear deeply boring from the outside - a sample "itinerary"¹⁶ revealed in 2021 suggested that these opportunities to sabotage the ship would be few and far between, rather than the bulk of the experience. It's tantamount to marketing malpractice that these more adventurous aspects were omitted in favour of a focus on "luxury" - misleading, since the Starcruiser's cabins and amenities were not luxurious in a conventional sense.

Disney's position at the top of the entertainment world comes with increased expectations and a lack of willingness for customers to accept problems. Larps, as largely co-created, volunteer-run, non-profit experiences with little to no marketing budgets, attract players

14 "Disney Completes 7,000 Job Cuts," *Variety*, May 31, 2023, <https://variety.com/2023/tv/news/disney-layoffs-end-7000-1235629809/>.

15 Suzanne Rowan Kelleher, "The High-Flying Death Of Disney's Star Wars Hotel," *Forbes*, May 28, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/suzannerowan-kelleher/2023/05/28/why-disney-closed-star-wars-hotel-galactic-starcruiser/>.

16 Shannen Ace, "Disney Releases Sample 3-Day Itinerary of Star Wars: Galactic Starcruiser Hotel Experience," *WDW News Today*, August 4, 2021, <https://wdwnt.com/2021/08/disney-releases-sample-itinerary-for-star-wars-galactic-starcruiser-experience/>.



An undercover agent beside Chewbacca

who are more experienced and tolerant of problems, creating a reservoir of goodwill understandably absent for a multi-billion dollar corporation. Larp promotion also tends to be more transparent about the details of player experience, helping avoid problems. This is no doubt borne out of decades of experience throughout the larp community – something the Starcruiser’s marketers and customers lacked.

Goodwill is essential with larp-like experiences becoming as technically complex as video games – and growing the chances for things to go catastrophically wrong. Game developers have adapted by instituting lengthy beta testing and “early access” periods. A similar strategy may have helped the Starcruiser’s launch; failing that, proactively offering full refunds for major technical issues would have restored some goodwill. Other blockbuster larps could manage technical risk by pooling resources on open source projects, as Odysseus did with the open source EmptyEpsilon “bridge simulator” game engine. This was probably not an option

for Disney given the highly specific needs of a Star Wars-based experience and their desire to maintain a technical advantage over competitors.

The Star Wars: Galactic Starcruiser was an admirable foray into creating a larp-like experience for mass audiences on a gargantuan scale. It was not perfect, but it was far from a disaster.

One can imagine a different outcome. If the Starcruiser had been marketed better and had launched with more robust technology, it could have attracted more guests; if Disney hadn't been subject to a shareholder battle, there would have been less incentive to close it. The Starcruiser might be expanding around the world, employing hundreds of people to entertain hundreds of thousands of guests per year. It almost got there. Regardless, the Starcruiser highlights a growing appetite for larp, and a growing willingness to pay for blockbuster experiences. Some of its fans have moved on to larping as a way to continue their hobby.

It's impossible to say when Disney or other theme parks will create another blockbuster larp-like experience given the negative sentiment now surrounding the Starcruiser. But this demonstrates the strength of the decentralised, non-profit, volunteer-run international larp community - it can withstand failures and misunderstandings, learn from them, and keep going.

Further Reading

Nick Fortugno has written a detailed response to Jenny Nicholson's popular four hour video on the Starcruiser, referencing larps: <https://nicholasfortugno.substack.com/p/a-response-to-the-spectacular-failure>

I wrote an extended report of my experience on the Starcruiser in 2023: <https://mssv.net/2023/08/07/star-wars-galactic-starcruiser/>

Kathryn Yu's article on the experience design and story flow: <https://kathrynyu.medium.com/the-experience-design-of-star-wars-galactic-starcruiser-immersive-and-interactive-personalized-d8b2ad8a1f03>





Kaisa Kangas

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Experiencing Art From Within

In my larp *Hyvät museovieraat* (Eng. Dear Museum Visitors), artworks came alive and possessed the bodies of the participants. I designed the larp for Amos Rex, one of the three big art museums in Helsinki, Finland. I ran it twice at their exhibition *Musta tuntuu, toistaiseksi* (*I Feel, for Now*), which presented artworks from their collections. It was a scalable larp that could accommodate at most 50 players, and tickets were sold online on a first-come-first-served basis. Players included both experienced larpers and newcomers. The larp was run when the museum was closed, so there were no spectators and players had privacy.

Amos Rex profiles as a “young” museum. For example, they have featured exhibitions by teamLab, Hans Op de Beek, Ryoji Ikeda, and other artists who create immersive installations – sometimes like alternative visual realities that you experience from the inside. Amos Rex has also held Game Amos seminars about game art. No wonder, then, that they also wished to have a larp in their repertoire.

I could have used the exhibition as merely a venue where some events happened to play out, but I did not want that, I wanted my larp to be in dialogue with the exhibition. Neither did I want the larp to be just one art piece among others in the exhibition. I wanted the larp to be *about* the exhibition, and I wanted the participants to be in constant interaction with the artworks as they played.

The game scholar Jaakko Stenros pointed out to me that I was doing in reverse something that artists like Brody Condon and Adam James have been involved with. Whereas they make art objects (such as a film) out of a larp, I made a larp out of an exhibition of art objects. Each player used one artwork as a basis for creating a character that would then possess the player’s body during the larp. The idea was that the artworks were living creatures with personalities of their own. In the beginning of the larp, they would

take over museumgoers' bodies: Each player walked into the exhibition as themselves, stopped in front of their artwork, and let it take control of their body (or, in other words, began playing the artwork-character). Thus, there was a pervasive element, and the players became the artworks.

Design philosophy from the blackbox tradition

For the Amos Rex museum, the larp was a way to draw in new audiences that might revisit the museum on other occasions. At the same time, we were showcasing larp as a form of expression to people with no previous experience of it. When a larp is advertised on the social media channels of a large museum, it attracts people from outside the larp community.

I aimed for a beginner-friendly design and for a larp that would be easy to access: Participants needed to be able to walk in without preparing beforehand. Dropouts and no shows were common at museum events, so I went for a scalable larp. It could not be too long; it had to be something that could be played in one evening after work. As no preparations, short duration and scalability are common in Nordic blackbox larps, I applied several design innovations from that tradition.

I aimed to fit the larp in 4 hours (which is the typical length of a larp slot at blackbox festivals). We ended up with a 2-hour workshop and about 2 hours of play. As in many blackbox larps, most of the design effort went into the workshop. I began the workshop with a guided meditation that introduced players to the themes of the larp. Then, there was a warmup designed to help them play artworks physically, and finally, we created characters and relationships.

Newcomers can find it difficult to come up with things to do in a larp. It becomes easier if there are experienced larpers present,

whose example the beginners can follow. This is called *herd competence* (Lundqvist 2015). To achieve herd competence, we aimed for half of our participants to have some previous larp experience. There were two ticket categories, one for beginners and another for experienced larpers.

In the fiction of the larp, Amos Rex was a museum where artworks came alive and possessed the bodies of visitors every now and then, and the guides knew about it. It was their job to advise paintings, sculptures and other pieces of art who were confused in their newly acquired human bodies. Most of the guides were played by actual museum guides, and we had a lot of fun together brainstorming “nighttime personalities” for them in preparation for the larp. Participants could always consult these museum guides - either in-game or off-game - if they felt at loss during the larp and did not know what to do.

Goals and Rituals

Clear (and perhaps even slightly gamist (see Edwards 2001, Bøckman 2003) goals are often helpful for first-time larpers. When players focus on a goal, it is easier to come up with things to do, and they don't get bored. Goals generate action that helps structure playtime.

Another possibility to make a larp beginner-friendly is to have a lot of pre-planned events to which the players can react. Since *Hyvät museovieraat* involved exploring a large exhibition space, planned events didn't feel practical, and I decided to go for goal-oriented play. Moreover, I wanted to give players who so wished the possibility to just freely delve in the museum space and concentrate on interactions, and in a larp it is easier to ignore goals than planned events.



Kalervo Palsa (1978): *Itseriittoisuus* (Eng. *Self-Sufficiency*). Photo: Stella Ojala / Amos Rex.

The goal for some characters was to stay in the body of a visitor, leave the museum, and become a human (the players got to decide for themselves whether their characters wanted this). To achieve this, an artwork had to perform a ritual that attached it permanently to the body, and it needed help from two other artworks. However, these assistants would have to give up the possibility of performing the ritual for themselves and thus give up on their hope of becoming human!

Museum guides instructed characters on how to perform the rituals, which meant we did not need to use workshop time on practicing them. Experiential artworks were used as ritual sites. One of these was *Spirit Systems of Soft Knowing* (2023-2024), a science-fiction style installation by the artist collective Keiken (see Picture 1). It is a glowing, shell-like space curtained off from the rest of the exhibition, where visitors lie down on soft pods with a vibrating silicone womb on their abdomen, listening to the installation's soundscape through headphones (see Amos Rex 2024). In the ritual, the group of three artworks - one who wished to stay in a human body and two helpers - would occupy one of the pods.



Keiken (2023-2024): Spirit Systems of Soft Knowing . Photo: Niclas Warius / Amos Rex.

Characters could also have other objectives. Some of them wished to continue their existence as artworks somewhere else than in this particular museum. Others wanted to prevent another character from escaping the museum so as not to be separated from them. Players came up with these goals in guided workshop exercises. Sometimes the outcomes could be quite drastic: one painting hated its maker and wanted somebody else to escape the museum and kill the artist.

Characters who went for the ritual option faced the challenge of persuading two other artworks to assist. One way to do this was to offer deals. An artwork could promise to do a favor for another one once it was outside the museum. The characters could trust each other's word on it since the ritual would bind them to it. Kalervo Palsa's painting *Itseriittoisuus* (1978; Eng. Self-sufficiency, see Picture 2) desired to be hung on display in a meeting room of the Confederation of Finnish Industries, a lobby group and major wielder of economic power. It helped another painting in the ritual on the condition that the escapee would convince the Confederation to purchase it from the museum.

Emotions and inter-character drama

Unlike many collection exhibitions, *I Feel, For Now* did not present artworks chronologically or arrange them based on art movements. Instead, the art pieces were organized thematically, with a focus on the emotions they expressed (in the curators' opinion). Five major themes had emerged this way: *Beneath the Surface*, *Memory Games*, *A Moment of Extasy*, *Emotional Language* and *Carried Away by the Senses*.

Since the exhibition was about emotions, I hoped the larp could be about them too. Moreover, I wanted to incorporate the main themes of the exhibition in the larp. So I decided that the curators' theme groups would determine who could help a given artwork in the ritual.

All the characters were artworks from either the *Beneath the Surface* part of the exhibition or the *Memory Games Part* or *A Moment of Extasy* part. The emotional life of an artwork was more limited than that of a human. Thus, in the ritual, an artwork who wanted to stay in a human body had to absorb the whole spectrum of human emotions. This meant that an artwork who was labeled under *Beneath the Surface* (which usually meant that they had dark, hidden emotions) needed the playful childlike emotions embodied by the *Memory Games* artworks and the feelings of almost religious ecstasy from *A Moment of Extasy*. Each ritual group would contain artworks from three different theme groups, and in the ritual, the two helpers would donate part of their own emotional landscape to the character who was going to become human.

To create emotional drama, I wanted to make the decision to leave or stay in the museum hard. Either way, the character would have to make a sacrifice - to let go of something. One obvious design choice was to divide the characters into tight-knit groups that would split during the larp.

In the workshop, we divided the characters into groups of about five. These artworks had been displayed close to each other in the exhibition, and their group dynamics resembled that of a family. We workshoped the details with the players and instructed them to create both negative and positive relations within the group. These groups would eventually break apart when some members would stay in the museum and others leave.

Physicality

Physicality was another thing to be considered in the design process. There is a social script for a museum space: a mode of behavior to which you tend to instinctively fall back when you enter an exhibition. In an art museum, people are likely to slowly wander around looking at the objects and talk in low voices. One of the goals with *Hyvät museovieraat* was to break the script and encourage people to behave in ways you don't usually see in a museum. For this to succeed, it was crucial that there were no outsiders in the museum during the larp.

The rules of the museum constrained the possibilities for physicality. For example, running is not allowed in the exhibition space, and there are other limitations in place to ensure the safety of the artworks. Moreover, intense physical touch was ruled out since the larp was in the official program of the museum and tickets were sold online on a first-come-first-served basis. Participants could touch each other on hands and arms and hug each other after asking for permission.

However, nothing stopped players from e.g. crawling on the floor or moving their bodies in unexpected, non-human ways. A museum representative mentioned this at the beginning of the workshop when explaining the museum rules. During the workshop, I encouraged participants to explore new ways of moving that could

suit their characters. The players warmed up for the larp with an exercise where they looked at different artworks and then tried to move the way the artwork would move if it were a living being.

In the character creation exercise, participants chose an artwork from a given area in the exhibition, and we would then broadcast from the museum PA system a list of questions that helped them create the character. There were questions about the character's personality and goals, as well as questions that inspired the participants to look at the artwork in new ways. Some questions guided them to think about movement, such as the following:

When you take over the human body, how do you move it? How does this movement convey your true essence? Take a few steps and try out this way to move.

The first run of the larp became surprisingly physical and emotional, given that it was such a short larp. One participant kept his hands behind his back all the time since a character in the artwork lacked arms. People crawled on the floor and screamed at each other. There was emotional drama, and players cried. I hadn't expected it to be so intense and wondered where the emotions came from. Maybe it was the artworks that inspired people's play.

On the other hand, the second run seemed much less physical and emotional. In the end, every player group makes a different larp.

Art pedagogy

Ultimately, *Hyvät museovieraat* was a way to experience art in a new fashion. The participants concentrated on one artwork and went quite deeply into it – often the way you immerse in a larp character. Thus, it was like looking at the artwork from inside.

Melanie Orenius, who works as a curator of education at Amos Rex, brought an art pedagogical angle to the larp. She formulated character creation questions that had to do with the size of the artwork or the technique used to create it. These questions guided the participants to pay attention to details they might have otherwise ignored. For example, one question was:

“Think about the colors in the artwork. Is there a tinge that dominates it, and is it tranquilizing or energizing? What do the colors tell you about the character?”

The questions also discussed how art is displayed and went into deeper inquiries about its worth. Part of the PA announcement went:

“Dear artworks. You are part of the collections of Amos Rex. But did anyone ask your permission for it?”

“Would you rather be in another museum, in a public space, or in somebody’s – maybe your own – home? How valuable do you feel you are, and what determines your value?”

When we were workshopping the small family-like groups, players looked at each other’s artworks when creating relationships. One group spontaneously came up with the idea of checking the years when the artworks were made and created a seniority hierarchy based on them: The older artworks would treat the younger ones like children or little siblings.

Curation and display became major topics during the larp. Many artworks wished to be moved to another place in the exhibition. In the second run, there was even a discussion about what would happen to the artworks who stayed in the museum once the exhibition ended. When I told them, in the role of a museum guide, that they would be moved into a storage space, it created an uproar.

Artworks who permanently took over a human body had to find a place to store the human spirit (that of the players) – a suitable artwork in the exhibition. At the end of the larp, everybody filled in details about their artwork (either the one they played, or the one they stored their human into) on a small form with questions like the name of the artwork, how it should be cared for, and how it should be displayed.

Many players left these little pieces of paper in the museum, and they were archived. It was fun to read them afterward. One participant renamed her artwork – a stylistic, acrylic neon sculpture of a pig – *The Plexiglass Queen* and wrote that champagne should always be served in front of it. Another one wrote that his artwork should not be displayed at all: curtains should be drawn in front of it.

Radical interpretations

During the larp each participant held the interpretative authority on what their artwork-character was truly about. There were no introductions to the exhibition or its artworks beforehand. It was the participants who decided how exactly to transform the artworks into characters.

This meant that there were some unorthodox and unusual interpretations. For example, one participant found their artwork ugly – a horrible sum of mistakes that just wanted to be destroyed and to destroy the artist who had made it. Based on the feedback, some participants found others' ways of seeing the artwork shocking.

How a larp turns out always depends on the ensemble of players. A group of curators and critics would probably have played *Hyvät museovieraat* differently. Maybe their interpretations of the art would have carried more weight and been better justified. However, some motivations for the larp came from the field of audience

development, where guides and curators who do interactive tours wish they could get visitors to be bolder about expressing their thoughts on the art.

The larp functioned as a platform for exactly this. Most people who look at art are not art professionals, and they always make their own readings and judgments on the art. They just don't usually express them to people within the art world. The new and radical thing about the larp was that it served as a forum to voice those thoughts and play with them.

Other reflections

All in all, *Hyvät museovieraat* got good scores on the participant feedback forms. Originally, the larp was to be run only once, but a rerun was scheduled because of the positive feedback. However, the larp probably wasn't as beginner-friendly as it looked on paper – even experienced larpers reported that it was not an easy larp.

In some sense, I knew this all along, deep down. Shortness and no preparation requirements lower the threshold for newcomers to participate in the larp, but they don't make it easy to play. First-time larpers often need clear instructions and struggle when they have to come up with stuff themselves. They are not sure what is possible, and they wonder what they are *supposed* to do. It is often more difficult to make your own character than to play a pre-written one. Furthermore, it is definitely easier to throw yourself into something familiar than to start creating characters and relationships out of artworks that might not have obvious connections to each other. There are a myriad of ways to turn an artwork into a larp character, even with guiding questions, and that very freedom makes it difficult. However, we got positive feedback also from newcomers who had great experiences. Many of them also created beautiful play. Creating content for *Hyvät museovieraat* lay heavily on the players, but

I don't see any other way in which we could have made this larp. If the goal is to engage participants with art, you have to do it on their own terms, with no readymade interpretations and easy-to-apply formulae.

Hyvät museovieraat (Eng. Dear Museum Visitors)

Location: Amos Rex art museum, Helsinki

Runs: May 21st and August 20th, 2024.

Duration: 4 hours

Number of participants: scalable, at most 50

Admission fee: 30 / 15 euros

Design: Kaisa Kangas (larp design) and Melanie Orenius (art education)

Producer: Sanja Kulomaa

Special thanks: Syksy Räsänen, Dare Talvitie, Bjarke Pedersen, Halden Pfearsen, Miles Lizak.

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Alex Brown

Alex Brown is an artist and larp designer from England, living in Oslo. His larps often explore ecosystems, more-than-human relationships, and liveable futures. He has presented at blackbox and chamber larp festivals such as Grenselandet, Blackbox CPH, and The Smoke.

The Art-Larp Paradox

The art-larp paradox refers to the tensions between the development of larp as an artform in its own right and adapting to institutionalised arts spaces, compromising on the essence of what makes it art in the first place. Drawing on my experience of Situationist practices and democratised participation models, I will argue that in adapting larp practices to be suitable for artistic spaces and audiences, embodiment, and player agency is susceptible to compromise – potentially sacrificing the artistic essence of larp itself. **In order to be more artistic, larp should be less like art and more like larp.**

The term ‘art-larp’ is a bit of a red herring. Generally it refers to larp which experiments with form, has a social relevance, or works interdisciplinarily with other artistic genres. Nordic style larp practice often falls into one of these categories, yet sometimes we are reluctant to acknowledge this. As influence flows between larp practices and artistic practices of audience-based media, larp conforming to artistic spaces is fraught with the danger of compromising key aesthetic values.

Art has a tendency to subsume other practices to be included in its definition. If we think of art as an aesthetic form for its own sake which allows the opportunity to think, feel, and experience something outside of the everyday, then it will be undoubtedly rapacious in its appetite of feeding itself from practices which are close to it, including larp.

Art’s habitude for subsumption does not negatively impact larp. However, in combination with the lack of widespread established institutions to legitimise larp and the prevalence of commodification within late-stage capitalism, larp’s cross-pollination with more established artistic practices has the potential to compromise the artistic essence of larp. The closer larp becomes to neighbouring practices, the more susceptible it becomes to compromising on player agency and the physical embodiment of a first-person audience.

Art-larp has a tendency to be pulled towards presenting to non-playing audiences, as *viewers*. Whether a live audience of non-players with any degree of interactivity in the case of immersive theatre, or a secondary audience who will engage with photography or video work at a later date, both have a similar effect; by creating a passive distance of spectatorship between artwork and viewer, the simultaneous production and reception of a first-person audience is disrupted.

In the case of larp, artworks which modify the mode of engagement to passive reception through visual images mediate the social interaction of larp. This is present in visual media works which use larp such as video art, film, and theatre, as well as photo documentation of larp. The simultaneous production and reception of larp as media with a first-person audience – a personal embodied experience as part of a collective experience – is in danger of being compromised or sacrificed when we also consider the aesthetic experience of a secondary audience. Visual aesthetics possess an immersive function in larp to help players access the fiction more easily, although in cases where artistic design choices serve a secondary audience first and foremost, it is the primary ‘audience’ experience which is jeopardised; the players of the larp.

In their essay ‘On The Commodification of Larp’ (2019), Usva Seregina mentions the trends within larp to document through photography and film. In doing so, there is a shift in the ephemeral nature of the work which lives through the documentation as ersatz representation, thus beginning ‘to condense and fragment the live performance, freezing it in time to concretize its meaning’. This is not to say it happens more or less with the disputed genre of ‘art-larp’, but visual documentation is a form of social capital which can be encouraged by presenting work in both overlapping contexts as art and as larp.

According to Seregina, this is a more subtle form of commodification, eclipsed by how we engage with larp as consumers more generally. Seregina's view is that individualising a collective experience becomes synonymous with consumer choice. The processes of individualisation and the mediation of larp through visual representation appear entangled, potentially having a far more detrimental consequence upon the collective social relations of larp.

In thinking critically about in-game social interaction altered through the consideration of aesthetics designed for secondary audiences, there are social effects beyond the magic circle. Larp is a reality when it is played, albeit temporary within the social frame of larp (Järvelä p.23). This is an important framing; how we interact in the reality of larp has sociological implications.

Considering this, larp's ephemeral state of performance to a first-person audience is altered by aesthetic interactions with the larp which are outside the scope of participating as a player with the fullest agency to affect outcomes. Rescinding agency to visual modes results in a process of alienation: interaction is mediated *through* the aesthetic, the viewer as a passive consumer is susceptible to being alienated from the real aesthetic of larp – improvised and embodied co-creation. Primarily this affects in-game interaction but in the sense that we are the characters we play, this also has repercussions beyond the magic circle.

A confrontation and resistance to the process of alienation in the field of art is integral to theory and practice of the Situationist International (SI). In *Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord (1967) argues that passive spectatorship commodifies social roles and relations, and social interaction becomes mediated through visual images.

The dogmatic approach in the manifesto of the Situationist International (SI) describes the active construction of 'situations' as a

tool for the liberation of everyday life (Debord, 1957). What the SI aimed for in the transformative process of the 'situation' was a reaction against the alienation of life, concerning work, private property, and the reception of cultural media. In the case of the latter, a passive state of engaging with visual media means the viewer is estranged from cultural life; the theory borrows heavily from Marx's theory of alienation. In contrast, the embodied experience of situations were liberatory – simultaneously a rehearsal in the social frame of aesthetics and an embodied reality. This prefigures progressive ways of organising and relating, in art and life. The parallels of Situationist and larp practice that I wish to draw attention to are: the temporary suspense of social norms, physical embodiment of the practice through empowered social agency, and the rejection of forms of spectatorship.

Claire Bishop espouses a critique of non-hierarchical participatory art in her book *Artificial Hells* – rather prioritising aesthetics of ambiguity and antagonism. I do not believe that spaces in which art happens are somehow magically exempt from critique of power structures. Paulo Friere's writings on education in *Pedagogy of The Oppressed* is useful in considering how agency matters. He writes and practices in opposition to a banking model of education, where students are empty vessels to be filled up, rather than independent agents of their own destiny, as they are in democratic learning models. This should sound familiar to anyone who has participated in larp activity; this is the agency of co-creation and often greater than the sum of its parts. Just like the passivity of the banking model of education, I believe viewership of larp in other forms of artistic media: visual arts/film/theatre denies the key aesthetics of social agency and co-creation and risks commodifying meaningful social relations of larp activity.

For better and for worse, larp doesn't have the same institutionalised infrastructure as more established artforms. Its position as a subculture also allows artistic freedom which does not have

to follow institutionalised taste patterns. Institutionalisation does allocate time and financial resources towards art making, but at a cost. Larp institutionalising itself usually must fit in the existing model of art reception which rewards artworks that can be commodified, distancing itself from the ephemeral nature of larp, and compromise the social agency of players as co-creators of the artwork. Can these practices still claim to have the liveness which larp's foundations are built upon? Does the 'live' of live action role play then become redundant?

The 'liveness' of larp is not only about being present. Those present should be trusted and empowered to have a share in the authorship of their own actions. As players embody the work and the emotional closeness of the experience, they simultaneously create and feel it. The aesthetics of larp are inherently social; they are performative ephemeral interactions which exist *between* players, (inter-)acting within the diegetic frame, referred to as inter-immersion (Pohjola, 2004). When an artist triangulates to another focus point – to a viewing audience – the reception of larp moves from the result of co-created interaction to a passive alienated state.

Here we arrive at the art-larp paradox. In trying to be more like art – by adapting to existing artistic institutions and familiar modes of audience spectatorship – larp loses its aesthetic value of embodied co-creation. The point of creation and reception – the immediacy of social relations as building blocks of the artwork – become diluted. The immediate emotional reception of the work through the first-person audience is compromised at the cost of a passive relationship to the play aesthetic. Rather than larp activity being simultaneously created and received in a constant state of dynamism, the representation of the larp experience creates concretised meaning, a finished product whose meaning can no longer be in dialogue with its audience.

Nordwall and Widing lament the design optimisation of larp prac-

tice in their article 'Against Design'. They view the well-designed experience product as failing to be in dialogue with wider culture (p.16). I understand their concerns of design related thinking dominating the discourse, but I don't believe one negates the other: larps can be artistically designed, by means of an open-ended dialogue between larp designer and participants, to address contemporary societal questions. One suggestion they encourage is innovation of the form, which should be handled with care so as not to commodify the experience via means of spectatorship. How can artistic form innovate - continuing the development of art-larp and its relevance to society and institutionalised art spaces - but without giving up the intrinsic aesthetics of co-creation and social agency? What are the conditions for broader artistic experiments which have less of a risk of compromising agency?

A participatory artform occupying this space, which I would find intriguing to move towards, is socially engaged art - or what Grant Kester describes as a 'dialogical aesthetic'. A key element is 'a re-definition of the aesthetic experience as durational rather than immediate' (Kester, p.12). This requires rethinking how we engage with character play, both as players and artistic larp designers, with durational relationality to larps as artworks. This might look like a series with themes that respond to societal issues, coupled with practices of integration. More broadly, integration is understood to be the awareness and openness to affecting change in our lives, beyond the larp itself (Bowman and Hugaas, 2019).

Resisting the art-larp paradox might look like a campaign or series with deeper critical reflection or integration built-in to the work. Maiju Tarpila's ecological larp trilogy, '*Kaski*', achieves this successfully by using a durational form, co-creating over a 5 year period. The players revisit the same fiction as a means for exploring ecological attitudes and values of the players (Leppä, 2024). In this approach, it centres the players as active citizens beyond the fiction who are enabled to affect change. As a larp practitioner

who feels frustration with the limits to critical reflection and integration of ecological themes in blackbox and chamber larp spaces, allowing time for these processes like in Tarpila's larps is an attractive prospect.

The art-larp paradox has created diversions for larp's aesthetics when adapting to existing modes of viewership. Through priviness to the effects of commodification when presenting work to secondary audiences, and being aware of consumer behaviours challenging co-creation, we open up possibilities to affect long-term change. By embracing larp as an artform in its own right, staying strong to co-creation aesthetics and advancing the inclusion of integration models - potentially through durational and dialogical methods - there are means for the paradox to be broken.

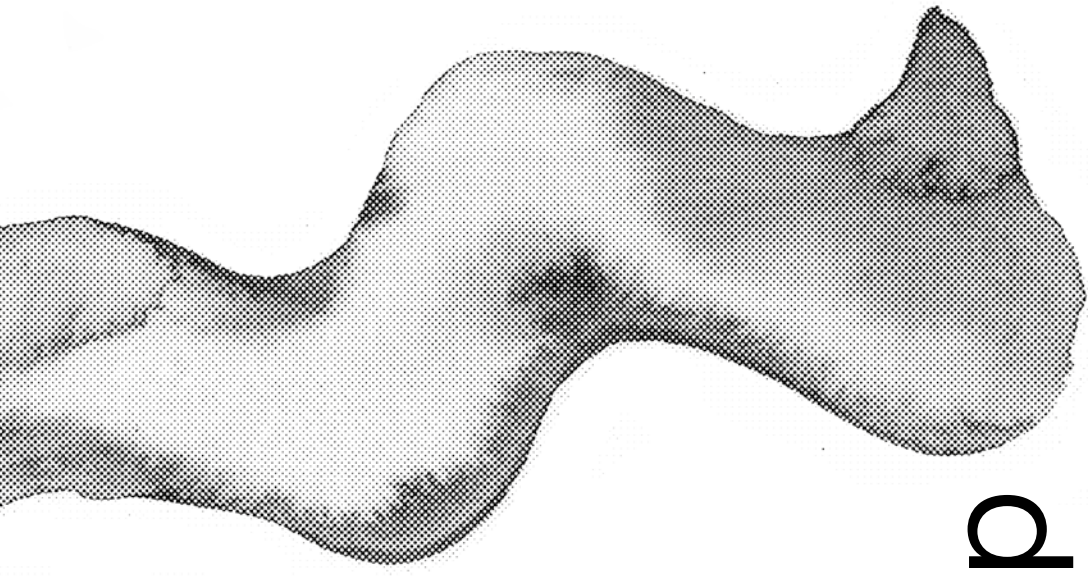
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thorax

Inside larp
(personal accounts)
and through larp
(learnings)



Lyssa Greywood

Lyssa Greywood is a queer writer based in Stoke-on-Trent, UK, who has been working as a freelancer since 2017. While they are currently pursuing a PhD on gender and sexuality in larp at Manchester Metropolitan University, they also dedicate a portion of their time to writing poetry, and have been larping since 2019. Their two cats, Apollo and Calypso, are steadfast companions throughout their journey to live forward. Follow them at @fireboundfox

Grief in Larp: Bleeding Through Two Lives

For Mike, may he rest well.

When I learned that a dear friend and mentor had passed away, I was at home, scrolling through social media. In that moment, a part of me that usually stays quiet—my other self, the character I embody in another world—rose to the surface, refusing to remain in the background. My grief seemed to split in two. As myself, I mourned the loss of a kind and dedicated man who had spent years creating a space where imagination thrived. As my character, I froze, feeling the absence of a mentor who had guided me, encouraged me, and helped shape the person I had become in that world. I did not know Mike for as long as others, but he always had a smile and an open ear for me. Our fantasy and real-life selves often shared a space at the same time; while he mentored my character as a ritualist and taught her how to command a circle, he also mentored me—ensuring that I would not be lost under the weight of others’ wants and needs.

Even now, as I write this, I can still feel myself trying to hold back tears. Two selves wrestle for control of my thoughts: one grounded in reality, and the other still standing at my mentor’s wake, deep in a forest, where a tree now grows in his honour. The UK larp community lost a very good man the day he passed; a man who pushed the boundaries of what *could be* in a game, yet even when he was busy, he always gave more than just a moment of his time for others.

It wasn’t the first time I had encountered death in this hobby, but it was the first time the loss felt so permanent. There would be no new character bearing his face with a different name, no scholar sipping tea near the College of Magic, no kind smile waiting at the Watchers’ table to open the circle for me. I miss his smile.

This death was quiet. Those of us who loved Mike gathered to mourn. His closest friends shared stories of how he had helped shape *Curious Pastimes*; a UK larp that has been running since 1996, and currently runs four mainline events a year set in its game

world. We listened, sometimes laughing in remembrance, but mostly sitting silently on the late summer grass, holding hands, hugging, crying, and honouring a man who had given so much and asked for so little in return.

The memorial was meant to be entirely out of character. We came together, ostensibly as ourselves, to grieve him. Yet, looking around, I noticed most of us weren't dressed as ourselves. We wore the clothes of our other selves—the characters Mike might also have met through his own alter ego. It was an unusual wake, held during a time when the event itself was in full swing, laughter echoing through the trees on the hillside. But in that space, we were caught in a strange in-between, neither fully in-character nor fully out of it. Two selves occupied one body, coexisting in shared grief.

I did not walk to the wake alone, and I am forever grateful for that. A friend—a brother, really, as he has been to my heart for many years now—walked from our faction's camp with me. I am, by nature, an emotional person, but I—perhaps foolishly—hoped that I could witness this event with the strength of an unbending face. Instead, I found strength in those around me who also allowed themselves to feel this loss.

I remember my heart-brother taking my hand as I cried. In that instant of vulnerability, he was every version of himself I had known, and I was every version of myself he had known. New friends, old friends—the Claw and his cub, the brother and sister—all of them were present in the way only this community could allow. Letting him wrap his arm around me brought far more comfort than forcing a brave face or pushing any part of myself aside. He has long been a safe place, across so many lives.

The Emotional Complexity of Larp

Death is a frequent part of larp, but it is rarely permanent. In Al'Gaia, one of the factions in *Curious Pastimes*, the primary belief is that when someone dies, they return to the cycle—the eternal loop of life, death, and rebirth. While the specifics vary depending on the character's beliefs, path, and connection to the deities of Al'Gaia, the core idea remains the same. For many, this belief offers comfort, something often reiterated by those in positions of authority during in-character funerals.

When someone in Al'Gaia dies, their body is carried back to camp and laid to rest in the glade where we set up our shrine at the start of the event. We gather, sometimes packed tightly into that sacred space, mourning the loss of one of our own. Yet, we are always reminded not to grieve but to rejoice—because the departed has returned to the cycle, and we will meet them again in another life.

I've always found it a complicated kind of comfort to hear those words.

I've attended many larp funerals. In both of the larp games I play—*Curious Pastimes* and *Wilde Realms*—I've taken part in these ceremonies as both an active and passive participant; someone who was directly affected by a loss and spoke on the individual whose spirit was now in the stars, and as a listener there to pay my respects to another that I may not have known as well. I've sung beneath the trees with others as fallen comrades “disappeared” (stepped out of play). I've stood with my herd, setting fields of the dead ablaze with violet fire. I've stood among the bodies, pleading with my in-character family to remember the fallen and continue the fight in their name.

Death in real life is not as dramatic, but it is just as deeply emotional. I cry the same tears, hold the same hands, and think the

same thoughts in both of my lives. The key difference is that death in larp is not supposed to be permanent. You mourn a character as though they were a real person—because, in many ways, they were. They had a family, a personality, a story. You fought beside them, bled with them, and waited anxiously for their return after a battle. It feels almost cruel to experience loss so frequently in larp, knowing it's temporary, yet still feeling the full weight of grief as if it were real.

This is, perhaps, one of the limitations of the *magic circle*—the invisible boundary that separates the world of play from the real world. (Huizinga 1938, 10) In larp, though we grieve our loved ones, we eventually see their face again in another body and continue living with them. In real life, death is final. My friend will not return.

This stark difference can intensify the phenomenon of “bleed”; a concept I am deeply familiar with, originally coined by Emily Care Boss in 2007 at Ropecon. In *Bleed: The Spillover Between Player and Character*, Sarah Bowman defines this concept by writing that “role-players sometimes experience moments where their real-life feelings, thoughts, relationships, and physical states spill over into their characters’, and vice versa.” (Bowman 2015) Bowman states that bleed can occur intentionally or unintentionally, and its effects range from catharsis to profound emotional devastation.

Bleed can be observed in three ways:

- Bleed-in: when the player's emotions, thoughts, or experiences affect their character.
- Bleed-out: when the character's emotions, thoughts, or experiences affect the player.
- Bleed feedback loop: when the boundary between player and character dissolves, especially in overwhelming emotional moments. (Bowman 2015)

What I experienced during Mike's wake—and even when I first heard the news of his passing—was undeniably a bleed feedback loop. I could not tell you who I was as I sat listening to his dearest companions recount their memories. I entered the wake as myself, but my body was dressed as another, and the distinction between the two identities blurred. Or perhaps they didn't blur at all. Perhaps they simply merged, becoming one.

I often say that playing at larp is a way to explore and embody facets of yourself—ideals, dreams, or fragments of your personality that you bring to life. In moments like these, the boundary between the player and the character collapses, creating an experience that is simultaneously beautiful and overwhelming.

The Fragility of the Magic Circle

The *magic circle* in larp serves as a boundary between fiction and reality, creating a space where players can safely embody characters and explore narratives. Central to maintaining this boundary is the concept of *alibi*; originally discussed by Markus Montola, Jaakko Stenros, and Annika Waern in 2009 in *Philosophies and strategies of pervasive larp design, in Larp, the Universe and Everything*, (Montola, Stenros, Waern 2009, 214). It is further deliberated by Bowman in her work on bleed from 2015, and again by Bowman and Hugaas in their 2021 article *Magic Is Real: How Role-Playing Can Transform Our Identities, Our Communities, and Our Lives*. *Alibi* acts as a psychological shield for players, allowing them to place blame for their actions directly on their character when engaging in situations that might otherwise feel emotionally or morally fraught. (Bowman 2015) (Bowman and Hugaas 2021)

But although *alibi* allows for emotional and mental distance between a player and their character, this tool of detachment is not infallible. The strength of *alibi* can vary depending on the story's

proximity to the player's real life—playing a character who experiences grief, love, or loss that mirrors the player's own can weaken the alibi, making it harder to maintain a sense of separation. In these cases, bleed—where the emotions, thoughts, and experiences of the player and character intertwine—becomes almost inevitable.

This fragility became glaringly apparent at Mike's wake. I entered the space carrying the raw weight of personal grief but dressed as someone else entirely—a character who also mourned. My usual reliance on alibi, the assurance that my emotions were distinct from my character's, crumbled. Instead, my two selves began to blur. My character's performed grief became my own, and my own feelings deepened their reaction. It didn't matter that my character hadn't been "let out to play" yet, I could feel their emotions just as solidly as my own. They were just as real. The magic circle, meant to protect and isolate, instead amplified the collision between fiction and reality.

This breakdown of alibi wasn't simply jarring—it was transformative. The safety net of the magic circle exposed me to an emotional intensity that might not have been as deeply felt outside of it. I wasn't sure where I ended and my character began. I didn't just mourn for Mike as myself—I mourned for him through my character. This merging of identities exemplifies how bleed can erode the structures we rely on in larp, creating profound, often overwhelming emotional experiences.

The Duality of Grief and Bleed

Grief within larp exists on a unique emotional spectrum, heightened by the phenomenon of bleed. Bleed, as players know, blurs the line between character and self—emotions from one spilling into the other. This becomes particularly pronounced during

moments of grief, where the loss of a character or even a fellow player can create a shared sense of vulnerability among participants. We all felt it when we lost Mike; we weren't alone in that field, listening to his dear friends talk about him. We were together in our grief, whether we knew each other personally or not, that moment connected us; Mike connected us. In *Why Larp Community Matters and How We Can Improve It*, Laura Wood highlights how larp evokes intense emotions and provides spaces for connection, amplifying empathy and deepening bonds. These spaces allow grief to feel communal and cathartic but can also make players more emotionally exposed. (Wood 2021)

Grieving alongside others in a larp setting can strengthen a sense of belonging, as moments of vulnerability bring participants closer. However, this same openness can exacerbate emotional overwhelm when grief spills over, especially if the loss feels personal on both in-character and real-world levels. Without adequate support, these heightened emotions may lead to unintended consequences, leaving players feeling isolated in their dual mourning.

Promoting Safety and Awareness

Mike ensured that I knew I was more than a ritualist with powers for others to use. He spoke to me about the importance of saying “no”, and helped me manage my anxiety about being in such a prominent position. Because of Mike, I learned to be powerful and powerless; my job was to lead the players in the circle, but the outcome of a ritual was not up to me. He was my touchstone in the Watcher's box; someone I could count on to be fair, but to encourage me with positive criticism. He was, in my opinion, the best Watcher that Curious Pastimes had. He looked beyond the play and saw the player, and I think that is something that is missing now.

We may have lost Mike, but we haven't lost his beliefs or his words. I can do my best to advocate for myself at larp and encourage others to do the same. Together, we can create an element of larp culture that is dedicated to wellbeing, we can manage the challenges of subjects like grief and bleed, we can understand that safety—physical, emotional, and mental—must become a cornerstone of our games. Wood's call to normalise safety tools like safe words and exit mechanics are just the start. (Wood 2021) These tools allow players to protect themselves without disrupting the experience for others, making it easier to process complex emotions such as grief. Educating both organisers and players about these tools—and creating environments where their use is encouraged and introduced to players before a game and during pre-game briefings—can help safeguard everyone's emotional well-being.

Self-awareness is crucial when engaging with grief in larp. Players should understand their emotional limits and approach topics thoughtfully, recognising that their fellow participants may be carrying their own burdens. Community-wide education on managing grief and bleed—through workshops, post-game discussions, or even casual conversations—can create a culture of care and responsibility.

By weaving empathy, safety, and self-awareness into the fabric of larp, participants can transform grief from an overwhelming experience to an opportunity for collective healing and deeper connection. As Wood suggests, this is the magic of community: learning to protect each other's vulnerability while embracing the shared humanity that grief uniquely reveals. (Wood 2021) I can't help but feel that Mike would share the same sentiment.

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Juhana Pettersson

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The Party Never Ends

The audience celebrates another premiere at the Orpheus Theatre with scattered applause. After the show is over, it's time for the opening night party. While the struggling, strange Orpheus has never been popular, its parties are legendary, attracting people who would never come for the show.

* * *

I spent much of my childhood running around various theatres in Finland. My mother, Arja Pettersson, was running a touring company called Tanssiteatteri Hurjaruuth, which did children's performances. I loved the huge green van which carried all the sets and equipment from one town to the next. According to legend, after a tour in the Soviet Union, the van broke ten meters after driving over the border back into Finland. A wheel came off and rolled independently back into Karelia. Perhaps it had decided to heed the glory of communism.



One of the things my mother taught me when I was learning to walk, was that you never touched the costumes that were carefully placed in the scenography. The performances involved a lot of costume changes, some of them extremely fast. The performers had to be able to trust that the clothes were in place when they ducked off stage to make it work.

In 1994, things changed. The theatre had a permanent stage at the Cable Factory in Helsinki. They did a new type of show: Cirque nouveau for the winter season.

It proved to be a hit. My mom became a circus director, and the shows grew and grew; a new one being produced every winter to this day. They became a beloved institution for Helsinki families, with audiences in the tens of thousands.

After the premiere of each new show, there was a party. It was a point of pride for my mother that the premiere parties were the best in town. Food and drinks were free, and often there was a band playing. Many of these parties were held in a concrete basement venue at the Cable Factory, lending the celebrations a certain brutalist charm. I ran around these parties with my siblings from childhood. They were part of the theatre life.

3 AM Forever is a larp by myself, Bjarke Pedersen, Troels Barkholt-Spangsbo and Johanna Koljonen. It's set at an Orpheus Theatre premiere party. The night becomes stranger and stranger, as the wondrous and malignant creatures of the fae creep in, attracted by the conviction and the sincerity; the desperation and the hope. The larp was originally supposed to be played in 2020, launching our series of fae-inspired larps, *The Wild Hunt*. Unfortunately, COVID intervened.

We finally got the party started in 2022 in Copenhagen, with two runs. One of the elements of the design is a system of escalation where a certain song accompanied by the lights turning blue means that you'll act on your heart's desire. The first time, people are hesitant. The 10th time they act immediately. In the end, it's just that song over and over in a blue glow.

The Copenhagen venue was at a very central location. At one point, a group of random people managed to get in, perhaps thinking this was a normal nightclub or a party. I remember seeing their faces as they sensed the atmosphere of sweaty, hot, distilled intensity, and saw the dazed people on the dance floor, before Troels kicked them out.

In my twenties, I worked at my mother's theatre making popcorn, writing press releases, sweeping floors, and waiting in the sidelines with a bucket of sand in case the set caught fire. (It never did.) The parties were a strange combination of family friends, raucous celebration and theatre craziness. It was a quirk of my youth that some of the most unusual things I ever saw on the dancefloor were at these family events.

Some parties were staff-only, including perhaps the most memorable one. It was held in an unrenovated industrial basement, gently covered in construction dust. The circus performers who put it together decided that it would be a beach party. After all, the January weather was outside, but inside it was warm; hot even. To get to the dance floor you needed to be in swimming trunks, bikinis or your underwear. For added motivation, the dance floor was also where the free booze was located.

Every other song played by the DJ was Kylie Minogue's *Can't Get You Out of My Head*. I remember taking a shower once I got home

the next morning. The water running off my body was black from the concrete dust.

I don't think mom was at this party, although to be honest I don't remember.

The story of *3 AM Forever* was inspired by that classic fable where mortals are abducted into the realm of the fae, to dance at a magnificent ball. Slowly, they realize the humans around them have been dancing for days, years, centuries, unable to ever leave. Among the fae, the party never ends.

This is the choice available to the hustlers, art students, jaded critics and aspiring actors who make up the characters of the larp. In the end, the fae extend an invitation: Is your character going to wake up in their own bed with a terrible hangover, or are they going to join the fae?

After mom retired, the theatre discontinued the extravagant premiere parties. But in the world of larp, it's *3 AM Forever*.

Julia Greip

Julia Greip is a Swedish larper, larpwright and organiser (known for Pleasing Women, Stenrike and Libertines). The fine line (or long jump) between social realism and the sensually divine makes her tick. She is passionate about historical undergarments, meaningful eye contact and finding what truly connects people. She has a B.A. in behavioural sciences, and is currently studying UX Design. She shares reflections on larp and other relevant subjects on the blog Flickers: <https://flickers-blog.blogspot.com>

Christianity is an
immersion closet

At the recent re-run of the larp Snapphaneland, I slipped into a very deep, immersive and solitary play on religion. As a fan of historical larps, I have of course played a Christian before, but never before have I had religious play as deeply immersive and moving. It made me get a glimpse of the importance that the Christian worldview had in history, and it made me want to explore and discuss these experiences. My focus in this text is describing my own experiences, and what contributed to finding that religious immersion. To do this, however, I first need to explain both the larp and the historical context, for those unfamiliar with it.

The larp Snapphaneland

Snapphaneland is a larp set during the Scanian War in the 17th century. Specifically, it focuses on the rebellion and guerilla war waged by Scanian resistance fighters (*snapphanar*) against the Swedish authority, the measures taken by the Swedish government and army to suppress the rebels, and how Scanian civilians were oppressed and punished, regardless if they aided the snapphane rebels or not. The larp is set in a Scanian village, and the characters in play are villagers, snapphane rebels and Swedish soldiers.

A life of toil

At the larp, I was a kitchen helper with a written character. This meant that I worked long, busy days, but could go out and play scenes now and then, and play while working in the kitchen. The kitchen was a mostly in-game area, and although it had some modern-ish equipment, many of the tasks were quite appropriate for the era – fetching water, keeping fires burning, chopping vegetables, and so on. It was also heavy work, with endless lifting, standing and walking. Although this was of course quite tiring, it also

meant that the days were filled with manual labour, in a way that is quite realistic for rural life in the 17th century.

The character I played was a farm maid (*piga*). Since she came from a large family, had no hopes of inheriting and slim chances of being married, this was how she would most likely spend her entire life, working very hard at someone else's farm for food and board. Her days would be endless toil. Of course, everyone in a rural village worked, to the best of their abilities, but the farmhands (*dräng*) and farm maids got the heavier, dirtier tasks compared to the farmer's family.

Most of the players at the larp did not have much work to do. There were some tasks that they could do if they chose – there was wood that could be chopped, sometimes things needed carrying, and they were always welcome to come help in the kitchen. Many of the people playing women brought knitting and similar handicrafts, to keep their hands occupied. But there were very few things that they *had* to do, and they could spend a lot of time sitting around talking, when not in the middle of Cool Scenes.

All this to say that while being in the kitchen for most of the larp, and not having much free time to pursue play, the benefit of my role was that the work was deeply realistic and immersive. My body ached from hard work. I was exhausted when going to bed in the evening, and then rose in the morning to do it all again. It was easy to lean into the knowledge that for my character, every day would be like this.

The Christian worldview

In Sweden in the 17th century, everyone (except minority groups of other faiths, of course) was a Christian Protestant. Belief in God was universal, it was a natural part of how the world was percei-

ved. Not everyone was a good Christian, of course, and it was not uncommon that people did things that were considered sinful. However, everyone *knew* that sinning was bad, and had to somehow relate to this. Similarly, belief in an afterlife in heaven or hell was a natural part of life, and a very big part of the Christian worldview. Life on Earth was considered to be largely filled with suffering, toil, and hardship: and only those who lived good, pious lives would be rewarded with eternity in heaven.



Photo: Tindra Englund

This was a deeply important part of my experience. As described above, my character's life really was full of toil and hardship, with no hope of becoming easier. These hardships were only increased as the oppression escalated, and life seemed almost unbearable. The thought of one day, when her life was over, being able to finally have comfort, rest and happiness in heaven was deeply important. Without it, life would just be a pointless struggle.

Loneliness and love

Love is of course one of the great joys in life for a lot of people, something that makes life beautiful and brings meaning and hope to our lives. In the case of my character, there was not much of that to be had, however. She was the kind of person that no one really fell for, the person in the background who was perfectly nice, but just... not the girl anyone dreamed about. She herself fell in love pretty easily, but had never had her feelings answered. On top of this, she had lived most of her life away from her own village, away from parents and siblings. She was a very lonely person.

For a person like this, the thought of God and Christ was deeply comforting. Through God, there was the feeling of an ever-present love. A parent figure that, though stern and forbidding, was also full of grace and forgiveness, and would reward her if she was good enough. And someone who saw her, all of her, and cared about her deeds.

Suffering – God’s trials

Since the larp took place in a part of the country where the civilian population were tormented by both the Swedish army, and sometimes the rebels, there was a lot of suffering. Some characters (including my own) had in their background the ransacking and sometimes even burning of their homes, and having to look for a new home. There was hunger and poverty, due to soldiers and rebels taking food from civilians. And as the larp progressed and the army cracked down harder to quell the rebellion, there were beatings, rapes, and other kinds of violent cruelty.

This created a vast wealth of internal play, with struggling with the age-old questions around God and evil. If God is good and all-powerful, why does he permit terrible things to happen? In Christ-

ianity, however, the reply is usually that God is testing your faith, and that enduring and remaining firm in your belief is how you succeed. This was beautifully illustrated and brought into play by my co-player and kitchen boss Kim Bjurström. My character had just been subjected to rape and abuse at the hands of the soldiers, and was quite broken. Kindly and gently, his character simply said: “God only gives us the struggles he knows we can bear.” It was all that was needed for my character to feel even more strongly connected to her faith, and to see meaning even in the absolutely terrible things she had endured. In a way, this is of course kind of weird and fucked up, as it can easily be construed as saying “You should really be happy that this happened to you, because it means that you are actually a really good Christian!” But, nonetheless, it was a very strong, moving, and immersive experience.

Sin

The concept of sin is great for roleplay, as it creates a strong incentive to not do things that might otherwise be very tempting to do. During the larp, my character often struggled with whether it was alright to lie - if you lied to protect someone, or if you were forced to lie by someone threatening you with violence.

Even more powerful was the thoughts around suicide and abortion. After my character had been raped, she was both traumatised and terrified of a pregnancy. On top of this, she had no future employment, and would soon be without food and housing. It was quite a heavy and hopeless situation, and the thought occurred to her more than once that she would be better off dead. But as suicide was a sin, this was of course out of the question. Similarly, if she did end up pregnant, then aborting the pregnancy would be a sin. This meant that she would simply have to submit to whatever God chose for her, and continue bearing it as well as she could.



Photo: Tindra Englund

Submitting, come what may

And this, I suppose, is the core of it: to submit. To keep faith. To suffer the sins of others, without turning to sin yourself. To bear a life with endless hardships and toil, trusting that after death all that suffering would go away, and you would be rewarded by an eternity in heaven.

I felt this very deeply all through the larp, in a way I never have before. And it was a quite moving experience. It was also exceptionally suited to solo play, even when I was too busy working, or couldn't find play for other reasons. The immersive relationship to God was ever-present. This is why I claim that Christianity is an excellent immersion closet.

What to take away from this article

In this article, I have focused on Protestant Christianity, since that was the religion at the larp in question. However, I think that the same playstyle can be relevant to explore in relation to other religions as well.

As a larper, I feel that it is very valuable to immerse deeply into experiences different from your own. It gives us a little bit of understanding and empathy for others, and humility before the manifold ways to live and understand life. I feel this to be even truer when it comes to getting a new perspective on religion, which is as important to many people today as it was centuries ago. I encourage other players to explore this, and to do so in an immersive, introspective way. Find your own Christian immersion closet, and/or religion as the lens through which you interpret and understand both everyday and extraordinary events.

As an organiser, I encourage designing for religious play, and not focusing solely on the outward expressions of religion – the rituals, the prayers, and so on. These things are great reminders to have during the larp, but they are not enough. Consider how you can design for religion to be always present in the back of the characters' minds, to be informing the everyday moral choices and interpretations that they make. In short: design for more people to have religious play as their immersion closet.

Ludography

Snaphaneland (2024): Sweden. Rosalind Göthberg, Mimmi Lundkvist and Alma Elofsson Edgar (Bread and Games). <https://snaphaneland.org/>



SAKSETRA
KIRKEMUSEUM





Leandro Godoy

Leandro Godoy is currently a sociology student. He is one of the founders and producers of Confraria das Ideias, a Brazilian NGO that has been promoting the language of larp since 1999. Also known as Confrade Godoy, he was awarded by the “VAI” (project of the São Paulo Department of Culture) in the mid-2000s, and has contributed for RPG and larp to be recognized as cultural practices by the government, including larp in the cultural programming of the city and state of São Paulo since then.

Chronicle: “Daddy,
tell me a story?”

“Daddy, tell me a story? But not that scary one!”

My father kindly let my brothers and I lie down on his bed in the space between him and my mother. He liked to start by telling a short story about how things were in his and his father’s time, and then continue with the terrifying stories that we supposedly didn’t want to hear. All of them were told as if they were real stories, events that had actually taken place many years ago somewhere in the interior of São Paulo - and they usually involved fantastic creatures that stealthily tried to deceive the living and take their souls to the afterlife.

This was part of my early childhood. It is known that the tradition of oral storytelling is one of the oldest and most powerful forms of cultural transmission, but curiously, until much later in my adult life, I had never realized how much this had manifested itself within my own history, and not only in what we learned in books.

The years passed, and my father became harder and more bitter due to the traumas, fears and frustrations of life, and I followed my own distinct paths in life, trying not just to survive, but to find my place in the world.

And these paths led me to a peculiar way of telling and experiencing stories, larp!

“Father, I tell stories!”

I don’t think he ever really understood what I was doing. Nor had I been able to see any kind of connection between my larp-making and listening to these stories when I was little.

I had already spent about fifteen years doing larp. To be more precise, it happened in October 2015, a week before the opening of a larp of the group I am part of, and my father had to be rushed to the hospital. I took turns with my brothers to accompany him

during his stay in the hospital.

I remember most of all the day before he was discharged from the hospital. He was excited because he was going home soon, so he had put aside some of the bitterness of life. We talked a lot and I had the opportunity to talk a lot about what I had done in the larps.



And at some point in the night I felt like I could ask again: “Dad, tell me those stories you used to tell when we were little?”

And he told me not only one of the chilling stories, but also a new one, one that I didn’t know - or didn’t remember. And it was the best one of all! I listened intently, not just to each word, but to the way he told it, the dramatic pauses, the intonation of the words, the rhythm of the speech and the plot of the story.

My father recovered and at that time he was able to return home.

As for me, I went to the place where the larp would take place. And now I had a new story in my head, one that carried a lot of mea-

ning. I had reconnected with my father. And on top of that, I had received a very valuable gift, one of those that cannot be bought. My father was discharged on Thursday and the larp had its first session on Saturday.

It was a larp about national folklore. The theme spoke directly to the stories my father told. So I suggested to my partners in organizing the larp that I tell the story my father had taught me as part of the game's immersion. But it ended up being much more than that, for that session and for all the following ones.

The two forms of storytelling connected, perhaps in an encounter like the moment my father and I had. I began to tell the story as a character who, around the campfire, enchanted the participants just as parents enchant their children on unpretentious evenings, awakening their capacity to imagine. By the end of the story, all the characters had already been transported directly into the game setting and were experiencing the larp. Of course, the work on scenography, sound and the larp text itself also supported this immersion.

The various stories of Brazilian folklore have already been portrayed in many books, films and plays, but there are many of them that have no record other than oral transmission that passes from generation to generation.

The larp in question was “A Peleja dos Vivos na Noite dos Mortos” (The Fight of the Living on the Night of the Dead), in which the characters gather, in the 1920s, and camp in search of protection to survive the night of the dead, when the dead and other entities from beyond are said to walk among the living.

And the stories my father told me had this same aspect, of fantastic beings walking among the living, testing them.

“Guys, I’m going to tell you a chilling story.”

By immersing the players and telling the newly learned story, I was able to express the oral tradition in the larp and enrich the experience, not only calibrating the game’s expectations, but also adding drama and resources for the characters’ interactions.

After that moment, my father lived for another 8 years, but his stories will live forever as long as someone tells them, whether around a campfire or during a larp.

Oh, and what story did my father tell me? It’s a scary story with lots of twists and turns, but if you want to hear it, you will need to be lucky enough to find a storyteller who knows it in the interior of the State of São Paulo, or go and play this larp with the Confraria das Ideias, at some time and some place, because that is the tradition!



Chronicle: “Daddy, tell me a story?”

Gijs van Bilsen **Anne van Barlingen**

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Learning from Bleed



This is Kai. Kai taught me how to overcome my fear of heights. Or rather, by playing the character of Kai, I was able to find a new part of myself. And later, that new part enabled me to face my fears. I learned from bleed.

I didn't play Kai with this intention. But Kai inspired me to develop ways to intentionally learn from bleed and that led to the formation of our company, Live Action Learning. In this article we'll

write about how you can learn from bleed yourself and how you design a larp in such a way that your participants can learn from their bleed, if they want to.

This article is based on the workshop “Learning from bleed” at the 2024 Edu-Larp Conference by Gijs van Bilsen and Kjell Hedgaard Hugaas, and all participants of that workshop, who discussed the topic together. It’s also based on the professional development training “Live Action Leadership” that we, Anne van Barlingen & Gijs van Bilsen with our company Live Action Learning, ran in April 2023 and November 2024, and the keynote speech “Summon your talent”.

What happened with Kai

Kai wasn’t a kind man. But Kai possessed an unshakable inner strength, grounded in a calm conviction that nothing could sway him. This kind of inner strength and resilience was new to me, and playing Kai had given me access to this. In other words: I learned something through bleed.

First, let’s define bleed. According to Hugaas (2024) “Bleed occurs when feelings, thoughts, emotions, physical states, cognitive constructs, aspects of personality and similar ‘bleed over’ from player to character or vice versa.” There are several types of bleed, as presented by Hugaas:

- **Emotional bleed** (Montola 2010; Bowman 2015), in which emotional states and feelings bleed between player and character.
- **Ego bleed** (Beltrán 2012), in which fragments of personality and archetypal qualities bleed between player and character.
- **Procedural bleed** (Hugaas 2019), in which physical abilities, perceptual experience, motor skills, traits, habits, and other

bodily states bleed between player and character.

- **Memetic bleed** (Hugaas 2019), in which ideas, thoughts, opinions, convictions, ideologies and similar cognitive constructs bleed between player and character;
- **Relationship bleed**, in which aspects of social relationships bleed between player and character. Romantic bleed (Waern 2010; Harder 2018; Bowman and Hugaas 2021) is the most frequently discussed subtype.
- **Emancipatory bleed** (Kemper 2017, 2020), in which players from marginalized backgrounds experience liberation from that marginalization through their characters.
- **Identity bleed** (Hugaas 2024), which deals with the sense of self and with how different parts of the self (“multiplicities of identities”) bleed between character and player.

In the case of Kai, the bleed can be classified as emotional bleed (the calm emotional state), but also as identity bleed (It did something with the way I think about myself; ‘I’m someone who can stay calm under stressful circumstances’).

Why is learning from bleed interesting?

To effectively integrate new behavior in your system, you need a couple of things: Opportunities to experiment with the behavior, feedback to fine-tune it, time to integrate it into your system, and a safe environment that allows for mistakes.

In a regular training session, you’ll have the opportunity to try new things, but often confined to a few minutes or maybe an hour. Training by practicing new behavior solely in your real life isn’t a safe environment in which you can make multiple mistakes or suddenly behave completely differently. But using larp and bleed... Well, talk about having it all!

But, of course, there are difficulties. For one, bleed is personal; you can't make bleed happen. However, you can inspire bleed (Edu-larp conference, 2024). The level at which bleed is present, but also the level of bleed that is noticed, differs per person and even over time. This is called the "bleed perception threshold" (Hugaas 2024). This means you might not notice any bleed at all. Or you can be completely overwhelmed.

The ingredients: designing for bleed

So when designing for bleed, whether it is for you personally or for a group of participants, be aware. Random, unfocused bleed can be very unhelpful, to put it mildly. In order to learn from bleed, you need direction, agency, priming, safety, time and space (Edu-larp conference, 2024). Using bleed on purpose, especially to learn, should always be with informed consent of what bleed you are designing for, preferably with agency of a participant to choose their own bleed and learning goals. Direction, agency, and priming shape bleed into something useful, while safety and time enhance immersion.

In our four-day Live Action Leadership training we've made very conscious decisions on these elements. The main theme was very clear: Leadership. The complete setup revolved around situations and scenes which required leadership skills, integrated in an overarching story about a failing management team. The participants were actively involved in formulating their personal learning goals and how those goals were translated into a character. The concept of bleed was clearly explained at the beginning, during the workshops. This made the participants aware of the signs of bleed and what they might experience. Having multiple opt-out options, and very openly discussing them as a safe and viable option to leave the game, made participants comfortable enough to immerse themselves.

And then, last but not least, the ‘thin alibi’, or ‘playing close to home’. Bleed occurs more quickly when the character you are playing resembles your real-life persona. For example, we might deliberately choose names for the characters that are close to their own. Björn might play a character called Bjarke, or Susanne might play a character called Suzette. We also thinned the border by choosing a realistic and recognizable setting. It is very possible to have bleed and learn from bleed from characters and settings that are further away from you. But the further away you are, the harder it is to find an applicable use in everyday life.

The timeline: Three phases of integration

We believe that learning from bleed is not about pretending to be someone else in your everyday life, but about finding a different version of yourself through playing. Therefore, especially in longer experiences, we have three phases for the participant to go through during play:

1. Finding the character
2. Challenging the character, and
3. Integrating to a competent version of the character.

Finding the character

How can you help the participant exhibit the traits that they want to learn? Experimentation is key in this phase. When not playing or designing for bleed, we might want to prioritize portraying the character consistently. But if you’re focusing on a specific character trait that is not natural to you, it’s important to experiment with different strategies to find a way that works for you. So if somebody wants to learn to be more outspoken, this phase is about finding multiple ways for them to play that outspoken character.

Challenging the character

This phase is about trying to entice the participant to exhibit the opposite behavior of what they want to learn, so that they can notice this and return to the character. Ways to do this can be to introduce a high pressure environment, such as a quest with a specific deadline, or by designing more emotional scenes. If you opt for this approach, it is good to have ways to remind the participant that they are slipping into old behavior. Having them choose one gesture, word or feeling that symbolizes their character is a good way for them to be able to go back to their character again.

Integration

The third phase is integrating the character into a competent version: a sort of mix between the character and the participant. Instruct the participants during an offgame calibration, to let go of a negative trait of the character and to replace that with a positive trait of their own. This will bring the character closer to resembling the participant and helps them to associate positively with the character. This can also be described as ‘learning to love the character’. If participants dislike their character, it is harder for them to want to learn from things that the character did. However, if you want to achieve the opposite effect, unlearning unwanted behavior, disliking the character works well.

After playing: Separation and anchoring

After de-roling and debriefing, we start the separation and anchoring phase. There are three questions central to this:

- Separation: What traits do you want to keep, and what will you let go?
- Anchoring: What anchor will help you summon these traits?
- Summoning: When do you want to summon these traits?

Separation

We want our participants to take a ‘version of themselves’ home, not the complete character, because characters have negative traits as well, traits that we don’t want to keep. Kai, the example from the beginning of the article, was a very powerful character with a deep source of inner strength and resilience. But, as you can see from the photo, he was also a criminal. So after playing that character, I separated the useful characteristics (inner strength and resilience) from the rest of the character. I found a way to access that inner strength by playing Kai, but now I needed only that part.

Anchoring

After separating comes anchoring. Here we build on the word, gesture or feeling that participants already have chosen to symbolize their character (see: Challenging the character). It can be a simple thing that helps you find this version of yourself. And from that thing, more of the behavior you associate with that version will follow. Besides a gesture, word or feeling, other possible anchors are:

- A name: the characters name, a nickname (‘the professor’) or an adjective, coupled with your own name (‘curious Gijs’)
- Music, from a short tune you can hum/whistle to an entire playlist which helps you find the character
- An object, preferably one that you can carry with you
- A smell, such as a perfume, that differs from your normal one
- A piece of clothing that you can put on in special circumstances
- A location where you want to have access to the character
- A posture you adopt when you need it

Summoning

It is important to think about when you want to have access to the talents you learned from bleed. There are three ways to determine when to summon your characters:

4. **Triggers.** Think of a sudden situation where you might need it, and identify a trigger that will remind you. For example, I played Kai, who was calm and resilient. Traits I can use when I start to feel my fear of heights taking over. When I feel my knees getting weak, that's the trigger to summon that calm, focused part of myself.
5. **On purpose beforehand.** If you know you will go into a situation where that version of yourself might help you, you summon your character on purpose just before going in. For example, just before an important meeting or social event.
6. **Integrating it into yourself.** Finally, you can integrate this version of yourself into yourself, meaning that it becomes an unconscious part of you. This takes time and practice. It generally goes from noticing well after the fact that you would've wanted to use what you've learned, to noticing it shortly after the fact, to adjusting your behavior during the situation and finally to before the situation. The final step is that it has become something you do without thinking about it.

Learning from regular larp experiences

The above steps detail how to design for others. But you can easily use these at a larp that is not designed for learning, even if you're only using it after the larp. Kai was not intended as a character for self-learning, but by separating and anchoring aspects of him, I found playing him highly valuable.

In short, the steps to take if you want to learn from the larp as a player, are:

- Decide what you want to learn
- Decide where you want to make the border between you and your character thinner
- Take some time to reflect on your learning experience so far

- If possible, use the three phases (finding, challenging and integrating your character)
- Afterwards, separate and anchor what you want to keep/learn
- Finally, summon the new version of yourself whenever you need it

We hope this article inspires you to learn more from larp and learn more from bleed yourself and, if you're a larp designer, introduce parts of the design process into your larps so you give your participants the option of learning from it.

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nerves

Towards (aspirations)

Alessandro Giovannucci

Alessandro Giovannucci is an award-winning italian larp designer and larp theorist. He co-founded the larp collective Chaos League and wrote the Southern Way Manifesto. His well known international larps include Sahara Expedition, The secrets we keep, Miskatonic university and Eclispe. His chamber larp has been translated into several languages. Curious, friendly and proudly antifa.

Larp Critique: Why We Need It and How To Write One

At the moment, there isn't much in terms of culture of larp critique. There is no structured reflection on how to write a critique that is analytical, constructive and well documented. There are some very good examples, but nothing systematic or with a recurring format. However, there are a lot of discussions, because organizers and players love to exchange impressions, opinions and comments on blogs, videos and social media. Larp is our passion and we can't help but talk about it. But passion, while important, cannot sustain larp alone. To avoid stagnation and advance the discourse, there is a need not only to talk about larp, but to talk about it in a critical, informed and clear manner. There is a need for larp criticism.

This article has a double aim: it maps the state of the art and offers a practical tool to produce proper analysis and communication about larp events. The tool introduced below is an analytical method, inspired by semiotic studies, which attempts to take in account the work of the designer, the analysis of the larp itself and the role of the players.

As Thomas B. (2024) wrote, the topic of larp criticism has been the subject of good, interesting articles before. Some of the things you will read here are summaries of what they have said. The model for larp critique proposed here builds on this past work.

1. The difference between criticism and review

These are two different ways of writing larp critiques. They are both valid but are structured differently and provide different outputs for designers, players and researchers. In an ideal world, they complement each other and are equally frequent.

A review can take various forms, from pure description of the event to the description of the emotional journey undertaken by

the participant. Sometimes reviews are even written in character or based on diegetic material. But all these different forms have one thing in common: at their core is the subjective experience of the writer. The style may be rational, emotional or descriptive, but it will be based on what the writer has experienced. Often reviews focus on the question: Did I like it? Would I recommend it?

Larp critique is an in-depth analysis focused on one or more aspects of a particular larp. Usually a critique presents an opinion from the author. But in this case the personal point of view has to be based on facts that the writer should be able to explain in a credible way. A critique is not directly aimed to help people decide if they should play this larp or not.

A critique usually provides historical context and stylistic analysis of a particular larp. To give an example, a review may say: "This larp is innovative!" because it's new for the writer. A critique, on the other hand, involves a bit of research before one can say that this aspect is new, because perhaps it has already been used in other larps. This is not a bad thing and the critique is not there to say that the authors of that larp stole the idea from someone. It is there to say: if you are interested, know that there are other larps that have done similar things.

Without wanting to minimize reviews, which are very important in getting to grips with larp in emotional terms, I think we should try to strengthen our culture of larp critique because writing them is much less common.

The risk is that, in an environment based mainly on personal experiences, these are stretched to the point of becoming an 'objective' judgement and that the larp community, which is fortunately trust-based, takes them as more broadly considered judgements. Personal subjective opinion being considered objective analytical truth is problematic. It is not good for those who spread what they

have read, it is not good for the organizers of the larp, it is not even good for those who only wanted to express their personal opinion and now find themselves at the centre of the discourse.

An example of the limits of personal judgment is related to definitions and genres. In the current larp discourse, the concept of 'artistic' larp has returned to centre stage. There is a desire to understand, to organise and play larps that are art. But what is an artistic larp? What makes a larp a piece of art? One cannot base everything on personal opinion and one's individual experiences. A far better answer can be given to us by critique, researching history, styles and designers and then disseminating information that can help players orient themselves and inspire designers to create.

Another element that we need to take in account is the possible problems of critique in a small community. The question is: as a community of respect and love, is there ground for sharp criticism?

Here some of the main issues:

- Generally, art critics and music critics are professionals. Because they earn their salary writing about art, they have the time and knowledge to write effective critiques. Moreover, they have often done studies on the subject and writing often increases their skill.
- In addition to that, they move in a professional environment that has its own rules and safety nets. When it comes to larp, however, we have to admit one thing: criticising friends hurts. It hurts them and us.
- We are a community where the boundaries between doers, judges and players are very blurred. Exposing oneself with criticism can be frightening, because those who criticise are afraid of being criticised in turn. We are a small community where everyone is recognisable. There is no anonymity of the review economy.

- The critic is only a true critic if they are authoritative. In practice, their main tool to be heard is their status. For the larp community this is a big problem, because we know that the status system brings distortions and abuses that we often fight against with safety, inclusion and respect.
- As Kangas (2022) pointed out: in larp there is no “object.” Not a sculpture, a text, a piece of material to be analyzed. Usually memory and interpretation are an integral part of a larp critique.
- If a critique has to be done by someone who took part in the larp, how can we ensure the due distance between the art object and the critic? What are the roles?

So do we really need the larp critic? Maybe things are just fine the way they are.

I think the majority of these issues can be solved, because the international larp community has already shown an incredible amount of caring, skill and dedication in achieving way more than professionals did in different fields. There are some good pieces of critique out there that are very encouraging.

2. The importance of larp critique

Critique is crucial for larp development and improvement because it offers us a different, more structured way of documenting larp. Documentation is the only way for larps to survive, to live longer than our bodies, our aesthetics, our flaws, ourselves. Critique is the set of theoretical and practical tools, of studies that can give judgements and explanations, regarding the evaluation of a work of art, in this case the larp. A critique is a text that talks about larp from a more objective and analytic point of view.

As Stark and Roberts (2017) pointed out, we need larp analysis

because it's an experience multiplier that allows us to know what happened at a larp we did not attend. Through analysis, every larp becomes an opportunity to learn and grow. It's also a chance to establish a common language that, for different reasons, is beneficial for players, designers, academics and even people outside of the larp bubble.

At the moment, the only places to find larp critique are among the articles in the Knutepunkt books, on nordiclarp.org and some other more incidental venues. These spaces are precious and their efforts very important, but we need more.

If we treat larp as an art form, then its critique could have much to learn from the historically more developed and structured criticism of the arts. Humanity has always discussed art, from Plato to Aristotle's Poetics, from Giorgio Vasari to Diderot and Roland Barthes. Artistic technique has been discussed, as well as ethical implications and social and educational impact. In different eras, art has been seen as a tool for social advancement, and in the larp milieu it often still is.

It is often said that we must not reinvent the wheel when it comes to larp design. So why should we do so when it comes to writing critique? Is there anything we can adapt to larp? Later in this article, we will go through one specific analytic model that seems very suitable for larp.

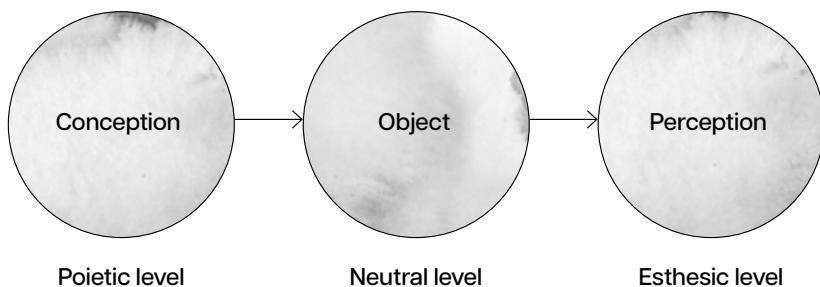
3. Practical tools for writing larp criticism

An effective critique should take into consideration the different aspects of the larp (or focus on just a few) and try to understand what worked and why. Elements should not just be listed or described, but should be explained and proven with demonstrable reasoning. It would also be interesting to construct reasoning on

history and aesthetics, so as to show the elements of continuity and those of rupture. Critique focuses more on finding the ‘why’ than on describing the ‘what’. The author of a critique should write analytically, precisely and always putting the focus on analysis instead of personal taste.

A larp has many aspects (theme, setting, design, narrative, techniques, participants etc.), and it is not easy to organise a discourse that encapsulates them into categories that avoid treating them individually, which would lead to fragmentation.

My proposal is to adopt a three-part system that divides the larp into three macro-categories containing the different elements that make the larp. It’s based on the work of French-Canadian musicologist Jean-Jacques Nattiez, who structures it from the ideas of the semiologist Jean Molino. The three levels into which the system is divided are: poietic stage, neutral stage and esthetic stage. The central idea is based on the concept of exchange, and on roles that are related but not interchangeable, as Molino (1990) said: “Every symbolic object presupposes an exchange, in which producer and consumer, transmitter and receiver, are not interchangeable and do not have the same point of view on the object, which they do not constitute in the same way at all”. The tripartition model, then, accounts for the significance of the object as well as the inherently differing interpretations of the communicator and the receiver, granting equal weight to all three of these coinciding meanings.



The aim of the model is to create a three-dimensional critique that does not take only the authors (poietic level), only the larp (neutral level) or only the results on the players (esthetic level) into consideration.

3.1 Poietic level

Generally speaking, the poietic level concerns production strategies and the author role. In other words, the poietic level corresponds to the processes involved in the genesis of the work. The poietic level is concerned, strictly speaking, with the creation of the larp, the author's intentions, the nature of the materials, and techniques used.

The questions that should be asked at this level are:

- Who is the author or the authors?
- Why did they make such a larp? What purposes did they have?
- What background do they come from?
- What are their poetics, their style?
- Is it positioned in a particular larp scene?
- What new elements does it have compared to other authors and what does it not?
- Are there any useful biographical elements to clarify their organiser choices?

Feel free to add to the poietic stage anything about the author and the production of the larp, this way you will make it clear to the reader who organised the larp, how and why.

3.2 Neutral level

This level is the one that analyses the larp itself, its shape and proportions. A good neutral analysis should exclude, in principle, any external element. At this level we don't care about who made the larp, and how it was received. The specific task is to study intrinsic structures.

In the broadest sense, the analysis of the neutral level occurs when we exclude or, we should say, try to exclude the factors of production and reception as much as possible. If we were studying a poem, for example, our analysis should be based specifically on the metre, rhythms, stanzas, rhymes and sonorities, morphosyntax, figures, lexicon and semantics.

The questions that should be asked at this level are:

- What was the design?
- How are interactions managed?
- How did the characters work?
- Were there rules or meta techniques?
- How was the game space managed?
- How was time managed? (Acts, continuous play, flashforward or flashback.)
- How was the narrative?
- What kind of agency was planned for the participants?

Feel free to add to the neutral stage anything about the larp itself and how it was made, all the elements regardless of the author's intentions (maybe they wanted to do something else than the actual larp, maybe not). It's also important to not include players' reactions or personal evaluations in this stage. The larp has its own affordances and internal forces. How were they combined?

3.3 Esthetic level

The esthetic level corresponds to 'reception strategies'. The word 'esthetic' is a neologism that refers to the faculty of perceiving a sensation. Specifically, the esthetic level includes all the processes of perception from the participants, and in general from the larp community (e.g. what impact the larp had in the community or society at the time).

Nattiez states that the esthetic level is not just the perception of

specialists, but rather a description of the behaviours and reactions of a given group or community. It's an active stage in which a person receives the neutral stage and interprets the larp through the lens of their own understanding and background. At the esthetic level interpretations are always varied due to the infinite nature of human experience. Each differing interpretation is of equal value, as no one person's interpretation can ever truly be wrong.

The questions that should be asked at this level are:

- How did the players react to the game? (Were they happy, disappointed, surprised?)
- How did they play the game? (They participated, they reinvented part of the larp.)
- Were there any particular incidents that involved them? (An accident, something nice or unexpected.)
- What were the reactions after the game?
- How was the larp received when it was publicised?
- Did it influence other larps?
- Was it influenced by other previous larps?
- How do participants talk about it?
- Has anyone talked about it? (Blogs, youtube channels, podcasts, mainstream media.)

Feel free to add to the esthetic stage anything about how the larp impacted the actual participants, and also how it was received by the audience that did not take part in the actual event but talked about it, read materials and expressed their opinions.

These three levels can be imagined as a mixing desk, where they can be set to different values. Let's take a simple example. Sometimes we talk about an 'innovative larp'. The proposed analytical model has as its main purpose ease of writing for the authors of the critique, but also wants to be clear for the reader. A larp can be innovative because it responds to a novel need of the author

(poietic level), because of a particular technique (neutral level) or because it has shocked the audience (esthetic level). Or it could be a combination of all these elements.

The hope is that with this model you will be able to more clearly back up your opinions with facts and above all understand what a larp looks like in its complexity. It is a way to express informed and verifiable opinions. Of course it is only a starting point: feel free to take this model, expand it, hack it and apply it as you like.

4. Conclusion

Critique is a form of documentation and documentation is crucial. Documentation is also complicated to achieve; it requires effort, commitment and skills. It forces us to step out of our comfort zone and show others who we are, what we think, how we work and how we fail. Keeping documentation alive requires patience and resources. It's also messy, and a lot of work.

But documentation can inspire, create new larps, improve them. So write articles, reviews, conferences. Create a blog or a podcast, or support existing ones. But above all, as long as we are the ones writing our history and preserving it, making it available to others, no one will be able to come and tell us that things were different, no one will be able to come and tell us how we were or how we should be. Because we were there and, if we weren't, someone left a trace for us. Memory is the best antidote to totalitarianism and one-track thinking. But we need to feed our memories. We need facts, and we need to support our memories with a precise and deep understanding of what happened. We need to protect and enlarge our heritage. Because there is a wealth of knowledge that belongs to us all. Because great stories are written together.

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Søren Lyng Ebbenhøj Troels Barkholt-Spangsbo

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Troels Barkholt-Spangsbo is a Danish larp organizer and the general secretary of a small NGO. Troels has been a co-organizer of several Nordic larps and a bunch of conventions – including all Danish Knudepunkts since 2003.

Designing Greener Larpos 101

As a species, we face no greater threat than the self-created climate crisis. The challenges seem great and the solutions often feel outside our sphere of influence or responsibility. But all sectors of society need to adapt and become more sustainable inside a limited number of years. This is not the responsibility of any of us as individuals. Structural issues require structural change. But larp organizers and community leaders are parts of the structures of our small section of society. When we organize larps and larp-related events we have the power to create structural changes within our areas of influence.

True sustainability includes many other aspects than climate impact such as social, community, mental, and environmental sustainability. In this primer, we focus on lowering the climate impact of larp events, but we acknowledge that every extra task for the organizing team requires time and resources from someone – in our case most often a volunteer organizer.

Lowering the threshold for action is one of the ways to structurally induce change, and this primer should be seen as an addition to the work that has already been done by many activists, artists, and designers in larp, such as the guide to more sustainable larps by Austrian 1000 Atmosphären¹ and the work on mapping emissions by Knudepunkt 2023 in Denmark, as well as endless contributions in related fields such as theater², conference style events³, and Youth culture⁴ to mention a few.

1 1000 Atmosphären, Checkliste für inklusive und nachhaltige Larp-Projekte, <https://www.1000atmosphaeren.at/2020/06/06/checkliste-fur-inklusive-und-nachhaltige-larp-projekte/> (in German)

2 The Green Book of Theater, <https://theatregreenbook.com/>

3 Atmosfair CO₂ event calculator <https://mice.atmosfair.de/home>

4 Greening the youth sector. Sustainability checklist, https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261953/A5_GYS+Checklist_2023.pdf/c3185655-d816-aeb7-elf0-4e70e7a7ef1b?t=1690893131981

Carving a path to greener larps consists of choices on very different scales:

- Bigger choices can significantly lower the carbon footprint of an event but might also change the project – sometimes fundamentally. This could include designing the fiction of a larp to require only second-hand costumes or choosing a location that is well-insulated and has a green heating solution.
- Smaller choices could be seen as adjustments to the project. They will not exactly cut your emissions in half, but are relevant improvements nonetheless. This could include placing the garbage cans so your participants are nudged to sort their trash or planning meals to minimize food waste.

For some larps and events, the big choices are already part of the design, such as black box larps without costumes or events with only local participants. For those events, it is even more worthwhile to look at the smaller choices.

For other larps and events, the bigger choices are more monumental. Some of the options we suggest in this article will be impossible to implement in some projects without completely changing the project into something else. Others would leave some players unable to participate in events they are used to participating in. While the bigger choices might make organizers a target of criticism or affect the fundamental design of the larp, the smaller choices may have little impact on the design, but will almost always increase the volunteer organizer's workload.

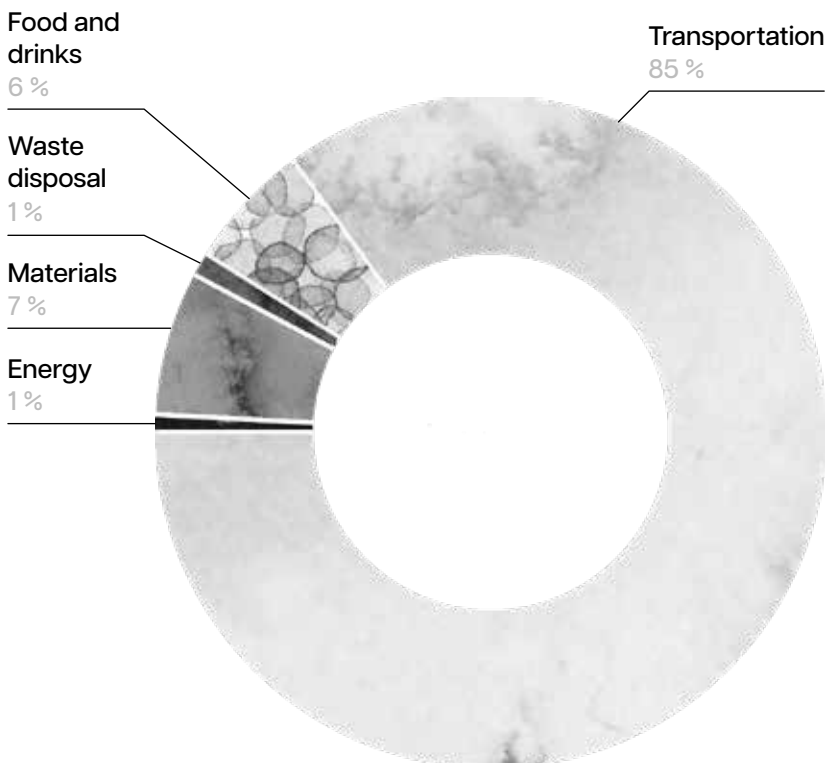
Fully sustainable events are not possible within society as it exists today, and we need to share ideas and explore design options. For this reason, both bigger and smaller choices are relevant and necessary to create the inspiration and structural change necessary for the larp sector to carry its weight in the green transition. But to be honest, even the sum of the smaller choices will seldom yield

the same results as the bigger ones – and will not be sufficient to reduce the emissions of the larp sector in accordance with international targets.

The scope of this guide

In this guide, we will be looking at the 5 major areas of larp events that create a carbon footprint: Transportation, Food and Drink, Energy, Materials, and Waste Management. The contribution to the total footprint from each of these different categories will of course vary depending on the event in question. Emissions of greenhouse gases are measured in kilograms (kg) of CO₂-equivalents (or CO₂e) as a measure of both CO₂ and other greenhouse gases with different climate impacts.

Main areas of emissions from a model KP-conference



The figure below illustrates the relative impact of the five main areas of emission of a model of a Knutepunkt conference. The modeled event includes player travels; a meat-based diet; maintaining low materials consumption in a country like Denmark with fairly developed waste management and green electricity in a venue with sustainable heat production. We estimate that a three-day larp with simple costumes and little to no scenography in an indoor location such as a small hotel with a similar energy profile, diet, and distribution of player nationalities would look mostly similar to the model KP Conference presented.

The model is inspired by the work done for Knudepunkt 2023 in Denmark. Working on this article, we have changed the methodology and reworked the data and calculations. All suggestions and conclusions in this article are the authors’.

Calculating the specific carbon footprint of an event is difficult, complex, and close to useless for individual organizers. Rather, instead of calculating exact footprints, understanding the relative impacts of each area for different types of events helps organizers focus their efforts where it matters most.

Rather than studying the numbers, this guide will focus on choices to make your events greener. We include everything we as organizers influence through our design choices, including the impacts of player actions such as their choice of transportation to the event or the costume they will be wearing. One could argue that players will eat no matter if they are at the larp or not, and that player transportation is not an organizer problem, but a decision for each participant. However, organizers of events make catering decisions for everyone, and the choice of venue heavily influences players’ travel choices.

Similarly, it could be argued that the plane will fly no matter if one buys a ticket, or the cow has already been butchered, no matter if

we buy the steak. These considerations might be technically true in the isolated case of buying one plane ticket or steak. But in a market economy, lowering the demand for products or services will eventually make the market adjust to supply fewer plane tickets. This is why none of us can do much alone, and why communities and society must come together to affect change. Also, applying these considerations requires significant knowledge about local and global markets and supply chains that most of us do not possess.

Transportation

The largest carbon footprint of most international larp events is organizer and participant transportation.

In our model KP mentioned above, transportation accounts for around 85 % of the total emissions. Depending on the emission calculator used, 24 participants traveling from outside of Europe (out of 430 participants) make up roughly 40-50 % of all emissions caused by transport and thus around 35-45 % of the entire event's emissions.

Flying of course emits more greenhouse gases than traveling by land. And the further you fly, the larger the emission, so flights between different continents emit more than a regional flight between the Nordic countries.

Sea travel is more difficult to estimate because unless it's a ferry that is especially green, it might have the same climate impact as a plane per kilometer traveled - but sea travel often means that the rest of the trip consists of overland travel. Our best estimate for the ferry between Oslo and Copenhagen (which is a rather green ferry) places it on the low end.

Traveling by bus or train is almost always the best option, closely followed by a car depending on the number of people in it and whether the vehicles are electric or fuel-driven.

As an example, flying from Oslo to Copenhagen emits roughly 150 kg CO₂e; going by ferry emits somewhere between 40 and 80 kg CO₂e; traveling by car (assuming 3 people in an average gasoline car); emits around 40 kg CO₂e per person and travelling by train (running partially on diesel) emits around 20 kg CO₂e per person. If you're able to travel exclusively by electrified transport modes like electric car or train (which is fairly common in most of Europe) the emissions would be even lower.

The most impactful choice you could make when designing an international larp event is to minimize travel, particularly air travel. There are several ways to try to achieve this. One could be to refuse to sell tickets to participants who would fly to your larp. You could base this on an assumption of how far you are willing to travel by land. Another is to design your larp event so it mainly appeals to local participants by designing for a specific primarily local tradition or making the default language of your event a local or regional language instead of English.

Smaller choices you can make would include improving the efficiency of necessary travel. The rule of thumb is that the more people in a moving vehicle the better it is when it comes to the climate impact. This can be done in several ways:

- Organize buses to transport participants from main cities or local public transportation hubs (rather than from airports).
- Publish travel itineraries from major cities by public transportation.
- Help participants travel together by bus, train, and car.
- Design in ways that make slower and collective travel more rewarding by planning eg. character/relation workshops, games, or other player preparation to take place during transport.
- Minimize transportation of materials by renting or buying materials, food, and whatever else you need for your event locally.
- Choose electric vehicles for transportation and travel for the

organizers if applicable.

- Organize multiple runs of a larp in multiple geographical areas so the organizers travel instead of the players – especially if you take measures to reduce the number of players traveling along with the larp.

While many travel services offer different carbon offset options, the field is controversial, and many schemes are highly unreliable or without any positive long-term effects. Evaluating the effect of them is difficult and we suggest you focus on reducing your own event's emissions instead of offsetting them unless you have insight in the field.

Food and drink

Food and drink are another main contributor to the carbon footprint of multi-day larps and one that is easily influenced by organizers in most circumstances.

As an example, they contribute around 6 % of the emissions in our model, with beverages contributing around a third of that amount.

The main contributor to emissions from food is by far meat and dairy products, and as such, minimizing meat consumption is the area where you can optimize the most. Apart from this, minimizing food waste will have a real impact. Contrary to popular belief, however, organic foods are often more climate intensive than conventionally grown crops, and transportation of food has next to zero impact compared to growing the food – as long as the mode of transportation is not flying.

The most impactful choice you can make within this area is to change the menu to a vegan one, or at least cut down on meat and dairy consumption. As a rule of thumb, going vegan will cut around half of the food-related emissions, while going vegetarian will cut roughly a third.

Other smaller choices you can make include:

- Minimizing food waste by ensuring on-site use of leftovers. You can plan large meals such as a banquet early in your event to be able to use leftovers.
- Handing out unused foodstuff to crew and participants, or donating unused goods to local food banks.
- Instead of serving beef and veal, serve pork or poultry.
- Focus on using products that are in season to reduce greenhouse heating footprint.
- Serve food produced on the continent where your event takes place should be preferred, but there is usually no need to worry about shorter transportation on land, such as buying Spanish tomatoes in the Nordics.

Materials

The materials category includes all physical objects used by organizers, crew, and players before, during, and after the event, such as costumes and building materials.

In our model, the materials make up around 7 % of the total emissions.

The impact of this category on the footprint of an event varies wildly depending on the larp. If you are playing a larp without any new costumes or scenography, this category will contribute next to nothing. In contrast, if you are equipping 700 Renaissance soldiers to fight over a purpose-built wooden fortress, it will be vastly different.

If we imagine all participants creating new renaissance costumes of wool, linen, leather, and chainmail, the footprint of our model event will rise by more than 50 %. In this case, the materials category would make up almost the same part of emissions as transportation. The reason is that the production of wool and leather

for such a costume emits around 200 kg CO₂e – equal to a plane ride from Copenhagen to Oslo.

The emissions from the use of a thing come from the production and disposal of the thing. Making do without the thing or reusing it many times over is the main philosophy for cutting emissions from the materials category. Luckily many of the costumes and leather accessories mentioned above would probably be reused before or after, as long as the aesthetics fit with other events.

This also means that overly specific costume demands that hinder re-use or promoting the use of cheap, low-quality products from Temu or Alibaba contribute to the climate impact of events.

A big choice would be to organize in a way that requires no costumes, props, or scenography, or at least no new production or purchasing of those. This can be done by removing demanding aesthetics from the design or by choosing a fiction where costumes and gear are readily available through second-hand stores or already exist in abundance in the target player community. It would also contribute greatly to choose a location that doesn't require much scenography to look the way you want.

If you want to prioritize which materials to minimize first, you should start with metal and electronics – but the emission from the production of wool or cotton is unfortunately not trivial either. So making design choices that allow your players to borrow costumes will be beneficial.

Other smaller choices could be:

- Make sure that everything you need as an organizer is borrowed or rented. In many countries, there are already organizations that rent or borrow out costumes and props. So look around. And if you're borrowing materials from a volunteer

organization, you should consider the work needed to maintain it and maybe let the larp contribute financially to the organization in some way.

- If you have to buy or produce new stuff, make sure you buy second-hand stuff or in a quality that allows for reuse.
- Plan for who will use your stuff afterward – such as team members, players, larp organizations or charities, etc.
- Organize costume rentals for players or facilitate the borrowing and selling of costumes and gear between players and from the community at large.
- Facilitate players of different runs of your larp using the same costumes and props.
- Make less demanding costume requirements or costume guides and guide participants to use fabrics that emit less greenhouse gases to produce. The ranking of some commonly used fibers and textiles by lowest to highest carbon footprint is: Linen, polyester, nylon, silk, cotton, acrylic, and wool.

Waste Management

Waste management covers the handling of all waste that your larp produces. From food waste to packaging and used materials that can't be reused directly. In our model, waste management is responsible for approximately 1 % of the total emissions.

The Materials and Food and Drink categories already deal with reuse and passing on leftover foodstuff, costumes, props, and materials. While very visible and often easily dealt with, correct management of unavoidable waste will not make a huge impact.

The amount of recycling that you can achieve is to a large extent defined by the region where your larp takes place. So the most impactful choice would be to organize it in a region that has an effective recycling system and collaborate with your venue to organize waste sorting and collection.

Smaller design choices are all about reducing the amount and optimizing the sorting of waste:

- Reduce the amount of waste produced by not using disposable materials such as single-use plates, cups, and the like. Many companies offer reusable alternatives to for instance beer and cocktail glasses if having players bring their own utensils would be unhygienic.
- Optimize waste sorting by making it easy and convenient; for instance, by making waste management an in-game function in your fantasy larp, by placing trash sorting close to the players' camps, or by handing out differently colored trash bags to the players before the larp starts.
- If you have the opportunity to recycle more than your venue allows or requires, for instance by driving it to a recycling center yourself, prioritize sorting and handing in metal, electronics, and glass for recycling at the nearest garbage disposal site.

Energy

Energy covers all the energy you consume to heat your location and power whatever electronics or other fuel-consuming activities you need – such as food production.

In our model, energy makes up less than 1 % of the total emissions. The reason that the contribution of energy to the total emissions in our model is so low is that it is based on an event in a modern building with access to both green energy and green district heating (heating produced off-site and transported to the house in pipes. A very popular form of heating in the Nordics and in big cities in Central/Eastern Europe). Calculating the energy usage for an event is incredibly site-specific but a conservative estimate is that going from heating a house with an electric heat pump or green district heating to an oil heater increases emissions tenfold. A poorly insulated venue will easily double (or more) the energy needed to heat it and the resulting emissions.

So when it comes to energy, the biggest impact comes from the choice of venue, the heat source it uses, and when your larp takes place. If possible you should run your larp at a comfortable time of year and choose a modern - well insulated - venue with a green heat source. That means it should use (in order of priority) solar heating, district heating, heat pumps, or wood boilers instead of gas, oil, or coal. For outdoor events, you could choose a location with access to electricity from your country's electricity grid to avoid having to use diesel-fuelled generators.

Smaller choices to minimize energy consumption could be:

- Scheduling the larp to a warmer time of year to reduce the need for heating.
- Matching costumes to expected temperatures to reduce the need for heating.
- Effective energy usage from cooking by having it done collectively or centralized at a single cooking station.
- Avoid buying firewood, and instead allow players to collect firewood locally if possible and legal.

Buying certified green electricity is complex and we only recommend you do that if you have the time and skills to research how that works for the specific companies involved.

Call to action

Larp design and organizing are almost always done by unpaid volunteers. And we acknowledge that many of the ideas and initiatives outlined require resources - mostly in the form of work hours or money. Some choices impact little for specific projects and might require many resources, while some are easy to implement and make a big difference. Sometimes impact and resources required are more aligned. That is why we include the relative sizes of

emissions from the different areas of the model KP mentioned at the beginning of the text.

We do believe however that all initiatives and choices you make to organize greener larps matter. When we attempt structural changes within a sector such as larping, we also do it to inspire others and to normalize climate action. And as more and more choices become widespread and accepted, they also become easier for others to make.

The next steps on this journey need to be collective ones. We need to share knowledge and help each other in inventing and implementing new and updated design practices – that in some cases might require more volunteer work and lead to conflicts and uncomfortable change.

Our goal with this guide is not to shame individuals for their choices but to inspire us all in the pursuit of structural change. The big choices we have outlined in this article might make you think that you shouldn't organize the types of larps that we are used to playing. This is not our point. But we need to start changing the way we design and organize – and this might change what larps will happen most.

We aim to encourage you to start (or continue) thinking about our environmental footprint and make greener choices when organizing. And especially, encourage you to share your successes and failures with your fellow designers and the rest of the community.

None of us are in this fight alone – and we need to take the next steps towards greener larps together.





Mirka Oinonen

Mirka Oinonen (born in 1992) is a Finnish larp designer with a focus on queer stories, set on bringing queer larp to small towns. She has been larping since 2008 and writing larps since 2015, and is most well known for her queer sci-fi game *Blush*, played in Savonlinna, Finland, in 2023 and 2024. She has a Bachelor of Education with a minor in Gender Studies (University of Helsinki), and a Master of Arts with focus in Game Design (Aalto University).

Gender Matters

Thoughts about Accessibility, Inclusivity,
and Gender-based Policing

When, how, and why could the player's off-game gender matter in casting for a larp? And if it does, how can we handle it in a way that takes gender diversity into consideration? How can we make games accessible for players with different needs about gender, while making sure we don't enforce existing prejudices or harmful gender norms? This article delves deeper into the issue of off-game gender in casting, and tries to offer some tips for organizers around it.

At Ropecon 2024, I held a queer larp panel for Finnish queer larpers and organizers. A question came up during the panel: if a player has stated they'd prefer not to play romance with men, how should the organizer handle such a request? Is it okay to have preferences? And how do we as organizers decide who to cast if we allow it?

After the panel, I had multiple discussions around this issue and saw many differing opinions from Finnish and international larpers. These discussions mostly took place online, primarily on the Facebook groups "Larpers BFF" and "Suomi Larp". In this article, I have attempted to tie together some of the common themes from those discussions, using comments roughly like research data, while reflecting on them myself. Individual comments from the discussions won't be quoted and commenters won't be named. This is mostly because this research does not aim to be academic, but also because I do not wish for readers to seek out information from Facebook.

Please note: Character gender is a separate issue — this article will strictly focus on the gender of players.

Policing players

When we design signup forms, especially questions about vague or ambiguous player attributes, we also take on the responsibility and authority to police these attributes.

Flagging questions in sign-up forms, for example, gathers data about how safe or comfortable people feel playing with other players. They are used to make sure people don't have to play with anyone that makes them uncomfortable, or sometimes to keep possible abusers or predators out of games. The questions can gather information in various levels of detail, but usually people have some players they'd prefer not to play close relationships with, and players they won't attend the same event with. The data gathered from these answers gives players the attribute of safety or unsafety: if a player gets flagged, the organizers must decide whether that person is safe, and whether they'll allow that player to participate or not. Flagging as a practice has its pros and cons¹ and some of these problems, like expecting organizers to police the player base based on very limited information, can also arise with other players' attributes that organizers might gather in sign-up forms.

In the Finnish larp scene, it's common to ask for a player's gender when they sign up, as well as their preferences for their co-player's gender in possible romantic plots. These questions are so common in the scene that players might write down their gender preferences even when it isn't specifically asked about.

Casting according to these preferences might seem like a simple issue — if someone doesn't want to play romance with men, you simply leave out any male players when considering their co-player. However, gender isn't that simple. The information in a sign-up form will always be limited, and the organizer must still make decisions based on them. For these reasons, asking for preferences on co-player gender, and going into the practice of granting those wishes can create new ways of policing who gets to play.

An unprepared organizer might end up in a situation where they

1 Brown, Maury, and Nina Teerilahti, "Flagging is Flawed." In *Liminal Encounters: Evolving Discourse in Nordic and Nordic Inspired Larp*.

have to, for example, decide which non-binary players are possible co-player options based on their assumed gender presentation. They might unconsciously start favoring players with a binary gender if those are easier to fit inside preferences other players have given. Suddenly, off-game gender can affect whether someone gets to play or not, and policing the player's gender might become the organizer's responsibility.

What could this problem look like in practice? Let's say a player asks to play romance with people who aren't men. They haven't told us anything about their understanding of men, we don't know why they have this preference, or how strong of a preference it is. The best match for their co-player is a nonbinary person with a masculine-sounding name. Should we assume that the first player is okay with this person because they aren't a man? Or should we assume that it is perceived masculinity, not them being a man, that is an issue for them?

What about player two, then? If they get cast as the co-player, not knowing the first player has a preference around gender or perceived gender, do we put them in an uncomfortable situation where their gender gets put under the spotlight? Are they comfortable playing with people who have gender-based preferences? And if we don't cast this person, making the decision they are too much of a man, and no other spots are available - is this a good enough reason to leave someone out of the game?

It's impossible to avoid these kinds of responsibilities completely; different kinds of categorization techniques are important in the process of making larps and casting players. Gender is complicated, as is casting, so making decisions around this subject can sometimes call for simplifications. A larp organizer might also balance between multiple realities of gender, as they try to fit together the gender norms of the larp's fiction and the gendered reality

we live in.²

However, the assumptions that organizers use to make these decisions aren't necessarily conscious or clearly stated to possible players. All this can lead to miscommunication around player boundaries, uncomfortable casting choices, casting that causes gender dysphoria, gender based discrimination, or casting that's transphobic. It can lead to people opting out of the game altogether, distrust of the system/organizers, and impact the future of the game. Systematically ignoring player gender isn't the answer, either. So what kind of viewpoints or issues should the organizer consider, before deciding whether to gather information about players' gender or gender based preferences?

Gendered preferences

Based on the discussions I had with other larpers, it seems organizers have multiple reasons to ask players for their gender, and for their boundaries or preferences around it. Players also have multiple reasons to have preferences on their co-player's gender, and varying views on if gender should be asked at all. For queer people, this question can pose different problems than it does to cis-het people³.

The most common reason organizers ask for preferences around co-player gender seems to be enforcing the player's feeling of safety and comfort. For example, people with experiences of gendered abuse might find it triggering to play romance with players of a certain gender. The preferences can come from other reasons too, like straight players wishing to play straight romance with players

2 Møller, Marie. "Gendered Magic." In *Book of Magic*.

3 Stenros, Jaakko, and Sihvonen, Tanja. "Queer While Larping: Community, Identity, and Affective Labor in Nordic Live Action Role-Playing." In *Live-Action Role-Playing Games*.

of the “opposite gender” to feel more comfortable. To make these players feel safe and comfortable signing up for a larp, organizers provide the option to state boundaries around co-player gender. However, triggers can be based on other factors that exclude gender, and good chemistry between players isn’t only dependent on gender. Requesting co-players based on their physical attributes, such as masculinity or femininity, could lead to multiple problems⁴, and this is why the preference question seems to be simplified to gender.

On the players’ part, the preference can be a soft or a hard limit. Some players simply prefer one gender over another, and are still able to play if the casting ignores their preference. It may lead to less intensive play or ignoring some of the romance elements, but it’s still an enjoyable game experience nonetheless. For others, the limit might be very strict. These players may choose not to sign up to games that don’t give an option to state gender preferences.

If a player is playing for bleed, they could have preferences about their co-players for that reason, as it can make it easier to immerse oneself into the story and character. Many LGBTQIA+ people have experiences of pretending to be cis and straight, or experiences of having to teach others what their identity means. Playing with people who don’t share these experiences can end up feeling more like educating your co-player, or like giving a performance to others, rather than playing for your own immersion. Getting positive bleed from this kind of play might feel impossible. For example, a queer man could get more out of a game where he plays romance with a man, than he could from playing the same game with a woman, even if the characters are male. However, some people can find it disturbing that their perceived gender is used as a tool for bleed.

4 van de Heij, Karijn. “We Share This Body: Tools to Fight Appearance-Based Prejudice at Larps for Participants and Organizers.” In *Book of Magic*.

The narrative reason for romantic plots and the playstyle of the game can also define how much the off-game gender matters for players. In a game where relationships are less central to the play, off-game gender may matter less. In an emotionally intense, relationship-driven game, the player chemistry becomes more important. If a game includes sex and nudity, off-game gender becomes important in a different way.

Asking for player gender can also be used for positive action to ensure inclusivity for all genders. For example, if organizers know only cis people are signing up for a game, they can choose to take action for a more trans-inclusive design. Or if men are always the majority of players, a positive action could be to consciously recruit more women to play. It's also important to consider if the goal is to maximize accessibility or to create the safest possible environment for a certain group of people. Running a game only meant for players of a certain gender or sexuality isn't accessible for everyone, but can create a space where those people can explore themes specific to them.

While making gender-specific choices can be inclusive for some players, others may feel excluded. Even asking for gender can be a cause of dysphoria for some, especially nonbinary, genderfluid, or genderqueer people. Knowing they will be gendered in the casting, being forced to give a word for their gender, or even just thinking about gender at all can be uncomfortable. Being able to write your own answer is better than just giving man/woman options, but even then it puts nonbinary people in front of a difficult question: how should they define their gender for this particular event and how will people react to that definition?

It can be scary to let an unknown organizer know your gender identity—not knowing how the information is used, not knowing how the organizers understand your gender, or being unsure if your identity is seen as valid, are common causes for concern. In

today's social climate, these concerns are more pressing than ever. Asking personal questions, such as one's gender identity in the sign-up forms should always have a good reason. And while it's not an answer to all problems, choosing to make games where the player's gender is irrelevant and not asked at all can be a way to make larp more accessible to some.⁵

In the worst case, gendered preferences can convey a sense of transphobia or homophobia. As the online discussions proved, there will also be people who explicitly wish not to play with transgender people, and it's up to the organizer to deal with requests like this.

Minority stress around nudity

In a game with nudity, gender needs to be especially well considered: this includes both games with nudity during play, and games with nudity outside of play. For example in Finland, a common example of nudity outside of play are group sauna shifts, where players and organizers go to sauna together after the game, oftentimes divided to men's and women's sauna shift, and a mixed sauna shift.

The fear of being misgendered or discriminated against because of certain body parts can very well be the reason someone decides not to sign up, or feels uncomfortable joining in shared activities where they are expected to be nude. A transgender player might be forced to come out of the closet for the game, or they might feel the need to explain their physical appearance to strangers before the game to avoid uncomfortable situations during play. Dividing groups based on binary gender can also cause distress and

⁵ England, Rei. "Magic To Fight Monsters: Larp as a spell for claiming my spaces." In *Book of Magic: Vibrant Fragments of Larp Practices*.

dysphoria to nonbinary people, or force them to opt out of activities. This all means an added layer of stress for the player, as well as an added layer of work the player has to do for the game.⁶

A player's off-game gender needs to be respected regardless of their appearance in any game, but emphasizing this in games with nudity could help ease players' stress. When signing up for such a game, everyone needs to understand that they shouldn't make assumptions based on genital appearance, and that it's not okay to comment on people's bodies or stare. It also needs to be clear that giving gendered preferences does not mean requesting a player with a certain type of genitalia, and that misgendering or any other kind of discrimination will not be tolerated.

Different religious reasons for gendered preferences are rarely considered in discussions, but they may also be important for some players, especially in games with nudity. Potential measures to make the game safer for some could include creating non-mixing spaces for nudity, or having nudity-free areas.

Final thoughts

In some cases, asking for the player's gendered preferences can make a game safer, more immersive, or more accessible. However, it can also do the opposite. Done badly, it can lead to transphobic practices and the many other issues presented in this article. Player gender matters for a lot of people, but thinking about gender also causes stress for many others. It's impossible to remove off-game gender from larping, and different games need different approaches; making a game more accessible for nonbinary players could look different from making it more accessible to binary transgender people.

⁶ Stenros and Sihvonen, "Queer While Larping".

There are no rules that always work for everyone in every game. No matter how inclusive the design is, there will always be contradicting needs, as with any issue regarding accessibility. However, making decisions around gender without having reflected on it often leads to enforcing narrow views and biases around gender⁷. A misconception that I wish to point out is that choosing to make a game genderless, or asking for co-player gender preferences, just because it's the thing everyone does, isn't necessarily making larp more accessible to queer minorities.

As the majority of games will probably not be queer, it's often the non-queer games that define the norms around larp-making. This is why it's important to make conscious choices around gender, even if it's not a theme in the game, and even if the organizers themselves aren't queer. Unconscious decisions are still decisions with real-life consequences, which can turn our play culture hostile to some, regardless of our intentions.

To make the hobby more queer-inclusive we need the non-queer organizers to genuinely question their decisions: is the game approachable and accessible for all genders? If not, how could it be? What kind of barriers are people faced with when they sign up and play our games?

It's our shared duty to strive for gender equality and accessibility, and sometimes that's difficult. Making mistakes and getting critical feedback is unpleasant, so it's safest to do the things others are doing. But we should be brave and open to trying new approaches, or we might get stuck in habits that don't serve the minorities they were designed to help.

7 Jones, Kat; Holkar, Mo, and Kemper, Jonaya. "Designing for Intersectional Identities." In *Larp Design: Creating Role-play Experiences*.

Tips for organizers

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to handling off-game gender issues in larps, but there are some good tips and practices to consider.

Note: This list was made using comments from the online discussions I had with other larpers and organizers. They are not all tried-and-true mechanics, but rather ideas from many different people on what kind of approaches could be used.

Stop for a minute and think about gender, no matter what kind of game you're making.

Biased traditions often live on, not because of bad intentions, but because people are not aware of the issues they cause. The first step is to stop and think about gender in the game—what kind of choices are you as an organizer making around gender, and what choices are you not making? How could those choices affect people? Try to think of the positions of power, traditions, and biases you have related to gender and how they might affect your game.

Be an ally openly.

Enforce a safe space for transgender people. State clearly that gender is self-defined, not based on the player's looks or names. Communicate that you expect all players to respect other players' identities. Think about your wording—for example, don't talk only about men and women, because that will exclude nonbinary people. Have an educational approach—teach the basics of the words you use, or give a link to resources people can use if they aren't familiar with them. If needed, teach players how to respect different gender presentations during pre-game workshops.

Set rules around player interaction before, during, and after the game.

For some, the reasoning behind gendered preferences could be the unwanted romantic approaches that have happened after games. Having clear rules on communication and behavior that expand after the game can help with this, as well as make it easier to spot possible cases of harassment.

When asking for player gender, tell your players why you need the information and how you will use it.

For example, will it be used for casting, keeping statistics, or something else? If player gender isn't stated, how will it affect things? Can the player get cast in romance plots without stating their gender? If needed, define how you understand gender so all players are on the same line. You should also specify who's going to see this information and how it will be stored, both for player comfort and for data protection purposes.⁸

If you allow off-game gender preferences, specify what kind of preferences will be accepted and what will not.

For example, not allowing cis/trans-based preferences or look-based preferences.

Promise to have discussions with players who have limits around gender.

If a player states they have an off-game gender preference, have an open discussion with them to see what they mean and if you can take it into account. Be clear about what preferences you can accommodate and how—for example, can you realistically

⁸ Wolford, Ben. "What is GDPR, the EU's new data protection law?"

promise not to cast someone with a male player? How will you define the gender of your players? How will you handle the non-binary players?

- + Leaves room for preferences without being black and white.
- Possibility for transphobic preferences on the player's part.
- Possibility of misgendering the players on the organizer's part.
- If a lot of players have preferences, the organizer needs to do a lot of work to get the discussions done.

Ungendered romance or no romance at all.

Give the option to choose either “no romance at all” or “romance with a player of any gender”.

- + Very little room for transphobic preferences, as gender is ignored.
- + Still gives everyone the possibility to sign up.
- + No need to tell organizers your own gender.
- + No gender is less likely to get cast in romance plots.
- Not possible to state boundaries or wishes around gender.

Romance with non-specific gender options.

Give the option to choose either “romance with a player of my gender”, “romance with a player of another gender”, “romance with any gender”, or “no romance at all”.

- + Less danger for transphobic comments than having an open field for preferences.
- + Still gives everyone the possibility to sign up.
- + Possible to state some boundaries and wishes about gender.
- You have to tell your gender if you want to have preferences.
- Casting is less likely for nonbinary people and for those not stating a gender.

- Choosing what gender to write at all could be difficult for some nonbinary/gender nonconforming people.

Don't ask about player gender at all, and ignore off-game gender during casting.

- + Removes gender bias around what roles can be played by who (hide player names and email addresses so you don't accidentally gender people based on them!).
- + No room for transphobic gender preferences.
- + No need to state your gender.
- Not great for positive action, creating specific kind of casting (for example, an all-women game), or accommodating needs/preferences around gender.

Create the romantic plots during workshopping, letting players choose who to play romance with

- + Possible to choose who to play with, no stress about romantic plots before the game.
- Can be stressful, and declining offers might be difficult on the spot.
- Could increase look-based biases.

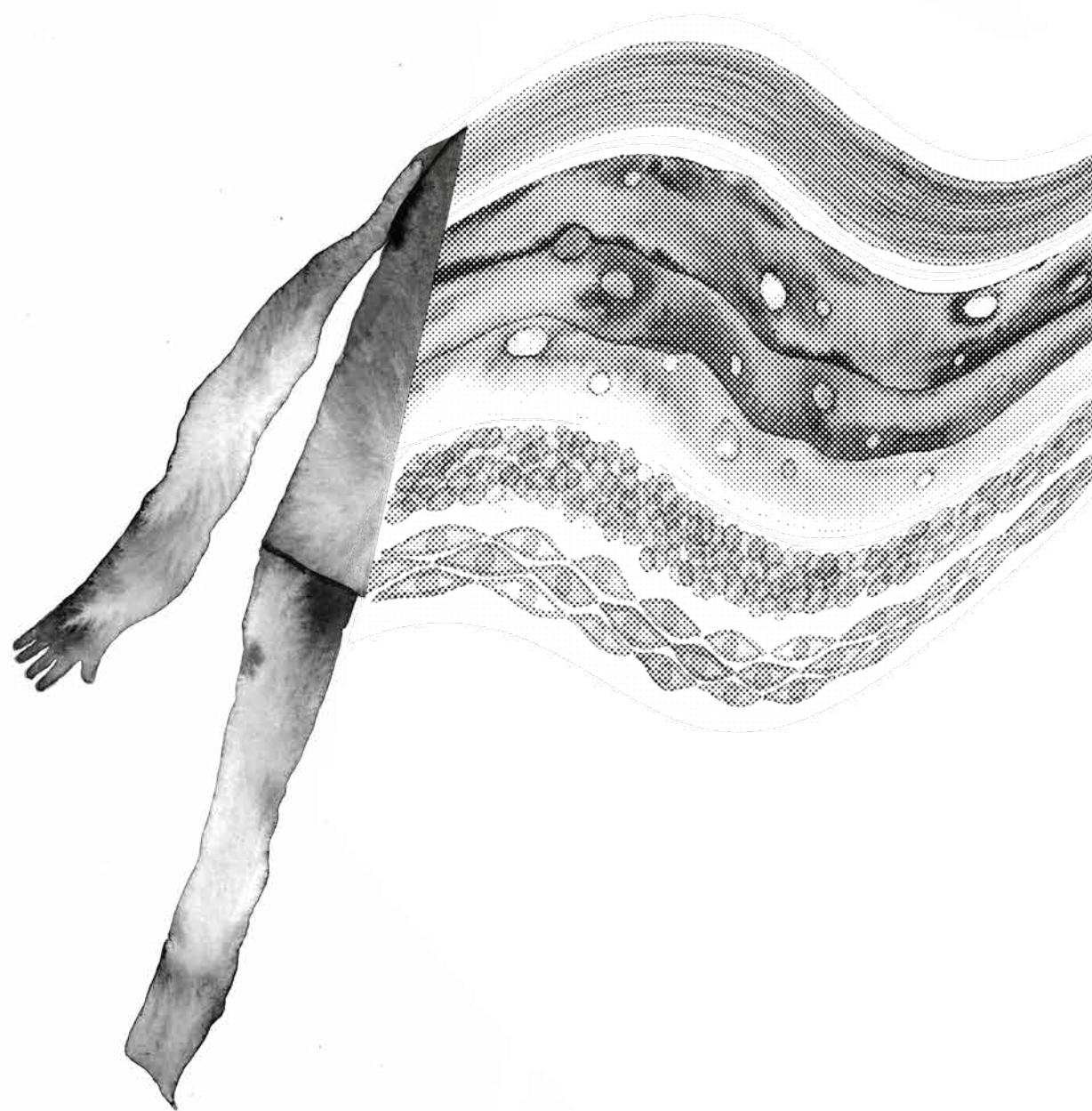
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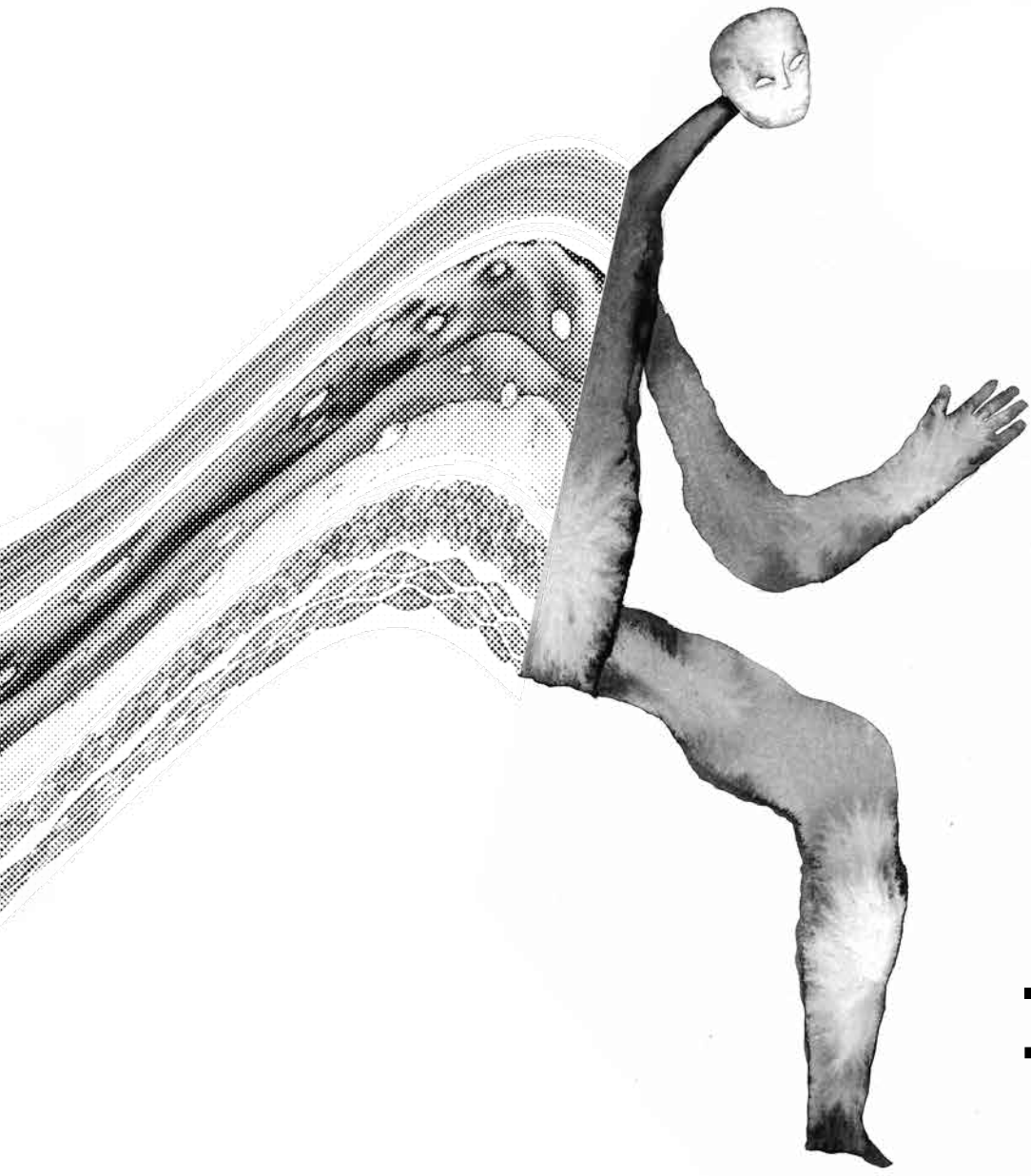
I want to give a very big thank you to everyone who took part in the discussions around this issue, both online and offline. This piece would not be the same without your help. A special thank you to the people who participated in the queer larp panel at Ropecon 2024, as this idea might never have been born without that.

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skin

Around larp (community)

Astrid Cecilie Budolfson

Astrid Cecilie Budolfson. Danish accountant. Headorganizer on Krigslive XIV (2018) and Fireflylive: Mining your own business (2026) Co-headorganizer on Krigslive XVIII (2023) and Endure and Survive (2024). Organiser and publisher of the 2024 book Krigslive.

Quit the Mother Teresa
Syndrome and the
Praise-addiction,
and love your work on
its own terms

A famous, or rather, infamous, larper once said; “There are only 2 reasons to organize: to get paid or to get laid”.

His point, as I understood it, was that you will never get appreciation, praise, or recognition enough to match the level of effort that it takes to organize larps.

And yet, too many organizers still seem to have recognition for benevolent sacrifice or creativity as their main motivation. And you shouldn't, because caring what everyone else thinks all the bloody time; that is fucking stupid. And I think it has downsides for the community too.

Most organizers are not going to get their efforts rewarded by being paid or laid either, at least not enough to justify the workload of organizing. If you want to organize, and do it long term, take your work and yourself off the pedestal and love your craft for its own inherent value and challenges.

Mother Teresa Syndrome

I grew up in Africa, and a certain type of expat used to work themselves to exhaustion, neglecting their friends, family, and themselves to help other people. We used to call it Mother Teresa Syndrome, because ultimately this “sacrifice” wasn't actually about other people. They were looking for a cross to suffer on, to please some vain personal desire for self-sacrifice. In most cases, you can help people just as well, while still also taking care of yourself. You can do both.

Pursuing a martyrdom is not only unsustainable and annoying on the individual level, it also has downsides for the community.

When work is framed as a noble sacrifice, for which people should be lauded, it has some downsides for the individual and the community. This enables the mindset that the harder the work, the

more noble the work. In turn, it glamorizes burnout and discourages designing for work minimization and for human boundaries. It also makes it harder to give feedback to a piece of work. You don't give saintly deeds notes. And most people with a self-sacrifice complex don't want to be told that their holy burnout work might be improved with some adjustments.

Praise-addicts

The first problem with basing your motivation and work joy solely on the acknowledgement of others, is that it is fragile. Other peoples' opinions are a wild thing, and trying to always be in line with public opinion, or controlling it, is foolish and impossible. There will not always be the time and space to acknowledge everyone; not everyone can win the prize. It can also be difficult for people to fathom how much work goes into a specific task, and many important tasks can be rather invisible. This is detrimental to getting shit done for the community as a whole.

Also, not all feedback is created equal. And some of it is just plain wrong. You shouldn't care about every opinion of every person, but use your goddamn common sense to root out what you can use - and what to ignore.

Praise-addicts gravitate towards visible/prestigious types of tasks, even if they don't have the aptitude or natural interest for it, and neglect less popular tasks. This is a great way to make yourself miserable, because you have put your priorities in the wrong order. Rather than enjoying the work first, and then enjoying the potential results and potential recognition as a bonus, you have gruelled through whatever task you thought would give the biggest payout in recognition. But neither results nor recognition are guaranteed.

Craftsmanship mindset

There is nothing wrong with enjoying results, recognition, or taking pride in going the extra mile when needed for other people. But no organizer can count on any of those things happening consistently. Sometimes projects will fail, sometimes people will hate your work (or you or both) and sometimes you sacrifice yourself completely unnoticed and/or unnecessarily. The only thing you can count on to be consistent is the work and the steady improvements, lessons and insights you can gain from it. This is what I call the “Craftsmanship mindset”.

If your main source of motivation is the joy you get from your work, you can weather a lot more and find more consistent joy. But it has to be a clear-eyed sort of love. Don't take your work - and yourself - so damn seriously that you can only love it as long as you keep it on a pedestal. If you can only love yourself and your work as long as you believe yourself and your work to be great or superior, then you don't love things as they really are. And you are probably insufferable. Love it because you enjoy it. That doesn't mean that the work can't sometimes be stressful. But it should be a side-effect of taking on a challenge, or handling an unpredicted problem, not a goal in itself.

Choose work you enjoy for its own sake; where you enjoy the downsides and struggles. And use your good sense to focus on what feedback to listen to, instead of caring what everyone thinks all the time and trying to influence it.

Kyria Van Gasse

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‘I want to hold you close’

An auto-ethnographical discussion
of sexual harassment in and around
larp in Flanders

In this paper, I will look at the larp scene in Flanders, Belgium, with particular reference to sexual interactions and possible harassment both in-game and off-game. I look at these through an auto-ethnographic lens and talk about my own experiences, but also through experiences and articles by international larpers. I then go on to zoom in on Flanders and our larp scene, as a base for the rest of the discussion. I will consider how a player might change their behaviour as a result of experiencing certain situations, but also how our evolving landscape is challenging whose responsibility it is to change.

Throughout the years I have encountered many experiences in larping. I will be discussing the positive sides – good mechanics, good rules – but also the negative – grooming. While larp might be a nerdy hobby, it also attracts certain people – ones that we should always look out for. But other than asking to look out for each other, I also want to emphasize the unique qualities and efforts of larp.

The larp scene in Flanders and the impossibility of reviewing

The larp scene in Flanders consists mostly of the campaign larp type. Most larps will have consecutive events that follow up on each other, and the players might play the same character for possibly years in the same game. In Flanders, we have a few organisations centered around larping, the most well-known of which are Eternica, Oneiros, and De Heren van Ternat. They organise all kinds of larps ranging from typical sword and shield high fantasy, post-apocalypse, steampunk, Lovecraftian horror, and Arabian fantasy. There are also a few campaign-like larps not associated with one of these organisations; such as the two wizarding college larps Myrddin Emrys College and Statera Mundi University.

The larp scene in Belgium is fairly small. It's not fully an 'everybody knows everybody' situation, but very close to that, making it easy to share and compare experiences among the player field. It is also not uncommon for players who want to join an ongoing event to ask around for the experiences of the current players. Internationally speaking, there are a few sites where experiences get shared, nordiclarp.org is one of those and probably one of the most known - although it doesn't have an open forum to share experiences, choosing to review larps in article form. Facebook also gets used, but rarely for review purposes, and mostly for expressing interest in a larp or setting. The community recognizes this as a flaw, mostly because when reviews are grouped somewhere, issues are easier to spot, bad situations get properly dealt with, and problematic players can be avoided - if there are no general reviews, there can also not be a place where problems with players or crew can get addressed.

It is, however, hard to review a larp, as every player will have had a different experience influenced by personal feelings or specific plot points only there for them. "Writing about larps is hard. They are ephemeral co-creations that exist both in a measurable, physical reality, and in the participants' imagination."¹ Players can not (always) walk around in-game with a notebook to jot down quick thoughts to include in a review later. As a researcher, I fall back on memories and textual recaps through online messaging systems as analysis material, both from events years past and very recent events that might be fresher in the mind. Thoughts and feelings will change during or even after the larp, perhaps after having a chat with the player who was your enemy in the game, who might have viewed a certain scene completely differently. Even very mundane things like troubles with public transport after the larp might completely skewer your view of the game. Because of the personal nature of larp, and because of limited channels for

1 Thomas, "This larp Sucked - and Everyone Should Get to Read About It."

reviewing our experiences, word of mouth is still the most commonly used technique in the Flanders larp scene when promoting events.

Safety mechanics and sex/sexuality in-game

As most of the larp player base in Flanders is older than 18, events might include sex and sexuality as a topic. Most of the time this is not in the form of explicit scenes – many times players will go behind closed doors and make sexual sounds, or use pre-recorded sounds. These scenes are also always consensual, player-wise and character-wise. It is a common rule in most of the larps in Flanders that rape does not exist. You can never rape a character, because the concept simply doesn't exist in the world and thus characters don't even know what it is. This rule is there to ensure that sexual dominance is never used as a power play in-game, as to limit the traumas a player could develop during play. This is slightly different from the international larping scene. There are several² – historic, mostly – larps where rape can be a subject of a scene, but then still this is between consenting players and calibrated³ beforehand. As Muriel Algayres says in her article about the evolution of rape in larps, “[d]epicting rape in larp is often used as a prime example to demonstrate the importance of organizer communication and emotional safety in larp.”⁴

It is important for players to feel safe enough to act out challenging and emotional scenes, without having the fear of their co-players

2 Algayres, ‘The Evolution of the Depiction of Rape in larp’

3 Calibrating is the act of verbally explaining what you want to do in a scene and listening to what your ‘opponent’ wants to do. Then you both talk about a choreography or a set of acts you want to play out. Calibration can also be a very short “my character is going to punch you now” whispered in the ear, or a pre-game conversation about certain limits, i.e. explaining you are not looking for any romantic play.

4 Algayres, ‘The Evolution of the Depiction of Rape in larp’

turning the scene dangerous. When organising larps where certain emotionally charged scenes could occur, the organising team should always enforce certain rules about these scenes, most importantly the consent rules⁵, the calibration rules⁶ and the safety signs. The most used safety signs in Flanders are the OK hand gesture, where a player would do the gesture and wait for the other player to react with either a thumbs up - everything is okay, please continue, a level hand - I don't know how I feel, this might be limit (this must be treated as a mild thumbs down), or a thumbs down - please end the scene immediately, and take me out of play.⁷ The middle option exists mostly because people are quicker to say they don't know, than to say they're not feeling good in a particular scene. This sign rule exists to subtly check if the player is still enjoying the scene, without fully breaking the immersion. It is mostly used in scenes where the character might be distressed or doing not so well, to then check if it is only an act or if the player is unraveling as well.

In May 2024 I participated in a mini-event of an ongoing chronicle taking place in a post-apocalyptic world. The mini-event was situated in Paris and had a Moulin Rouge theme. In this event, I played a *Lady in Red*, which is essentially a high-end sex worker. This of course invited some flirty and/or sexual play, so I consulted in advance how far this role could go. The storytelling team ensured me that no actual sexual roleplay would happen - except if I wanted to - and it would mostly stay at flirting. They wrote me a shy and more timid character, a role in which I felt very comfortable for the evening. In some situations, playing a sex worker could invite other players to act out scenes that could feel like sexual harassment. But not with this event. The player base of this chronicle was extremely respectful, and barely even made any explicit sexual

5 Never do an intense scene or any intense physical touching without the consent of the other player.

6 Always calibrate any intense scenes before you start the scene.

7 'Toolkit: The OK Check-In'





Drs. T. ...
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remarks towards the *Ladies*. This could be because of the player culture, or because of the lore, as a big portion of the player base played a motorcycle gang in which a powerful and combat-oriented faction was fully female-led. I didn't have to use any of the safety mechanics during the play, and saw no incidents taking place. Even more so, I felt like there were barely any sexually tinted interactions – excluding the burlesque show at the end and some conversations about things that happened in the past of these characters.

This left me with a very positive feeling about the incorporation of sex and sexuality in a larp. They did it respectfully and took care in checking that every player was comfortable. The players themselves were also very aware of the theme of the evening, and never went overboard without prior consent. The most physical touch I experienced or saw was a hand on the lower back or shoulder, or a hand being kissed in greeting. It emboldened me to perhaps, in the future, look at more romantic or sexual role play in larps, after being shown it can be done respectfully and safely.

“The core of role-playing is trust”⁸: sex and sexuality off-game

The Flemish larp scene, however, like many others, also has its bad apples. There are people with a thirst for power who easily prey on vulnerable individuals. For example, I had an experience while playing a larp about vampires in Ghent. This larp had a highly political undertone, with positions and titles that granted a lot of power to your characters. My character, after participating in a few sessions, obtained a fairly high position in the game, one about which I knew very little off-game. It seemed fortunate that there was another new player who also obtained this position, and offered to act as my friend and mentor, both in-game and off-game,

⁸ Bowman, Brown, and Koljonen, 'Safety & Calibration Tools in larps'

which ended with a form of grooming, and the banning of this player. I wasn't the only one he had targeted; he had managed to establish connections with almost every female player who was active at that time. It took a while for every victim to realise what was happening to them, and also to realise that the player in question was doing this to more people. When we started comparing experiences and banded together, we could take measures that led to this player being banned from the game. Unfortunately, this didn't get him banned from every larp event. Most organisers have his name on a list, but there are still some events that haven't. This is, as Maury Brown wrote, an experience branded with the term 'missing stair' a term "that is used to describe a sexual predator who many people know cannot be trusted, but rather than shunning, they respond by trying to quietly warn others"⁹. This is what happens in a small community where practically everyone befriends each other. It is sometimes very hard to see a friend for what he really is. Maury Brown goes on to describe that;

In the case of larp communities, a missing stair could be someone who uses their in-game or off-game power or social capital to coerce other players, especially new ones, to provide sexual favors in exchange for in- or off-game gain (similar to the concept of the Hollywood Casting Couch, whereby someone obtains a better role, plot, or esteem if they agree to give sexual favors to a person in charge).

Someone actively looking for newer and inexperienced players who may need some extra support in-game, which the abuser can give to them, in exchange for out-game favours, which was exactly what was happening in the situation described above.

After this experience, I adapted my style of play. I created a new

⁹ Brown, '19 Truths about Harassment, Missing Stairs, and Safety in Larp Communities'

character that had no bonds with the abusing player, and was totally different personality-wise. I had this doubt that the way my character was written - a femme fatale who used her charm as a weapon - had invited his behaviour and made me almost agreeable to being interacted with this way. The result was that I created a character that was way more naïve, with close family bonds with trusted players, and way more introverted. Although this character would turn out to be a favourite of mine, it did stunt my personal growth into larping, as I stayed closer to my comfort zone and who I was in real life. It also, unfortunately, made me wary of accepting help from older male players, which turned out to be helpful for me. After the experience above, I caught another manipulative pattern installing itself in a different friendship, before anything truly damaging could occur.

My experience is not an isolated incident. The larp world, as beautiful, accessible, and accepting as it may be, unfortunately also attracts predator types. They are often players who thrive on power and the ability to dominate others, often pursuing titles and positions in the game. These are often players who abuse the term *alibi*, most commonly defined as “it is not me, it is my character”. This is a notion that can be used in a positive way - as an enabler for a player to roleplay things that they wouldn’t act on in real life, such as playing as a thief or a murderer - but can also be used in a negative way to wave away the responsibility a player has to ensure the safety of players around them. They use the shield of their character to make others believe it was not them as a player acting on this urge, but the character making a decision, disregarding whether this behaviour happened in-game or out-game.

To point back to my own experiences in the larp scene, I have made it a habit to, when engaging in romantic roleplay with players, mention off-game that I have a boyfriend (in a subtle way). In this way, I remind them that I already have a romantic partner off-game, and also try to ensure they know the roleplay is just that

‘I want to hold you close’

- play and nothing else. But should an off-game protector have to exist just to be allowed some peace of mind? I have also mostly engaged in romantic roleplay with people I see as good friends, players who already know me off-game and know there are no other intentions behind my in-game actions.

It is enraging to see how I have made changes in my own play after a bad experience. It has changed the way I view romantic play in larps, and I will always have a sliver of doubt in my head, telling me the player might be playing into the romance a bit too much. As mentioned above, I have only started interacting romantically with strangers or not-so-close friends during larps very recently, after finally finding myself comfortable with it again. It is, of course, also a safety blanket. If I keep myself from romantic scenes in larps, no one will get a wrong idea about my intentions, and bad experiences might stay away.

There is, unfortunately, no universal set of clear guidelines. Every larp has its own rules and regulations. One Flemish larp didn't even have anything about consent or sexual harassment in their code of conduct until players pointed it out. It is also a form of roleplay that has been around for a long time. Older players might have different values and norms than younger players do - although that is never an excuse for bad behaviour.

As read above in the portion about the portrayal of sex in-game, some player bases are better than others. Some larps naturally attract certain players, or certain scenes will get played more at certain larps. Player bases also differ between genres of larps: full medieval fighting events cater to different people than the very political, mostly "social drama" chamber larps. But, to reiterate my statement above, that is also never an excuse for the behaviour of these kinds of players.

A conclusion, or making a parallel between international and national larp

It is interesting to see how a player – in this context, myself – changes their behaviour after experiencing certain situations. It is even more interesting to look at this and then transport this same situation to real life. In the real non-larping world, we also adapt our way of acting to experiences we had. If you have had a bad car accident, you will be more on edge in your car. If you have had bad experiences in a certain part of your town, you will probably try to avoid that part. I as a larp player have had a bad experience with romantic and sexual play, so I used to avoid this type of play.

We as a community must however try to avoid players seeing themselves personally as responsible for ensuring their safety during play. By not standing by passively while transgressions are happening, or by checking in from time to time with players that appear ‘weaker’ socially, we can already help them understand they are not the problem. By listening to people’s bad experiences, freeing the stigma surrounding talking about sexual intimidation, being on the look for manipulative patterns, and excluding predators. The flagging system exists - where players can note down other players they don’t want to interact with, both an orange flag (‘would rather not interact’) and a red flag (‘this person is a potential danger’), but not every larp implements this. Can a communal and open forum help in building this sort of safety net in the community - both locally in Flanders and internationally? Can this forum help in making such comments, reviews, or self-doubts less shameful, and create an open environment where such issues can be tackled and talked about? Should we move away from closed communities such as Facebook groups - where you need to be accepted to join in - or discord servers - for which you need an invitation?

There is, luckily, a changing mentality surrounding larp. The theme

of sex and sexuality both in and out-game is a part of that changing mentality, both being more respectful of your fellow players and also not letting rotten apples join the fruit basket. Many players aren't letting abusers keep up their game of manipulation, by refusing them entry to events. The Flanders community is small, and thus those kinds of players will quickly gain a reputation, resulting in them being shunned. The younger generations are even more active at rooting out these bad fruits from the basket. Larp is still - and becoming even more of - a safe space, where you can fight monsters with foam weapons, instead of the more human-looking predators in the real world.

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Julia Greip

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Why I hate post-larp compliment threads

It is a quite common phenomenon after a larp. In the larp FB-group, or other social media platform, a thread is created. "Comment with a picture of your face," it says, "and let people compliment you on your larping!" Then the thread explodes with pictures, and lots and lots of compliments. Such a lovely trend, right? So why does it always make me slightly uncomfortable and anxious?

The reasons are many, and I will try to detail them here. As the title suggests, this is an opinion piece. It is meant to identify a problem that I experience, and that I think I am not alone in experiencing. It also suggests alternatives that I think might work better for people who share my experience.

Unequal distribution

One of the core issues is that there will inevitably be an unequal distribution of compliments. Some will get many, some will get fewer. And while comparing is rarely something that makes us happier, it is hard to resist, especially if we are already feeling vulnerable and self-conscious.

The reasons for uneven distribution are many. One might of course be the quality of your larping (as well as casting and style, which we will return to below), and how many people you interacted with. Another is timing: those who are quick to post their picture in the thread will get more comments, while those who join the party after a few days might not get as many, as some people will already be "done" commenting. On top of that, those who diligently compliment many others will themselves get more compliments back - which is not wrong in itself, but risks giving the compliments a transactional nature.

What is good larping?

When comparing how many, and how enthusiastic, compliments people receive, it is easy to see it is an unofficial rating; the "best" larpers will get more positive attention, and if you do not get as

much praise that means you larped poorly. However, in my experience the people who get many compliments are also the ones that were noticeable and easy to remember. People who are cast as characters who are seen and heard, or who have a more expressive, extroverted playstyle, are more likely to receive a lot of compliments. And the people with a subtle playstyle, who play subdued characters, and mainly have intensive play with a few close relations, are more likely to have gone unnoticed by many at the larp.

Personally, I quite value the more subtle playstyles, the brilliance that is mainly visible when you get up close. And while more showy playstyles are often very valuable for larps as well, most larps thrive when they have a balance of different playstyles, and the right kinds of players as the right characters. But looking at the overall picture created by compliment threads, it is easy for the less noticeable larpers to suspect that they are simply not a very good larper, and that if they were showier and took up more space, they would become a better larper.

Doubting authenticity

People approach it differently, but there is a general understanding that you should compliment as many people as possible. As mentioned above, there is also a trend of reciprocity – people try to compliment the people who complimented them. And while it is a good principle to be generous and compliment everyone, an anxious mind like my own will often doubt: is this a genuine compliment, or are you just saying something because you had to come up with something.

Why it is so tempting

After a larp, many of us are still completely absorbed by the experience. We can think of little else. And many of us yearn for connection. We want to know that we were seen, that we mattered to others. We want to feel that we were as important to our co-players as they were to us. We want to spread positivity and let people

know how awesome they are, and we want them to think we are awesome too. This makes it very hard to resist the compliment threads, especially when we see the love bombing happening. There have been many times where I have initially resisted participating in a compliment thread, but eventually gave up and participated anyway, even though I know it makes me anxious.

So what am I saying?

"Are you just sore that you don't get complimented enough for your immersive, introverted shenanigans? Just don't participate in the compliment threads, if they're so terrible, and let people enjoy them!" Well, this is exactly what I do. However, I thought that others that share my discomfort might feel some comfort in knowing that they are not alone, and perhaps get perspectives on what makes them uneasy.

I also do have a suggestion of what I think is a far better practice. I tend to give compliments directly - either after the larp, in person, or reaching out to them via social media. A fellow anxious friend mentioned to me how this can be really difficult and intimidating (reaching out to someone when you weren't invited). While I absolutely understand this, I am happy that it is something I feel able to do. I rely on the fact that most people relish compliments and honest appreciation, and I try to do it in a way that is not imposing, or seems to demand reciprocation or further interaction. Something along the lines of "hey, I just wanted to let you know, I really liked the way you played [scene]. You portray [emotion] so beautifully. It was great to see, thank you!" .

The benefits of doing this are many. For one, a spontaneous compliment is great to receive, and it usually makes people happy. It also feels enjoyable for me to give compliments in this way. Another great benefit is that there is no comparison, you don't have to wonder if other people are noticing you more or less than others.

It should be mentioned that some people enjoy compliment threads a lot, and enjoy the benefits without any of the anxiety or overthinking that I describe. It is not necessarily something that we should all stop doing. But I think it is worthwhile to consider the options, and what feels best for you, and if there are other ways you can spread the love and appreciation after a larp.





Spoils of War

Rasmus Lyngkjær

Rasmus is member on five boards and the treasurer of two of those. He organized the Danish campaign The Flatland Saga for many years while working on its gameplay systems and being a co-creator of their GDPR-compliance. Currently he is a student of Dramaturgy at Aarhus University, and the administrative lead-organizer of the community 'Blackbox Liminal'.

Administrative and practical superheroes

And how your organization can better
support their work

It can be difficult to find consistent, engaged and skilled volunteers to fill administrative and practical positions for any creative endeavour, and larp is no exception. To create a successful event, we need people filling a variety of functions, from engaging with players, writing roles and guiding the plot, to organizing the economy, cooking the food and scheduling the event.

You are probably already aware of the severe lack of credit given, not just in larp, but across the creative industries to those filling admin and practical functions. Only few theatres name them on their programmes alongside the actors and directors, and many larps still don't have easy access to a list of these organizers.

I believe a lot of that stems from the cultural belief in the creator genius. This singular individual, who is culturally acknowledged to shape the entire larp/play/film and bring most of the value to the project, is traditionally seen as the artist, the creative force.

While credit culturally flows upwards to each of these people, they themselves will likely tell you that their successes are due to a large team of organizers working both in front of and behind the spotlight to create the experiences. Many of my thoughts on the creative genius have been greatly influenced by Chris Bilton in his book *Management and Creativity*, where he calls out the myth as follows:

"As with any mythology, the idea of genius protects us from our own doubts and fears, providing a simplified, sanitized explanation of how creativity works." (Bilton 2007)

In this, Bilton points to the comforting simplicity of having a single name to reference as one of the primary drivers of our tendency, as a society, towards treating individuals as creative geniuses, to the exclusion of the many working hands that are needed to keep a project afloat. While this is a bias worth being aware of, we

larpers have already put a lot of work into it. Rounds of applause for the ‘invisible’ organizers before or after the event itself, ‘meet the organizers’ posts on social media showing off the talent that goes into every part of the event and clear credit of work wherever someone’s work is visible are great additions that go a long way. However, while these are great steps towards ensuring your superheroes aren’t forgotten by the public, this is only the second most important arena of recognition and support for many administrative and practical organizers. Much nearer to the heart are the respect, inclusion and backup felt from the people around us, most importantly, from those in our organizations. This is always valuable, but especially when something in the process slips and the player experience suddenly stands on unstable ground and sacrifices in communication, logistics, planning or so on are needed in order to stabilize the event. That is when we have to ask ourselves the following question:

Do you recognize sacrifices?

Most organizers can agree that we make events for the participants. We’re here to create memorable experiences and vehicles for lifelong bonds among people. Their experience is, therefore, of utmost importance. This, however, makes it easy when prioritizing resources between invisible and visible work, to trend towards the work that players can directly see making a difference.

This will most often be the right call. However, every time it has to be made, resources have to be funneled - often away from the administrative and practical side, which will be left with a larger workload or tighter restrictions on getting the work done. When that happens, your invisible organizers are making sacrifices that the players will likely only notice if they aren’t made, and which are hard to spot for you as a co-organizer if you’re not actively looking and aware.

I have seen many organizers go through the logic of where to prioritize, figure out that their decision is the right one and then move on, missing the crucial step of checking in with the admin and practical people whose work might just get a lot harder in ways that are easy to overlook. The simple admission of *"I'm sorry we didn't plan better. Is there anything you need within the current possibilities? We promise to look into how to avoid this situation in the future"* goes a long way towards making them feel appreciated. In my personal experience, this is more important than getting credit from the participants. Being acknowledged for your work and having the main organizers recognize the workload you bear for the success of the event is essential for feeling like a part of the team, when the going gets hard.

Of course, many last-minute solutions and quick fixes can be avoided with better planning and a longer run-up before the event, but perfect conditions are a luxury we rarely have. Better planning of events is a broad subject. Too broad for this article. To avoid that, I'll focus on the action that will make the largest difference in how your organization handles this: Checking in with your invisible organizers, whether admin or practical. With regular, competent check-ins you will have a significantly increased chance of keeping your superheroes and thus, make more time and space for organizers that prefer to focus on the creative side of making larps.

For many 'invisible' organizers, there are three main needs the check-ins should address: The need for acknowledgment, the need for updates and the need for backup. Of the three needs, updates and backup should both generally be offered by the nearest leader/coordinator, where acknowledgement can be partially filled by most members of the organization.

1. Acknowledgement

The need for acknowledgement is filled each time someone that my work directly influences informs me of the difference it ma-

kes or shows appreciation for it. Each time I am shouted out at meetings, in conversations or online. This parameter starts many projects mostly full, as being asked to be a part of a team is a great filler. Putting effort into how you recruit people is a great way of making them feel acknowledged before the project has even begun.

The need empties each time a decision is made which increases my workload without anyone acknowledging that they see that increase. Each time the parameters of something I've worked on change, without me being heard in that decision. Finally, it empties when I am asked to do something I personally don't see the point in. When a leader believes a specific task should be done or a specific approach should be taken to the task and can't convince me of the merits of that given task/approach, especially if it's because I have specialist knowledge of an approach that I find better, that can feel like the leader isn't seeing my competencies and rather simply wants to use my work.

2. Updates

The need for updates is filled each time my nearest leader comes by to tell me how things are progressing for other parts of the organization or in game in the event. When they take my updates on how my work is going, especially if they are active and interested in that conversation. Finally, when they invite me to meetings where progress is being discussed. This last one fills the need, even if I decide that I don't need to be at that meeting.

The need empties each time I have been stuck on a task for a significant amount of time, which is likely not the fault of the organization as a whole, but still gives the feeling of isolation and being aware of this, as a leader, gives great opportunities for checking in with updates to break up that monotony. In addition to that, whenever I feel like I lack information about the event in a way, which makes my task harder to complete. Especially if the communication routes are unclear in the organization, making it harder to fi-

figure out how to efficiently seek out a given piece of information.

3. Backup

The need for backup is filled each time my nearest leader articulates that they have my back when we talk. When they take action after I inform them about a problem affecting my work, which can be social nature, when someone else is interfering; structural, when the printer, program or the like doesn't work; or knowledge-based, if I lack the information I need to solve it. It also fills when they ask for the details of my work, to be able to ensure it's represented in a meeting they're attending later.

The need empties each time plans change in the organization, and I am left with more work because of it. Whenever the leader forgets to follow up on a request I have brought before them, whether that be social, structural or knowledge-based. Lastly, the feeling of having people at my back relies on the feeling of knowing the rest of the team. It will drain if there's a large shift in organizational structure at once, every time I get a new direct leader assigned at the like. This last one is largely unavoidable, but being aware that it happens can help you as a lead organizer to recognize the situations where extra care for your core team is warranted.

How to start the conversation

An example of a conversation that would, when presented in an interested manner, fill all three needs would go as follows:

'Hey, Rasmus. Thank you for **the quick printing of the pamphlets** you did earlier. I just popped by to inform you that **the players are arriving and seem excited. We'll begin workshops soon**. Do you need anything from me or the others?'

That short monologue contains a compliment on specific tasks I achieved, thereby showing that my work is noticed. It then gives me the update on what is currently happening in the event, and it

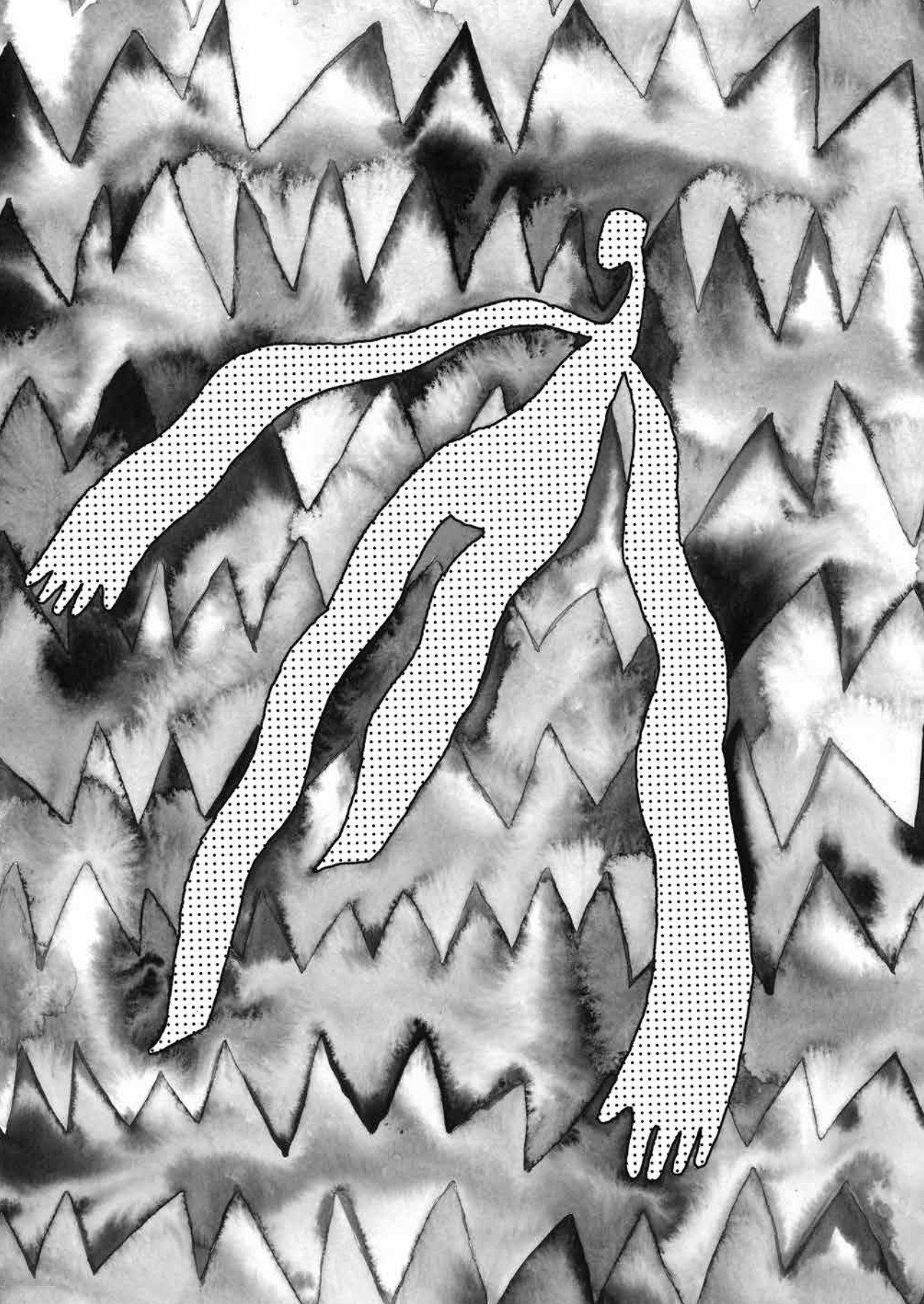
finishes off by offering backup, in case I need it. Of course, it's not a magic formula that works for everyone and should be religiously followed, but if you're unsure how to fill the needs of your invisible organizers, it's a good place to start.

One last point

One last point, here at the end, is to not crowd your invisible organizers either. Checking in once a month during meetings in the first stages is fine, maybe once a week in the last couple of months before the larp. You can arrange a daily check-in when there are sprints and during the event itself. Or, of course, whenever information becomes available that you think might be of interest to your invisible organizers. Because, while I speak of us in very general terms here, we are, of course, individuals. Some may align completely with my views here, many will think it a good starting place, a few might have completely different preferences. No one, I believe, will be offended if you, as their direct leader/coordinator, ask them directly what their needs are and how you can best help fill them.

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otherbody

Beyond larp (disruptions)

Áron Birtalan

Áron Birtalan is an artist, musician and student of theology exploring languages of intimacy between angel, creature and computer. They create guided games, mystical practices, musical releases, unruly thoughts and publications. Áron studied at the Royal Conservatory of The Hague, the DAS Graduate School in Amsterdam. They are currently a PhD candidate at Stockholm University of the Arts' Institute for Dance, and they run Angel Dog: a hospitality service and publishing house for bodily, performative and spiritual practices in Vienna.

You Ate Us; We Thought We Ate You

when playing plays us, and the pleasures
of being caused

He eats us; we think we eat him
—Hadewijch¹

The first version of this text was published in ŠUM journal #21 in 2023.² I wrote it as a departure from writing *about* my childhood experiences with live role-playing, and instead explore how it is to write *together with* them.³ Between 1999 and 2022, I spent every summer in a series of children’s fantasy camps in rural Hungary—first as a camping child and later as a counsellor. Founded in the 1930s as a clandestine pedagogical experiment, these camps house fictional countries where kids create worlds and creatures that inhabit them through a big role-playing game that lasts many weeks each summer.⁴ The following text is an attempt to treat the time we spent playing at the camps as a sentient being of its own - a creature with its own say, body and touch: we wrote this text beside each other, upon-beneath each other, nibbling on each other, as wayward bodies at play.

1

The southern end of the village culminates in a hill that continues far beyond the last house into a forest with ravines snaking up to a vast clearing. In this house, within this forest, through these ravines, atop of this clearing is where we met—once twice thrice

1 from her 13th-century mystical poem ‘Love’s Seven Names’. Hadewijch. *The Complete Works* (The Classics of Western Spirituality. New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 353.

2 Birtalan, Áron. *You Ate Us; We Thought We Are You* (In ŠUM#21 - ARIA, Algo-Rhythmic Ideation Assembly, edited by Brandon Rosenbluth and Tjaša Pogačar, 2023), 2714-2725.

3 the text uses *live role-playing* as to distinguish a set of practices and traditions from LARP/larp culture originating in the Atlantic canon.

4 Birtalan, Áron. *After the Critical Escape*. webinar for Fiume Crisis Workshops, hosted by Bálint Márk Turi. <https://youtu.be/nslH9tGVfuw?si=jyo78SH-lnU3iNLvD>



The main garden of the fantasy camp of Hegyhon, where I spent every summer between 1999 and 2008. Photo taken in the summer of 2023.

fourth. On our last day together, a small brass ring, a little life I could have, cold as spring water, was lifted from the thin black string holding it hanging around my neck. You stayed curled up on my chest—warm and light. I was out of you; you were never really out of me.

The greatest thing we ever did is allow you, so you may allow us in turn. *Surrendering time to receive you* has put time in your hands so you may move it through us, and through it move into us. In, within, through, atop. I could feel your helix through my skin. You snatched our inmost and poured it to eclipse the Sun. In the dark, we could no longer tell ourselves apart from you. It made us seek you wilder, give more to you, sweat to flood. Night dripping from your hair. The smell of summer.

2

How can we conceive of a playing that is not a *doing* but a *mutual being-done-to*? This does not mean delegating players to mere passive subjects to *the event of play*, but rather thinking of playing as a fellow creature who *events us* by the sake of its creatureliness. This creatureliness is a life-force that negatively prehends the creature, tracing the shape of its aspect as it matters the matter it moves through, and bodies the bodies that move through it.

Prehending this creature is what playing could be. This would make playing closer to a kind of *sensitivity*, rather than an *activity*. Here, sensitivity is best understood as a middle voice between active and passive. A *vital passivity* similar to the mystic's ecstasy that gives two-way flight to bodies, at the wayward velocity of sense perception.⁵ Sensitivity extends the playing body's reach and mobilises its depths by rendering boundaries permeable. In this sensitivity, we mayprehend the aspect of play as it writes its body onto ours. "O mighty jaw, without any mouth!"⁶ This prehension,

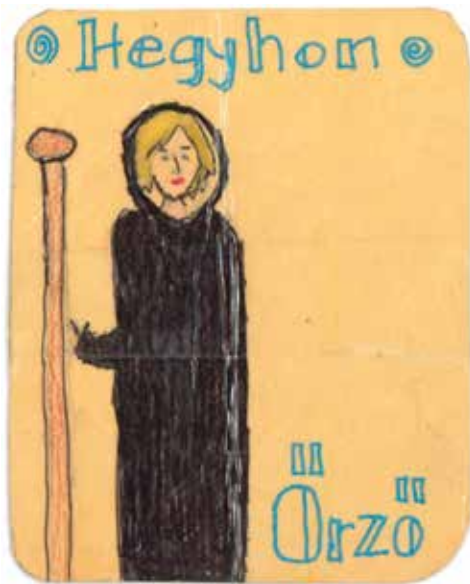
5 Kotva, Simone. *Ecologies of Ecstasy: Mysticism, Agency and the More-than-Human* (online talk, The Garden and the Dump Conference, September 16, 2021). <https://youtu.be/vXCABrVRBXE?si=xE3LTABlgH7bhO2g>

6 van Ruusbroec, Jan. *The Seven Enclosures*. in Ruusbroec, Jan van, and Guido de Baere. *The complete Ruusbroec: English translation with the original Middle Dutch text*. Corpus Christianorum : scholars version. Turnhout: Brepols, 2014.

while bearing a certain intellectuality, is a prehension that ultimately cannot land on certainty. The sensitivity of play moves bodies and matter in a dynamic of remembering/forgetting, knowing/unknowing, noticing/overlooking. The time of the creature is a creeping time. Creeping upon, a creeping within, a creeping through. We can never truly know the exact moment and the exact extent the creature enters us, yet we are compelled to reckon with our bodies in its wake. Us compelling play to move into us - compels us to move into play in turn.

3

Is play to the player what magic is to the magician? There is indeed something to it when you hear it first: playing is a kind of magic and magic is a kind of playing. Likewise, the player is sort of a magician, and the magician is sort of a player. This feels “right”, which



(Left) The Magician as drawn by Pamela Colman Smith for the RWS tarot deck (1910).
(Right) The Guardian, a legendary wizard from the children's fantasy camp of Hegyhon (ca. 2006)

is somewhat funny to say considering how “magic” and “playing” are both terms whose hospitality rests exactly in eluding any concrete definition as to what they mean. How can two terms resist definition individually yet hold a mutually prehensible relation?

Magic plays an essential part in role-playing, way beyond players playing characters with in-game magical abilities. Magic is an anthropological and design model (through the Magic Circle) and a master metaphor to imagine role-playing’s political participation in the world - a way of *seizing the means of imagination*.⁷ These models and metaphors understand magic as an *extraordinary ability* and dovetail well with an active and ableist view of player agency. In this view, player agency (from here referred to as *active agency*) is usually understood as an answer to “What can I/we *do*, and with what consequences?” Active agency tries to maximise clarity in the feedback the player is getting, thus creating a more coherent world through a series of action-recognition encounters. The consequence of each encounter therefore presents itself to the *positive comprehension* of the player, who can from there on, map out a more-less reliable playing field - be that in the physical, the social, the sensory, the conceptual, or in more meta-layers. Agency and a clarity in knowing hinge upon one another. From this approach, the play is *a territory of possibilities*, contained within the grasp of the player (or game master)—a master agent—similar to how the magician is often depicted wielding power over the world through their practice and paraphernalia. The pleasure in active agency

7 It is beyond the scope of this text to problematise the model of the Magic Circle, its origins in XX. century anthropology/ethnography (ala Arnold van Gennep, Johan Huizinga and Victor Turner) and the tectonic influence it had on the world of larp and on studies of play, performance and magic at large. But this is just to note that its influence is not without negatives. Much of the criticism in this text wrestles with conventions and standards in a larp world that is unable or unwilling to dream beyond the Magic Circle model. For a conversation on alternative models, see: Pogačar, Tjaša and Brandon Rosenbluth. *The Politics and Pedagogies of Artistic Role-Play as Collective Becoming A conversation with Áron Birtalan, Carina Erdmann and OMSK Social Club* (in ŠUM#23 - OTHERSELVES, edited by Tjaša Pogačar and Maks Valenčič, 2024), 2935-2951.

Demoniádóh magiya

A hatalm forrasa:

A magus aki varázsló vadat alapít akat köti
ar uabn egyik szellemével/démonnal, aki szellemi
csőrel hatalommal újradefiniálja meg a magust, és vadat

A magus

A varázslóesemények 2 igen fontos tárgya kell, hogy
legyen. A démonnal kötött paktum, melyet a varázsló
a saját szellemével kötött meg, mindig a szellem
egy-egy körülményben (fordul). Ez általában zárt
A másik a varázsló lelke melyek vége utános
formák, melyek révén a démon jele diriti. (Ezről majd később)

A magia elveit

A magus és tanácsai minden este egy rituáléval táplálják
a demont, aki ha elgedett hatalommal ad a varázslónak.
A rituálé során a varázsló in társaságai saját energiáikkal
juttatnak a démonnak (-szellemnek) saját kárára,
egy a mestis egy rituáléval szel feladatok valahán ahány
eseményt így a kárára vállalkoz.

A paktum

A szerződés melyet a varázsló a démonnal köt össze van
innen feladatok mindeikkel, és a varázsló a saját szellem
a szellemével kötött meg
kötésével így:



A page from a demonic grimoire, written by the teenage author in the children's fantasy camp of Hegyhon (ca. 2004).

is the pleasure of being the cause, the pleasure of the magician. The mystic's pleasure however is in their vital passivity: in the pleasure of being caused.

How much of the player as a world-builder mirrors the magician's

theurgic participation in a divine craftsman's work—as it occupies, regulates and governs territories deemed too opaque, fluid, unruly to the power of a single truth? When we carve out Magic Circles, territories of play, who's territory are we carving into, carving out of?⁸ The hand that fully knows who and what it touches is the very hand that risks colonising worlds and bodies that dance in the night of not-yet.

4

A transcription of a page from a grimoire I wrote as a teenager:

The Magic of Demon-Worshippers

The Fountain of Power: The mage who wishes to find their order must make a pact with a ghost or demon from the Umbra. They will in turn grant the mage and their order with power and might.

The Mages: The head-mage must have 2 important objects. First, the pact they made with a demon, sealed with the magician's blood, is carried in a pouch around the magician's neck. This is the seal of their power. Second, that magician's staff: its tip forming a unicorn's horn, its base adorned with the demon's sigil (more on this later).

A Theory of Magic: Every night, the magician and their apprentices feed the demon with a ritual, who, if pleased, shall grant further powers to the order. During the ritual, the magician and their apprentices sacrifice their own life-force (quintessence) to their own detriment. In some cases, the head-mage may choose to sacrifice someone's life completely. All life-force travels to the demon.

⁸ “Artists talk a lot about ‘space’ and what they want to do with it: activate it, respond to it, make it, occupy it, fill it, work with it, use it, choreograph it, read it, explore it. [...] I don't like the term ‘space’ because it implies something empty, neutral, and ahistoric — I don't think such a thing exists” - Hedva, Johanna. *Minerva: The Miscarriage of the Brain*. Saratoga, CA, Oakland, CA: Sming Sming Books ; Wolfman, 2022.

The Pact: The pact, which the magician makes with the demon, must be written on a piece of skin with runic script and sealed with six drops of blood.

5

In the role-playing universe of *World of Darkness* (developed by White Wolf Entertainment), the race of Werewolves has three primal forces that move the created world, known as the *Triat*.⁹ The Wyld, representing a force that breathes life and stirs everything akin to a primordial chaotic body; the Weaver, who moves the world as a great tapestry with an ordering, constructing principle; and the Wyrms, whose all-devouring mouth is destruction, decay, entropy. Only one out of three could be considered as a “builder”. In the mythology of the Werewolves, the origin of all problems is that the Weaver prevented the Wyrms from eating its creations and the Wyld from stirring up its structures.

“This world is a corpse-eater. All the things eaten in it themselves die also.

Truth is a life-eater. Therefore no one nourished by truth will die.”¹⁰

Is the worlding power of playing always a constructive action, a world-*building*? Can we conceive of a way of worlding outside of *ordo ab chao* (order out of chaos)? Can we conceive a body-of-play that is not a product of structures, but whose aspect emerges in the eyes and on the hands of the player, as they prehend the creature’s creatureliness? A body with a pulse, with weather. The worlding

9 Bridges, Bill, Mark Rein-Hagen, Robert Hatch, and Deirdre Brooks. *Werewolf: The Apocalypse : A Storytelling Game of Savage Horror* (White Wolf, 2000), 34-35.

10 from the 3rd-century Gnostic text, *The Gospel according to Philip* (ΠΕΥΔΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ ΠΚΑΤΑ ΦΙΛΙΠΠΟΣ). Translation from Coptic by Wesley W. Isenberg. In: Robinson, James McConkey, and Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, eds. *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*. 3., Completely rev. ed. (Harper, 1990), 153.

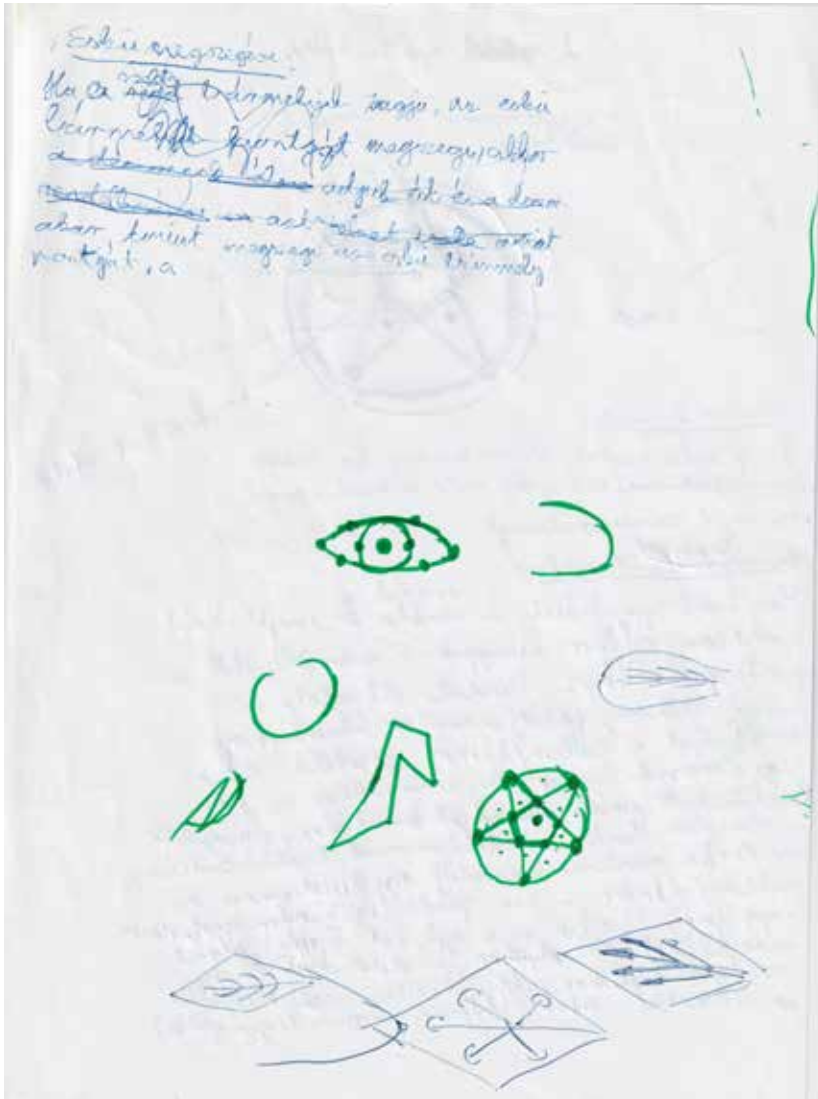
power of play can be then seen as a form of sensitivity. Literally, as *sensitivity's formative force*. An oscillation of remembering-forgetting, knowing-unknowing, noticing-overlooking, glimmering in and out of the dark. A rhythm whose tempo rises and drops as you run your fingers down the creature's spine.

The problem with approaching play from a purely constructive and structural perspective is that it quickly brings in a design mindset that overpowers bodies at play and the body of the creature by subjecting them to its single-truth standards. It silences the violence of a body's inherent unruliness by reigning down the slow and sustained violence of superstructure hierarchies. Such a conception of play will always render certain bodies too fidgety, too needy, too weak. It trades the hospitality of mystery to the yoke of teleology. It wants to find answers and solutions and realise utopias rather than mobilise bodies into new unknowns. This is not very far from a magician hoping to subvert transcendental forces, only to get caught up in their game of power, unable to exit. We cannot design ourselves out of this game of power, as the teleology of design-language will ultimately halt any body that puts its models at risk.

Could this lead to ways of playing that are just as close to the Wyld's stirring, immolating, liquifying; to the Wyrms' negating, eating and being eaten? It would create a field of intimacy with the creature akin to erotics without sexuality: a dance of mutual attraction, repulsion and whirling. "Through me into you, and through you from me."¹¹ This dance does not zap us out of this world, or lead to a union with it without any difference. Rather, this dance midwives us into the multiplicity of a world enfleshed. Players become conspirators in giving birth to a clandestine body that flowers from the depths of a nameless amongst.

¹¹ Mechthild of Magdeburg. *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. Translated by Frank J. Tobin. The Classics of Western Spirituality. (Paulist Press, 1998) 59.

The resonance of *play* may very well be ringing in the inter-modulating chords between artificial and emergent as they amplify and suffocate one another. Between its initial technicity from rules and practices and the chaotic energies it moves and they, in turn, move through it. The body of the creature is just as much of a *structural affair, as a natural offspring*.¹²



12 Italics paraphrasing Ricardo M. Villa's writing on Henry James's concept of the 'Imaginal'. Villa, Riccardo M. *Imaginal* (In *Architecture and Naturing Affairs*, edited by Mihye An, Ludger Hovestadt, and Vera Bühlmann, De Gruyter, 2020) 145–46.

6

Order must find; pact must make; demon must grant; mage must receive; blood must seal; satch must carry; neck must hold; staff must grow; horn must unicorn; sigil must adorn; ritual must feed; sacrifice must please; life must travel; skin must ink; rune must scribe; six must drop. Something's gotta give.

7

In the world of larp, the main theory engaging with the inherent porosities of the body-at-play is *bleed*.¹ Described as the two-way spillover between player and character, bleed has been revered as the Holy Grail of role-playing theory and practice. It originates from the Nordic larp subculture, taking notes from psychoanalytic concepts that hold in special regard a certain interiority of experience. Bleed locates the transformative event of play exclusively within a segmented human body—a vessel for a discreetly defined dual selfhood of player and character. It recognises an internal

porous boundary between these segments and the body-at-play who, just like all bodies, desires to pour over the discrete. However, it still locates this pouring-over as merely a two-way interaction between clearly defined domains of selfhood, rather than something that spills over the category of selfhood as a whole. It situates the word “role” in role-playing as synonymous with “character” or “function”. This role is a virtual entity that functions in the power (in-virtue-of) of the player as their augmentation of selfhood.

Bleed can definitely (i.e. through definition) help articulate role-

1 Bowman, Sarah Lynne. *Bleed: The Spillover Between Player and Character* (online article, Nordiclarp.Org, March 2, 2015).

<https://nordiclarp.org/2015/03/02/bleed-the-spillover-between-player-and-character/>.

playing's potential for human-to-human empowerment in the realms of selfhood and identity. My own experience growing up in an almost-century-old role-playing camp that brushed against fascist, communist and now Orbánist regimes, as well as the countless international examples in which larp has contributed to emancipating marginalised groups, should be enough to convince.² With that said, bleed has also been under criticism from voices that hope to think through the politics and somatics of role-playing from a non-identitarian perspective, or at least perspectives that treat identity and selfhood as merely one force amongst many.³

In the world of somatics and psychoanalysis, we can see a similar critical turn emerging, due to the influence of queer, black and decolonial thought. One main point is to problematise models of active consent, where a desire for all parties always to be in-the-know insufficiently engages with the “opacity of the other and in ourselves.”⁴ If we expand this to *consenting to who can be present with us*, role-playing under a purely two-way and human-only understanding bleed can easily become a means to serve domains of sovereignty, *identity* and exceptionalism - in the sense that only bodies that are clearly identifiable are taken as present. It fails to recognise the creature of play as a creature that is present with us - without selfhood, without identity, but with a life force prehensible, sensible, intelligible to intimacy. Play is an emergent middle voice that will always retain its far-nearness as a *fellow another*.

2 Kemper, Jonaya. *The Battle of Primrose Park: Playing for Emancipatory Bleed in Fortune & Felicity* (online article, Nordiclarp.Org, June 21, 2017). <https://nordiclarp.org/2017/06/21/the-battle-of-primrose-park-playing-for-emancipatory-bleed-in-fortune-felicity/>

3 Examples include: Widing, Gabriel. *Another Body Is Possible / There Is No Body B* (blog post, gwid.se, 7 May 2017). <https://www.gwid.se/2017/another-body-is-possible-there-is-no-body-b/>; Erdmanm, Carina. *Exquisite Corpse* (online article, 2021). <https://OctOp0s.net/EXQUISITE-CORPSE>

4 Saketopoulou, Avgi. *Sexuality Beyond Consent: Risk, Race, Traumatophilia*. *Sexual Cultures*, v. 61. New York: New York University Press, 2023, 3.

The life force of the creature and the unruly bodies blooming in its wake (including the bodies we deem as our own) are insurmountably abundant in their aspect, extent and age—and in their numbers will always remain beyond one’s counting. This is a challenge for the discreet and sacred interiority of a body that players can choose to augment and segment as they wish and exactly as many times as they wish.

How can we recognise the unruliness of the creature without fizzling out to a kind of “rhizomatic smugness”?⁵ That is, not to end up in a place where grand claims about non-linearity, emergence and entanglement are stated in a utopian bravado, but with an added moral relativism, that refuses to show up for the fruits of their actions. This does not mean claiming ownership over the emergent, but rather acknowledging its unyielding materiality and corporeality which cannot be negated and from which we cannot exclude ourselves, and cannot declare ourselves separate. In a space of bodies and matter there is an overabundance of possibility, but it is not an anything-goes.⁶ There is a specific way bodies and matter event one another upon encountering, and in their wake give rise to new bodies and matter that must be reckoned with, no matter how opaque their conceptions were. We cannot deny something has happened. Someone is with us.

8

You are nesting on our laps as we walk through the forest back towards the campsite. Your frail body turned towards us. You hung on to everything we did. That is all we did: having you hanging,

⁵ The term ‘rhizomatic smugness’ comes from an Instagram webcomic by the user avocado_ibuprofen, posted on the 9th of July 2023. https://www.instagram.com/p/Cuem0I7ly9h/?img_index=1

⁶ inspired by: Freeman, Jo. *The Tyranny of Structurelessness* (WSQ: *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 3–4, 2013). 231–46.

gnawing, ready to pull. Come on now! We *did*, so you may *take*. We thought you knew something about us, something we knew not. What a scam! You never knew anything *about* us. *Us to you* can never be an *about*, but a *towards*, a *beneath*, an *around*. Just as we could never put words *on* you, only *to* you. A breeze pulled the branches and we saw your teeth.



The Troll-Ravine in the children's fantasy camp of Hegyhon.

Photo taken in the summer of 2023.

Over the past years, my practice has confronted me with the urgency of *bodies that play* and the *play that bodies*. The bodies play moves, the bodies moving through play, the bodies that move play. To me, the most mysterious of them all is the play that bodies. This calls towards a playing that events all other nouns into verb, annihilating subjectivity as selfhood and mobilising subjectivity as event-relation. This event-relation is an emergent sentience, whose verbal middle voice in turn gives rise to bodies that matter.

“There is a stranger incarnating in our touch that is neither you nor I, but a being of relation. Anyone who is friends with a couple knows that implicitly. The relation is a being that has its own ‘personality’, irreducible to the personalities of the individuals in love.”⁷

What if we treat the relational force between players not as creation but as poiesis? A way in which players practice sensitivity toward the creaturely body of play via the space between the lines. In this case, the player’s labour departs from the active agency of the magician, and rather comes closer to the mystic’s *negative work*⁸: it’s a making-available that is more of a “wanting than a waiting”.⁹ Waiting is a form of attraction that needs not an object of attraction, nor a “why”. It implies a certain incompleteness, a

7 Birtalan, Áron. *The Abyss Between Our Hands* - Edition 0. (Stockholm University of the Arts, 2023). The quote paraphrases Brian Massumi in *Immediation Unlimited*. Original version: Massumi, Brian. *Immediation Unlimited*. In *Immediation II*, edited by Erin Manning, Anna Munster, and Bodil Marie Thomsen (Open Humanities Press, 2019), 501-543.

8 Both historically and in practice, the magical and mystical are by no mean exclusive. The separation here can be better understood on the level of intention and outlook on the ultimate opacity of each encounter and relationship. See: Birtalan, Áron. *You Will Move Into My Depths*. (essay published for ImpulsTanz, 2024). <https://aronbirtalan.substack.com/p/you-will-move-into-my-depths>

9 Kotva, Simone. *Effort and Grace: On the Spiritual Exercise of Philosophy*. (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

call with no response. Understood through a mystical sensitivity, waiting creates a vacancy within the bodies-at-play - into whom the creature is compelled to move. There, the body of the creature inter-carnates as a being-of-relation.¹⁰ This being-of-relation is not of a *transcendent without* or an *immanent within* but of a *haptic amongst*. It is entangled with the bodies it moves with—making the players hold distinction but not separation through the poiesis of their role. Just as with mysticism, playing does not happen in domains of pure internality or exteriority, nor the interactions between sovereign bodies. Likewise, the mystical event cannot be reduced to isolated encounters. Rather, encounters are points of iteration, induction, immolation to the relationship—as it *arches over, slithers beneath and blooms through*, bringing each encounter beyond itself.

10

Years later, we meet in bars. Our lives are very different now, and so is the way we move, walk, talk and move in the world, inviting the world to move into us. We sing old songs, debate adventures we had, recall jokes we cracked. As we say goodbye for the night, each of us gives a bit of ourselves to the creature. Its bite carves the aspect of our whole. Its teeth: just like ours. We were no-body before we met. Our bodies are but an answer. A verb slowing down to a noun.

10 A term from Catherine Keller (written as a single word in her 2017 book, *Intercarnations*). The concept of *inter-carnation*, is probably better understood as *intra-carnation* (where the event of enfleshment is a body of its own) - a play on the theological *incarnation*, and on Karen Barad's *intra-action* and For a concise definition on Barad's concept, see <https://indeterminacy.ac.uk/dictionary/intra-action/>

Etettél hogy megölhess
 Lettem ételed
 Vérem véredben kering
 Mire kell neked

You have fed me to kill me
 Your food I became
 Now my blood runs in your blood
 What are you to gain

Közös vér ha elcsorog
 mondd: az áldozat mit ér
 Vagyunk evők és ölők
 Vérrel virágzik a vér

Tell me, when our shared blood dries
 Was it all for naught
 Eaters and killers, we be
 Blood blooms with blood

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Reading Larps: The Larp Experience Through Larp Scripts

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

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

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

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

Can You Read a Larp?

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

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

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

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

Defining Larp Scripts

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

600+ Larp Scripts Published

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

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

Monographs (10 larps)

Paper books:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PDF's :

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

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

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

Collections of larps

Larp-anthologies (142 larp scripts):

ERITAIN-humoristinen: Pienimuotoinen-miniLARP saannhupaelma (Krisse Tuominen). Softcover and online. Short humor-larps in Finnish.

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

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

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

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

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

Phone Larps (Chaos League)

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

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

War Birds (US, Morya Turkington eds): includes 1 danish larp script
Bubbles - a hot tub larp anthology (Agnes Hultén and Mo Holkar, eds, 2024) - 16 short-larps

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

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

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

The Book of LARP (2003)

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

DO Larp – KP-book (Charles Bo Nielsen)

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

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

Larp Archives

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Archiving Larp Scripts

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

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

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

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

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

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

Larp Scripts as Playable and Readable Text

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Games Never Played: or Composting 'The Antarciticans'

In her book of essays *Death By Landscape*, Elvia Wilk (2022) describes why she decided to adapt the novel she was working on into a larp. She says she was driven by a desire to give the novel a life outside of herself, to “explode” it to see how its characters would change or stay the same (2022, 186), and to see whether there was a happy ending in the story after all, one that she herself had not been able to unravel. I recognize this desire as my own. When I create larps I am often curious to see how players will inhabit the roles that I have scripted, and more specifically, how they pick up or resist the genre conventions many of my larps experiment with. For example, in *The Kids Are Not Alright* (2023), I was interested to see what would happen when the creepy, horror-movie cliché of the haunted child met the underpaid and overworked social worker who has just stepped out of a Ken Loach film. For the child, monsters are real; for the social worker, evil is systemic. To explore the result of this genre-clash, the game needed to be played.

If larp is a co-creative practice, one that cannot exist without its players, what do we call larps that were never played? And what do we do with them? Can we still give them a life outside of ourselves, and enjoy their unpredictability? As will become apparent, this is a self-serving question that I nevertheless hope will chime with many readers. Who hasn’t had ideas or plans for larps that never came to fruition? Staging a larp is not easy. It requires time, money, access to suitable spaces, as well as a network of players and collaborators. In the Knutepunkt books you can find post-mortems of successful larps as well as practical how-to-guides for budding designers, but there is no discussion of designs that were never realized.

With this article I’d like to start such a discussion, and to do so I turn, again, to Wilk who concludes her essay with another metaphor for the creative process. She argues that rather than explode her novel, what she really did (and continues to do) with the story is compost it, recycling the material and using it “as soil for new

seeds” (2022, 192). I like this metaphor. There is value in a good concept; dreaming and ideation are worthwhile. They are like nutrients that need to be kept in circulation, otherwise creative ecosystems get depleted. This is a call to start composting your ideas. I will try to lead by example by composting a solarpunk larp that never got off the ground: ‘The Antarcticans.’ In the block quotes below, you’ll find excerpts from an initial pitch, beyond which the idea was never developed. This is the raw material that I offer back to the soil in the hope that from it new ideas may grow.

Project description

The Antarcticans is an imaginative excavation and worldbuilding experience. We will design a larp for 20-40 players to be played this summer, casting players as citizens of a solarpunk society living on a deglaciaded West Antarctica. Over the course of play, we will generate customs, rituals, and artifacts, to be embedded in displays for future guests of the museum to find. These will reflect the values, politics, technologies, and lifestyles of the Antarcticans.

I have been walking around for years with the ambition to design a solarpunk larp. In the summer of 2023, I came pretty close when, together with a glaciologist colleague, I applied to an open call put out by an NGO currently overseeing the reopening of the massive, saucer-shaped museum of technology in Eindhoven. They were looking for creators to contribute to the museum’s exhibition. Long story short, we did not secure the funding.

The call to which we replied was named ‘Spaceship Earth,’ after a phrase coined by Buckminster Fuller: a futurist and innovator known for popularizing the geodesic dome and other icons of the techno-hippie counter-culture. Ironically, one of Fuller’s many projects was a kind of larp that was also never fully realized. The World Game provided instructions for a real-life, resource management simulation played on a massive map of Earth (Stott 2021). Players were charged to solve global problems by collabo-

ratively itemizing and allocating resources. The game was supposed to be supported by a high tech knowledge infrastructure composed of screens that would display live data from around the world. Alas, the infrastructure was not developed in time and so the game was never played, though it did spawn several smaller-scale seminars and workshops.

This example shows that games that get stuck in phases of ideation or development can have interesting afterlives. In his book *Buckminster Fuller's World Game and its Legacy*, Timothy Stott (2021) traces the transformation of the utopian, technocratic blueprint for the The World Game as it was delivered by Fuller, into the more delimited actualized versions that spun off from it, which, although different in format, were similar in spirit. The Antarcticans too might find its way into different forms and formats. It was conceived believing that if we gathered the right people in the right place, and gave them a context conducive to self-organization, we could engender more intimate and more sustainable ways of relating to energy, to technology, and to the changing environment of Antarctica. This assumption might still be tested using different exercises of the imagination.

Why do you consider this project to be a meaningful project for Spaceship Earth?

This project combines science, the arts, and humanities to generate a lived experience of the future, contextualizing new technologies through their social and cultural use. West Antarctica's extreme environment serves as an analogue for the post-Anthropocene, requiring its society to confront energy scarcity during polar nights, bio-hack their bodies for warmth, and explore new socio-political practices. Thus the project launches a method of participatory futuring, harnessing player creativity.

In scholarly terms, solarpunk is a “sociotechnical imaginary” (Jasanoff 2015, 4); these are science fictions that emerge within insti-

tutions or communities, detailing desirable visions of the future. In more familiar language, solarpunk is a kind of online “mood-board” of sustainable futures growing on Tumblr, Reddit, and Instagram (Williams 2019, 7). I come to solarpunk from the study of ‘petrocultures’—a body of work that investigates the way our reliance on fossil fuel impacts society by fostering certain kinds of narratives, aesthetics, politics, infrastructures, and social practices. By extension, ‘solarcultures,’ or societies powered sustainably, might look and operate very differently. Solarpunk fiction runs with this idea and imagines whole cities transformed by a more intimate relationship to energy production and collectively organized according to a postcapitalist ethos that is attentive to more-than-human interests.

Much of solarpunk fiction is unabashedly utopian. It often imagines the problem of energy scarcity solved by the sun’s natural abundance. While I believe literature that fosters hope is important, the more gratifying solarpunk stories for me are those that face issues of energy head-on; *The Weight of Light* for example illustrates the different social and political implications of urban, rural, big, and small solar architectures (Eschrich and Miller 2019).

In the *Antarcticans*, I was interested to explore the challenges of a very particular energy culture, one characterized by polar seasonality. Can you do solarpunk without the solar? When six months out of the year are claimed by darkness, what does that do to the utopian imagination? With batteries struggling in subzero temperatures, and maintenance jobs complicated by inclement weather, this vision of a solarpunk community is a far cry from the garden-cities imagined in most popular fiction. To simulate these polar nights I wanted to create spaces of total darkness, and use sunlight therapy lamps in the staging, as they make concrete the difference between light and warmth, and because they put in stark relief the importance of light for psychological wellbeing.

Beyond its reluctance to deal with the nitty gritty of energy infrastructure, there is another concern with solarpunk fiction. As Cindy Kohtala argues, “The emphasis on storytelling and either narrative, literary forms or visual illustration [...] lends the impression that ‘solarpunk’ is a genre that is rarely actually practiced or used as a motif in eco-social making and prototyping” (2024, 4), even though the genre often imagines “a ‘maker-hero’ as counterpoint to the hacker-hero of cyberpunk: an archetype who embodies various ingenious maker, fixer and grower skills” (1). I too initially understood solarpunk as something to engage with narratively, but because the call for submissions spurred us to think of objects or experiences that could be installed as part of a wider exhibit, the design of *The Antarcicans* became much more centered around making things.

My collaborator and I geeked out over independent printing techniques as well as our shared appreciation of the garish color palette of Antarctic clothing and shelter design—chosen because it stands out against the snow. We talked about the need for customizing clothes so that people could be individuated in dark and stormy weather, and even planned for one of the larp workshops to involve (loom) knitting a high-vis beanie with reflectors. In this way, the *Antarcicans* re-centered for me the place of creative making-practices in larp. Already I can sense that in composting this project, I am nourishing other ideas, my own, as well as, hopefully, yours.

The first aim of this open call is to commission works that demonstrate a clear link to either the geosphere, the biosphere, the technosphere or the mindsphere. How does your proposal meet these requirements?

The game and its artifacts will engage all four spheres. We involve the geosphere through artifacts related to geology and soil-fossilized plastics, nuclear legacies, and mineral deposits; the biosphere through animal domestication-records of selective breeding and

biohacking; the technosphere through new methods of communication and sensing; and the mindsphere by involving Antarctic politics, kinship relations, and cosmologies, which will have to account for polar days and nights.

I sometimes feel like I read more games than I get the chance to play; I purchase interesting TTRPGs (tabletop role-playing games) that I never find the time to run; and because of my reluctance to travel by plane I also don't get to play as many larps, though I read about them quite a bit. What brings me consolation is that there is experience to be gleaned from merely reading games, and that, in fact, not all games are meant to be played.

Lyric games, or game poems, are typically brief texts formatted like TTRPGs. They generally don't require you to go through the motions of play, but instead ask you to engage with the game's instructions hypothetically, as yourself and (often) by yourself. Writing about this nascent genre—big on itch.io—Lin Codega (2021) argues “Lyric games are not for playing but, rather, for recontextualizing common experiences in order to challenge the game-playing process... [they] are experiments in pushing the boundaries of guided, immersive experiences.”

With the power of retrospection, some Fluxus artworks of the sixties and seventies could be identified as lyrical games. Dick Higgins' *Piece For Meredith Monk's Apartment* (1968, see Figure) has struck me, since I first read it, as a lyrical game poem. At first glance it looks like a location-based larp script, of the dancery, non-verbal kind that you might find programmed at Grenselandet or Blackbox CPH. But the hyper-specificity of the language evokes a context and a history that is not physically replicable. Blurring media borders in this way (between poetry and larp), creates new audiences for both artforms, and makes us appreciate aspects like brevity, and control of language.

Piece for Meredith Monk's Apartment

- 1., Naked except for a night gown, rain coat or other light covering. Blindfolded.
- 2., Starting from the left-hand wall of the kitchen, feeling one's way around the kitchen and out of it, along the wall by the bedroom, up steps, down into the bedroom, around and out of the bedroom, past windows and bookcases, down the steps, past the record player and out of the apartment area, into and all the way around the studio back to the point where one began. Identifying silently to oneself each object one encounters, as one feels one's way along.
- 3., Any number of people involved, but no one close to the person ahead or behind.

Generalized procedure: following the outer walls of *any* space using the process described above, identifying objects encountered, etc.

November 26th, 1968
New York City

Larp designers have also experimented with extremely short, lyrical formats. Matthijs Holter (2017) calls his 15 minute games "role-playing poems." I don't believe they need to be played for them to generate wonderful insights. For example, in *The Elf archaeologists are saying hurtful things about your skeleton* (2017) you play yourself, dead on the floor, for at least 1000 years while the other players say hurtful things about you based on your remains. To me this is funny. I imagine that there is barely anything you could say about a person's skeleton that would be seriously offensive. Our skeletons don't reflect our personalities at all. And why should we mind the opinions of elves anyway?

Since lyric games are not scared to ask for the impossible, featuring instructions that may be vague or impractical, perhaps

it's an appropriate format for an idealistic solarpunk larp. Step 1: gather strangers. Step 2: create a better world. Step 3: keep at it. Or, as this article's reviewer Markus Montola suggested, larps written specifically for communities out of (our) time, whether in the past or the future. I would welcome such thought-provoking hypothetical larps, or larp poems, in publications like the Knutepunkt books, offering a healthy counterbalance to the discourse's otherwise pragmatic focus (with its emphasis on tips, toolkits, and nitty-gritty design talk).

The second aim of this open call is to commission unconventional ways, yet tangible experiences that invite the audience to discover, unfold and engage with the next stages of evolution; the project must include an interactive component in which the audience can discover, learn and grow in their own personal ways. How does your proposal meet these requirements?

Museum visitors encounter artifacts through printed, audio, and AR prompts designed to feel like a paleo-anthropological study.

I would love to reframe *The Antarcticans* as a larp to be read, rather than one that needs to be played. I certainly feel that the strict character limit for the submission forced a condensation of the concept so that the result is ambiguous and evocative in the way that lyrical games often are. Unlike the detailed larp scripts I produce, *The Antarcticans* is mute on things like staging requirements, workshop exercises, rules and mechanics. I hope this muteness invites speculation. How would you simulate a deglaciated, future Antarctica in a museum space in the Netherlands? How would you involve participants in the hands-on processes of making and co-design called for by the larp?

More than a poem, of course, it reads like an academic abstract, which is why, rather than a poem, then, I should frame *The Antarcticans* as a piece of design fiction. Design ethnographer Mark

Blythe (2014) describes design fictions as stories or semi-working prototypes that function a little like conceptual art, or speculative design. He writes, “Conceptual art or installation art is an art of ideas [...] It is not of the utmost importance that critical designs actually function, neither, perhaps, is it necessary for them to exist” (2014). Design fictions may be provocative or ironic, or they may help tease out flaws or consequences in the design. For example, Blythe presents a series of imaginary abstracts for design journals that describe prototypes or media installations that were never actually developed. He finds that writing these abstracts “questions and explores a design space without committing too much resource. It allows for a number of possible outcomes to be generated and forces the imagined prototype into a research context” (2014).

Too few people get the chance to design larps. I think we can do more to onboard new designers. The formats that I have mentioned in this chapter: game poems and design fictions, provide templates for larp writing that are efficient and provocative. They also allow us to generate ideas and to share them with others more rapidly. Moreover, being more upfront with our failures (failures to get funding, failures to get games off the ground), and sharing unrealized concepts builds up the soil for other ideas to take root. It means being more transparent about the creative process of larp design, which does not always bear fruit, but which might, in talking about it, might scatter seeds of inspiration anyway.

Acknowledgements

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Josephine Rydberg

Rydberg has a fun job of crossmedia themed cultural development for the County Council of Gävleborg (Region Gävleborg). Where she grasps every opportunity to promote game culture. She is also a phd candidate at Stockholm University of the Arts with a research project called Dramaturgy for Participatory Practices, which allows her to explore larping in VR.

Mud in the Machine On Embodiment for Virtual Players

(I explore larp in fully immersive and social virtual reality, for both play and research. I mainly use a wireless headset.)

In order to have a connection to your virtual character whilst larping in VR, it is a good idea to make some effort to feel present in your virtual skin, sensitised and embodied. The virtual character is not a puppet you remote control, it is your body. This will let you better feel the emotional impact of what the character experiences and raise the dramaturgical stakes.

Let's begin this line of thought in the 1700s with the Scottish philosopher David Hume. Hume was revered in his lifetime and lauded as one of the great rationalist thinkers of the Enlightenment. In his old age he was asked by his publisher to write his autobiography. Hume agreed and delivered it; three pages long. I believe this indicates a great sense of humour and a petite ego, and therefore I have a lot of fondness for him. Also he argued against Kant, which is another point in his favour.

One of Hume's famous ideas is about how we cannot deduce objective truth from what our senses perceive, as our senses can be tricked by dreams, hallucinations, and other things. Our perception cannot be trusted to tell us only facts. In our time neuroscientists are well aware of this and often point to our brain's wonderful capacity for plasticity. They (our brains) can be tricked and manipulated into all sorts of things, as is sometimes illustrated with *the rubber hand experiment*. This experiment is a mix of practical science and parlour tricks, in equal parts whimsical and poignant. If you want to know what it looks like there are plenty of short videos to choose from online. I'll wait here patiently if you want to take a break and explore.

Now imagine I conduct a similar experiment with you in VR. I tell you to raise your arm and as you do you watch your virtual arm move in front of your eyes. Next I'll ask you to rub the backs of

your hands together, as you feel the contact of skin to skin you simultaneously see your virtual hands doing the movement. Proprioception is your body's awareness of its own movement and place in space, and when confirmed by visual input, this is often perceived as reality. It feels true, even though you know it is not. This is called a phantom body sense. You shouldn't worry if you don't achieve a phantom body sense, or are unable to hold on to it if you do, I tend to think of it more as a direction than a destination. Just striving towards it changes something.

So from this we understand that tricking our brains is the work of mere minutes and more specifically our proprioceptive awareness can easily be tricked into believing in phantom limbs, even unconvincing rubber limbs.

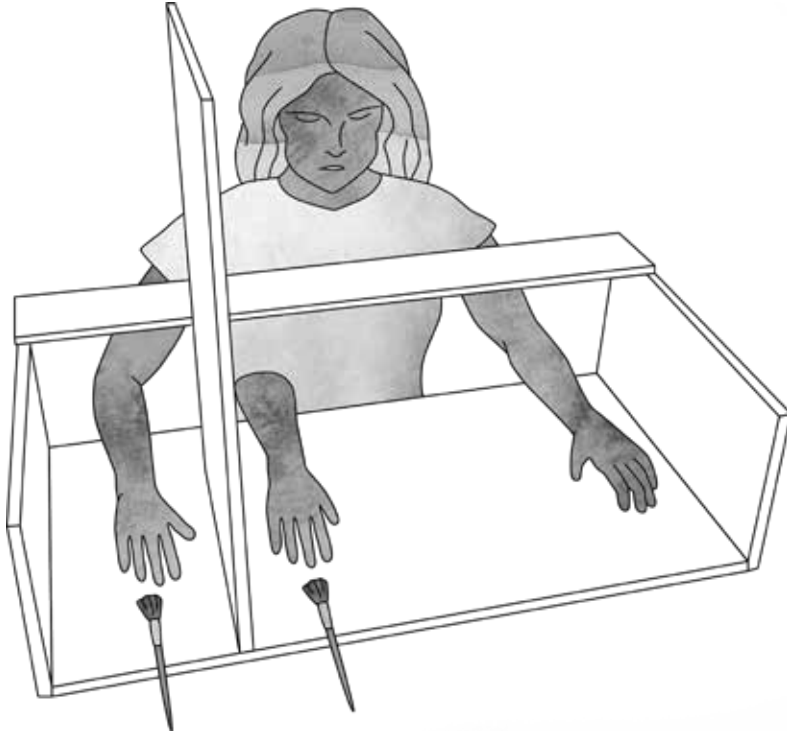
With this knowledge one can of course try and harness this effect for a more closely felt experience connected to a virtual character.

In VRchat¹, where I spend a lot of my time workshopping and playing with larp-adjacent formats, you are fully immersed in the virtual space. Your virtual representation, should you choose a human-like form, has arms and legs and isn't just a floating head and torso like on many other social VR platforms. Audio is spatially dependent and if you are close to another player you can whisper and hear them well, but if you move further off you'll have to shout. It is easy to manoeuvre intuitively and act as a virtual body in a virtual space because it mirrors the real spaces we normally move around in. While there are controls and menus, we rely on our bodies to navigate and if I want to grab something I just reach out and grab it with my hand. If I want to see what's behind the corner, I move my legs and turn my head until I see it.

If you look at your virtual arm as you move it up and down, you can transfer your proprioception to the virtual arm, just as with

¹ VRchat is an app for social VR, it lets you connect with friends and random people. You can explore all kinds of virtual worlds and avatars. You can find me there, under the user name: Joffe

the rubber hand experiment. Stand in front of a virtual mirror and move, and you'll feel it too. You are that virtual body, even if it looks like a skinny robot or a ginormous red cat.



I would start any play in VR with onboarding like this. From small movements to big ones. From individual exercises to groups of two and two and three and three. Once you are feeling fully present in your own virtual skin you can also be more sensitive and perceptive to other virtual players.

The exercises themselves are simple and mostly adapted from very basic dance or acting practices. Move, register how it feels, try not to think too much and let the body lead the head rather than the other way around. The purpose is to make players so closely connected to their virtual characters that they become fused. This lovely entanglement of humans and code is one aspect of why I think of it as a new materialist practice.

New materialist ontology (as Karen Barad² describes it) says that we, all beings, objects and matter, come into being by entangled interactive relating. Relationships (in the widest possible sense of the word) are impossible to divide from being. Beings are made from relationships on a molecular level. The dancing couples of energy and matter cannot be separated, not from each other nor from the dance.

I think this can be nicely illustrated by using the metaphor of larp. This character is mighty and powerful because other characters obey and simper to it. That character is funny because others laugh at its jokes. One character is seductive because other characters desire it. In larp it is obvious that we make each other. Even in the immersion closet, it is the relationship between player and story that makes it narrative immersion and not just some guy hiding because they need a break.

...

In 1986 feminist theorist Donna Haraway wrote a text called the *Cyborg Manifesto*, triggering a whole wave of cyberfeminism, artistry and activism online. Though the online world has changed much since then, what we have today would look different if not for this text, and I've been inspired by a quote from it in naming the practice of workshopping for embodiment of virtual players; *Mud in the Machine*.

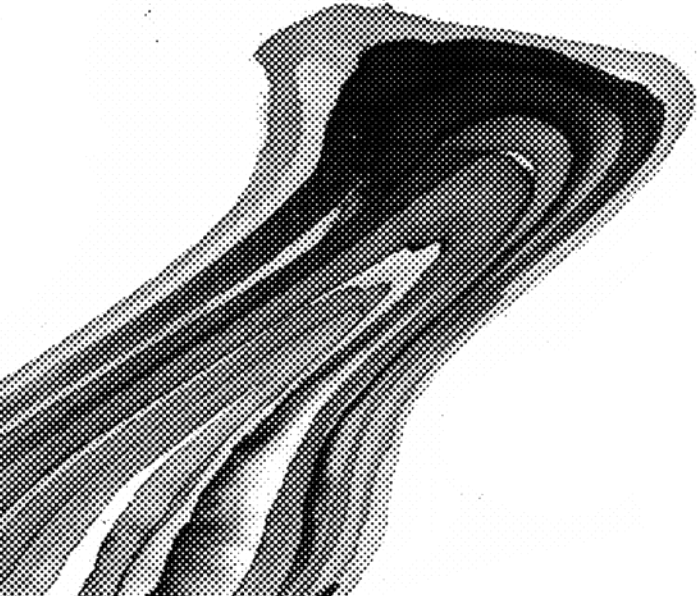
“The cyborg would not recognise the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust.”

If we can feel embodied and present in VR, we can larp there. If we can larp we can change the systems and the people within it to something a little more self-aware. We can bring a little bit of a

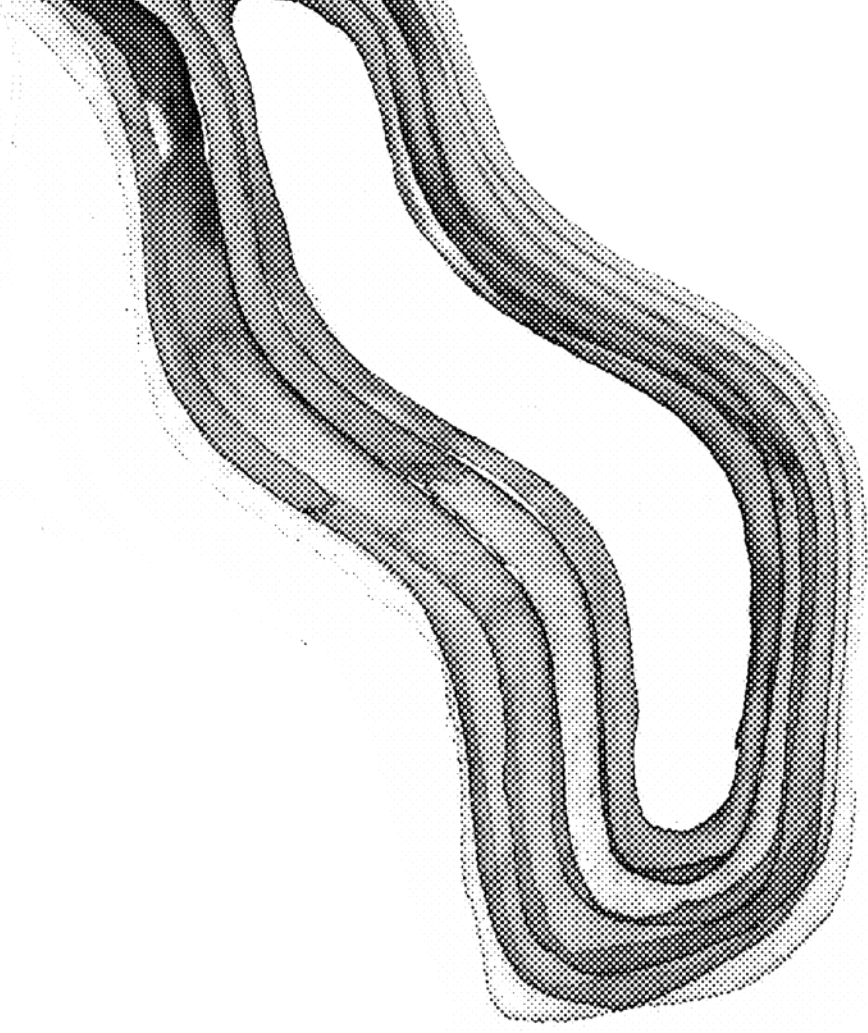
2 Barad, Karen, *Meeting the Universe Halfway; Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Duke University Press, 2007

larp-Eden to VR. Larping can do many things and has allowed us to understand and even change how we interact with each other and the world. The worlds of virtual reality are built on the same transhumanist logic and capitalistic fever dreams that built Twitter/X, Instagram, Kakao Talk and Weibo. The attention economy rules and has the planet by the scruff of its neck because attention generates profit for a few, and profit is more valued than sustainability. This state of affairs can be opposed. If we can, in any way, counteract these cultures by creating experiences that do not scale well, that value impact overreach, that is something; a small act of resistance. Then I believe we are creating something valuable. Change the story, change the world.





marrow



Within larp thoughts
(investigations)

Hanne Grasmø

Hanne Grasmø is a university lecturer at Molde University College, and a doctoral researcher at the Centre of Excellency in Game Culture Studies, Tampere. Her PhD centers around embodied role-play and sexual emotions. She holds an MA in sociology with a background in sexology, education, theatre and larp design. For over 25 years Grasmø has written about larp, founded the Knutepunkt conferences, wrote the first Nordic larp book and a larp monograph.

Neurospicy Larpers

Role-play as a Method for Working with
Neurodivergent Youth with Challenging
Behavior Regarding Sexuality

Neurospicy youngsters and adults are telling researchers how role-playing has been an important part for them in training skills, exploring social relations, and making friends. Both larping and tabletop are meaningful leisure activities for people on the autism spectrum and folks with ADHD. A lot of us larpers are *neurospicy*, a more positive and inclusive term than using the diagnosis mentioned. But how can social workers and educators use this knowledge professionally for challenged and vulnerable youth? That was the question that emerged from Oslo Metropolitan University for a Master's course about Sexually Challenging Youth on the Spectrum. Oslo Met wanted to make a Reader for the course, explaining all the methods available for professionally working with this group of youth, and they wanted to include role-playing as one of those methods. By doing a literature review, this essay was my answer, now re-written for the KP-book 2025:

Introduction

Tabletop role-playing games and larp are forms of social role-playing where participants play characters in a fictional world. In role-playing, we use our imagination and creativity together with others, acting out a situation or adventure in an agreed-upon setting or world. It could be a story we create within a pre-existing role-playing game (such as *Dungeons & Dragons/DnD*, *Vampire: The Masquerade*, or the Norwegian *Fabula*) or something specially designed by us or others. The fictional world we play in might be a fantasy realm, science fiction, set in a historical period, or resemble our own world.

The games themselves are not dangerous, as some educators still seem to think - even if the worlds and stories we create can be scary or violent. However, some individuals, especially those who are vulnerable, may develop an addiction to various activities - including gaming. It is not the gaming itself that is harmful but rather

the potential addiction that can arise. This phenomenon can partly be explained by dopamine release, although this is more associated with social media than with games in general - particularly not analog role-playing games.

Research over the past 30 years shows that role-playing games (and games in general) do not make people more violent or criminal. This also applies to neurodivergent individuals. It is also essential to distinguish between different types of gaming: Playing role-playing games alone on a computer, online with others, or playing in the same physical space without screens. The latter provides an opportunity for direct feedback from others and a space to set and practice social norms.

When it comes to content, the same principles apply as they do for movies, books, and theater: Not all content is suitable for everyone. This is especially challenging for adults with cognitive and/or post-traumatic issues. It is important for those around them to assess what is appropriate for different kinds of individuals. Processing dangerous, violent, or criminal thoughts and themes through role-playing games is, of course, much safer than watching real news or experiencing such events in real life. Generally, it is essential for adults to engage in the world of vulnerable children and youth and to discuss their experiences.

Role-playing in Education

Role-playing is a well-known tool in education (Bowman & Standiford, 2015; Algayres, 2018; Westborg, ref; Gjedde, 2014; Pomerantz, 2003; Harviainen, 2016), simulation (Harviainen, 2018), and therapeutic and clinical contexts (e.g., Morin, 2012; Snow & Maeng-Cleveland, 2009; Standiford, 2014; Burns, 2014; Gianotten & Reisman, 2017; Lee, Jacklin & Boyer, 2012; Ogden, 2017). This article examines two traditions of fantasy role-playing for recrea-

tional use, where participants play characters in a designed and planned fiction: Tabletop role-playing games and larp.

Participating in role-playing within fantasy worlds offers joy, exploration, and meaning for children, youth, and adults. We provide an overview of how analog fantasy role-playing games can serve as tools for social and therapeutic work with children and adolescents. There is a rapidly growing body of knowledge showing how role-playing games can promote personal development and transformation (Meriläinen, 2012; Bowman, 2022; Bowman, 2015; Daniau, 2016; Aron, 2012)

What Happens to Us in Role-playing Games?

When we participate in fantasy role-playing games, we use our creative, social, and emotional skills in interaction with others. Participants act out a situation or adventure in an agreed-upon setting or world, designed for entertainment, art, or education. Gary Alan Fine (1983) conducted an ethnographic study of a D&D club in the USA in the 1980s, defining role-playing as “any game that allows players to assume imaginary characters and operate with a degree of freedom in an imaginary environment.”

Role-players act through their fictional characters, which may be similar to, or vastly different from, themselves. Every role-playing game has rules - or a “system” - and various techniques to portray elements like magic, violence, and romance (Grasmo & Stenros, 2022). While imagination is central to role-playing, it’s distinct from “just fantasizing” because role-playing is always collaborative and intentional. Games with rules create a defined time-space unit, allowing participants to “lose themselves” in the process and act without self-consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi & Bennett, 1971). In tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs), participants sit around a table with a game master (GM) and two to six players, telling a

story or adventure together, where dice rolls commonly determine how successful the team is in various choices. Larp (live-action role-playing) came to Norway in the 1980s (Grasmo, 1998) and uses the physical world to represent the game world. It is collaborative, physical, and takes place in prepared locations where a handful to hundreds of participants live and act in a fictional world for hours or days (Grasmo, Sihvonen, Stenros, in press).

Sometimes the setting and costumes are “360” (Koljonen, 2019), designed to be as realistic as possible, while other times it follows the “black box” tradition, without costumes or props. There is no audience; everyone participates. Often, organizers or designers are present to conduct workshops, oversee the game’s progress, and facilitate a shared debrief afterward.

Unlike theater, larp is based on co-creation and improvisation; there is no script, but each player has a written background for their character. Players are simultaneously “actors” and the audience, a concept called “first-person audience” (Montola & Holopainen, 2012), meaning they witness their own play from within. Role-playing games have proven effective for developing social skills, increasing self-awareness, and promoting creativity. For children and youth on the autism spectrum, fantasy role-playing especially supports social interaction, empathy, perspective-taking, and communication skills (Fein, 2016). It also trains problem-solving and stress management, offering a “break” from oneself by being someone else temporarily (Helbig, 2019). Role-playing games can also be used for emotional regulation training.

There are specialized training programs for teachers and social workers to become “Geek Therapists” employing tabletop and larp. Worldwide, there is a growing body of professionals using role-play methods to work with neurodivergent youth, as well as more research on and with neurospicy players.

The ASD Role-player: Training Social Skills and Regulating Emotions

As early as 1984, Kallam (Baker, Turner & Kotera, 2022) observed that a group of “mildly handicapped” youth, who played D&D role-playing games twice a week for nine weeks, gradually developed better self-efficacy and the ability to handle creative and complex situations.

Elizabeth Fein (2016) conducted a study at a role-playing camp for autistic youth and found that the fundamental structure of role-playing aligns with the needs of the participants’ “cultural ecology for organizing themselves and their interactions with others.” The character sheets and rules for social interaction provided a meaningful framework for communication and participation. Fein noted that because the games often feature battles between good and evil, and characters with extraordinary powers and magic, this resonated with the participants.

A later study (Valorozo-Jones, 2021) also found increased inclusion and development of teamwork skills in a group of five neurodivergent tabletop role-players. Visuri (2024) conducted an extensive study on larp and autism involving 10 experienced autistic larpers. She investigated why there appears to be a large proportion of autistic larpers, even though immersing oneself in a character and playing in a fictional world requires multiple levels of social interaction, complex coordination, and handling of unforeseen events. Visuri (2024) found that autonomy, inclusion, and friendship (also with non-autistic individuals) are key benefits of larp. One reason for this is that since it is “just a game,” larp serves as a safe space to test social boundaries. Participants highlighted that bodily feedback and support systems in cases of “social prediction” errors contribute to both social confidence and personal growth. The conclusion is that larp is an “optimal autistic brave-space” (Visuri, 2024), from a cognitive theory perspective, where partici-

pants feel safe and courageous enough to test social boundaries - thereby learning better “social predictions.” Experimentation and learning from mistakes facilitate bodily learning. From the participants’ perspective, larping contributes to increased social confidence and improved well-being in daily life outside of larping. One reason larp works well for individuals on the autism spectrum is that autistic players have been involved in shaping larp from the beginning, helping create a space that suits them, according to Visuri (2024).

An important aspect of larp is that it usually includes a debrief afterward, providing an opportunity to address mistakes and misunderstandings and to learn more. Other larp researchers also highlight the debrief as a space where development and transformation can occur (Westborg, 2022; see also Bowman & Hugaas, 2018, Bowman, Diakolambrianou & Brind 2024).

Research on using tabletop role-playing games and larp for learning, transformation, and therapy shows that fantasy role-playing is effective for developing social skills and creating social networks (Helbig, 2019). It can also reduce bullying better than traditional empathy training (Bagès, Hoareau & Alain, 2020) and is an effective tool for transformation and identity work (Aron, 2012; Rusch & Phelps, 2020; Bowman & Braid, 2022). Role-playing games create a structured “safe space” to explore psychopathologies (Dare et al., 2021).

Baker, Turner & Kotera (2022) suggest that the narrative structures in D&D make fantasy role-playing games particularly suited for therapeutic work. The stories involve overcoming adversity, exploring alternative identities, and reflecting on aspects of mental health recovery (Kerr et al., 2020). The therapeutic effects of larp have also been explored in a project for Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) in groups (Varrette et al., 2023; Barnstein, 2022). Barnstein concludes that CBT-oriented larp is a useful component

in the treatment of various mental disorders. This case study tested a clinical CBT manual in a group of young adults and showed that larping had positive effects on mental health.

Another field where role-play and larp have shown positive effects is identity work and exploring both gender and sexual identity (Sihvonen & Stenros 2019), especially with the more and more common deliberate design of erotic larps. Working with challenging and vulnerable youth would benefit from including sexuality as a theme in the role-playing games.

Sexuality and Romance in Role-Playing Games

Sexuality and romance are common themes in role-playing games, particularly in the Nordic live-action role-play (larp) tradition (Stenros & Montola, 2000; Grasmø & Stenros, 2022; Grasmø, Sihvonen & Stenros, in press). In these fictional worlds, characters may fall in love, engage in transgressive sexual activities, or even commit acts of assault (see **Transgressions in Role-Play**: Bowman & Stenros, 2018/2024). However, what is allowed in these stories must be agreed upon by the players beforehand. This is especially critical for vulnerable groups, where an adult therapist, teacher, or social worker may need to take responsibility.

In larps with erotic content, players can engage in sexual and romantic interactions as their characters in various ways (Stenros, 2013). Although physical genital contact is not acted out, some instances may include performative “theater-sex,” with clothes on (Grasmø & Stenros, 2022). Other common methods for simulating sex include: Verbal descriptions, shoulder or hand massages (Wieslander, 2004), or using specially designed “meta-techniques” that fit the story and the player group (Grasmø, 1998).

A crucial aspect of Nordic erotic larp is calibration among players

(Grasmo & Stenros, 2022, Koljonen, 2020), which involves setting boundaries before the game, taking brief pauses to recalibrate during play, and using physical cues like saying “no,” “yes,” “less,” “more,” or “stop”. This makes larp a particularly effective way to practice social and emotional skills related to sexuality. Since everything occurs in a fictional setting, participants are not exposed to real risk.

Role-playing and larp are also especially suited for exploring queer identities (Sihvonen & Stenros, 2019; Baird, 2022/2024; Grasmo & Stenros, 2022). Many players report that they first experimented with their gender or sexual identity in a larp setting (Sihvonen & Stenros, 2019; Grasmo, 2023). For trans individuals, experiencing their gender identity embodied in this way has been important and empowering (Baird, 2022; Baird & Bowman, 2023; Grasmo, Sihvonen & Stenros, in press).

A recent study (Grasmo, NACS 2023 and Fagdag NYT conference, 2024) collected 43 anonymous accounts on how larpers experience sexual desire when in character during a larp. Preliminary findings show that for many players, sexual desire is often heightened during larp compared to everyday life. For some, having sex as a character in a fantasy role-play setting is the only way they can achieve sexual arousal; this was particularly the case for two neurodivergent larpers.

Role-playing is already a tool in professional practice for addressing sexual issues and sexual education (e.g., Mendoza, 2020; Lescano, Brown & Johnson, 2003). Combining sexual education with fantasy role-playing is also seen in the annual workshop “Clitical Games”, an annual event in US, where health professionals and role-play designers collaborate to create role-playing games for sex education and therapy.

Erotic larps always have an age limit of 18+. When Grasmo and

Stenros examined the design of 25 Nordic larps (Grasmo & Stenros, 2022) with erotic content, they found that these experiences can be transgressive, adult, emotionally intense, and even shocking. However, the game is bound by rules, ensuring player safety, with constant renegotiation, and with the option to stop or leave the game at any time.

Integrating role-play with complex sexual themes can be safer than discussing them directly. In this way, participants have the alibi of a character and a fictional world, with agreed-upon rules to rely on.

The Way Forward

My literature review shows that there are already a number of published articles that show how beneficial roleplaying is - and can be - for neurospicy people. Most of the research is about leisure, so the next step would be to study professional use of role-play games for function-variant youth.

The results from the research so far seem to emphasize social skill training and friendship. I imagine that there is an abundance of potential for professionals to explore. I will especially encourage social workers and educators to dare go into delicate themes like sexuality and darker themes like violence, war, and loss. My key insight is that the potential is great when we co-create and immerse into fantasy worlds with problematic, difficult, and dangerous situations. The larps and tabletop games do not need to be made “safe” nor “appropriate” by the professional, but rather address troublesome themes in breaks or debriefs. Unfortunately, few professionals know how to do that.

The biggest challenge currently is, that even if there is education available for professionals, very few have any knowledge of roleplay and larping nor how to professionally use these tools. My

hope is that both larpers in professional roles, as well as the larp community at large, manage to reach out further with the knowledge we already have to promote role-playing as a professional tool. I hope we can pave the road for organized larp- and tabletop activities, therapy, and training for those of us who are neurospicy, and introduce our hobby to those who haven't tried it yet.

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Simon Brind

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Failure Modes in Character Writing

Imagine a long hallway: The walls seem to be painted black, but this is a fictional space and hues are mutable. It resolves in the end to a shade that is possibly closer to charcoal grey. Portraits line the walls; variations of the same face look out from their frames. Some are sad, some seem delighted, others look tired, dangerous, or just worn out. The further down the hallway we go, the younger the portraits get. Each picture has a little plaque next to it, with a name, a title, and some dates. If we go back far enough they might have skill points, primary attributes, or even an armour class. There are many pictures in my version of this hallway; it stretches far enough that sometimes it seems like standing between two mirrors. Each portrait represents a character. My first observation is that some of the portraits are better than others; indeed, I have turned some of the portraits to face the wall, all the better to be forgotten.

This paper looks at both character *design* and character *writing* with particular reference to things that can go wrong during the process. Design comes before writing; first we create the bare bones structure, and then we flesh it out.¹ I also consider content design, which Winters describes as a way of thinking about how to “give the audience what they need, at the time they need it and in a way they expect.”²

Singularity is the point at the center of a black hole where mass is compressed so that it is infinitely small, resulting in infinite gravity and density. We cannot get close to it unprotected or we would be obliterated. Diegetic singularity is the narrative equivalent. It is the madness of the artist, the sweeping power of The Story, and the chaos of the emergent system of a larp. The character describes the role we play. It is both a created text and the exoskeleton that we wear as larpers to allow us to enter the game without that

1 Johanna Koljonen et al, “Larp Design. Creating role-play experiences”, 192.

2 Sarah Winters, “What Is Content Design?”

sense of ‘us’ being crushed³. A character gives us permission to engage with the story world (agency) and the ability to do so in a way that might be incongruent with our own identity (alibi).

As a community of practice we have been writing about this subject for a while. To acknowledge this thinking, I am going to begin with a literature review of the various articles published about larp character writing, character design, and about the processes of managing character creation. I will give a brief survey of the processes used by larp designers and writing teams today (2025). This is based on a mixture of responses received to a question on social media, my recent experience of writing with and for several large scale larps, conversations with other designers, and my own project management processes.

I will offer a series of ‘failure modes:’ things that can go wrong with a character, or as a part of the character writing process. Where possible I will try to identify where and how the current processes are dealing with the failure modes, how they can be mitigated / ways of avoiding various failure modes. However it would be reductive to suggest a single unified method to craft the *best* larp character for every player of every larp. Each larp makes different demands of the written character – if indeed they have pre-written characters at all – and each larper has a different relationship with, and a subjective reading of the text of these characters⁴.

Literature Review

In this section, where multiple writers have commented on the same topic I will group their thoughts together, thus this is not a chronological review but rather a thematic one. That being said,

³ Unless it is a very ‘thin’ character, and being crushed is what we seek.

⁴ Simon Brind, “Combat Narratology: Strategies for the resolution of narrative crisis in participatory fiction”, 166.

I'll begin with some archaeology. Starting with the first KP book and Jacobsson's opening statement, "it is hard to give general advice on character development because conditions vary."⁵ This predicts the now accepted wisdom that each larp is different, there is no single formula that describes the objectively best character. For example Jacobsson describes a collaborative character creation process involving questionnaires combined with a player-led selection process based on personality over profession.

Some contributors have general ideas about what constitutes 'good'. "Well-defined characters that are consistently communicated to players are an important ingredient in a potentially successful game."⁶ Others start to offer methods and frameworks for how to deliver 'good.' For example, based on his work into computer character design, Lankoski also offers the "Bone Structure"⁷ table. This breaks the character into three aspects, one which is a physiological description of the character (other than their age, I suggest this is less useful for larp character creation, perhaps) The other two are sociological (this like class, occupation, education, religion etc) and psychological. (goals, frustrations, temperament, attitudes, obsessions ,,,)

These seem roughly contiguous with Torner's basic and diegetic identity markers except Torner puts an emphasis on the verbs associated with the character - what they are able to do during play⁸. This will come up later (See *The Problem of the broken verb.*)

Jarl strips this back to basics suggesting a dramatic archetype (as distinct from the Jungian version) and a Personality Tripod - three

5 Holger Jacobsson, "Developing a Character". 16.

6 Petri Lankoski, "Character Design Fundamentals for Role-Playing Games." 139.

7 Petri Lankoski, "Character Design Fundamentals for Role-Playing Games." 143.

8 Evan Torner, "Designing a Character Description," 216-217.

personality characteristics that describe the character⁹ whereas Nielsen and Urhøj¹⁰ propose a typology method for creation based on the Jungian archetypes, Myers-Briggs, and the work of John Beebe to connect them. Teteau-Surel suggests a similar approach using the major arcana from tarot decks as a random selector for an archetype¹¹. All of these are useful approaches for designing the psychological frame of an individual character.

Most characters do not exist in isolation, and Lankoski presents a method derived from emotion theory and writing for drama suggesting that a character needs well-defined goals and functions, that these should be multi-dimensional, and that some conflict or potential for conflict creates play. Lankoski also discusses redundancy of conflict – to allow for dropouts – and introduces the idea of orchestration as a way to describe seeding plot through the relationship between the characters. Again, whilst not true for every larp, this approach seems to be foundational.

Fatland extends this with the idea of Incentives for play - ensuring there are reasons for the characters to be present in the fiction. To interact with one another and to continue to interact with one another¹². Whilst Temte reminds us that being overly prescriptive “with character descriptions that almost dictate how the player is to react in any given situation, you effectively restrict player agency.”¹³

Returning to the matter of connections, Nilsson makes an observation about the interrelationship between characters, that they often need the other characters to be aware of and play up or play

9 Morgan Jarl, “Creating a character A summary of a process with exercises and advice.” 167.

10 Charles Bo Nielsen and Hanne Urhøj, “Typology in Character Creation”, 31-32.

11 Leila Teteau-Surel, “Tarot for character design”, 242-243.

12 Eirik Fatland, “Incentives as tools of larp dramaturgy”, 148-149.

13 Bjørn Flindt Temte, “The narrative paradox”, 129.

out aspects of another's character that would otherwise be lost: A character with low self-esteem and problems opening up to people on has an interesting arc if someone has reason to and makes the effort to get close. The character who is a "Good Leader" needs to have subordinates who follow, and by extension, co-players who play those qualities up¹⁴. Without these connections, both characters fail. Hatherley tells us "every character must need or be needed by at least one other character in the game. Preferably more than one."¹⁵

Stenros, Andresen, and Nielsen note "When the characters are created by the *organizers*, the most obvious benefit is control. The designers have a full picture of all characters and how they relate to each other. They can be sure of the consistency of story, of quality, of vision. This also enables them to achieve any kind of a balance between different characters of groups."¹⁶

Whilst it has been around for ages, the idea of assigning characters to multiple groups was documented by Fatland as the *Three Affiliations Model* that derived from the larp *1942: A character is a member of multiple groups: a working group, a family group, a social group*¹⁷. As an approach it has clearly been adopted as a good way of ensuring redundancy of play: *A House, a Year, a Path*, and a social club.

Some larps provide pre-written characters, but allow players to materially change their characters ceding authorial control for a guarantee if not for playability, at least that the character could fit the experience the players were looking for¹⁸. As Svanevik notes,

14 Gustav Nilsson. "Your character is not your own", 158.

15 Steve Hatherley, "Writing Freeform Characters."

16 Jaakko Stenros, Martin Eckhoff Andresen, and Martin Nielsen. "The Mixing Desk of Larp: History and Current State of a Design Theory."

17 Eirik Fatland, "1942 & The Three Affiliations Model."

18 Charles Bo Nielsen, "Loyalty to character." 262.

“from a designer’s perspective, this open approach to character writing seems to work best for loosely designed, sandbox style games.”¹⁹ Some traditions assume players will create their own characters, this is a common approach in the German and UK traditions²⁰. Thomas introduces a hybrid system where players choose one or more ‘tags’ that are used by the designers as a guide to understand what themes the players were interested in²¹.

Lasilla observes “campaign characters get to evolve in a long term timeline,” and this is an important distinction²² because that evolution happens in play. Whilst there is some crossover in failure modes between pre-written and player originated characters, the latter form is largely outside of the scope of this chapter.

On the matter of character length, Pettersson observes that “Human beings can only remember a limited number of details; as long as all the important information is there, short is better than long.”²³ This is one of the most subjective aspects of character writing. Some cultures are used to long, detailed characters extending to many pages, others are used to writing their own, or receiving a pre-written character of no more than a thousand words. Some black box larps offer a single photograph or a random object as the entire basis for a character. We have seen characters rendered in 140 characters, or in three words. My observation based on my personal practice is that shorter characters are harder to write. This is connected to Petterson’s advice, “make sure to include only information relevant to the larp.”²⁴ A writer in full creative mode may generate beautiful yet superfluous text (see the *problem of poetry*).

19 Martine Svanevik, “Response to Charles B. Nielsen.” 266.

20 Monika Weißenfels, “Telling Character Stories.” 184.

21 Ian Thomas, “Wing and a Prayer — Stress and Structure: Getting emotional in the crucible of a wartime simulation.”

22 Katri Lasilla, “Larp Campaign Director’s A-Z.” 74.

23 Juhana Pettersson, “Basics of Character Design.” 194.

24 Juhana Pettersson, “Basics of Character Design.” 203.





I'd like to turn now to process management. Van der Heij makes the point that this is one of the most time-consuming tasks. This is a particular issue when you are writing at scale. All written characters need to be checked and edited, or character consistency and quality may vary²⁵. (see *The problem of the graverobber*)

Right back at the beginning, Jacobsson made reference to “mass production of characters”²⁶, and it is a version of this process that is described as the *Seven Step Model*²⁷. They go on to explain the problem of creating twenty five great characters, fifty okay characters, and then running out of creative energy²⁸ but offer a method to resolve this. This was the process used for larps like *Fairweather Manor* and seems to have been adopted in one form or another by other large larps. This method was further developed by Šumar²⁹ who suggests sorting characters into primary groups and designing that group structure first, then writing the characters, including a short blurb, but not their relationships before finally moving on to a planned relationship structure³⁰.

So to summarise, there are different approaches to writing individual characters, an understanding that the relationships between them are usually important, and an acknowledgement that the process of writing a lot of characters is time consuming. Yet some of them are still not very good. I will move on now to survey and summarise some of the reasons why a character might not work out.

25 Karijn Van der Heij, "Who creates the characters?" 205.

26 Holger Jacobsson, "Developing a character." 16.

27 Anders Gredal Berner et al. "The Seven Steps Model." 70-72.

28 Anders Gredal Berner et al. "Seven Phases for Character Creation" 73.

29 My original note here read "He is a comrade and thus beyond reproach" which of course is both true and yet also at the root of so many of the issues on the left. Anarchists are very good at thinking about structure and process.

30 Edin Janković Šumar, "Efficient Character Writing for Big Teams." 221.

Failure Modes

In this section I will list and describe some common failure modes. I have tried to group these failure modes into groups but I acknowledge that the taxonomy is imprecise and there is often an overlap between modes. Ryan notes that “a character is a tool for role play, a failed character is one that prevents play,”³¹ but a failed character is distinct from a bad character. These failure modes include examples from both categories.

Failures of Process

The problem of scale

Mass production of characters implies a production line approach; writers are asked to generate many characters to a tight deadline. In most cases writers are volunteers. If they are being paid for their work it is likely to be a fixed amount per character or a cents per word value far below that they could expect as a game writer. Many writing teams bring on new and untested writers and it is good that they do so. We need to make opportunities for new writers and develop people’s skills. However these things combine with the vagaries of life. Sometimes writers are unable to deliver, or what they produce is not suitable, or sometimes writers discover at the deadline that what they thought would be easy actually isn’t easy. This is the problem of scale. When characters are not written on time, someone else has to write more characters. There is a knock-on effect from this that causes any number of additional failure modes.

Whilst at least one larp designer deals with this by writing a hundred or more characters by themselves, this is not a scalable or sustainable solution. The most obvious solution here is one of project

31 Ryan Hart, Zoom interview with author.

management. Writers failing to deliver or failing to deliver to quality should not be a surprise. Having an early deadline for an initial character gives organisers some sense of how an individual writer works, but there is no hard and fast rule here.

Correspondence also noted that time management, particularly when dealing with different writing cultures is critical. A part of that is that writers are inclined to being writers and will usually refuse to stay within a maximum length; fun for them, but less easy for editors and reviewers to manage³². Getting people to stick to format, and to a word count, and to deliver to time takes project management effort.

The Problem of Burn Out

Connected to the problems associated with writing many characters, some larp writers will deliver to a deadline even when they should not. Whilst not always as obvious as the problem of scale, it can lead to the same increases in other failure modes, a loss of critical senses so that they are unaware that the characters they are turning in are objectively less good than they should be, or it can lead to burn out. This is not a term that should be used lightly, but there have been numerous instances of experienced larp designers working too long and too hard to hit a deadline at the expense of their own health. It is not an easy fix. Recovery times are long. Worst, and possibly most common, is that the person in charge of the project is the one who burns out. Self care is a radical act³³. We need to treat ourselves with the same care and respect as we treat all of our volunteers.

32 The irony here is not lost on me. At the time of writing this footnote I am about six thousand words over the limit for this article. Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.

33 After Lorde, „Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.“ Audrey Lorde, “A Burst of Light”, 130.

The problem of unplayability

“Willy’s Chocolate Experience³⁴”

Sometimes a character is written that is objectively not very good. An inexperienced writer, or inexperienced team publishes a set of characters that they are super proud of or invested in, and players get hold of the text and don’t know how to react. Someone uses AI to generate the characters and can’t see the problem with the text that the machine language learning module has spat out. This is awful and awkward and (fortunately) quite rare. Getting people to look at a draft character (or characters) who are not a part of the writing team always helps. Playtesting, if you are able to do it, is also excellent for quality assurance.

The problem of poetry

Related to this is my own weakness, the Problem of Poetry. A writer in full creative mode may generate beautiful yet superfluous text: Poetic language, or a long rambling anecdote designed to evoke a specific childhood memory. Some character sheets are designed to be diegetic, these take the form of letters, diaries, copies of bills of sale. Some are written in the voice of an unreliable narrator and the reader is expected to understand that what they are being told about the character is not objectively true, but rather the opinion of the character themselves. These approaches are less helpful for players, particularly those playing in a second or third language. If the design of the larp *needs* this approach, then I suggest that it also requires a very good editor to ensure that the text is readable, and if not, one who is able to lead the writer to kill their darlings³⁵.

³⁴ *Willy’s Chocolate Experience*, was an immersive family experience offered in Glasgow, Scotland in 2024. It was a failure that went viral. It did not deliver on anything it promised and it appeared to rely on AI generated concepts rather than good design.

³⁵ When necessary, and only after an argument.

The problem of Chekhov's Six Shooter

"If in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired. Otherwise don't put it there."³⁶

Consider a character who is written with extensive reference to a failed relationship or an estranged partner. It is a writerly technique of giving the player insight into a character, but it is a risky approach if the player is not clear on whether this is backstory or foreshadowing. There is a failure mode to be found anywhere where a character is searching the larp for something they believe to be a plot, but which is actually backstory.

Failure pertaining to players

The problem of the reader

"You are one subjective motherfucker."

Torner identifies three modes that we can use to explain where a character comes from, a literary mode which the player needs to analyse as text, a procedural-performative mode, which is perhaps a little more dramaturgical and constraining, and an emergent mode which the player discovers as a result of playing the character³⁷.

This is a useful starting point, but I'd like to consider to what extent the player performs literary analysis versus to what extent they are making an entirely subjective value judgement. As writers we cede control of the text to the participant at the moment they

36 Cited by Brian M. Delaney „Chekhov's gun and Nietzsche's hammer: The biotechnological revolution and the sociology of knowledge“, 167-174.

37 Evan Torner, "Literary and Performative Imaginaries - Where Characters Come From."

receive said text³⁸ and we can't control or predict what they are going to do with it, how they are going to understand it, or even whether they are going to read the thing at all! Even with pre-written characters, many players subtly or not-so-subtly, change their characters, either deliberately or otherwise³⁹. This failure mode - which I call The problem of the reader - is not one we can easily mitigate.

It is resolved for larps where players create or co-create their own characters. If they have ownership of the text then there is only one reading, and it is both the player's and the authors as they are one and the same. However for larps that require organiser written characters the solution here is to write characters that are readable, possibly separating the information that must be assimilated from that which adds depth. Break out the 'things the player absolutely has to know'⁴⁰ and the 'things we absolutely need this character to do during the larp. Facilitated workshops are also useful - if you have time - so that if a player has a radically different understanding of the character you are aware of it before the larp starts, or you can course correct. I also suggest making characters optionally available as audio or video for those who prefer to assimilate information in different ways.

38 For *Gothic* (2023, 2024) we made extensive use of footnotes to communicate dramaturgical notes to the players. Based on the feedback forms, some players were not fond of this approach whereas others adored it.

39 Juhana Pettersson, "Basics of Character Design." 194.

40 As should be clear by now, I have a personal fondness for putting things into footnotes; being able to address the player/reader directly, just as I am doing to you now, can be a very powerful tool for ensuring that they understand the nuance.

Failure of Communication Design

The problems of length

“Measure twice, cut once”

Enghoff suggests that there is a sweet spot for the length of a character. Too short and it is only a skeleton which fails to deliver any sense of authorial intent. A skeleton character can be a useful starting point for a character that is created by the player, or co-created, indeed as Holkar states, it can be the best of both worlds⁴¹ So the failure mode here is where the player is either not able to flesh out the skeleton, or when they take it in a direction that does not gel with the rest of the larp. This might not be a problem for some larps, but I argue that there needs to be a consistency of content. If some characters are skeletons and others more fully fleshed out then the failure mode starts to manifest. At the other end of Enghoff’s scale is the Zombie, where the player is drowning in facts and information leaving them with no room for “character interpretation and the joy of playing.”⁴² The former can be resolved with pre-play or workshoping with the support of co-players, or mitigated through careful design.

The problem of porridge

“She tried the first bowl, but it was too hot . . .”

However, there is an issue of subjectivity here. In some play cultures a character that isn’t ten pages long and laden with rich backstory would disappoint the player. In other places the idea that a larper may need to assimilate more than a paragraph or two is

41 Mo Holkar “Larp and Prejudice: Expressing, Erasing, Exploring, and the Fun Tax.” 211.

42 Martin Enghoff. “The good character description.” 158.

anathema. The ‘sweet spot’ therefore is hard to find. The mitigation I think is one of clear signposting. For example for *Shadows in Time*, the website⁴³ clearly states “The game relies heavily on the players being able to invest in reading the character material (~30 pages of character + the same amount of general materials).” Potential players know what they are signing up for and can make an informed decision about their ability to read and retain ten to fifteen thousand words of text.

Failures of Identify

The “Fishwife Problem”

Lasilla identifies a problem with a gender bias in pre-written characters, in that the leading characters are written for men and less important (supporting) characters for women⁴⁴. She states that this bias is “regardless of the writer’s gender.” For re-runnable Nordic larps (including those run as ‘blockbuster’ events) it has been common to write non-gendered characters. The pre-written characters available at *College of Wizardry* are written as gender neutral, with only an initial letter for their first name. For most characters in *Inside Hamlet* they offer a male and a female presenting name, although some characters are gendered for the purposes of that larp. There is, however, no restriction on players, so a person of any gender can take on a gendered character. Koljonen summarises the “fishwife problem”⁴⁵ as a (perceived) restriction of the agency of female characters as they were “often disconnected, by design, from the main narratives of the larps.” Whilst this was not a deliberate choice by the designers – most likely a reliance on tired fantasy tropes and a pseudo-medieval setting – it still made the larp less playable. At the time of writing I argue that a similar

43 <https://shadowsintime.weebly.com/sign-up.html>

44 Katri Lasilla, “Adventurous Romanticism: Enabling a Strong Adventurous Element in Larp”, 110-116.

45 Johanna Koljonen, “An introduction to bespoke larp design.” 25-26.

issue exists for older players, and that characters over 40 for women and over 50 for men are often without a connection to the plot(s) of the larp, because the writers do not understand how to write characters for this age group, either because they do not have the lived experience of people of this age, or because they are relying on a limited number of tropes.

The problem of the invisible (marginalised) identities

If, as I argue, there is a gender and an age bias in the creation of characters in larps, this is magnified for players with non-binary gender expressions, different sexualities, and for larpers of colour.^{46,47,48} Whilst some larps have been inclusive when it comes to players of colour, and of varying sexualities, often this has been done in the off-game space, by making a broad statement of inclusivity, rather than by including characters of colour or with varying genders and sexualities into the larp. An attempt to make larp more inclusive by explicitly removing stories and events that reference structural oppression has led to an erasure of players who have those lived experiences.^{49,50}

The mitigation here is to bring people from marginalised identities into your writing team, but not just to write marginalised stories, also let them write marginalised stories. Where you cannot recruit diverse writers, and even where you can, try to budget for and hire sensitivity readers. I want to quote Jamie MacDonald here, he writes, “As a sanity reader for queer characters. I cannot tell you how many times I’ve changed the backstory of a trans character from

46 Jonaya Kemper, “A Seat at the Feasting Table - A Call for Inclusivity in International Larp.” 209-221.

47 Kat Jones, Mo Halker, Jonaya Kemper, “Designing for intersectional identities.” 167-173.

48 Eric Wither Paisley, “Play the Gay Away - Confessions of a Queer Larper.”

49 Mo Holkar “Larp and Prejudice: Expressing, Erasing, Exploring, and the Fun Tax.” 98.

50 Martine Svanevik, “I Feel Released - How Designing for Inclusivity Might Mean Including Oppression.”

”you always knew you felt different” to a very specific story involving, say, a horse, a sunny day, and a revelation. These parts of characters can’t be cookie-cutter. Queerness is specific, and honestly I feel like every character is THAT specific regardless of identity.⁵¹ I think this piece of advice holds true across the board, not just for matters pertaining to diversity.

The problem of the fairy-demon-vampire-princess (“Your Mary Sue is Showing”)

For example, when players are encouraged to create their own characters there can *sometimes* be an imbalance. This is particularly common in a sandbox environment where the story-world is less well defined. *College of Wizardry* historically saw some player-created characters that were written in such a way that their presence affected the emergent story for others. The solution to this maybe an approvals process, a back and forth between player and organisers as suggested by Van der Heij⁵², however this may open up another failure mode . . .

The problem of nuance

“In which we acknowledge bias internalized, unconscious or otherwise.”

For character writing processes that ask for player requests or preferences, and for those which offer an approvals process for player originated material, sometimes marginalized players might need to change their character as written, or come up with an idea of their own that is a part of their liberatory process. In these instances any accusation of playing for attention, or of being a Mary Sue, is unfair, and potentially harmful. A lack of nuance is therefore a

51 Jamie Macdonald, Facebook Post, 2024.

52 Karijn Van der Heij, “Who creates the characters?” 210.

potential failure mode for any character request/approvals process. As organisers we need to consider why someone is requesting or creating their character in a specific way.

Failures of playability

The problem of the NPC

The American singer Halsey's viral video clip from 2021⁵³ reminded people that (in real life) the most important lesson a young person needs to learn is that they were not the main character in anyone else's story. The failure mode manifests when a character is not a main character *in their own story*⁵⁴. We can write someone who, at first glance, seems to be connected to the plots of the larp, and to other characters in the larp, but the connections don't have "main character energy". A well connected NPC is not the same as a well written PC. The question you can ask to identify this type of character is what would happen to the larp if this player didn't show up? If the impact of the larp is negligible, or if it can be easily resolved by a game master in less than ten minutes, then this character has a potential failure mode.

This is not a failure mode that can be mitigated unless it can be spotted, and some players may either hack the character, or take it in their stride. For other players though, this is a frustrating game waiting to happen. There are a few sub categories of the problem of the NPC, where a character as written lacks main character energy, or when they are not really a character at all.

The problem of the Quest Giver

"Is that an exclamation mark, or are you just pleased to see me?"

Related to the problem of the NPC is the tendency to conflate being

53 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I0oceeA1TBU>

54 Not every larper wants to be a primary protagonist.

central to many plots to the creation of a meaningful character. By overloading a character with all of the information and action they may end up being pushed into the role of quest-giver, thereby making them into an accidental NPC. This is a failure mode that can be resolved during the design phase, simply by identifying characters who may fall foul of it and moving responsibility elsewhere.

The Problem of Gandalf

“I was talking aloud to myself. A habit of the old: they choose the wisest person present to speak to.”

Sometimes we can create a character who seems at first glance to be really cool, one that many people want to play (at least in theory,) However if that character is not meaningfully connected to the larp, then there is a failure mode. Kangas’s example explains this: “Gandalf might be a cool and interesting character but if the larp is a romantic comedy set in a hobbit party, it might not be fun at all to play Gandalf since he is not connected to the core themes and probably has nothing interesting to do.”⁵⁵

The problem of the Service Top

“Me next! Hurt me!”

Some larps rely on some characters to play abusers. Mean girls at a school larp, abusive customers at a western-themed robot larp, decadent nobles in a country house. The failure mode here comes about when the player of the character feels like they have to make time and energy to be horrible to others at the expense of their own play. Sometimes this is because the character is one dimensionally abusive, sometimes because they don’t have any other significant call on their time other than to wallow in decadence.

55 Kaisa Kangas, Facebook Post. 2024.

This is the problem of the service top. Some players don't mind, of course, but I would argue that a character that feels like a function rather than an active character, is another NPC?

The Problem of the Broken Verb

Related to this is a failure mode that pertains to the larp design as a whole and so is harder to spot during the character writing and editing phase. Consider a character who is a television news presenter. They will research stories, have a film crew and will conduct interviews with other characters during the larp; asking difficult questions, exposing lies, speaking truth to power. Their verbs - those things that the player will be doing with their body during the larp - rely on the availability of the film crew and the ability to broadcast their news stories during the larp. If the technology fails, or the film crew do not show up, the character's verbs are broken. Whilst this can sometimes be mitigated during runtime, understanding the potential failure modes earlier may prevent this from happening.

Failures of Accuracy

The problem of history and consistency (“The Graverobber”)

When writing a character that belongs to a specific historical time some thought needs to be given to researching that period and checking the character for anachronisms. For example, a larp set in the UK in the 1930s should not have a resurrectionist character without a very good reason. The need to steal corpses from their graves for medical science came to an end in the middle of the 19th century⁵⁶.

56 Is it possible that only neurodiverse goths care about this sort of thing? Does it render the character unplayable? No. Does it take immersion, shove it into a sack, and sell it for sixpence around the back of the medical school? Yes, yes it does.

The problem of class

Related to an understanding of history, Nyberg reports of her experience playing at an Austen inspired larp was affected by the social class of her character,

“My character’s status required her to be present at the party of the gentry, but was too low for any hope of a romance plot. She couldn’t sneak into the kitchen either – and she was sternly turned away when she tried – because her status was too high.”⁵⁷

This failure mode has three aspects to it, one when the writers do not have a clear understanding of the (historical) class structure they are writing about, one where the other when the players do not understand, and a third where neither of them do. As a British person I have a pretty good understanding of how the British class system operates and has operated historically. I do not have an equivalent understanding of those structures in the Nordic countries. The character needs to specify the relationship within a social hierarchy, make the lines clear, whilst at the same time it needs to be playable in both directions.

Failures of Structure

The problem of the broken web

However as Kröger points out, there are situations where you get excited about things that might happen, and then it just doesn’t happen. So the expectations you are building are based on the written text but you are not able to actually play the things that you were excited about.

“There are plots that seem like a good idea on paper, but they don’t

⁵⁷ Kristel Nyberg, “History is Our Playground – On Playing with People’s Lives.”

work in practice: Because the other player is busy doing other stuff, or there is some big revelation happening too early and it makes the plot completely irrelevant for the remainder of the larp.⁵⁸

These can be identified by thinking about all of the plots together, rather than as individual elements. When writing characters we tend to think about their experience and not how they fit within the larger narrative, so this becomes a part of the narrative coherence / editing process. For a larp written at scale this is possibly done by an individual or a team, who are not the primary character writers; having some distance and an overview of the wider piece allows for some objectivity. This was the approach taken for the original run of *Odysseus*.

The Problem of asymmetric relationships

Sometimes one character is in love with another and that love is not reciprocated. That situation is not necessarily a failure mode. It comes down to authorial intent and content design. The failure mode is when *players* have conflicting or missing information. An extreme example of this is the player who was unaware that her character had a child until that child revealed it in-game.

It is possible to create a lot of drama from a well designed asymmetric description of the same event. Kröger explains that this is a core of much of her design, “your perception of events or your idea of what is going on is subjective. Rarely in life, there is objective truth, but there is your perception of what happened.”⁵⁹ The failure mode is when a mistake happens and when two or more characters either have missing information, or their understanding of events conflicts by accident rather than by design. Asymmetry is not necessarily a bad thing, apart from when it is.

Extending this, every character should have what Kröger calls a

58 Laura Kröger, Zoom Interview with author.

59 Laura Kröger, Zoom Interview with author.

mirror connection - one which is equally important in both directions. This could be a negative, positive, romantic, or ambivalent relationship but it should be reflected in the other character.

The other mitigation here is to make it very clear whether the character sheet has a reliable narrator. Is it a source of truth, is it the opinion of the character, or does it deliberately obscure information for dramatic purposes. It might seem an artistically valid choice to obfuscate but I suggest that the risk:reward ratio rarely supports it.

The problem of the ghost

Šumar identifies cases where a character is “defined entirely by their relations to other characters.”⁶⁰ much like the failure mode above, this is hard to spot on first reading. It is very common in archetypal female coded characters like ‘The Mother’ or ‘The grandmother’ who are written entirely in service to their children or family, but with no trajectory of their own. (See also *The Fishwife Problem*, above) This is often a failure mode of low status characters: servants, slaves, lower classes; it is common to consider these characters in relationship to the high status individuals, rather than as characters in their own right. The test here is to understand what would happen to them if the other characters were *not* present; would they have a story to explore? If the answer is no, then you may have a haunting on your hands. For *Gothic*, we resolved this by writing the servants separately, and focussing on their relationships with one another; their parts added in later. Another suggestion is to design and/or write lower status characters first.

The problem of geometry

“Love triangles should not have two right angles”

60 Edin Janković Šumar, “Efficient Character Writing for Big Teams.” 220.

Sometimes the ‘shape’ of the relationship between two or more characters is clear in the mind of the writer but, for whatever reason, they don’t connect them up properly. The failure mode here is that reading any one character in isolation probably won’t show the problem. It is only when the characters are read in parallel (or when they come alive in play) that it is apparent that there is something missing.⁶¹

The problem of literary fiction

“Sad loner is sad and lonely”

There is sometimes a distinction between a character that is interesting to read about and a character that is interesting to play. For example The outsider trope is a risky addition to the dramatis personae of a larp because they are isolated and distant from others. It’s a common mistake for new writers to write the poster child of dystopian YA – a mysterious edgy loner as a romantic interest for the protagonist – but that character will need support and genuine connections to avoid several other failure modes (*see below*).

The problem of agency to play

Power imbalance is a clear failure mode. If one character cannot act without the approval of another, and that other character is unavailable, inaccessible, or disinclined to give that approval we have this problem. Ask the question, “Can this character access the core experience of the larp?” If not, it’s an NPC⁶².

The most fundamental function of a larp character is ”to provide

61 I’m not a fan of the classic ‘love triangle’ unless it is a proper triangle, and only then if we are playing *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Two characters competing for the love of another tends not to work as well in practice as a writer might envisage. One character being in love with another who is in love with a third who, in turn, is in love with the first is only marginally more interesting. Your opinions may vary on this.

62 Juihana Pettersson, Facebook post, 2024.

access to the content of the larp.⁶³ Of all of the potential failure modes this seems to be the most critical. This could be caused by a number of reasons but ultimately can lead to a character being unplayable without some serious hacking on the part of the player. The most important takeaway from this whole chapter, I think, is that “everything that is written in the character needs to be in some way or shape relevant for the larp.”⁶⁴

Failure at the end

The problem of Table Scraps

“Someone you have seen” is not a relationship!

I’ve left this one to last because it stands for all of the characters that have ever been the last to be completed. It is just before the deadline. All the writers are spent. It is the hour of the leftover relations which don’t make any sense beyond “both of these characters still need a relation.” Statements like “you have seen this person around and do not really have a good opinion of them” are not relationships at all. Sometimes ‘leftover characters’ are the ones that writers pick last and are least enthusiastic about. As a player we have seen them around, and we don’t really have a good opinion of them⁶⁵.

The fix for this is simply not to do it. Table Scraps should be identified in the edit and replaced with a hearty feast.

63 Juhana Pettersson, “Basics of Character Design.” 198.

64 Laura Kröger, Zoom Interview with author.

65 I enjoy the conceit here, but I acknowledge I am being self-indulgent.

Current Character Writing Processes / Best Practices

To prepare this article I performed an informal survey of how larp creators approached the challenge of writing characters for large larps – those with a lot of characters – although I did not specify a threshold for what constituted a lot. I asked only about larps where the organisers do the writing or facilitate the character creation process in some way, rather than those where players created their own characters. I asked about processes, the management of these processes, and what problems the organisers faced. I asked them to share their tips, traps, best practices, and failure modes? A few respondents offered a short conversation, I followed up on these. I summarise the responses here with particular emphasis on ways to mitigate or resolve the failure modes:

One of the elephants in the room is about payment for writers. Larp is a form that tends to rely heavily on volunteers, or, if you prefer, larp is a form that has historically relied on unpaid labour. Some organisers do offer payment for writers. Others do not. Hart talked about payment for writers⁶⁶ and made the point that paying writers ten cents a word⁶⁷ did not scale well against paying actors/facilitators to spend time on a co-creative process with players. He notes that paying a hundred and fifty US Dollars for a character sheet is roughly equivalent to ten hours of what he would pay for facilitator time. Thus, his preference is not to have a character sheet at all. This can avoid many of the failure modes detailed above, but only if there is sufficient workshop time and the style of larp allows for this hybrid approach. It doesn't need paid writers – as it relies on paying facilitators – but it is a different skill set from writing. My preference, however, is to pay writers.

66 Ryan Hart, Zoom interview with author.

67 At the time of writing this seems to be towards the top end of payment for game writers; whilst most of the larp organisations who are paying their writers at the moment tend towards a flat fee per completed character, those that pay per word are paying six to eight cents.

There were a few suggestions about the size of writing teams. Whilst some people are very much solo writers – even for large games – most suggest between 5 and 10 characters per writer. Paddy suggests splitting a large larp into smaller independent sections each with its own team of writers. So 160 characters becomes four groups of forty, turning a large larp into multiple smaller ones⁶⁸.

When starting a character writing project a few people talked about providing writers with sufficient information up front in the form of a writer's guide, example characters, and the format of any character sheet. The writer's guide has details of the larp design, the storyworld, premise and mood of the game, and themes. It also explains how long the characters should be, how many relationships, and the milestones and deadlines of the writing and editing process.

Perhaps the most repeated piece of advice was around the importance of designing the characters before you start writing. In general this meant having a basic idea of the character, their function, and their relationships. A few sentences rather than a detailed description and backstory. This information is used to ensure there is no duplication of character concepts or plots, and so ensure a good balance of relationships. Not Only Larp used this approach for the characters for *l'inconscience* (2025.)

There were various approaches to this. A popular one is to design the group first. Start by conceptualising the group identity and then move on to the characters; Thus a single group idea could give you five characters. Some emphasised the importance of doing this collectively, spending a day making mind maps, coming up with factions, plots, relations, personalities, themes, etc. Others put these onto a whiteboard and drew "relationship lines" between them. Odysseus used a similar approach for the 2019 version with

68 Ryan Paddy, Create a Huge Larp, 2013.

a ‘dating site’ where “a character writer could say that, okay, this character would need this kind of connection.”⁶⁹

Significantly expanding on the Three Affiliations Model, Rasmussen offers a method for scaling the larp up and down less demanding, offering a series of relation diagrams for larps ranging from fifteen to fifty players. Identifying those characters that can be removed with the minimal impact on the network⁷⁰. Morningstar describes a similar process as redundant, fault-tolerant relationship maps⁷¹

This phase of design happens before the prose writing starts. What is implicit here is that the teams looked at these rough outlines and designs for the characters and their relationships and looked for failure modes early.

Some teams mandate a different person to do this, others state that all the writers worked on all sheets and cross-checked one another’s work (this is what we used for *Gothic*.) For others it was just the lead writers that went through and made changes. The important thing about this approach is that an individual writer does not ‘own’ a character. They can be changed without notice. This is a more efficient process to manage, but it does raise interesting questions about copyright. For all of these writing teams, correspondence talked about the importance of regular meetings, check-ins or co-writing time. Others encouraged a collaboration between writers to give immediate feedback. I suggest that some of this comes out of the lockdown experience where we collectively became more experienced at working remotely with one another.

69 Laura Kröger, Zoom Interview with author.

70 Amanda Natalie Rasmussen “LarpInABox A Playcentric Approach to BeginnerFriendly Larp Design” 44.

71 Jason Morningstar, “Redundant, fault-tolerant relationship maps.” 141.

During writing, some teams were structured simply with writers being allocated characters to write and then a waterfall approach to checking, editing, and releasing. Others had more of a dialogue between writers, or a distinction between character writers and plot writers. This idea makes more sense to me coming from a plot led rather than a character led tradition. Merging the two of them seems a very productive way of generating characters that are connected to the plots of the larp and plots that are connected to and centred around the characters. It is outside of the scope of this chapter to fully explore this relationship.

There was also a suggestion to make use of cut and paste boiler text for content that is repeated across multiple characters. We have developed a google script that will do this, it's essentially an amped up mail merge that allows a spreadsheet to populate characters, so that the correct 'boiler plate' text is pasted into each sheet. I believe *1942* used a similar method.

One of the consistent notes that came up is the importance of proofreaders, not only for language and sensitivity, but for continuity and consistency. This approach mitigates many of the failure modes if it is done properly. This includes checking and cross checking the relationships but also looking for other, perhaps less obvious failure modes.

Conclusion

Character writing for larps is not easy. Doing it at scale is even harder. There are documented processes and these do seem to have developed over time. The most obvious is the 'design before you write' approach. If the remaining challenge is in the quality of the editing or facilitation, I suggest that this set of failure modes can stand as a checklist - or as the first pass of a checklist - of things we can look for and avoid.

Back in the hallway there is an unmarked doorway. It leads to another gallery. This room contains characters I have written for others. As before there are some that I am perhaps more proud of than others. If I were to curate this collection rather than simply put the work up in chronological order then I think we'd discover that there were some characters that I rated more highly. I thought about them as though I knew them. Perhaps I cried a little at their endings, or felt *something* for them. There are some I would not wish to meet for, as their creator, they would surely hold me accountable for their backstory. Some I loved perhaps too much; early drafts who needed some of their shine taken away. However when a writer is a little bit in love with a character or characters they wrote, then some of that is passed through to the player, a form of evocational bleed that enthuses the larper and ensures that the portrait will take pride of place in their own corridor of memories.

Ludography

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- 416 The Secrets We Keep, run 6 by Chaos League.
- 450 The Ultimate Football League by JC Hoog.
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