

Seasons of Larp

Edited by
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Published by KNUTPUNKT (802432-9859)

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Print 978-91-531-8259-7
PDF 978-91-531-8260-3

Printed in Denmark

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Welcome

There is something magical about the larp community.

It's in the passion we have for our hobby. It's in the friends we make along the way. It's the process of co-creating.

It is all of that and more.

Another wonderful thing is how we let ideas regarding larp take form, grow and how we are able to share them with a community spread all over the world.

The ideas can be at any stage, from just starting a process to re-evaluating and upgrading something old to a complete 180-degree turn and changing something that has been set in place for ages.

This ever-growing and changing process in how we co-create, talk, and have things evolve is something that never ceases to amaze.

The process could not be more fitting for the theme of the 2026 Knutpunkt and the theme for this book : "Seasons of Larp".

Here, larpers from all over the world share their thoughts about old and new insights in the hobby, from creating a larp to reflections about Nordic larp.

Take a look, find your favourite texts, discuss them with your friends or in your community, find new inspirations for your own larp and most of all, enjoy!

//Anna, main editor



Spring

Something is budding, waiting and growing. Free from the harshness of cold and darkness, new ideas are reaching towards the pale sun above.

Like everything new, their first leaves are tiny, their stems almost translucent, and their growth might be painfully slow. Until it suddenly bursts. Over the course of one night, the ground is covered in a lush blanket of grass, trees don crowns of green leaves, and flowers cover the ground.

Just like the process of growth in spring, new ideas sometimes take time to grow, but when they do, they spread, inspire, and spark joy everywhere!

In the Spring section, you find articles about new ideas and things that are taking their full form! All from texts about community building and thoughts around AI to research around larping oppression and advice on how to translate culture over borders to reflections around cyborgs.

Dive into spring and get inspired, see what new ideas are budding all over the world!



Relational Larp

or: Towards a Shared Understanding of
a Common Form of Larp

Olivia Fischer

What is Nordic Larp?

“Oh, you’re doing Nordic larp!” is a phrase that probably not so few of us Non-Nordic larp designers have heard a couple of times. When I heard it the first time, by a German larper, I was confused because I did not know what “Nordic Larp” meant. I think, this was at some time around 2009 and I had only once before heard about larp in the Nordic countries - namely some years earlier, when a group of ambitious designers had run a big international larp in Sweden for which they built an even bigger dragon and where players had to follow strict rules concerning costumes, *Dragonbane* (yep, that’s what I had heard about it). So did my German conversation partner think I was creating larps where huge props were built?

Of course, my conversation partner back then immediately explained what a Nordic larp “really” was - a larp focusing on social relationships, non-competitive, somewhat innovative and creative concerning setting and design, and using few rules. It was definitely not a larp with a lot of boffer sword fights, quests, dungeons, riddles to solve, and 20 pages of point-based rules, like the majority of the larps in Austria were. And I was happy because this sounded like our design style and also like what I enjoyed playing myself. Larps like these Nordic larps - as they had been explained to me - had been around in Austria long before I had started larping in 2000. Since the 90s some of them were even documented, but nobody ever had a specific term for them, except maybe “cast larps” (translated from “gecastete Lives”). So some other Austrian designers and I started to adopt the term Nordic larp without ever playing a Nordic larp.

Only years later, when I got in contact with the international larp community, I learned that Nordic larp was “a term for shared larp traditions in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland” (nordiclarp.org). After having played international and Nordic larps, I finally attended my first KP in 2018, and I felt like there was some kind of crisis going on concerning the term “Nordic larp” or “Nordic style larp” - some Non-Nordic designers told me I should not call larps in Austria “Nordic larps”, some Nordics told me the same, others (Nordics and Non-Nordics) told me that we of course, were doing Nordic larp in Austria, if we did larps focusing on social relations and using no point-based mechanics. And once again, I was confused.

Tapping into a more theoretical discourse about Nordic larp and also larp in general in this year and the following years, I learned that there were actually several national/regional definitions of larping styles, which all were, in one way or another, similar to what we did in Austria. Some players in these communities used “Nordic larp” as their style of larping, while others explicitly and fervently rejected it.

Many Facets of the Same Gemstone

I love having a shared vocabulary and a shared understanding of things, so I kept looking for a term for the type of larp I like playing and designing. I looked at definitions of larp styles and larp manifestos, and I found some key points that maybe weren’t present in all of these texts but which were definitely all present in the larps I wanted to have a term for:

A focus on larp being co-creative

- “We believe, that the designer’s intent is embodied in the larp’s content and design, but we are also aware that, as is the case with many other performative activities, the final work of art can only appear with the players’ participations. We therefore see players as respected partners in creation.” (Content Larp Manifesto, 2016)
- “Larp is a voluntary and collective act [...] The player is a vibrant and co-acting individual, energy that wants to play a part in the project.” (Chaos League, 2016)
- “The characters are [...] co-created” (Modern Larp, n.d., translated by the author)
- “Playing to add [...] is born of collaboration.” (Iuama, 2018)

A focus on emotions and relations:

- “The characters are pre-written[...] with diverse connections and relationships linking them together.” “The game is supposed to create strong emotions..” (Larp Wiki, n.d., translated by the author)
- “As a special medium of expression, communication, and reflection, it offers people the opportunity to experience interpersonal, emotional, as well as philosophical and socio-political themes firsthand” (Neubauer, 2015, translated by the author).
- “There is no shame in feeling deeply before, during, and after a larp.” (Šumar, 2017)

Larp as an art form

- Larp “offers unique artistic experiences” (Pohjola, 2025)
- “One of the goals of content larp is to be seen as a form of art.” (Content Larp Manifesto, 2016)

Larp as a motor for transformation

- “If we complete a larp experience without learning something about ourselves that we can use to improve our daily lives, we feel that we have missed an opportunity.” (Hugaas and Bowman, 2019)
- Larps are extremely well suited at least for criticizing the society (Pohjola, 2003)
- “We believe in larptivism, larps potential to raise awareness and inspire social change. Our goal is to help the change for a better world.” (Not Only Larp, n.d.)
- “We should not reproduce the constructs of oppressive capitalist culture.” (Šumar, 2017)

So what do you call this type of larp, which aims at having these characteristics present? I think some people might call this a Nordic larp, others might call it a Mediterranean larp, or a Modern larp. People and larp communities might have numerous other names for it.

I strongly believe that in many larp communities around the world, traces of this kind of larp have always been there. They have been brought in by larp designers and players who also were (professional or non-professional) activists, teachers, artists, theater lovers, psychologists, dreamers,

critics, philosophers, etc. - by those people who weren't so much interested (or not only interested) in point based systems, boffer sword battles and dungeon crawls but in co-creating new experiences, telling shared stories and in personal and communal growth.

Relational Larp

In 1998, French curator and arts theorist Nicolas Bourriaud coined the term "Relational Aesthetics," underlining the participatory potential of an artwork and encouraging artists to explore the relationship between humans and artworks (Bourriaud, 2002, 2004). Bourriaud looks at an artwork as something that creates new meaning, "essentially a political project" (Chen, 2023), hence a potential input for transformation. Relational art focuses on relationships, including inter-human relationships and developing relationships with the world. (Bourriaud 2002; Smith 2024).

Drawing from Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of Relational Aesthetics, in which art facilitates human encounters and inspires interactions with the artwork, the space, and each other, I want to suggest that there is a type of larp, which I want to call *Relational Larps*.

- **Relational larps** are larps that focus on relationships between characters, their players, and the content provided by larp designers (including story, dramaturgy, space, pre-written or co-created characters, etc.).
- **Relational larps** offer their players the

opportunity to explore new perspectives and to experience themselves in relation to others and/or in relation to a theme in a meaningful way. They usually do so by enabling participants to immerse themselves into the mindset of the character and the world of the larp. Therefore, a Relational larp needs mechanics/rules that support players to tap into a brave space while also taking into account their emotional and physical safety.

- **Relational larps** underline the co-creative aspect of larps, among other things, by incorporating a play culture of playing to lift and playing to flow, in which meaningful actions and experiences become possible for all participants.
- **Relational larps** are intended to be a means of transformation by providing participants with an opportunity to develop a new relationship with a theme or with a perspective.
- **Relational larps** are pieces of art (with varying artistic value). They might belong to different traditions of larp design, but they also build upon ideas present in relational art, performance art, and participatory art.

And no, this is not a new manifesto. This is just a hopefully helpful addition to the vocabulary and theory around larp. It is meant as a new approach to talking about an art form / a form of entertainment / a medium which all of us love, without always focusing on regional terminology. Maybe the term "Relational larp" enables us to embrace the common vision and inspiration we have and work together on getting larp

the acknowledgement it deserves among other forms of art, entertainment, self-expression, and means of transformation.

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Designing Vessels of Meaning

Teddy Karlsson

I have never made a vase, but I have made larps, and I think there are some similarities between the two. Both have spaces to be filled with something beautiful and just like I have made larps and thus became a person who can make larps, I could start to learn different crafts and become a person who can make vases. In this article I will introduce and explain the term Vessel of meaning and how it can help us design and understand larp. I will also argue that making a larp is not as hard or scary as it might seem.

Let us begin with a larp I designed, called *Dancing with Myself* (Sweden, 2022), which is a game about people who meet themselves at a party. In the game, the players are divided into pairs and make a character together that they both play - discussing things the character cannot discuss with anyone else. Because the entire game consists of talking and dancing, I decided that a non-verbal break was needed. That became a scene where in the middle of the playtime all players would focus on dancing. To give it some kind of actual story purpose, all characters suddenly see everybody on the dancefloor as other versions of themselves, not just the one partner. This meta-scene was added with practical purpose, but afterwards I have been told that the scene was interpreted in many different ways and gave people a deeper experience. At first this made me feel like a fraud, like the players somehow thought I designed the game better than I actually did, when that meaning actually came from them. But they would not have created it without my design, and with that realization the term Vessel of meaning was born. Even though I did not know it, I had designed a Vessel of meaning for them to fill.



Photo by Teddy Karlsson

So, what is a Vessel of meaning? A vessel is something that can hold something else. One example is a vase, which is hollow - and intended to be filled with flowers. A vase is a particularly good metaphor for larp, because it is designed - but also in a way unfinished unless it is filled. Often vases are hidden away until there are flowers to put in it, just like a larp manuscript in a drawer, waiting to be played. Making a vase means making something that can be further finished by someone else, hopefully over and over again. The maker of the vase influences how it is filled. They decide how many and how tall flowers fit, and they decide if the vase is see-through, coloured or patterned. All of these design choices, made on purpose

or not, impacts what flowers people put into the vase, which type, which colour and so on. When it comes to larp design, the designer makes creative choices and steers the larpers; but the larpers are the ones that fill the vessel with their own meaning and story, to different extents depending on the larp.

What is meaning in this context then? In a way, it is the moral of the story, but because the story of a larp is experienced and created simultaneously, the meaning created in a larp becomes much deeper and more multifaceted than the moral of a fairytale or movie. Meaning can be a realisation, a deep feeling or something beyond words. Honestly, to me it is most of all something beyond words, and because it can be so many things I do not want to give it a too specific definition. What I do want to make clear though is that any story in any medium may have a greater meaning for a specific person, but only in cocreated mediums can the participant create their very own meaning that is part of the story. In a similar vein, many larps do have a meaning from the start - a larp about war might show how war is bad for example. In making their own story within the larp, players might add their own meaning though, like the importance of close bonds for example. To continue the metaphor, a vase may have some ceramic flowers inside it as well as room for fresh flowers from someone else. With this said, it is important to know that if one makes a larp, the players can put whatever they want into the designer's vase. If you want something very particular in your vase you could make a sculpture instead which translated to the larp context means making a book or play instead.

So, back to what a vessel of meaning is. My larp, *Dancing with myself* is one big vessel of meaning, as it is a game where the majority of the plot and thus also the meaning is made by the players. The meta scene is a vessel as well, and an example of an abstract kind of scene where you can give larpers space to create their very own meaning even in larps with a lot of meaning there from the start. There are also ways to create vessels of meaning in the small things. When we inhabit a character, we have to do all parts of their life, no matter how dull, but sometimes this means making things that could be dull deeply meaningful. At a school for example, standing in line and choosing where to sit in the dining hall can have lots of meaning. With the right design the least dramatic scenes can become the most meaningful, either by reminding players of their possibilities or by putting design into mundane things.

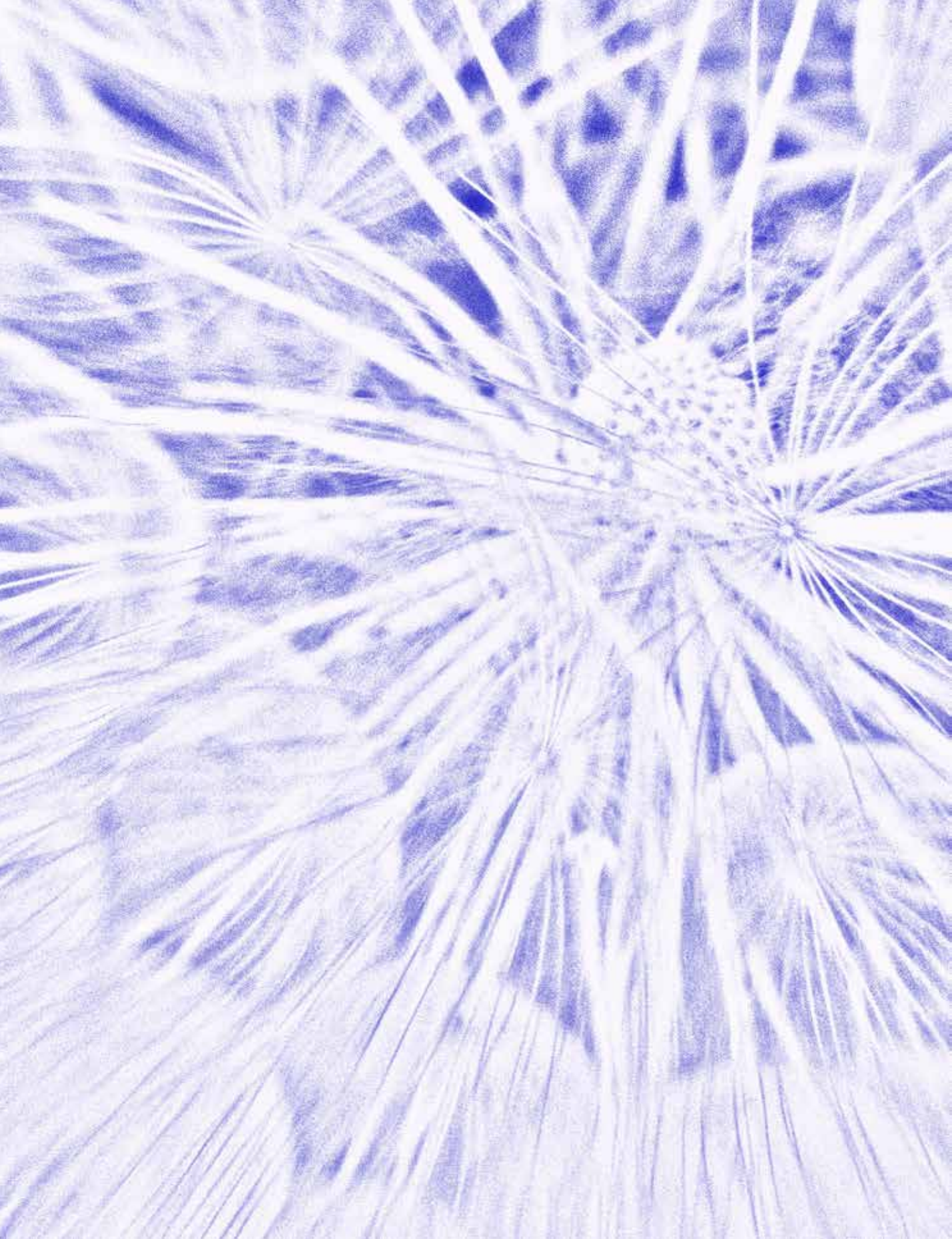
The fact that a larp is like a vase, also means that you never fully make a larp alone - cocreation is unavoidable, as soon as the larp comes into contact with players. Making a larp can seem intimidating, especially since it will never be completed until you show it to others, and the only way to become a better designer is to let players into your creation. But when you have players, they will ask about that detail you forgot to design so that you can decide it in the moment, and they will make up their own backstory where you forgot to. I truly believe that almost any larp is better than an absence of larp, and beautiful roses can be put into a crooked vase. Larp design also doesn't have to be very detailed - flowers can also be put into a very simple vase, that might give the players a greater opportunity to make an elaborate and

memorable bouquet. Sometimes the best experiences are created by letting players decide a lot of things themselves - but it still has to be designed with prompts and timekeeping. Putting flowers directly on a table is a completely different thing, and then you need to prepare to let your players craft their own vase.

Larps where a lot of decisions are made by the players can fully be vessels of meaning, and in other larps there might be vessels here and there. I encourage you to find where you have made vessels of meaning, and to make more. Most of all, I encourage you to make larps!

Ludography

Dancing with myself (2022) Karlsson, T,
Stockholm Scenario Festival, Stockholm,
Sweden



How to run a cheap weekend larp

for about 25 players, with only a small crew

Elin Dalstål



From the larp "På Gott och Ont 2025". Photo by Linn Vikman.

In this article I will try to live up to the title above. There will be some tips and tricks on the practicalities of how to run a game like that, some things to keep in mind, what kind of game design works well for this format, and why to buy pre-chopped onions. None of what I write is news. Larp communities have been doing this for decades. Collecting it like this is just a way to pass community knowledge and experience on to new organisers.

Assumptions made

This article is written from a Nordic perspective so some of the information here about for example location hunting will be based on what is often available in the Nordic countries. Things might work differently where you are at. This article will also assume that the larp is run non-profit and by volunteers.

Getting the project started

First of all: have an idea for a larp. It does not have to be a great idea, just something you find exciting enough to get going. If your larp idea is "Flower arranging contest gets infiltrated by ninjas but it is actually about social media" just go for it. All ideas usually start out sounding a bit silly. It might turn into a great idea somewhere along the way. When you've gotten an idea and are willing to try to make it happen, your project has begun.

Get a small crew

Getting a larp to happen is always a lot of work, and while people are often happy to volunteer and help out, they often have responsibilities, work schedules, studies, family, kids, pets, and/or other obligations as

well as that pesky need to get some rest every now and then. Sidenote: have you ever tried getting five adults together for something as simple as a board game night? You will often need three weeks of scheduling to get those five people in the same room for a few hours. You need to find a lot more time than that together to run a larp.

With that said – keep it small. The fewer people you need to get a project off the ground, the easier it is to get *across* that ground. For a 25 person larp I would recommend a core crew of 2–4 people. You might get a few more people helping out in the end, but in the planning stages it is best to keep it tight.

So now that you have 2–4 people who are excited by the same idea, it's time to start planning.

Get a rough idea of both the game design and what practicalities are needed

In a well designed larp, practicalities and game design are tightly linked. Take the flower show idea. Discuss what you think you need to make it happen in the most basic of terms. Perhaps you decide that you need a location where you can host a flower arrangement show, with both indoor and outdoor spaces, and the location should ideally be a bit secluded if the ninjas are going to commit acts of violence. If players will be staying overnight for the larp, you will need somewhere to house them, and if people are going to eat, you will need a kitchen and somewhere to serve food. When you have a picture of what your

larp design needs, you can start location hunting.

Location hunting

Locations are often one of the largest line items in a larp budget, and in this article I will assume that people will be sleeping at the larp. That means that you either need to find a location with enough beds for everyone, or a place where you are allowed to stay overnight on air mattresses or camping beds. As mentioned, the location is often the biggest cost for the larp and is the deciding factor when it comes to the size of the participants' fees. While it *is* possible to have a location cost at basically zero for forest larps, there is often a hidden expense expected of the participants in that they need to bring their own tents. This is fine if you own a car and a tent, but is a huge barrier to entry if you don't.

Luckily, larps for 15–35 people are at an advantage when trying to find cheap locations. It's easier to find a cheap small location than a cheap large one. Much, much easier. There are a lot of venues of a size that suits a larp with 25 players. For example, venues meant for 50–200 seated guests often work fine for about 25 players, they have enough space to create zones for different types of play as well as enough space for people to bring out air mattresses and sleep at night. Small camping grounds, scout cabins, summer camps, etc. often have at least 25–50 beds. Both types of venues generally have kitchens that can handle at least 25 people.

The best cheap venues are often run by non-profits. Cultural organisations, com-

munity- or village centers, churches, youth organisations, social clubs, sports clubs, etc. The problem is that you usually need to know about them to find them. They are generally not well known, not search engine optimized, they maybe have an ancient web site with a few blurry photos and a phone number to call. They are often on a shoestring budget and run by quirky, and in some cases elderly, enthusiasts whose trust you need to gain to rent the place – especially if you are going to make anything *odd*, like a larp. On the plus side, if you are an exemplary tenant, you can often build a great mutual relationship with these owners that secures you a location for future larps.

So how do you find out about these places? *Asking* is the key here. You ask around online and ask your local community. Perhaps someone's brother in law lives next to such a place, or someone's boss' kid was at summer camp there. Tell people that you are hosting a weekend event with about 25 people who are staying overnight and you are looking for good cheap locations, either with beds for everyone or a place that allows overnight stays on air mattresses and camping beds. Places like that may also be listed on lists for local community gathering places, lists of available stages for cultural events, or lists of wedding venues.

Some places allow for overnight stay on air mattresses and camping beds if you get a temporary permit from the fire station. In Sweden, that means getting permission from the site owner, filling in an online form to inform the fire station, and adhering to certain standards like having no lit candles and keeping fire exits in mind when setting up the beds to ensure fire safety.

Feeding people

Feeding people tends to be the second largest item in a larp budget. Since this is about how to organise a larp cheaply I won't go into catering and I will assume that the food will be cooked by volunteers, with or without help from the participants.

Choosing recipes

When feeding about 25 people you can just scale up ordinary household recipes. This means that the food cost won't have to exceed a regular food budget for the participants, especially if you chose recipes with cheap ingredients.

Aim for really quick and simple recipes as cooking for more people takes a lot longer than cooking for only a few. Something you can cook in 20 minutes normally will take about an hour when scaled up five times to 25 servings. Things like heating up water takes a lot longer when you cook a bigger batch. In addition, unfamiliarity with the kitchen or the recipe will also contribute to everything taking a little longer than usual.

If you search for recipes, specify that they should be cheap and simple. Saving money is mostly about reducing the most expensive ingredients, which is usually protein. But don't get fixated on saving money on things that are cheap. Sometimes it's worth spending a little more to save the kitchen a whole lot of work. For example, chopping onions takes a lot of time and is uncomfortable when you chop to cook for 25 players. People will literally be crying their eyes out if they have to manually chop a lot of onions. Just buying frozen, pre-chopped onions is *so* worth it.

Special Dietary Needs

For most larps, the sign up sheets should include two text box responses for special dietary needs: One box asking what they are, and one box asking for how serious they are. This is important. You want to know what can kill people if there is minimal cross contamination and what might cause mild discomfort if they have to eat a lot of it raw. (Both are valid needs but require different levels of caution.)

If someone's special dietary needs are so complex that you feel that it's tricky for you to safely provide them food, contact that player and discuss it with them. People with tricky dietary needs run into this problem all the time and will generally have suggestions on how to sort it out. This might be in the form of recipes, suggestions, or that they are allowed to bring their own food to complement with. (If they bring their own food, give them a discount for the food they won't be eating. They are saving you a whole lot of work and it never feels good to pay for food you can't eat.) The event is volunteer run and it is okay to not have the competence to not handle all the allergies in the world. It is better to say no and allow them to bring their own food, than to risk injury or death.

Try to find recipes that everyone can eat. That eliminates both the risk of mix up, cross contamination and saves you the work of having to cook more than one variant of the meal. If someone has an egg allergy and none of the recipes contains eggs, and there are no eggs anywhere in the kitchen you just saved yourself a whole lot of stress. This might make it trickier or more time-consuming to choose recipes, but it's generally worth the time.

Sometimes people can have conflicting dietary needs, in which case you might need to do different variants of the same dish, or have different side dishes. Just try to manage the risk and talk with the people with conflicting needs on how to best sort it out.

For breakfast items and snacks that are just served as they are, setting up the serving station correctly can eliminate or minimise the risk of mix-ups or cross-contamination. You can put the special diet stuff at a separate table to avoid mixups. Divide the special diet table according to allergy, like for example a cowmilk free section, and a gluten free section. This reduces the risk of someone without a dietary restriction accidentally eating all the special foods – as well as the risk of someone mixing up the spoons in different serving bowls and causing cross-contamination.

Send your participants the meal plan and recipes

After you decide on what you are going to serve, send out the meal plan as well as any recipes to the players. This will help people with special dietary needs double check if the food seems safe to them. In addition, many players just appreciate knowing what to expect when it comes to food.

Staffing the kitchen

You need someone to be in charge of the kitchen and that person needs to have enough kitchen knowledge to manage food hygiene and whatever special dietary needs the larp caters to. This person's job is to keep the kitchen running safely. They may help out with cooking, but that is explicitly not their main responsibility.

On top of that, you can either use crew members or let players help out. If you have enough crew members this can be the easiest option, but it requires people to spend the entire event as kitchen staff.

Having players help out in the kitchen is also a good option. Most adults have the kitchen skills needed. Players are generally happy to help out an hour in the kitchen if the larp is low cost and volunteer run. Especially if the kitchen work can be done in character. You can often come up with reasons in the larp fiction why characters are helping out: culture, habit, religion, practicality, corporate rules, it's a special holiday, "it's what we've always done", a whim or whatever. If it really doesn't fit the fiction, you can cook or meal prep out of character, and let your participants use it as an opportunity to calibrate or take a breather.

For any hot meal, you need about 2–3 people to comfortably run the kitchen (remember, everyone is in an unfamiliar kitchen with new recipes) on top of the person in charge of the kitchen. After the hot meals, you need about 2 people doing the dishes if the location has an industrial dish washer, or 3 people if it doesn't. Things like breakfast and late night snacks, where you just make coffee and set up a serving station, will usually require no more than two people.

Below is an example of how to distribute players helping out in the kitchen. My advice is that you just assign players to a meal and then give them the option to contact you if they need or prefer to switch to another meal. Often there are some people that for example are nonfunctional

in the morning before their meds kicks in or people that might not be able to do the dishes due to skin condition etc. Or you might have someone that needs to opt out all together. Expect that you will have to make some changes, but just assigning players randomly or based on what makes most sense in fiction can be a good start. If players help out in the kitchen, send out what meal they are expected to help out with together with the meal plan.

Meal	Number of people helping out
Friday Evening Snack	2
Saturday Breakfast	2
Saturday Lunch Prep	4
Saturday Lunch Dishes	3
Saturday Dinner Prep	4
Saturday Dinner Dishes	3
Saturday Evening Snack	2
Sunday Breakfast	2
Total	22

Write clear instructions for each meal. This includes the recipes as well as listing for example what should be put out for the breakfast buffet and so on. Even though you have someone in charge of the kitchen, written instructions make things run much smoother, it means that the players can organise themselves much easier, and that substitutions can be made in the staffing schedule with minimal issue.

Logistics and volunteers

Next up on the list are logistics and volunteers. Logistics is usually a smaller budget post than



Plastic tarp from the hardware store are used to create a psychedelic labyrinth. With the help of pitch darkness, cool lights and a soundscape, cheap materials can create extremely effective scenery. Photo by Linn Vikman from the larp "På Gott och Ont 2025".

location and food, but it can be a cost that sneaks up on you and your volunteers. That is why I added volunteers to this section.

One of the things that costs money is transportation. Well, sure, we are going to the larp site and back. But that is not the travel cost that sneaks up on you. Let us say that the organisers meet up regularly before the larp as well as run errands. Let's assume about 20 trips at least. If you live some distance outside of a town centre, you can easily rack up gas costs of €150 for just one person. For some people, €150 is pocket money, for others it is a substantial cost. For some people, that gas money will never cross their minds because they don't feel the difference, while others might really need that trip reimbursed to not have their private finances suffer for their volunteer work.

When organising a larp that runs on volunteer work, you need to address and figure this out. For example, if some volunteer runs a lot of logistical errands before the larp, and their car breaks down during those errands, what happens then? Think it through, discuss it, and decide on something. There are no obvious right or wrong answers, just honest discussions. Decide on a policy and plan accordingly. One larp I am involved in has the policy to pay for mileage, but if anyone doesn't feel the need to be reimbursed, we won't chase them down.

You can try to be smart about travel and other logistics to cut down the cost a little, but I think meeting in person can be one of the things that makes organising larps fun and is for many organisers a prerequisite for the larps to happen. So don't go digital-only *just* to cut costs.

There is also player logistics to sort out. How can players get to the location? If it is possible to get there by public transport, then tell them about this and how to go about it. If you want to keep participants' cost low, help them organise ride sharing. For a larp this size, ride sharing is usually the easiest way to sort things out if many of the players are local (or at least regional) and planning to go there by car. Spending some time on this in the planning stages saves both organisers and participants a lot of time in the end.

Stuff

By stuff, I mean props, costumes, makeup, first aid kits, special effects stuff, lighting, well, *stuff*. There is no limit on how much money you can spend on stuff, but generally if you try to make a cheap larp this is one of the smaller expenses. You can borrow, rent, or reuse stuff, and after a few larps you will most likely have built up a stash.

Presumably, many of the people who run larps are larpers, who often know other larpers, and larpers tend to own a scary amount of stuff. Asking around if you can lend or rent stuff for a larp usually results in you getting offered a shitload of cool stuff – sometimes not exactly what you were looking for, but perhaps something you didn't even imagine or know you needed. If you want to do things cheaply, adapting your vision to what you can get your hands on is a good idea. Just remember to give back to the community once you are the one that has the cool stuff, and someone else is asking.

If you need to buy something, you can often create low- or no-cost alternatives to things like sound- or lighting systems. A number of cheap, small, and strategically placed bluetooth speakers can be more effective than a huge professional sound system. A bunch of colour-changing light bulbs from the hardware store can replace professional stage lighting if you sneakily replace lightbulbs at the location before the game starts. And so on. For tricks like this, talk to your community and ask around. There is a lot of community knowledge on how to do this thing.

Other costs

Here you just lump together all the other things that might cost money. Pizza for the volunteers. Printer paper and -ink. Odd little cost that doesn't fit into the other categories. This is also one of the smaller categories in a regular larp budget. Its size and contents will vary between events, in accordance to varying needs. This is generally not where you can cut any significant costs, just make sure to have budgeted for the odds and ends.

Add a 15% buffer... (Or a 10%, 5% or 20% buffer)

Lastly, when you made a budget and added everything you think might cost money, then add an additional 15% buffer for unexpected expenses. Why exactly 15%? I dunno, that was what I learned when I started organising back in the bronze age and it has worked out for me so far.

Other organisers use buffers anywhere between 5–20%. It all depends on the economic risk level of the larp, how secure you feel about your budget calculation, if you are backed by an organisation that might support you financially if anything unexpected comes up, and what level of financial risk you are comfortable with.

I say 15%, because it is the number I like best. Usually you won't touch the buffer, but whenever I've had to use it, then 15% has covered the unexpected expenses.

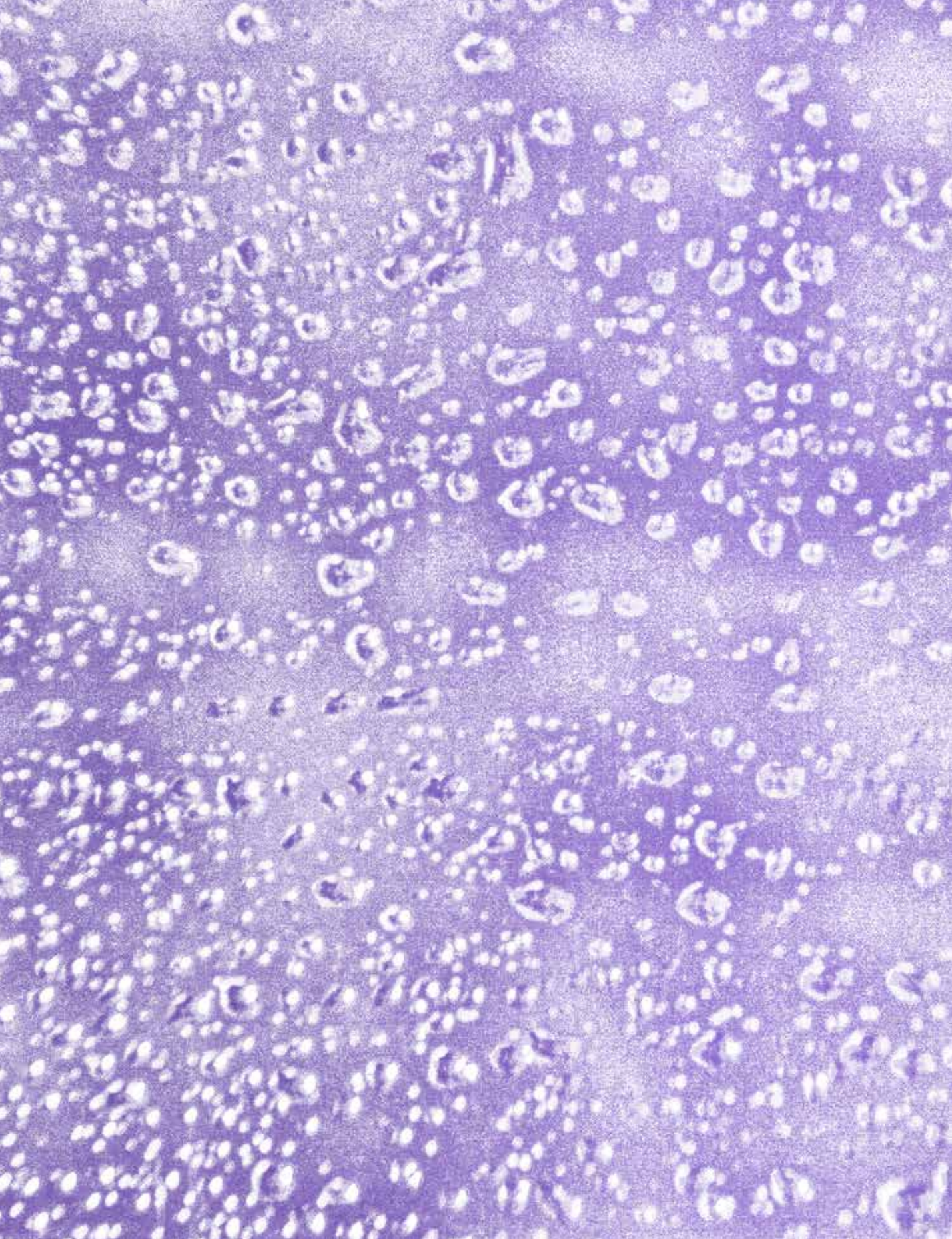
If you organise the larp under any sort of non-profit larp organisation that regularly organises larps or other events, any surplus can just be reinvested in future larps. Otherwise use it wisely; pass it on to other larp organisers, donate it to some larger larp organisation or to some cause you support.

Conclusion

Organising larps isn't an exact science. But running a cheap weekend event for about 25 players is very doable with just a few determined organisers. As this article only covers the practical and financial aspects, I would recommend reading the freely available [Larp Design book](#) for all the other aspects (or just because it's a damn good book!). I hope the main message you walk away with is that running a cheap weekend larp for about 25 people is not only doable, it is something *you* can do if you want to.

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The Importance of Local Larp Communities Through the Lens of Project Liminal

Frederikke Sofie Bech Høyer

It's a cold spring day in 2023. We were three friends that talked about the Black-box larp communities we knew of in the Scandinavian countries. One of us pointed out: "How weird that there doesn't exist one in Jutland!"

"There was one, years ago", I replied, "It was called Black Box Horsens."

"What would it take to create a new local black-box community? I mean, how would it be formed well?" the last of us asked.

An application was sent. Money was granted. And the rest is the story and beginning of Project Liminal (2023 - funded to 2026).

An invitation

Our talks from that cold spring day in 2023 became a project that aims to build a value-based and co-creative community across larp organisations. It's located in Jutland, with the goal to create a regional community with several local communities interwoven in which members can collaborate, play and jointly use the larp medium black-box together.

This article is two things at once: it is an exploration of usable design choices in local community building, examined through the lens of Project Liminal. Secondly, it is a love letter to all of our local larp communities and the differences they make. It invites you to look at your own local larp communities, care for and help strengthen them.

What local larp communities are

A local community can be understood as a group of individuals that share activities, perspectives and goals within a geographic or cultural area. Due to their lower barrier and connection to the local praxis, local larp communities often become an accessible first entry-point for newcomers to larp. As social anchors and knowledge repositories, they have the capacity to strengthen both individuals and the societies they are a part of. At the same time, they differ in style, aesthetics, and methods due to their specific cultural context and their playerbase needs. Strong local larp communities make both national and international larp communities grow steadily. The question is: how do we build and maintain them?

Building the foundation

When starting Project Liminal, we began our process by reflecting upon what kind of community we wanted to build:

- Which values should it be influenced by?
- Why had a community not emerged yet and which barriers/ issues needed to be addressed?
- Which activities should the community create?
- Whom would we like to invite to take part in forming the foundation of this specific community?

Deciding values and finding barriers

Answering the questions created the following framework: we wanted to create a safe, curious and playful environment across larp experience and age, inspired by Larp Writer Summer School and Black Box Horsens. We noticed that barriers for newcomers involved accessibility to, visibility of, and knowledge about black-box together with a language issue: many of our potential newcomers didn't feel comfortable larping in English and many black-box conventions were based around English. We didn't know the exact format of the community's activities, but we did know that it would potentially involve a black-box convention, scenarios, and workshops in designing and running black-box larps.

Being aware of these factors formed a strong foundation for the rest of the process from which we could choose a name, build a vision and invite co-organisers into our project.

Forming activities, a name, and a vision

A local community comes into being through the activities it creates for those who belong to it. Every time a member participates in an activity that is experienced as meaningful, they become more entangled in both the activity and the community facilitating it.

For Liminal, finding the right activities became important. We wanted to set up black-box larps and train people in designing them; we also wanted our community to be inclusive of young people in its core principles. That's why we

wanted to create spaces that dismantled the barriers otherwise preventing young people from attending activities on equal measure with adults, such as alcohol. Instead, we implemented social alibis through play and other social activities, and reduced economical limitations by keeping the activities as affordable as possible, sometimes even free.

A name influences people's understanding of a given community as well as becoming a potential part of the participants' identities. Therefore, a name must stem from and somehow relate to what the community does together.

Using Liminal in the name was inspired by the concept of the liminal phase in a rite of passage, wherein an individual crosses from one state to another, wherein they neither belong to the old nor the new role. Project Liminal wanted to build up an exploring community which could encourage designers and players to explore, seeking out the transformative in both oneself as well as the created community. Fostering a flourishing, creative environment for black-box larp in the area became our vision and goal.

Daring to invite and creating co-ownership

Finding the right team takes time, energy, and consideration. More organisers can make the project more viable and sustainable, but, to some degree, involves losing control over the project. Delegation requires trust. For collaboration to work optimally, your co-organisers have to experience agency, motivation and influence on the shared project. So the question is: how to find the right team?

With Project Liminal, we knew from the start that we wanted to include co-organisers from other organisations. We needed to invite more organisers who also had ideas, energy, and who could become bridgebuilders to their own local communities; doing everything alone would, at some point, wear us down.

One way to navigate this is to make a list of which qualities, experiences, and skills an organiser needs to have. Do they need to be an expert in their field or is it enough that they bring time and willingness? Afterwards, go through who you know who meets or almost meets your criteria. Contact those you want to organise with; as a general rule, people genuinely appreciate being thought of and included.

We imagined a regional network of smaller local black-box communities across Jutland, connected through larp organisations. We reached out to our friends and network in the following organisations: Østerskov Alicorns, Einherjerne, Prisma, TRoA, and The Larp School, Østerskov Efterskole. The final team met up physically to talk through how to organise ourselves across organisations, and the barriers they experienced. The biggest barrier was accessibility: we needed to find a way to make it easier, cheaper, and non-binding to participate. We asked the members of our local communities how they experienced inequality and took concrete steps to remedy where we could; for example we ensured free transportation and accommodation for our poorest community members.

Maintaining and growing a community

After the foundation, we started to explore how to maintain and let our community grow by nurturing our current members as well as inviting new members in. To do so, we asked ourselves:

- What communication would be beneficial for our local community, both digitally and physically?
- What knowledge and which skills do our community members and organisations need?
- What herd competence is needed in order to let the community grow healthy?

Communication becomes the key

In community building, communication is a core tool. When it is planned and coordinated, communication makes it transparent how to understand and be involved in the community and its activities. Where your community communicates shows who are included and not due to accessibility, economy, social background, etc.

One of Project Liminal's issues is how to connect all of our community, since they are spread across different media and prefer different communication styles. Therefore, we created both a Discord server and a Facebook group to start communication within the community. This, together with having to translate different communication styles across members, ended up using more time and energy than we expected. In the end, too few hands working with

communication resulted in having to cancel one of our activities, not due to lack of interest or ambition, but due to lack of connection caused by lack of early and steady communication.

Knowledge sharing and skill building

Lack of knowledge, skills, tools, and shared language are obstacles for community maintenance, since it stops potential members in supporting and contributing to the community themselves. Creating an alibi for our participants to explore, to take initiative and to build up their own knowledge and skill set is essential. Figuring out which knowledge and skills were needed, establishing knowledge material accessible for receivers and then distributing it among those who need it depends on one's understanding of the chosen target group and the resources one has available. Training can potentially result in more people gaining the skills to support the community but is often costly in time and resources. It is therefore an investment in the community's future.

Knowledge sharing and skill building was as important as running larps in order to create sustainable local larp communities; people needed to feel empowered to act. To do so, we started planning an organiser weekend wherein we trained new organisers and let them connect across organisations. We asked them what material they needed and most of them answered a place to find usable knowledge about the black-box as well as technical material, such as light and sound equipment, distributed among the

organisations, so a local praxis of black-box could be established.

This process gave us an important insight. If our newcomers don't know the language, online libraries, mentors and so on, it can be hard to achieve and find the necessary skill set. So we realised that we needed material in Danish about black-box larp. This insight resulted in the decision for us at Project Liminal to write a book. The goal is that it can function as a knowledge bank, including three larp scripts. The book is expected to be finished when this article is published in 2026. These different parts are equally important in order to create local laboratories and communities that grow.

Where to go from here?

Local communities offer both an easily accessible starting-point, physical spaces for activities, potential relationships, as well as having potential experiments, methods, and culture that can create a more diverse use of larp as a medium. Local communities are therefore a part of the foundation for the development of larp that we should nurture and support. Especially since strong, accessible local larp communities are not separate nor opposite to international larp communities; they are intertwined. Some support initiatives already exist. The Nordic Larp wiki or the larp database Alexandria provide knowledge to newcomers and new communities for example. Hopefully, more will arise as issues and needs are brought up. If there is one thing we learned through Project Liminal: A local community is never final or finished; it is an ongoing process of new beginnings.



Using ChatGPT in Character Creation

Charles Bo Nielsen

In 2022, ChatGPT was released to the world, and it immediately became the new hot thing. Especially in the beginning, before healthy criticisms were raised about where the training data came from. As I recall, it was especially when image-generating large language models (LLMs) made the rounds that it became clear that they were trained on actual artists' work without consent or compensation.

This article is not about the history of LLMs or whether or not they are ethical to use (spoiler alert: they are not). Rather, it is a serious, cynical, and pragmatic look at the pitfalls of using them. I realise that many people have started using AI-enhanced tools in their work, and it seems, as *The Matrix's* Agent Smith said, "inevitable".

I felt inspired to write about this for the Knudepunkt book already in 2023, for the call for articles for the 2024 book. Organisers had already started using ChatGPT to create characters at larps, and even in my own projects, co-organisers used LLMs. However, because of the justified backlash, I withdrew my article. I did not feel comfortable tackling the topic.

To be honest, I still do not feel comfortable. I am not sure anyone is capable of discussing this without inevitably ending up looking back and looking like a complete idiot five years from now.

I am now going to be that idiot and put some thoughts on the table, with every intention of being disregarded or proven wrong.

Why use ChatGPT?

Let's start out with some comparisons. When I started creating my own characters for *Dungeons & Dragons* decades ago, I struggled to come up with good names. A friend showed me something: a fantasy name generator. It was a game changer, a fun tool to get over the parts I struggled with. I could just press a button and it would reroll new names until I found something I was happy with. So I get the appeal with ChatGPT.

Frankly, it was a relief and in a way it got me more excited about working with characters and finding similar tools to support this path. When I started writing my first characters for others, I also used different support tools to create them. An obvious tool is some sort of autocorrect. I struggle with spelling, both in my native Danish and in English, so having word processors help me out with spellchecks and give grammar corrections is a big help. Having Wikipedia and Google to help with historic contexts and explaining words I don't understand is absolutely amazing.

ChatGPT and similar LLMs are in a sense the newest kids on the block, an amalgamation of these tools and information databases. I get why someone would get excited by this new tool and try to integrate it into their work and personal life to become more efficient.

So let's put it to the test! I want to discuss and explore the use of tools like ChatGPT in larp design from the lens of character writing.

Surrendering personal growth

I had a classmate who, when he was writing in Word and autocorrect made a suggestion to correct a mistake, would delete the entire word or even sentence and write it from scratch. At the time I felt this was silly; you could just click once to replace the word with the one word recommended. What I realized many years later was that this was actually intentional. He used the autocorrect to spot the mistake and then correct it, building muscle memory for the correct spelling of the word and taking the slower path to actually improve.

All these tools that we have for helping us out work the same way. They give you a seemingly correct answer on the fly and it is easy to just accept it and move on to the next task. If you develop a habit of using these tools on autopilot, you hamper your own development and also miss the mistakes the tools make, maybe due to your own incorrect input. No matter how advanced and smart LLM or AGI or whatever comes next is, you still need to use the tool correctly to get the correct output.

Put simply, if I input 2+2 in a calculator, it will answer "4", even if I meant or intended to input 3+3, which I will now assume is 4 going forward. In a small and simple question like this I might be able to find the flaw myself before moving on, but the more complex the tool, the harder it is to easily spot the incorrect input.

Raising a question and arriving at an answer that you actually understand is an opportunity to be a fruitful journey with unexpected personal growth, if you let it.

Seeing how my classmate chose to learn from a tool instead of letting it do all the thinking taught me something.

Arriving at actual character creation with ChatGPT

I have not used ChatGPT for creating characters, but I have used something else: actual people. In a few projects, I have been lead character designer for larps with over 100 characters; on that scale it is difficult to do all on your own, especially if you want to give each character your full attention. What we often do in the bigger larps is have teams of character writers create the characters.

People, just like ChatGPT, need directions on what to do and how. If you want clear and meaningful character, you need to be able to convey to them the framework and assign clearly defined tasks. Similar to using a prompt for ChatGPT, you need a design guide for your character writers. Now, real people take much more time than ChatGPT, not necessarily because they are slower, but because they don't have as much free time as ChatGPT. I have seen people in the zone write brilliant stuff as fast as ChatGPT can spit out a text. However, co-writers are not available 24/7 and they are usually not motivated to do as many rewrites and complete changes in direction as a mindless robot is.

Accountability

But people have something really, really cool: accountability. If there is a problem

with the character or something you don't understand, you can talk to the actual writer about what they actually mean to a degree that a chatbot is not really capable of. Real people can ask you questions about whether you understood the text they wrote or got the underlying ideas they tried to convey. This conversation can also be extended to the participant. If you go to the larp and someone has gotten a character written by your writer, when the player comes with questions you cannot meaningfully answer, you can direct them to the actual writer. This is one of those things that ChatGPT will likely never be able to provide. It can create a new analysis of its own text, but it will not be able to go back and go through its process or the intent behind it that might be lost to the reader. It can only provide a new answer and another new answer and so on, until you are satisfied or give up, with no guarantee that it ever gets close to your original task.

This, as I see it, is the true challenge of using ChatGPT. When you arrive at the larp and players come to you with questions about the character that was written for you by AI, you will struggle to help them with their character because you don't really know any more than your players. Usually as a character designer, you have some bigger thoughts and ideas than what is conveyed in the text, and for some players that broader perspective can be the key to understanding how to actually play their character. This is also a problem that ChatGPT will likely run into: understanding and conveying the bigger picture of the larp and how the written character is supposed to be a guide on how to unlock and interact with your larp. ChatGPT will just write you a cool story, but getting it to create connections

with other players and leave open options for creating plot and more connections is something it cannot do. It will leave you as an organiser and designer without answers for your players.

Going into the Chat GPT generation

With that in mind, now it is time to test it out for real. What would ChatGPT do if I put it to the test for creating a character and how would I rate it and the process of working with it? I have no idea what will really come out of this, but I have a load of assumptions we are going to explore. Therefore, I also want to keep it fairly open-ended and generic to not direct it too much.

This is the prompt I put into ChatGPT:

"I would like you to help me create a character for a magic school larp driven with social conflicts and the stress of school life. Modern Urban Fantasy world, close to our own world. The character needs to also have relations with other people in the larp."

Chat GPT then asked some follow-up questions about style of play and, funnily enough, also asked about the name and pronouns. I wanted it to focus on narrative and keep it story driven and so, I said it could choose name and gender itself.

This was the result:

Character Name: Iris Vale

Age: 17

Pronouns: She/they

Magical Speciality:

Resonance Magic – a subtle and emotionally charged art that lets Iris sense and manipulate the emotional “frequencies” around her. She can make someone feel slightly calmer in a crisis or amplify the tension in a room until it feels unbearable. It's powerful in theory — but dangerous for someone as emotionally raw as Iris. Strong feelings can rebound, causing unpredictable outbursts or draining exhaustion.

Background:

Iris Vale grew up on the edge of the magical world — her mother a once-promising enchantress who lost her license after an “incident,” and her father a non-magical journalist who still writes angry columns about “elite magical institutions.”

When Iris received her acceptance letter to **Orchard Hill Academy of Arcane Arts**, it felt like a second chance — not just for her, but for her family name. She entered determined to *be better, quieter, safer* than her mother ever was. But magic doesn't behave when you try to suppress it, and neither do emotions.

At Orchard Hill, Iris found herself trapped between worlds. The pureblood students treat her like charity. The non-magical-borns think she's cold and privileged. She spends long nights in the Resonance practice rooms, whispering apologies to the echoes that only she can hear.

Personality:

Soft-spoken, observant, and almost painfully empathetic, Iris feels *too much* and shows *too little*. Her fear of losing control makes her withdraw just when she most wants to connect. She keeps meticulous notebooks about emotions she can't express aloud — cataloging smiles, stifled sighs, every shift in tone.

But when she does open up, it's like a dam breaking: poetic, intense, and impossible to ignore.

Motivations and Inner Conflict:

- **To belong** — Iris desperately wants to feel accepted, but fears she doesn't deserve to be.
- **To control her emotions** — Her magic is strongest when she feels deeply, but that's also when it's most unstable.
- **To redeem her family's reputation** — She hides her mother's scandal, but it shadows everything she does.
- **To understand “truth” in emotion** — Part of her magic is listening, but she's beginning to question whether it's ever ethical to hear what others don't choose to share.

Secrets:

- Iris's mother didn't just lose control of her magic — she caused an incident that led to another student's death. The school quietly covered it up.
- Iris sometimes *feels* the emotions of the dead student echoing in her resonance

spells. She doesn't know if it's guilt, trauma, or a haunting.

- She's started experimenting with using her magic to suppress her own emotions — a dangerous and unsustainable coping mechanism.

Connections / Hooks:

These are open-ended, but with enough flavour that other players can easily attach themselves:

- 1 **The Confidant** — Someone who sees through Iris's polite mask. Maybe they share a quiet bench by the greenhouse after curfew, talking about things they shouldn't. Iris trusts them more than she should.
- 2 **The Rival** — A pureblood student who knows about her mother's scandal. They weaponize subtle gossip, but perhaps it hides a strange fascination or even attraction.
- 3 **The Anchor** — A non-magical-born classmate whose emotional "frequency" Iris can't quite sense — which makes them peaceful and terrifying at once. They remind her what it's like to just be.
- 4 **The Mirror** — Another student struggling with control — but who embraces chaos where Iris fears it. They tempt her to stop suppressing her emotions and to feel everything.

Roleplay Prompts:

- You often feel the emotions of others before they even speak. How do you act

when someone's sadness seeps into you during class?

- Someone discovers that your magic can manipulate feelings. How do you convince them you're not dangerous?
- Late one night, you hear the same emotional "frequency" your mother used to carry. What do you do?
- You realise one of your classmates is using you for information or influence. Do you retaliate, withdraw, or empathize?

Tone:

A character made for **intense, emotional, human play**. Great for moments of quiet vulnerability, unspoken attraction, and moral questions about empathy and consent. Iris isn't about power struggles — she's about *feeling too much in a world that punishes that*.

Feedback on ChatGPT character

This is what ChatGPT created in the first try after a bit of clarification. It also offered doing more for me, but I think we already have a lot to work with.

Looking at the full character, I have to be fair: I didn't give it much coaching about what kind of larp I was creating and some of the clear problems could have been avoided by prepping it better. However, I wanted to see what it would create from the ground up instead of showing it a finished character it could copy.

Now, I will go through each section:

Resonance magic: It is really creative, but as it is described, I think it is going to be difficult to actually do in play at a larp without complicated game mechanics (which I told it to avoid) or the larp being very internal-immersion. It is not impossible to play with, just a challenge. I can also already see a player coming back to me with a lot of questions on how I see this actually working in the larp and how to play it out.

Background: Very cliché, with outsider parents, her representing a second chance, and conflict with pureblood students. Lots of good stuff. So far also very difficult though, without much support from anyone. As I see it, this is going to be a very lonely player.

Personality: This is already a bit better, because it has a mix of things. While very introverted and likely very relatable for a lot of inverted magical fantasy nerds, the character still has some concrete things to

do, like write a notebook and have dam-breaking moments of intense emotions and poetry. The notebook is a great prop and notes can be forgotten or stolen to give play to others. To have an excuse to prepare these intense scenes of finally opening up to someone is something I think could be fun to do in a larp. Writing too introverted characters is always dangerous because they easily just become wallpaper for other players' stories. It is very important to give them ways to avoid that.

Motivations and inner conflict: This part is very bland and already made obvious from the rest of the character. I think with a longer character, this part would make sense as a summary. Now it looks like something that was just added to take up space.

Secrets: This part adds the fact that her mother's incident caused the death of another student and it was covered up. This is a big secret and could create an interesting story. It could be a major plot point for a larp, since the school covered it up and so other characters need to be involved with it. This is also one of those things that you as a larp designer could easily miss after just reading the first half of the character and forget to include elsewhere, and then this player would be looking for a mystery that only they know about.

I like the other secrets, about using her spells to connect with a dead student and also experimenting with using magic to suppress her own emotions. I am not sure they fit as a secret and they should maybe have been part of her inner conflict. Both ideas could lead to interesting play.

Connections / hooks: I asked ChatGPT to also create relations with other characters, and it did ask me if I had those characters or if it should just create some generic hooks, which it clearly then did. It even kind of explains that it is work in progress: “These are open-ended, but with enough flavour that other players can easily attach themselves”. This is a place to start and obviously more work would need to be done. Which once other characters had been created it would be easier to ask it to link them together.

Roleplay prompts: So, now we humans are also getting prompted by the AI on how to play. I like it. I think they are actually fine. There is some stuff to try to make happen at the larp and they are all ideas to explore with co-players in a workshop.

Tone: “Iris isn’t about power struggles — she’s about *feeling too much in a world that punishes that.*” What a banger ending! I think this works great at getting someone excited about playing this character.

This is again clearly the strong suit of ChatGPT, it is great at glazing and making things sound interesting. However, it lacks consistency and understanding of how things would actually work out in our physical world.

My conclusion

Using ChatGPT is fun, no doubt about it. It feels great just giving it a prompt and seeing it get to work without batting an eye. The process of not getting any pushback or questions is very different from how you work with co-creators that are humans.

ChatGPT will provide no pushback, no second opinion, and no time limits.

Let me say that again: “No pushback, no second opinions, and no time limits.”

Depending on what you get out of the line above, it will say a lot on how you view and work with other people. I can say from personal experience, that working on creating the first *College of Wizardry*, there was a lot of pushback, tons of opinions and never enough time. It was frustrating, it was tough, and it felt like the most impossible thing to put together. There was external feedback, so much arguing back and forth internally, and every part of the design was discussed endlessly.

These discussions and arguments, as draining as they could be, formed the core that held the larp together. Having real discussions with real humans is how we build a proper foundation as we poke at problems from every direction. They prepare us for when the larp meets the reality of actual players standing on location and asking questions about how to actually play the larp.

In essence, I think my conclusion is that even if ChatGPT can do some of the work, you will still need to take the time to go through and process what it has cooked up. Ideally, you discuss the content in a group with diverse perspectives and make sure it works for your larp. In the end, it is not really a great path to avoid putting in the work. ChatGPT will only be able to provide you with a starting point.

If we choose to use ChatGPT for character creation, we cannot remove the human

element in checking and editing. In the end, we will just be glorified editors for ChatGPT’s attempts at creativity. Maybe it is fine to just skip the middleman and go directly to the creative part ourselves.

So here in the end, do I feel more comfortable with discussing this topic?

The short answer is “Hell no!” There are a lot of legal and ethical issues that I did not want to delve into in this article. I feel it is already way too long. And it is easy to write it off on one side of the fence or the other.

But I have now written and I am now that idiot with some thoughts on the table, with every intention of being disregarded and proven wrong five years, or maybe already five months, from now. And I now pass the hot potato to you:

What are your thoughts on using ChatGPT in larp? Do you use LLMs in other situations?



Translating Culture

Siri Sandquist

As the larp community grows more and more international, it is inevitable that we start to invite each other into larp experiences deeply rooted in local culture and history. How do we as organisers translate the cultural context in which a larp was made to an international participant group? How do we as designers make ourselves aware of the intrinsic cultural knowledge that shapes the larp experience and how can we make this accessible to someone lacking this knowledge?

In this article, I have gathered my own thoughts as well as those of three seasoned larp designers that all have, in one way or another, worked to make their larps accessible to a wider international audience. Through comparing thoughts and reflections as well as analysing the experiences as an organiser and as a participant, I aim to start the creation of a toolbox for future designers. My hope is to make their larps accessible for players that might lack the cultural context that is intrinsic to a local larper.

Background

It all started in 2019, when I ran two runs of the larp *1912*. One in Swedish, Norwegian, and Finnish, one in English and Swedish. The larp was set during a Christmas weekend during 1912 in the Stockholm Archipelago. It was a larp about the bourgeois family and its friends celebrating Christmas and, maybe more importantly, the staff working hard to make the Christmas as magical as possible for the gentry. With *1912*, I wanted to create a window into a past moment in time, and dissect the intricate power dynamics between man

and woman, Swede and immigrant, upper class and lower class. As I was designing the larp, I realized quickly that it would be a challenge to make the international run (where English symbolised Swedish and Swedish Finnish) “feel” right. When I look back at the international run, I often say it wasn’t a bad larp, just a different larp, much more influenced by British culture through the common reference frame of tv series like *Downton Abbey* rather than Swedish media such as Ingmar Bergman’s *Fanny & Alexander*. This difference between the two runs interested me, and made me reflect upon what challenges we as larp designers face in trying to make a culture, or just a mood, accessible to someone from a different cultural context, when we hardly know ourselves what it is that makes it different. This interest of mine was reawoken in 2024 as I started the work of adapting *1912* into *1913 – Midsummer pleasantries* (Denmark, 2025). The decision to change the setting from Christmas to Midsummer came at a cost. I just could not see a way to make it international. Midsummer is too strange, too specific. Too *Swedish*. It felt like a hopeless task and I abandoned it before I even tried. But still the question had been posed. How can we translate the most intrinsic parts of a specific cultural context to a wider international audience?

When I interviewed him, Tim Wießner expressed a similar experience when his larp, first run for local German players, was remade into an international iteration. The players behaved differently, and interacted with the themes of the larp in a very different manner.

I had my challenge clear to me. Could we make a toolbox of good practices to make

this process of making larps culturally accessible? In order to explore it, I decided to interview three larp designers that all have experience in different ways when it comes to running larps with a local cultural context for international crowds.

Iva Vávrová is part of the Czech team that made Czech larp accessible for an international audience through larps such as *Legion* (Czech Republic, 2014).

Katrine Wind has a lot of experience running her fantasy game *Daemon* (Denmark, 2022) in several different countries.

Tim Wießner ran a larp about Germany during the Second World War, first in German but later in two English-speaking runs together with larpwriter Alessa Münch.

By interviewing them about their personal experiences as larp designers and larp runners, I hoped to be able to pinpoint best practices when it came to translating intrinsic cultural understanding to an international audience.

These were the three main areas we could pinpoint together:

- Cultural expression as a way to feel connected to the larp’s subject matter
- Common vocabulary and clear communication
- Preparation and the role of workshops in preparing the player

Cultural expression and sense of belonging

The air raid had dragged us all out of our beds and into a dark cellar in the headquarters of a Nazi research institute. We were huddled in shocked silence. “Won’t anyone sing a song?”

Yes, I thought off-game in my head. This is the perfect scene for a song. And several songs came to mind. The problem was that they were all in Swedish or English. And the English songs from the 40’s were all... not very Nazi. The only one I could think of to sing was Tomorrow belongs to me, from Cabaret. Something that immediately would break several people’s immersion too. The question was met with silence. And I was in an instant extremely out of game.

This is an example from an international run of a larp I attended in 2025. It illustrates the difficulty that comes with playing in a cultural context with which you have no personal relationship. I wanted to be able to sing a song to boost the morale of the soldiers around me, but I was unable to since I lacked the necessary cultural knowledge to know a song that would be appropriate. Music is an extremely strong bearer of culture for many of us. The difference between the folk music of Ireland and the folk music of Greece immediately brings different associations, feelings and moods. As such, music can be an amazing way of bringing a feeling of a culture to the players, but also an extremely strong way of pulling them out of the context. At the larp *Wise Women* (UK, 2025), set in the Outer Hebrides during the 1950’s, music and singing were very much a core theme of the larp. To make this possible, an extensive

part (2–3 hours) of the workshop was put into teaching us to sing a choice of four songs. We were also given the sheet music in advance as well as the lyrics printed to sneak a peek discreetly during the larp. At that larp, the question “Won’t anyone sing a song?” would never have pulled me out of immersion, because we already had a fallback of the supplied songs that also in different ways highlighted the cultural context we were trying to portray. At *Legion*, a Czech larp about the last legion to walk through the Siberian tundra on their way home after the First World War, music was also an integrated part of the design. Larpers are given a specific song that they then get to practice to sing in Czech ahead of the larp. As a larp originally designed for a Czech player base but now having been run internationally 34 times, (39 at the time of this publication), it seemed like the perfect project to look closer at when it came to how they have worked with translating a complex and personal part of Czech history for an international player base. In conversations with Iva Vávrová, the main organiser of the larp, we delved into the tricky balance of making this very pivotal period of Czech culture accessible to international players with limited understanding of the historical and cultural context of the larp’s setting. “*It is important to analyse what in the design it is that makes the players feel a certain way*” Iva says. An example she brings up is the names. In *Legion*, there are both Czech, Slovakian and Russian characters. In the Czech players, the very different name cultures immediately creates a sense of familiarity and alienation. For international players, this isn’t true at all. Instead, all names feel foreign and strange to the majority of international players coming

to the larp. In the translation of the setting, some of the meanings are lost.

However, the function of the different name cultures when it comes to creating different groups within the larp still works since the names are different enough. In the translation of the setting some of the meanings are lost and some remain.

The meaning of words – a common vocabulary?

According to Rob Boddice, a historian who has focused his research around the human experience through time, we are unable to fully understand the experience and emotions of people in a different historical context. He uses modern neuroscience research into our brain’s plasticity to explain how lived experience influences our understanding of emotions and sensations. How we experience the world is then literally shaped by our frame of references according to this theory – and when applied to larp, this of course becomes a problem. Our instinctive understanding of a term is influenced by our own culture and so in our conversations of freshly created terms for larp design, this means we sometimes might be blind to differences in understanding, as well as the cultural expressions in the larp experience we try to create.

Katrine Wind is a Danish organiser who has had some of her larps, such as *Daemon*, produced in several different countries. She brings up an interesting part of the issue of translating larp to foreign contexts: the lack of a common vocabulary. For herself, someone deeply rooted in the Nordic larp tradition, she points out that the

only coherent larp academia in English is the Nordic one. This means that even organisers outside of the Nordic countries, and therefore the Nordic tradition, often fall back on using toolboxes and vocabularies minted in the Nordic larp culture, through for example the KP conferences. However, sometimes these terms or tools are not as functional outside of the Nordic contexts, or they take on a life of their own. With Nordic culture come several concepts of collaborative play, volunteer-based work, Jante Law, and cultural taboos that gives us a somewhat shared understanding of words and concepts that might get a different meaning in another cultural context. How a term is applied might change the whole meaning and lead to misunderstandings of playing style and themes.

For example, the term “pressure cooker larp” as applied to the personal playing style is a very different thing than as applied to the whole larp. If one player believes pressure cooker design means feel all the feelings internally but show nothing outwards (the traditional meaning in most Nordic countries) and another player interprets pressure cooker larping as pressing down feelings up until the big explosions when the lid blows off, this will naturally lead to two very different kinds of playing styles, and if you as an organiser wanted one version but got another, this can lead to disappointment. Iva Vávrová mentions this as well. She puts a lot of emphasis on the necessity of clarity in communicating your vision of the larp beforehand. You cannot rely on a shared cultural understanding, and thereby a shared vocabulary. You need to explain the themes, the playstyle and aesthetics in a way that is so detailed that it leaves as little room for misunderstanding as possible. We as organisers must try and find what words

and terms we use that will not be commonly understood by a person from a different larp culture, as well as what words and terms will not be commonly understood within the larp setting. We need to translate all of these into a shared vocabulary and world of association that the international players are able to internalise and understand. Many international larps are run by organisers in their second language. Material written in one language loses depth and nuance when translated to English. Since the overall English skill is high in the international larp community, we sometimes become blind to our own weaknesses, and the richness of character and fictional texts might become simplified in translation, not only because the receiver lacks the cultural context to understand them, but also because the designer might lack the language skill to fully translate the depths of the material to an international crowd.

Preparing the player

In order to succeed in the translation of cultural context for international players, clarity is key. Clarity of vision and tools for the participant to actually help to embody it. As an organiser, having an international player lacking the cultural context in question look through the material as it is being translated will help you, not only with language but with finding the context clues that players might not understand. Katrine Wind mentions an example from when she was running *Daemon* in the US, and realized that American players lacked the cultural understanding of feudalism that is important in the world-building of the larp’s universe. She had to add a specific part of the workshop to clarify what that meant in the European context.

She also specifically addresses common things in the local larp culture when running a larp abroad during the workshop, and clarifies how to do or not do similar things in the larp in question as a part of the workshop. This can for example be common ways of signifying going off-game, calibration mechanics and so on that are the norm in the local scene but not a part of her game design. Another important part of the preparation of the players is, as always, to communicate a clear vision of what this larp is supposed to be.

Before the larp

This starts with the web page where information, pictures, and writing style all together communicate a feel for the larp in question. Every surface is a designable surface (Koljonen, 2019) and the web page is a very underestimated one in my opinion. Especially in larps where the fiction might be alien to the player, it is an important way of communicating the style and mood of the experience. It is also here we can add lists of books, movies and other media that might give a greater understanding of the style and subject matter of the larp, as well as historical and cultural context clues to help players from different contexts start to familiarize themselves with the themes. Tim Wießner mentions sharing movies and other kinds of media before the larp to the players as a way to try and convey the cultural context within which the larp takes place. Avalon larp studios goes further in some of their larps and organises optional remote movie nights. This naturally leads to unofficial discussions about the movie and the cultural setting. It could also perhaps be done with a more facilitated conversation about cultural differences.

Other tools that can be given to the players well in advance, in addition to fictional texts about setting and culture, are tools to express the culture during play. For larps like *Wise Women*, a song list and a music sheet was provided in advance, together with recordings of how to correctly pronounce the Gaelic names of the characters. This helped the larpers to prepare and practice cultural expressions that would be the framework of the larp.

You can also do like *Legion* and use the sign-up as a tool to gather information of preconceptions and knowledge level in the player base around the cultural contexts of the larp. For *Legion*, they for example send out an image of the Czar's emblem and the Communist symbol and ask the prospective players to explain how the symbols make them feel. This will give important context clues around:

- 1 Whether the players know these symbols at all, and
- 2 Whether their views of the two political systems they represent are strongly negative or positive

The organisers can then use this information in casting. I believe you could also take this one step further. If you know the preconceptions and basic values of your players, you can use this to modify the workshops in order to balance these potential differences in views.

During workshops

During the workshops, it is important to give time and space not only to the historical

setting but the cultural setting to players. Whether by informing the players about what specific behaviors and expressions will be used and giving the cultural meaning for them, or by practicing them, it is extremely important to give the players the tools to try and embody the cultural expressions chosen. This is really no different from the way we prepare to enter into a fantastical setting, or a historical setting. We need to try and simplify the complex cultural context and make it playable by choosing what to highlight. During the workshops, we need to be mindful of what terms we are using, and that we have a common understanding of what this means. To say “*17th century Sweden was very Christian*” is true, but also very non-descriptive. Instead we need to explain what made the church in Sweden stand out. How it will be playable during the larp, for example: “*In 17th century Sweden, everyone went to church twice every Sunday. The priest was not only the religious leader but also the news anchor who communicated decrees from the crown and other important more local news. The Swedes were Lutheran, which means they preached in Swedish, and there was an overall belief that if you worked hard and dutifully in this life you would be rewarded in the next.*”

This means that information will have to be more detailed and nuanced. It means that it will take more time and be harder for the players to memorize and embody. Therefore, it is helpful to know the player base a little. Either through using a local producer like Katrine Wind or by having an extensive casting document where you get to answer questions of your pre-knowledge of the cultural context like Iva Vávrová. If you want specific cultural expressions to be a part of the experience, you also need to workshop them. Whether it is how to

dance around a midsummer pole in *1913* or how to sing Gaelic working songs in *Wise Women*, it is important that the players get to do it several times before the actual game time if it is meant to feel familiar to them in-game. Otherwise the experience of not knowing what to do will bring them off-game in their heads and lead to insecurity in how to play out the cultural contexts.

Conclusions

When you want to translate something, it is inevitable that things get lost in translation.

When we do not know instinctively how something works or feels, we will draw from our closest frame of reference, just like I argued in my article “Use of History in a larp context”. This means that what is unknown will leave a vacuum that will be filled with our closest frame of reference, either in our own culture or in popular media based in a similar context.

However, it is still a worthy pursuit to make larp settings in specific cultural contexts available for an international audience – if you are willing to simplify some things. As a designer and organiser, look at the setting and the content of your larp and ask yourself: what is in it that would be hard to understand for a foreigner? Ask for help in this process. If a larp is run in another country where there is another dominating larp style, having producers from that country present, helping you to translate context clues in both setting and larp style is very helpful. But even if you run an international version of a local larp, having someone from a different cultural background look over the

material and ask questions will be helpful for you to be able to see where your blind spots are.

Make sure to choose what expressions of culture you deem necessary, because just as in historical larps, if you do not tell people how to play something, they will revert back to the closest context clue they can find, often from popular media set in other cultural contexts. When you have decided on what cultural denominators you want to give your players in order to perform the chosen culture, give them the tools to learn and practice these denominators before the larp starts, so they can feel at least a little bit more familiar. Be prepared that a player without intrinsic knowledge of a cultural context won't be able to understand every single nuance. Instead there is a value in itself to rediscovering a cultural context through the eyes of someone seeing it from the outside. Things you would not have reflected over as culturally significant might suddenly become glaringly obvious when the cultural context is being embodied by someone lacking the intuitive understanding that you have. In the same way, as a player, there is a joy in getting to experience things that are alien to us, whether it is a Medieval feudal society, a space base in the future or a Swedish midsummer celebration.

Something worthy of noting here is that there is a danger in declaring one way to be the only right one of performing a cultural expression. It can easily translate to saying that only our own view of what is culturally significant in a certain context is the right way of “doing” that cultural expression. A cultural context is way too complex to be completely nailed down. And in any cultural

context, there are individuals who, in different ways, have other cultural contexts influencing their norms and behaviors. The herd mentality is what becomes interesting here: the things we understand without necessarily knowing why can be exposed when interacted with by people from outside of the context something was created in. Something as simple as how long a pause you leave after one sentence is uttered before the next speaker starts can be the difference between someone coming off as rude or polite in different cultural contexts. We might not realise that these are the things grating at us when seeing someone larping a setting “in the wrong way”. Or even in everyday life where unspoken patterns of behaviour and norms are grated against by people from a different cultural understanding than us. Something interesting happens when we see the unwritten rules we were not even aware of ourselves getting exposed by this kind of embodying by the other. We see our own cultural biases, but we also get to experience our own culture from the eyes of someone else. This rings true no matter if we are talking about the setting of the larp or just the unwritten rules around larp style. If we can see this as a strength, and learn how to distill what we deem important in order to fully engage with the message of the larp we are designing, we can make larps more accessible in our growing international larp scene. The important part being that we do this purposefully, and with an understanding of the necessity of making the cultural expressions accessible to people who do not have an intrinsic understanding of them. That way we will broaden both our own understanding and the playability of our larps in a growing international community.

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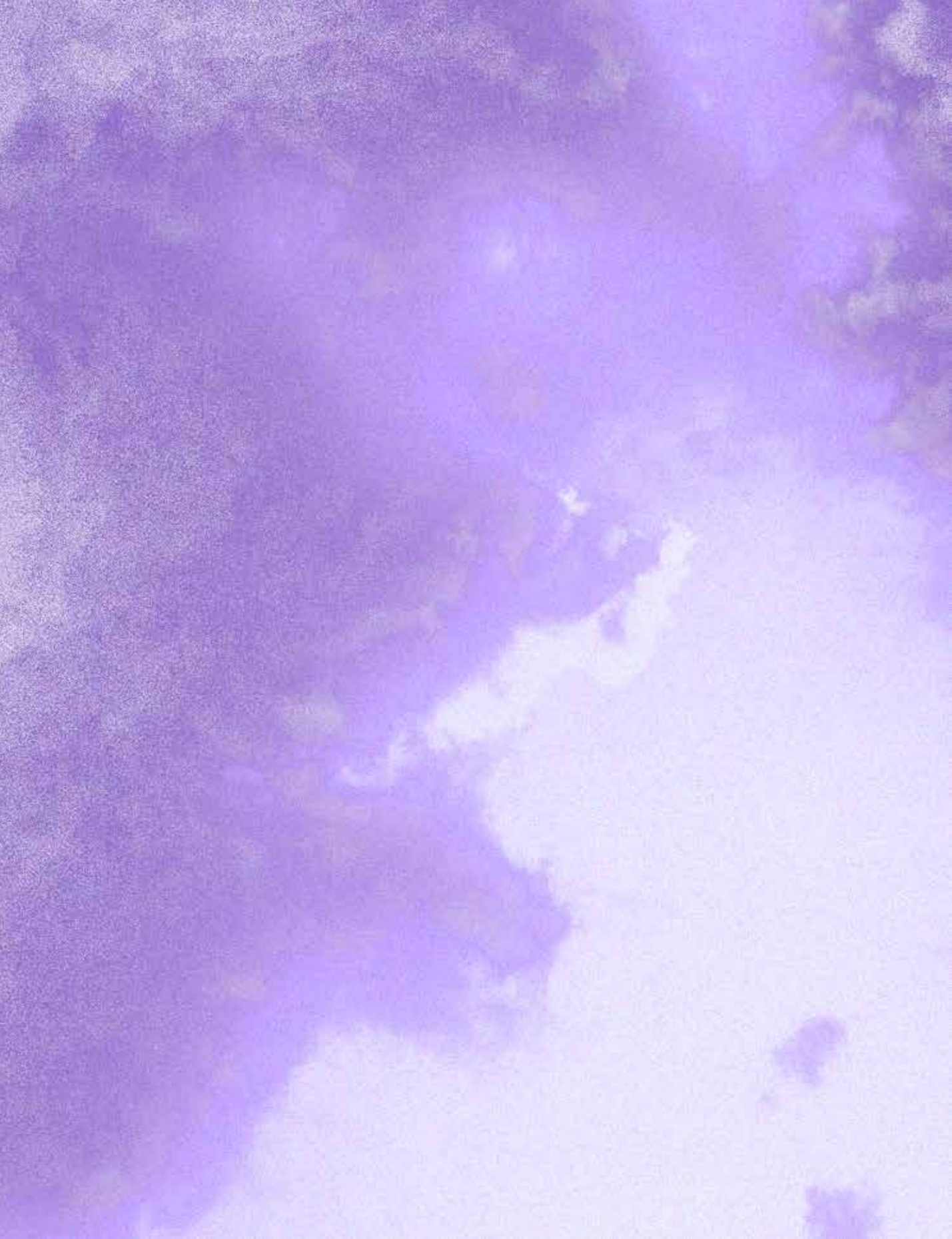
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Designing and playing for hope in a hopeless world

Sandy Bailly

When we talk about larping for transformation, it feels like there's often a focus on very individualistic experiences. These usually come with an emphasis on transformation through suffering, living it or inflicting it. However, in a world that is rapidly enacting scenarios that we didn't want to imagine as a reality, does it still make sense to embody these same scenarios in our games? Instead of learning from a position of privilege why we don't want certain things to happen (again), is it not worthwhile to focus on learning to hope again instead?

The privilege of type 2 'fun' and hopelessness

Type 2 fun is a term that a lot of larpers, especially in the international Nordic and Nordic-inspired community, frequently refer to. It's a type of play and narrative game design the same community often may go looking for. With this term, I refer to the type of fun that doesn't feel like you're having fun in the moment, but afterwards, you look back on the event as a good and fun experience. For larp, type 2 play can also refer to the situation where your character is not having fun at all in the reality of the larp, while you as a player are very much enjoying playing out their story. When discussing this term further in this context, I wish to purposely leave the word 'fun' out of it, for reasons tied to privilege that will hopefully become clear in the next few paragraphs.

Within transformative play, I see type 2 as a term for the kind of games in which we change perspectives by embodying stories that give us insights into why

people commit horrible acts. But also into how decision-making can be steered into directions we don't want to see in the world, as well as into how certain societal structures, behaviours etc. sustain systems of oppression, to mention a few.

I want to acknowledge that these experiences can be valuable and important from an educational point of view, and that the transformative experiences people have through them are valid and can be life changing. However, it's important to also not be blind for the privilege that lies in being able to embody these stories. Exploring underprivileged and unsafe points of view within the bubble of a safe space is a privilege, and so is being able to step out of these situations at any given moment.

Stepping out of your comfort zone and into the brave space of exploring these type 2 stories is easier when you have a place to return to afterwards that:

- Is relatively safer,
- Doesn't confront you with the same extremities in being powerless and underprivileged,
- Or is just a comfort zone.

It's more difficult to do this if your everyday reality forces you out of your comfort zone or even into survival as a constant, instead of as an exception.

Hopelessness is a privilege. This is a statement that is true, not only in our current reality, but also in our larp design and communities. I remember attending a silent memorial for the Nakba, when two

people walked by and one told the other they didn't understand why people would still protest, as the situation was hopeless anyway. This way of considering a situation hopeless is something that comes from a position of privilege. Choosing to accept a situation as it is, and opting for apathy instead of action, is a massively understated privilege, and one that is rapidly shrinking. People in underprivileged circumstances cannot afford to give up in the same way people in privileged lives can. Similarly, it's easier to play on hopeless situations and narratives when you're returning to an individual life situation that doesn't have to face the circumstances for this hopelessness on a daily basis. However, it is exactly the privilege of being able to play on hopelessness that should have us rethink why we would do so in the first place.

Agency for growth and the power of community

Powerlessness and a lack of agency are an important and undeniable part of living in underprivileged and oppressive circumstances. They are also a circumstance that hinders growth and healing, and that can be or often just is impossible to overcome. Trying to empower people to (re-)discover their agency and their potential and trying to inspire people to heal and grow is impossible when their circumstances force them into survival. When I was coaching people in the past, one huge hindrance when you finally got someone to find some self-confidence again, was often the ways in which they couldn't follow through on their dreams and plans, as their circumstances often forced them into having to take

care of other, more primary and pressing needs instead. You cannot heal and focus on individualistic needs when the world around you imposes a difficulty to just exist in groups and communities as a whole.

As bell hooks made abundantly clear, we do not heal in isolation. Healing is an act of communion. It happens in community, and the unique co-creative nature of larp as an artform holds an incredible potential to create safer spaces for communal healing, discovery and learning.

The antithesis of fascism, of populism, of right wing rhetoric and practice, lies in community and connection. We need to step away from looking at playing and designing larps as a purely individualistic experience and practice when we're talking about larping for transformation. You can have individually important and meaningful experiences within a larp and a community, but it's important to understand that it is exactly thanks to the existence of these communities surrounding the game and the space they create that one is able to have these experiences. Thinking about designing for and playing within the community is indispensable. Both as an element in the narratives and structures we create as well as within the context of larp as a whole, and hence, also in how we create these temporary communities while we are not our characters, but ourselves.

Creating shared spaces in which people can explore narratives while feeling supported by the community they are surrounded by can be incredibly empowering, especially when they are not used to having a sense of agency. Being allowed to feel and explore difficult feelings and narratives and having

the support and opportunity to not just embrace them, but to also move past them is an experience that can change lives as well as communities and their dynamics and hopes.

So why not imagine the effect it can have to not just design for the experience of being stuck in a difficult situation and understanding how we got there, but instead, to design for being in that situation of powerlessness to then move beyond it by your own and your community's doing? Having played with narrative and structural design for healing and hope in my own larp designs, it has been very powerful as well as meaningful to see stories unfold in which people were allowed to move from problems to solutions, instead of the other way around. When asking a group of participants to one of my larps in Al-Khalil (Hebron) to summarise the feeling they left with in a few words, all of them voiced some variation of 'tomorrow will be a better day'. So, why not design more stories that allow people to find this kind of hope for the future? Why not reclaim our agency in our stories first, and then carry on this hope and this interdependency into our interdependency into our everyday practice?

The radical choice for hope

'We find it easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.' This is a quote that stuck with me ever since I heard it in a radio broadcast about how to design alternative narratives in today's world, and I hope it's one that can encourage others to shift their thinking about play and design as well.

Instead of focusing on gaining an understanding about the how and the why of bad things happening, we should shift our focus on how to move beyond the difficulties, the trauma and the end of everything, and think about growth and rebuilding instead.

I will not deny the value in telling these stories, and in understanding how oppressive systems come to be, I just want to raise the question whether this is really what we currently need to focus on, when we're living it in real time?

We live in a world that requires us to hope. Our current reality is clearly showing us our privilege if we are able to choose when we do or do not acknowledge the worst of it. We need to reclaim our stories, our narratives, and ultimately, our realities, and this is not going to happen by creating stories that soothe us by having us realise how bad certain realities are. Instead, we need to retell the endings of these stories. We need to not accept that hopeless situations are where our stories end, but instead, we need to act and rewrite these endings with growth, hope, and communal belonging, first in our imagined worlds, and next in our actual one.



Larp against sexism

Julia Leśniewska

Introduction

Can larp be a tool for preventing sexism in the world of today? As an active larper, I see sexism used as a larp world element in numerous games, those from the past and those happening right now or very soon. Sometimes it is very clear and straightforward, showing a sexist community; sometimes it's a more hidden element, disguised by fantastical worlds and supernatural powers. Nevertheless, it appears consciously (and sometimes also unconsciously) as an element of the designed world and gameplay in numerous larps. Looking closely at this topic encouraged me to think about the role that those games play in their players' lives and how they encourage reflection towards not only society but also towards the players themselves. And those exact musings brought me here, asking the big question about the possibility of larp being a tool for preventing sexism, and deciding to pursue this topic as my PhD research.

As a young woman, the issue of misogyny and sexist attitudes towards women represented by young men plays a significant role in my life. Seeing the increase of sexism and blatantly open aggression towards women among far-right voters has prompted me to try and research how to prevent it. In my doctoral research under the flag of University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland, I will study the topic of sexism in larps and whether playing games focused on it can be a source of reflection for the players. Based on both qualitative and quantitative research methods I will attempt to determine what are the effects on the participant of playing larps involving sexism.

One of the main thing that sticks out today for me is this: if we, as a society, don't attempt to breach the gap between the genders so visible in Gen Z, we will watch that generation grow into hatred, resentment, and unhappiness, unable to form friendships and relationships beyond their own gender. It is disheartening that in times when we should keep fighting for trans and queer rights, we have to come back to the issue of sexism, misogyny, and misandry. Despite the disappointment of it, I feel the call for action, and want my research to be a small step towards resolving this issue.

As mentioned, I will conduct doctoral study on the subject. This article is a small intro and breakdown of how I plan to research and write that doctorate and most importantly, what inspired me to do it.

Literature review

To conduct a valid and in depth study, I first have to consult already published data, as I want to anchor my work in existing research, and present my findings as a continuation and response to it. I am still finding more and more publications on sexism in young people, and the ones presented in this article are only the peak of an iceberg. At the moment I am focusing on sexist views and behaviours among men, but I am starting to expand my research to women's sexist behaviours towards men.

Current studies about men show that sexist attitudes are highly present in young men especially.

- The most recent International Women's Day 2025 Ipsos report shows that not only does the gender gap among Gen Z persist compared to their previous research, but that perceptions of tensions between men and women is also the highest with younger age groups, and that there is more optimism about the future for young women than for young men.
- Harriet Over (2025) from the University of York in the United Kingdom has recently published a study on the 'manosphere', which Cambridge Dictionary defines as "websites and internet discussion groups that are concerned with men's interests and rights as opposed to women's, often connected with opposition to feminism or dislike of women," showing that their preliminary data suggests the 'manosphere' is encouraging sexist attitudes.
- Lucas Gottzén (2025), at Stockholm University, Sweden, conducted a study showing that both far-right and Jihadist extremists contend that masculinity is threatened by feminism, and that young men often become radicalised not primarily for ideological reasons, but as ways to prove their masculinity.
- On November 18th, Equimundo has launched a new report on the state of UK men (2025) which states that 1 in 4 men believe no one will ever fall in love with them, 71 percent of men believe that people take jokes about gender stereotypes too seriously, 44 percent believe that men make better executives and leaders, and a third believe that a man should always have the final say in his relationship or marriage, among other observations.

Another element I am looking for as a part of the background research is reading articles that focus on an educational and transformative aspect of larps. I am interested in works that both prove and disprove that larps are a good tool for those purposes and to find reasons why.

- Jiayi Zhang (2025) from North China Electric University conducted studies showing that in comparison to the control group, the experimental group which used larp as an educational tool exhibited a significant increase in social-emotional competence.
- The research by Jessica Lichy, Yuan Zhai, and Derek Watson (2025) from IDRAC Business School in Lyon, France, reveal larp as an innovative tool for management development, demonstrating its positive influence on developing managerial identity development, while extending its effects to participants' real-life identities.

The articles and reports presented above are just a few examples of texts that for now form a part of my research.

Methods

Another important element of my research is to choose the right methods to conduct it. This is not an easy choice at the moment, as I am still in the planning phase, and many elements can change by the end of this academic year.

At the moment I am thinking about the following:

- Researching different larps that use sexism as a significant part of their in-game world and are organised in 2026 and 2027, in order to see how this topic is currently explored in games.
- Consult with those larps organisers to have a clear understanding on the topic of sexism used in their games, so I can find potential research participants.
- Conduct semi-structured interviews with those larps organisers, with an intention of gathering data on their design process and game-play intentions about sexism.
- Create a voluntary survey for those larps' participants to gather quantitative data on their motivation to play on the topic of sexism, their experiences, and reflections.
- Conduct semi-structured or unstructured interviews with a small number of those players, in order to dive deeper into the understanding of their experiences and combine it with the quantitative data.

I plan for my research to span a larger area than only Poland, but at the same time to be easily accessible for me and doable in a span of four years, which is why I decided to look for games organised within Europe. I will be focusing on games organised, facilitated, and played in English only, as it is a restriction that will let me run a more in-depth study, because it will not require any translation work.

Results

I am expecting that larps will turn out to be an effective tool to encourage reflection on sexism and potential change in

sexist behaviours and attitudes in young people. When I larps, I look to experience situations and feelings I might not be face in my everyday life, or that I might not be conscious are happening around me. I want to feel deeply both as my character and as myself, and I want these feelings to have a meaning. And because it is my intention, I usually come out of larps with lots of thoughts and reflections, and sometimes even realisations about myself and the world around me. Personally I consider it a strong transformative tool, and I am certain many other larpers feel the same way. But is it a common feeling? If yes, then how common? Could larps become a universal tool for reflection and change? The only thing I can be sure of is that my findings will be interesting and complicated.

Discussion

Mapping out the methods and finding the right tools were both significant steps forward for my upcoming research and I hope that this article has given some insight around my reasoning so far.

My study aims to see if larps can be an effective tool for fighting sexism, focusing on young people, maybe especially men. It is not a straightforward topic and I will face many difficulties, starting from elements as basic as finding the right participants for it and not being critical towards sexist beliefs and behaviours in my survey and interview questions. These difficulties led to some questions for me:

- Which larps should I choose?
- Should I decide to conduct my own experiment, test my own larps?

- Which qualitative and quantitative research methods should I choose to reach as clear results as possible?
- How can I account for the researcher bias during the whole process and how can I use it to my advantage?

These dilemmas are all happening now, at the beginning of the research, and I have not even reached the stage of designing any of its elements yet. When I reach this point of my study later in 2026, it will only mean more questions for me, and I cannot express how excited I am about it. It is only the beginning. My doctoral studies will span the next four years and I am certain to discover more and more on the topic with every passing month. I am also thrilled for this study to be a great opportunity for new collaborations with scholars who focus their research on live action role-playing.

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Beyond Bleed: How ‘Mixability’ and ‘Human-Centered Design’ Help Design for Learning

Mátyás Hartyándi
Gijs van Bilsen
Anne van Barlingen

Bleed has become one of the central concepts in larp studies (Jeepen, 2007; Montola, 2010; Montola, 2011; Bowman, 2013; Kemper, 2017; Leonard and Thurman, 2018; Hugaas, 2019), and for good reason.

First defined by Emily Care Boss (2007), bleed captures how a player's inner life and their character's experiences can influence one another during play (Hugaas, 2024). Because roleplaying naturally blurs the boundary between fiction and everyday life, players often find that the experiences they enact are not easily separated from their real-world selves (Järvelä, 2019; Kapitany et al., 2022; Hartyándi 2025).

Quick recap: different kinds of bleed

Many players are familiar with the phenomenon of emotional bleed (Montola 2010; Bowman 2015), in which emotions and feelings transfer between the player and the character. A related concept is relationship bleed, of which romantic bleed is the most frequently discussed form (Bowman and Hugaas, 2021). However, the concept of bleed encompasses far more than merely having a 'larp crush'. For instance, Hugaas (2019) outlines a wide range of forms, including ego bleed, memetic bleed, procedural bleed, and emancipatory bleed.

Hugaas (2019) also introduced the concept of 'identity bleed': *"Identity bleed happens when a player is able to experience a so far underexplored part of their own identity through play. This experience can further impact their sense of self by facilitating for commitment to this newly explored part of their identity"*. Exploring hidden sides of your own identity, that would make bleed a great tool for learning and development.

Consequently, over the past years, 'bleed' has gained attention from a developmental perspective: if larp affects us so deeply, might (identity) bleed itself be used as a tool for learning and personal growth (van Bilsen and van Barlingen, 2025; Hartyándi, 2025)? Following Johanna Koljonen (2019): should bleed be a designable surface?

Our expert opinion

We frequently use role-playing methods and techniques as full-time trainers, leadership consultants, and psychodramatists. In our experience, serious larp designs and applied larp implementations are often not goal-oriented or focused enough in their character design to act as an efficient tool in this regard.

Counterexamples exist, like our own designs (Hartyándi and van Bilsen, 2024). What these counterexamples have in common is a deliberate move from story-centered toward *human-centered* design: characters are intentionally crafted around the developmental needs of the participant, often in collaboration with the designer or facilitator.

Leading to the question...

This, in turn, raises a fundamental question: if developmental larp design increasingly revolves around the player rather than the character or story, are we still designing *for bleed*? Or do we require more precise terminology and more nuanced models to describe what is actually happening?

We therefore present a framework – Jacob L. Moreno's role theory – that we believe offers valuable additions to developmental larp design. Building on this, we will explain

the differences between human-centred and story-driven design, and discuss the implications of these approaches. We will compare Moreno's perspective with the framework of bleed. Finally, we will explore how a more nuanced model may offer different insights in designing for development.

What if your personality is just the roles you play?

Moreno (1962), the founder of sociometry and psychodrama, had a radical idea about personality. He believed that the self isn't something fixed or hidden deep inside us (Diakolambrianou and Bowman, 2023). According to him, our identity is shaped by behaviour patterns we act out in different situations: being a friend, a daughter, a manager, a lover, a rebel. It's built from the different roles we play in life. These social roles are the crystallizations of all situations that occur to us in a given field of activity. And these roles do not stand alone, they influence one another and often come in groups, or what Moreno (1962) called *role clusters*.

For example, the role of 'woman' often coexists with and shapes other identity-defining roles such as 'daughter,' and often 'partner' and 'mother,' creating a dynamic ripple effect across the individual's role system. Take the example of Kai from Gijs and Anne's previous KP article (van Bilsen and van Barlingen, 2025). Gijs played a bold character which unexpectedly helped him to better cope with his fear of heights. Social disinhibition and courage in the face of falling are all parts of a *role cluster* in

his personality, so a liberating experience in one might be translatable to the other. Moreover, becoming more like Kai using a mental technique might also work when climbing a tall ladder. Moreno believed that all the roles we've ever played leave a trace, and together, they make up who we are as a cluster effect.

Moreno made another important distinction. Your *role inventory* includes every (social) role you've ever played in your life. Your *role repertoire* is more restricted however, as it includes only the roles you're able to access and use right now (Moreno, 1959). The good news is that your role inventory and repertoire can grow. Through life experiences, learning from others, or even imagination and creative exercises, we can develop them. One powerful way to do this is through something Moreno called surplus reality: fictional or imagined scenarios that let us safely explore new ways of being (von Ameln, 2013). This is the foundation of psychodrama, where people act out situations in the dramatic space to gain insight and flexibility in real life.

What follows from this, and how do activities such as role-playing and larping actually support personality development? Here are two clear ways: expand your role inventory, and enhance your role repertoire.

Expand your role inventory!

The more types of roles a person plays, even in fictional settings, the more flexible and adaptable they become in real life. Each new role adds a potential way of thinking, feeling, and behaving. To some degree, every Nordic larper is aware of this. Over time, this effect creates a richer 'toolbox' of behaviours to draw from. Some studies

even suggest that living out multiple role-played ‘lives’ can help people develop a healthier attitude toward deep existential topics, such as fear of death (Hugaas, 2023).

Enhance your role repertoire!

This is about the roles you can actively use right now. According to Moreno, what matters most is not how many roles you’ve experienced, but how spontaneously you can react in the moment (Moreno, 1975). Spontaneity, in this context, means two things:

- Giving a fitting response to a new situation, or
- Finding a new response to an old, familiar situation.

In other words, personal development is not about following a previous behavioral pattern, but about responding spontaneously and reaching an emotional catharsis. For Moreno, catharsis meant not only purification from negative emotions, but also the recognition of new opportunities for experience and action. (Moreno, 1959, p. 247). According to his original definition, Moreno (1943) also used the term ‘role-playing’ in this way: not as rigid as ‘taking’ a role in social situations, nor as free as pure role creation, but somewhere in between: it includes some spontaneity between expectations and behavioral patterns.

Beyond the general benefits of expanding your role inventory and enhancing your role repertoire, there are also more specific, transformative effects role-play can offer:

Fill in what’s missing! The ‘Barbara Effect’

One of Moreno’s most well-known examples comes from his early experimental theatre group in Vienna. Barbara, an actress in the group, was often cast in roles that were gentle, modest, and well-behaved. But in real life, her husband complained that she was often angry and harsh at home. In response, Moreno gave her the opposite roles on stage: fierce, aggressive women. The result was unexpected: by expressing these strong, repressed emotions in a safe, fictional space, Barbara became calmer and more balanced in her personal life (Moreno et al., 2013).

Moreno believed that acting out unfamiliar or hidden parts of ourselves, what some might call the *shadow* (Chappell et al., 2019), can unlock real personal change. *“By depicting dimensions, roles, scenes, and interactions that life did not allow”* (Moreno, 1979, p. 33), we can grow beyond rigid patterns and expand who we’re capable of being.

Psychodrama: exploring the inner cast

Psychodrama (Moreno, 1949) is more than just role-play. It’s a structured group method where people act out personal situations, often stepping into different roles (including parts of themselves) to gain insight and healing. In psychodrama, roles are not just characters; they represent parts of our personality, or even different ego functions. The process brings these roles to the surface and allows people to work with them actively and creatively.

Moreno wasn’t focused on abstract theories as he believed in action. Still, he made

many important distinctions: different types of roles, stages of role development, role imbalances such as underdeveloped or overdeveloped roles, etc. His legacy was continued by others, especially Max Clayton (2005), who further developed role theory into practical frameworks for therapy and personal growth. Even though Moreno’s role theory isn’t considered mainstream in psychology today, its depth, prevalence, and action-oriented nature make it a powerful resource, especially for those designing or researching larp-based and or experiential methods of learning and development.

Designing for learning or designing for development?

Learning and development exist on a spectrum. When designing for learning, the focus lies on subject matter and content, rather than on the learner as a person. Designing for development, by contrast, aims to change the learner through the process itself. When such change is not gradual but radical, it becomes transformation, implying a fundamental shift in identity (Hartyándi, 2026). Story-centred design is well suited for learning and can indirectly support development, whereas human-centred design is more effective for development as it directly catalyzes personal growth.

Story-centered design

Most recreational role-playing games have a story-centred focus. Designers aim to create a compelling narrative, and roles are written in service of that story. This allows for a wide range of characters and the development of rich story arcs.

Role-play can also be designed as story-centred from an educational perspective. In this case, the focus is on the experience or the narrative itself. Participants are invited to experience what something is like. For example: what it means to belong to a minority, or how it feels to live in a particular historical period.

Human-centered design

However, when the aim is genuine development of a participant’s talents or qualities, a different design approach is required. The focus shifts to the participant and their needs. This leads to the creation of characters that can influence a player’s self-image. For example: *“I thought I could not speak in public, but through this character I experienced that I can. I now see myself as someone who is able to do that.”*

When scenarios are designed with human-centred focus, participants are more likely to experience *identity bleed*. At the same time, role-plays of this kind tend to be less compelling from a narrative perspective. The setting is often less elaborate, and the storyline typically less engaging. The emphasis is on the relationship between the character and the player.

Bleed as a tool to make sense of it

We use the concepts of alibi and bleed to help participants in our trainings make sense of what is happening. To support them in understanding the different emotions, feelings, and insights they experience, we introduce them to the concept of bleed. This gives players a way to distinguish between desired and undesired consequences of the role. By emphasising that they are not their character, we offer them an excuse

to experiment with unfamiliar behaviour during the training – and, if needed, to distance themselves from it afterwards.

However, this is where the concept of (identity) bleed starts to fall short. On the one hand, we want participants to see themselves as the source of certain behaviours (You are your role: *“I can do this, because my character can do this”*). This matches with Moreno’s way of seeing roles. On the other hand, we also want them to distance themselves from their role (You are not your role: *“Don’t blame yourself, you are not your character”*). These two positions are difficult to reconcile.

Points of view: Moreno and bleed

Moreno assumed that all roles, both fictional and real world, are part of the same whole: the self. From this perspective, there is no bleed, because everything already belongs to a single system. Moreno’s role theory assumes an internal source: you. Barbara herself generated certain patterns, and by examining these within a fictional frame, she was able to transcend them in real-world contexts.

If we imagine the self as a transparent vase (Fig. 1) filled with all the roles we have ever played, Moreno’s point of view suggests that there is only one vase. The roles floating closest to the surface form one’s role repertoire, while all roles together make up one’s role inventory. But this creates a highly undesirable implication: Excelling at playing an ‘evil’ character would, under role theory, indicate that such a role forms part

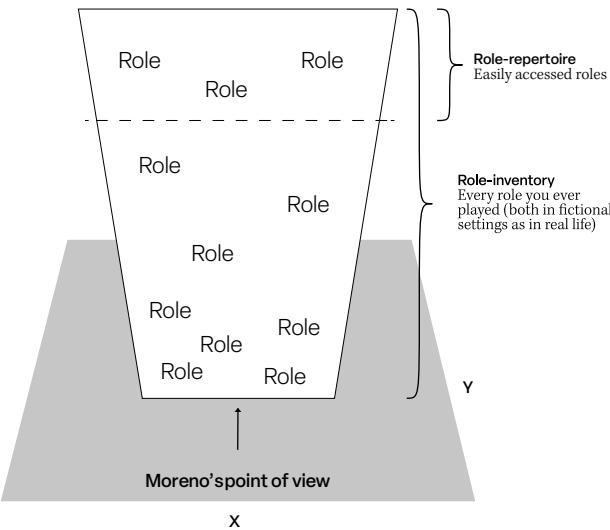
of one’s role inventory. This role may not be accepted or useful in everyday life, but it is still part of the personality... the source is you.

The consequences of this implication make playing an unpleasant character far less appealing. The alibi of *“this is not you, it is the character”* no longer holds from Moreno’s point of view.

Yet this alibi is crucial. To preserve our own sense of psychological safety, it is important to maintain a distinction between self and character. Categorising emotions as ‘not mine’ and ‘belonging to the character’ enables players to disengage from them when needed.

Shifting the point of view:

So what do we do? In our training, we introduce the concept of *bleed*. We move our point of view, moving in the illustration to side Y (Fig. 2). We tell our players and participants that it is not a single transparent vase, but two vases placed one behind the other, connected by an open channel. One vase represents who we



really are; the other contains all fictional roles. There is spillover between these two vases, but they remain clearly distinct and separate domains (Bowman, 2015). These vases seen from Moreno’s point of view seem to be one, but there are actually two.

Bleed as coping mechanism

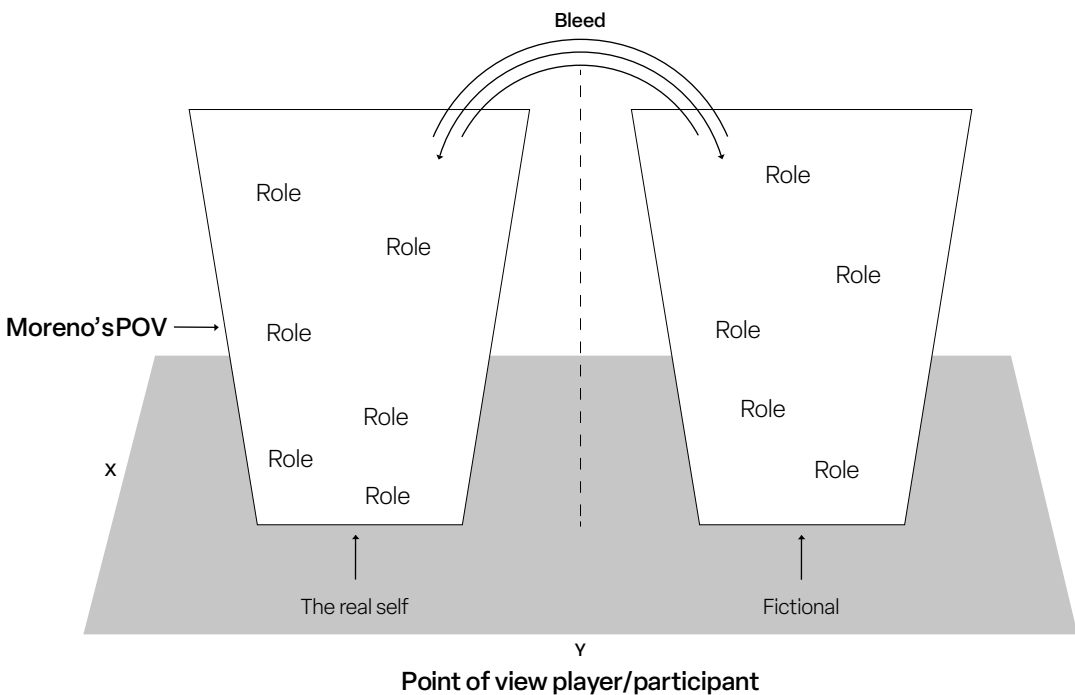
This image holds when we are talking about the character’s experiences influencing the player, and the player influencing the character. Yet from the perspective of role theory, that distinction seems artificial. Bleed implies an external source of emotions and behaviours. It also implies a permeable wall between the self and the fiction, or a way to let the self resonate with the fiction. The model becomes complicated, if you want to keep the distinction between self and fiction. Here, the limits of (identity) bleed as an explanatory concept become apparent.

To us, distinguishing ‘self’ from ‘character’, and calling remnants of one or the other ‘bleed’ is a coping mechanism: a way to avoid incorporating certain roles into one’s inventory and to maintain a stable identity. It is a tool to retain agency! *“I can decide for myself who I am, and who I want to be.”*

What if Moreno is right: mixability

We know that roles designed from a human-centred perspective are more easily incorporated in the self-image of participants than roles that are written for the story. So, some roles blend more easily than others.

What if there is, in fact, no separation? What if Moreno is right, and everything ends up in the same vase, but the extent to which roles blend with a person’s self-concept differs from role to role? All roles may be part of the role inventory, yet some roles do



not integrate with the coherent whole we experience as our self-image. Most of our roles are interconnected through different role clusters, but some in our inventory remain isolated.

This means that some roles are just more mixable: some roles mix very easily with your concept of self, some don't (Fig. 3). Mixable roles integrate with existing role clusters, making them more accessible to spontaneity. Non-mixable roles, by contrast, are fragmented from the self, blocked from spontaneity, and excluded from the role repertoire, as integrating them into role clusters would shift the entire role system and thus the self itself in an undesired direction (Moreno, 1962; Clayton, 2005).

This makes designing for development more straightforward. To what extent is a

role mixable with the player's concept of self? The higher this mixability, the easier it becomes to integrate that role.

But what if we don't want some elements to mix?

A player may have an experience that is not positive; an experience that can negatively influence their self-concept if it is accepted as part of the self. These may be feelings, thoughts, or actions that linger after play and have an unwanted impact. In such cases, bleed becomes an extremely useful tool. Explaining the concept of bleed, and introducing the role as an outside source, gives clarity.

This gives participants agency over their own learning process. Does this behaviour fit with how you see yourself, or with who

you wish to be? Congratulations: you have just expanded your role inventory. Does it not? Then you are experiencing bleed: you are having feelings that are currently part of you, but which you do not accept as belonging to your inventory.

We introduce the concept of bleed as a coping mechanism to help participants engage with their emotions and feelings in a way that enables learning and reflection. So then, are we designing for bleed? No, we are designing for mixability. Roles that can be integrated relatively easily. We use the concept of bleed as a tool to give players and participants agency over their learning process.

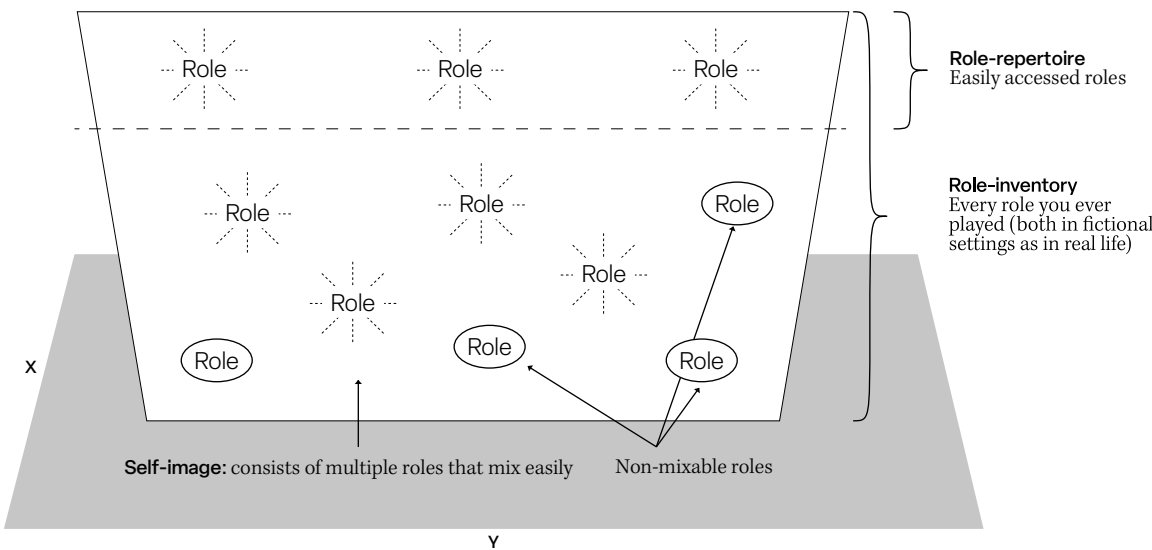
context, bleed functions best as a reflective and coping tool, giving participants agency over what they integrate into their role repertoire and what they consciously keep at a distance.

Finally, this approach opens clear connections to established developmental frameworks that work with personal qualities, ego functions, and parts of self. Exploring these connections in depth lies beyond the scope of this article and will be addressed in future work.

Conclusion

We argued that while bleed remains a useful concept for describing player-character interactions, it is limited as a primary design surface for learning and personal development. For theorists of bleed, Moreno's original role theory and our concept of mixability offer complementary perspectives by shifting attention from spillover to the degree to which roles integrate into existing role clusters and the self-concept. From this view, developmental effects are less about boundary crossing and more about integration.

For larp designers working with personal development, this implies a shift toward human-centred design and intentional character co-creation. Designing for mixability, rather than for bleed itself, supports learning that is both effective, efficient, and psychologically safe. In this



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Beyond Vampires and Campfires: Engaging with Democracy in Larp

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Can larp stimulate deep reflections on how democracy works and how it can and should function? Can larp make us more inclined to value and engage in democracy? Can it even help us develop democratic skills? These questions underlie the Larpocracy project, an EU-funded collaboration project run by academics and larp practitioners in Europe. The project started in January 2025 and is still just in its infancy – much work remains to even begin to answer these questions.

One of the first questions that emerged in the project was a very basic one: *What do larpers even mean when they say democracy?* To untangle this, we performed a series of workshops with larp designers and participants, aiming to explore how they saw democracy and democratic themes being approached in larp.

It turns out that larpers stress as important aspects of democracy such as activism and resistance. But at the same time, they ignore or pay less attention to pivotal considerations that make up the core of democracy, such as fairly managing conflicts in a shared community (Dahl 2008).

Democracy, in a broad sense, is a means of peacefully managing and resolving social conflicts. It allows those affected to express their views and take part in the decision-making process. Ideally, the chosen solutions are accepted by everyone, at least provisionally, including those who did not support them from the start. However, accepting a solution does not mean that those who disagree should remain silent. The right to organise opposition in order to influence political direction and change

previous decisions is a central part of a well-functioning democracy. This complex understanding of democracy is rarely reflected in larp, and the activities that larpers and larp designers mainly associate with democracy do not fully capture its power or purpose.

Workshops on democracy in larp

During the spring of 2025, six workshop sessions on democracy and larp were run, both physically in Sweden (2) and Norway (1) and online (3). The workshops involved around 100 people total from over 15 countries, most with at least some larp design experience. The participants provided interesting insights that can help broaden discussion on democracy as a theme within the larp community, as well as design inspiration for future larp design with democratic themes. This chapter focuses on how the workshops shed light on what larpers mean, when they talk about democracy.

The workshops, both online and physical, followed a set structure designed by Sarah Lynne Bowman, Elektra Diakolambrianou, and Karin Johansson. They consisted of a short intro and then a series of exercises building on each other. These served to subsequently deepen the participants' reflections on democracy and the link to larp. Most exercises started with the participants first reflecting individually on a question, writing down their thoughts on post-it notes. These were then shared with the group who would order and sort them, discuss, and possibly add more notes. The exercises included:

- 1 Listing synonyms to Democracy
- 2 List emotional relations to democracy.
- 3 Finding art, artistic examples and imaginations that exemplify democracy
- 4 Identifying moments of democracy
- 5 Evaluating examples of democratically themed larps
- 6 Listing examples of activities they associate with democratic skills
- 7 Do a small design of a democratic larp

It is worth noticing that we did not supply a given definition of what “democracy” is. Instead, the purpose was to let the participants articulate their own understanding of democracy, both intellectually and affectively, before exploring the concept of democracy in relation to larp.

The results of the workshops were analysed through thematically grouping the post-it notes generated for each exercise. In this chapter we discuss the results from task 5, evaluating examples of democratically themed larp, and task 6, listing examples of activities associated with democratic skills.

For the activities associated with democratic skills (task 6), the thematic analysis revealed themes related to practicing, experiencing, and reflecting on one or more of the following:

- Institutional democracy (e.g. voting, formal decision-making)
- Informal forms of democracy (e.g. collaborating, organising, and participating in meetings, dialogue, and/or debate)

- Resistance (e.g. civil disobedience)
- The perspective of others (empathy)
- Co-creation, which included both co-creating within a larp (e.g. forming a new societal system) or co-creating a larp or a larp event

In task 5, the “listing larp” exercise, over 100 larps were mentioned total. We restricted our analysis to the larps that came up in multiple discussions, since many of the larps in the full list were unknown to us and difficult to find documentation for. The larps that were mentioned multiple times were either well-known, or run sufficiently recently so that multiple workshop participants had experience of participating or organising them. Hence, it was also easy to find documentation of these to understand their themes. These were: *97 Poets of Revachol* (Czech Republic, 2024), *Halat Hisar* (Finland, 2013), *Just a little lovin'* (Norway, 2011), *Odysseus* (Helsinki, 2019), *Polytropa* (Krakow, 2020), *Road to Edinu* (Berlin, 2018), *Strangers* (Copenhagen, 2016), *School Council* (Finland, 2019), *Suffragette* (Sweden, 2018), and *Superhero Union* (Greece, 2020).¹

¹ *97 Poets of Revachol*: A larp about an increasingly more polarised society. *Just a Little Lovin'*: A larp about the outbreak of AIDS in New York in the 1980'ies. *Halat Hisar*: A larp about the Palestine occupation. *Odysseus*: A Battlestar Galactica - inspired larp about re-creating society on-board a starship fleet. *Polytropa*: A Bladerunner-inspired larp about humans and androids. *Road to Edinu*: A postapocalyptic larp where several factions come together to re-create society. *Strangers*: A wordless larp depicting a refugee situation. *Suffragette*: A larp about organising a protest in the suffragette movement. *School council*: A school council scene in a school for superheroes. *SuperHero Union*: An election in a country of superheroes.

The themes reflected in these larps were very similar to the ones found for activities associated with democratic skills, only the larp would frequently reflect more than one theme. For example, a larp that explored social fragmentation could include both activities of empathic engagement and resistance (as in *Polytropa*) but also training aspects of democracy (as in *The Road to Edinu*) or co-creation (as in *Strangers*).

- Social fragmentation (*Road to Edinu*, *Strangers*, *Polytropa*)
- Oppression and resistance (*Suffragette*, *Halat Hisar*, *97 Poets of Revachol*, *Polytropa*, *Odysseus*)
- Enacting (some aspect of) institutionalized democracy (*Road to Edinu*, *School Council*, *SuperHero Union*, *Odysseus*)
- Empathy, “walking in somebody else’s shoes” (*Halat Hisar*, *Just a Little Lovin’*, *Polytropa*)

What we found particularly interesting was how often the themes of resistance and oppression came up, both as larp themes and as larp activities. The theme of resistance covered all of the following types of activities:

- Resisting oppression
- Standing up to authority
- Civil disobedience
- Rioting, uprisings
- Organizing resistance
- Mocking or bashing fascists

These activities are about active resistance as well as voicing opinions, and seem to be directed at what is perceived as non-legitimate decision-making or a non-democratic procedure.

Political, yes! Democratically themed? Not so much...

There is a discrepancy between the themes expressed by larp designers in the workshops, and central concepts in democratic theory. An observation is that some comments seemed to relate to running larp as a form of activism and/or the desire to highlight various forms of oppression. This may indicate that the participants were referring to political larp more generally, and not to larp specifically focused on democratic themes.

Larp as activism

In parallel with our workshop series, we are also interviewing larp designers from around the world about their perspectives on democratic engagement in larp. In these (ongoing) interviews, it is commonly brought up how a youth audience² will often express having a lack of a say in the political discourse. Depending on their background and context, some designers bring up the importance of learning how to organise resistance under authoritarian regimes. The designers that bring this up see larp as a resource in providing agency as well as training resistance. This might be one reason why larp and larp-adjacent activities related to resistance were so commonly brought up during the workshops.

² The concept should here be understood quite generally, referring to children of school age and young adults.

There is no question that such larps are needed. For example, we interviewed a larp designer from Belarus who described how the skills they had learned from designing and participating in larp had been directly applicable to organising street protests. But resistance, while an interesting political topic and an important skill, can be both democratic and anti-democratic depending on framing. Activism also definitely has a role in democracy, as accepting a decision does not mean that those who disagree should remain silent. Rather, they should actively participate, raise their voices in protest, and present their arguments to convince enough people to bring about change. The right to organise opposition in order to influence political direction and change previous decisions is a central part of a well-functioning democracy.

A particularly interesting political theory in this context is ‘agonistic pluralism’ (Mouffe, 1999), since it maps well to the way in which activism is brought into larp. This strand of political theory considers consensus fundamentally impossible, no matter if the political system is democratic or authoritarian, due to how political decisions create shifts in power structures to favour some groups at the expense of others. Agonistic pluralists also argue that conflict can be considered a resource for renewal in democracies – as long as it is somehow “tamed” so that the combatants do not seek to destroy each other, but respect each other’s right to exist. Larp, and games more generally, can potentially provide this “taming” of agonist conflict,³ through the protective frame of the magic circle (Stenros, 2014). The fictional context, and the way roles allow participants to

³ <https://wanais.substack.com/p/agon>

explore alternative positionalities, contribute to this taming.

However, democracy, at its core, is a system for peacefully coming to collective decisions. While resistance has its role in democratic systems, the act of resistance does not in itself further a decision-making process. There is a gap between what resistance can accomplish and what democracy is fundamentally supposed to achieve; a gap that could, and should, be interesting to explore in larp.

Help, help I’m being oppressed

A related issue is that so many of the larps depicted oppressive and authoritarian regimes, rather than democratic rule. Among the larps mentioned in our workshops, several touched on the theme of political occupation and oppression (e.g. *Halat Hisar*), and a few on identifying with groups experiencing oppression in society (e.g. *Just a Little Lovin’*). Many also played out in dystopian and post-apocalyptic settings (e.g. *97 Poets of Revachol*). One might speculate that the Nordic larp community’s prevalent value of playing to lose⁴ as a way to achieve emotionally intense scenes (Nilsen, 2012) contributes to the prevalence of themes of oppression and dystopia.

But playing on oppression will only teach what democracy is not. It can map out its contours, learning vigilance and how to look out for signs of failing democracy and the slippery slope towards an authoritarian rule, but it leaves its inner workings and conditions uncharted.

⁴ https://www.nordiclarp.org/wiki/Playing_to_lose

Is democracy too boring to larp?

Let's be honest. "Larp democracy" is a rather pejorative term among larp designers. For starters, players dread the "council meeting" effect – boring meetings that drag on forever with participants focusing more on telling their characters' back stories than coming to a decision. But designers also dread the "larp revolution". If you design a nice, oppressive culture for your larp, chances are that at least some of the players will bond together to create a revolution, ending up with a tight community where everyone is nice to each other, and spend the rest of the larp sitting around the campfire telling war stories. Essentially, we have two versions of democratic engagement that both are prone to generating quite boring play activities; these we can call the Vampire and the Campfire versions of democratic engagement.

Vampires – four hats and an effort to collaborate

Larps tend to lean towards heightened drama, conflicts, and disagreements. This has been acknowledged for a long time in the larping community, such as in the 2016 Solmukohta book on larp politics (Kangas et al. 2016).

One reason this is so common is that it is easy to design for polarization and conflict. Commonly, a larp design will split the players into something like three to five groups, each with their own characteristics, with the groups preferably told apart by different hats or other visible traits. The characteristics can be mostly about shallow differences, or more complex conflicting interests and opinions. Such prompts are easy to design, and are easy for the players

to pick up, inspired by the differences to create conflicts between the groups. ("Hats are pretty! Caps are shitty!") The conflicting groups' designs can be placed in most settings, such as: pirate crews under different flags; sci-fi worlds with androids, humans, and mutants; fantasy larps with elves, villagers, and orcs; and so on.

The basic division of characters into factions has commonly been used in larps that aim to discuss democracy. These designs split the characters into factions but give them a topic to collaborate around, looking for peaceful ways to come to agreement, and in this sense coming fairly close to a democratic process. The approach is in legion in the larps brought up as democratically themed in the workshops, including all of *Road to Edinu*, *Strangers*, *Polytropia*, *Suffragette*, and *Odysseus*.

The reason why this strategy works is that one of the more interesting challenges for democracy is to enable decisions on solutions despite belonging to groups with sometimes radically different opinions, values, and interests. It also explains why the faction and intrigue-oriented setting of vampire larp can be a functioning platform for exploring aspects of democracy, as was done in Parliament of Shadows.⁵

However, while this "Vampire" design strategy manages to create drama and narrative while exploring at least some aspects of democracy, it falls prey to another simplification. It implements a "diplomacy" version of deliberation in which focus is placed on debate and negotiation

⁵ A larp staged in the European parliament, in which players took on characters as Vampire lobbyists. <https://www.nordiclarp.org/2018/01/23/lobbying-dead-vampire-larp-european-parliament/>

between (and in the case of Vampire larp, back-stabbing within) pre-defined factions where each tries to optimize their own gains. The model mirrors well theories of politicized social identities (Simon and Klandermans 2001) developed in social psychology, which describes how people tend to associate themselves with collective identities that struggle for power within a specific societal context. The problem with implementing politicized social identities in larp is that they very easily become fixed, ingrained in the character design, with little or no opportunity of changing (other than, possibly, switching to another faction). There is very little room for working together to find new solutions to problems, and even less for finding out or changing your mind on a topic. In this kind of setting, changing your mind means losing the competition between factions or (maybe worse), losing parts of your character.

In a larp where the identities are fixed, drama is generated through conflict, and changing your mind means losing, meetings can drag on forever because there is simply no point in reaching a decision.

Campfires – conflating deliberation with consensus

At the other end of the scale, the "sitting around the campfire" larp exemplifies another trap in designing democratic engagement: that of over-emphasizing consensus. Wouldn't it be nice if we could all agree? It is easy to see how a larp that primarily considers democratic engagement to be about achieving consensus could end up being – extremely boring.

There is drama inherent in democracy, in how we have different opinions, values,

and needs. It is possible that a deliberative process can end up with entirely new solutions to a joint problem, solutions that make outcomes acceptable to all. But most political decisions cannot serve the best interests of everyone, and in the real world, a deliberation process will not always end up in consensus. Sometimes, the best result one can hope for is that everyone gets to voice their opinions and needs, while a decision must be taken anyways with the understanding that the needs cannot all be met. This aspect of democracy is very seldom reflected in larp design.

Resisting negative outcomes

Most of us share a commonsense understanding of democracy as a generally nice thing to have, and that both designers and players frame democracy in a very utopian sense; as a system where people are able to listen to each other, empathise, collaborate, and collectively find solutions to all problems. Apart from making for fairly boring larps, an unreflected utopian vision of democracy does not prepare us well for real-world democratic problems and processes. As has been mapped out by a number of political theorists, democracy comes with a range of risks, such as the tyranny of the majority (Nyirkos, 2018). Democracy always occurs within a context of conflict, and there will always be decisions made that do not take every perspective into account, this *even* if all perspectives have been heard. Both contestation and consent lie at the heart of democracy.

In larps, we frequently see how players will resist decisions no matter how they were made. As an example, in the SciFi

larp *Eclipse* (Polen,2025),⁶ it is narratively written into the instructions to players that the decisions made are the objectively best possible decisions for humanity. All characters have a chance to influence the course of action based on their knowledge about the current situation, and based on this information a computer system generates a course of action that will enable humanity to survive. Only, there are no decisions without bad consequences. Even though the players know that their collective votes contributed to the outcome rather than the actions of the organisers or a few key players, the larp frequently ends up with factions trying to create a revolt, changing decisions in hindsight.

While there is a need for activism and resistance within the democratic system, if the ideal is for decisions to always be obstructed this indicates support for a form of government other than democracy. It could be argued that many larps implement an anarchistic political standpoint, in the sense that they resist all forms of institutions that yield power and authority. The larp revolution that ends up at the cozy campfire exemplifies this really well, in how it manages to replace an (oppressive authoritarian) state with a voluntary, free association – a group sitting around the campfire telling war stories but not running a society.

Potentials for designing democracy in larp

We believe that there are some things we can do to make democracy a more interesting element in larp design, that at

the same time produce a more accurate and critical perspective on democracy. Larpocracy wants to explore whether larps that, to a greater extent than before, address democratic challenges could broaden the larping community’s understanding of democratic processes – and still be engaging and fun larps. We propose two strategies towards this goal: we can work with designs that present a more accurate and critical picture of democratic challenges, and we can work with more faithfully implementing deliberative processes.

Playing on democracy as conflict

One idea is to emphasize more explicitly that democracy always plays out within a context of conflict. Larps that involve resolving conflicts in legitimate ways can be more challenging than simply allowing conflicts to be expressed and perhaps even fuelled. Drama can, for example, be generated by being overruled and still having to accept that the decision was democratically made, or by accepting decisions that affect yourself both positively and negatively. Here, there are plenty of opportunities for “playing to lose”.

Second, as mentioned earlier, there is room for resisting even democratically made decisions, such as if democratic rules are abused by a democratically elected majority. Even the winners in a democracy cannot do whatever they want, but must exercise their power under the community’s rules and laws. However, it is not straightforward to determine when power is abused or what constitutes a proportionate response. Larps could include disagreements about whether resistance is legitimate, and which actions of resistance can be considered proportionate.

Third, and related to the previous point, if an action is *not* considered a violation of democratic rules, and one deems others’ protests disproportionate, how should one respond? When and how to exercise democratic self-defense? How is democratic self-defense organised? There is dramatic power available both in designing larp that defend democracy, but also in designing larp that explore when and why the legitimacy of a democratic system ends, potentially drawing on debates in political theory to explore various criteria for what constitutes a legitimate democracy. As an example, a larp about the January 6th Capitol Hill protests in the U.S. could surface many of these questions in one and the same setting.

Playing on the full scale of deliberative activities

Deliberative democracy is a democratic theory that argues that democratic decisions are legitimate if all relevant considerations are equally reflected upon. It is a normative ideal in which people come together on the basis of equal status and mutual respect to discuss political issues and decide on policies that will affect their lives. This means that legitimate democratic processes are not merely about stating preconceived and stable preferences; rather, they are communication-centred processes in which these preferences are formed. Empirical deliberative research (Dryzek et al. 2019; Curato et al. 2017; Bächtiger et al. 2018) has shown that citizens have the capacity and desire to participate in deliberation and that deliberative processes work well, but only under certain conditions.

Over the last few decades, deliberative democracy and its normative, empirical,

and practical research fields, including the development and implementation of various citizen assemblies, have taken a strong position in democratic research and theory. However, this field of research is not without controversy. On the contrary, it is challenged by alternative viewpoints, and the internal discussion of virtually every component of the theory is lively.

Aware of the critiques and ongoing controversies, we suggest that larps related to deliberative democracy could encourage reflection on democracy, including contestation and temporary consent, because deliberation presupposes both. As a first and fairly central design challenge, foreshadowed by Rantanen (2016), Larpocracy is experimenting with designing such larps.

Put simply, deliberation is based on equal participation in a respectful exchange of considerations (Bowman et al. 2026), which means that the main components of democratic deliberation are:

- 1 Opinion stating, justifying, and explaining what one wants to happen or believe to be true, based on one’s own experience and gathered evidence. It is important that such statements are done honestly and authentically rather than participants trying to be strategic, manipulative, or coercive.
- 2 Listening, trying to understand, and avoiding intentional misinterpretations of the statements of others.
- 3 Openness to change or adjusting one’s claim, if (and only if) convinced by others’ considerations.

⁶ A space base larp. <https://chaosleague.org/eclipse-larp-en/>

As can be seen from this list, most larp meetings don't implement deliberation fully. In the Vampire larp intrigue setting, strategic, manipulative and coercive statements are legion. Active listening is made harder in most larps through the double-layered interpretation that players have to engage in, having to at the same time understand what is said and figuring out how their character would react. Finally, negotiation between set factions leaves little room for changing or adjusting one's own standpoint. Fixed factions do not mirror well the fundamental constructivist premise for deliberation; that interests and preferences regarding political issues are not predetermined but formed through social interaction.

Modern deliberative theory also acknowledges the need for including forms of expression that are not just rational argumentation. Marion Young (Young, 2002) has pointed out how overly demanding deliberative practices can exclude marginalized voices in particular as well as reinforce (or even create new) unequal power relations. Larp can be a particularly powerful tool in this regard, as it is possible to create both characters and cultures that support personal storytelling and self-expression. From this perspective, it is not so strange that raising awareness and fostering empathy comes up as democratic themes in our workshops, despite being only marginally related to the democratic decision-making processes as such.

We could, conceivably, turn this relationship around. Instead of designing larps that incorporate deliberative processes, we can use larp as a form of self-expression within such processes. For example, we could let people

design small larp activities as a form of self-expression in the context of deliberative events such as citizen assemblies. There have been successful attempts to bring roleplay into deliberative events (Gordon et al. 2017) and these could be enhanced by larp practice.

In order to explore deliberation fully, characters need to be designed with a range of nuances, so that they can develop their positionality as part of the deliberative process. Characters can have social positions and experiences that influence, but do not determine their interests and preferences regarding the conflict to be resolved. This requires characters with different experiences, interpretations of reality, and contrasting views on what constitutes a reasonable solution to the specific social conflict at hand. These interests and preferences will then form a basis for developing their positionality throughout the process, through interaction with other characters. Since there is no real deliberation without contestation of various considerations and justifications, such an exchange of considerations may produce mutual understanding to varying degrees. Therefore, a deliberative larp should allow for different endings. While a consensus solution is possible, it may be an extreme or at least rare solution, as research on citizens' assemblies has shown. More likely outcomes include meta-consensus (mutual agreement on relevant considerations) and agreement on parts of a solution. The Larpocracy larp *The Assembly* (Sweden, 2025)⁷ has been designed to train and experience deliberation.

⁷ A larp about community members engaging in democratic deliberation about issues related to tensions between bodily autonomy and public safety. <https://scenariofestival.se/scenarios-2025/the-assembly/>.

Reflections

The larp community of today is already very good at designing larp for political purposes, raising awareness and strengthening agency among players. However, we are less good at designing for democratic engagement, and we may not be very good at reflecting on what that involves. Even within the Larpocracy project, we repeatedly come up against questions related to how to design for dialogue between participants with vastly conflicting political views, and if we would even want to do so.

Still, if we want to protect democracy as a political system and not as a general 'niceness' in society, we have a duty to understand what it means and what it requires of us as citizens. Larp can help us do so. While both 'vampire' and 'campfire' larps have their merits, larps that thoroughly engage with key democratic challenges could be at least as interesting and dramatic to play, if not more.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe project Larpocracy: Developing Spaces for Deliberation and Democratic Skills through Role-playing, Project no. 101177307.

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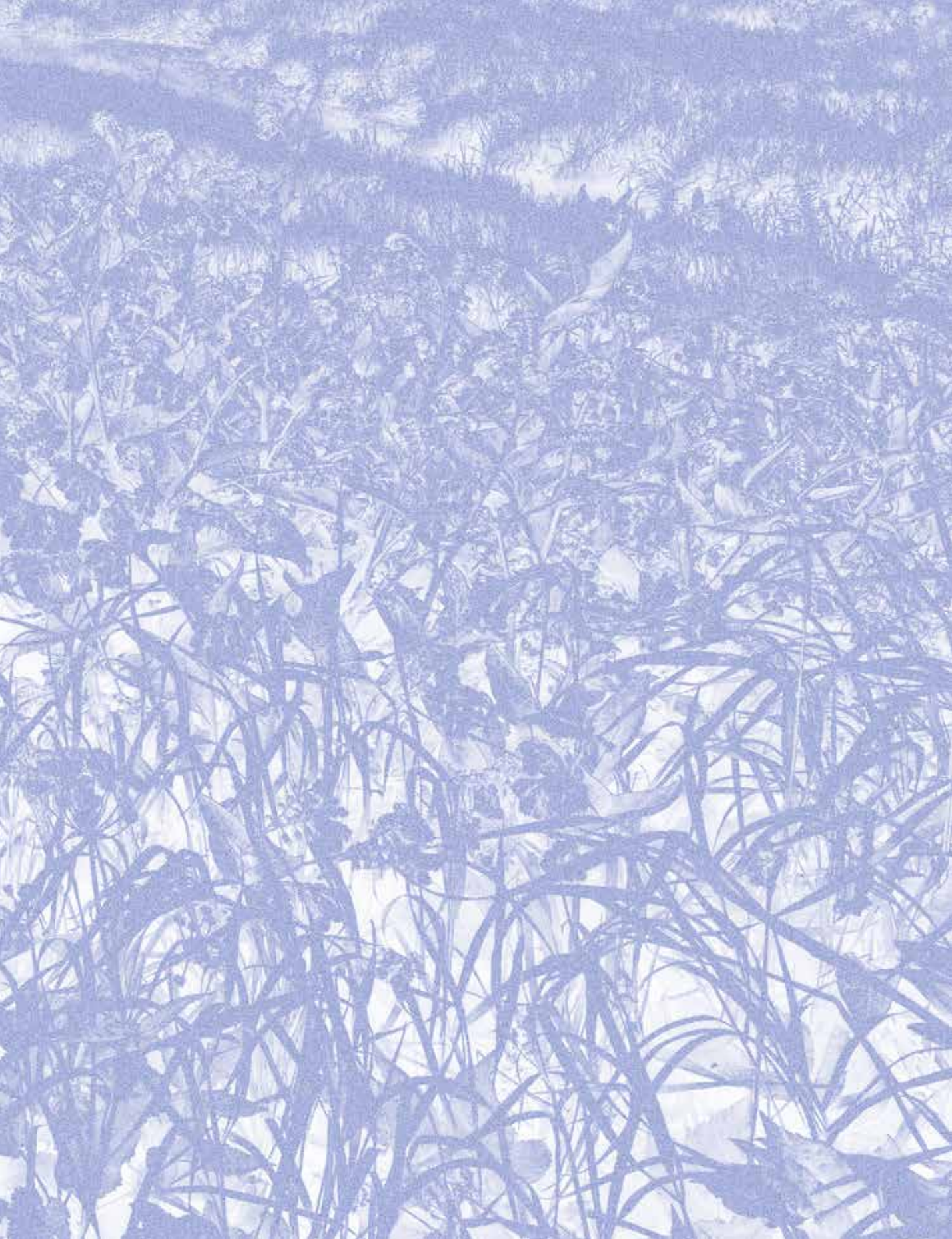
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Embodying Future Cyborgs

Larp as an Anticipatory Practice for
Socio-Technological Change

Lorenzo Lin Angeli

As humans, we often "extend" our bodies and cognitions: clothes, glasses, weapons, tattoos... or prosthetics, exoskeletons, smartphones, or mind-reading devices. Sometimes, extensions even give us new senses, such as a person grafting magnets below their skin. For a few decades, scholars devoted particular attention to hybridisation with technology, framed as people becoming cyborgs. Crucially, every time we create new forms of cyborgs, something changes in how we relate to each other - sometimes subtly, sometimes dramatically.

In this article, I argue for the potential of larp to explore how forms of cyborgisation may change our personal interactions and societies. By embodying present and future cyborgs, we can experience and engage with the invisible forces governing technological systems, which in turn affect us, adding or removing extensions and senses.

Introduction

A fundamental part of the human experience is that of interacting with a multitude of objects and tools. These tools, in many ways, extend each person's capabilities, forming a figure that has been called, since at least the 1960s, the cyborg (Clynes and Kline, 1960).

Throughout our daily lives and existence, we are in a way always cyborgs, using various machines that are enmeshed with ourselves by permanent physical implantation (e.g., a pacemaker), temporary bodily extension (e.g., clothes, eyeglasses), or practice (e.g., smartphones). Some technical tasks, such as monitoring crowds or tracking people

in indoor spaces, are so much easier if one takes our cyborg nature for granted, and decides to track a person's machine extensions rather than their human bodies!

In spite of this, the number of larps made to explore the cyborg experience are not many.

In this article, I will try to elucidate this gap, focusing on the following questions:

- Can we use larp to explore future forms of cyborgisation?
- How can we use larp to explore how "being a cyborg" might feel in the future?
- How would these new forms of cyborgisation change the interactions between people?
- What social change could result from new forms of cyborgisation?

I will argue that not only *can we use larp to explore these questions*, but that there is a considerable design space to explore if we decide that we should, and propose some possible ways to do it. By connecting reflections in sociology, philosophy, computer science, futures studies, and organisational learning, I will sketch the outlines of how larp can become an "anticipatory practice": how, through play and reflection on play, we can create suitable conditions to explore the potential social effects of technological change, and how to prepare for it.

Cyborgs and extensions

The contemporary view of the cyborg arguably derives from Donna Haraway's

Cyborg Manifesto (Haraway, 1985), a piece of writing that is just over forty years old. In the *Manifesto*, Haraway calls the cyborg

"a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction"

If the cyborg inhabits the intersection between reality and fiction, then it shares this space with another creature: the player of larps. In a 2025 article, Roda Martínez reprises the idea of Gary Alan Fine's "laminations" (Roda Martínez, 2025) and maps them to a five-phases model of play to highlight how everyone engaging in a larp is at the same time a person, a player, and a character, and that even though each phase of play sees one lamination as the dominant one, the others coexist. In other words, the game's "magic circle" creates an intersection between fiction and reality. This idea of liminality is later reprised by Haraway, that calls the cyborg

"[a creature] simultaneously animal and machine, who populate[s] worlds ambiguously natural and crafted"

The wording "worlds ambiguously natural and crafted" describes surprisingly well both a cyborg and a larp. If a cyborg is a creature that threads between organic and machine, natural and crafted, and reality and fiction, it may make sense to explore its liminal nature in a context that mirrors its nature: the larp.

Yet, I argue, many larp scenarios are *implicitly* about cyborgs in the meaning that Haraway defines. When humans are cyborgised, machines form an extension

of human bodies, creating a novel, more-than-human entity (More and Vita-More, 2013). Achieving "more-than-humanity" can happen in many different ways, and we can trace the idea to the origins of humanity: clothes are a very ancient extension, allowing humans use to extend the capabilities of their bodies to regulate temperature; writing, as studied by scholars of antiquity such as Carlo Sini (Sini, 2010), can also be framed as an extension of the human. We can see these technologies (clothes, writing) or even mythological figures such as chimeras, as forms of early cyborgs.

What all of these examples have in common is that the use of a technology extending human capabilities creates a "new human" - a cyborg - made of their "normal human" body, plus an extension. But how do these extensions work?

Cyborg extensions affect our bodies and senses in three ways: the individual, the relational, and the collective. An individual extension affects one's interactions with themselves; relational extensions change the way we interact with specific other persons, and collective extensions change the way we interact with generic "people". If the individual dimension is quite self-explanatory, we may need to delve deeper on the difference between the relational and collective. To grasp the difference, think of how different it is to talk about a controversial topic with your friends or family (all of whom share history with you) or in front of a crowd at a protest. The first situation is relational (you can tune your message specifically to each person), the second is collective (the people in front of you may have a common objective, but you

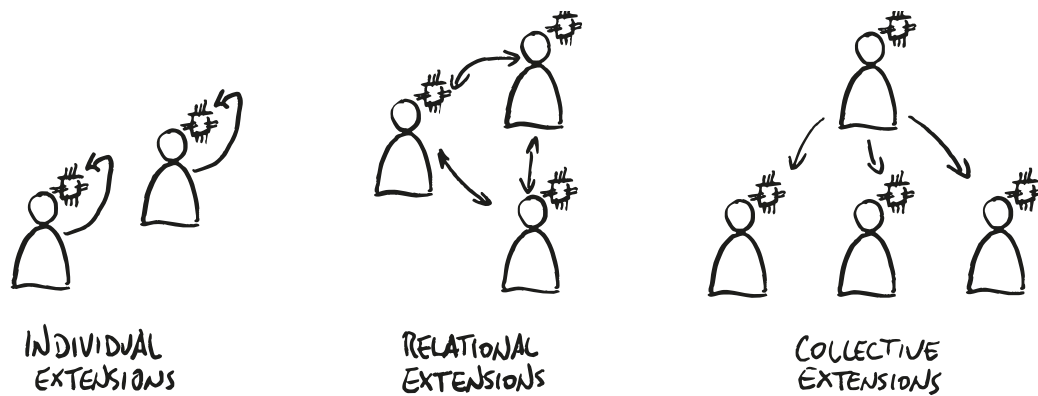


Figure 1: The different types of cyborg extensions, and interactions they enable. Credit: Illustration by the author.

can't hope to connect with each individual person).

Many humans today have all sorts of extensions. To find examples, I will look at a typical day of mine, and highlight some of the extensions involved in it.

When I wake up, I use a smart watch to look back at my night's sleep. As a vivid dreamer, and someone who often has lucid dreams,¹ that's quite helpful: the data gathered from the watch helps me understand my sleep patterns better (was I restless last night, or was I dreaming about being restless?), or reflect on my dream recall (I remember a particularly long and vivid dream: did it actually last that long?). My smart watch, in this case, is an example of an individual cyborg extension: the technology provides me a new way to relate with myself.

As I move on with my day, I check the online workspace I share with my colleagues. Andrea wrote unusually late yesterday,

¹ Lucid dreaming is what happens when a dreamer realises they are dreaming.

at 3 AM... I may try to reach out to see if everything is alright when they show up later at work today, or just don't bother them if they don't seem to be in the mood. And here's a relational cyborg extension: seeing the time at which Andrea wrote gave me an insight on their potential mood.

I hop on my bicycle, and because I'm in a new city, I plot the route on a GPS navigator, which helpfully tells me there is heavy traffic on the route. Oh, right, today there is a march downtown! Should I change my path and avoid traffic, or go join the march? Whatever my decision, the navigator is serving as a collective cyborg extension.

These few examples from daily life hopefully give an idea of how we commonly use more extensions than we might be aware of. Crucially, also, these cyborg extensions impact ourselves, our interactions with others, and the world around us at all times, even when we are not consciously aware of using them.

Cyborgs in larps: props, mechanics, metatechniques

While the examples I provided in the previous sections are taken from mundane daily life, there are situations in which cyborg extensions drastically change one's life and how they experience reality. Cyborg extensions may also create or deepen social issues such as fairness (think about athletes with access to better equipment), unequal opportunities (when one can't access public services without a smartphone), or even outright discrimination (for example, when airport scanners enforce gender normativity (Costanza-Chock, 2018)). A larps story and social dynamics, however, can help with bringing potential issues to the forefront in a relatively safe space.

In larp, we can use proxies, props, mechanics, and metatechniques to create cyborg extensions, or proxies for cyborg extensions,² and experiment with the interactions they enable... all of this, potentially, without needing for those extensions to actually work as they're supposed to!

Chaos League's *Eclipse: A New Home* (Poland, 2025) features a versatile cyborg extension (which is not declared as such): each player is given a "datapad". The datapad serves many functions: it lets players review game procedures (making them always appear competent, an individual extension), send texts to characters or groups (a relational extension), receive broadcasts, and interact with the base's systems (collective extensions). Bugs and glitches in the datapad's systems (while

² A proxy is an object that symbolises something else. When players agree that a broom handle is a wizard's staff, for example, the broom handle is a proxy for the staff.

in my understanding not willed by the organisers) lend to the game's sense of frontier exploration and precariousness. When the datapads don't work flawlessly (for example, when a base-wide alert is not broadcasted to everyone, or one can't reread a procedure), the players' detachment from their characters' knowledge suddenly reveals the players' and characters' nature of confused cyborgs.

A quite different example, *Mobilized: An Essay Pretending to Be a Game* (Finland, 2025), gives explicit commentary about our contemporary nature as cyborgs. *Mobilized* sees players follow the instructions given by a web application on the players' smartphones. The application guides players through a number of sequenced "mini-tasks" that invites players to reflect on their relationship with technology, inviting them to act chorally, following the application's instructions, and then establishing a 1:1 "controller/controlled" relationship with another player, with roles being occasionally swapped.

The application that powers the experience is a cyborg extension used in the context of the game. Most crucially, going through the experience makes participants realise that their smartphone itself is a cyborg extension they use in their everyday life. *Mobilized's* application reshapes each player's perceptions and capabilities collectively (in that all players are hybridised, and "mobilized") and relationally (in the con-troller/con-trolled activity). Implicitly, however, *Mobilized* invites the players to reflect on the smartphone as the epitome of contemporary individual cyborg extensions. Through its activities, *Mobilized* draws the participants' attention to how our hybridi-

sation with technology - our cyborg nature - redefines social relations.

Neither *Eclipse* nor *Mobilized* explicitly cast their players as cyborgs, but both games add elements of cyborgisation through their design choices. This is particularly clear in *Mobilized*: even though this is not declared, all person-to-person interactions are mediated through the application. In other words, all players interact through their cyborg nature.

These examples provide varying degrees of implicit commentary on our contemporary cyborg condition. I argue, though, that larp has space to explore at least two more directions: direct, explicit commentary of contemporary cyborgs, and reflections and concrete paths of action for future forms of cyborgisation.

The distinction between explicit contemporary commentary and paths of future action is somewhat blurry. Larp can help us explore the implications of these choices by creating a safe space in which we can play with the effects of adding, removing or altering cyborg extensions.

Let's say for example that we wanted to give some characters a form of cyborg telepathy. We could, of course, agree on a mechanic that gives players that wish to communicate "telepathically" a gesture they can use to communicate in secret. But what if we wanted to push the idea further?

The idea of "synthetic telepathy" is not new: the US military has financed grants on the topic since 2008 (with a study discussing preliminary results in 2010 (Deng et al., 2010)), and has in 2024 opened a grant "to

develop high-performance, bi-directional brain-machine interfaces."³

The suspension of disbelief and social contracts of larp can ease the technological requirements of providing telepathy to some characters. A subvocalization recognition interface (see, for example, the AlterEgo prototype (Kapur et al., 2018)) combined with non-occlusive headphones (for example, bone conduction headsets)⁴ can become a first approximation of confidential audio communication that cannot be heard by those that don't have the appropriate devices. It is much easier for "non-telepaths" to immerse in the fantasy of dealing with "telepath" characters if they literally cannot hear it!

If implementing telepathy is per se an interesting idea, what is arguably of even greater interest is exploring the social implications that stem out of this new technology. With larp, we have the option of designing scenarios where these social tensions might take place. We can easily imagine that telepathy might affect adversarial dynamics, romance, negotiations, and more. But what social dynamics might arise in the interactions between telepaths and non-telepaths? Through larp, we can play and see where the situation takes us.

Without creating ex-novo technologies, we can use larp to rethink our interactions with existing technologies. Hearing aids, for example, are an individual cyborg extension with strong relational impacts. We can

³ See <https://www.darpa.mil/research/programs/next-generation-nonsurgical-neurotechnology> (Accessed 2025/12/12)

⁴ See example images at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Bone_conduction_headset (Accessed 2025/12/12)

design larps, however, that challenge the stereotypes and stigmas associated with hearing aids, creating worlds where relations unfurl differently, and letting people experiment different roles in these relationships.

Stories and social dynamics: towards larp as anticipatory practice

One of the greatest potential for larps, when used to discuss potential social issues connected to technology, is that of exploring dangers of discrimination. This activity, however, is not without risks. In a 2021 paper, Leonard, Janjetovic and Usman discussed the benefits and risks of using larp to experience marginalisation, particularly in practices of "dark tourism" (Leonard et al., 2021).

In the article, the authors argue that larping marginalised identities can lead participants to empathise more deeply and promote equity at a relational or collective level. The same practice of larping marginalised identities, however, may also perpetuate stereotypes or lead to culturally inappropriate representations. Can this dynamics change, however, when we turn our attention not towards the past or the present, but towards the future? In other words, what if we were trying to use larp not with the objective of creating an *emancipatory* practice (one of the goals of "dark tourism"), but an *anticipatory* practice?

When I say we can use larp as an "anticipatory practice", I borrow the meaning of

"anticipation" from a subfield of sociology called futures studies. Futures studies is the discipline of sociology that is concerned with working with the future, "being open, ready for surprises, and prepared to manage them" (Poli, 2019, p. 5).

The disciplinary theory of futures studies is based on three modes of engagement with the futures: forecasting, foresight, and anticipation (Poli, 2019, pp. 10-16). If forecasting reminds us of the weather, with mathematical models useful to provide quantitative indications of how the future may evolve, foresight and anticipation may be less familiar. Foresight helps us explore some of the possible futures that may unfurl from an unpredictable situation: what are, for example, some of the possible complications one may encounter when embarking on a long-distance biking trip from Italy to Sweden?

If foresight tells us what complications we may find, anticipation is concerned with translating these insights into decisions and actions. When a sailboat skipper is preparing for an ocean crossing, forecasts may tell them that heavy winds are unlikely, foresight reminds them of how dangerous it is to encounter a storm, and anticipation makes them double-check that their safety gear is well-maintained, just in case.

Much like a well-written piece of speculative fiction, aptly-designed larps can go beyond providing deep commentary about our current condition, and make us imagine different ways our world could evolve. In other words, a larp's design can become a source of foresight. Nór Hernø's *Panopticon* (Denmark, 2025), for example, tells us of a world that could - unfortunately - be:

“In the Panopticon prison, those trapped within live under constant surveillance, until the prison begins to glitch and you are finally afforded moments free from observation.”⁵

While *Panopticon*’s prison may not present a projection of our current state, it is nonetheless a plausible future: surveillance is, after all, a theme that is receiving substantial real-world attention. *Panopticon* includes elements of foresight in raising questions such as: “What could happen if our societies were to turn up the volume on surveillance?”, or “How do people’s behaviours change when they know they are placed under constant, close surveillance by an oppressive system?”, or again “How would different types of people react to a progressive loosening of surveillance?”. Beyond larp design, play is a source of foresight: repeated runs may unfurl in radically different ways, with different patterns of player-to-player interaction emerging in successive runs. Each run explores the same questions and finds different answers: some answers may be incompatible with those found in previous runs, but play is the proof that all of these answers are possible given the same scenario.

If foresight is found in design, play, and re-playing, I argue here that anticipation can be found during, but especially after, game time. Observing how characters react to a given situation and evaluating whether they’re successful in pursuing their goals can be a source of anticipation, but the game’s debriefing, or a successive analysis exercise, can also inform anticipation.

⁵ Description from <https://alexandria.dk/en/data?scenarie=18733> (Accessed 2025/12/12)

The principles of *reflecting-in-action* and *reflecting-on-action* mirror Donald Schön’s *Reflective Practice* method (Schön, 2017): retracing one’s steps and reflecting on how characters reacted to the game’s situation and the emotions and consequences *characters* explored in the game may have parallels in the real world if *players* were to face similar situations is a powerful source of anticipation.

The embodiment present in larp can also be a catalyst for deeper foresight: when a player wonders “what would happen in that same situation if I were to replay the game with a different character?”, they are applying foresight. Successive play, re-playing, and reflection can then bring the focus back to anticipation.

When applied to technological change and cyborgisation, larp can have the potential to be a meaningful source of anticipation about issues connected to technological change. By structuring the debriefing in moments of individual reflection, small-group interaction and plenary discussion, designers can mirror the individual, relational and collective nature of cyborg extensions, enabling different levels of reflection on the social dynamics generated by cyborgisation.

I argue here that there is ample space for design, with effects that range from larp’s individual transformative potential (Bowman et al., 2024, p. 50), to educational impacts (for example through EduLarp, for example as reported in the Computer-Human Interaction education space (Robinson et al., 2023)), to making debriefings an act of collective anticipation and elicitation of change.

Conclusions

In this contribution, I explored the potential of larp to investigate the potential future effects of social change enacted by technology. I did so by focusing on the figure of cyborgs - hybrids of human and machine that inhabit multiple spaces at once - and their machine extensions, combining the idea of Reflective Practice and “anticipation” from the field of Futures Studies to define larp as an “anticipatory practice”.

In the introduction, I set out to explore whether we could use larp to explore future forms of cyborgisation, how being a cyborg might feel in the future, and how cyborgisation may affect relations and social change in the future. While this piece is theoretical, I argued that the potential of larp for reflection on futures lies in all of its phases: from ideation, through play and replay, to debriefing. Different phases lend themselves to foresight or anticipatory aspects, highlighting the ample design space that larp has to inform reflections on social impacts of technologies.

As a future direction for those who wish to explore this line of reasoning, I’m inviting our community to start explicitly including reflections on cyborgs in their own larp designs. Donna Haraway’s seminal essay goes well beyond technological commentary, and includes a thorough analysis of the interactions between modern technology and, most prominently, womanhood.

I wonder, then, how larp can help us explore these ideas even further. In these last few decades, cyberfeminism has been thoroughly explored in academia (for example, in Braidotti’s work), speculative fiction (Le Guin), and the arts more broadly. In larp, we have not explored these themes as much. Uniquely, though, our medium lets us temporarily inhabit the bodies of other lives: how can we push further on the idea of embodying future cyborgs? The anticipatory potential of larp lies in how, during and after play, we can reflect on our lived-by-proxy experiences, and wonder what they tell us about our current

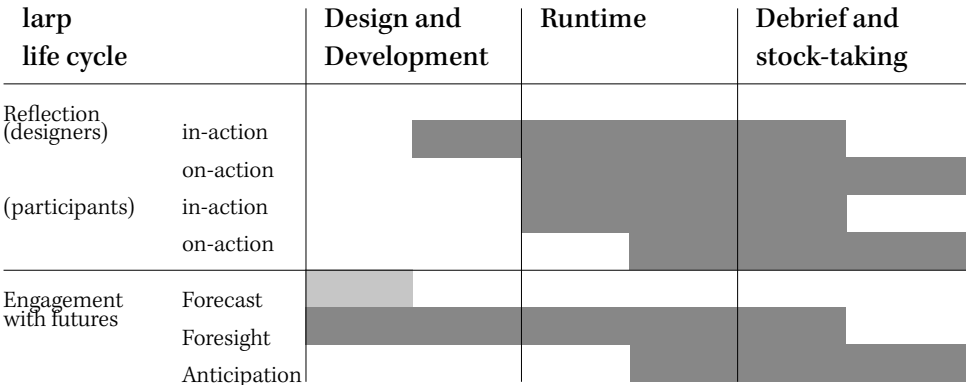


Figure 2: A possible mapping of the different macro-phases of a larp’s lifecycle to the types of reflection that participants and designers can be involved in, and different engagement with futures. Different phases of a larp’s lifecycle need to engage different modes of reflection in and on the action, and towards the future. The forecast cell is drawn in a different colour to symbolise how, in the piece, I argue that larp may not be the ideal medium to engage with futures through a forecasting lens. Credit: Table by the author.

condition, and in what place we wish to be in the future. What happens after the larp, and our futures, are all about how we play our cards, and larping lets us imagine, create, and pick new cards, helping us to strategise with the ones we have. So... where are our cyberfeminist larps?

Acknowledgement

Thanks to Diana Domenichini for the partnership and support in developing some of the reflections about cyborgisation that are foundational to this piece.

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How Do You Value Creative Work?

Perspectives on Collaborating (Respectfully and Productively) with Creatives – and Why it's Still Worth it in the AI-Era

Tia Carolina Ihalainen
Freja Gyldenstrøm

If you're a larp organiser, you probably sometimes find yourself wanting something done for your larp that is either a little outside your own area of expertise or just more work than you and your team have hours in the day. This is where you find someone to collaborate with, who can do that work for you. Initially, this text was supposed to be advice on how to find the right sort of person for the task, as well as how you should treat them and what you should offer in return – from two creatives who have collaborated with a lot of larp organisers and also work professionally in our fields. It still does that, focused on creative work. But, this being 2026 and all of us learning to navigate the currents of the cyberpunk future-present while they're rising around us, we're now also going to tell you why you cannot simply replace us with ChatGPT.

The clankers do pretty fast (for free)

Let's get one thing out of the way. There is no artificial intelligence, at present. What is commonly known as AI, or sometimes more precisely as large language models (LLMs), image generators, and similar, is predictive technology. It doesn't think. It guesses what word or pixel is statistically likely to appear next. Regurgitating data sets, it neither imagines nor dreams (of electric sheep or anything else).

A series of problems is connected to this type of technology.

Some have to do with quality

Being statistical, AI content can and does lie to us, because it isn't about presenting facts but probability. This is how we get human figures that have too many fingers and chatbots telling teenagers that lethal doses of toxic substances are safe, as was the case for a teenager in California recently (Black and Council, 2026). We ask for facts and get approximations.

LLMs specifically are trained to reconstruct what different texts have in common, which is not primarily messages, but wording. This magic formula can structure sentences prettily. Sure, they may become a little bit repetitive, because the technology has learned that certain patterns, such as [rhetorical question] + [denial] + "but" [alternative poetic idea] + —[something presented as deeper meaning], are the best way to ensure satisfaction.

Can AI alone surprise and delight you? Perhaps not, but it can satisfy your need to get something down on paper that looks impressive at first glance—and is that not, in the end, what art is all about? [it isn't]

The end result is that AI text often has no real message at all, or simply communicates the most common denominator of all other messages in its genre. And without a message, the text becomes empty. The tricky thing is that this isn't always obvious if you are the kind of reader who fills in what you expect text to say (which, when we're in a hurry, might be most of us).

But then, the reverse can also be true, as generated text may sometimes only appear to be empty. Unplanned racism and dated

tropes may be some more common ideas introduced by LLMS that try to do as asked. But sometimes you get a policeman turning into a frog, as in a January case from Heber City Police Department in Utah, where the automated report program mixed dialog from the movie *The Princess and the Frog* playing in the background with body camera footage (Constantino, 2025). Writing totally without contextual understanding doesn't always result in excellence.

Maybe none of that matters to you. Maybe you're happy to fact-check and analyze your generated texts, ignore uncanny valley-type touches on aesthetics, or you're specifically looking for "all vibes no plot" kind of content that'll allow your potential players to project meaning where there isn't any. However, human creators do have context awareness and creative intelligence, and if you want depth, originality (of both style and ideas), and soul, you may consider investing in human creativity.

Other problems have to do with ethics

It's no secret that there are environmental costs to the increasing use of AI. Like the Matrix, AI isn't purely digital, but has its physical home in large specialized data centers, of which there are, by November 2025, more than 12,000 globally (Leichter, 2025). One issue with this is water consumption. According to EESI, the Environmental and Energy Study Institute, a large one consumes 19 million litres of water per day for cooling, equivalent to the consumption of a city of 10,000–50,000 people (Yañez-Barnuevo, 2025). According to scientists from the University of California, this translates to roughly one

To check what a text says, take a pen and look for the messages in it. Underline where they are. You might just discover that you only thought there was a message, or that it is something other than you expected. It may be something which is only hinted at.

Wonder why. Could it be because the message would be offensive to say outright? Or because the writer doesn't want to actually promise anything?

To check the strength of the message, if indeed it's there, look for supporting arguments. Are there any?

Conveniently, this method should make you better both at navigating totalitarian propaganda and avoiding signing up for larps that you've projected your own hopes into, but which actually offer something totally different.

water bottle per 100-word search (Verma and Tan, 2024). It may not be the water from your city, but it's coming from somewhere, and the locals are starting to have to go without (Fleury and Jimenez, 2025).

Another issue is that AI training is largely done on stolen content, as evidenced by the mangled watermarks of artists that still sometimes appear in "freshly generated" pictures. If we consider larp art, and many of us do, is it defensible to build it using stolen content that we cannot even credit? That may potentially contribute to the general displacement of creative work as AI content is increasingly normalized?



And then of course, there are the optics to consider

It sends a message when you use AI, even where there isn't one within the content itself. The question is if it's the message you want to convey. It can seem to your potential audience like you don't prioritize quality, putting in the effort, or considering ethical concerns when you use it in your materials. A common protest here is that not everyone is a professional or has the means to acquire high-quality content in other ways. This is why we include some tips on what you can do instead at the end of this text.

Creative work in a larp context

Creativity is the necessary punk to the cyber surrounding us, passion-driven resistance to corporate greed, which would have us merely produce. But that doesn't mean creative work shouldn't be rewarded and supported in such a way that it can continue. Artists, photographers, composers, and writers need to eat just as accountants and producers do, and what we contribute often involves the use of skillsets that have taken years to develop. It should be worth it to us as a community to value that. Valuing means rewarding creative work, in whatever way makes sense, and we're here to help you figure out how to do that. Whether it's with free food, a ticket to your larp, or actual cash.

"But anyone can create"

Yes. And everyone who wants to should. Maybe even those who don't. But larpwriting is not the same as any other type of writing.

A great journalist doesn't necessarily think in terms of playability and alibi. A novelist might never consider branching plot or co-creation. Depending on how much of your design is anchored in text, you might need your larpwrights to take on design responsibilities, or at least to understand how to translate your vision into actionable content.

Visual art can strengthen your vision for possible attendees. It helps them visualize the world they will inhabit and grow enthusiastic about co-creating it. What they see on the website conveys the level of professionalism a project has, and tells the players how much you're ready to invest of time, effort, and/or money in the quality of your larp.

A skilled larp photographer captures emotional moments without interrupting them and creates lasting value for participants. A well-composed theme song can manipulate the heartstrings of your participants years after they have forgotten most of what happened at the larp itself.

Creatives who are just starting out may have a wealth of ideas and enthusiasm that old rats do not. They probably also come cheaper. A professional photographer isn't necessarily going to want to cancel three days of wedding shoots to take pictures of your larp for nothing, nor should you expect them to. The trick is to figure out what you need, who you need for it, and how you can compensate the artist – accounting for the fact that value, within our hobby, comes in many different forms.

So, you need something created for your larp?

Step one: figure out what you need

You gotta know what you're making, to know who should make it. Are you creating an international 800 Euro Blockbuster larp, or running the next installation of a local school larp where everyone on the team is paying to attend because otherwise the budget doesn't work? One is no better than the other, but projects with high production value are easier to pull off if the majority of your team has experience.

If you need art for your website, it might be easier if you collaborate with an artist who also understands how best to reach your audience visually, unless you know exactly what you want. Or maybe you can make do without, relying on existing photography, stock photos, symbolism, and colour use in ways that still support your message. Simplicity can be a powerful tool, especially when it's intentional. If you need 120 8-page characters that specifically support your design vision, you probably want some experienced larpwrights involved, or at least a *very* visionary team of fresh creatives.

Ask yourself which parts of your larp are carried by the creative work you need done, and how important those parts are. If core parts of design or marketing rely on it, and your vision is something of high production value, consider investing in someone who has the experience that matches. If the creative work is more decorative and/or your project is low budget, you probably don't need a lot of expertise, and the energy of fresh enthusiasm may actually be worth more to your project. Experimenting together to develop something fresh can be

a reward in itself and lead to super interesting results.

Step two: figure out what you can offer

What you offer should match what you need, and everyone involved should get something out of co-creating for your project. Yes, even if they don't ask for it. The good news is that there's a lot that you can offer.

Most of us are here because we love this hobby/art form. A ticket to your larp is a very real commodity. And if we can't go, and that's what you would offer, then a ticket to another larp or payment of the value of the larp ticket are reasonable offers, depending on the workload (you can always ask how much that would get you). If we're professionals, it's going to be a lot less than we'd make in our actual jobs, but most larps aren't commercial projects. When you want to collaborate with professional-level creatives, payment of some sort is more about recognizing that we'll need to take time off from paid projects to make larp work because there's only so much writing or drawing one can do in a day.

For others, who are just starting out, it's nice to offer a larp ticket, if you can, but the experience itself may be of great value as well, if improving is their priority. Maybe it isn't. Maybe they're only interested in joining the project for social gain, and then what you want to offer is a spot in the car going to Germany and a bed on location the last night, so they can stay for the afterparty. This is all a bit fluffy, but the point is that you should consider what your creative collaborator wants and needs, as well as what everybody else is getting, and adjust

accordingly so it's fair. You may need to adjust your needs and wants at this point, and that's okay.

Do you need:

- Enthusiasm, fresh new perspectives, willingness to learn -> a fresh creative is great for this
- Company in the artistic process -> personality may be most important
- Original idea development/design on a high artistic level -> you need someone experienced

Are you offering:

- The opportunity to get experience and guidance -> may have value to fresh creatives
- Exposure for creative work -> new creatives can need this (if the exposure is real)
- Helper role, transport costs, food, lodging (friendship and socializing) -> this has value to someone who wants to spend time with you or others on location, or just wants to be there
- Money in the form of larp ticket or actual cash -> this has value to most people
- Creative satisfaction (they get to co-design the larp) -> of value to the artistically inclined

What to do if you're on your own?

If you can't find anyone who fits the bill of what you want, need, and can offer, we suggest you reach out to your community. If you're feeling lost but you've got little to offer, it's also an option to look for an advisor. Many of us are happy to help out with advice on how to make creative decisions for your larp without any other reward than the satisfaction of contributing. Often, anchoring your vision in some strong key themes, whether visual or thematic, does a lot. As long as it feels intentional, you can get away with using content such as stock images, creating characters from fragments of existing literature, or using tools that heighten efficiency by re-using paragraphs across characters – in the vein of Larpweaver, which is not commonly available, but did exactly this (Pettersson, 2022).

In brief

With the danger of sounding capitalist, there is a cost to everything. The difference is how visible it is. The cost of giving over part of your creative work to AI may not be immediately obvious, but it reveals itself eventually. Choosing to work with human creatives means knowing what you pay from the get-go, and we do suggest you budget for it, because the better we support our creatives, the more sustainable our community becomes. We'll be better equipped to continue making art even when the world around us doesn't always value it.

But shouldn’t everybody be rewarded?

Yes, they should be.

“But I think AI art is fine”

With all kinds of love, if what you would create with AI isn’t something you could create yourself, or have the related education and experience to understand, you most likely do not have the level of critical artistic thinking required to understand if it is actually good. Also, oftentimes in larp, we reward love of the game higher than something that appears surface-level impressive but did not involve human creativity. Even something that isn’t as pretty as AI content can be more emotionally engaging. It calls out to us because it’s genuine.

We’ve all been beginners. Just give it your best, know what to ask for, and remember to expect what you deserve as well. That way, we can keep supporting our community’s continued development going forward.

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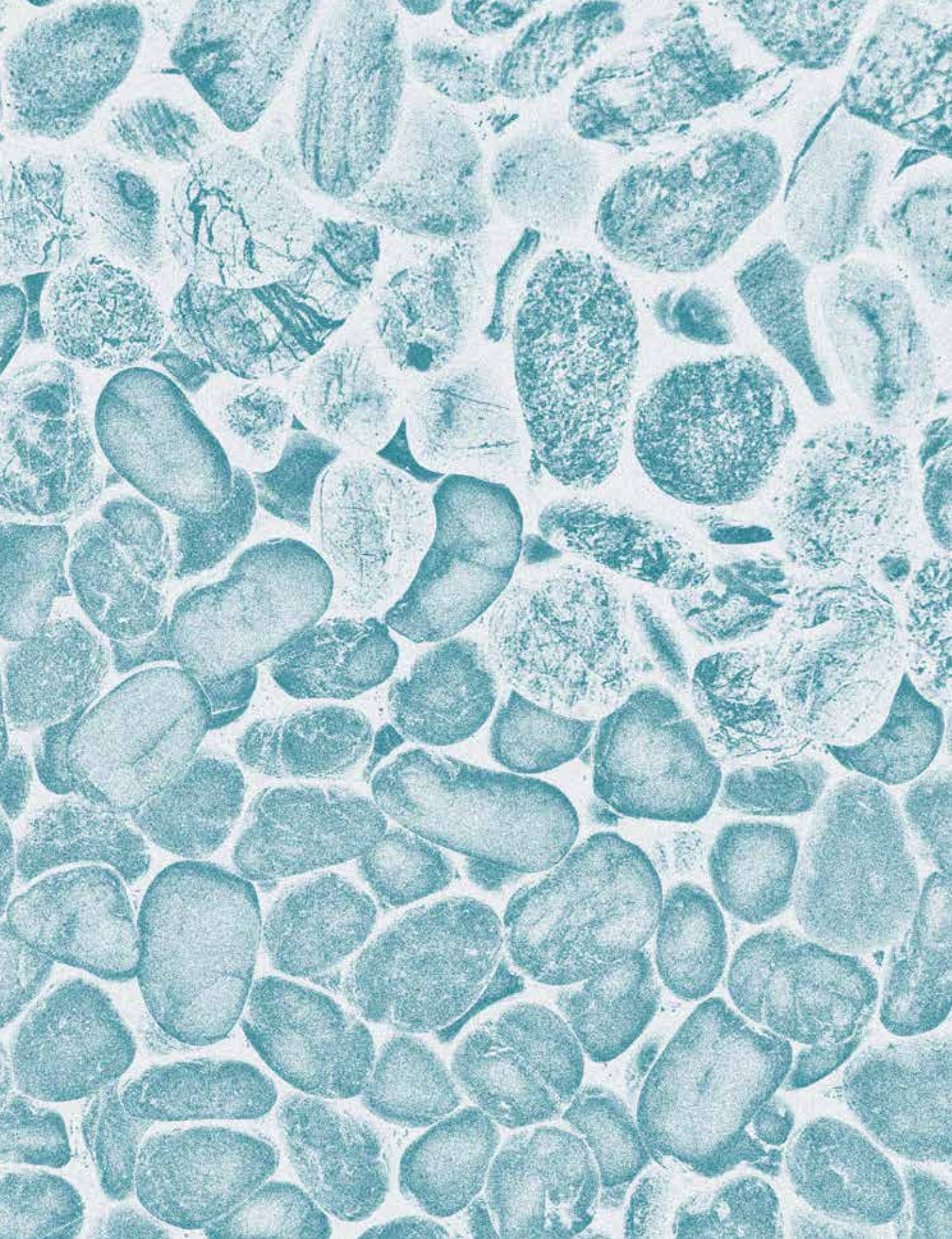


Summer

Cover your eyes! The rays are no longer soft, long and golden. The sun is bold, brilliant, and real, like the ideas presented in this section. They have been sharpened on the whetstone of praxis and show the wide variety of trends blooming in larp today.

This summer section spans the globe and includes articles from Asia, America, and Europe. From tools for character creation, software development, and VR, to new ways of playing and designing, ideas on ritual and the sacred, to opinion pieces, politics, and manifestos; this section is sure to have something for most readers.

Although it can be read in any order, it's curated to fit like pearls on a string one after the other to create a greater whole.



Shadow Relations

Lara Hartung

Relationships are complicated – oftentimes way more complicated than we are aware. This is a great thing for larp designers, because it gives us a lot to work with.

In this article, I'd like to present *shadow relations*, a relationship mechanic that is inspired by the psychological mechanisms of *transference* and *projection*.

In simplified terms, **transference** is the process of repeating emotions, behaviours, or patterns from a past relationship in another, unrelated relationship (American Psychological Association, 2018).¹ It is why we might have an irrational aversion towards a person we just met, perhaps because something about them reminds us of our last boss; or we instantly trust someone who laughs just like our sibling. **Projection**, on the other hand, means attributing something to others that is actually a part of us (McWilliams, N.). In its simplest form, it means expecting another person to be like us: a compulsive liar might expect others to constantly lie; a self-loathing person might assume everyone else hates them too. Both concepts are intricately connected: transference can be described as projecting one's image of an important person from the past onto another (APA, 2018).

These psychological mechanisms can be narrative gold when it comes to character stories; they allow you to connect the present with the past, and other characters with oneself. But their potential for larp design goes beyond that, because luckily as larp designers we are not always bound by reality, and this is where it gets interesting.

¹ This is primarily used to describe the relationship with a therapist, but in its generalized meaning transference can also be part of any other human interaction.

What are Shadow Relations?

A **shadow relation** is a pre-written relation between two characters in which at least one character (usually both) projects a **shadow** – their image of someone or something – onto the other. If the player is playing their character as if the shadow is part of the diegetic reality, they are playing on a **shadow level**; if they are playing without the shadow, they are playing on a **real level**.

We developed shadow relations for the larp *Blankspace* (Germany, 2024), a surreal horror larp about people literally haunted by their past – the mistakes they made, the patterns they fail to shake off. To bring this past into play and allow characters to repeat or break their toxic patterns, they project people from this past (or other concepts important to them) onto other characters. Over the course of the larp, this shifts from normal transference to a full-on delusion that the other character actually is this shadow.

Here is a simple example what a shadow relation could look like:

Let's say the captain of a spaceship acts as a mentor and role model for their young first officer. Both have a complicated parent-child relationship in their backstory. The first officer reminds the captain of their ten-year-old child, whom they have abandoned; the captain reminds the first officer of their dominant, absent parent. In the beginning, the captain is simply a mentor to the first officer. Gradually, they become more and more of a surrogate parent as the two build up a bond that is unusually strong and emotional for people in their positions, but still logically plausible considering transference. Towards the end, the captain

believes that they really are the parent, and that the first officer is ten years old. The first officer accuses the captain of the things their real parent has done.

You can see that a shadow relation between two characters is actually three relations in a trenchcoat: the real relation and the two projected ones. In this case:

- A normal relation between captain and first officer
- The relation between the first officer and their parent, the image of whom they project on the captain
- The relation between the captain and their child, the image of whom they project on the first officer

The difficulty is that the last two only exist for one of the characters – a player only ever sees two of these three relations. When two players play a shadow relation, they initially play the same relation but gradually begin to play two different ones.

Nevertheless, none of the players ever changes their character or plays an NPC for the other. The only thing that changes is how they view each other.

So how is this supposed to work?

At its core, playing on the shadow level is about playing *past* each other *together*. A relation only needs to make sense in its player's mind. When we receive a pre-written relation and only read our side, we construct an image in our head of what the other side will look like – what we expect the other character to know, remember, think, feel, and intend about ours.

As long as everything the other character says aligns with this image, we can play entirely different stories without noticing. As long as their actions make sense within our story (and vice versa), we can follow its flow and have meaningful play no matter what is going on in the other person's mind. And as long as the themes and core experience of the two stories align, we can still have a shared, connected experience together.

Thus, whether or not a shadow relation works depends primarily on whether these three relations are similar enough that they *feel* like the same relation and players can play unimpeded even if their interpretations differ, without being so similar that they become redundant.

This works best if there is not too much focus on worldbuilding, factual details, and consistency, and more on emotions and relationship dynamics. It also means that playing with shadow relations works best intuitively. The fewer specific names or places there are, the less characters can contradict each other, and the less you think about logical consistency, the less it matters.

In the case of our example, that might look like this:

Both players center their play on the emotional dynamic between the characters and avoid mentioning specific, insignificant facts, such as in which city or how many years ago it all happened. Whenever one of them does, the other simply ignores it or quickly changes the subject. When the captain sings to the first officer the lullaby they used to sing to their small child, the



Shadow relations can make the backstory come alive and add depth to relationships. Photographer: André Balzuweit.



At Blankspace, a metaspace helps players initiate play on the shadow level: at the core of the spaceship, all shadows are true by default. Photographer: André Balzuweit.

first officer's player decides to simply add this detail to their own backstory. They deliberately leave open whether they really heard the same song back then, or whether it just represents the same feeling – it is not important for the game.

Why would you use Shadow Relations?

Make hard-to-access aspects of your fiction actively playable

You can make almost anything or anyone appear for individual characters without somebody actually having to play them (or it). The most obvious use case is creating play with people from the character's backstory – even dead, distant or imagined ones. But as you'll see later, you can also externalise inner conflicts by having characters project aspects of themselves onto others, playing out relationships towards abstract themes or concepts, and more.

Guide and pace the fiction

By having a transition from a real level to a shadow level, you can naturally bake in a specific development potential to characters without explicit railroading or offgame instructions beyond those in normal relations. If a relationship they project developed a certain way in the past, players are likely to either repeat or purposefully break this course of action. You can also let characters develop specific emotions or motivations towards one another.

Give more complexity, nuance, and range to character relations and play dynamics

You can build intense relationships between characters who have never met

before (e.g. by projecting someone very close to them), and easily create complex or contradictory feelings. The transition between two relations also opens up a new range of possible relationship dynamics and character concepts. You'll find examples below.

What are the constraints?

Effort and complexity

The biggest and most obvious downside is that shadow relations add cognitive load. This goes for players, who have to manage the additional layers and all the information involved, but especially for character writers, who will have to plan their networks with an extra dimension in mind. From our experience, creating shadow relations only really works with a very design-centric approach to character creation, where you plan dynamics out before you start writing. It also requires repeated iterations between character, backstory, and relation writing, since they are intricately connected.

Less realism and factual detail

You'll need to either find a diegetic explanation (e.g. magic, delusion, scifi tech) for the shadows, or choose to view them as an element of surrealism or magic realism, both of which limit the larps' realism. As we saw above, the player's ability to play on facts and details is limited since those often differ between characters. This makes the mechanic difficult for larps where plot, secrets, or high-resolution worldbuilding are central.

Difficult in groups

Shadow relations are not transitive: relations of relations do not logically fit together. Just

because Alice is the shadow mother of Bob and Bob is the shadow father of Charlie, this does not mean that Alice is the shadow grandmother of Charlie. This means that playing with multiple characters at once on a shadow level tends to amplify logical inconsistencies; the consequence is that players are nudged to play less in groups, and more in scenes with close individual relations. While you can adapt them to work in groups, complexity scales up rather fast.

Designing Shadow Relations

Besides the normal character and relation design, most of the design work creating shadow relations goes into the balancing act of matching the three relations by just the right amount so that they are playable without becoming redundant.

Matching real relation and shadow (in one character)

Usually, characters will slowly transition from the real relation to viewing the other as the shadow, so on one hand, these two need to be connected to provide a consistent, meaningful experience. On the other hand, any shadow you introduce should add something that couldn't be achieved without it – otherwise it's just unnecessary cognitive load.

The easiest way to achieve this is for the real relation to be a *light version* of the shadow. A new friend could become the best friend you lost, a mentor becomes your parent. The purpose of such a shadow can be to escalate the emotions, raise the stakes, or nudge the character to make the same mistakes again with a different person.

While the shadow adds intensity and new dynamics, everything that was present on the real level still feels logical.

But the shadow could also be the opposite of the real relation or a very different take on the same themes. Such a shadow can contrast or twist what is already there, or lead characters on new paths. In this case you'll have to think more carefully about the arc this will create: if there is supposed to be a gradual transition from real level to shadow level, you will need some kind of middle ground or "in-between" that is playable, too.

Matching the two shadows (between both characters)

The two shadows can be factually quite unrelated. Structurally, however, they need to be quite similar – specifically, the imagined other side of each shadow needs to be roughly the same as the actual other shadows. More specifically: What player A – after reading their shadow – might imagine or expect to be written in player B's character sheet needs to be roughly the same as the shadow player B actually has.

If I have a positive relation (shadow or not) with my parent, I might expect them to view me as someone they need to guide and protect, to remember how much I cried when I lost my favourite plushy, and to love me. As long as these things are part of the other character's shadow as well, it doesn't matter much if in their story, I am actually their little sibling and the lost plushy was a broken bike.

To match with each other despite factual differences, shadows need to fulfil three symmetries:

Role symmetry

What type of relationship is it? Are the roles the two characters take for each other the same in both relations? Are they on an equal level or is there a power difference?

Examples of different relationships that still fulfil role symmetry:

- **Personal, power difference:** parent/child, mentor/mentee, bigger/smaller sibling
- **Personal, equals:** best friends, siblings, close work partners/allies
- **Impersonal, power difference:** guard/prisoner, boss/employee
- **Impersonal, equals:** business competitors, enemies by fate

Narrative symmetry

Do the stories behind the relations follow the same narrative beats? Are the events that shaped the relationships structurally the same?

Examples of different relationships that still fulfil narrative symmetry:

- **Alice betrayed Bob but is trying to regain their trust:** *Alice cheated on their romantic partner Bob but now tries to win them back, or Alice stole their colleague Bob's work to further their career but now tries to rebuild the friendship.*
- **Alice and Bob are growing closer but Alice is a bad influence on Bob:** *Alice is lovebombing Bob to trap them in an abusive relationship, or Alice and Bob*

are becoming closer friends but Alice is influencing Bob to take drugs and drop out of school.

Emotional (and cognitive) symmetry

Do the thoughts and feelings both characters have about each other match what the other would expect?

Examples of very different relationships that still fulfil different emotional symmetries:

- **Remorse vs hurt:** a remorseful criminal and their former victim, a parent and their child they just lashed out against, a person and their abusive partner whose ego they just accidentally offended.
- **Love-hate or co-dependency:** ex partners who can't live with or without each other, a rebellious teenager and their conservative parent, a person with low self esteem and themselves.

The shadows don't have to be perfectly the same to fulfil a symmetry – rough strokes are enough. Nor do you always need all of them: As a rule of thumb, at least 2 out of the 3 symmetries should be fulfilled, the third you can purposefully break or twist. Small inconsistencies make things interesting, and they can be the spark that leads characters in a new direction - but it tends to be a fine line to walk.

A detailed example²

Consider the following two characters who only just met each other a few days ago:

² All relation examples in this text are from the larp Blankspace and were designed and written by Tobias Mühlau, Orin Safron, Afra Spies and myself.

Static used to be an idealistic lawyer. The crushing injustice of the world and their inability to change anything led to self-destruction, drug abuse, burnout, and eventually a breakdown. Static gave up, became nihilistic, hopeless, and hedonistic, and now loves to talk down to others for their own fun.

Lucid, on the other hand, used to be a hedonistic rich kid who on paper was studying law, but in actuality was spending all their time with parties and drugs. When their best friend died of an overdose, Lucid turned their life around: they dropped out of college, became a spiritual leader, and strictly renounced all physical pleasures to strive for mental clarity.

STATIC’S RELATION WITH LUCID	
Real relation:	Shadow:
Rarely have you met a person whose stick is so far up their ass as Lucid’s. They preach abstinence and the renunciation of all pleasures to make the emptiness of existence look a little less sad compared to the emptiness of their own life. You couldn’t care less - if anyone falls for this, it’s entirely their own fault. But it is an exciting thought: if you were to throw everything away, would it really bring you more clarity? Is there a greater truth somewhere that you haven’t yet rejected?	When you were still trying to make the world a better place, you only had one ally in a small law firm. The fight against windmills made you close friends, and it was actually sad when you switched sides. You miss them, working together on something bigger. You’re ashamed of your betrayal and of what you are now. At the same time, you definitely don’t want to end up as joyless as they – and even less do you want them to end up like you. Are they a way out, or are you dragging them down?

LUCID’S RELATION WITH STATIC	
Real relation:	Shadow:
Static spits in the face of hope, but their spiteful rants entertain you. You deem yourself more evolved and don’t take them too seriously. It is still kind of freeing to think about. What if everything is bullshit? Why not unburden yourself from everything you have worked for years and years? You want it. This destructive freedom, powerful and selfish. But no. You are better now and can handle them. This is a good test of how far you have come.	Your best friend from law school who died. You always loved that no rules seemed to apply to you when the both of you were together. You are drawn to them and want to get lost together again. Maybe you could rewrite history. Maybe you could save them, or you would go down together. Did you not deserve death more? Could you bargain for their life with yours? Whom do you have to bribe for this exchange? You just really want to know how to make it right...

These are the relations both characters have with each other. On the left side you find the real relation, on the right side in grey the shadow.

From this, we can derive a few expectations Static might have about their former friend: *they used to consider Static an ally and close friend, but now feel betrayed and judge them. At the same time, they are very unhappy and joyless with their doomed endeavour.*

Lucid might have expectations about their dead friend such as: *they cared a lot about Lucid and both kept pushing each other harder. Now they are dead, which they really dislike* (remember, it’s imaginary), *and they blame Lucid for not saving them.*

Matching real relation and shadow

The shadows are extensions of the real relations: On real level, both characters are confronted with a person holding the values and lifestyle they themselves once used to have. On shadow level, they are confronted with a person they actually knew in that time, who most strongly represents this past life.

Gradual transition from real level to shadow level amplifies and grounds the feelings and dynamics already present on real level. It twists their status dynamic from moral high ground towards doubt and guilt. And thus, it lowers the barriers keeping them at distance (Lucid’s extreme self-control and Static’s arrogance and inability to take anything seriously) and allows two otherwise rigid and controlled characters to open up to each other and potentially fall back into their old habits.

Matching the shadows:

While there are quite a few factual differences (including whether or not one of the characters is even alive), the relation fulfils the different symmetries in various ways:

In both relations, the characters used to have a close and special relationship but are now opposites. Both also consider Lucid’s path morally superior (role symmetry).

In both stories, the two characters initially share their values and are very alike. Due to their mutual lifestyle, something bad happens to Static/Lucid’s friend. This prompts one of them to turn their life around, resulting in fundamentally opposite values and the end of their friendship (narrative symmetry).

Emotional symmetry is only partly fulfilled: Both miss their time together and feel guilt and regret over how it ended, but both also blame themselves while expecting the other to blame them.

What else can I do

The above examples involve the most straightforward case of shadow relations: two characters projecting another person from their past onto each other in a way that is quite similar to transference. However, there are other ways shadow relations can be used.

Relationship structures that defy logic

Shadows allow to bend the rules of how relationships can look like and make metaphorical representations of dynamics real.

Example: a group of characters whose central theme is generational trauma and people passing on the violence they experienced to the next generation. The shadows of these characters form a literal circle, with each character being both perpetrator and victim to another, allowing this cycle of generational violence to be perpetuated (or broken) within the very short timespan of the larp.

Self projections

Characters can not only project others, but also themselves, their past/future or alternate reality self, or parts of themselves onto others, allowing them to act out their own feelings towards themselves. They can treat these other characters like a “devil on their shoulder” or a voice in their head.

Examples: Two very self-destructive best

friends projecting themselves onto each other, treating each other just as cruelly as themselves; A tortured artist addicted to the inspiration they draw from suffering, who projects their inspiration on a person who is abusing them.

Abstract shadows

Shadows can be abstract concepts played as human-like personifications.

Example: an obsessive historian who projects all of history onto a very old character. During play, the historian can study their field and work on their research project by interacting with this character and diving into their personal story and conflicts; thus replacing a solitary activity with active roleplay that creates meaningful personal play for two characters.



Shadow relations can allow characters to interact with parts of themselves. Here: a suppressed character pondering whether to kill off their emotions for good. Photographer: André Balzuweit.

Different realities

By combining several shadows under one theme, you can open a new narrative reality for an individual character or a group.

Example: a group of characters whose shadows tell a fairy tale, opening a shared second layer of reality.

Special character concepts

Using the structural elements of shadow relations (like the transition between two relations) allows one to implement unique mechanics for character concepts that are otherwise hard to create.

Example: a character whom other people increasingly *forget* the closer they get to them. Most of the shadows others project on this character are variations of “a complete stranger”—but each with a twist that enables meaningful emotional play even after the other character forgets them (e.g. being paranoid about or strangely drawn towards them). The player can experience the emotions and stories that arise from the character being forgotten without becoming isolated or locked out of play.

Bringing internal play to the surface

I believe that there are a multitude of possibilities still unexplored, especially when it comes to twisting the mechanic for a specific larp concept. Shadows could enable dual characters to blur over the course of the larp, or lost memories to gradually return. They could give access to past lives or predetermined fates, or construct a second reality slowly taking over the original world.

What shadow relations are best at is bringing internal play to the outside. They can make backstories come alive, externalize inner conflicts, and enable direct interaction with distant or abstract themes. Thus, they can be a valuable tool for character-driven larps to deepen both character relations and the inner lives of the characters themselves.

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Ludography

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Play to Loop ∞

Larping conflict as a loop as a way to sustain drama

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Inventing the wheel

What kind of conflict happens in toxic groups that never dissolve? How do we as players feed the drama without running out of steam? How to play a group full of conflicts without final escalation or ending with someone being shunned or ostracized?

The Circle (Denmark, 2024) threw us right into the middle of a complicated knot of toxic relationships. We did not really know each other off-game beforehand as a group, and due to flight delays and life in general we had almost no time to flesh out relationships or calibrate playstyles before game start. Still, our characters instantly were this tight-knit and dead-locked group, and we managed to play intense emotional conflict easily throughout the whole larp – without ever feeling bored or done. This extended to providing play to other players through the group’s unpredictable conflicts and everchanging alliances.

“How the hell did this happen?” was our first question at the debrief afterwards. To not settle for the universal answer of “larp magic,” we got together to collect influences, design-features, and methods of play to see if we could provide the community with usable take-aways from this experience.

Of course, repetition is nothing new in larps, but to consciously work *against* resolving conflicts in a larp, has much too long been lacking a fancy name. Well, no more! We call it: *Play to Loop*.

The general rule in playing to loop is that any conflicts within a group – especially ones that have known each other over a longer period of time – will never be permanently resolved.

If that was possible, it would have happened long ago. Conflicts are never solved in-game, but instead transformed into new interesting conflicts with changing parties – and so used to drive play. In the larp where we first tried it: if the conflicting characters

felt they had resolved or exhausted an issue, other group members always stepped in and erased any progress by fuelling the conflict from another angle or shifting it to different participants.

We are convinced play to loop can be used as a concept for game design – as well as a player technique – and be adapted by players and designers alike to further their particular game.

A matter of circumstances?

The premise of *The Circle* was a cult where close relations and negative emotions are frowned upon. The larp played out the final days before a few members of the cult would be chosen by their Messiah, The Maestro, to help heal the world.

The design document of *The Circle* framed it like this: “*The Circle is a larp about relationships – about the longing for closeness and purpose, and when those things are at odds. We will be playing continually on that dilemma, and it might never be resolved for your character.*” It was also explicitly communicated that the larp was not about toppling the power structure of the cult.

The authors of this article were all cast as the leaders of the five chapters of the cult – each with their own perception of how to reach the enlightenment the cult sought after. This meant that each of us were part of two groups: the Inner Circle (the group of leaders) and our respective Chapter. Since our leadership group had known each other for nearly two decades and had spent several years early on in their lives closely

connected, it was obvious that the conflicts between them were not to be “solved” during a weekend.

If getting along or resolving conflicts was an option – surely that would have happened years ago. It was made clear that these self-absorbed characters would not be swayed by either reason, pity, or the greater good, if it could cost them but a fraction of their status. At the same time, the Inner Circle was the closest thing to a group of friends the members had; the people that knew them the very best, and the only ones whose situation resembled their own.

The different approaches to salvation made it easy to create a changing net of alignments and hostilities, depending on who in the group were considered the greatest threat to your own agenda or status at any given time. The characters were written as each having a set of warm, cold, and lukewarm relations in the group. In hindsight we ended up elaborating on this to keep the loop in flow, and regularly switching out which one of the other characters in the group we felt, warm, cold, or lukewarm towards. This was mostly done by playing everything to our character’s personal advantage, being petty and disregarding reason, or overreacting to minor comments or reactions that could be perceived as a threat or an opening. This kept the issue of who is on top and in the bottom of the conflict ever-changing and helped avoiding stalemate situations. It was a pact among players to never accept a permanent status quo in the power struggle, but always keeping it alive by mixing up the alliances. It was never about being on top – but about not being alone at the bottom.

Getting into the ring: how did we loop?

“I feel that you attack me now to avoid talking about you and your problems, to be completely honest. I see you deflecting.”
– (in-game quote)

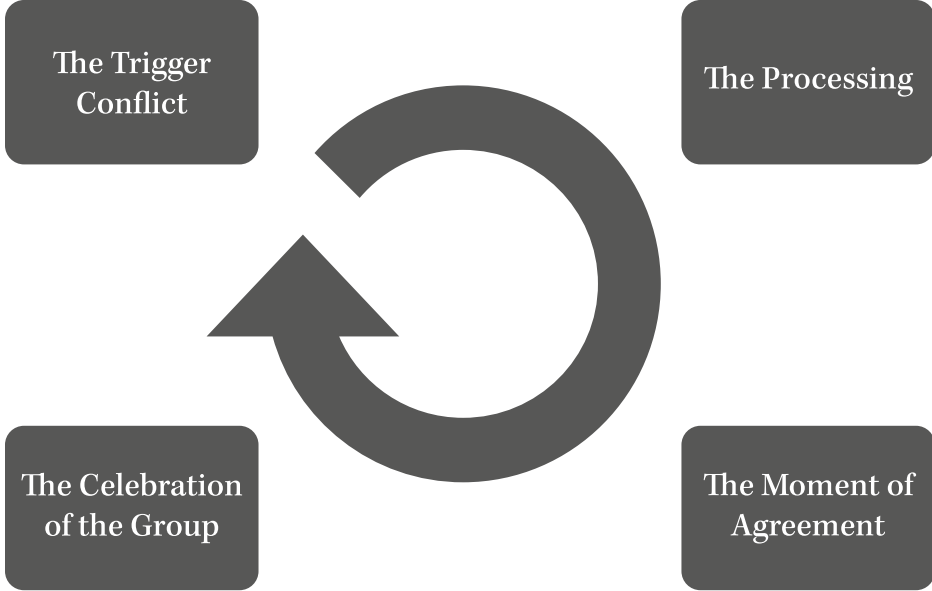
The loops we created were not a conscious choice between us. They came into existence naturally, since we as a group weren’t allowed to fall apart for off-game reasons, some part of the design, some part of our mutual understanding as players that we wanted to play this together. The fundamental agreement between us was to help each other play our character back into the group, if the character had a fallout with some or all of the others. This basic agreement, created semi-consciously as an off-game rule, turned into becoming our safety net: everyone was free to storm out in a huff, claiming to be *done* – safely knowing they would be pulled back in, or would be allowed to play themselves back in. Thus making sure that no matter how ridiculously our characters behaved, we as players would never limit ourselves from play by going all-in.

Everytime we as a group felt that we resolved a conflict, we celebrated, reconnected and patted ourselves on the back for being such excellent conflict solvers, until someone felt that *“maybe it was a bit unfair that...”* or *“I am not sure we talked enough about...”* or *“actually it wasn’t this person’s fault, but that person caused it by their behaviour...”* and then the loop took another turn.

Taking a step back and examining our process after the larp we identified four phases as part of each repetition:

- **The Trigger Conflict:** Any kind of disagreement, old grudge, moment of envy between two or more of the members of the group can be used to set the loop in motion. This could also be done by other group members not actively involved, i.e. under the guise of ‘clearing out the air’ or ‘to help you guys move on’.
- **The Processing:** Some or all members of the group work to ‘resolve’ the conflict – or that’s what the characters might believe (or pretend to believe). In truth they are fuelling their egos or following their own agendas – and the players know that there is no actual resolution.
- **The Moment of Agreement:** When everyone is tired out, guilt has been assigned and accepted, someone has stormed out and was brought back or a more urgent matter comes up, the group agrees that the conflict is ‘resolved’. By definition – not by actual solution.
- **The Celebration of the Group:** To cement the ‘Agreement’, to reinforce the bond of the group and let out steam.

In between the four phases of the loop, we had other kinds of play: scheming, one-on-one play with members of the group in always changing constellations – that always fed into the loop of how this group of leaders was functioning. “Functioning,” of course, meant being dysfunctional leaders more often than not; spilling the effects of our quarrels over onto the characters in our chapters, using chapter members as pawns, audience, and participants in the conflicts that played out in rituals and other forms of group activities.



Play to loop: the four phases of repetitive play.

Playing to loop made sure that we always had more fuel to put on the fire for our co-players.

Another relevant byproduct with looping is that we experienced the passing of time more actively. When going through the loop the second time on a given conflict, reaching phase 2, ‘the processing’, we could experience with our whole bodies that *“we have done this before”* – therefore confirming the feeling that we as a group have been doing this exact same thing many times in the past. If you go through the loop a third time, it’s tradition – and after that, it feels like you have done this forever. It gets easy to feel annoyed by *“they are always doing this fucking thing!!?”* when they have done “this fucking thing” once or twice already.

Buying a round for the crowd: how can you loop too?

For the Inner Circle we played at this specific run of *The Circle*, a lot of things fell into place to create the positive, functioning loop experience we described so far. Part of the circumstances in favour were rooted in the design of the larp, part came from us as players. Reflecting on that and understanding the fundamental concept and core-technique led to the question: how do we think this could work also in other larps? We would like to suggest this as a technique for players to use in their game with each other and for designers to use as a concept in writing characters and relationships.

An important foundation for this is built from conscious, transparent agreements between the players, that can either be stated in the character descriptions by the designers or reached by the players in calibration – or both.

To take a step back from our own experience, imagine a similar setup of character relationships in a different setting. For example a village council of elders in which the oldest member of each family resides. This could easily set up the framework for playing to loop within the council and with interaction with the rest of the larp. Here are some exemplary assumptions for that and how they work as a foundation for playing to loop:

Having this Council is tradition and is believed to have kept the village afloat during uncertain times for the good of everyone – this gives *reasons to bind the group together* and *reasons to never leave for good*.

All council members believe that their own family should stand in higher regard than others in the city, because of their contribution and sacrifice – this gives *reasons to hold on to one's own agenda and not be swayed*.

Each character in the council is designed with strong traits and flaws connected to past, ongoing, and unsolved conflicts between them (i.e. mismatched relationships, unsolved crimes/accidents, and all kinds of other misunderstandings and abuses) – this gives *reasons for triggering a conflict*.

From a designer's perspective as well as from the player's side, we think it's important

that all of this needs to be transparent to everyone: the in-game information as well as the intention behind it to give the players the best tools to make it work in the larp. All council members can then work together during the larp to discuss and solve the problems of the village. Their allegiances in the group can shift depending on the subject or the tone of individual relationships. To make sure of that, the players need to be in the know of the reasons above and the intention of the set up. Then they can listen for their trigger points and shift their focus of kindness and cooperation – or rejection – accordingly.

The City Council, The Group of Elders, or The Squadron Commanders, can make sure to meet up regularly and keep the loop going while bringing back conflicts to players in other groups. Agreeing to make time for play in the group (and also with one or several members of the group) keeps the conflict alive and establishes a group dynamic. This states the importance of the group – co-leaders, friends, family members and so on – in the lives of the characters and provides the players with a place to play if they need a safe space to escalate (since a rule of playing to loop is to always bring people back in) or if they are feeling bored or alone, while providing them with opportunity to bring back play to other groups they are a part of.

Keeping the example in mind, the following paragraphs sum up some essential decisions, agreements, and actions that we consider useful exploring for your own version of playing to loop:

Clearly state the idea that we are not playing the one point in time where these characters finally reconcile

but to create a fragment in time of a relationship that loops – and perhaps always has looped – with waves of high and low conflict.

Define one or more core conflicts that are not to be solved. A group of players can decide to hold on to a specific core conflict while other conflicts around them – or offspring conflicts of this core conflict – can be resolved. Keeping a core conflict boiling amongst everything else that happens can provide the opportunity to create more conflicts from this, and helps avoid conflict-free play or 'they-lived-happily-ever-after'-endings while creating the feeling of age-old relations or emotions.

Agree upon what ties the player characters together. Are they bound by blackmail, kinship, duty, money, solitude, demons? They need to be dependent on each other in a way that makes it 'impossible' for one character to fall irreparably. This is something designers could actively go for when writing characters and relationships.

Find your tone within the group to mask the bad times as good ones or rephrase critique as praise. Decide an alibi for 'reconciliation', a ritual, a group-hug, something that none of the characters feel they can miss out on, if someone calls for it. Sometimes you need to remember why you are a group and why you'd like to stay in it.

Based on these decisions, agreements and actions, the following two paragraphs compile checklists of practical tips to prepare before starting and adjust your playstyle during the larp.

Getting the loop ready

Make time to calibrate the following in the group before play. Select, modify, and make it your own.

- We want to play conflict together. Engaging in conflict is saying yes to the game.
- We will actively make time for playing together in this group. We play other stories as well, but being with the group should feel like entering the shared-apartment-scene in a sit-com.
- What are the reasons to hold on to one's own beliefs and not be convinced to end the conflict, change course of action, or search for agreement? Petty works well.
- What are the characters' triggers to escalate and de-escalate conflict? Not all necessarily need to be remembered by the group, but it can be good to have them actively addressed.
- What binds the group together and why can none of us ever truly leave – even after a fight? Having one common reason is stronger than having individual ones. We don't just aim to be bound to the group – but to be bound together in the group.
- What happens if a character tries or threatens to leave the group? Define this never happens in secret and discuss the options and each character's go-to reaction to hold the group together.
- Agree to welcome each other back into the group and the conflict as players. Do the players need help to be pulled back in, or will they play themselves back in?

- What are our warm, cold, and lukewarm relations within the group to start with – and what can change them? Agree to make sure that the relations change regularly to keep the loop going.
- We can ‘forgive’ and ‘move on’, without truly having done so. Everything can be brought up at a later time – especially if you have had time to gossip with your current warm relation about it.
- None of us plays to win – or to win at losing.

Keeping the loop alive

Use these as a checklist of reminders and practises for your group play. If you feel some points are specifically relevant to your own play, revisit them in short calibration sessions during the larp. You don’t need to play a full transparency larp for this, but at least short coordinated check-in with your fellow players are very useful to play to loop.

Never resolve. Act like you forgive and then never forget! *Larp like a Real Housewife!*

- Take turns to oppress and to be oppressed, support the victim, play to lift, and play for the players to choose losing and still be a part of the group. Bringing someone down with you might be more important than being on top.
- Gang up with positive reinforcement – “*you are the only one that understands me, not X.*” Shift these alliances to create dynamic play.
- Mix between group play and one-on-ones – having the whole group in mind at all times.

- Use other players as pawns and leverage to create play for each other and for players outside of the group.
- Mix up alliances: me against you, us against them, all of us against the world. We may talk shit about each other, but others can’t talk shit about the group.
- Use the whole toolbox of hidden hostile communication: Toxic positivity! Doublesided feedback! Backhanded compliments! Concern trolling!
- Make sure that the game within the group differs from the game outside of the group, to ensure a loop feed in both.
- Play both good and bad times – or mask bad times as good. You need to remember why you are a group and why you stay together.
- Pay attention to jokes, toasts, greetings etc. that pop up during the larp. Hold on to them and use them over and over to create the feeling of old relationships.
- If it’s going too well: drag up old shit and start over again!
- Enjoy watching the others in the group rise and fall, savour their stories!

Closing the circle: final words of wisdom

Larping conflict as a loop – and not as a straight line with a start and end – is a way to sustain drama and make it last during a larp – while still keeping it interesting.

We believe that all sizes of groups within a game – including pairs – can integrate playing to loop, and that you can benefit

from it whether your group is in a place of leadership and decision making or merely to spice up your quarrel. The added safety net in this tool where the player group pull any member back in – or allow them to play themselves back in at all times (although not without in-game conflict) – also makes it useful for groups playing as families or otherwise close contacts where you want the high and low tides of the conflicts to occasionally peak without risk of either character relation or conflict play falling apart.

The loop of conflict is the antidote to the dreaded larp consensus. You could call it the equivalent of the annoying person in the back raising their hand with a “*well, actually...*”

It’s a carousel of drama that is designed to be game-driving, and of course evolving together with the game. By defining and naming the play to loop technique, we hope to give players and designers a framework to discuss and refer to, when in-game consensus is not preferred. Use it wisely. Make it your own. And enjoy!

Ludography

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Designing Characters for Resilience

Reverie Studio's Abstraction Approach

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Character design in larp is a rich artistic environment with many interpretations and approaches. Every design team confronts the same challenge: how to create characters that are rich, playable, and emotionally resonant without building systems that struggle with ordinary larp-runner challenges such as participant drop outs, or designing characters that are unsatisfying to play. This article traces Reverie Studio's evolution on how to deal with these challenges and our current design philosophy used for *Fracture* (USA, 2023) and to prepare for *Neon Void 1984* (USA, 2026), with a participant-driven technological character system: *Abstraction*. The goal is to create a procedural yet expressive framework where each participant authors their own way into the world while maintaining a cohesive, thematically guided tone.

In our earlier work at Reverie Studios, we wrote fully scripted characters with complex webbed ties, often drawn from the Nordic and American larp traditions. Each sheet could span multiple pages, with descriptive traits, light and dark personality aspects, pre-written questions for reflection, and a network of five or more pre-designed connections to others. It was labour intensive on the writing and design side to build the systems for these characters, and brittle in play if any of the written elements didn't align for the participant or if there were participant drop outs. If they didn't like the character as written, we encouraged participants to change whatever elements suited them, so long as they communicated to us or other participants if it would likely affect the overall story or connections. To us, that felt more like a bandage for a design flaw we hadn't quite addressed.

As we grew our practice through larps like *Eskhaton* (USA, 2019) and *The Haunting of Gray Manor* (USA, 2020) we realized that the traditional "full-sheet" model was not only a workload problem but a design problem. It assumed a level of stability that large-scale larp may not deliver. When participants drop out, ties break; when people role-play differently from what was written, narrative scaffolds can collapse. And most importantly, too much prescriptive writing can prevent the participant's sense of ownership. Our emerging focus became resilience: creating character systems that survive disruption, thrive in participant hands, and scale sustainably for designers.

Our first opportunity to put this into motion started when we collaborated with Juhana Pettersson in 2020 on designing *Saturnalia* (USA, 2022). We proposed *Saturnalia*, a city-wide World of Darkness larp in New Orleans's French Quarter for about 200 participants, and we needed to solve a design challenge to allow those 200 participants to make meaningful characters that were as fully fleshed out as the long form sheets we traditionally produced. The approach we took with Juhana built on the work he did on other projects such as *Enlightenment in Blood* (Germany, 2017) in which he used a software tool called Larpweaver (created by a Texan company, Incognito Limited). As Pettersson discusses in the article "*The Death of Hamlet – Deconstructing the Character in Enlightenment in Blood*," about why he used this system, "the method of larp organizing where each participant is provided with a written character is a lot of work, especially in big larps" (Pettersson, 2022).

Because our design goals differed from those for which Larpweaver was designed, we built

our own tool for *Saturnalia*, incorporating feedback from Juhana, and approaching character writing with a new mindset. The tool worked, and we successfully ran the larp, managing the around 200 participants who all made characters, with the normal problems of drop outs and fills being mitigated without arduous recasting. After *Saturnalia*, we kept using and improving the tool instead of abandoning it, explored other applications for it, and named it *Abstraction*.

Abstraction

We use the term "abstraction" for our character creation system to represent multiple layers of problem solving for larp character writing. When we use it, we mean it is accomplishing a reduction in labour through software development, but also in an artistic sense. Abstraction aims to distill character creation on both the writing and participant side. We create an intermediary form between larp traditions where participants make characters using, for example, a point buy system, and more structured larps where the larpwrights deliver fully realized characters. The approach we use should provide customization to participants to tailor a character, while also reducing the workload on writers.

The system uses an application portal approach for larp designers and participants, loading in writing assets in containers that are connected through relationship mapping, and checked out via a shopping cart approach. We can assign limits on the assets when needed to create uniqueness

for selection and make selection contextual. For *Saturnalia*, we had character abilities that appeared as choices depending on the vampire clan that was selected. By design, only a few characters could select a certain attribute (e.g., older vampire). Similar to a "choose your own adventure," participants follow the decision tree, adding choices that branch based on selection, and eventually arriving at a unique character all their own. When they complete the character, it locks the selected assets so others, if unique or limited, can not select them, and generates a character sheet the participant can save or print.

For *Fracture* we used a hybrid method, allowing participants to select character 'seeds' (such as *Overburdened Camp Administration*) which had some of our longer form approaches for writing like a short history and pre-written relationships, but allowed participants to add additional layers as they built the character to expand this seed in a direction that is enjoyable for them. In post-mortem we determined that our future larps, such as *Neon Void 1984*, would break from the pre-written method as it was still labour intensive and participants enjoyed the options they could select that were more custom for their experience based on responses we received in our post-event survey.

For *Neon Void 1984*, we are adding a layer of complexity to the tool: generating social connections without involvement from the larp designers. In our previous larps, we wrote these relationships for each character to create meaningful points of connection to other characters. The degree to which these written relationships manifested in participant experience depended on:

- the quality of the writing of the relationship (since authors often matched characters out of necessity rather than intentionality, not all written relationships displayed the same level of quality).
- whether the participant wanted to engage with the relationship as written (did the participant get any satisfaction from the writer's interpretation of the character they are portraying).
- how the participant portrayed the character (a relationship as written differs from how the participant portrays it).

It was also the most labour-intensive aspect of character writing, requiring many revisions. We are looking to address these concerns with character relationships.

Our proposal is to write categories of social connections, similar to other selectable assets in the character creation system, representing typical character relationships. When a participant chooses a relationship type, they express their desire for that kind of relationship, even though they don't yet know the details, such as who it is with, how it started, how important it is, etc. (participants are free to determine these details collaboratively). Once all characters have been created in the system, the larp designers engage in a process that will sort and match the choices and make assignments that provide the traditional relationships and add a social component that can be explored before the larp or during workshops.

This kind of relationship assignment will require careful algorithm design. The algorithm should be equitable, fair, and highly

configurable. By equitable, we mean that there should be no preferential treatment of one participant over another. A system where participants choose their matches might overwhelm popular larpers with unwanted attention while excluding new larpers.

By fair, we mean the algorithm should try to assign relationships as closely to what the participants requested as possible. Ranked-choice voting for relationship types (not the individuals in the relationship) is an appealing choice as it should help ensure that everyone gets at least some of what they want. For example, imagine the unlikely scenario in which only one larp participant has requested a romantic relationship. Here, there is no one for the participant to be paired with, so they cannot get that relationship. If this participant selected "romantic" as their top relationship pick and "rival" as their second highest, the algorithm should ensure that it satisfies their second pick, because it could not meet their first.

The algorithm, when complete, will be highly configurable, similar to the rest of Abstraction, so it can adapt to the needs of individual larps. A larp may want to limit the number of a specific type of relationship for narrative reasons (for example, an academic larp where one professor is being blackmailed has a unique tone from a larp where *all* professors are being blackmailed). Other larps and other types of relationships could be unlimited (for example, every student can have a friend and a rival). Some relationships, like friend circles and love triangles, can involve over two characters, so relationships don't always have to be between two people. The algorithm should be flexible enough to support such designs,

fairly distributing any limited relationship types using the ranked choice system above.

With *Neon Void 1984*, our intention is to implement the mentioned systems. Participants will select categories that act as sliders or levers: calibration options to fine-tune the character they are making and offer linkage points to other characters or stories of interest. Then, they receive a complete character as a result of the choices they make in the system. This character is custom to the participant and has enough story elements from the choices they make to match the long-form characters we used to write as a studio. They will also have connections to other characters that are in alignment with the play experience they'd like to have.

If drop outs occur, which our experience shows happens approximately 20-25% of the time per event, we believe Abstraction's design approach will mitigate the impact on both organisers and participants. An incoming participant that is filling a spot can join the event and get a customized character that is built to their spec, and can onboard through the same systems, including the relationship algorithm running again to make a connection, without a serious loss of fidelity of their experience. When the process was manual in the past, the existing characters and relationships restricted the incoming participant to which characters that were available. From a design perspective, Abstraction's systems are preferable, making casting more straightforward, and allowing the incoming participant to design a character as anyone else. We don't have to design a fully written long-form character at the beginning and worry about a loss of

experience for anyone if their relationships don't show up.

Challenges

While the Abstraction system offers some advantages, it also raises new design challenges, which we raise below. In developing this system, we are not proposing that it replaces any existing approach to character design, or that it is superior. We developed this system out of our own necessity to reduce labour in writing and design of characters, to give participants more options for what their character is for their own experience in the larp, and to deal with some challenges associated with character casting (such as when a participant drops out). In our experience on the design side, it is a successful project, and participant surveys reflect satisfaction with the outputs, but we acknowledge challenges that exist.

Depth versus Modularity

Can modularly assembled characters evoke the same emotional depth as authored ones? Some participants thrive on co-creation, while others miss the curated poetry of a hand-written role. Balancing expressive richness with scalable systems remains a key artistic tension. In the past, our writing efforts have focused on sequential steps for character development that incorporate participant feedback and desires. Using a survey approach, our first pass at a character design asked participants to describe broadly the idealized character. The writers used these inputs to create a draft output, and the participant accepted or changed it. The outcome was a written character semi-built to spec for the participant,

which many participants enjoyed (based on post-event surveys), but we felt we could offer a similar level of customization while avoiding the level of labour required to use this approach.

For our purposes on the design side, Abstraction offers a more streamlined approach to this process, and a more customized experience for participants. Whether it is as good as a traditional long-form character as we would have written in the past or not, we do not have any hard evidence beyond participant surveys, which suggest participants enjoy the system. There are other approaches to character design such as collective larps with cocreative design, black-box larps with minimalistic characters, etc. But for the kinds of larps our studio runs (which are larger-scale ‘blockbuster’ style larps in a longer form style) the tool we developed offers the labour savings we desire and a solution to participant desire for a meaningful character. Also, we think the tool can scale down to accommodate other formats, such as fest larps, enabling participants to develop characters quickly in an intermediated format.

Technical Accessibility

Software introduces opportunities, but also maintenance costs. Not all design teams can sustain platform development or infrastructure. Our long-term goal is to make Abstraction open-source or hosted for community use, allowing other designers to build upon our framework without heavy technical lift. Using Abstraction comes with a trivial financial cost. We estimate that if others were to use it, we might charge a nominal fee for use, primarily to cover hosting and maintenance/development.

We do not expect the price point to be a barrier; however, the use of the system requires adapting the design and using a system that may be unfamiliar. A potential larp organiser wanting to use Abstraction would have to be educated on the system to load in their assets and similarly educate any participants on how to use it, which are additional steps to take in running the larp. As we have not yet worked with any larp designers other than Juhana on this, we do not have an estimation of how difficult using this system will be and how long it will take for other designers to become familiar with it.

Cultural Adaptation

Different larp cultures have different relationships to authorship. Nordic and American scenes vary in how much agency players expect. Clear onboarding and designer education must accompany Abstraction’s use to align expectations on the designer and participant sides. Conceptually, the system is a break from some traditions. Since there’s so much variability in character development, the storytelling approach for a larp must align with the character design. The system must allow players to select a unique character seed if the story or plot of a larp is tied to a specific character. The system must also account for the character’s potential modularity in other aspects, such as personality, relationships, or other potential changes that are selected during creation using Abstraction’s ‘choose your own adventure’ approach.

Algorithmic Ethics

Introducing procedural matchmaking raises ethical concerns around consent, represen-

tation, and perceived bias. It will be essential to have mechanisms for participant review or veto, along with transparency about how relationships are assigned. The approach of being equitable, fair, and configurable means solving some potential sorting and matching problems, but may introduce others. We balance this and allow characters to belong to selectable relationship groups, and also state that participants can develop relationships on their own, and that procedural matchmaking is only meant to be an additional tool for easier onboarding into the larp.

Comparisons

We recognise other tools exist, but we designed ours for our specific circumstances and design needs that have grown organically with us as a studio. As we developed as a studio, we stopped looking at characters as a static sheet to be written and made up of thematic components that participants bring to life, and instead as a dynamic engagement engine. We want participants to feel they have the agency to build a character they like within a framework, to save labour on the studio side in writing by focusing on core themes we want to see in a larp – as opposed to working them narratively into the sheets, and making sure that those core themes are present, even if there is no specific character that must be the catalyst for that theme. For *Neon Void 1984* we intend to have Soviet infiltrators, but it does not matter which character is the infiltrator, and who ends up picking that trait is not relevant to our design approach. We believe that Abstraction fits those criteria, and furthermore we believe it can be a useful tool for other studios to consider using to solve similar problems.

There are other character creation systems and methodologies available in the larp tradition that achieve some of these goals. We cannot speak to all of them, but there are likely some that fit better with what we are looking to achieve than others. For instance, in ‘The Mixing Desk of Larp’ [The Mixing Desk of Larp, 2019] there is a pedagogical framework for larp design which uses the concept of ‘faders’ like those on a mixing board which is useful as a basis for the theory of what we are looking to achieve with Abstraction, but there is not an accompanying software application to use which would achieve the results we desire as an output. Other approaches for character creation that are lightweight on the design side and offer meaningful participant involvement, such as the co-creation method used for *Lumen: The Journey to Hope* (Italy, 2025) are inspiring, but for our purposes we are aiming to provide pre-larp creation and on-site calibration, and are not basing our larps on Jungian archetypes – so this is not the ideal fit for how Reverie approaches larps or why we designed Abstraction.

There are some technological tools that fit most of the criteria, and currently offer more features than we do, such as LarpManager (LarpManager, 2025) which is the closest analog to Abstraction. The approach LarpManager takes as a system differs from the one we propose for design, however. LarpManager’s features are impressive, including a payment and registration system which Abstraction currently lacks, but it is a system more for selecting a fully designed character, and would work well for larps featuring long-form character sheets or short-form characters paired with analog

solutions for achieving similar results to how we designed Abstraction.

We do not propose to replace the methods used by other larp designers, as Abstraction was developed as part of an ongoing exploration of our own needs. Nonetheless, we think that making it available to other larp designers could offer benefits in terms of labour savings and participant satisfaction.

Future Enhancements

Looking ahead, we would like to expand Abstraction to include:

- **Analytics and feedback loops:** giving designers insight into which combinations lead to stronger participant satisfaction. These tools can help design, but also give participants some agency in the choices that are most interesting to them. Long term, this can give better insight into the satisfaction of participants, which leads to better design.
- **Integration with other larp infrastructure:** such as registration systems, casting databases, and debrief tools. Currently, many of these systems are ad hoc and exist in many forms that are not connected except through manual labour by organisers. Centralising them will make a larp using Abstraction a more holistic system. It would be ideal to offer a one-stop place for all aspects of a larp from registration and payment to casting, but at this time Abstraction fulfills only part of those needs.

- **Enhanced UI and UX elements for both participants and designers:** include the ability to import/export assets, allowing for plug and play for designers, and templated character sheet exports so that participants have a nicer looking character at the end of their creation.
- **Availability for larp designers:** at the time of this article, the tool is still in active development for *Neon Void 1984*, but we intend for it to be available for use by other larp designers in the future. We are working to build the tool to a point where it is approachable for designers and participants. Larp designers can contact us (contact@reverie.studios) to request early access, but it would be on an alpha-testing basis. When it is in a state we feel comfortable releasing, we plan on making it available for development and use with a community announcement. We hope to have this completed by 2026.

Conclusion

Resilience in larp design is not simply a logistical concern; it is an artistic philosophy. By treating uncertainty as a design parameter rather than a failure state, we can build larps that thrive on emergence and intentional desire. In developing this tool, we aim to enable participants to have more input in the co-creation opportunities. Pettersson states, “As a player, those moments of design-enabled reciprocity are beautiful: Someone makes the larp work for me and I make it work for someone else” (Pettersson, 2021, p.258). The Abstraction system represents one pathway toward that future, where characters are not static blocks of text but dynamic

systems capable of developing with their participants. They can fulfill their desires and develop a framework for collaborating and co-creating with other participants as the larp designers in Abstraction empower them to weave together.

We are working towards building a space where larp designers can find their own way to iterate on this model, bringing additional freedom and flexibility to the design, and increasing participant agency as co-creators. We hope that this approach can help make large-scale larp more sustainable and creatively empowering. In the same way that larp itself decentralizes narrative control, resilient character systems decentralise authorship, transforming the designer’s role from writer to architect of possibility.

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‘Let’s Just Add Another Neighbourhood If We Get More Players’

Scalable Character Creation in *Trohetslöften*

Trine Lise Lindahl

How can we reduce the amount of work we put into character writing while still delivering high quality, well connected characters? I have pondered this question through the years. For many designers, the character-writing process is both the most pleasurable part of organising, and at the same time a source of stress and burnout due to the sheer amount of work that is needed for a large larp.

I was very excited when I learned about a way of doing it that has seemed to work very well both for the designers and the players. For the larp *Trohetslöften* (Sweden, 2025. Eng. *Pledges of Allegiance*), Mimmi Lundkvist, Alma Elofsson Edgar and Rosalind Göthberg designed a set of 15 reusable characters for a 45-player larp. This design reduced the workload for the organisers and had the added benefits of making it easier for the players to have an overview of all the characters in the larp, and to have mirror characters that gave perspective to their own.

In this article I will first give a short description of the larp and describe the concept. We will get some player perspectives based on their feedback forms. Then I'll let the designers tell you more about how they got this idea and chose to use it for this larp, what sort of larps they recommend using this process for, and some tips for people who might get inspired. I will finish off with some thoughts about how I would use this inspiration.

What is *Trohetslöften*?

Trohetslöften is a larp about common people in 17th century Sweden. It is a story about the devastating consequences of big

politics and war, and at the same time, a story about everyday life and the small and big joys in life, told through the events of weddings and conscription.

The larp was designed and run by Mimmi, Rosalind and Alma through the organisation Bread and Games in July 2025, in the larp village Berghem in Skillingaryd. It had 45 players and lasted two days, with on-site workshops, approximately 24 hours of playtime, and an evening of debrief and afterparty.

The concept: sets of reusable characters as opposed to unique characters

In the Nordic larp tradition, the most common way of creating characters is that the designers write a set of characters that together form the ensemble of the larp. The characters usually have a written description that can range from three sentences to 25 pages, with a typical character being 1–2 pages of character background, personality, relationships to other characters, motivations and other relevant information. *Most importantly in this context: The characters are usually unique. For a larp for 45 players, you write 45 different characters.*

One set of characters makes a small larp

For *Trohetslöften* Mimmi, Alma and Rosalind designed a set of only 15 characters. These 15 characters were divided into three families that together formed a neighbourhood within the village. All relationships were contained within the neighbourhood, and

the players only needed to learn who the characters in their own neighbourhood were. In this way, the neighbourhood functioned as a small larp in the larger larp. The rest of the larp became a backdrop for the small larp, providing play opportunities with extras and more spontaneous relationships.

Three sets of characters makes a larger larp

The designers used three of these sets to make up a village of 45 characters. If they had wanted a larger village, they could have added a fourth or a fifth set, without much more work than adding new names.

Each of the characters and each of the families had a name starting with a different letter of the alphabet. In this way, the players could recognise who was who in the other neighbourhoods. Since they knew that for instance Kirstin in their neighbourhood was the mother of the bride, they knew that this was the case for Kajsa and Katarina in the two other neighbourhoods too. In this article, I will refer to this as 'same letter characters'.

Character shells for co-creation and making the characters distinct

The characters were fairly simple. On the webpage they were described as 'character shells' that the player would have to fill in based on questions. Similarly, the families had a very basic structure, but the rest had to be fleshed out by the players, based on a set of specific questions. This was done in a digital workshop, and filled into the family document. The neighbourhood was not described beyond a name.

The characters had a description of who they were, of how the character was perceived, their family, their relationships and a dilemma. In addition they had some questions the player needed to fill in, to flesh out the character and the relationships.

For instance, one character had an injury that would make them ineligible for conscription. The character sheet had some concrete questions for the player to answer like: 'Did you hurt yourself to avoid conscription? Could you have saved yourself, but still let the trunk fall? Or was it a complete accident?'

The character also had a relationship marked by conflict. It had the accompanying questions: 'How long has the animosity between you been going on? Have you always been in conflict, or were you friends previously? In that case, when did the friendship turn sour, what happened? How is your animosity evident to you and others?'

In this way, the frame of the character was designed by the organisers, but detailed by the players. This gives more ownership to the character's story, personality and values, and it is easier to remember details when you have made them up yourself.

Characters in the Nordic larp tradition sometimes have a list of questions that are meant as inspiration to make the player reflect on how they can make the character come to life, and the process for *Trohetslöften* might not seem too different from that. One of the most important reasons for letting the players fill things in here, though, was that this process made the characters that were based on the same, reusable character text distinct from each other.

Player perspectives

I first heard about this idea because I met three very enthusiastic players at a party. What they told me is echoed in the feedback forms from other players. Although there is always a chance that players who didn't like the concept have opted out of giving feedback, a significant part of the players gave very positive feedback.

The neighbourhoods

‘The neighbourhoods with lettered characters were an innovation. Without having learned the others’ details, it worked to make an illusion of a village where we knew each other.’

‘It was easy to understand the dynamic [of the other neighbourhoods] as they were directly parallel to ours.’

‘It was very good to get to know so much about the other neighbourhoods just based on their names!’

‘Our neighbourhood filled all my needs for play. I didn't play with the others, and didn't miss it. But I liked the concept that several neighbourhoods created a village.’

One player thought the designers could have communicated clearer that the neighbourhoods also had the same letter, and that each neighbourhood had a specific naming culture (Norse, Christian, Germanic) to make it easier to understand what neighbourhood a character was part of.

Several players said they would have liked time in the workshop to talk between the neighbourhoods, for instance for

the servants to talk together, or to form relationships.

Co-creation

Some players said it was challenging to organise themselves and would have appreciated help. They also acknowledged that they knew what they signed up for.

One player said they had a hard time fleshing out the character on their own, without the context and an understanding of the other characters and the whole drama, but that it got better after talking with the player who played their sibling. Others liked the balance between what they got from the designers, and what they had to create for themselves.

Same letter characters

When it comes to playing with their same letter characters, people had different approaches. One player was not disturbed by playing with them, but avoided going too deep into family dynamics. Another player avoided playing with the others of the same letter, because they were afraid it would be too silly. Others were very happy about playing with them.

‘I played [X] and had a lot of play with the other [X's]. It was fun to know they were in the same situation, were marrying their daughter off etc.’

‘I played a lot with the other [Z]'s. It felt good to get to develop the character on our own, so they felt different. [...] I think we would have benefitted if those of us who played the same character had gotten to talk about the similarities and differences between us in the workshop.’

Interview with the designers

Mimmi, Alma and Rosalind have worked together in different constellations. Mimmi and Alma made *Lindängen Riksinternat* (Sweden, 2013 Eng. *State Boarding School of Lindängen*), and Rosalind and Alma have made *Den utan synd* (Sweden, 2019. Eng. *The One Without Sin*) together with Siri Sandquist. All of them together have made *Snapphaneland* (Sweden, 2022) and *Trohetslöften* (Sweden, 2025). They like to explore themes like social realism, reality, common people, and historical questions.

When I talked to them about the design, they told me they had a very good time organizing *Snapphaneland* together, and wanted to do a new project with the same group. During a planning weekend for the rerun of *Snapphaneland*, they watched a TV-series on Swedish history, about weddings and military conscription in the 1600s, and got inspired to make *Trohetslöften*.

How did you come up with the idea of writing sets of character shells, instead of individual fully written characters?

We had floated some ideas for a different way of creating characters between us for a while, so when we got the idea for *Trohetslöften* we saw that this was a larp where we could experiment with our process for character writing. We had three sources of inspiration.

A larp in the larp

The first is the larp *Fortune and Felicity* (Sweden, 2017) that Mimmi and Rosalind designed characters for. *Fortune and Felicity* is a Jane Austen inspired Regency larp. The larp was for approximately 100 players,

divided into four groups. All relationships and groups were shaped within the group, and the other three groups / 75 players served as a backdrop, a larger community around the players’ native group. In this way, each player only had to learn who the people in their own group were, but had the possibility to play with the full larp.

We saw that this gave the benefit of both a small larp where you can have the overview of the characters paired with the benefits of a large larp where you can feel that your character is part of something bigger. We wanted to see if we could do something similar.

Workshop weekends in a digital format

The second source of inspiration is the sort of character creation we used to do in pre-larp workshops 10-15 years ago. When we made *Lindängen*, we had our players gather for a full weekend of workshop four weeks before the larp. In this workshop we led the players through a process where they co-created their own characters and their own groups.

We believe that this way of creating characters gives the players more ownership to their characters and the whole experience, and empowers them to take charge of their larp experience. They get a character they want to play, and they learn both their own character and those around them better.

We still believe that a good workshop process is needed to make sure everyone is in line with the vision and themes of the larp, and that the power balances work out. However, we didn't think that our players would commit to a workshop weekend

these days, and we had limited time for on-site workshops, and so we asked ourselves: ‘How can we get as much of these benefits as possible, without running a workshop weekend?’ We figured we would have to do it digitally, and then we asked ourselves what the players would need from us.

Character sheet as a questionnaire

The third source of inspiration was that Rosalind and Alma have experimented with making characters based off a questionnaire and a two-line character concept for *Perfect Match* (2023), but there the characters didn’t know each other. We were curious to see how we could make it work for a larp with pre-existing relations.

Did you save time and work creating the characters this way?

It probably took us longer to write the individual characters. In creating the characters as a mix of prewritten and questions for the players to fill out, we had to make a lot of decisions, like what questions should they answer, what should be in what part of the character or the family, who should decide what?

Since we have written two larps in a similar setting, we could probably have written these characters quite swiftly based on that previous experience. So, it took us at least as much time to write the characters in this format as it would have to just write them out. *But when we could multiply the sets of characters, instead of writing 15, 30, 45 more characters, that’s where we saved time.*

When we decided what needed to be pre-written by us and what could be answered by the players, we needed to take into account

whether the players had the competency to be able to answer the question in line with the historical setting or not. For instance, we had a couple of siblings who were born out of wedlock, and in the 17th century that was nowhere near as shameful as it became later. When writing historical larps, it can be tricky with the things that changed between the 17th and 19th century, as the 19th century has shaped more of what players think of as ‘the olden days’. The good thing was that we knew we would have a lot of players that had played our previous 17th century larps, so they already had a certain grip on the era.

So how did it work out?

We must say it went beyond our expectations. We were particularly happy with a few things. One was that the same letter characters could be a mirror to your own story. One player told us how impactful it was to see how one of the others chose a different fate than her. Several of the players also reported having very nice play with the other same letter characters.

Another strength the players pointed out was that they only needed to learn who the 15 characters in their neighbourhood were to be able to read the basic concepts and the dynamics of the rest of the larp. It made the village a living place with much less effort for the players.

The biggest benefit from our point of view is that the players felt more ownership of the larp. In the workshops between acts they took more and more charge of the process. Since there were only 15 people to coordinate and not all 45, they had a good overview and could take responsibility for the development.

The people playing the neighbourhoods also got to know each other well and knew each others’ stories. This created a strong community feeling among the players.

Were there any weaknesses with this design?

We should have thought about what we would do if we got dropouts and replacements after the family workshops, and communicated to the players how we wanted them to handle that. We should have decided whether the replacement would get any say in shaping the character and the family, or if they would just take over what the dropout had been part of planning.

We also knew that when we outsourced part of the character work to the players, they would engage with it to a varying degree. There was some frustration when the players couldn’t get hold of everyone in their family to have a meeting. At the same time, we clearly communicated on the website that the players organising themselves was a precondition for us to organise the larp.

What sort of larps do you think this process works well for?

We think this works well for larps where the players get a very unified story, where the characters are expected to experience very similar things, where you want to design for a streamlined experience.

It works well to spread out play on the main themes of the larp, here it was the wedding and conscription. In a regular larp there would probably be only one wedding.

Here there was one in each neighbourhood, which meant everyone was involved somehow.

A larp like this probably only works if you have a super clear vision. It must be evident to the players what the designers want to bring to life. We made a very clear homepage, and leaned on herd competency of players that had played our larps before.

On the other hand, the sets of reusable characters would not be right for a larp like *Den utan synd*. In that larp, what happens to the whole village is what is important, and for that reason the diversity in the ensemble is important.

Do you have any advice if people want to try this out?

Think through what happens when the players get this amount of responsibility. How important is it that they do specific things? How can you facilitate that?

Consider if you need to tweak it if you have less structure and longer playtime. Our act structure was very tight, with four acts played over 24 hours. The acts had clear structure and themes, and we workshopped in the act breaks. We don’t know how it would work for three days without act structure and common events. Maybe you then would have to design for more diverse play, to make it less evident that you had duplicates of characters.

Factor in that co-creation gives the player a weaker alibi than if the character had been fully written by the organisers. If you are making a larp where some or all of the characters need a strong alibi to do what

is expected of them, you might need to think even more about what you write in the characters and what they decide for themselves.

It was really important that we as workshop facilitators were coordinated, as we ran the onsite workshops mostly separately in the different neighbourhoods. If we had added a fourth and fifth neighbourhood, we would probably have included those workshop facilitators in the design of the workshops, to ensure that they were coordinated with us.

Finishing thoughts

The designers finished off our talk by saying that it would be really cool if it could inspire more people to not put more work into organising than needed. This is inspiration I take to heart.

For larps like *Till death do us part* (Palestine, 2012) and *1942 – Someone to trust?* (Norway, 2017), I have written ensembles of characters in a documentary fashion, with the goal of conveying knowledge and insight into the characters’ situation to the players. Each character represented an aspect of the history we wanted to tell, and together they made a whole.

But I doubt that anybody has read the 35 characters for *Till death do us part* or the 100 characters for *1942*, or even has an overview of them. If I write another documentary larp with the goal of conveying information to my players, it will probably be more effective to create a smaller set of characters, and then duplicate them inspired by the way Mimmi,

Rosalind and Alma did for *Trohetslöften*. And a lot less work.

“No criticism, just YES to more of this!”

(Player feedback)

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Crying Alone for the Invisible Audience

VR Roleplay Design and Traditions

Sophie Green

Beryl slumps to the floor, on her knees. Her hands ball up into fists and she starts to cry. She is alone in a small stone house. There are no other participants nearby. I am the only witness. I am invisible and silent. She does not know I am there.

Beryl is played by Rydog, and she is on her hands and knees, crying alone in her room. Crying into a Virtual Reality (VR) headset.

As Beryl she has just witnessed the death of her husband in a nightmare, acted out in a dreamlike landscape by the participant who plays as her husband. My role as the Game Manager (GM) is to use the tools we have in VR to teleport her from this dreamlike landscape to the floor next to her bed. To make it seem as if she has awoken from the nightmare.

I watch the scene play out, and my focus is on whatever missing context there might be. We can only feel so much in VR. It is my task to fill the void between what the player is experiencing and what is represented virtually. I decide that I cannot add to this in any meaningful way, and any interruption would take from the scene, disrupt the purity of the roleplay, and trample player agency. My actions should be additive to the scene. It is obvious to me that she is fully her character at this moment. I say nothing and act only as an invisible audience.

She stumbles out the door of her house. An icon appears in the bottom of my vision, alerting me that other participants have a query. Using my GM tools, I teleport to them. They want to know if the clothes they were attempting to dry are still wet. This is not something the virtual world can tell them, and it is my role as GM to establish

a common truth for the characters. For the next five hours, I will move from participant to participant, answering queries, delivering prompts and organizing story events for a cast of 40 participants. The role of GM is also the role of designer in Virtual Reality Roleplay (VR RP). As GMs we plan regular sessions, we set up and organise participants, and during live sessions we move between scenes touching the roleplay directly.

This article is an exploration of the traditions of VR RP design from the perspective of the GM through the lens of player agency. The practice of GMing is the process of design during a live session, through the use of prompts, queries and direction of support characters.

Player agency – a lens for design

Player agency in the VR RP tradition is more than the ability to influence the outcomes of plot. It is the space in which a player has sovereignty over their own roleplay. In traditional VR RP terms, this is the idea that players own their character, and that a GM should have very little input on how that character is played or depicted. Player agency is a boundary between player and GM that informs decisions on all levels of design; rules regarding avatars (costumes), playstyles, alibi, gameplay system mechanics, support character direction, direct GM prompts, the layout and functionality of virtual worlds, and more.

As the community matured rapidly in 2020 this concept gained importance due

to the rise of live streamed roleplay in VR. Players started earning a living streaming the point-of-view of their characters, and so ownership over those characters became guarded. In some cases, as players were spending long periods of time inhabiting their characters in repeated weekly sessions, they became closer to their characters than the GMs who set out the initial conditions of a character. In a space where a GM can quite literally become a voice in the head of a player during live roleplay, how much a GM could influence a character became a debate.

The dilemma is how can a designer create an experience for a player without the ability to influence the design of their character. We have developed norms for play that define what is acceptable for a designer to influence, and what parts of roleplay belong to the player. GMs are expected to never deliver emotions or thoughts directly to a player. It is considered unacceptable to tell a player how their character feels or thinks. A skilled GM will offer, as a prompt, a piece of context laden with emotional meaning that a player may accept based on their understanding of the character. This is played out within the mind of their character, under the agency of the player.

As a way to negotiate between the agency of a player and the designs of a GM, character sheets have been taken from tabletop traditions. These are used as a means to form a contract of play between GM and player. Tabletop game systems and videogame gameplay mechanics have been adapted for use within roleplay to confine, constrain, or guide the kind of roleplay that can be done. The difficulty for designers has been to ensure that any systems are additive

to the flow of roleplay and do not impede upon the boundary of a player's agency over their character.

Touch, taste, temperature, scent – GM practice

The main responsibility that a GM in VR RP has, is to be active and present during live sessions. GMs move invisibly between scenes and players, answering queries, delivering prompts, or directing Support Characters. GMs will work with support character participants, directing them to engage in some story driven event for the player characters. It's common for roleplay projects to use virtual tools that allow players to "summon a GM" to their location to ask a question. This is known as answering a ping or a query. GMs have special means of moving between players, either by directly teleporting to them or by using "noclip" which allows movement through objects and flight while in VR. When not being called on, the GM can deliver prompts to player characters engaged in scenes. This is a kind of narration that bears some resemblance to scene setting in tabletop traditions.

When delivering a prompt or answering a ping, GMs have the ability to break roleplay, to bring players out of character just by saying something. Usually a GM is just a disembodied voice. The goal is to be low impact and to flow with a scene to minimize disruption. Every interjection by a GM into a scene must be additive not subtractive.

The aim is to fill the void of context between what a player character is doing or experiencing and what is represented in VR. The GM must fill this void with context. In VR

we lack some basic senses and the GM can give context to those senses. Temperature, touch, and smell are all unrepresented. Sometimes a Player Character can infer each of these from visual or audio cues. Usually however, the GM must add to the reality of a scene. As a GM you establish the temperature, you describe the feeling of a thing physically and you influence the characters with the scent of a place or a thing.

Given that we must take care to not infringe upon the agency of a player, we should look to present the missing context in a way that does not directly carry with it the thoughts of how a character experiences the world. How a GM offers information matters; it can set a mood or indicate some narrative intent to the player. Here GMing becomes a task of poetry and staging to convey images, senses, and indirect emotional imagery via prompt or query response. Since we are invisible, our voice becomes the tool of action. Where we speak from, the tone, the volume – all these are parameters we have control over.

Every time a GM speaks to a character during roleplay, we incur a level of risk that we may end up being subtractive to a scene. For example, when being summoned via a ping, choosing where to position yourself and when exactly to speak to a player is part of trying to remain low impact. If I interrupt a player mid-sentence and speak to them from behind, they will turn, and be broken out of character. Knowing when not to speak is one of the most essential skills of a GM. Knowing where to speak from is just as valuable.

In a purist sense, roleplay must never be interrupted, and a scene should always

exist as the most pure version of reality. Disruption is to be avoided at all costs. However the community has found that a lack of context creates more confusion. If enough context is lacking the scene becomes a bland murkiness that creates a mental burden to track. If there is unclear context, a GM can set the reality of the situation for all participants to aid in the flow of roleplay. Thus prompts and responses to queries not only have to carry the emotional moment of a scene, they must fit effortlessly into the reality of a scene, so that no player is taken out of their character.

When not delivering prompts or answering queries, observation is important. It's the GMs responsibility to be the invisible audience for the player. Besides it being a privilege to get to witness the performance of art between roleplayers firsthand, there is a more pragmatic purpose to being this invisible audience. In order to best deliver plot or prompts we must know the characters of the players as if they are our own. How else can a GM know how a participant may react to the interjection of a prompt, if not by observing the roleplay and building a rapport through repeated interactions? We can make educated guesses about how well a prompt may land, or which kind of prompt will best aid the roleplay of that player, only if we have spent time seeing them play out the lives of their characters. We must respect the agency of a player to deeply define their character, and we then facilitate them through prompts and queries.

Here of course is the implicit argument that a GM is a dedicated role that is to be carried out during the full time of a live session. This is not a norm within the community, but has

become an emerging debate surrounding what it means to practice good GMing. Within some projects the lead organisers of the project will be both GM and player. This results in a kind of myopia from GMs who see the reality of the roleplay world through the eyes of their character.

We cannot ever be perfectly objective when it comes to where our focus is, but having characters as a GM creates a natural conflict of interest. The less time spent as a GM also further harms the experience of players as a GM will essentially build up a knowledge gap between what is merely pre-planned and what is actually happening and being experienced in session. “Part-time” GMing leads to worse outcomes for players, even when the best intentions of objectivity are kept in mind. In very poor cases, GMs will create scenarios that they themselves will be a participant in.

GMs who participate as players will lack the knowledge necessary for delivering subtle and impactful prompts. In order to serve the needs of a scenario or plot, prompts will be coarsely used to affect a story outcome, instead of being focused on the emotional impact it has to the other characters. Plot outcomes might still be varied with simple narrative levers, but the influence a player has over the outcome of a plot point is less important than the influence they have over the inner thoughts and emotions of how their character should feel about that outcome.

By not nurturing and enabling a rich ground for players to explore the emotional depth of their character, GMs essentially rob them of their roleplay experience. GMs should aim to facilitate and be a tool to aid the roleplay

of a player – not to direct their roleplay into narrow arborescent paths of narrative plot.

The third pillar of VR roleplay – supporting characters

Support Characters within VR RP are part of the main organization of how live sessions operate. It is exceptionally rare within the VR RP community for monsters or NPCs to be computer controlled. GMs will organise a team of Support Characters and give prepared roles to act out. This happens in much the same way as in other roleplaying traditions, however the ability for a GM to micromanage a support character is much greater. A GM can shadow a support character and speak directly only to them over a private voice channel, allowing for a high degree of micromanagement.

It is often imagined that Support Characters have no agency within roleplay. That they exist merely as tools for a GM to use as levers for the scenario. This traditional imagining of the role leads to poor roleplay outcomes. GMs should allow for players to “touch” a support character, even if that means the support character will not fulfill their narrative objective. This may be an emotional impact that a player has on the support character to act in a way counter to the direction of the GM. Forcing an emotional response that disregards the influence of the player, for the sake of some story objective, tramples the agency of that player.

In order to preserve the truth of a scene, some agency must be given over to the support character, and there must be some

trust that they as a roleplayer can react with emotional honesty to the actions of player characters. As GMs we are more detached from the reality of a scene than those within the magic circle. Support Characters are closer to the truth of the roleplay. This is the agency owed by the GM to the support character, in order to create a more real experience. We usually imagine this as respecting the purity of the roleplay – that what happens inside the magic circle is a kind of sacrosanct truth that can only be “retconned” in the most exceptional of cases.

Without Support Characters, very little of a world can be made to react or come alive by a GM. It’s strange then, that such a crucial role within the community is so undervalued. Many different terms exist for this same role. Sometimes referred to as extras, non-player characters (NPCs), assistant player characters (APCs), and more. It has become fashionable for projects to come up with new terms for this role as a way of continuing to attract participants, or to signal some faux improvement in the treatment of those relegated to this underclass. In VR RP there are no meaningful differences between “NPC” and “Support Character”.

The community maintains a caste system whereby those better connected socially, or those who have some success and popularity as a live streamer can more easily participate as player characters. They enjoy the privileges of player agency. There persists a myth of “earning” or “working your way up” from Support Character to player character. This myth drives much of the participation of those who are Support Characters, despite the common

mistreatment and exploitation of people’s time and energy.

Some projects have, in order to retain participants or out of a sense of fairness, allowed Support Character participants to create semi-permanent characters to play during roleplay in minor roles. This lets designers fill out the virtual world with background characters, and creates a way for Support Characters to roleplay when not needed for specific story events. Participants in these roles often find themselves in a grey area between full player character and Support Character. They will often be treated by some player character participants as fully realised characters, but be ignored by the GMs and other players as background. This dissonance can create a kind of disruption in the roleplay as participants can easily sense when some characters are not being treated as real people by the scenario. In worse cases players become unhappy that a character they would otherwise wish to speak to or have a scene with, is whisked away to become a monster at the whim of a GM who is out of touch with the needs of their participants.

There have been slow changes that challenge this tradition, where the focus of a project shifts from the needs of all player characters, to the needs of all participants. Some projects have changed their structure such that the role of Support Character becomes shared among all participants, erasing the boundary between player and non-player. The shift from viewing only those who are player characters to seeing all who participate as being deserving of the attention of the designers has become a litmus test for good design within the community.

Excuses about time, GM availability, or skill have been raised as part of a pushback against this equitable treatment. In some cases the unfair treatment is seen as desirable, as participants should “earn” their status as player characters. In other cases the issue of trust is raised as a spectre of concern. Roleplay projects whose priority is on a live streaming audience, will ensure that any support character role of importance is played by a GM, as the quality of the live stream is paramount to all other concerns.

Designing for player agency

In order to mature to the point where development and design of new VR RP projects can be codified and built upon, design theory needs to also mature past simply repeating the traditions of the community. Many new projects will thoughtlessly copy or reproduce the same kind of design traditions and result in the same poor design. Player agency can be used as a guide to find the best outcomes for roleplay. If a project elevates all participants as being worthy of equal consideration, then the benefit manifests in more real worlds, and more satisfying outcomes for players.

For GMs this essentially means that designing for player agency raises the quality of roleplay. It is giving agency not just to the participant themselves, but to the result of the truthful emotional reactions in scenes. Actions only have real consequences if a player feels those consequences in the mind of their character. For a choice to matter, it must matter on an inner emotional level,

not just as a branching path of plot. This can only come from the player themselves, and we as GMs should facilitate that.

Player agency as a design lens within the VR RP community can provide a foundation for improvements in how we structure and run projects. It can act as a guide for how to act in session as a GM.

For the player Rydog coming out of her nightmare as Beryl, crying on the floor, my role as GM was not to tell them they were in distress. If I did, it would be more than simply not giving them a choice, but stealing the actual roleplay of their scene. They themselves are the agent of what their character felt and lived within that moment. The choice to observe and not “touch” the scene as it played out gives it greater meaning. We as GMs should be there, as the invisible audience, to experience the emotion of the character so that when the time comes for a prompt or a query, we can engage at the same emotional place as the player, and deliver a more honest and truthful reality.



A Crowded Field

Squeezing Larp into “Immersive” Entertainment

Evan Torner

“The English profs keep sweeping our work under the rug, but that rug is about three feet off the floor by now, and things are coming out from under it and eating the English profs.”

–Ursula K. Le Guin (1989)

Anger and impatience, while not necessarily positive traits, are frequently my impetus to write. In this case, they came from a session at our own Playable Theatre Symposium 2025, an online event that our non-profit organization holds with the games festival IndieCade. Two individuals representing the Association of Interactive Performance Professionals (AIPP) held a town-hall meeting about their own organization, which aims to “serve creators of all forms of interactive performance by providing a forum where you can share, learn, celebrate, and collaborate in the creation of impactful interactive performance experiences” (2025). As a lifelong larper, I felt included in that group. Twice during the meeting, however, I felt notably shut down. One moment, we were asked about our motivations for why we did interactive performance, to which I responded with my interview line from the forthcoming documentary *Halcyon Daze: The Final Voyages of Disney’s Star Wars Galactic Starcruiser*. We larpers are frequently the sorts of people who auditioned for high-school theatre but never got the part, who were never seen as attractive enough to perform for others. During a readthrough of the chat, however, the two AIPP reps read every comment aloud *except* for mine. I indulged their oversight. However, in another moment – this one provoked

by my curiosity about the earlier moment – I attempted to include “larping” in the catalogue of different forms of interactive performance and, once again, it was conspicuously left out on the main channel. Since the two AIPP reps didn’t know me from anybody, I had to assume there was some underlying ideological force behind their omissions: *Whatever anyone says, we are not larpers, and what we do as “interactive performers” is not larping*. Despite the laudable work of playable theatre (Torner 2025) figures such as *Starcruiser* alumnus Caro Murphy (2024) trying to pull us all closer together, standard immersive practitioners appear to hate larp. My conclusion from this exchange was that “immersive media” may be built on the adult pretend play that we call “larping,” but these foundations must apparently be disavowed when the interactive performer comes near attention or money. Larp attracts the wrong kind of attention and never truly makes money. Labour and professional organizations apparently require these matters of *play* to be taken seriously.

An apocryphal story told by Aaron Vanek about a more direct situation is perhaps useful, too. The first-ever Larpy Awards, hosted by the North American larp company NERO, were held on April 30, 2006 at the Avalon in Hollywood, California, and featured celebrities such as singer Debbie Gibson and baseball player José Canseco. The story goes that Canseco, who was universally known for his home runs, was standing at the bar during the Larpy Awards, when a gamer in a cape approached him with their boffer sword. “Will you autograph this?” the gamer asked. “Fuck off, nerd!” was Canseco’s reply.

Larp as a medium is a powerful basis for immersive entertainment, but also apparently necessitates mockery by established performers and omission from professional organizations that supposedly represent this precise activity. “Interactive performance professionals” are paid larpers, much like our time-honored-but-unpaid NPCs. But for every Laurie Penny (2025) who openly embraces their larp engagement, there are hundreds of Cansecos ready to preserve their social capital *against* larp through insults and abuse, if not also through tactical exclusion. We larpers are the *abject*, that which must be expelled in order for the norm to continue (Kristeva 1982). We are summoned from our dark corners when creative pretend-players are needed, only to be dispelled or disavowed at the earliest possible opportunity. Larping cannot assume the same status as, say, knitting or filmmaking, even when it already has taken over most of its participants’ remaining hobby capacity.

Admittedly, we larpers are accustomed to this, and it also sucks. Now that immersive media are professionalizing, the adult pretend play at the heart of larping is considered the “raw” material to then be “mined” by specific commercial immersive forms: the escape room, the themed dinner, the cruise, the crowdfunded role-playing game, the participatory virtual-reality theater performance. It’s not so much a progression of “first they started larping, and they went on to *immersive media*,” but rather that larp is the *primary*, “embarrassing” form of play that then must be repackaged into a more alibi-savvy form: “This is an immersive dinner in which your choices matter!” “This is a participatory ritual experience with game

elements.” Euphemisms abound, despite the earlier insistence of Claus Raasted (2015) and others that we maintain the word “larp” despite all challenges posed by the use of that term. A larper holds the skeleton key to all of the commercial forms, and they are frequently *better at* adapting to their affordances and constraints than non-larper audiences. Whatever positive international media coverage that larping has experienced, however, its stigma remains, and is now reinforced by a new generation of creators who see it as *precisely* the bad object from which they must distance themselves.

Turning to philosophy for answers, I find Friedrich Nietzsche’s (2008) 1872 essay *The Birth of Tragedy* offers me two ideal types with which to discuss this matter further: the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Nietzsche inherited these two categories from ancient Greek author Lucretius, interpreting Apollo’s art as the clear-eyed language of *dreams* and *prophecy* and Dionysus’s art as that of *intoxication* and *delusion*. These categories, however, are also connected with health, with Apollonian forces representing ruddiness and beauty and Dionysian forces representing sickness and homeliness. Apollonian arts are clearly formed such as sculpture and epic poetry; Dionysian arts are folk arts such as music, dance, and child’s play. These two mysterious poles nevertheless help us parse out how larp and immersive entertainment interact with one another.

Let’s use a concrete illustration of the principle: larp photography. In my youth in the 1990s and early 2000s, photographs of larpers were firmly in the “Dionysian” category. Photos of larp were discouraged,

because we were participating in the exact pastime that had caused the Satanic Panic and thus did not merit thorough documentation; we were, in a word, afraid. Particularly *Vampire: the Masquerade* (1993) larps were intended to be secret, private, and semi-illicit. As a result, photographs from that era are the kinds of informal, blurry affairs that one would expect of the practice and technology of the time. Indeed, when Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros (2010) assembled the magisterial *Nordic Larp* book 15 years ago, they consciously leaned into this informal photo culture and forbade “glamour shots” from inclusion in the collection. Grainy photos of larpers in costumes or on location predominate in that work. However, with the (intertwined) advent of high-definition, Internet-shareable photos and the semi-normalization of larp as a hobby, glamour shots are so common as to even require integrating them into a standard blockbuster larp schedule. Such work, in which players and characters are looking their best, is both amazing as well as thoroughly Apollonian: the larp becomes a theater rehearsal, a film set, or a photography studio, with the intention of capturing the healthy and symmetrical, even amidst the tragedy and horror found in some larps. It is a compliment to this generation of larp photographers that they have managed to entirely re-frame a medium, for the better.

However, polished photography also plays a role in expelling the Dionysian from the hobby. Make-up intended to last a day of rough emotional and physical activity in-character is categorically different from that which best highlights facial features for high-definition photography. Worse still, larpers who incorporate streaming

or recorded video into their own branded social-media production *separate* from the official media presence of the larp will effectively generate their own miniature film set and crew within (often blockbuster) larp productions. Players with disabilities, non-normative body profiles, and non-camera-ready appearances have felt expelled from the selective framing of an event. As Karijn van der Heij (2021) writes: “If all photographs from previous runs that are picked for the website only show conventionally attractive participants, the idea that the larp is mainly meant for them will settle in the minds of the participants and make the larp harder for those that do not look like that.” Apollonian documentation – the kind that only sees the conventionally attractive – dignifies and sells the hobby and medium to the wider world, but at the cost of the Dionysian freedom to simply *be oneself, as one is, in-character*. The hodge-podge costumes and nondescript fields one witnesses, say, in the 1980s UK *Treasure Trap* (1982) documentation are increasingly replaced with coordinated uniforms, photogenic locations, and camerafriendly playstyles reminiscent of theatre.

“Immersive” performance, with all of its larp-adjacent terms and forms – playable theatre, participatory theatre, live-action experiences, high-intensity facilitated experiences, highly interactive theatre experiences, and so forth – unintentionally undermines the subcultural either to earn cred either in *bourgeois* art circles or in mainstream commercial circles, aspiring to a “mythical norm” (Kemper 2018) that does not necessarily swell our ranks with new larp practitioners. For example, I was interviewed by executive producer Carly Kocurek as part of *Halcyon Daze*

when she (correctly) assumed that the *Galactic Starcruiser* experience was a larp in disguise. One point I emphasized in our conversations was that without the modern subcultural structures of larp regarding post-larp drop, workshops, and debriefing, the *Starcruiser* fans did not have helpful tools to cope with the waves of emotion they were feeling after the event. While there are now larps being run at HalcyCon, the annual *Starcruiser* fan event in Orlando, Florida, it still has not occurred to most participants that they were, in retrospect, larping. On the other hand, there is also the opposite: larp without larping. OMSK Social Club in Berlin hosted a May 2018 “Crypto Rave” event that was explicitly advertised as a larp, essentially a party that had an optional workshop in advance of the event. I received the character “Cyprian Toke, the crypto soothsayer,” and was treated as part of the “larp element” of the party. We even received rudimentary safety tools in email communication, although it was still unclear what we would be *doing* in the game. It was only after I had arrived in costume that I realized what had happened: us larpers had been summoned in to spice up what would have been otherwise a normal Berlin EDM party. I never found the game, any of the other players, or anything in which my pre-game preparations would’ve been relevant. The Dionysian club game transformed into the typical Apollonian space to see and be seen. In the *Starcruiser* example, the fact that the participants did not know this high-budget immersive experience was effectively a larp may have inhibited their ability to understand the experience and connect it to broader subcultural design norms, something the *Halcyon Daze* documentary team seeks to correct in retrospect. In the OMSK Social

Club example, the larp subculture was used to lure a target audience to an event that had little to do with the medium or subculture.

Murphy, Raasted, Montola, and Stenros have joined Celia Pearce, Lizzie Stark, Johanna Koljonen, Adrian Hon, and myself, among others, who have tried to normalize larp as a folk artform and legitimate practice in the public sphere. However, it is safe to say that we haven’t properly apprehended what the public sphere *does* to larp, especially when we cheat outward (in the theatre sense) to an audience that may turn on us and bully us at any moment, that will use us for marketing, for play infrastructure, and for ideas amidst a larger machine that only affords money and attention for itself.

In brief, I want larp to have a more dignified existence, in which it is valued, celebrated, and even archived. However, I want it to avoid the kind of commercialization and visibility that costs its essence, when there are no longer on-ramps for the ugly, the private, the neuro-atypical, the disabled, and the poor. Adult pretend play can be done by anyone, anywhere. To watch the Apollonian exclude the Dionysian is not only painful, but it also mirrors what we feel when we watch our neighborhoods gentrify, our jobs get replaced, and our legacies vanish. My anger and impatience come from a place of love: larp offers the world so much, and it must continue to exist for its own sake, preferably in harmony with so many other forms of human expression. “Immersive” and larp are not only mutuals, but they both thrive on each others’ contributions.

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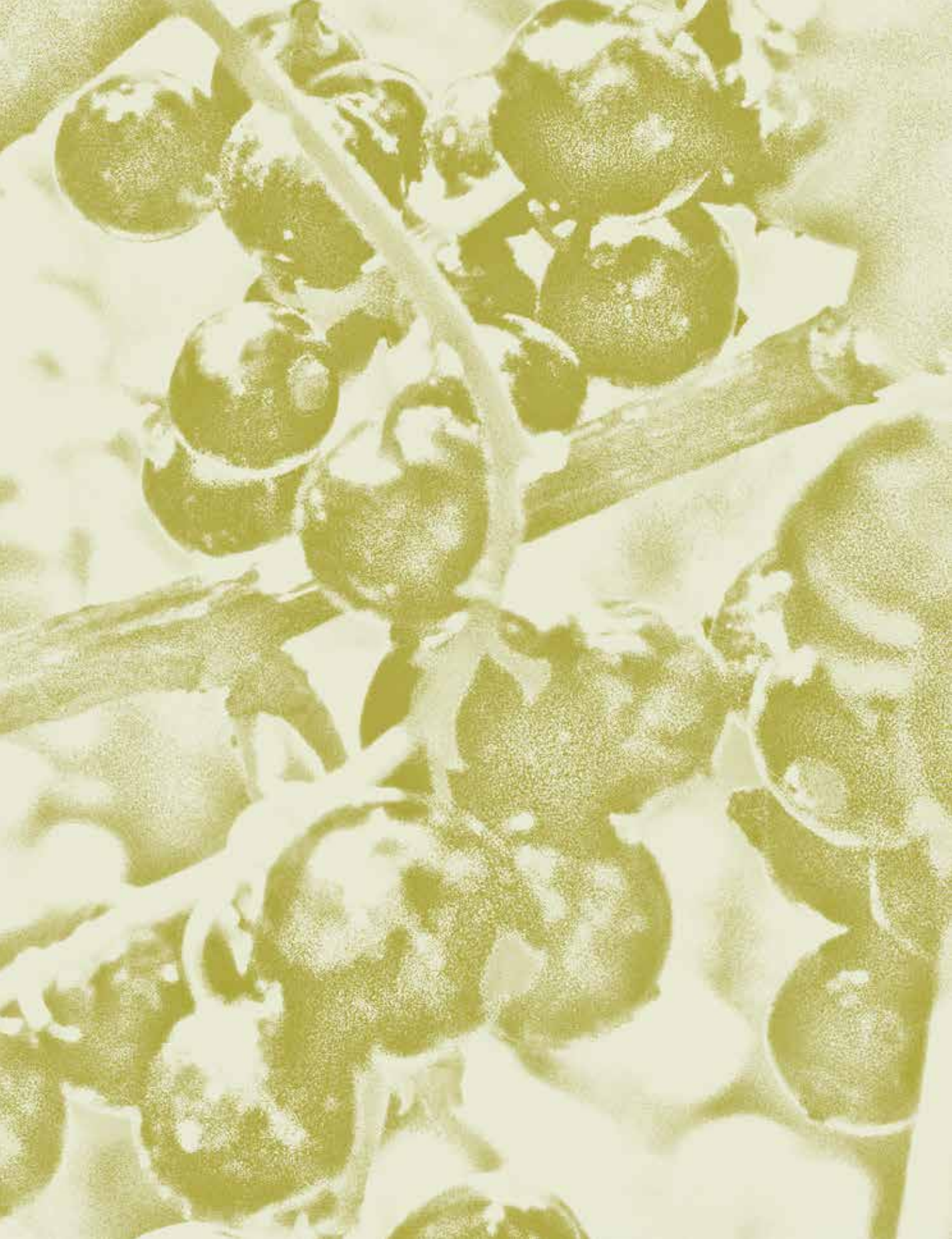
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The Magic Circle

How Larp Gives Power to Queer Larpers

Lyssa Greywood

I remember the first time I stood in a ritual circle at a larp. It was a ritual for an old friend (he/him), who asked me to lead a performance that would consolidate his two lesser magic skills into greater magic, giving him the ability to cast stronger elemental magic spells than he could at the time. A transformative rite, yet only my second event as my new character, and I still felt haunted by the other character I had left behind. I remember the anxiety and the fear, the way my hands shook as I made my first attempt at leading other larpers through this magical process that was so inherent to our world. The burden of this ritual was mine alone, and though my mentor was nearby, it was a pressure I had not felt during a game for some time.

Still, beyond the panic, beyond the notes I grasped between my hands and the twine I spooled between participants, I recall a moment – just one moment – when something snapped into place in my mind, and I wasn't afraid anymore. This power that my contributors and I wielded that evening – breathing magic into the air like rain – cleansed the space before the fire we cast, burnt the old, and allowed a phoenix to rise from the ashes.

Tell me – if not this magical circle of our game space, which welcomes change like the rising and falling tides – what other part of these games we play is such a perfect piece of symbolism for changing oneself? For *becoming*? We queer larpers often live our lives in half-truths and shadows, waiting for the sun to shine on us, waiting for the moment we can step into the circle and say, “*Oh, there you are – there I am.*” I am nothing if not a poet with the hands of one who so endlessly spins words into

rhythm and rhyme, calling down the pieces of a puzzle to fit into place as I wish them. My preferred role out here in the real world is no different from the role I choose for myself in the games I attend: a wielder of words interlaced with intention. This is the heart of me, and I have threaded myself into three separate game spaces in the same way, speaking in riddles that resonate and casting magic to change myself, to change others, to reflect what truly is and what should have always been.

And yet, my queerness does not separate me from the other ritualists that I work with or the ones that know my name or my face from other factions, heritages, or groups in the same game space. Instead, my queerness individualises me. In being myself, in being loud about who I am, who I love, and how others should perceive me, I create a magic circle of my own. A space where those who accept – those who respect – see me as I am and can, in turn, be seen as who they are.

A circle of acceptance. One where your identity is more than a performance; it is fact, sown into the cosmos among the very stars.

Instead of the magic circle that is larp, or the magic circle that is ritual, the space provided to queer players is a patchwork of individual circles, each shining a light on a person's true self as they deem it to be. Though the waters of an individual's circle may be shrouded, in my experience, there is always more than one thread of truth in a player's circle when they are timed-in to a game. In these spaces where identity carries forth so many people, through imaginary (yet real) battles, bloodshed,

heartbreak, loss, and yes, even love, there is little time to pretend to hide yourself. Be of the shadows, be a rogue, an assassin, be a sketchy character who hoards secrets, but be welcome to wear yourself proudly! Be welcome to pin your pronouns to your clothes, to hold hands with those you love, to kiss and marry hordes of other players in a celebration of merriment and adoration. Be welcome to walk around the fires with each other and see nothing but smiles from strangers and friends in attendance.

However, larp is not some magical exception where there is no homophobia or bigotry. There are those who will question your gender identity, your sexuality, and those who “do not understand” using singular they/them as pronouns, despite their use in the English language since at least 1375 – where its use in the English retelling of *The Romance of William and Werewolf* or *William of Palerne* is believed to be the earliest written account of “they” as a singular pronoun in English (Baron, 2018). Or, at least, the earliest surviving account to date.

Despite this, love, and be loved. Know that no matter what trials you may face, more larpers will stand with you than those who are against or confused by you. That no matter who disrespects who you are, they are unwelcome in these spaces. There are people who will take up arms for you; your friends, your group, your faction... The people who know and adore you. When the day comes that you can only whisper in protest, watch the roar that happens when others find out you've been disrespected. Watch the queer larpers and the allies band together, and see the magic circle shine bright.

How larps and larpers can empower a queer circle

It's unfortunate that I have to write this, but there is no ultimate safe space in the world where queer people can be themselves without any worry. However, from my nearly seven years of experience playing in the UK larp scene, you can find a kind of safety and acceptance in the larp community that you may be lacking in your personal life or that you may not get to experience when out in society. There are larps where wearing pronoun badges is encouraged, and this is a step forward in respecting the identities of those around you because all it requires is a quick glance at someone's bag strap, lapel, shoulder, or wherever they have it pinned. A wonderful example of a larp that encourages the wearing of pronoun badges by all players (in order to normalise their use) is Wilde Realms (UK, 2022), a UK dark fantasy larp system with an abundance of queer game team, crew members, and players. It's a smaller larp, with an average of 60 to 70 players per game (Wilde Realms, 2025) and four games a year, but the community they've built there is the safest and most seen I have ever felt. And that feeling comes with you back to the real world because the people you meet there continue those connections. I have never felt as welcome to sit with and talk to so many groups of people at an event as I do when I'm playing at Wilde Realms. It may not have been the larp where I had my first experience of empowerment in a magic circle, but it has certainly become the place that I most associate with feeling whole in relation to my identity.

Wilde Realms has a zero-tolerance policy for

bigotry, which is stated outright during the pre-game briefing at every event and has been in place since its conception in 2022. Although my first larp system was *Curious Pastimes*, a much larger UK fest-style larp, I witnessed *Wilde Realms* be one of the larps in the UK that are leading the call for the inclusion and use of pronoun badges from an organisational team to their players, while at *Curious Pastimes* and several other larp systems, pronoun badges were, and still are, a player-led commodity. The use and normalisation of pronoun badges is so important to *Wilde Realms* because they recognise the need for them to assist in the creation of a space of respect and understanding in larp. Take, for example, rule 5 in *Wilde Realms's* Rules of Play:

“5. Respecting gender identity and pronouns

a. Respecting identity, including using the correct name and pronouns for the people around you, are mandatory, in accordance with our Code of Conduct. This will be reinforced with pronoun checks at briefing, and provision of complementary pronoun badges (where stocks allow). Intentional breaches of rule 5 will result in expulsion. Accidental breaches of rule 5, and accompanied corrections, should be handled with grace and good intent. Please refer to the Code of Conduct for further guidance. If you are experiencing trouble with another attendee in relation to rule 5, please speak to a member of the game team and we will step in discreetly on your behalf, in accordance with our safeguarding policy.”

(*Wilde Realms*, 2025)

A new magic circle

I specifically mentioned my tie to *three* larps earlier. The third is *Descendants* (UK, 2026), and it was born from my love of larp, the space it creates, and my need for the queer community to have more safe and accessible spaces. I wanted to prove, with the research and arguments in my thesis and the larp that reflected it, that this pastime we all share is more than just a hobby; that it creates pockets of acceptance away from the fires that keep razing parts of our world back in “real life”. These spaces – these magic, inclusive circles – are more important now than ever. As parts of society deem to paint queer and trans people with a brush of lies, allowing our community to – once more – be *othered*, and follow the decline of progress back to a time that no queer person wants to remember, we must stand together. We, the LGBTQIA+ community, with all of our rainbow of colours, and our allies who stand with us. It is by speaking out that we are heard. Yes, but it is also in the moments between – the moments that we create through our online communities, through our larps, and through the connections we make – that we can continue standing.

Descendants utilises an inclusivity and accessibility toolkit I created and tested through my larp. Some of the points in the toolkit include:

- 1 The first rule of play outlines the importance of respecting everyone in the gamespace, with express mention of respecting identity.
- 2 The use of pronoun badges (which are supplied by the event team, as opposed

to players feeling that they need to provide them for themselves).

- 3 The availability of various sizes of mixed all-gender bedroom spaces that players can opt into for larps with accommodation, as well as the addition of a fem-identifying/fem-aligned room specifically for players who wouldn't be comfortable rooming with everyone (this being “fem” as shorthand for “female”, not “fem” for “femme/feminine”), and a ground floor bedroom for players with accessibility needs.
- 4 The use of non-verbal hand signs for check-ins and opt-outs during roleplay.
- 5 Complete openness for the identity of all player, crew, and game team characters with respect to gender identity, gender expression, sexuality, and pronouns.
- 6 An explicit rule regarding getting consent before touching another player or engaging in roleplay that may be highly emotional or triggering.

At *Descendants*, you are who you say you are, and your character is who you want them to be, and I am incredibly proud of my game team, crew, and my players for ensuring that our little community of full-fae and half-fae is so open and accepting.

Long live the (Un)Seelie Queen.

Starting small is still starting

I've mentioned pronoun badges a few times now, but they aren't a tool only used in larp. The queer community has used them for years, and the more people adopt

their use inside and outside of larps, the better. It, like the use of any pride flag or pride-flag-coloured apparel, is a symbol of safety for those of the queer/LGBTQIA+ community – and adding these small pins onto your clothing, your bag, or wearing a rainbow around your wrist are all ways you can convey without words that you are a safe person, whether you're queer or not. A close friend of mine (he/him), who happens to be cisgender and heterosexual, wears a pronoun badge at larps and has one affixed to his bag that he takes with him to work. He does this purely to support his queer friends and show that he's a safe person to the queer people around him, and I cannot thank him enough for this action. To him, it's probably a small thing, but to me, and to other people in the queer community, it's incredibly meaningful.

My dear friend spends a lot of his time surrounded by queer people at larps. At *Wilde Realms*, especially, there's quite a number of us for such a small larp – but when you create a space run by queer larpers, queer larpers will flock to it. And when you're a safe person with queer companions, other queer players will, ultimately, feel safe around you. Inadvertently, just by being himself and supporting his friends, he's created his own magic circle like the ones I mentioned earlier. A place where he can be himself and explore his identity, and we are free to be ourselves and explore ours with only love and acceptance. There has never been a moment in our friendship where I've ever felt the need to defend my choices or my identity to him, and when I have needed someone to confide in, he's been all too happy to sit with me and talk, because to him, my queerness does not separate us, it's just another part of the me that he loves.

When I think of love and acceptance, I think of the friends I have made at larps, and the magic circles we have created between us. I think of my queer platonic partner (they/them), who has been my wife, sibling, and twin as different characters we’ve played because the love we share for each other allows us to circumnavigate all of our identities without concern for what others think they see between us. I think of the wedding ring their character presented to mine at Beltane in 2025 during the first *Curious Pastimes* event of the year, and the bracelet my character gave to theirs at *Wilde Realms* (where we are siblings instead of partners) in the same year.

I think of my group of Owls that I created at *Wilde Realms*, which is strong with queer-identifying people and allies. I think of all of the pronoun badges I see on players, monsters, and NPCs at *Wilde Realms* and how they always run out of she/they badges. I think of the people that purposefully refer to me as “they” because they know that I appreciate the effort and the acknowledgement of my non-binary identity, even though my pronouns are ordered “she/they” because I still try to make myself smaller in the world even as I shout for the right for my people to be and love who they want to.

I see the friends that I have made at larps who step into the magic circle with me and trust me to lead rituals that transform them. I see the magic we create, and I cannot help but feel hope for the future, even when the world is on fire; even when *our* world is on fire.

I have to remember, much like my first ritual, that phoenixes burn. But they come back stronger.

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Ludography

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Approaching the Sacred in Larp

Kes Ward
Mish Liddle

We are a Pagan and a Quaker, with a sense of the religious, who are happy to approach and explore that within larp. We both collaborated on *Nine Candles LARP* (UK, 2025) (inspired by the TTRPG *Ten Candles*), and previously have written/organised other larps that have made use of religious or sacred elements.

In this article we will consider the means by which one can evoke the sacred within the format of larp, and use it to craft a transformative experience in play. We'll look at some general techniques, how they are represented through some specific religious traditions, and some of the results of the past use of the sacred in larps we have run.

Within our games we have used the tools of religion to create spaces, both physical and psychological, in order to feel, process, and transform. By tools of religion we mean: the following of the timings of Christian hours,¹ repetitive phrases used in specific circumstances, or the use of the Quaker 'being moved to speak'² within a silent group. These all give what larpers might recognise as alibi, but are specifically used as alibi within a religious context. So including the tools of religion in the larp design allows players to engage spiritually as well as emotionally, even if they don't engage with the underlying meaning of the rituals.

We will concentrate on three techniques:

- The use of borders and boundaries around the sacred as a means to quieten the sounds of everyday life upon approach – On Borders and Boundaries

¹ See also <https://www.nordiclarp.org/2025/07/31/christianity-is-an-immersion-closet/>

² <https://qfp.quaker.org.uk/passage/2-12/>

- Sacredness as an individual openness to transformation through direct engagement with concepts taboo in unsacred life – On Children and Death
- Sacredness as captured in a defined tradition and ritual that connects one to a wider community of ritualists – Adherents on the Organising Team

On borders and boundaries

In order to create the possibility of a numinous experience within a larp, the players need to be open to it. To have this openness, the players need to feel safe both within the game space, and in the special space created for the religious elements. When we use the term special space, this can include an actual physical space or a delineated time. Some games, where the whole setting is the religious space, can rely on pre-game workshops or detailed descriptions of the expectations for the setting³ to create a sense of safety. In a more historical setting these might be a plethora of documents on expectations of social norms, gender roles, etc. especially when they explicitly differ from modern expectations. For example, the word of a Christian Man in a trial may be deemed more reliable than a non-Christian Woman.⁴ Other documents encourage practising recitations before the larp – so that your character might use them in game – or spend time considering in advance what the words mean to your character.

³ Such as a dedicated section on the larp's website, e.g. https://www.profounddecisions.co.uk/empire-wiki/The_Way

⁴ Circa Regna Tona (UK, 2016-2020) <https://shunnedhouse.co.uk/circa-regna-tonat/>



Photo: Kes Ward

If you have sacred and secular places within the game, you need to establish where and what the boundaries are. Boundaries define the space (physical or temporal) in which you are able to explore the numinous: The lighting and snuffing of candles, the starting and ending of some music, a physically designated space between standing stones, or indeed the room of a chapel, can all be used this way.

Many games with religion as a central theme make use of music, sounds, and singing or chanting as a cheap and simple way to do this. The music creates a feeling of community when a group is singing together and gives the player a sense of safety within the group to play. It also gives simple access to a sense of the sacred,

depending on the choice of music and what expectations this evokes. Repeating words and actions together can instil a sense of communal understanding which is easy to use for larp religious purposes. That in turn allows the player to step outside of their everyday life. A⁵ number⁶ of⁷ larps⁸ set in religious communities have done this, and it is likely the reader will be familiar with at least one.

Quaker theology tends to reject the use of sound (or, more accurately, to encourage

⁵ *Wise Women* (UK, 2025) <https://rhiannonsp.wixsite.com/website>

⁶ *Our Lady of Absolution* (UK, 2015) <https://aeonhorror.com/2015/05/15/our-lady-of-absolution/>

⁷ *Redemption* (Finland, 2021, 2024) <https://nordicrpg.fi/redemption/> | <https://nordicrpg.fi/redemption/>

⁸ *Alma Mater* (UK, 2023) <https://www.almamaterlarp.com/>

the use of silence) for the forging of a border around sacred space. We tried to reflect this in our larp techniques. In *Nine Candles*, we asked the player characters to recruit the NPCs from the playerbase for each scene, as characters who needed to hold a silent vigil for those who ventured out into the darkness (while the player took on NPC roles for the black-box scene). Players would sit in silence for a while, then leave the room to play their NPC role. When they were done, they would come back to the room and sit in silence until they were rejoined by the players who had recruited them. The use of NPC roles to support the forging of spiritual connections between characters gives a sense of witness and upholding to the choices faced by the characters within the sacred space, akin to the Quaker sense of “holding in the light” - that communal silent witness may hold a person closer to the experience of the divine possible within themselves. Players commented that it forged connections between the characters that were then possible to play out further on in the larp.

On children and death

Larp is for some of us a way to experience emotions and situations in a space separate from normal life. Depending on your definitions I (Mish) play to bleed in that I play to feel within the space created by the larp and I wish to allow others the chance to do the same.

At a player event set in *Profound Decisions' Empire (UK, 2013-)* game I set up a small sacred area of “swampland” (if you want to know why swampland you’ll need to read

up on the in game religion).⁹ One of the players, a kid, headed over appreciating the calm of the space and curiously looking at all the props. Immediately her Mum bustled over to ask what the little side alcove had been set up for and as soon as I explained that it was a place to think about the dead she tried to shoo her child out, saying “Oh no, you can’t be here, it’s sacred.” I said that it was fine and that children should be present where the dead are (I won’t get into the in-game nuance of why my character thinks that or if it’s correct in game as that’s not relevant here) to me that illustrated a difference between perceiving religion as a performance or as a practice. In the UK we’re very used to a secular society in which the majority religion’s places of worship cross over with museums and galleries of the type that the artefacts are displayed to be looked at but not used, to be known about in a scholarly manner but not experienced. If you don’t practice a religion then it seems very likely that you appreciate it only as a performance or something to be looked at.

Though the art world (encompassing music, visual arts, theatre et al) has seen an increase in interactive and installed works over the past thirty-plus years, a large majority of mainstream art relies on the passivity of the viewer and the agency of the artist(s). In larp we have an interesting opportunity for this not to be the case, being based upon the interplay between creators of varying agency rather than a traditional viewer/artist relationship. As a religious person I find the response of atheists to feeling and existing with a setting that allows them to feel an experience of numinosity utterly

⁹ See: https://www.profounddecisions.co.uk/empire-wiki/Wintermark_culture_and_customs#Funerals

fascinating, as I view religion as something to be lived within in my everyday life. Obviously to me, in a lived religion children should be allowed to access sacred places, albeit you may need to give them rules that wouldn’t exist outside of a fantasy setting: no summoning circles here, little necromancer.

Could we mis-step and offend? Absolutely: but when the possibility exists for creating understanding through an experience that would not be offered in one’s everyday life, then it seems worth that possibility.

With a similar conclusion, I (Kes) come to this from a very different theological angle. I have had several raised eyebrows and queries of “really?” when insisting that players of my larps at Pardshaw Quaker Centre are entirely allowed to camp in the burial ground. This is despite its active use for the interment of bodies. Quaker burial

grounds reject the idea of sacredness of place – or rather, reject the idea that any place is *less* sacred that might be implied by the establishment of a place as *more*. If it’s inoffensive to the divine to camp anywhere on this earth, it’s inoffensive to camp in a Quaker graveyard. To Quakers, young adults are considered within the “youth” category, and larp could be considered somewhat equivalent to children’s play – a means by which the inexperienced fumble and learn to engage with deep concepts. I concur with the fact that many people now engage with religion primarily through the means of heritage, museum, and gallery – something carefully curated for mass viewing but also othered away from a living practice towards a dead thing preserved behind glass. No touching! This is in my view a crying shame, because all ash was once fire, and to engage with something as if it were always ash is to deny the presence of the living flame that can be found today.



Photo: Kes Ward

Quaker religious beliefs involve that of God in everyone, an ever-present linkage to the divine that, if listened to by quietening other sounds, can enact a personal transformation that calls you into your needed place in the world. While they don't evangelise, they do believe that spiritual education should be made accessible to all who wish it, rather than gatekept behind barriers of exclusivity or finances. This mirrors the idea of use of the arts for spiritual development and personal transformation, with a particular focus on non-materialistic and community-oriented philosophy. Quakers don't think the experience of art itself as a consumer is the priority: to many of them faith, without subsequent faith-led action, is entirely missing the point. Probably the most blasphemous bit of evoking the sacred in larp from a Quaker perspective would be the idea that you could charge a lot of money for tickets, deliver in return a genuine experience of encounter with the divine, and *not* expect your playerbase to go away changed.

From a practical perspective, what this looks like is that when I asked some of the local Quakers if I could design a larp based on Quaker theological perspectives, they counted it as a form of spiritual education. They offered me affordable hire of their building (leading to affordable ticket prices) and also asked me if I would write about it in their local newsletter. Now I'm a site trustee. It also looks like the fact that I have so far recruited three new weekend larp organisers from my time running this game, having structured it in such a way as to make the transition from player to organiser as easy as possible.

Experienced roleplayers knowledgeable

about setting up environments and games with transformational play intended are going to find a lot of the techniques and tools involved in games involving the sacred really familiar.¹⁰ All that differs is the notion that the player may have a spiritual experience in addition to the emotional, ethical, or other secular transformations that are sought or expected within mainstream larps.

Adherents on the organising team

It's a lot easier to play with notions of sacred and create separate spaces when the religion is entirely fictional; everyone is happy with the alibi that of course we're not worshipping any real deities. But some of the most profound experiences I've had have been in games that have played with a fictionalised version of real religions (mostly these have been Christian, some Pagan). There has been an unconscious assumption that in order to treat a religion with respect within your larp you need someone of that tradition, or at least with a grounding within it, on the writing team. I think that that's true; certainly within Paganism it helps you to navigate between shared and closed practices with respect for the boundaries. When you're creating any sort of art you owe respect to your subject matter. Even in larp which blurs the boundaries between subject and medium that respect is still due. This is reflected in the amount to which the writers and organisers research both the facts as well as the techniques that the practice uses.

¹⁰ For a more detailed look at this from a secular perspective, see <https://www.nordiclarp.org/2019/12/10/transformational-role-play-design-implementation-and-integration/>

Running religious games for larpers inexperienced with religion has included the experience of answering basic theological points of the religion in question. I have had to explain that despite a spiritually arisen testimony against the use of alcohol or drugs in any of their buildings, Quakers are totally fine with coffee (you're thinking of Mormons), and also hand sanitiser (it's not about whether ethanol is molecularly involved) – which broadens into the conversations of *why* such a rule is in place, and related discussions about testimonies to simplicity and community and what they might mean in the context of a larp event. Quite frankly, you can't have those discussions if there aren't any actual Quakers around. I would worry that running a game about a lived religion with no adherents of the religion on the organising team could lead to the proliferation of misinformation about religious practice.

There's also the problem of misuse of religious language. With *Nine Candles*, we ended up using a lot of deeply religious Quaker words such as “overseer”,¹¹

¹¹ A person serving in a Quaker role of non-religious welfare support and guidance, which we used for our mental health first aider NPC. In modern British Quakerism the role name is now “pastoral Friend” after the original term was deemed a little creepy. We kept the original term for exactly this reason, so admittedly we were leaning into the in-joke.

“Friend”,¹² “concern”¹³ and “hope so”,¹⁴ in the larp, in ways that went over the heads of the non-Quakers in the playerbase and ended up completely misused linguistically. The Quakers in the playerbase mostly treated this as hilarious in-jokes rather than religiously disrespectful. I would imagine that in a different religious tradition, far more offense would be taken by religious adherents in your playerbase, and you might need something like a dictionary workshop before the larp starts to limit the misuse of any language you introduce.

¹² A member of the Religious Society of Friends – that is, a Quaker. Quakers do not refer to each other as Quakers when speaking internally, and differentiate between “friend” and “Friend” verbally via subtle differences in pronunciation or context. Most of the playerbase missed this and probably just thought certain people had large friendship networks.

¹³ A sense of irresistible spiritual calling to a task that may require support from other Quakers to ensure that God's will is enacted and the person experiencing it is not harmed by going through the experience alone. We used it so the GMs could drop plot on people and the playerbase had to respond, leading to some very unusual grammatical patterns around usage and a complete lack of the usual process for the corporate testing of concerns, because every player could see the GM.

¹⁴ A version of “yes” that acknowledges that only God can answer certain things in the affirmative, and our translations of God's will are always imperfect. Generally used to affirm your belief in God's living presence within a statement (i.e. a higher standard of approval than “yes”, though it sounds lower).



The Origins of Larp

How the Human Capacity for Ritual
Makes Larp Possible

Bjorn Long

Larping is not just something we do for fun, it fulfills a primal need: the need for ritual. Rituals are powerful events, changing the way we think, alleviating stress, and forming strong bonds among a community. They are part of how our brains evolved to deal with the unpredictable world and to coordinate group behavior. Larps are a kind of ritual, as has been argued by scholars like Sarah Lynn Bowman and Martin Ericsson, who have used Victor Turner's work on rites of passage to show the similarities between the two forms (Ericsson 2004, Harviainen and Lieberoth 2011, Larsson, Bowman and Hugaas 2021). I will be turning to the animal origins of this need for ritual, discussing the biological benefits of rituals, including larps. Examining where this behavior originates will help us understand better how we are connected to our non-human relatives, and where our desire for larp comes from. The biological need for ritual creates some of the most powerful effects of larp.

Larping as Ritual

Anthropologist Victor Turner would call larping, like theater or sports, a 'liminoid' (or ritual-like) activity (1982). Others would argue that roleplaying is not *like* ritual, but it literally *is* a kind of ritual (Bowman 2015, Ericsson 2004, Lehrich 2005). An quick examination of the similarities should make the reasons clear:

- 1 When you go to play a larp, you usually enter a specific place, designated as your playing space. It might be a black box or a castle, but it has boundaries that will temporarily divide the world of the game from the outside world. Religious rituals

are also in special places, divided from normal life, like a synagogue, a shaman's tent, or a sacred grove. These boundaries are what play scholar Huizinga would call a 'magic circle' (Huizinga 1938).

- 2 Next, you will likely turn your attention to the larp facilitator, who will guide you through the experience, much like a shaman or religious leader (Bowman 2010, 51-52).
- 3 They will set out a series of rules for you to follow, separate from the rules used in everyday reality – 'rule-governance' is one of the key definitions of religious ritual (Bell 2007, 153-155).
- 4 You will be given a specific role with a special place in the game, a role that transforms who you are. This is just like the different roles in a religious ritual, that can vary from spectator to embodying the masked personification of evil.
- 5 The larp isn't just a game: there's an important narrative layered on to the rules and roles. The in-game behavior takes on a special kind of meaning, and the actions represent something more than themselves: touching someone's forearms in a roleplaying game may represent sex, or playing rock paper scissors may represent violent combat. In religious rituals, you may leap and kick your legs to represent combat (Schechner 1976), or drink wine to represent consuming the blood of a martyr.
- 6 When the game is over, you transition back to your 'normal' identity, and move on, passing out of the magic circle and leaving behind the rules of the game. But like ritual, you may find this normal

identity transformed by the experience — you may now have strong social bonds with the other players, a new perspective on life, or more confidence. (Bowman and Hugaas, 2021).

The Origins of Ritual

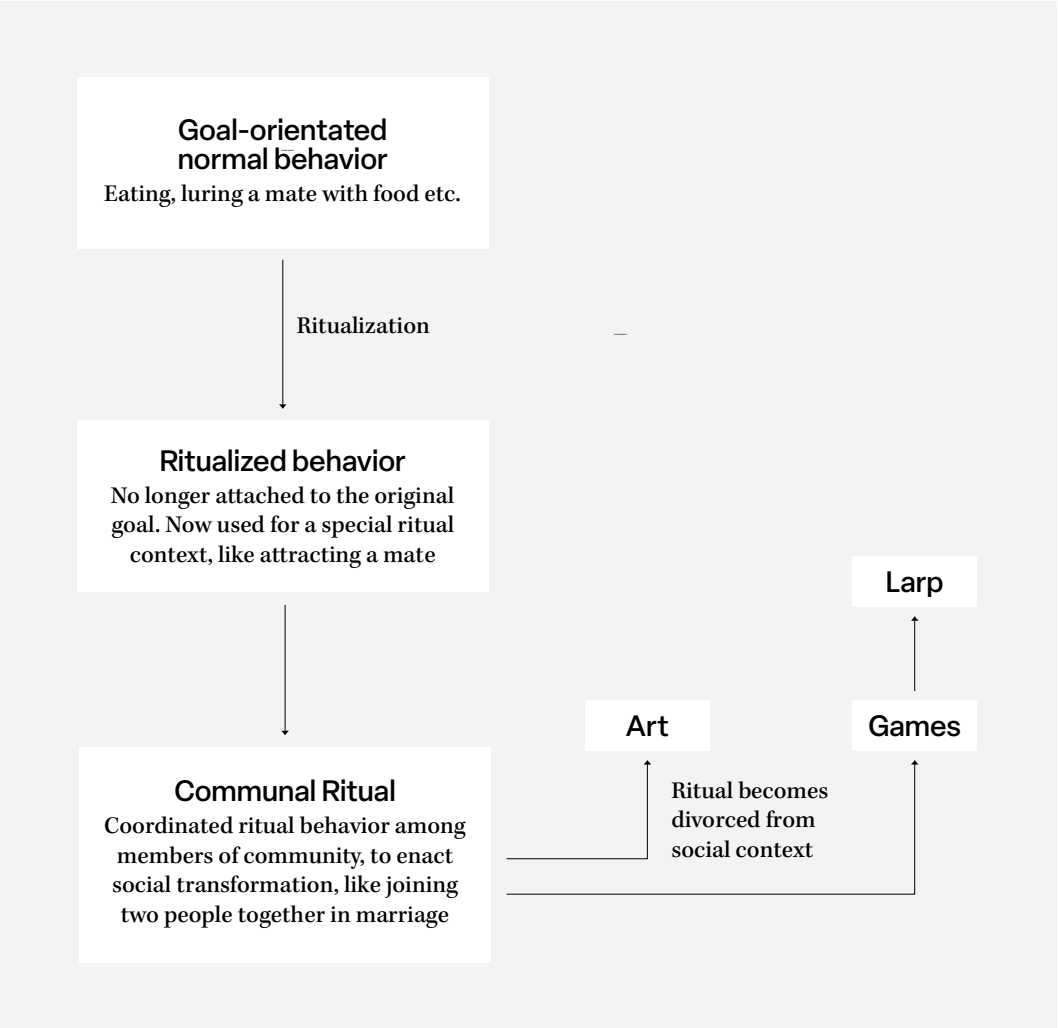
Ritual behaviors like larp are not a modern phenomenon, nor even an exclusively human one. They are how living beings calm themselves and communicate. Modern ritual evolved out of this animal behavior.

Ethologists, people who study animal behavior, use the word "ritualization" to refer to behavior that has adapted from an original purposeful behavior to a symbolic one. Mating displays in birds often re-use the gestures of other behaviors. The gestures of landfowl hens feeding their chicks is re-used by cocks to attract female attention with food, and in certain species the females do not even eat the offered food. (Stokes, 1971). The food has been ritualized from actual nutrients into a symbol that promises sex. This occurs with animals as simple as flies: mating displays in which flies offer food in small webs have been ritualized: in some species there is no food at all, just attention grabbing little sails that have no pragmatic function except their beauty and their ritual meaning (Lorenz, 1966). Ritualization isn't just for sex: chimpanzees perform stylized "aggressive displays" where they perform their dominance, bristling their hair, charging about, grabbing and throwing anything that happens to be at hand (usually sticks, but it can be anything from metal cans to a hapless youngster in the wrong place.) Some of the display behaviors (like charging and bristling) are the same as what

chimps do during actual violence, but these performances do not result in (intentional) physical violence (Goodall 1971). They are merely to intimidate, to tell others "I am the most powerful." Ritualized behaviors like aggression or mating displays are behaviors that have taken on a new social function, communicating ideas to other animals.

The purpose of other ritualized behaviors, like the solitary stone throwing ritual of chimpanzees, are more mysterious. Chimps sometimes travel alone to specific isolated trees, where they pick up large boulders, hoot in excitement, and bring the stone to the tree: they may passionately throw the rocks at the trunk, bang them on the thick roots, or hide them inside a hollow, recombining behaviors from targeted aggressive displays. Scholar James B. Harrod, who studies religion in animals, speculates that the ritual is a form of release for chimpanzees who have been bullied by dominant members of their group, a way for them to target their frustration on an inanimate object and make themselves feel more powerful (Harrod, 2022). It is a way of relieving stress.

These rituals are not religious – there's no reason to think they are connected to some kind of belief in a spiritual reality. But they may be connected to intense emotional experiences, even spiritual ones. Chimpanzees perform 'rain dances' when they encounter waterfalls, thunderstorms, or even fires – when they observe powerful elements, they begin to hoot, run, and smash branches, similar to their aggressive displays, but aimed in this case at elemental forces. (Goodall 1971, Harrod 2022) Thunderstorms and fire inspire intense awe in humans, and it is likely a



similar experience inspires the ‘rain dances’ of chimpanzees, a way of coping with the anxiety of these powerful forces. Animals of all kinds also have strong reactions to death, conducting ritual behavior that seems to be a way of coming to grips with the passing of a companion. Some magpies, foxes, and gorillas practice forms of funerals: magpies lay grass beside the bodies of their fellows, foxes have been reported burying their dead by kicking dirt over them, and gorillas sometimes bury their dead with dirt and branches as well (Beckoff 2007). Perhaps rites like this are a way of expressing and

calming themselves in moments of great crisis, like the stress-relief of rock throwing chimpanzees.

These ritualized behaviors, which no longer have a practical purpose, but serve either a social one or an emotional one, are similar to the religious behavior of humans. They are, in essence, the same activity. We have mythological explanations behind our ritual behavior, but it is most likely that meaning was layered on to rituals after they had become fixed elements of our culture (Tonna at all 2019, Lang 2019). Religious scholars

have argued that cognitive understanding is not central to religion, but a later addition. Affective emotional experiences around shared activities came first (Schaefer 2012, Harrod 2011). These ritualized animal behaviors have transformed over the eons into modern human rituals, from great festivals involving an entire village, to a moment of prayer around a dining table, to a larp in a curtained black box theater.

The benefits of ritual

Human ritual provides the same important benefits as ritualized animal behavior. Ritual can communicate ideas, reduce stress, and foster social cohesion, often at the same time.

Like chimpanzees throwing rocks against a tree when they feel powerless in their social relationships, human rituals also have powerful abilities to relieve stress. Predictable repeated behaviors like rituals calm us in stressful situations (Lorenz, 1966, Tonna et al 2019, Krátký et al, 2016). All kinds of ritual, from knocking on wood to communal festivals, are experimentally tied to stress relief. We even seek out rituals when we feels stressed (Lang and Chvaja 2023).

Larps release endorphins and make us feel good, just like religious rituals can. Larping is it is not quite as predictable and repeated as most religious rites, although there are comfortingly predictable elements in most larps, like workshops before and afterwards, and familiar generic tropes. Larps also give us a chance to rehearse reality, practicing high stress situations in safe environments. For this reason, Larping is used as a form

of therapy, helping people practice stressful situations, which then making them more relaxed when they must navigate those real life situations (Bartenstein 2022).

Like mating dances, human rituals are also used to communicate ideas. The Kaiko dances of the Marin Tribe of New Guinea are huge events where individual groups travel for miles to gather and feast on the host village’s mass slaughtering of pigs. In addition to the feast, they wear special costumes, dance all night, and trade (Schechner 1976). This is a way of expressing alliances. The visitors become indebted to the host village, but they also participate in an exhausting ritual, traveling and dancing for hours, that expresses their willingness to ally in much stronger ways than words ever could. Religious scholar Martin Lang argues that ritual provides “material anchors” which “translate the intangible commitment expressions [aka talk] into tangible physical acts” (2019, p. 236). Ritual allows people to walk the walk instead of just talk the talk in their commitments before we have to do risky behaviors like hunting or war.

Like Kaiko dances, we make a similar kind of statement when we larp: we materialize our commitment to an identity as larpers, sometimes committing large amounts of money and time, and traveling over large distances to participate in these communal rituals, ways of displaying how important we find this activity and our identity as members of the larp community.

Rituals aren’t just ways of communicating your membership in a society: performing them makes you more connected to it. People who participate in synchronized

ritualistic activity like dancing and singing together create strong bonds – these behaviors release endorphins and expand our sense of self to include others participating with us, which makes us more likely to cooperate with those individuals (Wiltermuth and Heath 2009, Lang et al 2017). Ritual often incorporates such activities, but even those that do not, like making difficult pilgrimages, have been shown to increase social cohesion (Lang 2019).

Larp automatically creates these same strong bonds among its participants, that often persist long after the game has ended. Some work suggests that participating in roleplaying games strengthens team building, just like rituals (Bowman 2010, Daniau 2016), which will not be surprising to anyone who has experienced the friendship-making of these rituals firsthand. Intense experiences, synchronized actions, and an expansive sense of self are key to forming bonds (Lang 2019), and we find all those things in larp as we do in ritual.

Ritual can also communicate by coordinating our thinking, teaching a community of people to categorize objects and sounds in the same way and form shared models of the world (Roepstorff et al, 2010). We practice shared behaviors and shared ways of thinking, all our brains connected by the same specific rule-based logic of the game world (Fingerhut, 2021). In participating in rituals we practice and affirm our commitment to social norms and social worldviews. Larps can be used to communicate complex embodied experiences in this way, using ritual to allow people to experience what it is like to be another person.

Understanding that larping is related to these deep rooted animal drives helps us understand that these benefits are not just side-effects of play, but core to our need to engage in activities like this in the first place. What kind of community is the larp creating? What kind of values? How are people using it to reduce stress in their lives? Intentionally or not, larp is a powerful way to provide the benefits of ritual even outside of the holy site. We can form new bonds, think in new ways, and participate in the essential behavior that makes us communal animals: sharing a space and a way of thinking, and for a short time experiencing together a different world.

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Much Ado About Flagging

Discussion of survey results on the implementation of and opinions on flagging in larp

J.D. Lade

Heated debates about safety flagging in larp are as old as the tool itself. Even in communities where its use is the norm, there are – and always will be – widely differing stances on how beneficial the approach actually is. The discussions are mostly highly subjective and tend to even veer into toxic territory. In order to escape the debate loop, in which the most disarming argument on either side is “but this is my experience”, actual data is needed. We are asking ourselves, what kind of systems are commonly used? How prevalent is abuse of flagging for petty or nefarious reasons? Is flagging as a tool so flawed it wouldn’t survive an overhaul?

Generally and for the purpose of this article, flagging is defined as a safety tool in which players may report (flag) other players to the organisers for misconduct and/or personal incompatibilities, which in some cases will lead to the exclusion of a player from the event in question.

In May 2024, the SK Book article “Flagging is Flawed” (Brown and Teerilahti, 2024) was republished on the Nordic Larp website. What followed were hundreds of comments on Facebook and numerous discussions all across social media revolving around flagging and its pitfalls. One of the main criticisms stemming from the above-mentioned opinion piece consisted of flagging being ripe for abuse: several commenters, as well as the article itself, claimed that people would not use flagging for its intended purpose (anymore), but to maliciously exclude others for petty reasons such as disliking them, or them being an ex-partner they wanted removed from a larp community. Opinions emerged calling for flagging to be abolished because they would

rather have no safety tool in place than one that is, allegedly, as faulty and dangerous as this one.

To directly quote Brown and Teerilahti (2024): “A player who does not like another player can simply flag them and ensure they will not have to see them at an event. The threat of weaponizing the flagging safety practice is also unfortunately common.”

The article, and people who (largely) agreed with it, also criticised the lack of nuance implemented in flagging when the only – and most common – option was to “Red Flag” someone, which would lead to automatic, unquestioned exclusion. Also, they argued, any kind of more nuanced system and so-called investigation into flags would put an undue burden on organisers, forcing them to take on the roles of judge, jury, executioner, or – sometimes – therapists meddling in the interpersonal conflicts within the player group.

Other authors in the larp scene entered the discussion, most notably Laura Wood and Mo Holkar, who published a response piece that same month, “Flagging: A Response” (Wood and Holkar, 2024). In their article, the authors point out that they – and other larp organisers they have encountered in the international scene – use more nuanced flagging systems than the initial piece suggests to be most common, quote: “that [the only option being “Red Flag” leading to immediate exclusion] would indeed be a problem – which is why larp organisers don’t, in general, ask solely for red flags. Instead, they usually ask for a range of different indications of concern, with only the most severe meriting a red flag and hence exclusion.”

Both sides of this debate have one thing in common: They rely on anecdotal evidence to underscore their points made. In both articles named above, it is made clear that there is no other data available than what the authors have experienced, seen, or been told, themselves.

If we want to move beyond individual anecdotes or loudly voiced opinions, we need to ask questions on a bigger and more structured scale than what a discussion on social media can provide. For this reason, the author of this article launched two surveys in an attempt to quantify and put data behind some of the arguments brought up in the *Flagging Debate*. Both surveys were completely anonymous, not collecting names or email addresses, and were shared widely in international and more regional larping groups on Facebook and Discord servers. Of course, this makes the accounts of respondents unverifiable and (potentially) biased. However, the author believes that some core trends and concepts can be extrapolated even if some of the quantitative data is unreliable.

The author does not claim universal truth by the analysis of the survey results. They do not claim that the sample groups are of scientific relevance. The surveys were conducted purely to gather some data about much-discussed topics as a basis for more conversation. Furthermore, the author does not claim any of the quoted opinions or reported experiences as their own. This article is an analysis of collected data and published discussions, not an expression of personal belief, and therefore relies exclusively on respondent statements and cited materials to illustrate the range of perspectives within larping communities.

In the first survey, called “Harmful Misuse of Flagging”, a total of 83 larp organisers offer a rare glimpse into how flagging actually works on the ground. Though the dataset is non-scientific, it is the first attempt to quantify the real breadth and variation of these systems and – maybe most importantly – how rampant (or not) the aforementioned abuse of flagging is.

The second survey, dubbed “The Big Ol’ Flagging Survey”, collected responses from 117 people, larpers and organisers alike. The questions aimed to find out about fears and worries tied to flagging in general, as well as experiences of safety tools such as flagging or blacklists. For the purposes of the survey, *blacklists* were defined as follows:

“[A] private list maintained (either as an actual list, or from memory) by event organisers to track individuals who are barred from attending their events.”

Player exclusion was defined as “a (potential) participant being uninvited from, or disallowed to attend, one singular specific event. It does not mean being banned in a wider sense unless otherwise specified within the framework of the question.”

A comprehensive write-up of the results of “Harmful Misuse of Flagging” is available as a freely accessible PDF.¹ For this article, the author uses and compares data from both surveys in cases where questions overlap.

The majority of respondents in both surveys reported their main larping activities to take place in Europe. European countries, regions – or just plainly “Europe” – make up

¹ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1JffL7rxTxN5Mw6X2f4Yupv76VnpwrtWQ/view?usp=drivesdk>

about 90% of responses. The rest consists of mentions of the USA and Canada, and a few mentions of Australia. From the outset, both surveys aimed to look into a wide range of larping communities and their use of safety tools rather than the Nordic Larp Community specifically, as larping has become an international and intercultural hobby, and the concept of flagging has been implemented, as these two surveys show, all over Europe and beyond. To confine the discussion to include Nordic only would not accurately reflect the scope of the issue.

The results of the second survey show a wide variety of participants, ranging from new larpers with 3 months of larping experience to veterans with 40 years under their larping belt. On average, respondents participate as players/guests in 6 events a year, with responses ranging from 0 to 20 larps or larp-adjacent events per annum.

With about 90.5% an overwhelming majority of respondents report to attend at least some larps which use flagging or other reporting systems as safety tools. The rest reported to not attend events with flagging at all, some indicating that they had been unfamiliar with the concept until taking the survey.

When asked for possible reasons for flagging someone, respondents described wanting to avoid romantic or emotionally intense play with ex-partners, real-life spouses, or those with incompatible play styles, among other minor concerns or personal differences. Individual flags in this category don't usually lead to exclusion of the flagged player. However, a total of 81% of participating organisers in the second survey who use flagging reported having excluded players for minor to moderate

concerns, such as but not limited to personal dislikes, not wanting to deal with specific player drama, having received a certain number of non-exclusionary flags that made the player impossible to cast, or non-dangerous but repeated breaking of event rules.

Some respondents, both larpers and organisers, reported flagging on behalf of others, reflecting community care but also risk of rumor-based exclusion. These results echo those of the first survey, where the 83 participating organisers reported widely the same reasoning for and definitions of flags and exclusions.

Among the 78 participants in the second survey reporting to be or having been an organiser, a total of 63 use flagging or similar tools such as organisation-only blacklists or other reporting systems they don't explicitly call "flagging". They reported an average of 12 non-exclusionary flags per event. Interestingly, they report an average of one exclusionary flag per event, and a clear majority of participating organisers report having had between zero and three exclusions ever, from all of their events combined. This comes to a total of more than 1300 events over the span of 27 years. These numbers are fairly similar to what was reported in the first survey, where almost 80% of respondents reported between zero and two player exclusions on average per event. Overall, the data from the two surveys strongly suggests that player exclusions due to flagging is not as prevalent, or rampant, as the public discourse suggests.

Across both surveys, both larpers and organisers indicated nearly identical

reasonings for exclusionary flags or bans. The most severe cases involved sexual assault, harassment, grooming of minors, and boundary violations – flags and exclusions often cited as necessary acts of protection. Others flagged or excluded players for reasons including but not limited to physical aggression, unsafe combat, substance use, or hate speech such as antisemitic or transphobic behaviour.

Among the 117 respondents of the second survey were a total of 19 who reported having been excluded from at least one larp at least once due to flagging or a blacklist. Most of them reported having been excluded once or twice. Two respondents reported having been excluded from an entire event series, putting the number at 20 events they've been disallowed from attending.

Their detailed responses reveal a landscape marked by secrecy, fear, and emotional harm. Many describe being banned or "Red Flagged" without being told who flagged them or why. For several, the experience was described as devastating; reports include weeks of depression, anxiety, and a lasting fear of signing up for new events. Some called it the most psychologically damaging experience of their larp life, describing a sense of public accusation without trial, akin to being branded unsafe or dangerous without evidence or recourse. A recurring theme is lack of transparency and accountability.

This leads to one of the most important takeaways from the survey results: exclusion from larps is perceived by some as harm. And, by extension, taking measures to purposefully exclude someone may be considered facilitating said harm. Even

if not stated outright, results show that (admitting to) flagging someone with intent to have them excluded is widely avoided, and respondents report rather dropping out themselves than triggering the exclusion of another. When asked if they had ever reported / flagged anyone regardless of whether exclusion from the event was a possible outcome, 70% of all respondents answered Yes. However, when it came to flagging someone with the specific intent or purpose of having them removed, only 34% of respondents said they have done so, stating reasons of severe (sometimes criminal) misconduct as outlined above.

This shows that among respondents, flagging is widely used but clearly separated from intent to remove someone from a larp. This result alone contradicts the notion that malicious flagging and wrongful exclusions are commonplace. The data suggests that when presented with a choice, only a third of larpers would, figuratively, choose violence. It becomes apparent through the responses that excluding someone from larp or larping spaces is perceived as a socially violent act, depriving people of a way to fulfill their basic human need for community and social interaction. This hesitancy to flag to exclude showed up throughout responses regardless of whether respondents have been excluded themselves or not.

The sentiment of harm and reducing it is further supported by responses from all respondents to "Agree or Disagree"² questions aiming to indicate levels of worry about being (unfairly) excluded or banned from larps.

² All Agree/Disagree questions used this scale: 1 - Strongly Disagree, 2 - Disagree, 3 - Neutral / No opinion, 4 - Agree, 5 - Strongly Agree

While the level of worry about exclusion, ban, or discrimination of themselves was generally very low, with an average of 26% of respondents marking “Strongly Agree” or “Agree”, the same could not be said when it came to worry on behalf of others: 33% reported being worried about someone other than themselves being excluded from

larps, which shows a trend of compassion for others’ experiences rather than fearing exclusion oneself.

When asked about discriminatory flagging, another trend came to light. There were many instances of respondents fearing misunderstanding and/or unfair exclusions

Agree or disagree: You are worried about flagging systems leading to you being excluded from an event.

117 Responses

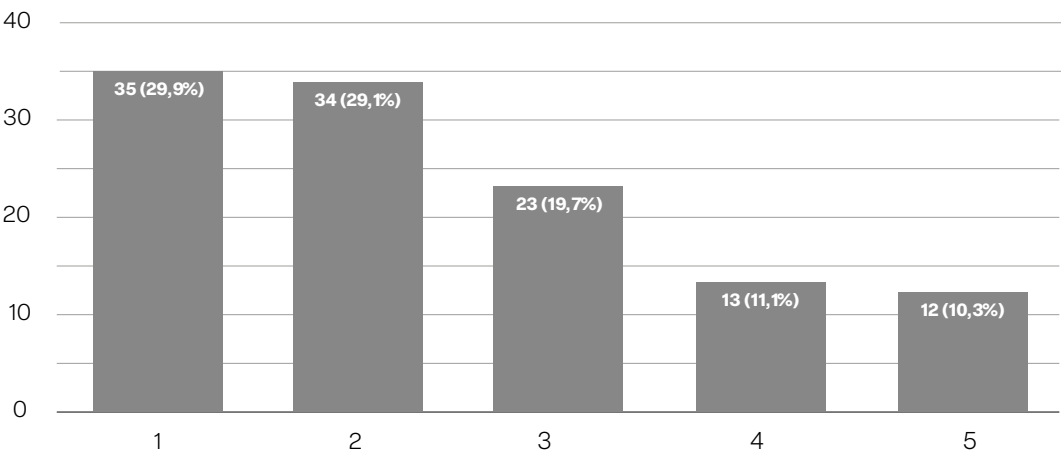


Figure 1: diagram by the author

Agree or disagree: You are worried about you being on a blacklist without your knowledge.

117 Responses

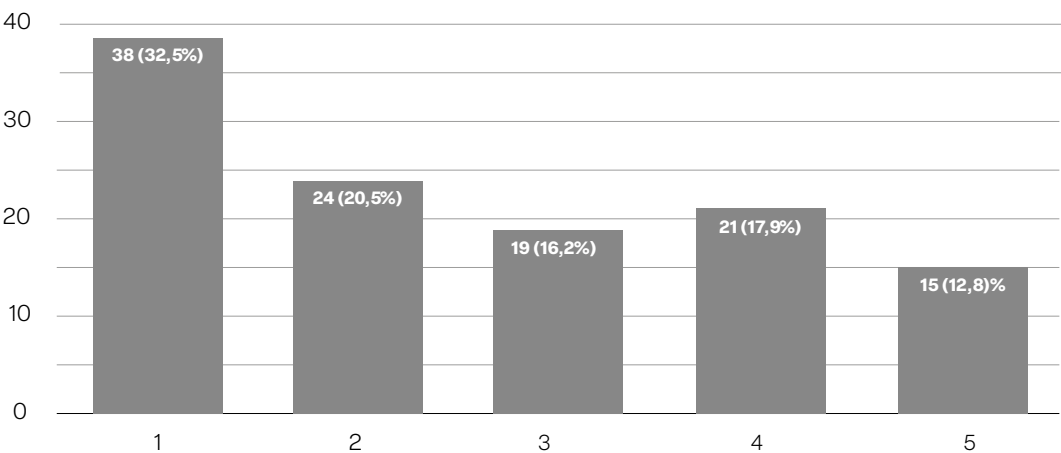


Figure 2: diagram by the author

Agree or disagree: You are worried about flagging systems leading to someone other than yourself being excluded from an event.

117 Responses

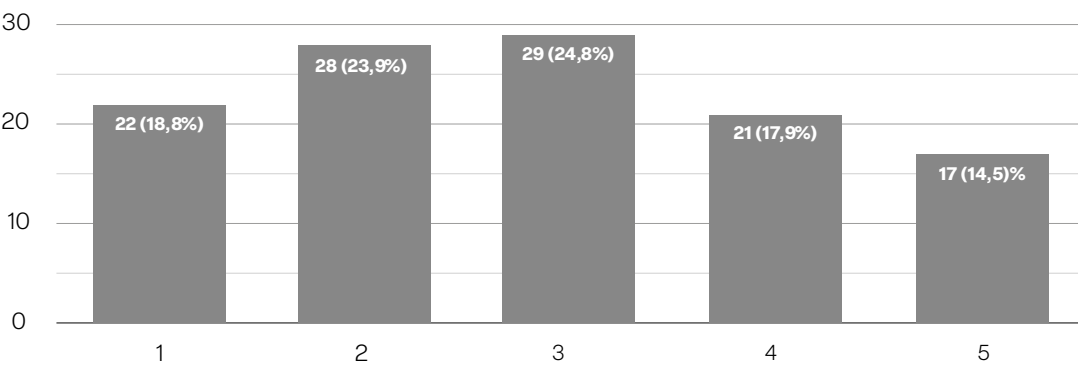


Figure 3: diagram by the author

Agree or disagree: You are worried about someone other than yourself being on a blacklist without their knowledge.

117 Responses

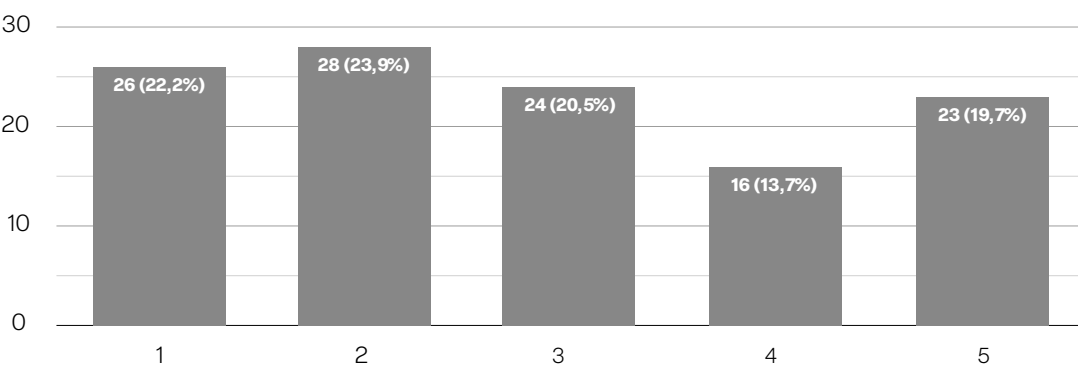


Figure 4: diagram by the author

of neurodivergent larpers, with terms like “neurospicy” or “autism” coming up in 75% of responses reporting to be worried, or very worried. However, neither survey showed indications that exclusions due to neurodivergence are a widespread phenomenon. The first survey asked about reasons for flags which later turned out to have been false, exaggerated, or even malicious in order to exclude a player. Responses indicate that neurodivergence

has been a very rare reason for false flags. This does not mean these cases don’t exist. Rather, the responses in both surveys are an indication of a misalignment of risk perception between organisers and players. Specifically, when it comes to the risk of these safety tools leading to exclusion on the basis of neurotype, more transparency from organisers could mitigate these worries.

The results of the second survey also show opinions and experiences of respondents who do not use, or outright reject, flagging. About 9% of all respondents reported not attending events as a player or guest with flagging or reporting systems in place. Almost 20% of participating organisers do not have any flagging, reporting system, or blacklist, in place for their own events. An additional 11.5% of organisers reported having ceased using flagging, or currently working on abandoning the tool.

Whilst there have been concerns raised about the data protection implications of flagging in public and online conversations, these concerns were not reflected in the survey results despite a specific question about the issue. The clear majority of organisers not using flagging (anymore) stated lack of evidentiary standards and a preference to solve conflicts in conversation rather than with a safety tool as their main reasons. This also marks a trend among flagging-skeptical respondents regardless of whether they are organisers or not.

Several respondents preferred direct communication or mediation over anonymous reporting, with some explaining that they view flagging as a way to avoid accountability or honest conversation, among other things. These accounts clearly echo the worries voiced in “Flagging is Flawed” (Brown and Teerilahti, 2024), as well as that side of the public debate. However, it is important to note that – while clearly existent and valid – a clear anti-flagging stance makes up less than 10% of overall responses.

Several flagging-critical respondents shared personal experiences of false or vague flagging leading to loss of reputation or

opportunities. Overall, critics are viewing flagging as corruptible, divisive, and damaging to community trust. When asked about their general stance on flagging, respondents were provided with a list of choices ranging from *Extremely Important* to *Harmful*. Five respondents chose the *Harmful* option, making up 4.3% of the group. They emphasized that while the system’s intent can be valuable in theory, in practice it often becomes unreliable, biased, and easily abused. Some noted that differing interpretations of flags (from “awkward to be around” to “rapist”) make the tool dangerously inconsistent. One respondent compared flagging to a “secret police” system, turning organisers into unqualified arbiters of justice and enabling social exclusion through rumor or retaliation.

The majority of respondents, however, reported a positive-leaning outlook on flagging, with *Extremely Important* and *Important* making up 67% of responses. In discussions online, it might sometimes seem like people calling for organisers to stop using flagging are a majority, especially when influential or widely-known figures are chiming in. However, these two surveys show that while extreme opinions, as well as cases of system abuse, do exist, they represent only a small fraction of opinions voiced. In this case, 4.3% stand against 67%. And just because the smaller group is sometimes louder and uses stronger, more emotionally charged language, does not make their opinions more valid.

The surveys confirm the opinion that, yes, flagging is indeed not perfect and some flaws are perceived and pointed out even by respondents viewing flagging as *Extremely Important*. However, most

respondents make it very clear that a flawed system is still better than none. Many of respondents’ worries as addressed above could be mitigated by implementing tiered flagging systems more widely, and reducing “Immediate Exclusion” to being an the ultimate remedy for extreme – and thus extremely rare – cases instead of being the norm.

Respondents of the second survey proposed a wide range of improvements to make flagging systems fairer, more transparent, and less prone to abuse. The most common suggestion was the need for clear, transparent procedures — players should know when and why they were flagged, and ideally be offered a chance to respond, appeal, or demonstrate change. This is reflected in the responses to “Agree or Disagree” questions about transparency toward a flagged person and rehabilitation from exclusion.

70% either agree or strongly agree that it is important that flagged individuals be told about their status and the reasons for the flag(s). The question asking whether organisers should put effort towards investigating exclusionary flags was either agreed or strongly agreed to by almost 70% as well. When it comes to rehabilitation, a smaller majority (38%) agree that it is important that flagged individuals be given at least one chance at rehabilitation. 36% marked the neutral “no opinion” option for this question, the reason almost unanimously being that a right to rehabilitation heavily depends on the reasons for the exclusion. Some respondents calling for no chances at rehabilitation for anyone argued that e.g. rapists do not deserve to reenter a larp

community. This implies that the only people banned earned their status by committing serious misconduct, which is demonstrably untrue given the wide variety of non-criminal conduct listed above that has earned people an exclusion or ban.

Many argued that organisers could profit from training in mediation, trauma-informed practice, and bias awareness, since poor handling often causes more harm than the flag itself. Of course, we have to acknowledge that the burden of expectations placed on organisers here is very high, and not every organiser will want or be able to take these steps. However, it is also important to note that not every single individual larp team member is being asked to do extensive training. It is evident from the survey results that there is a need for specific individuals who are tasked with handling flagging and/or casting within the team and could consider such measures.

A few respondents proposed community-based alternatives to the organisers investigating or handling flagging, like trained confidants, mediators, or ombudspersons who can handle complaints privately and neutrally. Another few recommended a centralized, transparent authority or database – with documentation and oversight – to prevent gossip-based or arbitrary bans.

While many organisers already report diligently working on continuously improving upon their processes, the surveys suggest that these improvements have not been widely implemented on an international level. At the very least, the steps taken seem to have gone largely unnoticed by groups or communities not involved in design or safety discourse.

Overall, participants of the survey stressed that flagging must prioritize communication, education, fairness, and rehabilitation over punishment. Systems should be accompanied by clear policies, accountability mechanisms, and cultural guidance, ensuring that they serve safety and inclusion rather than fear or social control.

In the end, flagging stands as both a mirror and measure of our communities’ maturity. It reflects how we handle harm, trust, and responsibility when no perfect system exists. The data suggests that while flagging and subsequent exclusions can wound, the absence of it is not at all widely accepted as a viable solution. The challenge ahead lies not in abolishing the tool, but in refining it. Anchoring its use in transparency, compassion, and due process rather than secrecy or fear. If larp is to remain a space of trust and transformation, then flagging, too, must evolve. Not as a weapon, but as a bridge between safety and accountability.

The purpose of this article, as well as the two surveys it is based on, is to spark further conversation on the topics discussed. More thorough research could be conducted inspired by this text. Most importantly, we as larpers, organisers, designers, authors, should talk to each other and work together, not against each other, to sharpen the safety tools at our disposal. Misunderstandings and disagreements will happen, but our focus should remain on the core of the conversation: safety within and around larping. Safety for players and organisers alike. Safety for our mental health, and empathy for the mental health of those who might have been wronged by processes in need of improvement. From

what the author has seen in the surveys, the path to making flagging better is already being walked by many, no matter how loud the voices from the sidelines scream at them. They are putting in the work and there is grounds for hope that this work will be successful. We just can’t stop now.

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The Devil's Advocate

Applying Kink Perspectives for Top Drop
and Aftercare in Larp

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José Esteban Muñoz writes in *Cruising Utopia* that Queerness is an ideality, a “structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the present.” Larp communities share this communal desire; we come together – using the magic circle to carve out alternative realities as we cruise utopic and dystopic lifetimes, transported to alternative identities through roleplay. Muñoz argues in ‘Stages: Queers, Punks, and the Utopian Performative’ (2006) that “queer performance” is defined by “a refusal of mastery and an insistence on process and becoming” (15). This prioritizing of process and becoming infuses both kink and larp spaces, distinguishing these performance forms from others which establish replicable products to be sold under the banner of mastery for the consumption of audiences. Larp, then, as well as kink, are inherently queer performances, centered on the creation of alternative realities through shared emergent narratives and process-centered (rather than rehearsed) roleplay. Sometimes, however, in both the queer performances of kink and of larp, the roleplay in which we engage can create a need for additional care.

This chapter responds to Hernø’s (2024) article highlighting self-care practices for players engaging in transgressive or villainous play and the Solmukohta presentation ‘Fears and Tears’ (Villarreal and Norwood 2024) which focuses on the concept of expanding larp cultures of care through the lens of Muñoz’s call for those engaged in queer performance to strive towards utopic visions for our performance communities. As cousins in queer performance, we identify ways in which larp facilitation can benefit from considering kink concepts. We use an educated mode

of desiring to see beyond the present moment towards a future of larp design which embraces radical transparency in workshops, building off Hernø’s suggestions of individual caretaking, to craft communal supports informed by top drop.

Kink and larp are infinitely variable; there is no one “correct” way to engage with either, and both are interpreted differently in disparate communities. The definitions and guidelines used throughout this document are grounded in the authors’ autoethnographic research, building upon scholarship in Queer Theory, Performance Studies, and Larp Studies. While we stress that there is no one way to participate in larp or kink, we must clarify the terms and concepts upon which we are building. Throughout this chapter, we refer to “kink” as an umbrella term to describe activities that involve BDSM (the paired concepts of Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, and Sadism and Masochism) and fetishes. Although the popular perception of kink is an act that includes sexual arousal or sex acts, we acknowledge that this umbrella covers nonsexual acts, including other forms of pleasure outside of sexual: euphoria, catharsis, satisfaction, or things that escape definition.

Larpers and kinksters alike are familiar with the concept of drop – the emotional and physical low that begins anywhere from a few hours to a few days after the emotional and endorphin high experienced during a larp or kink scene. The overlap between these communities and concepts has been well-established in larp scholarship (Motola 2018, Stenros and Bowman 2018, Villarreal and Norwood 2024). Multiple types of drop exist: the phenomenological experience,

onset time, duration, and emotional and behavioral impact of drop are shaped by biochemical and hormonal variations, as well as by our unique cognitive and behavioral patterns. An individual’s unique physiology shapes their experience of drop promptly after a scene (Sagarin et al. 2009; Sprott and Randall 2016), as their own brain chemistry, life experiences, and processing patterns impact the experience of drop.

As well as individualized differences in the experience of drop generally, there are multiple types of drop which activate distinct emotional responses. Generally, when drop is mentioned, larpers are most likely referring to the “Post-Larp Depression” examined by Bowman and Torner as an alienating experience that combines emotional bleed with the difficult experience during which “the mind must divest itself from the vivid social reality of the larp” while recovering from hormonal fluctuations caused by roleplay (158). Scholars have identified that this sort of drop, is shared among both larp and kink play (Harviainen 2011, Bowman and Torner 2016).

The kink community identifies sub drop – that experienced by the receiver of action – as separate experience from *top drop*, which is experienced by the doer of the action. Both parties undergo an intense experience together and similarly experience intense levels of drop, and both types of drop require aftercare. However, *top drop* is a unique experience, which has been identified by Sexualities researchers as “relatively independent of the cascade of hormones that are implicated in the more immediate experience” of general event drop (Sprott and Randall 2016) although both forms of

drop can occur simultaneously, becoming a layered psycho-emotional experience. Top drop infuses self-doubt and guilt into the experience, as illustrated by Hernø (2024). Especially for those raised in cultures which eschew violence, we may find ourselves shocked, appalled by, or feeling guilty or ashamed of the actions taken in character. Perpetration-linked shame increases psychological distress and makes psychological healing more difficult and complicated (Canivet et al 2025); therefore, top drop layers onto general larp drop to make recovery more difficult for larpers of villainous players by negatively impacting our mind’s capacity to divest itself from the larp.

Following a 2020 run of *Velvet Noir* (2019, United States), a player recalled a non-playing character (NPC) role where they’d agreed to play the oppressor per another player’s request. The other player asked for a specific brand of anti-Semitism, listing specific slurs she wanted used against her. While the person playing the NPC felt uneasy, they agreed. During the scene, they provided the requested interaction, though they struggled with the extreme nature of some of the content and could not use some of the language requested. The room rushed to the oppressed character’s aid, rallied together to berate the NPC and physically remove them from the gameplay area, leaving them alone. The NPC player was shaken and disturbed, both berating themselves for the aggression they portrayed and for not having done enough as the oppressor. Feeling unable to reach out for support, they struggled to recover and reintegrate into play.

Sub drop tends to be somewhat alleviated by in-game aftercare; as in the above example, other characters often rally around the injured character and against the antagonist, providing care and support to the victimized character. This eases the immediate chemical responses to the heightened scene in ways that serve the player behind the character, as well, allowing the player who received in-game care to feel that their scene ended well, fueling “reductions in physiological stress (cortisol) and increases in relationship closeness” while participants who feel that their scene did not end with reconnection and support – typically the villain – do not have this same positive physiological response (Sagarin et al 2008). When the aggressor is punished or retaliated against in character, the player’s experience of self-doubt, shame, or guilt for even pre-negotiated aggressiveness is exacerbated. This leads to top drop following the scene which, if left unaddressed, can then complicate the player’s experience of larp drop following the event. Because the experience of top drop increases physiological stress through hormones – including, per Sagarin et al, both cortisol and testosterone, regardless of the player’s gender – the hormonal fluctuation compounds the already difficult experience of post-larp drop by changing the brain chemistry further, leaving the player with more to overcome.

Furthermore, many workshops introduce safety mechanics in a way that implicitly prioritizes the needs of the player who is receiving transgressive roleplay. For example: during Solmukohta’s 2024 *Violence and The Feeling of Violence* workshop, participants were paired and told to slowly escalate to increasingly violent acts “until tap out was needed.” This helped

participants identify their boundaries when receiving violence; however, it unintentionally pressured participants committing violence to continue escalating until the participant *receiving* violence tapped out. If tap out was not reached, aggressors felt they were not giving their fellow participant “the full experience.” Because it was not directly mentioned that both sides could tap out, at least one participant needed to be told by their partner that they could tap out and set boundaries even as the “top” in this situation.

This method of receiver-focused practice is commonplace. In the larp *Conscience’s* (Spain, 2018) intimacy workshops, players were paired and instructed to practice the “tap out” mechanic by initiating slowly escalating actions upon their companion until the person receiving the actions tapped out. The players were then instructed to switch roles and repeat the practice – again with instruction reinforcing that the tap out would be done by the receiver of the action. Similar receiver-focused practice with swapping roles is used in many larp workshops, such as *Helicon* (Denmark 2024), *Lord of Lies* (Sweden 2021), and *Velvet Noir*. This practice is informed by the best of intentions: we want to protect the person we perceive to be most vulnerable and to ensure that transgressive play is not forced upon unwilling participants. But this fails to acknowledge that the person playing the villain’s boundaries may not perfectly align with the receiver’s boundaries. And desiring to play to lift, the villain-player can feel pressure to ignore their own boundaries, persisting until told to stop, as illustrated in the Solmukohta example above.

Receiver-focused training of consent mecha-

nics subconsciously trains players not to prioritize the needs of those playing villains – and trains players of villains not to expect or seek care. Thus, both in role and out of role, the person perceived as victim often receives support by design, while players of villains’ experiences of multiple types of drop are compounded by the experience of other characters reacting negatively to, punishing, or ostracizing the villainous character in response to the villainy portrayed, while these players are often incidentally left without support out of role, as well. Hernø (2024) autoethnographically describes this experience: “during the larp, I started feeling increasingly bad. And after the larp concluded, I became riddled with guilt. I felt physically sick from what I had done to people I cared about, being the manipulative and scheming horror of a person behind many of the transgressive actions of the larp.”

Larps establish a Magic Circle – a “social frame, that has social rules of its own,” which together with alibi, invites participants into activities that they avoid in the mundane world (Järvelä 2019), although characters’ emotions and actions are real experiences which impact the participants (Burgoyne Dieckman 1991; Leonard and Thurman 2018; Stenros and Bowman 2018; Hedgard Hugaas 2019; Järvelä 2019). Similarly, kink scenes – encapsulated by predetermined space, time, expectations, and rules of engagement – exist within unique social frames, inviting performances that foster very real psycho-physiological responses for participants. While larping, continued role-play creates an emergent narrative which links scenes to one another without clear breaks, creating a durational experience in which the cultural expectation is to stay in character for the entire larp, limiting use

of out of role spaces to “emergencies.” This often leads to situations where players of oppressor roles have little real opportunity for immediate out-of-role aftercare. As previously discussed, in-role aftercare can mitigate sub drop, but we invite larp communities to embrace tools informed by the kink community to better provide care for those playing villainous characters, so that they are not left entirely to fend for themselves as described by Hernø.

While Hernø calls upon antagonistic players to “make sure you at least have the support off-game,” these individual transports can be insufficient – especially for larpers who have not yet developed their own self-care practices or discovered those suggested by Hernø. Designers, however, can help mitigate the impacts of top drop by infusing a few simple shifts into workshop facilitation, implementing tools from the queer performance of kink practices into our own play. We offer the following tools larpers can incorporate into current practices: Radical Teaching Transparency, Training for Failure, and Multi-tool Approaches.

The kink community offers the concept of RACK – Risk Aware Consensual Kink (Switch 1999; Wignall 2020). The term encapsulates the process of acknowledging that every environment and action incorporates some level of risk; directly assessing the reality of risks which are likely to arise during play; and ensuring that participants are fully informed and capable of processing and consenting to these risks without coercion. This parallels theatre artists Villarreal and Rikard’s concept of *Spaces of Acceptable Risk* (2023), who acknowledge that the concept of “safe

spaces” has been misappropriated from the queer community and invite organisers of creative processes such as larp to:

“acknowledge that no space is truly ‘safe’ due to the power imbalances that are ever-present and can acknowledge that being asked to remain ‘brave’ is a difficult task that requires more effort from those whose identities have been historically marginalized. [...] provide time, space, and actionable tools that can facilitate the process of caring for the needs of those who are concerned about their safety or about what might be emotionally triggering or emotionally activating. And [...] ensure that these tools are practiced, modeled, and used. By using these tools, we support those who need care in asking for it without fear of retaliation.” (8)

Both the concepts of RACK and Spaces of Acceptable Risk (SOAR) maintain the importance of clearly communicating the risks inherent to specific scenes or collaborative activities, ensuring participants are not only fully informed but that they have the time and space to process what is being asked and to fully consider whether the risks inherent are acceptable based upon their boundaries in the moment. This, for larpers, is a step beyond negotiating the *content* of a scene. Playing to SOAR would include naming the risks inherent in the negotiated content, to ensure that both players understand and choose to accept these risks, *a la* RACK. Villarreal and Shively (2025) take SOAR a step further, calling for “Radical Teaching Transparency” which is already being applied in North American larp spaces effectively.

Radical Teaching Transparency, as introdu-

ced by Villarreal and Shively (2025), places transparency at the root of facilitating collaborative processes and creative communities. The authors, both Intimacy Choreographers and faculty of Theatrical Intimacy Education, call upon organisers to “**communicate with clarity our intentions and expectations**, both to establish trust (rather than demanding it) and to ease anxiety for [participants] who enter our spaces carrying a lifetime of experiences that have taught them not to trust us as leaders” (11, emphasis original). Villarreal and Shively further emphasize the need to establish “the expectation for discomfort and offering strategies for working through those moments [...] explicitly and purposefully naming expectations that go against socially normalized concepts” (11). The authors offer that facilitating through the lens of Radical Teaching Transparency includes clearly stating:

- “How participants will be invited to engage,” or for larpers, what participants should expect to do or encounter while playing;
- “How participants will be expected to step out or disengage if needed,” which many larp designers already do well;
- “What participants should do once they have stepped out or disengaged”; as well as
- “How they can re-engage when ready” (11).

Larp designers can improve existing practices to support top drop by *teaching* participants to form care-centered communities by focusing on these final points. Explicitly state that when someone stops a scene because a boundary is reached, this

communication – and responding to it – are not shameful, but are, in fact, integral parts of the trust-risk cycle which defines consensual risky play (Pennick 2017). In-game, when someone who receives violence is supported by other characters, they rebuild trust to continue positively. However, the villainous actor may not receive this support, thus finding it more difficult or emotionally exhausting to re-engage with the type of play that they are responsible for in the storytelling. This can be especially true for the players of characters whose villainous acts are needed to facilitate the overarching narrative of a larp: “black hat” guests and hosts in *Conscience (Spain, 2018)*, the Inspired in *Helicon (Denmark, 2024)*, the House in *House of Craving (Denmark, 2019)*. One player of a black hat guest in the larp *Conscience* described the feelings he had after playing a depraved abuser for the duration of a multi-day larp as leaving him feeling “numb,” “raw,” and “drained, wrung out.” These experiences of emotional and mental exhaustion are often exacerbated by the feelings that if the player’s character does not provide the necessary antagonism to the narrative, that other players will have a less enjoyable game, often causing an internal pressure to push past mental and emotional boundaries for those in the roles of villains.

The recent *Monstrosity* (United States, 2025) larp leans into Radical Teaching Transparency’s last two steps. In workshops, organisers frequently repeat the phrase: “just because you’ve been given permission to do something doesn’t mean you have to; your boundaries are perfect exactly where they are,” which normalizes that both the participants behind villainous and behind potentially victimized characters have

boundaries that are equally deserving of respect. Furthermore, players are trained how to respond when someone uses the consent mechanic to disengage and to offer support while focusing on ensuring that both participants can safely return to play. This further mitigates top drop by reminding all players to support the storytelling in specific, actionable ways while always upholding all players’ boundaries.

Generations of larp designers have established and implemented a variety of tools, policies, and procedures to support players in engaging with risky, transgressive play without encountering nonconsensual or “real” violence, that which “transgresses physical, social, emotional, and ethical boundaries between actors” (Newmahr 2011, 175-176). In that time, larp communities with regional understandings and shared larp vernaculars have emerged, as well. This has led to our current reality, in which the best intentions of designers and larpers are sometimes rendered inadequate, because different players’ contrasting interpretations of concepts like “playing to lift” lead to misaligned expectations for one another which can yield a sense of violations of trust in the face of what is actually incomplete communication.

Radical Teaching Transparency invites organisers to precisely state the intended meanings behind colloquialisms commonly relied upon (Villarreal and Shively 2023, 10-13). Brief, unelaborated phrases such as “play to lift” – which are well understood to those who have engaged in larp research – may be interpreted differently by new players from different countries and cultures. Vejdemo (2018) identifies that this phrase is “fed by a social contract to co-create the best

narrative” while acknowledging that play to lift fails when players have misaligned expectations for what the “best narrative” is.

Simple adjustments such as stating “playing to lift means responding to others’ play in a way that supports both the story and your own boundaries” so that players don’t assume we mean “endure and agree with everything, regardless of your boundaries” clarify designers’ intentions. It seems obvious – this is what designers have always *meant* – but with a transparent acknowledgement that mitigates misunderstandings that can lead to undue harm.

Discussions of boundaries can also often lack transparency in larp. In kink communities, boundaries (or “limits”) are directly discussed with specificity and detail prior to scenes; communicating a clear boundary facilitates play by informing kinksters *what they can do*. Knowing that a participant is assured in their self-knowledge and confident in communicating their “no” enables a greater trust that their “yes” is rooted in an understanding of and commitment to upholding their own boundaries, which empowers emboldened play.

However, the self-imposed pressure to be a “good” larper or to be “easy to play with” may push players to say that they have no boundaries. When we say this, we rely upon social contracts, presuming others understand that we really mean something along the lines of: “I have the ‘normal’ boundaries that I *assume* that you assume that I have.” This ambiguity drives miscommunication. Misaligned cultural or social assumptions can end in unintentional

violations of unstated boundaries, even between the most well-intended players.

Responsible players don’t want to violate someone else’s boundaries, of course; most players have the unspoken boundary of “I am not okay with violating other players’ boundaries.” Therefore, a player who clarifies and enforces their boundaries upholds the unspoken boundaries of fellow participants. Communicating boundaries is not a hindrance to play, but an invitation to the types of play that *do* work for players’ boundaries.

By communicating the types of experiences and engagement players should anticipate, as well as the types of play that lie outside of the designers’ boundaries, we establish a clear framework that boundaries are normal and useful. We can then invite players to communicate their boundaries, and if they feel they do not need to list additional boundaries, use the phrase “my boundaries are covered by the boundaries of this larp.”

This further mitigates top drop, as the players of villainous characters aren’t left wondering what boundaries were unsaid, or whether the player with whom they have prenegotiated a scene simply felt uncomfortable naming boundaries. During play, those playing villainous characters sometimes invest emotional energy into self-policing, doubting their actions because they are uncertain what the boundaries actually are and they fear unintentional boundary crossings. Clearly acknowledging that the larp’s boundaries meet the player’s needs encourages other participants to play within those boundaries, rather than holding back from engaging with that

individual out of the fear of crossing an uncommunicated line.

Stating that boundaries are individualised and may fluctuate over time also mitigates top drop. This prepares players for boundaries to arise or change as a natural part of the collaborative communication that facilitates play, rather than as a punitive response to some unknown wrong. During workshops, if encouraging prenegotiation, remind players that these conversations are not promises. Boundaries change based on our emotional state, those in the room, the previous moments and their impact upon us, even what we’ve eaten recently. We should remind players that they do not need to explain – they may not even know – why boundaries changed, and repeat that shifting boundaries should be communicated and respected. Reinforcing this supports players of villains by normalizing boundary communication and pre-loading the understanding that respecting changing boundaries is a good thing, rather than an indicator that they have somehow failed to be a “good larper.” Because larpers are keenly creative, we can always find ways to massage the narrative to continue in new directions that uphold boundaries as they arise. But if we as designers do not prepare players for changing boundaries, they may feel as though completing prenegotiated scenes – things they agreed to hours previously in an entirely different context – overrides their current boundaries and needs. By providing players tools to implement when managing shifting boundaries, we prepare them to respond in ways that support their needs, counteracting the socialized pressure to silently endure harm and to self-shame for their boundaries shifting. These

intentions are not new; wanting *all* players to advocate for themselves and have their boundaries upheld during play has been at the forefront of the minds of generations of larp designers. By adopting transparency that is radically thorough in pursuit of teaching each cast to create a community of care, we shift the paradigm from self-care as individualized labour towards a communal materializing of that goal.

Tools for creating communities of care have long been established in the kink community, where consensual violence is not considered particularly taboo. However, many tops or doms still feel guilt or fear that they’ve harmed the other person in ways that weren’t wanted. This is natural; we’re taught that hurting others, especially when others put their trust in us, is bad. Even though everything is done with consent, the feelings of guilt and fear of harm are deeply, socially ingrained in us. Therefore, the doer of the action – the top in kink or the villainous character in larp – often needs reassurance and care once the durational play of the larp ends, especially when such care is not available during play as scenes progress and the narrative continues evolving in ways that do not provide aftercare.

Like in kink, the player behind an antagonist is taking actions that were agreed to. Without those characters, many larps wouldn’t have the catharsis or conflict they’re looking for. Players who portray victims may receive comfort after their larp or scene, while those who played aggressors may not receive the same aftercare. The aggressor player might experience guilt, recrimination, and an off-game accumulation of all their violent scenes, but the

social conditioning that aggressors who seek care from those they harmed are manipulative may convince the player they cannot ask for help. Furthermore, the player may not identify the feeling of top drop. Thus, they are unable to ask for help. As well as utilizing the concepts of RACK, SOAR, and Radical Teaching Transparency, designers can communicate with players that the distinct – but often layering – experiences of general larp drop and top drop are normal occurrences, as well as providing tools for players to recover from each.

How do we help players understand that they’re experiencing top drop? Part of this comes back to transparency: communicate what off-game deroling supports will be made available. Every larp has different ways of having in-game vs off-game time; some run unbroken in-game throughout and will only call off game at the end; others have breaks. For those that contain breaks within the game, safety workshops can encourage those who have been in intense scenes of oppression or victimization to talk to each other off game and reinforce that they are feeling comfortable with their in-game play. Providing tools to facilitate this communication can further mitigate top drop. This is massively helpful for people who may be feeling distress or guilt at playing antagonists. For games without built-in off-game time, communicate this ahead of time so that participants can prepare for selfcare throughout the game time as prompted by Hernø; additionally, remind people preparing to play oppressors that their needs and boundaries are as valid as everyone else’s. Deroling takes many forms; so designers should offer a variety of tools and options for players, rather

than mandating one specific approach and leaving players to assume that if the one approach did not work for them, they are in the wrong, which may exacerbate drop rather than providing care.

Everyone’s needs are different; some individuals need socializing to recharge, while others need a quiet moment alone. There are no universal guidelines as to what “has” to be done for aftercare. The end goal of aftercare is to communicate and ensure everyone is taken care of. There are a variety of ways to accomplish this. Some partners enjoy cuddling, nourishment, sharing stories and validation after going through a heavy and intense experience. Other participants may wish to process the experience alone, and need the space and tools to do so. Different options should be available to serve participants’ diverse needs. If two people have polar opposite needs for aftercare, such as one person needing affirmation and cuddles and the other needing time alone to process, this is important to learn before the heightened emotions from a scene complicate communication. If people are aware they have incompatible aftercare needs, they can organise so that both their needs are met. This neatly translates to larp, as larp designers can offer multiple avenues for aftercare and deroleing, allowing each member of the cast to engage in the form of care that supports them best. When many designers spend time trying to determine what is “best,” it may in fact be most effective to merely offer transparency around the options available and encourage individuals to make choices that work best for them. As Muñoz reminds us, queer performance should center on collective care while reinforcing process and resisting mastery or correct ways of being. Leaning into

transparency and RACK, acknowledging and informing participants about top drop, and providing options so that participants know what is available and can make decisions to meet their own needs – rather than forcing one ‘masterful’ method onto everyone and leaving those for whom that method is insufficient to fend for themselves – can increase our collective care and help mitigate the multiple, complex, layered forms of drops that players experience.

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The Spirit of Glarping

Sheila Poor

A few years back, during a humorous conversation among fellow ‘aging larpers’ – as we playfully describe ourselves – we riffed on the familiar ‘I’m too old for this shit’ whinging and whining. While we wrapped ourselves in blankets, munched on a few extra snacks we brought to the game, and laughed at our own growing list of comforts, I cheerfully chimed in with a wink and spontaneously proclaimed ‘I am a glarper and I am proud of it!’.

That was the moment I realised I had accidentally named something I had already been living for years. In an ironic, hilariously self-aware, and slightly epic moment, the term ‘glarping’ was born – at least for me. Ever since, I happily kept spreading this idea and its spirit.

To get into the right mood I wrote this article in between three international larps, played in three different countries within four consecutive weeks. It was an intense endeavour, it pushed me to some of my limits. At the same time, it felt like the perfect opportunity to remind myself of what I need to experience a good larp – while being exposed to the stress of travelling abroad, sleep deprivation, emotional turmoil and intense experiences with mostly strangers, some of whom I hope will become friends, and some who might also see larp not only as escapism but also as a little holiday away from reality.

What is glarping?

When my wonderful hobby, larp, entered my life around thirteen years ago, I quickly realised that comfort is not only key, but king to me – especially in combination with international travel. With a few well-chosen life hacks and self-indulgent perks I

organise for myself, glarping becomes a sort of hedonistic take on larping. As glarping is not a generally shared concept let me elaborate a bit.

‘Glarping’ is a coined word combining ‘glamping’ and ‘larping’. Some time ago the idea of ‘glamping’ emerged in the camping community, meaning glamorous camping, a lifestyle that combines nature with comfort – often in wildly over-elaborate ways. Think carpets, feather beds, bathtubs in tents, or a fully prepared campsite with a chef grilling Kobe beef on a BBQ stove and an open fire prepared by a park ranger. That kind of thing. While glamping is luxury despite nature, ‘glarping’ to me is about adding a bit of personal luxury or extra comfort to larping. It is attending a larp with an optional personal add-on bonus system I organise for myself. The idea kind of blends nicely, as some of us enjoy the set in-game drama and the deep character-play experiences, but perhaps not the prospect of spending the night on thin mattresses in damp sleeping bags with mediocre coffee in the morning (yes, to some coffee is a big deal). This is when glarping steps in, which is about pampering myself a little more on location so that comfort also enables more engagement and diving into the role.

Hedonism, immersion and why ‘glarping’ comfort matters

When I larp I do not only give my time and presence, but I give my personal energy, commitment and heart to the gameplay and fellow larpers. I also love tasty food, my cup of good coffee, a warm bed and hopefully a hot shower at least once a day. Overall, I

would probably consider myself a bit of a hedonist. I have always had a taste for the good life, enjoyed comfort, and appreciated occasional indulgence – not in opposition to others, but in responsibility toward my own limits and needs.

Glarping means I make my stay even more pleasant by bringing or organising a few extra things for my personal comfort, when they are – for whatever reason – not provided by the organisers. I simply prepare myself for staying somewhere else and having a good time. We all know that intense larping consumes a great deal of our energy. When we are deeply immersed, we are so into the game that we often even forget to eat or drink. Nights tend to be short, beds may be uncomfortable, and we are often far from the usual treats and small comforts we have back at home. This is when the spirit of glarping becomes practical rather than glamorous. Initially the idea was about indulgence, but I quickly realised that sometimes even little things can be a dearly missed luxury. Ultimately, we are not at home and are instead guests at the venue. You may not fix a missing hot shower on location, but you can make sure you are well prepared, or might find solutions like booking a separate accommodation nearby. These little extras may also allow me to have an even greater larp experience myself. Being comfortable allows me personally to fully engage with the emotional, social, and creative depth the game asks of me.

When I decide that I would like to play a larp, I first register what is provided by the organisers before signing up for a spot. I assess if there is anything crucial that I could really be missing, and if this larp is suitable for my needs. I do this by checking

the larp announcement to see if I can possibly find any additional information about the location online, or simply asking the organisers in case I’m looking for something special. Transparency on the organisers’ website regarding services provided on location helps me a great deal to decide if the larp is suitable for me. I then decide what I might want to bring for myself as my own personal level of comfort or luxury.

Knowing what to expect allows me to relax into the experience rather than brace against it. Of course, I also recognise my own limits and do not sign up for games where my basic needs clearly cannot be met – for example, playing on a ship when I know I get seasick, or committing to a physically active and strenuous outdoor larp that would exceed my endurance. At times sleeping in a tent outside or a room with twenty people might just not be the right thing for me.

Some larps are played at great locations with a lot of add-ons, some offer a great location but no additional services. Some higher-priced larps already offer glarping, but it is not about the big things. The location and services provided are clearly what they are, and this is totally fine. Mostly all organisers are very clear and transparent about what amenities to expect on location and this is super important for us players so we can plan ahead.

Once I have been accepted, I do a bit of additional research. Like if there is a supermarket nearby in case I forget anything, or check-in facilities and services in the area. I may ask organisers to clarify questions on certain amenities,

like whether there is a kettle available. If necessary, I take certain things into my own hands – transparently and without interfering with the overall organisation, like organising a separate place to stay in case I do not want to stay on location and sleep in a tent.

Ideas of how to glarp

So why do I sign up for a larp when what is offered by the organisers does not fully meet my needs? Because I love larping, and I understand that everybody's expectations are different, and that is perfectly fine. I realised that I might need a few cherries on top that others might not want at all. It does not always have to be a big or fancy thing. For some larpers a good warm coffee or hot drinks and a tasty bite for hunger outside strict mealtimes could already be a glarping factor.

For me, glarping can be something very small, ranging from a delicious homemade snack in between, to a water kettle I bring for my hot water bottle that goes into my sleeping bag. An electrical heating blanket or reusable hand warmers have found their way into my suitcase. A nourishing face mask for my skin and eye patches after a short night is standard already, and I love to share them with my roomies. Or I bring wet toilet paper in case there are portable toilets available, or wet body towels when there are no showers on location. It can also be a little coffee maker for delicious coffee so I can begin the day grounded, and my favourite oat milk and caffeine-infused-chocolate snacks for in between are also helpful. It can be a flask of delicious liquor I enjoy in private (when allowed) or booking a massage treatment to cool off and relax after the larp, when adding an additional day

before I travel back home. When travelling with friends, it may extend to sharing an exclusive off-game accommodation close to the larp location that allows us to rest and recover together. What all these choices have in common is intention. Glarping is not about overindulgence, but about personal sustainability – ensuring that I can give my best to the game without burning out because of a lack of personal comfort, and leave feeling relaxed enough to jump back into my daily life.

Glarping as a holiday lifestyle?

Over time, I have come to see glarping not only as a personal practice, but almost as a shared mindset among some players around me. Many resonate with the idea of a dash of extra comfort as they also lead demanding lives: stressful jobs, busy family situations, and a wide range of obligations that already consume much of their emotional and physical energy on a daily basis. For many of us, larp is a hobby we lovingly squeeze into already full schedules. We plan for it months in advance, sometimes sacrificing other holidays or leisure activities to make it possible and often commute longer distances. In that context, it feels natural that some players would like their larp experience to be especially nourishing – not because they are unwilling to commit, but because they want their limited free time to be meaningful, joyful and restorative. Especially international larping often comes with significant financial and logistical investment. Travel, costumes, props, and time off work add up quickly.

Once, with friends, we rented a 400 square meter villa that came with a pool, a gym, a cinema room, a BBQ-area and a sauna. We mainly chose the accommodation due to the big space, the many beautiful

bedrooms and most importantly, the short ten minutes' drive distance to the larp venue. It was of course not necessary to have all that exaggerated luxury. But we felt very privileged to have all that available, as though we were on an exclusive larp holiday getaway. The official event accommodation would have meant taking a bus and travelling at least 30-45 minutes to the hotel twice every day, so it was about comfort and good planning for a small group of people. Some of us even extended the stay for one day so we could properly recover after the game before driving back home for about eight hours. Yes, it does involve some planning for a little group of around ten larp-holidaymakers and so far, this villa has been the most exclusive place I organised besides a few extra nice boutique hotel rooms. But when a few people get together, have a vision and throw a bit of a budget in the pot, super glarping can surely be achieved.

When larp might become the primary form of holiday for some of us, it makes sense to approach it with the same care we would apply to any other valued break. Seen this way, glarping is not about avoiding hardship or escaping immersion. It is about choosing where hardship serves the story, and sleeping off-game in a warm bed or staying in a nearby hotel does not make someone a worse larper. On the contrary, glarping often allows me to show up as a more present, resilient and active player. My preparations and perks may allow me to stay more grounded, focused, and emotionally available – which ultimately benefits both my own experience and that of the people I play with. Glarping might have a collective dimension in that sense as well. Players who take responsibility for

their own regulation by adding additional levels of comfort could place less strain on organisers and thus on fellow participants.

It means being prepared, allowing myself to take good care of myself, and treating myself with kindness and little treats rather than endurance-based pride. This is why I often go the extra mile not only for a good character portrait, but also for a small stash of guilty pleasures and smaller practical comforts I bring to the location. At the same time, I still consider myself an all-in larper. Wanting comfort off-game – or even occasionally in-game – does not diminish my commitment. It simply means that I want to show up regulated, present, and able to give generously to the shared fiction.

Psychology of care and psychological depth

Larp is a playful, joyful, and in a way a very intimate leisure activity. I am willing to put effort not only into my character play, but also into my personal surroundings, so I can make sure I truly make the most out of the game – for myself and, of course, for others. I personally enjoy the Nordic larp genre a lot, and for me larp is about self-awareness, exploring inner roles that are often archetypal, and engaging fully with interpersonal dynamics. The personal development I strive for in larps often happens through escalating drama and the descent of my characters.

The psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung once stated, in the context of role and individuation, that “we do not really understand anything unless we experience it” (Jung, 2024) – so, only the experience makes us fully understand. Jung is often regarded as one of the psychological

fathers of roleplay, together with Jacob L. Moreno, who stated: “The patient learns by doing, by experiencing, by living through situations“ (Moreno, 1946). Moreno believed that people learn and heal through the active enactment of situations. For me, this understanding is not abstract. To truly dive into the depth of roleplay – to fall into a role and to let go of any shame, inhibition and inner constraint – I need to feel comfortable in a very tangible, physical sense. I feel this most clearly when my body is calm enough to let my character fall apart. Only then can I take emotional risks without holding back.

Comfort, for me, is closely tied to safety. And safety is not a vague emotional promise, but something grounded in basic needs being met. At some point, I need to be (hopefully well) fed. I need to know there is a place where I can rest. I need to trust that when I step off-game, I am taken care of as well. I am willing – and often eager – to deprive myself on several levels for the sake of immersion. I can explore the inner world of my character and go hardcore into a role when the gameplay asks for it, and I am ready to do it. I just need to know that deprivation is temporary and consensual. If there is no food provided in-game, it would be great if nutritious snacks or hot drinks like tea or coffee are available off-game, maybe even in the safety room if there is one. Ideally, these recreational options are accessible even outside strict mealtimes, because my body does not always follow tight schedules. If such a service is not possible or not in the budget, this is fine, I just need to know beforehand so I can organise myself accordingly. For me personally, the feeling of being safe, sane and in consent is connected to food and resting possibilities for my physical and mental health.

I believe psychologist and psychiatrist Abraham Maslow’s model of human motivation reflects this well with his hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943). His idea of continuous progress is displayed as a pyramid with five tiers. It displays the process of coverage of basic physiological needs such as food, water, and sleep in the first tier. He then moves to safety needs, followed by the needs of love and belonging, like the stability to love, a feeling of belonging and interpersonal relationships. The fourth tier shows self-esteem, and finally on the top is self-actualisation. All this resonates strongly with my larp experience. In larp, personal growth, fulfilment and thus deep play become possible when the tiers are reliably covered.

Neurodivergence, self-care and personal responsibility

I am not only a hedonist, but also a neurodivergent person diagnosed with ADHD. This matters here because neurodivergent people often experience Maslow’s pyramid more intensely, with additional challenges layered on top. ADHD can affect sleep patterns, hunger cues, sensory processing, and daily routines – all areas that larp could disrupt quite dramatically. You can imagine that larp can stir up my daily routines and rhythms immensely. Time collapses, mealtimes are different, or I even skip meals because I miss the time slot, sleep becomes fragmented, and emotional intensity rises quickly. To avoid unnecessary stress, I need to take conscious care of myself. I do not want to rely on others to regulate my wellbeing, nor do I expect organisers or fellow players to manage my personal limits for me. The agency stays with me and glarping is a practice of responsibility.

When I commit to a larp, I do not only give

my time and money. I give my presence, emotional energy, trust, and often vulnerability. In return, I always trust for transparency and reliability regarding basic needs. Food does not need to be luxurious, but it should be sufficient, nourishing, and accessible, at least off-game. Sleeping arrangements do not need to be extravagant, but they should be clean, safe, and honestly communicated in advance.

In hindsight, the idea of glarping did not emerge from abundance alone, but also from a series of challenging and sometimes disappointing experiences over the years. Some larps had different standards to what I had anticipated. That made me aware of how deeply accommodation, food, and basic care influences my ability to play. Some locations were cold, wet, windy, mouldy, or simply dirty and thus very dusty. Coffee was sometimes absent, sometimes barely drinkable. Food could be scarce, poorly prepared, unhygienic, occasionally accompanied by flies. None of these experiences were dramatic on their own: every one of them could be stressful, but together they shaped a growing awareness in me. Each of these moments taught me to look more carefully at what is provided by the organisers on location next time – and what is not possible to cater for. It might be helpful though to maybe add a few more pieces of information when advertising a larp, because for some players some services might make a big difference. Coffee or hot tea is a good example of this. This is not a critique of organisers, but an act of self-responsibility. When my basic needs, which might differ from others, are covered well, glarping becomes a joyful option rather than a coping mechanism. If I can easily arrange some extras for myself

without interfering with the organisers’ plans – and inform them where necessary – I see no harm in this.

For me, glarping is also not about demanding luxury from organisers. It is about retaining agency with transparency. To me, this is not about entitlement, but probably about good project management and making information available, like a checklist of what to bring and what is offered. I guess organising a larp means planning for human bodies as much as for stories.

This article is written with heartfelt gratitude to all larp organisers. Their dedication, care, love and competence make these experiences possible. Even small gestures can have a powerful impact on how safe and comfortable players feel and many offer glarping perks even though they are not aware of it. Because even a minor thing can make a big difference to us players. Thank you all for your hard work!

This article only reflects my personal and obviously biased opinion. So what do you think of glarping, what is it for you, and have you ever super glarped before? I am inspired by the quote ‘When life gives you lemons, turn them into something sweet and opportunities!’ Let’s start a friendly discussion on ‘glarping’!

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The Rise of Larp in Malaysia

Sean Wang
Cheryl Bates



Photo: Edwin Ho

A humid jungle with muddied sneakers, an oversized black t-shirt and two hard foam rods to protect me. By the end of the day, I was covered in sweat and bug bites. One of my white socks turned red due to leeches. That was what it was like when I first started larping in Malaysia.

While it may sound horrible, I'm still here. I'm even running things now as the head admin for the Malaysian Live Action Roleplaying Community.

So, why did I stick around? One word. Community. It was the community that made me feel welcome and made larping in Malaysia so fun, and through this article, I will dive further into what made the community here work and some of the challenges we've faced as we grew.

Early beginnings

Malaysia is no stranger to events that involve dressing up. Our city centre of Kuala Lumpur has a large-scale cosplay event every other month. Urban life is saturated with anime, comics and games, but despite that larp is still pretty young here.

The first recorded larp was an unnamed one held in 2013, followed by a Marvel-themed larp based on *Thor: The Dark World* at Comic Fiesta, a major local anime, cosplay and games convention. When *Wira Games & Hobbies*, a local wargaming shop, opened soon after, the small but passionate community finally had a space for parlour larps like White Wolf Publishing's *Vampire: The Masquerade*.

In 2015, Malaysia saw its first long-form fantasy larp campaign, *Maelstrom* (Malaysia, 2015), adapted by Sacha Dijkshoorn from *Vortex Adventures LARP* (Netherlands, 2003). It was the first Malaysian larp with structured mechanics, safety calls, and boffer combat. Costuming was more prominent but they were still quite simple due to budget constraints.

In 2016, Aaron Lim Fei Hoong created *The Quest* (Malaysia, 2016) at KDU University (now known as University of Wollongong Malaysia), a larp with sci-fi/fantasy elements. This evolved into *Tales of Kowloon* (Malaysia 2016).

Since then, the community grew from fewer than ten players to about forty active participants, mostly concentrated in the Klang Valley, a central location in Malaysia where most of the playerbase resides. The hobby had participants from 18 years old to even folks in their early 40s.

Maelstrom was still an incredibly popular larp as it started to diversify from just the yearly 2-day-1-night larps to day larp and the occasional parlour larp.

The crossroads

The COVID-19 pandemic hit us hard. The 'live action' aspect of larping was not feasible for the few years of Movement Control Order, a series of national quarantine measures implemented by the Malaysian federal government. All we could do was bide our time and wait for the government to lift movement control restrictions. Then, another blow to the community came in 2023 when Sacha, our head admin, migrated with his family back to the Netherlands.

It was at this time, as one of the remaining organisers of *Maelstrom* and with no other volunteers, I took over as the head administrator to the community. Honestly, it wasn't easy. I was inexperienced and felt underqualified. And to make things worse, I was having troubles with my day job. Furthermore, interest in larp in Malaysia was waning as significant numbers of people were leaving the community after the pandemic, pursuing other hobbies.

With no one else taking up the mantle of leadership, I almost considered dispersing the community altogether, effectively ending larp in Malaysia.

The Renaissance of Malaysian larping

It was around this time that Aaron Lim returned from Australia to Malaysia. He brought his insight and expertise from his experiences with playing at *Swordcraft* (Australia, 2011), a long-running fantasy larp, to games in Malaysia by advising me and also developing his own larp, *Crucible Conflicts* (Malaysia, 2023). His contributions to the community were invaluable, as it was due to his oversight and advice that the Malaysian larp scene had a resurgence, with around 20 new players making the community their home.

The Malaysian larp scene also saw significant expansion in 2023, as it expanded its horizons beyond the fantasy genre, for the first time since the *Vampire: The Masquerade* games all those years ago. This was with the introduction of *Minutes to Midnight* (Malaysia, 2023) by Cheryl Bates. The game was a cosmic horror parlour larp loosely inspired by stories like the SCP Foundation, an online webseries about anomalous objects that are being contained by an enigmatic organisation.

Since then, the Malaysian larp community began to flourish, as more larpers started developing their own games across genres and with varying levels of rules complexity, such as *Secret Brews* (Malaysia, 2024), a superhero-themed comedy larp, and *Murder Party* (Malaysia, 2025), a free-form larp where people play as crows.

Meanwhile, *Maelstrom* has only continued to grow. With a rules overhaul inspired by *Crucible Conflicts*, the strategic combat larp, it was easier than ever to get into Malaysia's flagship campaign larp. Now, *Maelstrom* was attracting about ten players from outside of Malaysia, with players travelling up from Singapore, Indonesia, and Australia to join our fantasy events.

MyLARP, the Malaysian Live Action Roleplaying Community platform, also continued to increase its reach in the country by facilitating outreach programs through conventions like Animangaki and Season4Otaku, craft bazaars like Craft Affair, and universities like Asia Pacific University. It is through these outreach efforts that our presence is made known and the local larp scene grows steadily.

What does larp in Malaysia look like?

In Malaysia, we have a phrase borrowed from our regional neighbour Thailand, 'same same but different'. Similarly, I think that larp in Malaysia is very similar to many of our Western counterparts but we have a few things that we do differently.

Costuming in Malaysia

When looking at videos of larps outside of Malaysia, you'd often see intricate industrially-made injection-foam moulded

boffer weapons and costumes made of real leather and steel. In Malaysia, you'd see very little of that. There are two reasons for this: low spending power and low accessibility.

As Malaysia is a growing economy with a weak currency, our spending power is on the lower end. The median individual income in Malaysia is estimated to be around RM 2,864 (around 600 EUR) a month. This means that Malaysians have to be incredibly selective on how we spend money on hobbies.

As there are no major larp equipment distributors in Southeast Asia, purchasing ready-made larp gear like boffers and armour would have to be done with European manufacturers like Calimacil or Epic Armoury. This would prove to be prohibitively expensive for the average Malaysian, especially when you factor in shipping costs and customs fees.

Due to this, Malaysians mostly opt to build their own boffers and armour.

Initially, any material that was 'safe enough' was used. Early Malaysian larp boffer weapons had everything from broom handles to metal rods as cores and high-density foam coated in rubber paint. Now, we primarily use fibreglass rods wrapped in low-density EVA foam, sanded down and coated in latex. We even introduced stab tips made of various soft yet malleable materials to allow for safe stabbing.

We test our weapons rigorously by squeezing them to test for softness, twisting them for core adhesion and ramming them against solid surfaces for stab-safety. Now, many of our weapons are on par with the safety

standards of other larps as seen by some of our players bringing their Malaysian-made weapons to larps like *Swordcraft* in Australia.

As for armour, due to the high cost of getting steel plate armour in Malaysia, we primarily use EVA foam painted the appropriate colour to represent the material it is made from. For example, steel armour is painted silver to represent that it is made of metal. This differs from some overseas games we've heard of that only allow armours to count as heavy armour if they are made of metal.

Aesthetics-wise, since we do not have dedicated tailors for larp gear in Malaysia, most first-time players rely on practical solutions. Many start with affordable costumes from online malls like Shopee, while others repurpose old cosplay outfits or modify thrifted clothing to fit the setting.

Costuming with the climate in mind is essential for Malaysian larpers. The humidity is intense, and the sun can be overwhelming, with temperatures often sitting between 30 and 40 degrees Celsius. Because of this, most cloth costumes are made with breathability in mind, using thinner fabrics that allow heat to escape. Foam armour traps heat easily due to poor airflow, so many of us score small vents into the foam to help release warmth during combat or extended scenes.

Our weather also brings sudden tropical thunderstorms. When events are scheduled outside the rainy seasons, a downpour can arrive without warning. For this reason, many Malaysian larpers carry multiple costume sets. It allows us to swap into a fresh kit after getting soaked, muddy, or simply overheated, which helps maintain comfort and immersion throughout the event.



Photo: Edwin Ho

Language in Malaysia

Malaysia is a cultural melting pot consisting of three major ethnicities (Malays, Chinese and Indians), each bringing their respective cultures, languages and practices into their hobbies. Malaysia's majority race is Malay, and the national language is Bahasa Malaysia. Due to our shared colonial roots, many people in Malaysia speak English as at least their second language. It is due to this unifying factor that larps in Malaysia primarily use English as their *lingua franca*.

As English is often a second language for many of our participants, we had to take that into account when developing game rules. For this article, let's take a peek behind the curtain with the rules overhaul we had for *Maelstrom*, Malaysia's longest-running

campaign larp. In short, our approach was to simplify the language as much as possible without compromising clarity.

In the earliest stages of *Maelstrom's* development, the rulebook was about 5 different books, each tailored to a different aspect of the game, such as Spellcasting, Rituals or Potioncrafting. Since then, to improve language accessibility, we've not only trimmed all the rulebooks to one book but we've also gone over everything to reduce language complexity and added lots of visual aids to help.

An example of a significant change to the game was how we handled spellcasting. Initially, each spell required a sentence to be spoken before it could be cast. The long sentence led to memorisation issues, and the intent of

using it as a means to create a cast-time for spells was not effective as people began to rap through the chanting if they could remember it. When we updated the *Maelstrom* rules in 2023, we removed the chant altogether. Instead, players may use any means they'd like to symbolise their spellcasting, from chanting in any language to weaving sigils with their hands. All that mattered was an effect call that was shouted at the end.

Effect calls are also something that received a lot of changes as we tried to make the language accessible to the average Malaysian. During earlier builds of *Maelstrom*, there were upwards of 40 different effect calls, each with specific effects. While most of the calls were quite straightforward, like 'Freeze', there were a few that were a bit less so, like 'Sunder'. So, when we were updating our rules, we compressed the calls into around 20 calls instead. Each call functioned significantly differently from each other with simple 1-3 syllable words like 'Slow', 'Fear' or 'Silence'.

Furthermore, initially damage types were also spoken when spells or attacks were used. This meant that people had to tack on types like 'Fire' or 'Frost' to their attacks. While flavourful, this caused unnecessary cognitive load. So, we removed it wholesale. Instead, the only calls used are calls that have a mechanical function in the game, like the previously mentioned 'Fear' call.

Outside of game rule design, we also do our best to integrate different languages into the game's stories. This led to interesting events where some characters spoke Mandarin Chinese and could not communicate with the English-speaking characters. The players had to find ways to communicate or

find a player who could speak the language. We've also integrated multilingualism in some of our background lore, like the Wind Elementals speaking Mandarin Chinese and the Earth Elementals speaking Bahasa Malaysia. These integrations make for fun representation of our shared cultures and languages while making as many players' cultures feel seen in the larps.

Culture in Malaysia

Malaysia as a culture is steeped in South-east Asian traditions. Despite there being many different cultures present in Malaysia, there are overlapping themes like representing emotions, respecting authority and embracing conformity. This means that there are certain hurdles that Malaysians face when trying larp.

One of the immediate challenges is that it takes time for many players to come out of their shells. Malaysians as a whole are extremely shy and emotionally reserved. Because of this, the first few games for new players often involve game organisers and veteran community members gently encouraging newcomers to open up, experiment and express themselves more freely. Once the initial mask falls and players realise how much they can explore through roleplay, they begin to thrive. As a result of these efforts, we've started to see more players come to larp as a place to escape from the strict norms of our conservative society.

Malaysia also has a very strong collectivist culture. This mindset shapes the way people play. Players tend to prioritise group harmony, cooperation and shared success, which naturally tilts our larps toward PvE-focused gameplay. People enjoy facing monsters, puzzles and story challenges



Photo: Edwin Ho

together rather than fighting each other. PvP requires a level of emotional separation and social maturity that not all players have developed yet, so while we do not prohibit PvP, we rarely encourage it. Our players generally prefer teamwork and narrative-driven collaboration.

This is also why Malaysian larps tend to be warm, lively and collaborative, often blending serious storytelling with the chaotic humour that is so characteristic of Malaysian social life.

A conservative upbringing means that many Malaysians were not raised with values that help keep larp communities safe. Many of us grow up in environments that prioritise hierarchy, restraint and conformity over open dialogue, emotional expression or boundary-setting. This is further compounded by religious upbringings that may not offer healthy education on interpersonal behaviour, gender dynamics or inclusivity. As a result, some individuals may unknowingly carry rigid expectations, sexist attitudes or prejudiced views into shared spaces. When people who come from such backgrounds enter a larp environment, they might not naturally understand the importance of consent, communication and emotional awareness. What feels like harmless roleplay to one person might be deeply uncomfortable to another.

To help with this, we developed safety tools that allow players to express boundaries without disrupting the flow of the game. One such tool is the "Okay" sign. If a person seems distressed, another player can flash the sign to check if they are acting or genuinely uncomfortable. If the sign

is returned, everything is fine. If it is not returned, gameplay pauses and a game organiser steps in to mediate and assist. Because this tool is expected, taught and normalised across the community, players use it freely to check on one another.

Larp organisers must remain vigilant. We establish clear guidelines, encourage open communication and address problematic behaviour quickly, regardless of ignorance or intent. Our Code of Conduct outlines what is expected in our community and is enforced by a team of Community Leaders who guide, educate, and if needed, take corrective action. We believe that most missteps come from inexperience rather than malice, but serious violations still result in suspension or removal to keep the community safe.

Because Malaysia consists of many different faiths and cultural groups, we also take care to avoid sensitive topics that might upset participants. In games set in the real world, we intentionally avoid references to real-world religion or politics as these subjects are deeply personal and can easily cause discomfort or conflict. We also generally discourage inter-character romance or sexual themes. This is not about moral policing but about recognising that the community is still developing the emotional tools and boundaries needed to handle intimacy and potential bleed responsibly.

Despite these cultural limitations, Malaysian players are incredibly enthusiastic and open-minded within boundaries that help them feel safe. Players embrace cooperation, shared objectives and immersive storytelling. They enjoy all aspects of larp, from fast-paced combat to comedic

shenanigans. With the wide range of cross-genre games available in Malaysia, including cosmic horror in *Minutes to Midnight* and whimsical roleplay in *Murder Party*, there is truly a larp for every kind of player we have met so far.

By setting thoughtful limits and cultivating a healthy community culture, we create a strong foundation for players to grow together. As the community matures and gains experience with consent-based play and emotional safety frameworks, we can expand the kinds of stories we tell. For now, the priority remains ensuring that everyone feels respected, comfortable and safe while engaging in collaborative storytelling.

What to expect in the coming years

Overall, the Malaysian larp community still has a lot of room to grow in the coming years and as some of our members bring back their positive experiences from events in other countries, we aim to adapt what we can from the successes and learn from the challenges. Ultimately, our goal is to foster a larp community here in Malaysia that is an inclusive and safe space to express ourselves in our favourite hobby. Hopefully, as the Malaysian larp community grows, it would be synonymous with weekend activities as tabletop roleplaying games like *Dungeons & Dragons*. We will continue to bring mainstay larp activities like *Maelstrom* and *Minutes to Midnight* in the coming years, but we also aim to hit the freeform larp genre more frequently, both with self-developed games and games adapted from other larps overseas.

Anyone curious about joining us can find our community page under MyLARP on Facebook and Instagram, where we post upcoming events and newcomer-friendly introductions.

Ludography

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Murder Party (2025) Wang, S., Malaysia

Secret Brews (2024) Lim, C., Malaysia

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Tales of Kowloon (2016) Lim, A., Malaysia

The Quest (2016) Lim, A., Malaysia

Vortex Adventures (2003) Unknown, Netherlands, Vortex Adventures



Types of Fun, Flavors of Experiences

Rachel Hoekendijk

A first version of this article was originally written in French as a contribution to the francophone larp scene, where the typology of fun is used often but sometimes in very creative ways. I wrote it because last year, a friend who participates mostly in traditional medieval-fantasy larps in Belgium asked me to define what a Type 2 larp was. He had seen a larp presented as such and he wondered what it meant, exactly. His first assumption was that said larp aimed to provoke emotions, but then he backtracked: so-called “traditional” larps also provoke emotions. He thought: Is “Type 2 larp” a catch-all expression for all kinds of “non-traditional” larps? Is it a pompous way to define a casting-based and “well-designed” (his words) larp?

I asked around on francophone larp groups what people assumed “Type 2” meant and I was surprised by the diversity of interpretations in circulation. Someone explained: “Type 1 is when you feel the same thing your character feels, Type 2 is when you and your character are feeling different things.” Some went as far as to explain there was a hierarchy between different types of larps and larpers: “People usually start with Type 1 larps, as they are more accessible and you can usually participate with friends. But once you get used to this, you can move on to more sophisticated flavors. Type 2 larps go deeper, they are for more mature, more experienced players.” This, of course, provokes strong reactions to the expression “Type 2 larps” because it then feels condescending. I should point out that not everyone in the francophone larp scene is familiar with Nordic larp and it’s common for what you might call a “Nordic larp-inspired” larp to present itself simply as a “Type 2 larp.”

Few larp-related and easily accessible documentation on types of fun are still available online. In this article, I aim at achieving two things: First, I will try to clarify the typology of fun by putting it in its context and distinguishing it from other notions that might sometimes overlap or be confused with it. Secondly, I aim to document the diversity of uses of this typology, as well as some new or creative takes on it. By this, I hope to offer a reflection on how theories are crafted, appropriated in different contexts, and reframed.

Types of experiences

What is referred to as “Type 2” is an abbreviation of “Type 2 fun.” We are talking about the types of experiences that can be expected while larping. The Nordiclarp.org article indicates that the term “Type 2” was first used by Markus Montola in the Facebook group *Larpers BFF* in 2016. It stems from the outdoor adventure community, where it is used to describe experiences that are objectively unpleasant at the time but that would be enjoyed in retrospect, like working out until you puke or the final 300 meters to a peak that make you swear you hate alpine climbing. The typology, to put it simply, goes: Type 1 is fun the whole time, 5/5 stars, would recommend. Type 2 is challenging, uncomfortable or even painful at times, you might touch on your limits or even slightly exceed them, but afterwards you can expect to feel satisfied in some way. Type 3 is... We’ll come back to Type 3 later.

If we apply this to larp, we will experience **Type 2 fun** when we expose ourselves to a **range of uncomfortable experiences** that we would rather avoid in our daily lives. This



Photo: The Art of Momentography, Si Qua Fata Sinant (Belgium, 2023)

can be **on a physical level** (such as hunger or sleep deprivation), **an emotional level** (exploring feelings including anger, grief, or anxiety) or **a psychological level** (such as high levels of stress, moral dilemmas, cognitive dissonance, poor mental health, etc.).

In contrast, **Type 1 fun is enjoyable in real time**. Type 1-oriented larps aim at giving you a good time. This can take various forms. You may find intellectual stimulation in solving puzzles or devising strategies. You may enjoy a banquet or singing in a group, making snippy comments at your companions, getting into brawl fights, falling in love, looking good in a costume, getting an adrenaline rush, or writing poetry during a retreat. If it makes you feel good, you’re probably having Type 1 fun. It is worth noting that what is enjoyable to some is not necessarily enjoyable to everyone. Some

people enjoy horror movies, having a good cry every other weekend or getting a back massage that feels like it might break your body. The point is: you know *you* enjoy it.

Type I fun is an activity you’re sure you’ll enjoy, and you do. [...] But Type II fun? That’s the sweet spot. It challenges you without putting you in danger — and it’s often uncomfortable but in ways that also make you feel alive. (Washington Post, 2022)

Whether it is appropriate to call these Type 2 experiences “fun” is open to discussion. For the sake of this article, the important part to focus on is that even though it might not feel good right away, it does lead to other forms of gratification, as Montola points out in his 2010 article ‘The positive negative experiences in extreme role-playing.’ Type 2 fun can, for example,

satisfy a desire for intensity or exploration. It often offers memorable experiences that take us out of our daily lives, confront us with our limits, catalyze social bonds and make us feel alive. Type 2 can be cathartic in the sense that it allows us to experience, in a controlled environment, things that we would rather avoid in everyday life and which can, it seems, help us grow. This is, arguably, at the heart of transformative play.

How to use this typology?

A tension that runs through this typology is the question of what it applies to. Does it apply to experiences, to players, or to games? There is no unique answer to this, but they all bear slightly different meanings. Ericka Skirpan (2021), for example, argues that “recognizing your type [as a player] is a great resource to help you negotiate scenes, pick the games you are attending, fill out character surveys, and get the best experience you can for your own personality.” But she also stresses that you shouldn’t feel married to your “type”: it can change. Identifying what type of player you are would then be quite connected to identifying why your larp, an inclination towards the type of experience you aim for, and it would help to set boundaries in order to remain true to the experience you want.

Oftentimes, this typology is applied to games to say, for example: “this larp is a Type 2 larp.” I would argue against it, even though it is very common. It’s a shortcut and I think not a very accurate or even helpful one, as this typology describes a quality of experience, which might very well not be shared by everyone during a particular larp. When organisers use it in their statement of

intent or design document to describe their larp, what it *really* means is: “in this larp, players can *expect* a Type 2 experience.” The organisers are communicating about the experience they’re *trying* to deliver, but the organisers’ intentions are not a guarantee.

The players’ experience will not necessarily be homogenous within the same larp. The first episode of *Clones* (Belgium, 2016) was one of the most difficult experiences I’ve had in terms of Type 2 play. However, during the debriefing, I discovered that a significant number of players had experienced the same weekend as genuine Type 1 fun. *Conscience* (Spain 2024) is a larp that deals with dehumanization, oppression and violence (including sexual violence). When participating, it is very clear that we should expect to experience violent situations and rather uncomfortable, disturbing emotions connected to these themes. I was very surprised to realise afterward that I ended up having overall a quite *feel-good* experience thanks to a particularly beautiful love story that was central to my play.

Not all larp organisers seek to design specific experiences for their players. Sometimes, they are mainly aiming at creating an interesting environment in which players will have the freedom to create their own. This is particularly noticeable in larger scale events: when an important number of participants are gathered in the same larp, it becomes clear that not everyone necessarily experiences or seeks out the same thing. Players decide, to a certain extent, to steer the game in one direction or another. This typology remains very useful: saying for example “for me, *Ragnarok* this year was really a Type 2 experience” allows

you to situate your experience in relation to others.

What Type 2 is not necessarily

In the context of the francophone larp scene, Type 2 is sometimes confused with other concepts that I would like to distinguish here.

Not all Type 2 experiences are “hardcore.” What we sometimes call **hardcore larping** is a way of engaging with the larp in a particularly intense way, by making the choice to simulate less than what is considered normal in a particular larp tradition. The threshold of what is considered hardcore will vary from group to group and time to time. In many larp cultures, Type 2 experiences are not considered hardcore. You can have experiences that are uncomfortable at the time at varying levels of intensity. Type 2 play can become a norm in itself within a community.

It can be tempting to conflate Type 2 play with the idea of “mature larp.” A larp with **mature content** may address themes or present content that is not appropriate for all audiences, such as certain types of violence, sexual content, nudity, or gore. What we mean by this is that a certain level of discernment is expected from participants to approach these themes maturely. It is clear that this sort of content is not strictly necessary to have a Type 2 experience. Type 2 is not a theme: it is a quality of experience.

What I sometimes hear in the use of the term “mature larp” is that you need a certain maturity as a larper to play this

type of game. Indeed, Type 2 experiences can be overwhelming or disturbing – they can trigger complex emotions. They often require better emotional safety tools (e.g., a clear framework for calibrating, processing and debriefing these experiences), as well as better communication between players and with organisers. In this sense, they can be suitable for players who can make use of these tools. However, it is important to keep in mind that many people have started larping with these “Type 2-oriented games” and many more have been larping for decades without ever exploring those.¹ Maybe this should be thought of as eating spicy food: some people seek it, others don’t, some people will enjoy it even if it systematically causes them to cry, others will take it without breaking a sweat – in any case, it’s good to have the information accessible on the menu so everyone can make informed choices.

Finally, it is sometimes implied that Type 2 experiences are **more authentic**, as if crying your eyes out after your loved ones murdered each other at your birthday party were the pinnacle of human experience, while enjoying a game of dice in a tavern would be superficial. The idea that suffering produces a deeper, truer, more authentic experience than pleasure should be seen as problematic. Some within the larp community question the temptation to #always_escalate to more drama, more provocation, more shock, more tears. *Les Canotiers de Santeuil* (France 2014, Eng. The Canoeists of Santeuil) is a game that could be described as “slow larping.” It aims to counter the idea that “*les gens heureux n’ont pas d’histoire*” (a French idiom meaning

¹ This might sound very trivial when you are reading this in the context of Nordic larp, but in more local larp scenes, this is important to keep in mind.

“happy people have no story”) by creating a low drama larp with characters that are normal people with engaging stories. Sandy Bailly defends the dignity of so-called “*feel-good*” play, notably in her presentation at Solmukohta 2024: “It’s not bad to feel good. The meaningfulness of slice of life and feelgood play.” See also “Finding the magic in the mundane” (*Bailly and Kyhn, 2021*), which argues that we don’t need big scenes or exceptional situations to have deep and meaningful experiences in larp. Exploring situations in which our characters flourish, experience intimate and beautiful relationships, or feel accepted and live their passion without feeling shame can also be very meaningful and moving for players.

Expand the typology?

The terms “Type 1” and “Type 2” fun are commonly used by larpers, both in French-

speaking countries and internationally. These terms communicate effectively about the type of experience we are having or want to live. We have so far touched a bit on how this typology means slightly different things depending on how it’s used; we will now take a closer look at ways in which it has been reappropriated and expanded on in sometimes creative ways.

Type 3

In the world of outdoor adventures, Type 3 fun is usually referred to as “not fun at all, either during or after – a total disaster” (Cordes, 2009). However, **the notion of Type 3 hasn’t been adopted so successfully** by the larp community – particularly not in the francophone larp scene. Partly, I believe, **because of the logical contradiction of assigning a type to fun that isn’t fun.** There are recurring jokes that try to capture



Photo credit: Benjamin Roulleaux, Les Rencontres de la Taille (Belgium, 2024, Eng. The Taille Gatherings)

what a Type 3 larp might look like, as the KPTV 2025 clip “Enslaved by the Fish Orcs” illustrates.

Skirpan (2021) makes an interesting case for the Type 3 “fun” by making the typology into a sliding scale with regard to one’s boundaries and limits. Type 1 is when the player is playing within her comfort zone. We’re sliding from Type 1 to Type 2 when the player is affected by the discomfort or negative emotions out of character. This stretches the comfort zone but remains within the boundaries that the player sets for herself. This can be the place to experience some discomfort as a player, but within safe limits. We’re slipping into Type 3 when leaning too much towards pushing boundaries leads to actual damage – which should absolutely be avoided. In this reading, the three types of fun overlay partially with the zones of safety, challenge, and risk model described by Sarah Lynne Bowman and Kjell Hedgard Hugaas (2025), although it doesn’t correspond entirely.² I’m not sure that’s how the types of fun model was initially intended, but it sure is an interesting way of looking at it – and

² The zones of safety, challenge, and risk model provides “a spectrum approach between more comfortable and riskier play, using both numbers and colors to indicate the level of risk, with Zone 1 (Green) referring to one’s comfort zone, Zone 2 (Yellow) referring to one’s growth edges, and Zone 3 (Red) referring to high-risk brink play” (p.16). Zone 3 (Red) is described as being at the edge of “too much,” but some players might still choose this sort of play. It is noted that: “such experiences can be unpleasant or even disturbing in games and yet highly valuable learning experiences” (p.17). Undoubtedly, this corresponds to the definition of Type 2 fun. Type 3 fun is definitely supposed to be placed outside the range of positive experiences, as Skirpan (2021) insists: “Type 3 is not fun. It is pure misery during the whole damn thing. The goal in sports, and in larping, is NEVER to get yourself stuck in a Type 3 experience.”

one that justifies the existence of Type 3 according to its original definition.

Belgian Type 3

In Belgium, one take on Type 3 fun has been in use since at least 2021 – and it has nothing to do with the original typology that stems from the outdoor adventures. Type 3 in this context (I will call this “Belgian Type 3” to avoid confusion) is defined as a specific type of enjoyment that people who are a bit knowledgeable in larp theory experience when they appreciate a design. A form of intellectual stimulation, in short, something that could be translated as: “I see what you did there, it got me thinking, it inspired me!” One could come home from a larp and say: “I didn’t have a lot of fun, I didn’t really have strong emotions, but it really engaged me on a meta level.” It can be the quality of the writing, the elegance of the scenography, the intelligence of the meta-techniques, something in the technical set up of the larp or in the way the workshops were conducted. Maybe people who experience a lot of this Type 3 fun position themselves more as art critics, their enjoyment being mediated through knowledge of the context and creative gesture. Seeking out Belgian Type 3 fun can be a perfectly valid reason to register for a larp and organisers can actively seek to design for this type of experience, for example by creating a game with a particularly elegant or experimental design.

Potpourri of fun

Some people in Belgium might have heard of **Type 0.5 fun**. It was popularized during a social activity at BEta Larp³ 2023 in the **3** BEta Larp is the Belgian mainly francophone but international leaning annual larp conference. <http://beta.larp.be/>

quiz question “Which type of fun can you have at *Les Rencontres de la Taille*?” The correct answer was “0.5.” The organisers had been going around describing their larp as “a Type 0.5 larp” and by this, they meant to distinguish their larp from “Type 1 larps” in the sense that their larp “doesn’t even pretend to be cool.” It refers to the idea that they offer a game with no stakes and minimal constraints – a pretext for play, an excuse to spend time together – without trying to accomplish anything grandiose and with a fairly low emotional impact.

After some clarifying discussions with the initiators of the concept, I understand that this is a reaction to a prevailing discourse that (erroneously) associates “Type 1 larps” with “traditional heroic fantasy larps,” in which we would play heroes and therefore, we would be “cool.” In my view, however, the typology of fun is not an appropriate way to discern between different genres of games. Furthermore, *Les Rencontres de la Taille*’s description as a “Type 0.5 larp” illustrates beautifully how organisers can present their game in a certain way, but fail to deliver this specific experience to all players. After one session of this larp, a player told the organisers that “their game had definitely been Type 2” for him. My investigation into the Type 0.5 fun leads to the conclusion that it isn’t anything more than a joke, but one that has fruitfully forced people to ponder on their experiences, their design goals, and on the categories they use to describe them.

Finally, during BEta Larp 2024, Damien Bonnelle came up with the idea of **Type 0 fun** as something that can be experienced when you are at a larp but not (actively) engaging with the game. Don’t photographers, musicians, some helpers,

or those that we might pejoratively refer to as “tourists” also have fun? Shouldn’t their experience be accounted for in some kind of typology? Participating in a larp can be an experience in and of itself, even when you are not actively engaging with the game. Social time, volunteering, cooking, playing music, participating as a family with young children, or even just existing in a beautiful location – all these things and many more are also ways to have fun at a larp, Bonnelle claims. One could say, to illustrate: “I’m participating in this larp mostly to camp out with my friends by the lake, it’s really Type 0 for us. I won’t be bothered with the full orc costume this time!” If we adopt Bonnelle’s idea, Type 1 fun would be reframed as applying to positive experiences lived through interacting with the game, while Type 0 would occur outside of it. This changes the original definition of Type 1 quite a bit. But after all: who decides what the correct use of these concepts is?

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to achieve two things. First, to clarify a set of concepts – the types of fun – by distinguishing between them and replacing them in their context. Secondly, to document some new or creative uses of them. To be clear: while Type 1 and Type 2 fun are quite widely used in the larp community and beyond, the other types of fun mentioned here are more anecdotal, used in a range of different ways (Type 3), only by a few initiates (Belgian Type 3 and Type 0.5), or are even completely emerging ideas (Type 0). I believe it is interesting to try to define the experiences we seek or live, and certain additions to the original typology make it possible to highlight the

diversity of experiences that larp can offer (Type 0 and Belgian Type 3).

Most theories we consider canon today were once an enthusiastic conversation in a bar, or any other type of social space (be it virtual.) They have been passed on by several people and then written down at some point, they have travelled from one larp scene to another and they have been affected by the difficult trial of translating culture. These concepts we’re crafting, they can help us to communicate with each other (our feelings, our intentions, our thoughts, what is important to us) and they give us a chance to connect and be understood. That is, at least, if we go through the trouble of reaching out, explaining ourselves, and building something that might become a common language.

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The Blue Note Manifesto¹

“What does it matter how many lovers you have if none of them gives you the universe?” (“Lacan”²)

Simon Brind

¹ So this piece is about Lacan, jazz, and safety, and it is important to state up front that I don’t know anything about any of these things. The original title was “The Dunning Kruger Quartet Manifesto,” I will try to justify this in footnotes elsewhere.

² Sounds like him, right? Certainly attributed to him! Did he actually say it? Who knows?

I - The Symbolic

The bridge that connects intersubjectivity between larpers.

We have come to fetishise safety as if it were a velvet rope around the museum exhibit; a uniformed guard shouting “Please do not touch the trauma.” But sometimes we want to be able to grab the trauma and hold it tight, or to bind someone else to it with clever knots; repurposing that same velvet rope that once signified the boundary line. Sometimes we *want* to take a risk.

As a community we have already identified and resolved this first paradox: to produce danger responsibly, one must build thicker walls of safety than ever. After all, the stronger the safety net, the more daring the trapeze act. What is larp if not a circus of clowns and peril?

In jazz we know this too: Ornette Coleman did not simply “blow nonsense.” He drilled modes, scales, forms until the muscles remembered. Only then could he let the saxophone cry. Likewise in larp, before we summon the storm, we *practice*: workshops, consent games, calibration rituals. Safety mechanics are the rhythm section – bass and drums. You only hear them when they fail, but without them, no solo can soar.

And what is our solo? Is it *risk*?³ – No! At least not in the insurance claim sense. Not broken bones, but rather broken certainties. Not risk per se, but certainly an exercise in bravery – the biggest risk we **3** “Danger” carries legal, ethical, and literal connotations. As a terminology tweak, this early in the paper I moved from “danger” → “edge” → “risk.” What I am talking about is the intensity of “affective” or mental/emotional risk. I’ll occasionally keep “danger” as the colloquial shorthand, but I want to reframe it conceptually.

take is allowing ourselves to be vulnerable. The risk is *in potentia* of failure: asking someone, “Will you be my ally? My lover? My tormentor?” and then in the heartbeat between request and response, “Have I said the wrong thing? Is this too far ...” This is the *edge* – a trembling, dissonant chord cluster, half unresolved – and beyond it, the void; this dangerous place is not given; it is *made*. We make it with tools:

- Ambiguity, like a horn played through a mute.
- Constraint, like hands tied with ribbon, moving differently through some smoky club as though in a dream.
- That moment of silence, where the lightest touch becomes louder than the impending storm.
- Authority that vanishes, leaving us free to improvise.
- Honesty, truth manifesting as music from the soul.

For some players, larp is already a psychoanalytic session disguised as play. Not merely because the form has the capacity to heal you, but because it mirrors the very structure of our desire. The character’s experience is the *objet petit a* – the little object-cause of desire – a fiction we chase, knowing it is both real⁴ and unattainable, and precisely in that impossibility lies the *jouissance*.⁵

4 But not True. (I use the word “real” to describe the events that take place within the diegetic reality of the larp, our characters may be in love. The emotions are real, but — unless the bleed gets out of hand again — not true.)
5 the transgression of a subject’s regulation of pleasure.

Safety mechanics, then, are not simply tools to prevent collapse; they are what we might call structures of permissible rupture. The *escalation mechanic*, the *off-game* word: these are punctuations of the Real, little tears in the diegesis through which we remind ourselves that the symbolic frame will hold us. Without them, the jouissance of play collapses into trauma. With them, we can circle ever closer to the unbearable kernel – the dangerous sweetness of intensity.

II - The Imaginary

The storyworld and the characters we bring to life through the active suspension of disbelief.

Let us repurpose the term: *affective dissonance*.⁶ This is the jazz of larp: the deliberate misalignment of gesture, tone, and expectation that produces affective surplus. A hand almost touching, a command half-obeyed, a silence held too long. It is in this dissonance that the body trembles – not in harm, but in heightened awareness of the fragile contract sustaining us in the diegetic note.

And another: *safety swing*. Like the rhythm section in jazz, safety is not a cage but a groove. It is precisely the reliable pulse of off-game words and consent mechanics

6 Elsewhere, an affective dissonance theory suggests that “there are sometimes dysfunctional, perceptual, autonomic nervous system dissonances between anxiety and sexuality, eroticism and dependency, and so on.” In neurotic conditions as examined by psychoanalysis, this leads to “an emphasis on fantasy rather than real sexual relationships in the erotic inner life of some individuals.” Unpacking these ideas go far beyond the intention of this paper. De Vos, George A. “Affective dissonance and primary socialization: Implications for a theory of incest avoidance.” *Ethos* 3, no. 2 (1975): 165-182.

that allows players to syncopate, to push off-beat, to improvise intensity without chaos. Safety swing is not the negation of risk but its very condition of possibility.

So the root of the manifesto is as follows:

- 1** To design truthfulness is to choreograph affective dissonance.
- 2** To play with intensity is to inhabit the safety swing.
- 3** To enjoy danger is to let our character approach the *objet petit a* of the scene – the impossible moment of total surrender to the character or to the story – but never fully grasp it.

And is this not the essence of both Lacan and Jazz?⁷ The endless circling, the refusal of resolution, the infinite solo that never arrives at tonic. The Truth of the larp is like the Truth of improvisation: not in the resolution, but in the detour, the riff, the unbearable prolongation of intensity itself.

How to calibrate for risk

In much workshop discourse, we ask: “tell us what not to do,” but to cite Katrine Wind’s article, *The House of Bravery* (2026), “this is the *safety ceiling*; this is the place where intensity becomes meaningful, the upper limit of play” (Wind, 2026) where the solo bursts into fire.

Lacan tells us that desire is never simply about the object avoided; it is structured by what is longed for but impossible.⁸ Thus,

7 See footnote 1
8 It is entirely possible that he does not say this at all. Who knows with Lacan?

calibration must not only patrol the “no-go zones,” but also help players sketch the contours of their jouissance-threshold within the limits of the larp – the affective dissonance they wish to flirt with, the danger they desire. Because having hit and held the high note, everything else becomes possible.

Let us – you and I – invent the neologism *provocative consent*. Not mere avoidance, but affirmative invitation. This is not just a physical calibration – instead of “do not touch my arm,” the player says: “I want you to corner my character verbally, but not physically.” – not one of power dynamics – “They want to be commanded, but they reserve the right to disobey” – provocative consent is a way of asking “please provide me with an alibi to...” This is not just safety; it is also composition; it is giving the band the key and tempo for your solo.

Another neologism: *edge-mapping*. A calibration exercise where players, in pairs or groups, articulate not just their boundaries but their desired intensities **and outcomes**. Think of it as plotting notes on a scale: if they are too low the play is boring, disengaged. If the notes are too high it can quickly become overwhelming, traumatic, or problematic. What we reach for is that perfect blend, where the improvisation is just right; the sweet spot of trembling, the swing. This derives from *trust*.⁹

Our tools for creating danger are in fact tools for engineering an ensemble of trust:

- The calibration is the bassist’s walking line: steady, pulsing reassurance.

⁹ And champagne. The Blue Note Manifesto serves bubbles early in the evening; this is jazz, not Sweden!

- The safeword is the cymbal crash that cuts the noise.
- The replay, the point-of-view swap, is the Coltrane sheets of sound, reframing the melody until we are dizzy.
- The instigator role is Sun Ra’s cosmic trumpet: chaotic, yes, but tethered to the pulse of Saturn. Some extradiegetic inspiration that sounds like a demon’s soul at 3am.

Notice the dialectic: the more carefully we codify withdrawal, the more fully we can throw ourselves into surrender. Absolute freedom emerges only when its limits are understood and enforced. Hegel, Ornette, Nordic larp: all the same lesson.

III - The Real

Unmediated content which haunts us as larpers while we dream of the imaginary after it is lost.

So – The Blue Note Manifesto reads:

- 1 The task of the larpwright is not to compose the music, but to set the stage where dissonance can bloom into form. Every participant a soloist, every boundary a rhythm, every rupture an invitation.
- 2 Our metatechniques are techniques for managed intensity and personal truth, not for harming or manipulating people. (Think of it as free-jazz: you deliberately introduce dissonance, but only because everyone has agreed on the edges of the piece – the key, the meter, and the exit cue.)

- 3 The only legitimate reason to increase danger in design is to enable specific emotional or narrative effects that players have opted into and prepared for. Otherwise you are not revolutionary – you are reckless.¹⁰
- 4 Alibi is the jazz found at 2am in a basement club that you may never find again, so lean into the solo.
- 5 We must have trust in our co-player’s ability to take care of themselves.
- 6 “No” is beautiful (“no, but ...’ even more so” (Wind, 2025).)
- 7 Never confuse recklessness with bravery. True bravery is speaking your own truth out loud.
- 8 The only way to truly love something, is to realise that it may be lost.

The paradox: to get to real intensity – that delicious, Hegelian moment where subjectivity trembles – you must be hyper-organised. The more you want to flirt with the edge in your design, the more you must invest in the invisible, careful labour of consent, trust, and aftercare. It is like avant-garde jazz: the wilder the solo, the tighter the rhythm section. Without it, you are not radical – you are merely hazardous.

And the risk? The real risk? That in the middle of the game you discover something more true than truth itself: that freedom is unbearable unless it is shared.

¹⁰ I don’t mean you cannot surprise your players, or that every scene needs to be pre-calibrated, but if your slow Hobbit larp involves the wholesale destruction of the Shire and the murder of innocents it is probably more ethical if your players know this is coming.

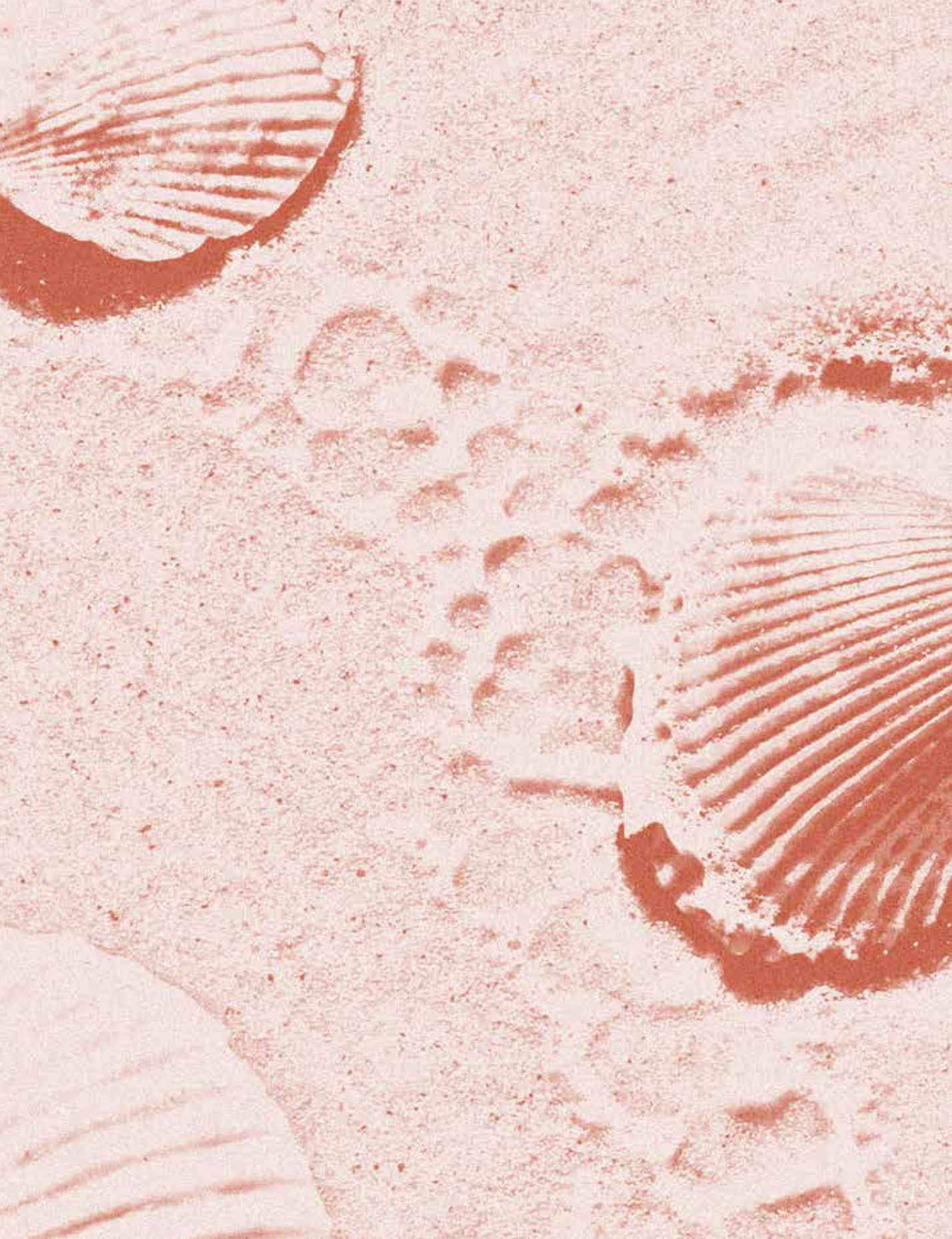
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You Must Be This Bold to Enter

Simon Brind

“Vulnerability is not weakness; it’s our most accurate measure of courage.”
– Brené Brown, *Braving the Wilderness* (2017)

In my pitch for the book I promised to follow up the self-indulgent riff *The Blue Note Manifesto*, with something practical, some workshop scripts building on its ideas. As I sit down to write this though I suspect that I am going to fail. This is not a deliberate act of self-sabotage. I fear failure. Far easier to be a soloist, projecting some intense brooding shadow into the darkness than to make eye contact with another and use my words to speak my truth.¹ The challenge I’m trying to solve is how we get larpers to speak openly and honestly about their wants with strangers. When I started to write, I focussed on the forbidden. I asked myself the question “Why is it so difficult to voice our dangerous desires? Not to enact them, but merely to *name* them?” To desire is never solitary; it is always mediated by the gaze, the imagined judgment of the Other. So whether I say aloud: “*I want my character to be humiliated,*” or “*they want to exert control over others,*” or “*I want to be seen*” – what I fear is not the desire itself, but the echo of the Other’s voice: “*what kind of person are you to want this?*” Our fear is like the **super-egoic jazz critic**, always present, always ready to sneer. In Žižekian terms: we are ashamed not of transgression itself, but of our failure to transgress *properly*. We

¹ I am perhaps qualified to speak to the challenge, but not to offer a solution to it. The Dunning-Kruger effect can be my saviour here. After all, I have been larping since the early 1980s, and I am a middle-aged man so therefore my subjective ability in anything pertaining to the form must surely be world class?!

² Note change of voice here, in this third example it is the player speaking their own truth rather than using the alibi of character.

fear that our desire will appear either *too much* (perverse, obscene) *too needy*, or not enough (boring, banal). In jazz terms: we are terrified our solo will be judged off-key, self-indulgent, ridiculous.

In recent months, with the weird shadows of mortality dancing in the moonlight behind me, I realise that this is not about forbidden desires at all, but rather about vulnerability. It is perhaps more transgressive to admit that “I want to feel like I belong,” or “I want to be loved,” than any other wish? If that solo fails, if the admission falls flat, there is no coming back. Here enters our first neologism of this appendix: **improvisational shame**. This is the effect produced when the intimate riff of our desire collides with the imagined audience of the Other. It is not fear of danger, but fear of rejection – the humiliation of being caught in an uncool groove, or fear of the void, the auditorium empties and all that remains are the echoes of embarrassment and perhaps a patina of pity? This is where safety fails us. We have no automatic right to belong, nor to be loved; rejection is a facet of community. Despite the Nordic cultures’ propensity to adopt loners, to bring them into a community (presumably to help them survive the dark winter months?), not every solo will land, and the fear of falling flat is all the more real because of the propensity of the community to catch you.

This gap between what I feel internally and what I dare to perform externally is like Coltrane’s “sheets of sound”(Gitler, 1958): too many notes, too fast, threatening collapse. To speak my desire – dangerous or profound – is to risk exposing this dissonance; to make audible what my inner jazz critic tells me should remain internal noise.

And this is why calibration workshops are so difficult. We invite players to map their edges, but the very act of voicing is a confrontation with the Real and naming desire makes it *real* in the eyes of the group. The fantasy is shattered: I am not pure, neutral, abstract. I am implicated, sweaty, ridiculous, or – worse – awkward.

“We must have trust in our co-player’s ability to take care of themselves.”

There are workshops designed to build trust and to enable honesty; most of them run over a course of a weekend, they are incremental group experiences, not sessions delivered in under an hour just before the game. The irony here is that the point at which honesty is easiest comes *after* the larp; however this moment is lost as the debrief sessions – ironically – teach us to lock up our truths in favour of introspection and saying nice things about one another.

The task for a workshop design, then, isn’t to prise secrets out of participants; it’s to build a temporary symbolic frame in which honesty feels aesthetically justified and socially safe. I propose the following approach:

1) Break down barriers and create an honest space as well as a brave space

I think something like the Two Minute Game³ works well here as it is an incremental trust

³ The two minute game is a practical workshop used in the larp *Gothic* for teaching negotiation, calibration, and for building trust between players for physical interaction. Players alternate between asking/answering the questions: “How would you like me to touch you for two minutes?” and “How would you like to touch me for two minutes?” with an opportunity for negotiation and calibration. It is based on the work of Harry Faddis.

and calibration exercise, but also has the side effect of releasing oxytocin. Our jazz metaphor may also suggest champagne, although – as the manifesto points out in a footnote – even though it *can* work, requiring alcohol to loosen inhibitions is an ethical bum note.

2) Provide structure for the questions that need to be answered

The Desire Chorus is the space where a group of players build up to telling their truths. If you are fortunate there will be people with few inhibitions. They have played enough to know where they want to be and have no problem voicing their limits and desires. Once they have shown the way to do this, they have another role, to act as facilitators, to encourage the other performers, and to ask for more. Just like in a calibration round between acts, where one player says ‘I don’t need anything’ the experienced player will know whether that is the truth, or a co-player whose heart has broken.

Sometimes the kindest thing we can do for another human being is not to let them get away with their bullshit. Or, to put it another way, the group needs to create a microculture that kindly cultivates honesty.

For the other players, those who are ashamed, afraid, or who are socialised not to take up space or to ever speak the words “I want ...”, encourage them to use the alibi

of the character:⁴ “I would like my character to...” Asking on behalf of someone else, even if you will share a body with them, is somehow easier. Alternative forms are:

“If I were brave, I would ask that someone does X to my character.”

“If I felt able to ask for it, I would love my character to be an integral part of the group.”

“What I dare not ask for is...”

Iterate and escalate. Move around the group, each player has a solo, but it does not end there. Build on one another’s bravery. Encourage the question “and, what else?” It is the job of our co-players to tease out everything. Differentiate between “*I am okay for my character to experience...*” versus “*I want my character to experience...*”

Depending on the themes and nature of the larp, it may be useful to provide structured questions as a starting point; sometimes these are about physical or emotional limits, or about themes that players may or may not wish to engage with. In an ideal situation, there is a facilitator who can hold the silence so that everyone gets a chance to be heard. Perhaps this involves a timed turn, or even an instance that the group doesn’t move on until each participant has shared something that everyone in the group can feel is real? This could be done by gently asking follow-up questions like “You say that you don’t need anything, but what can we give to you?”

⁴ This was my intent with the original title of the manifesto, to construct a character who acknowledges the ridiculousness of his own opinions and to create enough distance between my ideas and myself. My editor - ironically my best friend - took this from me and threw me naked to the wolves. To be fair to her, this is what I asked for.

or which encourage a thematic escalation, asking “How can this build up?”

The Counterpoint

Underlying all of this, of course, is the simple truth that we do not owe our co-players capitulation. We must be able and willing to say “no”, and we have to be able to hear and accept “no.” It is a charged word that many people struggle with. As infants we are told “no” all the time, and as an adult it can provoke all sorts of difficult ingrained emotional responses. This is the ultimate risk of edge mapping. Sometimes you will be out there, all alone. This does not mean you have failed, only that you need to meet the group where their limits are. Conversely we should not say “no” out of politeness or fear. Turning down an offer or an opportunity to play in order to cede space to another player, or because you believe you are taking up too much space, might seem like a generous act, but it could stifle play, or signal that you are not interested at all.

I think we should be profoundly grateful to our co-players for expressing experiences that we cannot bring to their game, but neither we nor they should feel guilt about this outcome. There is a (largely) gendered problem of *people-pleasing*. Before saying yes to anything, consider where it is on the “*willing to* versus *wanting to*”-scale.

Your willingness may range from “hell yes!” to “only for you” to “just this once” or “only to here.” Anything beyond that isn’t willingness: “I feel sorry for them,” or “I want to be a good larper, so I will do this” are not facets of willingness.

For some people there needs to be a “no” to keep themselves or their co-players safe, for others there needs to be a possibility of “no” for them to feel like a safe player.⁵ This dichotomy is resolved by the workshopping and the pace and energy of the conversation.

As larpers we must commit to this: communicate your willingness where it exists. Acknowledge the co-player’s silence as a “no” where it does not. People need to see that their offering lands gently. Mirroring, repetition of a phrase, or a single acknowledging gesture work better than analysis.

In practice, what should happen is that a room full of strangers briefly becomes a jazz ensemble: people hear themselves and others wanting roughly the same things – connection, intensity, belonging. Once that recognition lands, subsequent calibration or character work becomes much easier; the fear has been metabolised into the music.

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Ludography

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⁵ For others still these are both inherently patronising positions.



Autumn

“Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
The redbreast whistles from a garden-croft,
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.”

(John Keats, *To Autumn*)

The leaves are changing to yellows and reds, and softly falling. It's still warm, but the nights are starting to lengthen. The crops have ripened, and it's harvest-time. What have we learnt? What has come together, come to fruition? What can we consolidate, build on, and move forward from?

The articles in this section are gathering experiences, sorting, drawing conclusions, and processing. Here you'll find practical lessons for larping, and for design and organising; theoretical frameworks examining what we do when we larp; and personal accounts of larping practice.

As you journey through autumn you'll be feasting on these delicious morsels and also pausing to reflect: the year is turning. Who will you be, now that winter is approaching? How will you be ready for what's to come?



Facilitating Metareflections

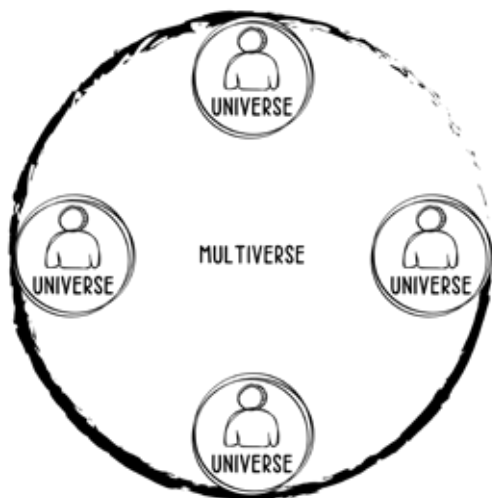
From Individual Universes to a Collective
Multiverse through Workshop Design

Nór Hernø

Larp unfolds in a dynamic space where reality and fiction intersect. This intersection is a space where players' individual focus is transformed into a collaborative one. Where they can reflect on their role within the fiction, negotiate interactions, and navigate expectations towards other players as well as towards the fiction itself. While these reflections are an emergent feature of larping, they can also be intentionally facilitated by designers, enhancing player agency, collaboration, and capacity for imaginative play – as well as practising the reflective process the players will reproduce during the larp.

Multiverses and metareflections

Each individual has their own impression and understanding of the world, shaped by their perception, understanding, and experiences. This can be described as an individual reality or *universe* (Maturana, 1988). Together, these individual universes make up a collective *multiverse*: “When we each have our closed system, this means we must view the world as a *multiverse*



consisting of many worlds or realities instead of a *universe* consisting of one reality” (Jensen et al., 2011, 24, translation by the author).

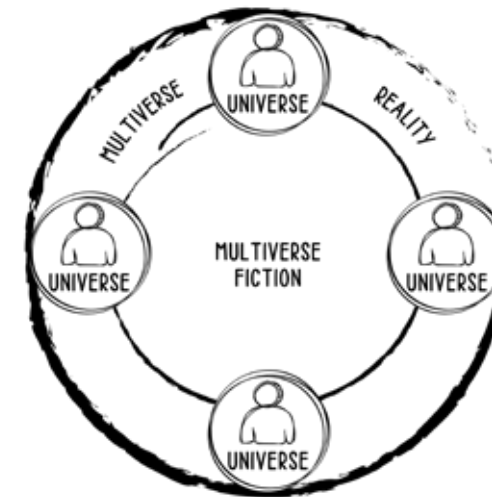
Even though every universe is considered a closed system, there can be a coordinated understanding between the different universes of a group's collective multiverse. As something that the group has either defined together or individually agreed to. This shared meaning or agreement can be referred to as consensus.

Take the example of a larp: the designer has created the framework of the larp's fiction and communicates this to potential players during the larp launch and sign-up phase. By signing up and embodying a character within the fiction's setting, a consensus is reached both between players and the designer, and amongst the player group, regarding what the shared fiction consists of.

In this context, the group's collective multiverse partly consists of the fiction of the larp, made up of the understanding of it and the approach to it by everyone involved, e.g. the designers, organisers, players, crew, etc. The other part of the shared multiverse consists of the surrounding reality.

As with children's play, larps occur simultaneously on a fictional plane and a factual plane, which refer to each other. The factual plane is made up of the playing or the players' actual reality, while the fictional plane is the diegesis of the story, which can be described as a *play plane* (Jensen et al., 2011, 12) or the *role-playing fiction* (Levin, 2020, 67). These two planes simultaneously overlap and remain separate, forcing the players to navigate them both concurrently:

“When you are playing, you will see the world around in *double vision*. You will see the fiction as real through your character, but obviously you are also aware of the ordinary everyday world as a player” (Stenros, 2013).

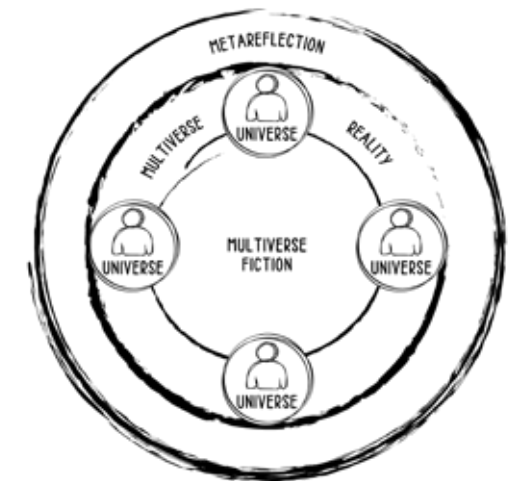


The two layers are therefore not separate but refer to each other, for example through the communication of the participants involved in the activity. In children's play, the roles, topics, or the course of play may be renegotiated; in larps, participants continually negotiate and renegotiate interactions and the shared story.

Jensen et al. describe this renegotiation as occurring on a metalevel, where reflection and communication are about the play rather than within the play (Jensen et al., 2011, 11+27). Levin has a similar view, describing *metareflections* as reflections concerning both reality and fiction in connection with a fictional experience (Levin, 2020, 67–68).

This way, the players of a larp reflect on their understanding of the fiction based on their reality, and a metareflective level emerges where communication about the fictional multiverse takes place. This

metareflective level constitutes the final layer of the shared multiverse.



As such, metareflections act as the bridge between reality and fiction. They are the processes through which players consciously compare their own universe with others, reflect on the fiction in relation to reality, and negotiate meaning and consensus. Metareflections are actively carried out by the players every time they consider how their character would act in a given situation, use a metatechnique, reread their character sheet, etc. But metareflections also happen when the players calibrate with their co-players or use techniques like slow escalation, consciously transmitting their character's intentions – or when they reach and reestablish consensus on their collective fictional multiverse. As such, metareflections occur every time the players interact with each other or the fiction in a way where fiction and reality overlap and refer to each other.

Facilitated metareflections

As well as being an emergent feature of larping, metareflections can also be

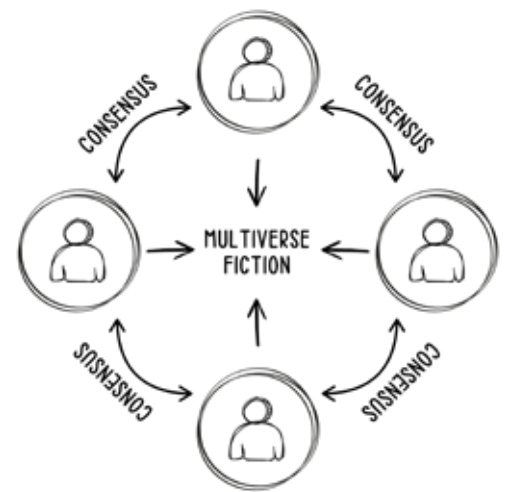
consciously facilitated by the designer using methods that encourage this reflective process. For instance by introducing meta-techniques to the larp, facilitating player calibrations, or training the players in different metareflective techniques such as escalation tools, slow escalation methods, and safety techniques.

The facilitation of metareflections can also be a core element of the workshop design. By utilizing metareflections, the designer not only activates the players and invites them to reflect on the fiction and surrounding reality, and their role in both, but also creates a preparative space for the participants to explore and practice interacting with the metareflective level. This way, the players will experience a greater degree of agency by becoming active co-creators; and will prepare to reproduce these reflections on a later stage themselves.

To facilitate the players' metareflections through workshops, the workshop design must, first of all, support a process which focuses on the process itself rather than on a predefined outcome or result. Since larp is co-creative, roles, interactions, and narratives are continuously renegotiated and redesigned, and a fixed goal would therefore contradict the nature of the activity itself. By focusing on creating a good process that trains players in co-creative and metareflective methods, it is possible to ensure they are well-prepared to continue the process on their own.

Secondly, the process should alternate between creating space for individual reflections and creative development on one side, and group exercises promoting dialogue and calibration on the other.

While metareflections can be carried out individually, this approach supports metareflections as well as the establishment of the consensus necessary to define the shared fictional multiverse. The ongoing group reflections strengthen the players' abilities to co-create and negotiate, thereby allowing them to practice interacting on a metareflective level, and create the framework for each player's personal universe development. Simultaneously, it reinforces the shared multiverse: The continuous fluctuation between collective and individual focus facilitates an ongoing renegotiation of the shared fiction, ensuring that the displacement or fragmentation of meaning remains limited and that the fiction stays coherent and collectively owned.



Methods for facilitating metareflections

Another aspect of facilitating players' metareflections is the method by which these metareflections are prompted. Overall, players can be encouraged to

engage in metareflections through both *direct* and *indirect* methods:

- Direct methods include explicit instructions, structured prompts, and reflection exercises.
- Indirect methods involve sensory and aesthetic tools such as music, auditory cues, visual artifacts, and physical interaction.

An example of a direct method can be found in the workshops for the larp *Eclipse* (Poland, 2025), where the players are instructed to co-create an Academy Log (unscripted character relations with preselected co-players), based on a fiction premise and a series of discussion prompts. Through this direct method, all three layers of the shared multiverse are activated, as the players simultaneously discuss and develop the shared fiction and relationships, get introduced to the players they share these relationships with, and reflect on their boundaries and wishes for play together.

Indirect methods can be additionally diverse, as they can be rooted in the diegesis of the larp (e.g. auditory cues that are a part of the larp's fiction and are used for the workshop), can function as non-diegetic elements (e.g. music, which is not a part of the larp's fiction but sets the mood for the workshop), or can bridge the gap between the fictional and the real completely (e.g. physical interactions, where the players use their bodies to mimic fictional actions or act out scenes during the workshop). An example of this variety can be found in the workshops for *Panopticon* (Denmark, 2025), where indirect methods like physical

interactions, and a series of sensory and aesthetic tools, are used in combination with direct methods to facilitate metareflections both individually and in groups of players:

- 1 While themed music is playing, players divide themselves into groups based on narrative prompts to ensure synergy, coherence, and co-ownership.
- 2 Using diegetic auditory cues referencing time, each group aligns expectations and defines a shared narrative framework and individual roles, establishing consensus within their collective multiverse.
- 3 Groups establish role relationships using narrative prompts, supported by physical interactions to build trust, comfort, and further immersion.
- 4 While themed music is playing, players individually select visual artifacts to expand and enrich their roles. These artefacts are then presented to the group, strengthening mutual understanding and collaboration, while diegetic auditory cues reference time.

Through this approach, the group's process and the individual reflections continuously inform each other. The shared multiverse is thereby reinforced, and the players' personal universes are given space to develop within a common frame of reference. The metareflections emerge both as players compare fiction and reality, continually negotiating how their desires for play and the fiction align; and through the oscillation between diegetic and non-diegetic indirect methods, which support the continued establishment of consensus between the players and designer. This

way, the metareflections become both an individual and collective act that fuels creativity, calibration, and collaboration.

The hidden benefits

Metareflections, both emergent and facilitated, function as creative engines that enable narrative development and encourage creative exploration individually and within groups.

By providing players with a structured framework for their metareflections, designers empower players to navigate the intersection between reality and fiction. Thereby they strengthen the building of consensus, support calibration of expectations, and enhance player agency, as well as fostering trust and collaboration among participants. At the same time, actively practicing metareflections during workshops can help manage safety and reduce miscommunication: it normalizes simultaneous reflection on the fictional experience and the surrounding reality, enabling players to express real life boundaries and wishes for play, while helping them get into the habit of calibrating with their co-players. This way, the players prepare to adapt and co-create as the narrative evolves, ultimately reinforcing both individual universes and the shared multiverse, aligning them into a cohesive whole, in a safe and engaging way.

In this sense, metareflections are both a tool and a practice: A way of engaging that enables players to reflect on and understand their individual universes within the structure of a larger collective multiverse.

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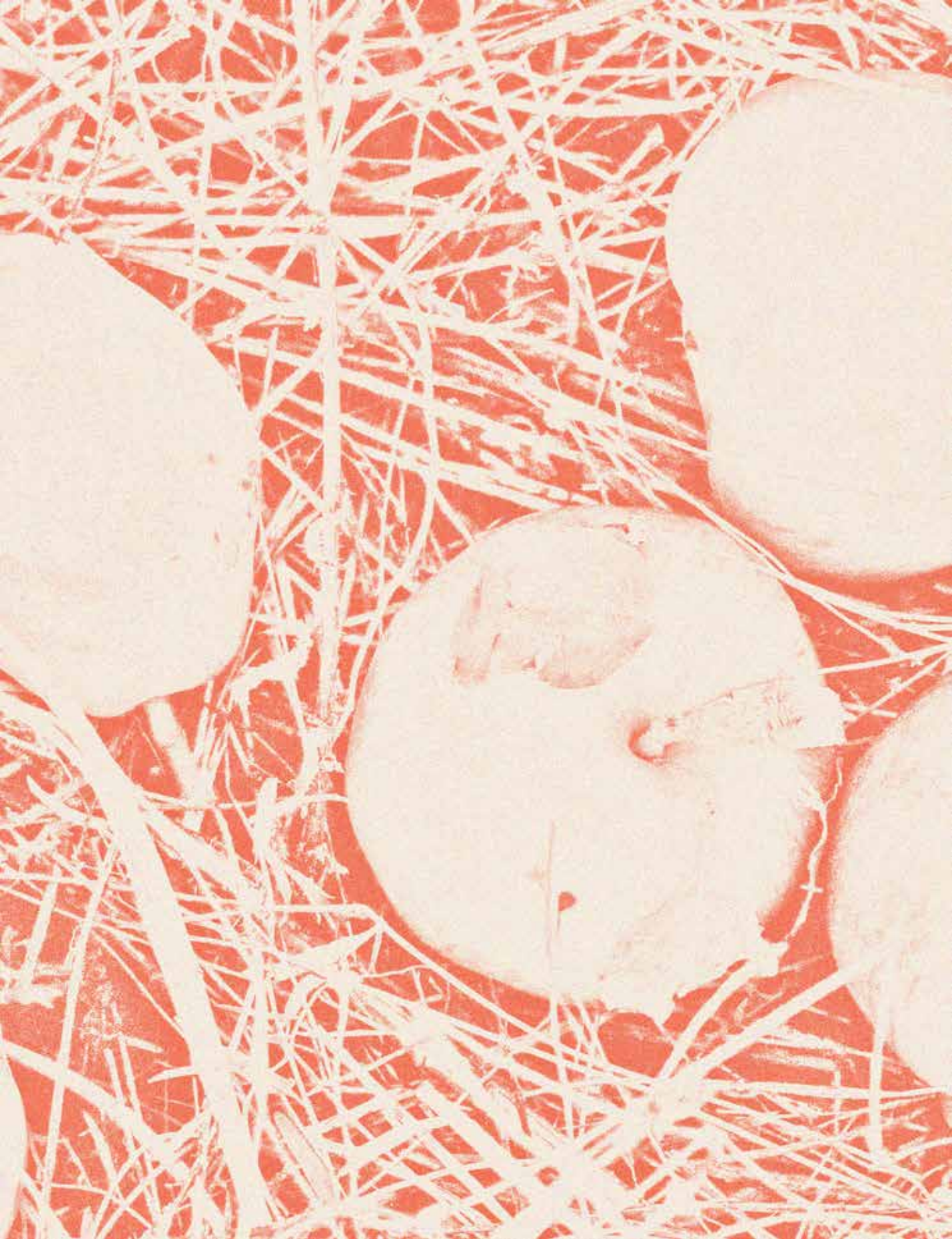
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SWAT – a System for Care within Larp

Piper Fraser

The following outlines a proposed and trialled system of handling different aspects of care whilst at larp events. This system has been trialled at a game in the UK called *Beyond Ragnarok* (BR), produced by Meta Games Studios Ltd, of which I am a part of the organisation team and company owner. *Beyond Ragnarok* is a UK based outdoor weekend larp based on Norse mythology, set after the prophesied final battle did not go according to plan. The game consists of approximately 120–150 players, and 60–80 crew, using a scouting association venue near Manchester.

What is presented below is an outline of this system and a description of how it works, as well as the context in which it came about. It is acknowledged, however, that this system may also not be appropriate for all larp events in its entirety. BR is a large game held on a large site. Some elements may be irrelevant for smaller games with less moving parts. It is hoped, however, that this outline could develop into a handbook for care at larp, where individual organisers can decide for themselves, based upon their event needs, what to include for their game. After a year of trial at BR no problems arose which would prompt changes. However, it would not be accurate to say it's perfect – no new system is. No doubt this will be an evolving process, as with anything in larp, for when something unexpected happens to prompt said evolution.

Context

There has been a growing trend within larp, both within its academic literature, and within the physical worlds of the events

themselves, of increasing and extending the systems of care organisers give to their players and their crew. Castiello Jones et al (2016) mentions medical care and therapy counselling; Murdoch (2018) talks about organisers owing a duty of care to protect participants from harm; Atwater and Rowland (2018) also talk about counselling in larp and having a dedicated person to oversee participant wellbeing; Saitta and Svegaard (2019) talk about accessibility in larp, of the production, the material, the performances and the fiction itself, to make sure that access needs are thought about in all aspects of the larps creation; Høyer (2025) describes inclusion in larp, specially in regard to younger players; Grasmø (2025) speaks of neurodivergence in larp, of the benefits for neurodivergent people and the considerations this brings to organisers; Oinonen (2025) talks also about accessibility in larp, specifically in regards to gender. These examples span the last decade, and there are many more out there which discuss these considerations. The community is therefore becoming increasingly more aware of the needs of participants of their events; which is only a good thing!

What is currently missing from our community and from our literature, however, is a comprehensive system of working towards all the different aspects of what Murdoch (2018) accurately describes as the 'duty of care.' This is not to say that there are not statements, normally termed as a safeguarding policy or a conduct policy, which address the organisers views and values towards discrimination and abuse. But, how these are handled in the moment; who is responsible for them; what to say over the radio; what covers what problem

that arises, and how situations are solved, are missing.

In an effort to address this, a system has been created by the Meta Games Studios Ltd team – myself Piper Fraser, together with Lee Fraser-Price and Megan Cummins – aimed at managing all aspects of care at a larp event. The system has been named SWAT, which stands for Safeguarding, Welfare, Accessibility and Trauma. It separates the different aspects of care and puts them into distinct categories which can easily be referred to. This system attempts not only to be able to help participants more accurately but also guards against the wrong team member having to deal with something that they are not equipped for.

SWAT breakdown

SWAT is broken down within these four aspects, into distinct teams of personnel, with their own callsign over the radio. Further down this article is shared the diagram that is currently being used at BR, which includes all of the radio callsigns that are used at that event.

Safeguarding

Safeguarding is broken into two sections. Each of these sections will have their own callsign.

Section 1: Deals with abuse reports; sexual, physical abuse, and discrimination.

Section 2: Deals with trespassers, terrorism and dangerous violence

These two have different callsigns, as those dealing with abuse and discrimination will likely have different experience and different qualifications to those dealing with trespassers on site. Section 2 is essentially security personnel, and depending on the larp it may have its own radio channel, so a different callsign may be unnecessary for this reason. However, if you do not have dedicated security, but rather someone on your staff who can fulfil this function when required to, then a callsign may be more discreet.

Welfare

Welfare has several different elements. It deals with occurrences that can include, but are not limited to:

- social advice;
- incidents of a person who has had their tent rained into and everything is wet;
- menstruation emergencies when someone has been caught short;
- when there is a missing person.

Amongst the team who are under this banner, there may be different personnel who are more equipped or more appropriate (such as with menstruation issues), to deal with this. If a welfare call is made, it would be expected that the person on that team most adequately equipped to handle the situation would be the one to respond.

Accessibility

Accessibility deals with handling questions about, or from, participants who have extra and alternative needs. This covers neurodivergence, learning difficulties, mental illness, and physical disabilities.

This could be listening to someone with physical access needs, who cannot get into part of the event site, about how best to solve the situation. Or it could be listening to an individual with autism about how a part of the game is inaccessible to them.

Solving the issues brought up here may require a subsequent conversation with the game organisers, but this team's members are the first line to listen and to understand what is happening or has happened.

Trauma

Trauma is also broken down into two different sections.

Section 1: First Aid

Section 2: Mental Health First Aid

As noted above with regard to the two areas of Safety, these two sections are likely to be staffed by people who have different experience and different qualifications.

Crossover, gender and age

There are likely to be instances where either there is a crossover of two teams, or a person of a specific gender is required, or a minor is involved – meaning that someone who has been cleared to work with children is needed. So, for example, if a welfare issue arises but there is no female welfare team member available, but there is a female accessibility team member, then this may be the person who responds. Or, if a welfare scenario escalates into a safeguarding issue, it may mean that that team also needs to be called.

The system is created to be separated: but as with any social situation, flexibility may be needed to address the concern appropriately. Where flexibility should not be applied, though, is for instances where those with specific qualifications are required to deal with a problem.

SWAT diagram

The diagram shows the system that has been trialled and used, complete with the callsigns used during the trial.

Accompanying policies

This system is for the event back-end handling of situations that occur at the event. However, as with most systems it needs supporting structures to make sure that it works properly. This system would not work without the aforementioned conduct and/or safeguarding policies that inform participants what is expected of them, how breaches are handled, and potential consequences (such as in the case of abuse). Here is a link to the current front-end policies for *Beyond Ragnarok*: www.meta-games.co.uk/OurPolicies.php as an example of the structure that the SWAT system works within.

In addition to the front-end policies, for this system to work effectively, personnel must be selected and trained for it. BR currently has this in place for its own personnel, aimed specifically at our game. However, currently in development is a more generic manual and training accompaniment which could be used by anyone.

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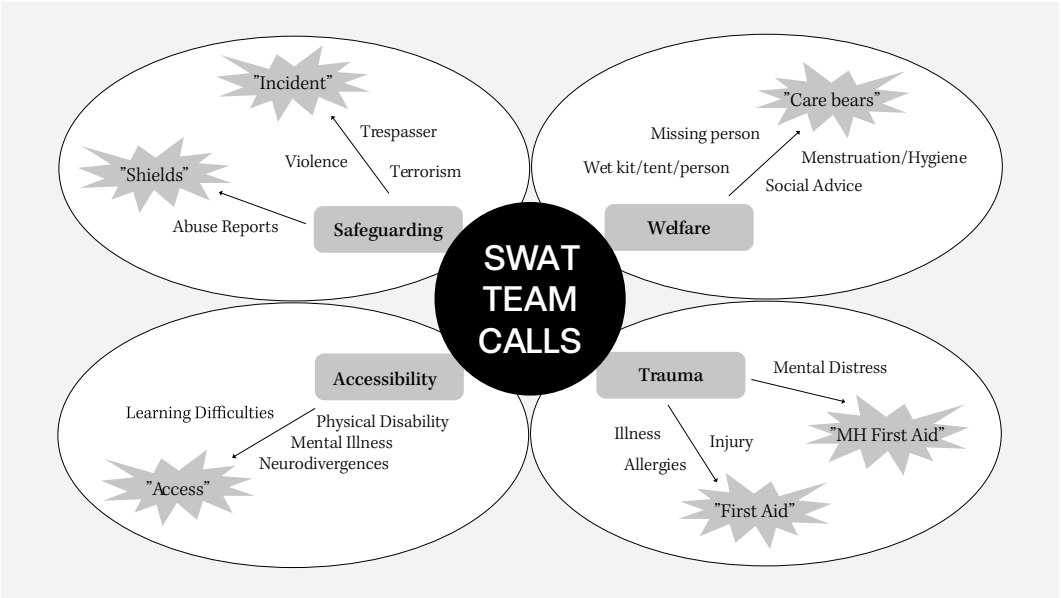


Figure 1. SWAT team calls (diagram by the author)



Expanding the Language of Consent

**Marlies Kok
Suus Mutsaers**

In 2019, Suus wrote “The Language of Consent” for the *Larp Design* book (Mutsaers 2019). Now, six years later, we are revisiting that article looking at new insights and expanding the theory and practice behind the language we use to talk about consent.

The original goal of the article still very much stands. Too often when introducing newer larpers to consent negotiations, we ignore the fact that many of them are not used to talking about such topics. Thus the framework from which they can pull in order to verbalise their wishes, desires, and limits is often too small to actually properly convey the message they want to send.

Locations on the body	Adjectives and intentions	Situations
- Face - Head - Neck - Hand/arms/shoulders - Legs - Breast/chest area - Stomach/back - Below the belt	- Tender - Harsh - Rough - Stroking - Sudden - Grabbing/holding on	- Not when we are alone - Only in spaces with light - Not when I don't see it coming - Not when either person has had a specified amount of alcohol

Table 1: Words to use for consent, from the earlier article (Mutsaers 2019)

Violence	Intimacy
- Screaming/yelling without touch - Grabbing/pushing - Threatening - Light slapping - Stage violence - Full contact, low impact violence - Violence with real force (hitting, pushing, pinching, etc.)	- Verbal without touch - Soft and gentle touch on arms - Soft and gentle touch on face/body - Soft and gentle touch in private areas - Harsh touch on any body part - Sex simulation techniques (e.g. Ars Amandi) - Simulated sexual action (stage kissing, etc.) - Non-simulated sexual interaction (actual kissing, touching, etc.)

Table 2: Physical interactions, from the earlier article (Mutsaers 2019)

The original article includes three categories for this framework: Locations on the body, adjectives and intentions, and situations. Putting the focus on physical interactions between players as their characters. With the knowledge we have now, we are proposing a similar framework for the emotional side of relationship play. In this article we see relationship play as any interaction between two or more players that influences the way these characters and people interact, including their underlying motives. The latter is extra important as we believe the underlying motives can be especially harmful if not communicated properly.

Emotional consent

The impact of emotional interactions in relationship play should not be underestimated; it is one of the pillars of bleed (Bowman, 2015). As such, we propose adding the following table to the language of consent model as introduced by Suus in their original article.

Establishing clear understanding of expectations and boundaries is paramount in any kind of relationship play that is driven by emotional interactions, as many pre-written character connections are. Sometimes this understanding can partially be achieved as part of the game-play, for example when the pre-written connection is a budding romance, but with more established relationships it is beneficial to discuss how the characters show this emotional connection, be it positive or negative. Does a loving couple show affection through touch, or by special terms of endearment, or little in-jokes? Does the abuser intimidate their victim by force, or by emotional manipulation? Does the leader show their contempt for

one of their team members by openly being a bully, or excluding them from the group, or publicly deriding and dismissing their input? Most larpers will have some awareness of the more common emotional boundary requests, like not being excluded, but we don't have enough shared language to actively ask after them.

Crossing the streams

Physical and emotional boundaries are not separate pillars, they are both needed to hold up the roof. This seems like a given, but often they are discussed as separate entities without giving much thought to how one influences the other. For example, someone might accept a loving or neutral hand on their shoulder but be uncomfortable with the same motion being done out of anger. Similarly, physical and emotional bullying behaviour can hit different. The emotion behind physical touch affects the boundary and should not be forgotten.

We therefore advocate to talk about these themes together in workshops to model

Violence	Intimacy
- Exclusion - Belittling/disparaging - Bullying - Not being taken seriously - Unequal relationship - One-sided relationship - Maltreatment/oppression - -isms and -phobias (i.e. sexism, racism, homophobia etc.) - Being ignored - Yelling/screaming	- Caregiver - Care receiver - Feelings of infatuation/crush/love - Unrequited love - Grief - Being betrayed/betraying someone - Conditional love - Absolute dependency - Projection - Loose ends/uncertainty

Table 3: Emotional interactions

a more holistic approach. It would be beneficial for organisers to model the fact that physical, emotional, verbal, and intimate interactions rarely happen as standalone situations, and negotiations are therefore never just about where you can touch someone or whether it is ok to yell at them.

Consent as an ever-changing goalpost

Triggers are not set in stone and consent needs to be re-confirmed. An experienced larper might be aware of the factors that influence their capability to take on specific content. They might be able to take into account things like: the amount of sleep they've had, the amount of noise in a space, or things that have happened in their life recently that might influence how much they are capable of taking on. Oftentimes though, players need to be prompted to help determine if and why their boundaries change as the runtime progresses. A quick consent re-negotiation can be helpful in this. This can be as simple as checking in over an off-game breakfast and asking someone if they are still happy with what was previously negotiated. It can also help to pinpoint new insights a player or their coplayer might have had. It often happens that players don't find out their boundaries until they actively run into them during playtime. Like figuring out you are ok with being screamed at, just not when it is about a very specific topic. Or the other way around, figuring out you are comfortable with something you previously thought might have been a boundary. Being able to adjust as play progresses helps ensure

everyone involved stays in their comfort zone.

The risk of underlying motives

Often consent negotiations as presented during workshops focus on the outward appearance of a relationship or situation – what it looks like to others. It is easy to build one's framework and understanding of a relationship based on that outward appearance and assumptions are made quickly.

When relationships come into play, character actions can be heavily informed by underlying motives. Therefore if a player makes a proposition to another player that is really multilayered it is important to clarify. For example: Player A propositions Player B for an intimate scene, and the consent negotiation around the physical elements make it look like this action comes from a sense of attraction or desire. In reality, though, the character wants to use the action to trigger jealousy in a third character. The motives in this scene can very possibly cross the boundaries of Player B, but unless the underlying motive is clearly communicated, Player B won't have any idea of what is happening until long after the scene.

This requires a certain level of transparency not all players might be familiar or comfortable with, as in this example Player A will have to divulge the hidden motive to ensure player boundaries are not crossed. We argue that player comfort takes precedence and that it is possible to ask about boundaries without going into specifics of intended scenes.

Conclusion

As our community evolves, so should our understanding of consent. Negotiating consent is a skill that can be learned – and if mastered will empower participants to not only articulate their boundaries but also their narrative intentions; taking control of their stories in a more satisfying way. Both players, as well as organisers, have a role in educating each other. Consent is not a barrier to relationships or dramatic play but the very tool that will allow them to flourish.

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The House of Bravery

Built with Safety Measures

Katrine Wind

Safety at my larps is not meant to be a fence that holds you back. It's the floor that holds you up and a ceiling that keeps you dry. It is The House; and it exists so that you can be brave.

We larp to experience Cool Stuff™ and while it's great to focus on making interesting choices and “just-do-it”, something comes before that. To be brave, you need to feel safe, but I want to challenge the current catalogue of hard-to-remember safety measures; they might be achieving some of their intended purpose, but I find that they make me more scared and less interested for others to engage with.

The concept of the House of Bravery is a way to enable larpers to make brave choices by using what we have learned about consent, emotional care and responsibility and turning it into an environment where they can take creative and emotional risks without losing themselves in the process.

What are we trying to solve?

In newer Nordic larp history, we have rightly attempted to “safety up” larps. Both in society and in the broader larp communities I have been part of, there was and is a sorely needed focus on being good playmates and stopping predators. The #MeToo-movement in society fuelled and validated even more what we were doing and also helped create a space for people who hadn't previously dared to speak up.

However, I don't like all the solutions implemented. Over the years, I have seen a lot of complicated safety measures and mechanics being put in place that stopped people from engaging in even minor interactions. Some of the mechanics,

the attempted solutions, have instead created uncertainty and paralyzed players who don't feel enabled to use them either because of the mechanics themselves or the quality of the workshops teaching them. For example, some organisers to this day still practice the scuba diver inspired hand sign of “ok” check-in. Some larps make it a requirement to actively check in on each co-player in a scene, and even worse: some require that you check with everyone in a room that they are okay with the scene you are about to initiate. This solution to help people feeling safe is exhausting and intimidating to me, and it creates a barrier against doing something brave, like many of the mechanics utilized more or less elegantly. I already try to do my best to co-create with my co-players and play them up in our shared larp experience. If I have to take responsibility for every single person around, and understand/decode how they are feeling off-game beneath what their character is expressing, I would never do anything at all.

I started to wonder if we could do this in a better way if we all had some very clear expectations about what is cool, appreciated, and accepted behaviour in each particular larp, as well as the tools and responsibility to communicate our needs. I want to share my suggestion for a solution where we need less runtime calibration regarding safety, because we agree and understand a common framework safety-wise.

Boundaries and limits

To understand brave play, we need to separate *limits* from *boundaries*. While

they are somewhat synonyms, the crucial difference between being able to feel brave is in exactly this distinction if we define it as below.

Your *limit* is the line other people cannot and should not cross. It's a line that protects your integrity, your safety and your autonomy. Limits are non-negotiable. Only you have the right to redefine your limit if you want and are able to. Your limit is something that is non-negotiable at a given moment of time. They might change over time but not within the duration of a multi-day larp.

Your *boundaries*, however, are flexible edges. They mark the areas within which you *still feel safe*, but maybe also a little uncertain, out of known waters or uncomfortable. This is where you could *learn, grow, and*

challenge yourself if you pushed them.

Bravery lives in that space between your boundaries and your limits. It is the zone where fear meets trust. An example could be giving a speech in front of the whole larp. It could be playing a leader. It could be engaging in a stunt fight, or being vulnerable by letting your character be convinced by another person to change an opinion or behaviour. Pushing a boundary safely and intentionally is how we expand what we are capable of exploring. Your boundaries are not the same with different people, and might even change scene to scene. Thus, I always stress how you cannot expect to be allowed to do the same thing with one person that you have seen them do with another. If you want to push boundaries in a larp setting, I recommend doing it in interaction with people you feel really safe with. The

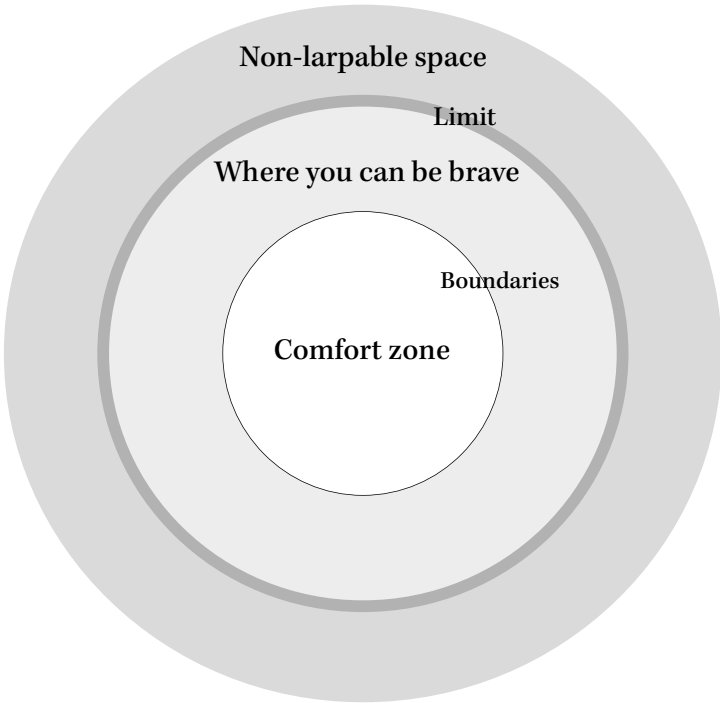


Figure 1: Limits, boundaries and where you can be brave

feeling of safety doesn't necessarily mean you have to know the person, maybe you even have an easier time pushing your boundaries with a person you just met who had no preconceptions of you. But pushing boundaries in a way I think is okay in larp requires a feeling of safety. When you feel held, respected and trusted, you can lean into that brave zone and attempt to make a shared experience of being; exactly that is what the House of Bravery is built for.

Building the House of Bravery together

Shared responsibility is crucial to build the House of Bravery. But since we can't read each others' thoughts and emotions, we have to agree that we will all take proactive responsibility for ourselves and our safety before we walk into the house. However, the original problem we were trying to solve with our safety measures was inconsiderate and/or dangerous co-players just doing whatever they wanted and pushing other peoples' limits with sentiments like: *"If you can't take it, then you shouldn't be here"*. So to ensure that common room with a feeling of safety, I found that you as an organiser can help set some hard limits *for the larp*. When everybody buys into these, people will have an easier time to push their own softer boundaries and be brave.

Solutions in other larps are based on: *"I don't trust your yes until I hear your no"* but I really don't appreciate that sentiment. It suggests that people are unreliable and that they are not really taking responsibility for themselves. Instead, I want people in my larps to agree on the following:

- You are your own responsibility
- You communicate clearly and respectfully
- You listen and act accordingly when you hear somebody drawing a boundary and a limit
- You trust others to do the same

The philosophy in all my larps is that self-care comes first. I expect you to take responsibility for your own experience and well-being. That means stating your needs, boundaries, and using the safety mechanics if you need it as well as asking for help if necessary. You can count on everybody else, players and team, doing the same.

If we agree on these principles, we can build a house together where emotional risk-taking is not only allowed, it is encouraged.

The role of the organiser: building foundation and walls

As an organiser, you can build the foundation and walls of the house. We are not neutral observers. With transparency, expectation management, flagging processes, and explicit code of conducts, you can build the walls and by enforcing your principles act as a bouncer to only let in the people in the house who want to play the same game. This enables you to invite to play around more difficult themes as well. Then the players don't need to do the emotional labour of gatekeeping. That's our job. They get to focus on larping.

For example, *Spoils of War* (Denmark, 2019–2025) is a larp containing dark themes, and it can include triggering subjects such as violence, war crimes, torture, sexual violence, pregnancy, abortion, mutilation, and racism. This content warning is the foundation of the house; if you are not comfortable with this, it is probably not a larp for you. Racism between the two fictional cultures *is* very much a part of the larp and we want to enable people to play on it and not be paralyzed by the inherently nasty nature of the theme. To help you be brave and play on this harsh theme, we will workshop good ways to play on it in-game at the larp, and provide a specific vocabulary to express your character's points-of-view. We also remind players that the people who have a lot of this content in their character explicitly asked for it and/or agreed to it in their sign-up form. This means that they welcome it from the get-go as well as expect to play on racism towards their culture.

Content warnings of what you can meet in the larp in general is an excellent foundation to put down when building The House of Bravery. But we then build the walls that players will NEVER be forced into this kind of play, if they don't want to. They can always leave a situation: they decide what is right for them. The code of conduct states that we don't want any sexism, bullying, body-shaming or racism based on off-game traits. But we also make it clear that they can't stop scenes between other people playing on these themes. They will have to remove themselves from the scene or the content.

This means that you can be sure that everyone who signed up knew that these themes could appear in *Spoils of War*, and everybody is okay with the themes being

part of the larp even though not everyone wants to play on all of them. We also know that none of it is welcome in off-game contexts.

I always encourage players to assume the best about others. I remind players that they probably have different larp cultures so strive to be observant and empathetic. If someone states a boundary, you shouldn't be scared or feel bad. They are helping you and themselves by taking care. While this can sound like empty rhetoric, I find statements like this from an organiser are an important piece in the puzzle of making a group of larpers feel safe with each other. You have to dare to be clear about how things work here when you are hosting a party in this particular house. During the larp, the role of the organiser can change. I usually see my role switching from bouncer standing at the door to the host when I'm inside the house with you. As organisers, we can act as guides. If you feel lost, confused, or stuck mid-game, if the story took a turn you didn't anticipate or you're not sure what kind of intensity is expected, we help orient you. We'll listen, offer structure if you need it, and suggest gentle doors to knock on.

The role of the player: floor, ceiling and rooms

To further enable bravery and build the house, we as organisers can provide expectations of behaviour from the players. The floor is an assurance of what you can always do without having to ask permission and the ceiling is the upper limits of certain interactions. I see many larps only

implementing *either* a floor *or* a ceiling which creates uncertainty respectively of how trivial interactions need to be calibrated and how far a co-player would potentially go with you if you don't actively stop them.

Setting the expectation that everyone's co-players know the confinements of the house means that no one has to calibrate with anyone beforehand to do things "below the floor" and don't have to fear others will do anything "above the ceiling". This can help create exactly the space we need for moving into our brave space. It is a huge advantage to communicate the ceiling and floor in the material about the larp that is available before people sign up so they opt into walking into this specific house, but you can never cover all possible scenarios so try to give a general overview and idea of the most crucial areas that could challenge peoples' limits in this specific larp and depending on the kind of experience you want to offer.

The floor

At *Spoils of War*, we provide a baseline of what you should be okay with being done to you as a player to participate in the larp. *Spoils of War* will feature physical interactions and verbal conflict, and the floor of what you have to be okay with without any calibration is e.g. a stranger grabbing your arm, shouting at you, giving you a hug, holding your hand or kissing you on the cheek. No players generally uncomfortable with this should sign up. You can still always opt out of these kinds of situations with the safety mechanics if you like. But your co-player can rest assured that they are not doing anything wrong when

assuming that they can do these things to you out of the blue.

I have found that minimizing the uncertainty by narrowing the space where you have to consciously check in with your co-players will free up mind-space for brave play. The floor can also be "you have to be okay with strangers talking to you". This is an example of something we would take for granted that it has to be okay, at least in Nordic larp but it serves as an illustration that the House of Bravery thought can be implemented no matter what the floor and ceiling is; the point is that being able to describe the floor ensures that more people are aware what they are buying into when agreeing to co-create this specific experience.

Because some of the larps I am involved in invite play on extreme themes (violence, loyalty, identity, trauma), we also know that the emotional impact of those experiences are easier to lean into when the players feel secure in how far things can go. That is why we offer not only a **floor**, but also a **ceiling**.

The ceiling

Brave play is relational and we set an expectation that you can trust that no one will go above the ceiling even if you're in your most vulnerable state. It means you can offer powerful gestures without endless prior calibration because you know they fall within the house. It also ensures that people with limits that are through the sky don't intimidate co-players or dominate the larp with seemingly limitless behaviour.

If physical violence is a part of a larp, a known ceiling can create a lot of feeling of safety. For example, if you play a victim of physical violence in the larp, it might be nice

to know that no one will actually go to the length of punching you in the face. While that would be acceptable to some people as part of their larping, I don't want it in my larps. A valid example of a ceiling to set in a larp could also be that no violence is allowed at all. I will often allow and even encourage stunt fighting but where the ceiling is "no flailing arms and legs", the focus is on brawling, pushing the other person against walls etc. "No physical injury" is a sound ceiling but when you bruise like a banana like I do, "nothing that leaves physical marks" can be a very low ceiling. The point is to carefully choose your words and be sure what you want people to actually do. Intimacy is another area where a ceiling can be beneficial, and an area where many larps actually do have a ceiling. Below is the description of the ceiling (where you can go to at the absolute maximum) for *Spoils of War*:

"Players can choose that their characters act in violent or sexual ways, experience dramatic breakdowns or suffer from mortifying humiliations. Dramatic display of emotions and physical interaction is welcomed at Spoils of War. For sexual play of any kind up to theatrical sex (dry humping) is alright, but no off-game sex is allowed. It is not the norm with this kind of interaction publicly but you might encounter it in the larp. No nudity of torsos or genital areas is allowed during the larp for any genders."

Both intimacy and physical violence are part of the workshop of *Spoils of War*, and different player groups will ask questions about the limits of the larp depending on their own preferences and insecurities. I am absolutely aware that you can't cover

all possible descriptions of ceiling or floor in the pre-larp descriptions. You have to stop the information overload somewhere, and sometimes you haven't thought about a specific possibility that the players bring up. However, scheduling the safety workshop later in the on-site pre-larp preparations helps to ensure that you have built some trust in the group already if you have provided well executed workshops. This will help with everyone understanding approximately where the ceiling and floor are for this larp and cause for less insecurity. For example, kissing isn't covered in the text for *Spoils of War* above, but that is usually pretty uncontroversial for the player group just covering it during the workshop.

The rooms

To stay within the allegory of the house, I often stress to players that the same rules don't apply in all rooms of the House of Bravery. You might feel safe within the house itself and how to state your limits but your boundaries will be different with different people. This means that you build different rooms yourself and together with co-players, or groups of co-players depending on how brave you feel to push your boundaries alone or with different people. It might be fine for an off-game friend to kiss you full on, but not for anyone else. That has to be okay. Similarly, the House of Bravery also serves the purpose that you don't HAVE to use the safety mechanics with someone if you stay under the ceiling of the House and you are absolutely sure they are okay with what you are intending. Is it just a show we perform for others at the larp that we robotically have to use the safety mechanics in the same way with everybody, then? So maybe you don't always have to have calibrated a violence scene beforehand

but you have to if you aren't sure of the other person's boundaries. This approach provides less of a need for interrupting scenes with off-game calibration. I have sometimes felt alienated and experienced lack of meaning during workshops when I encountered inflexibility with mindlessly being forced to use larp mechanics for something trivial in our relationship. Once, I had to visibly check in before shouting at the character of my close off-game friend even though I knew for certain she was okay with it. Another example is having to ask for permission to kiss the character of my long term off-game partner with whom I kiss every day even if kissing is within the ceiling of the larp.

There can be a separate point in visibly having to telegraph to everybody in the room that you use the safety mechanics and that there are no exceptions, but I experience in many larps that it is not the intention of the organisers; a communal sense of safety is. Therefore, my suggestion is to make a common and known framework for the larp, urging people to state their own limits if they are met before the limits of the larp itself and to validate that boundaries are different with different people.

If the player group understands this difference of boundaries with different people, it is my experience that it can help to bring in players who might otherwise have opted out, so no one sees that person as fragile or not fun to play with: you just build a slightly different room with them and they are helping to maintain the house.

This also means that if someone communicates that a boundary was overstepped, you just listen and take care to not do it again.

Sometimes we overstep a boundary, maybe even because the other person wasn't aware that a certain interaction would be too much, and if we can dedramatize how much of a villain you need to feel like for accidentally doing that, you are more likely to make brave choices and push your own boundaries.

Calibration and safety mechanics: Tools for redecorating a room

When we play internationally, we have different playing cultures coming together. It is my experience that it is a good idea to have workshops of what you understand with the word "calibration" and how to do it.

I always ask players to use the word "off-game" if they quietly need a one-line calibration in the middle of a scene. This management of expectation is necessary, as some play cultures are okay with off-game commentary in general or lengthy off-game conversations in the middle of the playspace.

That is not the atmosphere I am looking for. However, part of the House of Bravery in my larps is that you are sure you can stop people if they are getting too close to your limit even if it is within the limits of the House. The word "off-game" can work in most larps as a tool of communicating that you need or want something as a player and not a character. While using the word off-game as a calibration measure is fairly common in many parts of the Nordic Larp community, regarding other safety mechanics, I am heavily inspired by what I learned from Johanna Koljonen. She stressed how players are more important than larp and introduced safety mechanics to me that are still very

useful and elegant today (Koljonen, 2016). It struck home for example at *Inside Hamlet* (Denmark, 2018) where Koljonen introduced how all other interactions become more safe if you escalate slowly – also called *Bullet time consent*. She illustrated it with the analogy of the movie *The Matrix*, where the characters are able to do wild stunts but they do it in slow motion. If we are able to do that as players, we give our co-player time to react. I always add the example of not attacking someone from behind as they have no chance to see you and opt out. But I then add that you CAN attack someone from behind if you absolutely know they are okay with it. Go slower the less you are certain of the boundaries and limits of the specific co-player in a scene.

Koljonen also introduced the Tap-Out where you double tap e.g. on the arm of your co-player like in martial arts to indicate that they should dial back a little (Koljonen, 2016). It can be really helpful if you for example see a co-player being about to slap you and you don't think you have time to verbally stop them. If you tap out and they then hold back, it provides time for you to explain off-game what they need. It could also be useful if you are playing in the dark, as Koljonen states. I have never used the tap-out mechanic in a larp myself, but it gives me such a feeling of safety that I know that I and others have that tool available if necessary.

While these safety mechanics are part of the foundation of all my larps, The House of Bravery is not determined by which mechanics you use. It's just important that you have thought about it, make them clear and applicable as well as fitting for the larp experience you want people to have.

Off-game room and safety team

Adding an actual off-game room and possibly a safety person can help build a safe environment in many larps – obviously it benefits more the heavier the larp's themes. Having a place where you can draw back to reflect on the larp and take a break can be great. Even better if there are snacks! It can sometimes help you to sort out complicated emotions and sort out what is in-game relevant and what is something you should communicate with a co-players about off-game. Maybe you are just hungry or tired? Maybe you actually need to go in another direction with your larp. That can happen just in an in-game space alone or in your bedroom. Klara Rotvig, who is an exceptional safety person and who has been a crucial partner in developing my approach to safety in larps, has taught me just how much distress comes from physical discomfort; if a snack or a nap helps, maybe it is worth starting with that solution.

Obviously, in my line of thinking, players would ideally make sure they have just the right snacks for themselves, or go to bed at a time that makes them feel good. But my experience is that many larpers don't take enough care of themselves. Sometimes, this lack of self care can create separate safety hazards because of over exaggerated outbursts against co-players or emotional anguish that could have been much less painful for the person experiencing it. You can also choose to offer up an emotional safety person/team. Personally, just knowing that a safety person is present often relieves my need for one. I have never needed a safety person as much as in larps where there wasn't any.

Conclusion: The House is a Culture

The House of Bravery is not a checklist, but rather a tool to build a culture of safety that enables brave choices. It lives in how we set expectations before a larp, how we workshop, how we check in, and how we recover when something doesn’t go as planned. We learn that saying *no* is not a weakness but architecture. Saying *yes* is not reckless but trust.

We rehearse discomfort because of pushing boundaries in safe ways. We will make mistakes deliberately and then learn how to correct them together. We will laugh about awkwardness, use the word ”off-game” without fear, and remind ourselves and each other: it’s okay to want more. It’s okay to want less. It’s okay to say no.

So when you arrive, know that this house already has foundations. We built them for you. All you need to do is step inside and push your boundaries together with others while taking responsibility for yourself.

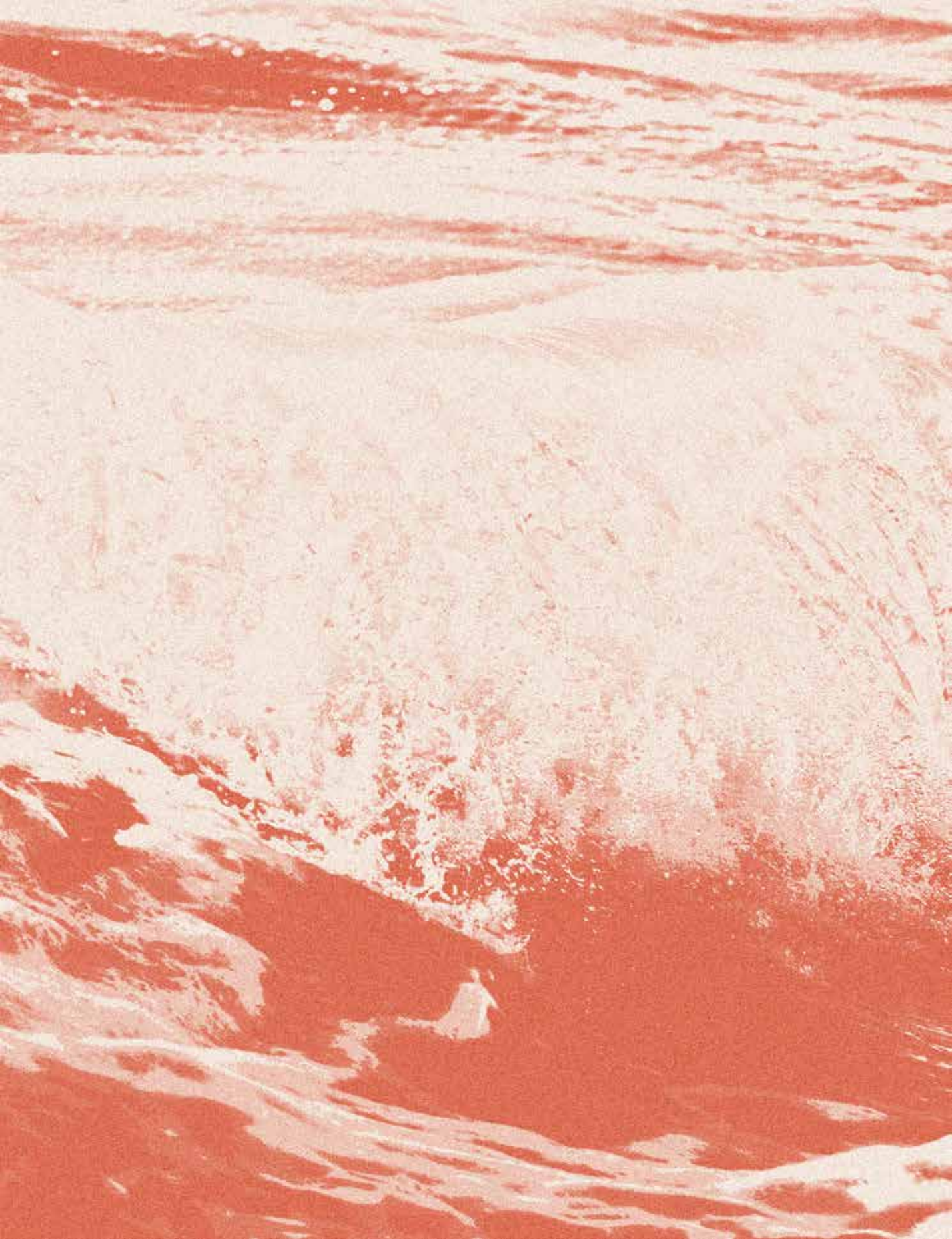
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Type Two Food

Marijke Van Hauwaert

Introduction

What influence does the food experience at a larp have on the rest of the event as a whole? Does having bad food that is also in-game, i.e. food you consume during the larp that fits the setting thematically or is part of the initial larp design, still make for a good larp experience? Would you perhaps call something like eating cold beans out of a tin can in a war-themed larp “type two food”?

Type two fun is defined as something that is hard to do, but fun to remember. It is challenging and can seem like a gruelling task at the moment. However, in hindsight, type two fun makes for great stories because it reminds us of our ability to grow and overcome obstacles (Type Two Fun 2022). So that would make type two food some kind of food that may not be to your liking off-game, outside of the larp, but in-game absolutely fits the story, the genre, or the circumstances your character is found in. Sure, eating unidentified grey mush is not anyone’s idea of a great meal, but at a science fiction larp playing strongly on themes of poverty and scarcity, it might just be what you need to elevate your feeling of being immersed completely in the story.

Having watery, garlicky, oily “soup” with one single piece of carrot – if you are lucky – sounds awful. But that is all people had during WW2, so it is what your character is having. But make sure to also take care of yourself as a player, not only as a character.

When offering type two food at a larp, it is always a good idea to offer some type one food (food that is nourishing, tasty, filling, and generally nice to eat) off-game, as well.

Players need nutrition; food is one of our basic requirements. Making sure everyone is well fed and safe should always take priority over however “cool” the food looks. And right above physiological needs in the hierarchy of what humans need to thrive is safety.

Emotional and physical safety can and should be designed for in larps. Luckily, it doesn’t have to be that much work, considering the huge impact having a list of ingredients or allergens next to a dish on a buffet can have for the feeling of safety of your players and crew.

Through research, interviews, and a survey conducted by myself, I will look deeper into what larp food in all its aspects means to different players and crew.

1. Food as a basic requirement

a. The first level of larp participation

Food is a basic requirement. Westborg, March, and Maxe (2024) rightfully put food as a level one off-game need, in their article Six Levels of Larp Participation. Even outside a larp, food is right at the bottom of the famous pyramid of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.

As far as basic human needs go, I am sure most people will agree that eating, sleeping, and decent toilet facilities are the three things that absolutely have to be taken care of at a larp. Problems with your toilets can make any otherwise spectacular larp a terrible event. The same goes for food: if the food is lacking in quantity or quality, if your players go hungry, their mood and desire to continue the larp suffer – unless

you make this part of your design. More on that later.

Vice versa, if your larp is not all that great, it can absolutely be improved by having decent sleeping arrangements and an abundance of good food. Or at an already well-received larp, like *Tenebra* (2025), players had continuous access to a big table stuffed with snacks of all varieties. The kitchen crew had a high budget for taking care of the in-game food – and it showed. They got raving reviews and players never went hungry. This way, an already well-liked larp got even higher ratings in their after-larp survey, just because of the food.

b. Players cooking their own food

Players cooking their own food as part of your design, is quite tricky. Westborg et al. (2024) describe this as the second level of larp participation: giving your players a task. If players cook the food, did they agree to do so while signing up for the larp? What if they want to do something else in-game, can they let organisers know and drop their task? Is there a backup plan? Having food for your players is a high priority, so the organisers’ schedule for food distribution should not be disrupted. Clear communication between participants and organisers is vital when it comes to a basic requirement like food.

What if all players together prepare the food? In *Children of the House* (2025), for example, participants magically found the ingredients for their meals, and ritually turned them into a meal to share together. This was communicated and workshopped before the larp, and thus an integral part of the larp design. Often they worked with exactly the same ingredients

for every meal – which some players liked and some disliked, but this was taken care of through off-game complementary foods. Unintentionally, but not surprisingly, co-creation of the larp through food instantly created a strong sense of community in-game.

Apart from which players are tasked with cooking the food, it is undeniably a good idea to add this information in your larp design document. Make sure participants know what they sign up for, on all levels.

c. Survey results

How much does good or bad food add to the overall impression of a larp? According to a small survey I ran in 2025 for this article, all respondents agree that having good food adds to how well the larp is received overall. If the food was good, they always talked about it, both in-game and off-game. Surprisingly, no one kept quiet about good food.

What made their food experience so great? Here, respondents give varying but no shocking answers. Aspects such as fresh ingredients, good quality, and tasty food are all highly regarded. Also, simply warm food, having enough for everyone, and plenty of options were important to many players. That the food is part of the design, fits the setting or atmosphere, or adds to the immersion, is also mentioned often – but not always. For all survey results it is true that if the food was good, it had a positive impact on the rest of the larp experience.

On a scale from 1-5, how was your overall larp experience at this event?
23 responses

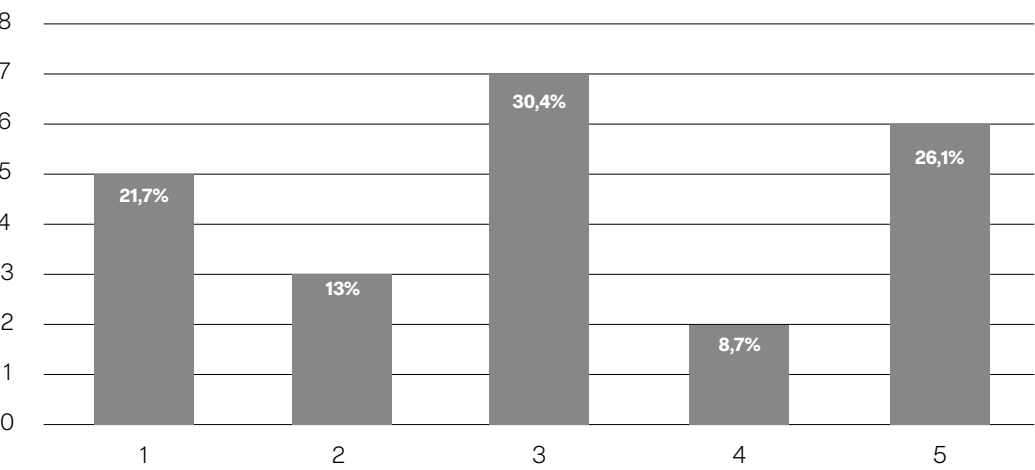


Fig. 1: Players rating their overall larp experience, with 1 = terrible, 5 = amazing, linked to a larp with a good food memory.

How did this food influence the rest of your larp experience?
25 responses

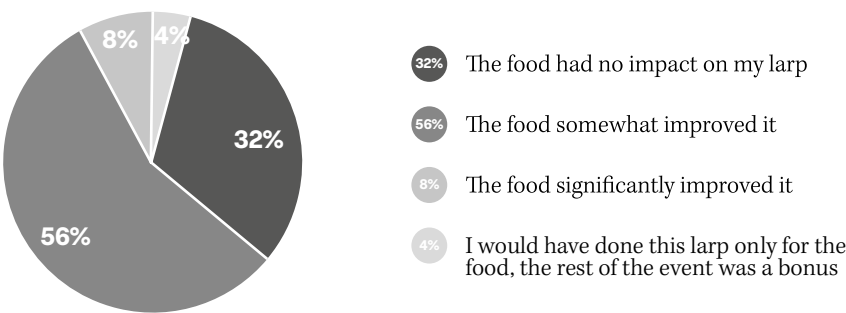


Fig. 2: Players rating how the food influenced the rest of their larp experience, linked to a larp with a good food memory.

A bad food experience, from the same survey, was almost always linked to basic requirements complaints: the food was later than planned, cold, badly prepared or seasoned, and uninspired. If the food was bad, most respondents of the survey talked about it in-game or off-game, but not always.

The overall larp experiences linked to bad food experiences were diverse. But the food did often have a negative impact on the rest of the players' larp experience, more than a neutral impact.

On a scale from 1-5, how was your overall larp experience at this event?
25 responses

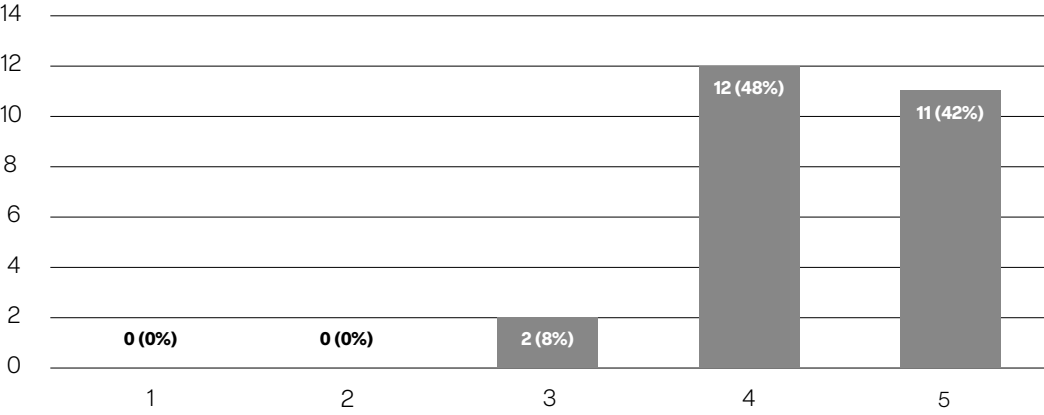


Fig. 3: Players rating their overall larp experience, with 1 = terrible, 5 = amazing, linked to a larp with a bad food memory.

How did this food influence the rest of your larp experience?
23 responses



Fig. 4: Players rating how the food influenced the rest of their larp experience, linked to a larp with a bad food memory.

2. Food as a design tool

a. Dinner warfare

Not only the food, but also the timing and setting are something to design for. If your players eat in-game, you should make the meals themselves meaningful. You can design this through specific mealtimes, seating charts in larps with strongly

designed or worked out relationships, where the characters sitting next to yours can influence your entire eating experience. Katrine Wind (2024) calls this “dinner warfare”.

Wind utilizes dinner warfare in *Spoils of War* (2019), by having the winning and losing side of a war celebrate a sacred feast together, where players have to celebrate

Life, no matter the circumstances. The written characters have complex relations, so the seating plan is made off-game by Wind. In-game, it is made by the Queen, who invites all players from all sides of the war for the feast. “Prisoners of war sit with their captors and the family that is desperate to have them back. Former lovers sit next to the one that broke their heart – you get the sentiment. The cultural and religious agreement that we don’t attack each other during a meal provides the alibi here.” (Wind, 2024).

For larp organisers, it is very important to be clear about what is part of your larp design and what is not: maybe scarcity of food is part of the larp, and you want participants to also be hungry off-game (Westborg, Maxe and March, 2024). Make sure all players understand your concept, so they can prepare themselves to play on this. Maybe they want to be hungry too, to feel immersed, or maybe they would rather just act it out while secretly sharing some snacks in an off-game area. Not informing your players about your food design, when it has a big impact on the game like this, would make your larp very unpopular very quickly.

b. Larp to flow

Food and meals can be designed for warfare, or for wholeness and community. The act of consuming something, shared together, forces people to take some time together while they eat or drink something. Forcing a moment of slowness in a larp is an excellent way to create some low drama. It is excellent for being your character instead of acting as your character. Finding magic in the mundane, as described by Bailly and Kyhn (2021), is perfectly doable while

eating. This way, you can get into the flow of your character.

In addition to the idea of larp to flow, you can design your food to fit into what you want to convey during a larp. A larp with a strong upstairs/downstairs element where rich and poor are very distinct, like *Aether* (2013), can serve the same food for all players. Only, the richer people get their food nicely plated, served at the table by a staff of waiters, and the poorer people get it served buffet style, or even all mixed together in a stew in one or two pots. If participants pay the same amount of money to attend this larp, you do not want to make anyone disgruntled because they had worse food.

In a larp designed for survival and scarcity, having food become a ritualistic thing can create something really powerful. A lot of strong food memories were made around flatbread at *Children of the House* (2025), for example. The entire larp focused on gratitude and being thankful for little things, and expressing this through small rituals created a lot of play.

c. In-game food that fits the setting

At the larp *Gothic* (2023), players are trapped in an erotic, psychological horror story, created by their own imaginations. From their design document (Brind et al., 2024), players were to be served two in-game meals. The designers wanted the food to be more than just sustenance – they wanted it to blend in, and enhance the setting and player experience. The larp was set in the Regency era, so they mainly used recipes from British and Danish cookbooks of that era, adapted for the modern kitchen and dietary restrictions. Along with the recipes, the designers describe signs to go with each

course, to give the players a clue about what they were eating. The food design then continues describing the specific atmosphere, ways of serving, and practical tips for the organisers. Clearly, making the food fit the setting is extremely important for this larp.

Perhaps my favourite example of type two food – food that fits the setting but is specifically designed to make the players feel awful in some way – can be found in the larp *Made in Hessbrand* (2015). This larp played on poverty and sickness, and the food that was served looked terrible. The colour of their “Fishy Mush” as they called it was not very appetizing at all. The taste, however, and the additional toppings were amazing and well designed. This meant that the food was tasty, even though it looked horrible. It increased the players’ feeling of being abused by a system and the feeling of poverty. At the same time the actual food was really tasty and filling (Göthberg and Sandquist, 2017).

d. Survey results

That food is part of the larp design and adds to the overall feeling of immersion was noted as important by a significant part of the survey participants, but not all. One anonymous participant states that “food can add to immersion and gameplay. There could be narrative reasons for certain dishes or missing ingredients. Though quantity and quality should not suffer from this, unless specified clearly in advance. For example, a winter camp survival style game.” A second anonymous respondent finds that “unless the food is a part of the game (e.g. a dinner party) keep it simple and foresee tasty snacks in between.” Which is also an excellent summary – food can be

part of the design, but if you see no reason to do so, focus on other aspects and just make the food simple, plentiful, and tasty.

A well designed dinner can definitely add something to an event, though. “The larp *Conscience* starts with a dinner, and it was amazing. It gave everyone something to do and react to in character. The revolutionary workers were amazed that they could have more than one potato. The artists commented on the particular colour of the sauce. I, a priest, made sure everyone else at my table had enough food before I took any for myself. Eating is such a part of the human experience, that it matters more to me that the food and service fits the setting than it objectively being “good”. In a post-apocalyptic game, I, the player, would much rather eat food cold from a scavenged tin than to sit down to a banquet.” With these examples that I am sure many would agree with, Bob described perfectly at the end of my survey how both good and bad in-game food can contribute to a larp event.

3. Food as a safe haven

a. Emotional safety concerning food

At larps where an emotional/physical safety space is provided, snacks are no luxury. A bit of tasty sweet or salty food during a moment of quiet can provide players who just went through a bad experience with a moment of calm, happiness, and make them feel prepared to get back in-game. Food as a safe haven should never be underestimated.

When food plays an important part in your larp design, workshops can definitely help your players feel safe. At *Children of the*

House (2025) it was stressed that players should do what they need for themselves, food wise. Players were assured they could not make mistakes, and if they needed anything else besides the in-game food, they could find it in a designated off-game kitchen. Even small things like having food that is meant to be eaten with your hands, because you are playing in a survivalist setting, can cause stress. Simply offer some cutlery for those who need it, without making a big deal about it.

During the online larp *I'll Have What They're Having* (2021), players share meals and meal times together in front of their cameras. Emotional safety around these specific food situations were designed thoughtfully. The meals were picked by the designer, recipes provided beforehand, while keeping in mind they should not be too loud or crunchy for people with food sensory issues. Even more, before each meal time the players calibrated, and could agree to turn their microphones off completely while chewing. And even more, it was communicated to the players they could eat anything they felt comfortable with, diverging from the designed meal plan. Or they did not even have to eat at all if they did not feel comfortable doing so. Clearly stressing that the players could make their own choices on all levels, and they could decide for themselves how far to go, within the boundaries of the larp.

b. Off-game complementary cornucopias

The importance of good off-game food at a larp with possibly (for various reasons) challenging food situations, cannot be overstated. Not all players might use or need it in addition to the food provided in-game,

but for those who do, it can make their entire event. At *Children of the House* (2025), the off-game eating area provided a break from the same ingredients for every meal, and the silence that was linked to every meal they shared all together in a big group. They provided a kitchen where players could ask for meals, or get some sweet or salty snacks – all in all plenty to make everyone happy and full. In-game they played on scarcity, so the off-game snacking was complementary. And it even urged some players to try new things or explore food issue boundaries in an exciting but safe environment.

The feeling of safety by making sure there is enough, and preferably a few different choices, is important at an event. It seems evident, but you do not want your players to go hungry. As Göthberg and Sandquist (2017) state, “I don’t know about you, but I get rather grumpy when I am hungry – and that makes me less keen to focus on the rest of the larp that’s happening.”

c. List your ingredients

Part of physical and emotional safety concerning food is listing ingredients or allergens and putting them up next to the food. I prefer making complete ingredient lists, and where necessary (e.g. on large buffets) clearly mark which dishes are vegetarian, vegan, lactose-free, gluten-free – whatever players have indicated during their registration for the larp.

d. Survey results

Listed allergens, vegan, and vegetarian options are often mentioned as very positive larp food experiences in my survey. Physical safety concerning food starts simply with being confident in the fact that

eating the food in front of you will not make you physically ill. Comments from bad larp food experiences talk about not listing all allergens in the meals, food being badly or not seasoned, no list of ingredients being available, or that the kitchen crew could not cater to all specific dietary wishes. Overall, having enough food for everyone that is tasty and served in a properly heated space, is the biggest contributor to physical and emotional safety, according to the survey results.

4. Food for thought

a. About pressure, textures, and Burger King

Quite a lot of larpers have difficulty eating at larps, as anecdotally described by Wind (2024). Hungry people in many situations tend to be worse larpers. The kind of pressure that dinner warfare provides can make it difficult for some to eat – and one of the ways Wind remedies this is by making the dinners very long. If players sit down for 2.5 hours and are served three different courses, almost anyone will have eaten something at the end.

Something I would like to do more research on, is the fact that relatively speaking, a lot of larp participants are in some form neurodivergent. Textures and tastes are therefore important to keep in mind if you want to make your food extra inclusive. I have been working with this concept from the start, subconsciously, but more awareness can only add more to the feeling of safety that eating nice food can bring.

Allow players to provide some food safety for themselves. Imagine the food being so

bad (e.g. picture the driest falafel you ever had, and make it ten times worse) that the participants are really suffering. If one of the players suggests making a quick off-game trip to a local fast food chain and bringing back a few orders, by all means, let them.

b. Appreciate your kitchen crew

The kitchen crew does not need a type two larp. They work hard enough, so make sure they are well staffed and give them an opportunity to enjoy the event a little, too. You could offer them a small role if they wish, a small token of gratitude, or just any word of thanks if there is something you appreciated about the food. There is a lot of appreciation for kitchen crew in Belgian larps – possibly linked to our love for good food, and the whole culture we built around that. Our kitchen crews are almost always known for being very creative with a small budget for larp food.

Enthusiastic chefs, whether they were in-game or off-game, were also often mentioned in the responses of my survey. Players are immensely grateful for a kitchen crew that goes above and beyond the call of duty. Catering to everyone’s needs is a challenge, taking the setting of the larp into account is a whole extra layer. It is certainly not a simple matter – but that makes it interesting, and perhaps even fun.

Conclusion

Firstly, I would strongly implore everyone to enjoy their food more, in-game or off-game. Type two food can be great during a larp event, but how great is type one food, both in real life and during a rollercoaster of an emotional larp?

Lastly, as head of various larp kitchen crews, I do enjoy some type two fun while cooking, too. Coming up with extravagant meals on often a tiny budget, the ever present chaos of a kitchen with time limits, a myriad of allergens and dietary wishes, makes for a stressful but fun event. I can only speak for myself, but I hope all you other larp food designers share at least a little of my sentiment.

Thanks

A huge, heart-felt, cinnamon-filled thank you to Sandy and David, without whom this article would probably not have happened. Thank you to everyone who filled out my survey and even linked me to additional sources for this article. And of course, a thank you to the proofreaders, and everyone who made this book happen. I hope it was at least a little bit type one fun for you, too.

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Editing for Character Sheets

Mia Kuhn

Editing is a crucial but often overlooked part of the writing process. It transforms a pile of disjointed ideas and potential into one greater whole, and sorts through the mess to make sure a text really shines. Good editing will make sure all your character sheets work together, it will check that all the timelines match up and that the relations make sense, and it will help you put together a concise and useful description of your setting, to name a few examples. And if you plan it well from the beginning, it's not as difficult as it may seem.

It's easy to acknowledge that editing is important, but how do you actually approach it? I worked as a lead reviewer for a translation team for three years, but before I earned this professional experience I certainly didn't have a clue what good editing looked like, and I think a lot of people could use some more tangible guidelines to get the most out of their editing. This article gathers some practical tips and tricks for how to structure the editing process and provides you with a solid jumping-off point for your own process.

While many of the methods outlined here can be useful for any kind of writing, I am going to focus on editing larp characters. This is for several reasons: in many cases the characters will represent the bulk of writing done for a larp, and this is where I have the most experience myself. What's more, larp characters carry some extra challenges compared to, say, a player guide: they will usually be the work of several different writers, and while often no one player will read every single character, they still need to communicate a coherent narrative to some degree. Editing is crucial to bring all these different elements together, so

this is where a solid editing stage will often have the biggest impact. The main intended audience is organisers working as a character lead or otherwise in charge of the character writing process, but it could be helpful for anyone interested in editing texts for larps.

The two editing types

If we simplify things a little bit, there are two overarching types of editing: proofreading and content editing. To put it bluntly, I don't care about proofreading, and neither should you. A couple of typos or awkwardly phrased sentences simply don't make that big of a difference. Of course some issues can impact understanding, but they will usually be caught in the content editing anyway. Get a friend who's good at spelling to read the text through once if you want. Anything more than that is a waste of your precious time and resources.

Content editing, which I will be focusing on, contains two elements in itself. It requires both a deep dive into the individual sections of the text – making sure it fulfils the expectations and conveys the right message and information – and an overarching perspective on the text as a whole to ensure coherence. I like to approach editing as trying to answer a list of questions about the text. Exactly which questions are most relevant will of course depend on the larp, but here are some general ones that are almost always pertinent:

- Do the characters convey the message we're trying to communicate?
- Does each character fit into the larp we're creating?

- What are the central themes of each character? Are they clearly communicated?
- Does each character give the player enough avenues for play?
- Does each character contain all the information the player needs from it?
- Does the timeline make sense?
- Do any of the characters contain conflicting information or contradict each other in some way?
- Is each character interesting and playable?

For this reason I also don't believe you need to be a native speaker of the larp's language to be a good editor. I'm not a native English speaker myself, and I've done plenty of English-language editing. Sometimes it may even be helpful to have a non-native speaker read through a text if you expect an international player base, as they are better at identifying obscure words or idioms that would be difficult for many non-native speakers to understand.

Style guide: the editing bible

If I could give only one piece of advice, it would be to write a comprehensive style guide. Putting together the style guide is the first, and in my view most important, bit of the editing process, and it should happen before a single word has been written.

Ideally the writers and editors should work from the same guide, so that the writers know exactly what's expected of them, and the editors can hold it up against the text

to check if it does everything it's supposed to do. The editing process becomes so much easier when the writers and editors are on the same page and working towards the same clearly described goal. I cannot stress how important a good style guide is and how much grief it can save you. A solid 90% of all the issues I've encountered when editing could have been solved by a more detailed style guide. It should be your final source of truth, your bible, the most holy text – though in practice it is never infallible and will often change and evolve to some degree throughout the process.

A style guide should include everything the writers and editors need, though more detailed information about the setting might be useful to keep in a separate document, depending on the larp. Common elements include:

- The formal specifications. This is things like word or page count, the layout, if you're writing in first, second, or third person, how to refer to other characters, whether you're using British or American spelling if you're writing in English, and so on.
- The overall vision. What is the purpose of the characters, how do you want the players to use them? Are you looking for the full picture of each character's life with many details spelled out, a skeleton for the players to build upon, or something else?
- The writing style to aim for. Should the writing be straightforward and to the point, or flowery and poetic? Should the text dive into the minds of the characters, or recount facts from an outside perspective?
- A detailed explanation of each individual section of the character sheet, e.g. back-story, relations, group description, or

whatever else you are including. Explain exactly what each section should communicate to the player.

- A glossary of commonly used terms and links to any other resources.
- A note about what the editing process will look like, how many passes you expect the text to go through, and how much control, if any, the writers will have of the final product.
- It's a good idea to also include a checklist for the editors. I like to write this as a series of questions similar to those introduced above. This is less relevant for the writers, but it will be helpful for them as well to see what the editing process will focus on.

Before sharing the style guide with the writers and editors, go through everything with the rest of the organising team or lead organiser to make sure you are on the same page. Ask many and detailed questions to understand exactly what they hope to get out of the character sheets. We all have our own unspoken assumptions about what a good character looks like, so try to get as many of them out in the open as you can. What does playability look like for your team? If your characters are divided into groups of some kind, how clearly should those groups be defined on the sheets? Should every character's opinions about some central theme be clearly stated? How open-ended can the relations to other characters be? The challenging thing about assumptions is that you won't know you have them until they start clashing later on in the process, but the more of them you can hash out early on, the smoother your experience will be. I recommend prioritising a meeting like

this and spending time preparing as many questions as you can think of beforehand to make your style guide as comprehensive and useful as possible.

Creating a schedule

I can only give very general advice here. The editing schedule will naturally depend heavily on the scope of the larp: how many characters you're writing, how long each one should be, and the size and time commitment of your team. A rough rule of thumb is that for the editing stage you will need about half the amount of people and time that you used for the writing stage.

There are many ways of putting together a team, but one golden rule is to never have a writer edit their own work. We will always be blind to our own mistakes and it would defeat the purpose of a separate editing stage if the writers were editing themselves anyway. As long as you follow that golden rule, the editing team can easily be the same as the writing team, but it can also be beneficial to pull in additional people at this stage to look at the text with fresh eyes. In practice it will likely be a mix and depend on the individuals on your team. Perhaps some only have time for writing, perhaps others will only be available later in the process and can step in as editors. Keep in mind as well that being a great writer does not necessarily translate to being a very helpful editor (and vice versa) so try to use your team's strengths as effectively as you can.

It is also a good idea to leave time for a third stage I call "final checks". This is when you check for overall consistency, finalise the

layout, and deal with any other last-minute issues. I would advise to again dedicate about half the time needed for editing to the final checks, but I would not include more than three people at the most at this stage, regardless of scope. These should be the very final tweaks before the finished products, and too many cooks will cause you to lose the oversight needed to ensure consistency.

If you have ever organised anything you will know that no timeline survives contact with reality. It's tempting to abandon editing altogether when (not if) deadlines are missed, but before jumping to this I would let the stages overlap to some degree. Most likely at least some of your characters will be finished in time: have the editors begin with these, while the last of the writing gets done. This does make checking for consistency more challenging, but it prevents one delay from disrupting your whole schedule. Another reason to make time for final checks is to address any issues that might arise due to the editing stage overlapping somewhat with the writing stage.

Including writers in the editing stage

How involved should the writers be in the editing stage? Will the characters be completely out of their hands the moment they hand them over, or should they be sent back to the writers for approval in a back-and-forth dialogue with the editor?

There is no right answer here. It depends on your and your team's preferences, and as long as you are clear about your approach

from the beginning I don't believe one way is inherently better. I personally prefer to forgo writer approval for a couple of reasons. A character is not like a book or an article; they are one small part of a whole rather than a stand-alone piece of writing. Writing a larp is a co-creative process, and any collaboration requires some willingness to relinquish control of your work. Writer approval can be important if an author wants to share the text somewhere else, but a character sheet will usually not be particularly relevant in any other context. What's more, including the writer requires more time and effort from both writer and editor, which stretches your already strained timeline and demands more of your already tired team. It will require more and stricter deadlines and create more points of failure when someone has to leave the team. Including the writer seems like a kindness, and many writers like to be a part of the process (as do I!), but it is worth considering just how labour-intensive this approach can be before committing to it.

When sending back a text to a writer, be clear about why the edits are needed, and provide some suggestions for what they could do differently so they have something to go off. Refer back to the style guide whenever you can. Comments like "The style guide actually calls for a more straightforward tone of voice, could you delete this metaphor?" or "This is a great part, could you include it in the backstory as well and make it clear when it happened in the timeline?" are helpful. Comments like "Change this" or "That doesn't work" are not.

Conclusion

Editing processes are as diverse as the larps they are editing. I have gone over some tips for how to get started, what to focus on, how to schedule the work, and how to handle the relationship between writer and editor, but everything will require some degree of tailoring to your unique larp. Elements that are indispensable for one larp will be completely irrelevant for another.

For that reason, the most important editing work takes place before even the writing, when you define the goals and scope of your texts. This will give you the blueprint to check your characters against during the editing so you can be sure that they communicate everything you need. I strongly believe that every text in the world can be enhanced with editing, and your design will shine all the brighter for your effort. The most important part is to know what you want out of your text and be clear about your expectations before you begin.

And above all else: worship the style guide.



The Art of Adversarial Play

The Narrative Purpose of a Well-Designed Villain

Karolina Fairfax

Conflict is the engine of the story – it is a drive that leads to character development and communal storytelling. A well-designed conflict is fundamentally reliant on a potent source of adversity: the antagonist. Yet, across many larp genres – from high fantasy campaigns to intense political simulations – the antagonist role often remains underutilized. Sometimes it means that they are relegated to one-dimensional NPCs or treated merely as a vehicle for the protagonists’ advancement. The potential for antagonists to deliver nuanced, fulfilling play experiences is frequently missed. This leads to an unfulfilling experience for those tasked with playing the villain, and can ultimately result in a less resonant narrative payoff for the protagonists.

I would like to argue that a truly successful larp villain must be designed and played with a multi-perspective approach – from the organiser, the antagonist player, and the protagonist player – to maximize agency, depth, and the overall narrative yield for the entire game ecosystem. If even one of these pillars fails, the experience of the antagonist and the protagonist may suffer, as may the narrative linked to both.

Write a good baddie

The success of an antagonist starts with the larp organiser, or designer of the character and the narrative. Their task is to move beyond the monolith of pure evil and engineer a framework that supports three-dimensional conflict. The first critical step is providing the antagonist with complex internal logic and believable motivation. A compelling villain should not want

power for the sake of power; instead, they may seek totalitarian order to prevent a perceived greater disaster, or act out of profound, albeit misguided, utopianism. Players frequently tell me that receiving a comprehensive, nuanced background outlining *why* their character operates – complete with grudges, fears, and moral justifications – is the single most important factor in delivering a three-dimensional performance.

Furthermore, those involved with character creation must solve the problem of agency by ensuring the antagonist is an active participant, not a passive reactor. A villain who simply waits for the heroes to arrive and foil their plans exists only to lose. Instead, the character design must equip the antagonist with sufficient resources (e.g. political capital, dedicated subordinates, critical information) to pose a genuine, scalable threat. For multi-day or multi-episode larps, their schemes should be designed for tactical failure only: the defeat should thwart the current manoeuvre, but allow the villain’s core goal to remain achievable. This continuous challenge will sustain tension throughout the narrative arch.

Reflect the bad and the good off each other

Another idea is to design the villain’s objectives to directly intersect with the protagonists’ core values or relationships. This creates a powerful thematic mirror effect, where the villain acts as a dark reflection, forcing the heroes to confront the moral ambiguity or potential cost

of their own methods. By engineering points of conflict that necessitate a moral dilemma – such as forcing the protagonist to choose between following the law and stopping a catastrophic plot – the designer transforms a simple obstacle into a profound narrative tool. “*We aren’t so different after all*” is a powerful realization for a hero – and something that can turn the character’s inner world upside down, lending emotional payoff.

Hated, but never lonely

For the player, portraying a villain is a demanding role that often requires significant emotional labour. Their purpose is multifaceted:

- to create a compelling, high-stakes conflict;
- to clash with protagonists in the context of overarching goals;
- on the personal level, to be the vehicle for plot progression;
- and, in the case of NPC antagonists, to be the eyes and ears of the organisers within the larp.

That is a lot of work. And while it can be incredibly rewarding, it requires a set of tools to support the players in question and make their task feel less laborious. As Dalstål (2018) points out: “*Often playing a perpetrator is emotionally harder than playing a victim.*”

Throughout this article, I have been referring to the villain in singular form, but

the greatest strength of such a character – and player – lies in numbers. One of the worst feelings a larper can experience is that of loneliness at a larp, and it is dangerously easy for an antagonist to stumble into this pitfall. Being opposed by the majority feels isolating enough; if we add to it the often-used trick of planting spies in the ranks of antagonists – characters who really work for the protagonists or who will betray the villains at some point – we are potentially adding another layer of isolation to the already outlier role. By designing a comprehensive villain network of allies, lieutenants, and pawns, we ensure that the antagonist isn’t a lone wolf – but a faction – and that the conflict is more balanced. If this faction has unifying goals and in-game reasons for internal loyalty, then planting spies and turncoats within it will not be a detriment to the antagonists’ experience but may, in fact, enhance it.

Crucially, the antagonist is also a story generator. Their existence is a great tool for generating subplots (e.g. chasing down corrupt officials, tracing a conspiracy, finding a rare artifact) that drive protagonists into specific scenes and player-to-player interactions. If antagonists have the agency to come up with their own ideas and react organically to what the protagonists are doing, they can create narrative tension that will lead to a cathartic resolution.

Praise the baddie

This is where we arrive at the other side of the coin: the protagonists, and their role in antagonistic play. A hero is only as great as the opponent they’re trying to defeat.

Therefore, it is in the hero's best interest to play up the antagonist as much as possible. We teach this to the players at *Adventurers' Academy* (Poland, 2024): *"If you lost a duel, curse your opponent for being deviously clever; if you won, tell everyone how tough they were to bring down. Compliments disguised as backhanded remarks go a long way."* Calling the villain weak and unimpressive may feel like a temporary victory, but it downplays the other character, and it diminishes the threat which, once defeated, won't resonate as a great success, because it wasn't set up as a great threat to begin with.

Work with the baddie

Larp is a collaborative endeavour – it is a truism that shouldn't have to be repeated, yet sometimes it is easy to fall into the stereotypical "us vs. them" mindset where one side are winners, and the other are losers. Keeping the overarching story at the foreground is a task that can be designed and workshopped by the organisers only to a certain degree; the rest lies in the hands of players, and it is their play and their decisions that influence how collaborative the experience is going to be.

Calibration before and during the game is a great tool for gauging the direction and intensity of antagonistic play – for all parties involved. What is everyone comfortable with? Where do they draw their boundaries? Do they have any specific ideas on how to build tension? Talking about the relationship before the game helps set expectations and boost the confidence of both sides. It gives clear signals to the antagonist: *"I am okay with you doing this to*

my character," or *"This is going too far."* The more information the antagonist receives from the other players, the better they can angle their play for mutual satisfaction. Likewise, the more the protagonist knows about the antagonist's *modus operandi*, the more leeway they have in playing them up.

Sometimes, this means going against the logic of the world and rejecting the "my character would never do that" angle. This, in turn, means stepping out of immersion and assessing the situation to make an informed choice that the character might, indeed, never do. Examples of this behaviour include walking into an obvious trap, trusting the wrong person, making a disadvantageous deal, revealing a secret to someone untrustworthy etc. These actions have one thing in common: they are a mark of the "play to lose" playstyle – but they don't have to be. A better word for it is "play for drama", because if both sides of the in-game conflict play it the same way, the win-lose ratio will see-saw between the sides, building up to a dramatic resolution.

Let the baddie shine

Speaking of resolution, if the conflict's build-up was sufficiently dramatic, it needs a cathartic pay off. It's easy to get swept up in the heat of battle and swiftly dispatch the big boss, but will this provide a satisfying ending to the story? Or would it be more interesting to demand a one-on-one duel, witnessed by others who were invested in the plot, so that the narrative and emotional payoff resonates with a larger number of players?

To serve their narrative function within the larp, antagonists need their moments of spotlight – not just at the end, but throughout the story. It can be a hijacked transmission broadcasted to the public, or the activation of a powerful artefact, or the execution of a beloved king (most likely an NPC). These moments have three powerful functions: first, they play up the antagonists as a force to reckon with; secondly, they provide the protagonists with a reason to act (ideally, with some emotional investment looped in for good measure); thirdly, they tilt the scales in the villains' favour just enough to telegraph just how serious the situation is.

Take care of the baddie

Due to its emotionally taxing nature, the role of an antagonist requires a strong focus on off-game safety. As Hernø (2024) reminds us, *"Being behind the transgressive actions can be just as emotional and taxing an experience as being on the receiving end."* It is, therefore, the role of all parties involved – fellow participants and organisers alike – to make sure that those who provided antagonistic play are well taken care of. Setting clear boundaries and introducing safety mechanics are crucial, but so is proper debriefing and a chance for players on all sides to acknowledge that what happened in-game should stay in-game. Not everyone enjoys post-game hugs, but most players will enjoy a simple *"Thank you, our antagonistic play made my game so much better"*.

When in doubt, hit them in the ethics

Antagonists come in all shapes and sizes, with various levels of complexity and motivations. To me, the most enjoyable games have been those where a morally complex antagonist forced my protagonist to confront her own weaknesses, occasionally pushing me to compromise her moral compass. The most interesting heroes are defined not by their powers, but by the choices they make. The villain's methods should test the moral framework of the hero, pushing them into grey areas that facilitate character development. Protagonists who face a purely evil, one-dimensional adversary might achieve a mechanical win, but protagonists who face a nuanced, relatable adversary – one whose goals are at least understandable, if abhorrent – achieve a narrative victory that fundamentally changes them.

The true art of adversity in larp is not the creation of insurmountable evil, but the engineering of a complex, meaningful conflict. By viewing the antagonist as a narrative partner rather than simply a narrative tool, designers and players ensure that the hero's journey is validated, and the resulting story is profound, memorable, and rich in complexity. After all, larp is about the stories we tell together – and what better way to do so than by creating a framework for everyone to be supported and appreciated within the narrative and outside of it.

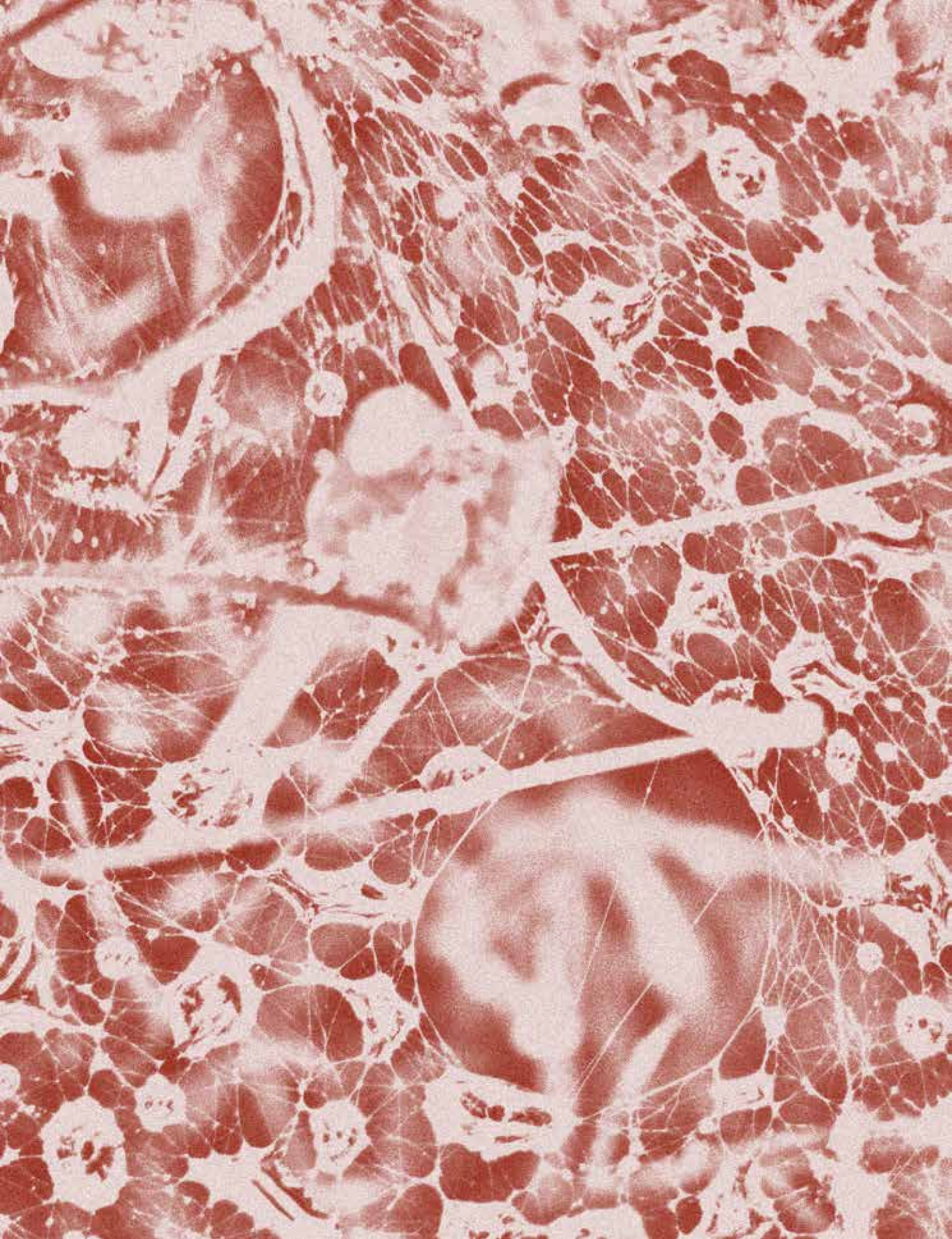
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An Ode to the Elephant in the Room

Julia Greip

Within larps – and within all kinds of fiction, really – I have become gradually more aware of my intense love for things left unspoken. The thing that one is very aware of, but avoids mentioning: a truth with edges so jagged that if touched, it would cause fresh wounds; or a bruise so tender that the slightest touch would cause tremendous pain. So it is not mentioned, and the characters try their best to live their lives without accidentally coming in contact with that unmentionable thing.

The scope can vary. It may be something that the whole cast of characters know, like the class reunion where everyone knows that we all used to bully our old classmate horribly – but we don't talk about that, because we don't want to acknowledge our guilt. Or it can be smaller, like within a family, or a couple – the betrayal that tore our trust asunder, and left us wondering if we can ever go back to the way we were. It can even be within a single character – the feelings and thoughts that I have, but don't know if I could ever speak aloud.

It is a bit Swedish of me, I suppose, this love for things unsaid. Swedish traditional culture has a tendency towards silence, to paying attention to what is fitting and right, and to clenching your fists and suffering in stoic silence. But I also think that I have been influenced by, for example: English historical fiction. One of the things I loved about the historical upstairs-downstairs tv-series *Downton Abbey* is the stiff upper lips of both upstairs and downstairs characters: how they would suffer in silence over so many things, and where so many things might have become easier if they would just *talk* to each other. But they don't, and instead they marinate in their pains and doubts.

Four secrets and a funeral

The first time I became more actively aware of my love for the things we don't talk about, however, was watching an American tv-series: a horror series by the name of *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018). This series is about a family who experienced a terrible tragedy when the children were young, and the mother died under mysterious and tragic circumstances. 20 years or so later, the members of the family are all dealing with the past in their own ways, when they are brought back together by a second loss in the family.

Now, this is an excellent show in so many ways, but the episode I loved most was the episode with the funeral. During the funeral, there is such tension – all the things left unsaid are coming to a boil, in that figurative pressure-cooker that many larpers – myself included – love so dearly. But then, things boil over: people actually start saying the things they have held back for so long, and it proves to be hurtful, but in many ways also cathartic and healing.

I made a black-box scenario heavily inspired by this episode, and based on the beloved Swedish children's books of *Emil i Lönneberga* (1963-1997). The scenario was called *Förgrömmade Fucking Gubbe* (Sweden, 2019, Eng. Damned Fucking Old Man). In this scenario, I reimagined the relatively innocent story of a mischievous little boy, with darker undertones, and how the story might have progressed in a darker way. The characters featured parental abuse, drug abuse, and other such dark themes. The main characters were then brought together by the funeral of Anton Svensson, Emil's father, who had been a flawed and abusive person.

The rules of the larp established “The Things We Don't Speak Of”: things that were known by some or all characters, but that they were not allowed to address directly – not until a given point in the last act. Before then, they might hint at it by off-hand remarks, glances and similar gestures, but they would never address them outright.

Another work of fiction that I find really inspirational is *August: Osage County* (a 2013 movie adapted from a 2008 play), which also features a dysfunctional family, a loss within the family, and a funeral. There is just something about those themes that are so extremely suited to letting that elephant into the room. The loss brings so many pains and old wounds to the surface, but the conventions around funerals and grief dictate what one is supposed to say and feel: one should not speak ill of the dead; one should be brought closer together as a family by the shared grief; and one should of course not point any fingers of blame at anyone. One should not mention that one's mother is a drug addict, or that one's marriage is in shambles, or that the father one is burying might not have drowned so much as drowned himself. So we try to play nice. Until it all boils over and all hell breaks loose.

In all of these examples, it is not the boiling over itself that makes the scenes so impactful. It is not the dramatic revelations. It is that these secrets; these thoughts, feelings, and painful truths, have been carried in silence for so long – festering and nesting inside the hearts of those who carry them. That, to me, is what makes them truly meaningful – and without that aspect, the scenes, where things finally come out into the open, fall flat.

The absence of release

In the above mentioned examples, I've described stories where all the secrets do come to the surface sooner or later, in more or less explosive ways. But all things unspoken do not need to get a release to be deeply meaningful and rewarding. This is something that Mimmi Lundkvist and I were very eager to let players explore in *Stenrike* (Sweden, 2022, 2024, Eng. Realm of Stones).

Stenrike is about Sweden in the 19th century, during a period of great poverty and bad harvests, making a great number of Swedes emigrate to North America. The larp is about the circumstances that pushed people to consider leaving, about the agony of making such a difficult choice, and about finally deciding whether to stay or to go. The story, as well as the playstyle, is very inspired by Vilhelm Moberg's *The Emigrants* (1949) and the movie adaptation by the same name (1971). In this story, there is a melancholy terseness to the dialogue, matching well with the extreme hardship of everyday life for the characters. We wanted very much to portray that in the larp as well. We wanted there to be long, heavy silences, pregnant with all the things that the characters didn't dare to speak aloud. What if this year's harvest fails? What if we starve next winter? What if our son's injury never heals and he'll remain a cripple for the rest of his life? What would happen to grandmother and grandfather if we left?

Of course, during the course of the larp, some of the things left unspoken would come out into the light. For example, the mere idea of emigrating would be something that no one spoke of at first, apart from a few brash

youngsters eager to see the world. Then, as the story unfolds, some of the unspoken things have to come out – but often they come only after hard labour, as if unwilling to come out.

But for the last act of the larp – when the ones who will emigrate leave, and those who stay watch them go – I also made a suggestion to the players. This goodbye might be the last time you ever see these people in your life. This may be your last chance to say the things you never said: to admit your love, or ask forgiveness, or to forgive someone, or any of the other things that you might have carried close to your chest for so long. And while it is sometimes a very rewarding experience to play out these last words, it is a surprisingly strong and rewarding experience to leave them unsaid. To watch that person, growing smaller and smaller in the distance as you part, knowing that you will now never get the chance to tell them what you thought, how you felt. Knowing you might carry it silently for the rest of your life.

Invite the elephant in

My hope is that reading this piece may serve as an inspiration to some, to let the elephant into the room, both as players and when organising larps. I have often heard it expressed that there is no point of secrets at a larp, unless they get out. And I have at times felt that Dramatic Revelations™ fall flat, because they seem more focused on causing a scene or making sure many people find out, rather than exploring what the unspoken thing means to the people affected by it. Of course different larps,

and different situations, call for different approaches – there is rarely a “one size fits all” when it comes to playstyle. But I still wanted to shed light on, and express my deep appreciation for playing on things that are not spoken of.

If you want to introduce this playstyle into your larping, it is often a sound tactic to adopt a transparent approach when calibrating with your co-players. Discuss with people playing a long-time friend, a romantic partner, or a family member. Below are a few suggestions for questions that can be used as inspiration:

- Have they ever said [insert what makes sense for the relationship]?
 - I love you
 - I hate you
 - It was your fault
 - I don't blame you
 - I forgive you
- Do they ever talk about [insert painful memory, or uncomfortable truth]?
 - the time she was unfaithful
 - that his mother suffers from dementia
 - that their son is being bullied
 - that their parents were abusive
- How does the character react when the conversation moves uncomfortably close to things they avoid talking about?
- Are things usually easy and comfortable between the characters, or is the thing unspoken between them something

that makes everything a bit tense and uncomfortable?

As an organiser, it is also possible to invite the elephant into your larp, and explain to players how they can explore it. Not speaking about certain things can be instructed either by in-game rules (social norms or actual rules), by off-game rules (meta-instructions about what you are allowed to do), or simply by recommendation (“this is probably a rewarding way to play, but you don't have to abide by this”). There can be rules that change during the larp (for example that you will not speak of these things before the last act, but they are allowed to come out, or that there are some things you may only speak about after the sun sets).

Regardless, I hope this piece has inspired you in some way or other, to see the beauty and dramatic potential of things unsaid, and to continue exploring all the ways we can play with the elephant in the room.

Ludography

Stenrike (2022, 2024) Greip, J. and Lundkvist, M., Askhults by, Kungsbacka, Sweden, Bread & Games

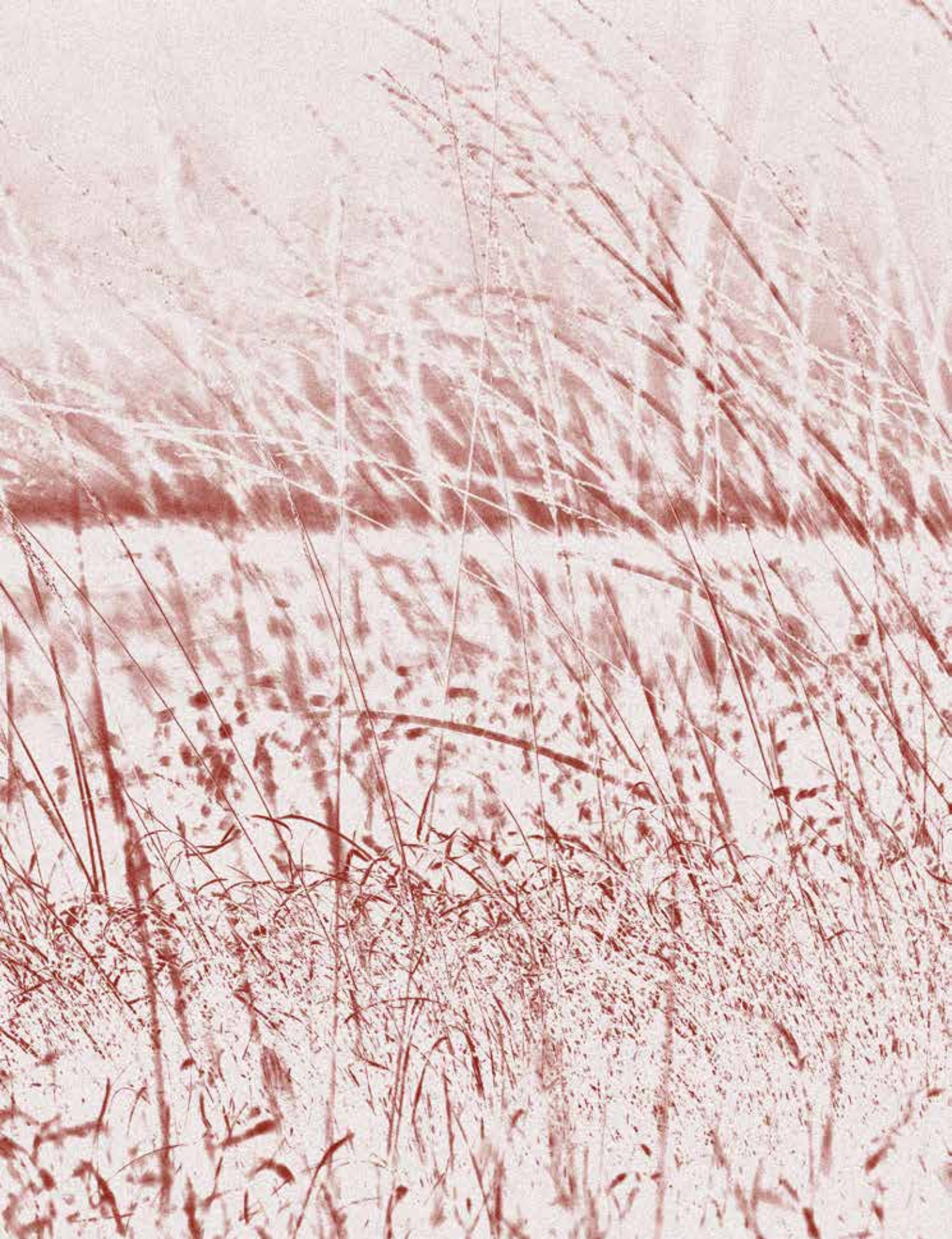
Förgrömmade fucking gubbe (2019) Greip, J. and Sjöstedt, N., Black-box scenario

Filmography

August: Osage County (2013) [Film] Directed by John Wells. United States: Jean Doumanian Productions, Smoke House Pictures, Battle Mountain Films and Yucaipa Films.

The Emigrants (1971) [Film] Directed by Jan Troell. Sweden: Svensk Filmindustri

The Haunting of Hill House (2018) [Series] Directed by Mike Flanagan. United States: FlanaganFilm, Amblin Television and Paramount Television



How to Play to Lift

Katrine Wind

Larp at its best is for me a collective act of storytelling. Whether we are playing out courtly intrigues, desperate struggles, or quiet moments of personal revelation, our experiences are shaped not just by what we do but by how others react to us. It can be a vulnerable endeavor and sometimes we need a little help if we want to play anything other than the core of ourselves and our off-game strengths. I have become convinced by experience and from good people in the community that the concept of “*You can be what you can convince people of off-game*” works in certain experiences, but this is easier if you are young, handsome, able bodied, charismatic, skilled, strong... If someone is meant to be the kingdom’s most feared warrior, their reputation is only as strong as the fear and respect the rest of the players grant them. If a character is a brilliant scholar, others help that experience along by turning to them for advice or debating their theories. Similarly, villains only work when they are given proper respect and/or fear – playing up the antagonist makes conflicts meaningful and deepens the stakes for everyone involved. If someone plays an antagonist and has to convince people off-game that they are awful, then they actually need to be awful. The antagonistic role without collaborative tools is likely to be disruptive to the larp or just unpleasant to play and interact with.

Some larps handle this issue with a numerical stats and features in character sheets, but I think the deeply collaborative solution to this in Nordic Larps is the concept of *Play to Lift* that Susanne Vejdemo defines as follows:

“Play to Lift means that the responsibility for your drama and your character also rests on all

your co-players ... [or] ‘Play to Let Others Win’”.
- Susanne Vejdemo (2018)

My aim with this article is to provide inspiration to how you can Play to Lift in practice while maintaining the integrity of your own experience at a larp. It can be difficult, of course, since we already juggle so much in the live moment: remembering relations, setting and mechanics, costume adjustments, off-game needs like food and rest, and so on. The act of *lifting* others can feel like one responsibility too many. This article also responds to criticism of the Play to Lift philosophy that I have often heard from more purely immersionist larpers. They argue that you shouldn’t have to be responsible for anyone else’s experiences – that full immersion demands total focus on the inner world of one’s own character. Some also argue that co-players should just do and portray what they are able to off-game to lessen the need for suspension of disbelief.

However, Play to Lift is not about taking care of another player’s emotions. It is about shaping the shared fiction so that we feel like we are playing the same larp, and ensuring everyone has space to shine, including yourself.

As is obvious from the statements above, I strongly believe there is an ethical dimension to choosing to larp with each other and that we are to some degree responsible for each other’s experience. I think we are obliged to reflect on why and how we engage with others. I will discuss the ethics and reasoning behind this sentiment first, but if you already agree with the ethical statement, you can skip to the “how-to-suggestions”. If the ethical

perspective does not land with you and you have another set of ethics, I will argue that even from a rational choice perspective, Play to Lift makes sense. If you still don’t agree, I hope the article can provide some insight into how others might think about the issue.

Besides my own analytical points, this article is written with great input from the (Nordic larp) community both online and from a brainstorm session at Knutepunkt 2025.

Expanding on the definition and ethics of Play to Lift

Vejdemo’s article frames Play to Lift as an approach for you to help others claim attributes in a larp that their actual self would not allow them. I appreciate that Vejdemo suggests to step away from Playing to Lose at all costs being “The best way to role-play in a non-gamist way”™ and while the article has some excellent points, I don’t agree with the second part of the definition above. I don’t think Play to Lift actually is about helping others to win.

I see Play to Lift as a collaborative approach that prioritises mutual storytelling over self-centered play, reinforcing the narrative world and amplifying each character’s role within it. At its core, Play to Lift means making active choices that enhance the stories of those around us – and not just by winning or losing. So Play to Lift does not per say mean sacrificing your own experience to help the person in front of you or becoming a background extra in someone else’s story. Rather, it means making choices that invite others in, acknowledge their contributions, and strengthen the collective experience.

What is most difficult to actually experience without being lifted by your co-players is often being very good at something or having status. Elina Gouliou (2018) states “*High status can never be demanded in character; it can only be conferred freely by people around the character*”.

However, this principle extends beyond status to many aspects of play. Gouliou expands the understanding of playing to lift both the character’s strengths but also weaknesses. She provides these brilliant examples of why and how:

- **Reciprocity:** If you lift, you also get lifted. If you want people to acknowledge your character’s strengths, you need to do the same for them.
- **Recognition:** Understand that every player has a responsibility to support others and to tell a great story together.
- **Good Communication:** If your two characters are dueling, discuss beforehand with the other player who wants to win and why. Sometimes, losing can be the most satisfying dramatic choice.

- Elina Gouliou (2018)

Beyond narrativism: How Play to Lift can work for immersionists too

Some argue, with basis in the widely known *Three Way Model*, that Play to Lift is only relevant to a *narrativist* preference of playstyle, where experiences are focussed on that scene-to-scene interactions should satisfy the overall story (Bøckman, 2003).¹

¹ Bøckman described an updated form of the original RPG version of the three-way model where Simulation was replaced by Immersion. I will further use the term Narrativist instead of Dramatist as that is the widely used term in Nordic larp today.

The sentiment is that playing someone up beyond “you can do what you can realistically portray” breaks their immersion – that it takes a lot of suspension of disbelief to Play to Lift a small and weedy person to believe them to be very strong physically. I acknowledge that Play to Lift requires some kind of active choice and even more so for people who strongly prefer immersionism, but so can modern bathrooms in a historical larp, non-diegetic name badges, fire exit signs, machine stitching on otherwise historically accurate clothing, etc. The ethical aspect of mutual obligation towards co-players is obvious to me since we are co-creating the larp experience together with others the moment we are more than one person in the larp. Why would we be willing to overlook objects that might break our immersion but not extend the same grace to the people with whom we share the experience?

So in my opinion, the immersionist argument against Play to Lift doesn’t consider the participatory importance of larp. Immersion is not a suspension of disbelief but an active choice to believe. This faith extends beyond our own character and incorporates a shared belief in the storyworld and the other characters in it (Brind, 2024). As a designer, I definitely use more narrativist than immersionist tools to give the most possible opportunities for emotional impact. I describe this in my River Rafting Design approach (Wind, 2025). But as in many Nordic larps I also aim to offer possibilities for immersion in different ways if that is what you are looking for. My argument is that a Play to Lift mindset has the potential to enhance immersion and strengthen the believability of the diegesis across all styles of play – including even

more classical *gamist* larps. Your experience of winning the fictional battle can feel more significant if everyone believes in the power of the villain. This is magnified when they have really been played up as being terrifying, powerful etc. This is the case if you don’t just see Playing to Lift as a service to an individual co-player, but also a collaborative tool to build immersion for everyone and make sure everything feels like part of the same larp.

In an online comment, Ewa Smolańska notes that Play to Lift is not just about being generous to your co-players - it is a reinforcement of the world’s lore and a crucial element of making a larp function: *“Some stuff just doesn’t work if you don’t play on it.”* A noble court is only impressive if the courtiers treat it with the proper reverence. A gang of outlaws only feels dangerous if the townspeople act afraid. Ignoring these elements weakens the collective experience and breaks the immersion. While some immersionists would prefer to not think off-game about what would make the person in front of them have an even better time, they can still help make the story make more sense on a structural and setting level. I, for one, wouldn’t have a very immersive experience as a feared experimental scientist if everybody was just fine with the dangerous and immoral experiments I wanted to do. I acknowledge that it has to be a player choice to actively play on something another player tries to portray that doesn’t completely convince you off-game but that is no different from other player choices that affects the character’s choices. That is not immersion into the character and their emotions but instead a bleed-in of your off-game feelings. Bleed-in is something that happens all the time,

but it invalidates the argument that you are just going with “what your character would do”. For an expansion on how immersion and making character choices that are affected by player choices are not mutually exclusive, see Montola, Stenros, and Saitta (2015) about the concept of *steering*. Play to Lift is not the same as steering but could partially be seen as an example of steering. Let’s get down to how you can actually Play to Lift in practice.

Practical techniques for Playing to Lift

1. Pay attention and share the spotlight

Pay attention to what other players need to shine. If someone is leading a dramatic confrontation, give them space. If someone has been on the sidelines, invite them into a scene. This creates a dynamic flow where different players get their moments of focus without needing to demand it.

With great power comes great responsibility: if you have a powerful voice – understood in the broadest possible sense – use it to give others space. For example, you could repeat something they said: *“That thing you said earlier about guilt... I haven’t stopped thinking about it.”* Repetition validates their narrative. That also counts for shutting down loud **players** in order to open a space for a quieter person: *“I want to hear what X has to say”* or *“You are forgetting yourself, General, as we have not heard the opinion of our Sovereign Monarch!”*.

2. Playing up the villain and respecting authority

Villains and authority figures are only as powerful as the respect the rest of the game world gives them. If the tyrant king

is openly mocked, the rebellion loses its emotional impact. If the cult leader is ignored, their followers seem insignificant. By playing up the status of powerful figures – whether supporting or opposing them – you create a more immersive experience for everyone involved. A key technique is to *play around, not away from* these roles. Instead of avoiding an in-game authority or ostracizing a known antagonist, find ways to challenge, manipulate, or engage with them more deeply. In *Epos Daimon* (Denmark, 2025),² when someone in the school was revealed as a heretic, they weren’t simply cast out – the group worked to bring them back into the fold, forcing them to repent, denounce their old beliefs, and prove their loyalty under pressure. This reinforced the setting’s oppressive nature while keeping the character in the story rather than sidelining them and provided a way for high status students and teachers to experience the acknowledgement and respect the setting promised to provide for their terrible actions. More practical examples are mentioned in the article *Playing an Engaging Victim* (Wind & van der Heij, 2020). For example you can fail to avoid your perpetrator or be a bad liar. Or we help each other prevent white knighting – stopping scenes of oppression that the players want to have even though their characters might be in distress. In this instance you could consciously be too slow to save your friend, be less assertive, or more hesitant when your character is a witness to an oppression scene, or even join in with the oppression instead of stopping it. You can also Play to Lift the villain by giving them ideas of what to do

² A larp about young people in a school under the fascist Magisterium inspired by the Daemon setting and with original inspiration from Phillip Pullman’s His Dark Materials novel trilogy.

to you, e.g.: *“Oh no! Don’t make me marry HIM”* or *“Please don’t throw me on the floor”*.

3. Larp wing-man-ing: Pushing others into play

Playing to lift isn’t just about responding to others – it’s about actively helping them engage. In *Daemon* (Denmark, 2021), this is encouraged through mechanics that push hesitant players into action. For example, if a character is reluctant to seek therapy, the players of their friends are encouraged during workshops to push them into it later in the larp, giving them a reason to participate in a key emotional scene. In this way, you can provide an alibi for your co-players.

You can also Play to Lift by actively directing other players towards meaningful interactions. If a character wants to confront the villain but the player is unsure, help steer them toward the moment. If someone has a crucial secret, nudge others toward uncovering it. Being a larp “wing-man” means facilitating opportunities for others to shine. You can even join the scene proactively yourself if it makes sense and enhances the impact of the scene.

4. Seeking out expertise

Characters who have specific expertise – whether as scholars, healers, strategists, or mystics – thrive when others acknowledge and seek out their knowledge. Instead of assuming answers yourself, engage with in-game experts. Ask questions that allow them to showcase their character’s skills. Instead of *“What happened here?”*, ask *“You’re the best tracker we have – what do you see?”* Giving someone the chance to demonstrate their expertise lifts their role

and strengthens the immersion of the world. You can also ask OR questions to help an expert: Instead of asking *“Which classical composer do you prefer?”* ask *“Do you prefer Mozart or Beethoven?”* This allows the other player to make an informed choice and seem knowledgeable without requiring extensive off-game expertise.

5. Calibration: Making sure others know what to lift

Not everyone will instinctively know what aspects of your character should be highlighted. You can ask for this beforehand from specific players if you pre-calibrate. Organisers can help by writing facts like this about you into other peoples’ characters or offering calibration rounds where players express what they want from the game.

This is obviously easier if the characters are transparent, but even if they aren’t, maybe one could ask for general help instead of getting out a specific secret: *“Can someone help me feel more oppressed?”* rather than *“I would like someone to find out that I stole item A”*. Some practical techniques include:

- **“No, but”.** If you have the power to block another player’s input and there is a good reason to do it, provide them with an alternative: *“No, you can’t marry the love of your life... But you can marry this other person to save your brother”*.
- **Provide possible memories in-game.** Saying *“Do you remember when we...”* gives another player an immediate opportunity to co-create shared history.

6. Enforcing status and social play

Some larps rely heavily on social hierarchies. If a larp depends on status, organisers should clearly communicate the key roles and how they should be upheld. Joanna Piancastelli provides an example of status enforcement in *The Last Song* (Denmark, 2022): *“I was playing a sage grandmother type who could have been dispensing good, practical advice that would help the many youngsters make slow and meaningful progress with their aims... but instead, I ran around reminding everyone of their most drama-inducing values and encouraging everyone’s worst ideas”* (Online conversation.) By not embodying the societal expectations of her character’s role, she elevated the game for everyone.

Use titles and formalities: Referring to someone as “MyLord” or “Captain” reinforces their character’s position without requiring them to self-declare it. Mirka Oinonen provides another example that can help lift: *“Yelling in agreement to a specific point when someone makes an improvised speech (‘well said!’ or something similar)”* (Online conversation). This obviously also applies the other way around. As a noble character, you could Play to Lift your maid by being reliant on their help and including them in scenes. For example, I pretended to be busy fixing my dress with both hands when a maid brought a very problematic letter and I insisted on her reading it out loud to both my character and the character’s husband. That gave the maid player the option of being uncomfortably caught in an explosive situation but making it about her by constantly asking her opinion - as well as providing a lot of information for her to use in her own experience later.

A curious terminology issue here could be: “But aren’t the two different ways of enforcing status above called ‘playing up’ or ‘playing down’”? I would argue that both are Play to Lift because it is about enhancing and reinforcing the traits that the co-player is portraying. ‘Playing up’ is what you do when you pretend to be impressed by an off-game mediocre speech while ‘playing down’ would to a higher degree be if you ignore mistakes someone makes off-game – like spilling wine as a competent servant or using the wrong titles as one noble to another. So no matter if you oppress or are appropriately impressed by another character, both are examples of Play to Lift if it makes your co-player’s experience more immersive.

As an organiser

As an organiser you can help players by highlighting what you think someone should be played up on. For *Spoils of War* (Denmark, 2019), the most legendary and strongest military leader in the world is female and just to make absolutely sure that no-one is in doubt about how dangerous this character is, I highlight it actively as an organiser in a briefing. You can also take player wishes into account. If a player approaches you and is worried about if they will be played up on a certain feature, you could help them by highlighting it to other players. This works really well in a collaboratively minded community where the goal for this player isn’t getting all the spotlight, but where it is a genuine worry that they will not be played up on certain factors in their character because of off game features. At my larps, I often offer calibration rounds where players can ask the group for specific help with their experience. This ensures that

others can Play to Lift with confidence, as the players they are helping are expressing what they want help with. I always ask the co-players to dedicate, meaning that if they raise their hand and offer to be one of the people helping with something to make sure that they also actually do it. It sounds painstakingly simple, but often that expectation is not set by organisers. If you set that expectation and give people time to reflect on whom they promised to help with what, there is a good chance that someone actually will.

If you don’t want to have off-game time or calibration rounds, there could be stickers on a name tags stating: *“Please provide me with an alibi to crossdress / fight a duel / steal a cake”* or other non-diegetic means that could communicate player wishes during scenes without actively pulling anyone off-game. Many larps have used different badges on the costumes to indicate opting in to certain types of play (e.g. bullying or violences) and then you can be clear as an organiser if it means *“PLEASE give me this kind of play if you want”* or *“I am okay with this type of play being initiated”*.

Conclusion: playing to lift as a larp skill

Playing to lift is about generosity, responsiveness, and trust. Whether you are reinforcing the setting’s power structures, creating opportunities for others to act, or simply listening to what your co-players need, you are ensuring that the game world is richer, deeper, and more rewarding for everyone. I think it can be practiced and taught if we spend a little energy trying different ways of doing it out.

As a player, ask yourself *“What can I do to make others shine?”* and as an organiser, ask

“How can I build a culture where playing to lift is the norm without the individual player compromising their reason to be at your larp?” Collaborative storytelling is, after all, a powerful part of larping.

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Layering Alibi To Liberate Creativity

A Workaround to Silence the Perfectionism Goblin

Charlie Haldén

When I talk about art in this piece, I mean art in a broad sense: drawing or painting, writing prose or poetry, making music, and all other types of artistic creations.

Creating art in larp can be a wonderful experience. It can deepen your relationship with and understanding of your character, it can let your character express themselves in different ways, it can provide a space to let you the player explore your creativity, and it can fuel and further your own creative endeavours after the larp. But it can be difficult to shake perfectionism and the perceived need to be good at creating art. In this piece, I will describe a solution that I stumbled upon in Autumn of 2025. It is a form of layering of alibi that freed my creativity from those constraints. The piece is based on my own experiences and thoughts as well as talks on the subject with other larpers.

Like many of us, I struggle with perfectionism and performance anxiety. I can't count the times I have told myself to focus on "good enough" or repeated "done is better than good" like a hopeful mantra. Still, I get stuck in perfection paralysis, which freezes the creative parts of the brain and makes playful creativity impossible.

Alibi

In larp, this is an issue that can be helped by having the alibi of playing a character. In the words of Thomas Munier: "It's not me, it's my character." In larp and tabletop roleplaying, this justification of our actions is called alibi, and it allows us to dare to try new experiences." (Munier, 2021) Munier (2021) also writes: "Used well, alibi is

emancipating, /.../ letting participants act without fear of being personally judged (for example, allowing them to speak or sing in public)."

This should mean that alibi would enable us to go forth and let our characters create art in-game without worrying about the quality of that art. But sometimes, for some of us, that's not quite enough. The little voice in the back of our head saying you have to be good at this is not silenced that easily, and we can end up not doing the thing at all for fear of perceived failure or perfectionism paralysis. Both myself, and other larpers I have spoken to, have chosen not to sign up to larps we would have loved to go to, or avoided choosing roles we would have wanted, because of anxiety around creating or performing.

Layering alibi

However, it can be possible to alleviate this a bit by adding more layers of alibi. Hanne Grasmø and Jaakko Stenros introduced the concept of layering alibi in their article "Nordic Erotic Larp: Designing for Sexual Playfulness" (2022). They speak of how different aspects of larp and character design can enhance alibi for erotic larps: thick characters, with ample written backstory and specified sexual interests, that are pre-written and not similar to the players, and narrative design choices that include being possessed by unnatural forces.

An extra layer of alibi that can help with creativity-related anxiety is having your character be young and inexperienced. *The Forbidden History* larps (Poland, 2018)

and *Fragment of a Novel* (Sweden, 2024) are great examples of this; you play people in their late teens or early twenties who have a lot of passion but little experience, which gives permission to create and revel in art that can be seen as juvenile, banal, pretentious. This layer of alibi helped both me and others a lot, but not quite all the way. Probably partly because the setting of a college reinforces the frame of creative endeavours being judged as good or bad and given grades, even though that does not happen in-game.

A friend experienced the double-layered alibi of character and youth working well at *Fragment of a Novel* when they added a third layer: the character being explicitly written as not needing external validation. Another thing that can override the performance anxiety and silence the perfectionism goblin by virtue of speaking louder is feeling that your creativity is Doing Something Important. As in giving voice to a marginalised group, to people from history whose voices were silenced during their lives, or similar. An interesting design choice that might also help is the framing from *Aniara* (Sweden, 2025): every character was explicitly framed as being mediocre at creating art.

Children of the House – finding the layering that worked

But the very best tool for silencing the goblin is one that I encountered in the larp *Children of the House* (Poland) in August 2025. *Children of the House* (CoTH) was created by Poltergeist LARP based on the novel *Piranesi* by Susanna Clarke. The larp is set in a vast building, referred to as the

House, where a group of people live, and as far as they know, have always lived. They remember nothing of their lives before or outside the House. It is their entire world. The House provides food and rudimentary clothing, which appear as if by magic.

The characters in the larp revere the House as a sort of godlike entity. Several of the characters act as conduits for the House, perceiving and relating what the House tells them. And some of those characters create art. Painter painted what the House showed them, Poet wrote poetry, and my character, Bard, told the stories that the House gave them: fables, myths, all sorts of tales.



Photographer: Lotta Bjick

I was both delighted and terrified when I received this character. While it encompassed everything I loved about the book and the larp, it also meant that I would spend the larp making up stories on the fly. Would I be able to do that? What if I couldn't? And these stories, my mind told me, had to be good enough in all sorts of ways: fitting the setting and mood, furthering the story and plot, being beautiful, having good symbolism and so on. The performance anxiety fear of not being able to be creative on cue, and the perfectionism that puts up high bars for the art, were working in tandem. I thought about creating some stories beforehand to have in my back pocket. But I decided against doing so, because that would have hindered me from having the experience I wanted with this character. I went in blind, just trying to be relaxed and open.

What happened was extremely liberating. When I allowed myself to let Bard just close their eyes and listen to the House, the stories came. My creativity and imagination came rushing like a happy little river. And the key to setting it free was this extra layer of alibi: my character was not creating art, they were channelling something outside of themself. They were a conduit, a vessel, not creating but transmitting. The shift from trying to make up stories to opening up my mind and waiting for them to appear took away the element of performance from the character as well as from the player. Being the conduit instead of the creator became a layer of alibi for the character, and adding that extra layer unclenched the parts of me that so often stand in the way of the flow of my creativity. My friend who played Painter had the same experience and found it equally freeing. The art we created while channelling something

outside of ourselves did not actually exist in a space of good and bad, it just *was*. It was what the House gave. Good and bad were not applicable adjectives anymore, no longer part of the equation. I would call this specific type of alibi *conduit alibi*.

Playing with conduit alibi

We could see this kind of alibi layer being possible to create in different ways. Just as the House was diegetically seen as a form of deity, giving your character a religious faith and a god or gods that they channel could work similarly. Likewise, having a character be possessed by a demon or other entity can create a conduit alibi. Another possibility is creating a personification of inspiration, such as with the Muses in *Helicon* (Denmark, 2024) where some players have recognised this type of layered alibi as being beneficial. A friend told me about how having played characters who were oracles or seers has worked in similar ways for them.

A direct analogy for this can be made to what Grasmø/Stenros (2022) write about how narrative design strengthens alibi in erotic larps. They note how “being possessed or dominated by ‘unnatural forces’ provides a special strong alibi for the players” (p. 88). In many erotic larps, being possessed or compelled by gods or demons does this, and Grasmø/Stenros talk about how limiting agency makes the alibi stronger. I have been thinking along precisely those lines about conduit alibi as well. When the creativity is framed as coming from somewhere else, neither you nor your character are responsible for what is created. The framing of less agency leads to more actual agency,

when the inhibitions related to being judged and/ or being good enough are lifted.

Conduit alibi can be created and designed for on a larp level, either as a default setting or as a possibility to opt in to, but also on a player-character level. You may be able to give your character beliefs or traits that enable a conduit alibi that might never come up in-game, but that can help you be creative.

You may also be able to give yourself some sort of conduit alibi to free your creativity in the world outside of larp. If you have used it in larp, you can carry it with you from there and let it influence your creativity in other larps and outside larp. And regardless of whether you have yet used it in larp, you can try seeing your creativity as a force of inspiration that comes from somewhere else and flows through you. See if being a channel, a vessel, can silence your perfectionism goblins and let you play.

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Autumn, the Season for De-roling

Bruno Setola

I always believed I was immune to full immersion.

As a game designer, I would always observe myself while playing, taking mental notes as I went. It kept me safe – in control.

Until White Death.

The worm inside

In *White Death* I played an old, broken warrior, once proud and strong, now struggling with age and fatigue. The larp was non-verbal – all communication happened through sound and gesture. A fellow warrior and I grunted like Vikings to express camaraderie, loss, defiance against the storm. We roared together until one of us, my friend, died. When he fell, my roars turned into wails. I threw my head back, grunted until my throat gave up, and the sounds became animal, broken, guttering. I died too, surrendering to the blizzard, to exhaustion, to silence.

It was an intense experience. The absence of words made it more real, more physical. I came out feeling weak. And then, somehow, the de-roling – our ritual to come back to ourselves – was skipped, because we had run out of time.

I stood there, mute. I couldn't even grunt. It felt like a thick invisible worm had coiled up deep within my chest and guarded my throat.

My body didn't understand the game was over. The spirit of that old warrior had found a place to live, and it wasn't leaving

voluntarily. When we started sharing reflections, I couldn't speak. I panicked and could only whisper, "I need to de-role."

Luckily, our larp facilitator understood immediately. He led us through a common de-roling ritual: imagine your character as a skin. Peel it off. Drop it to the floor. Shake it from your hands and feet. Throw it into an imaginary fire.

As I did this, I imagined pulling that worm out of my body. I began to burp involuntarily. It was physical exorcism, nothing less. Slowly, breath returned. My body loosened. After half an hour, I could finally speak again.

That was the first time I understood the real power of de-roling.

Roles on the chess board

A few years ago, my own father's health had suddenly sharply declined and he was given a cautious prognosis. He's still with us, thankfully, but the feeling of that abruptness stayed with me. Around that time I did an experimental session with a practitioner of family constellations.¹ I'm fascinated by anything that uses play to help people adapt, so I agreed to be her playtester.

She placed a chessboard in front of me and asked me to choose four pieces to

1 A family constellation is a guided method in which people or objects are spatially arranged to reveal hidden relational patterns inside a family system. For an introduction to how family constellation sessions work, see the short explanation video by Sarah Peyton: "What Are Constellations?" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P8PZJOCy00A>

represent my family: my father, my mother, my brother, and myself. I picked the king for my father, the queen for my mother, the knight for myself, and the bishop for my brother. I placed the king and queen side by side, the knight and bishop in front, an intuitive formation, parents behind their children.

Then she asked me to remove my father's piece and rearrange the others. Without thinking, I moved my knight next to the queen, leaving the bishop where he was.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because if my father's no longer there, I'd have to be by my mother's side," I said. "To keep the family intact as much as possible."

She nodded, then asked quietly, "Do you think that's a role you *have* to take?"

I hesitated. Then she said, "Is there another way you could place them?"

I moved the knight and bishop in front again, leaving my mother standing behind.

"Why did you move it there?" she asked.

"Because maybe it's time to shift focus to being my own person, with my own family."

When I put my father back at her request, the constellation looked the same as before, but felt entirely different. It was no longer about staying close, ready to stand in for him. It was about standing on my own, looking forward towards the future.

That small exercise, with nothing but chess pieces, reminded me that letting go of a

role starts by letting go of what you think it means.

Letting go before you go

I take on many roles: son, husband, father, friend, teacher, facilitator, designer. Each role comes with expectations, with scripts I half-inherited and half-wrote myself.

And each role has its own sub-roles. Teaching, for instance, feels like a dance between roles: instructor, guide, coach, peer, friend, mirror, midwife. I switch depending on what the moment asks of me. But when a student graduates, that dance stops abruptly. I've always struggled with such abrupt endings. How do you let go of a role that feels so vital, so connected?

I remember facilitating a design thinking workshop for a group of managers in the energy sector. They had realized that their offboarding process, when someone left the company, was bureaucratic and cold. People packed their desks, handed in their access passes, and were escorted out by facility staff. There was always a final drink, a joke, a short speech – but most of it felt transactional.

They contrasted this with onboarding: days or weeks of care, mentoring, welcome lunches, introductions, handbooks, check-ins. Why such asymmetry between arrival and departure?

In the workshop, we began co-creating alternatives. The most powerful one became the Advent Calendar ritual. During the final week before departure, the team would

prepare seven small boxes or envelopes – one for each day. Each contained a photo, an anecdote, a small gift, or an invitation for a shared moment. The departing colleague would open one each day.

The participants recognized how small rituals can humanize transitions.

De-roling in life

So I began to imagine what other rituals could exist for different contexts. What if surgeons, for instance, had their own de-roling ritual after losing a patient? It could be as simple as unzipping their sterile gowns slowly and intentionally, acknowledging the symbolic act of taking off the role of healer.

De-roling applies to love, too. After a breakup, the role you held in relation to someone doesn't vanish with the relationship. When two lives have been intertwined like tree roots, separation is never clean. You can't untangle them; you have to tear them apart, and each tree carries pieces of the other in its roots. That's why it's so hard not to look back. The roots still remember.

Many transitions in modern life have no rituals at all, even though they would benefit from them. We have ceremonies for births, marriages, and funerals, yet countless everyday role-changes unfold without any shared way to let go.

Mourning and gratitude are powerful components of de-roling in larp: we mourn the role's disappearance, and we thank it for the experience it gave us. Such gestures

would benefit many real-life transitions too. De-roling, in that sense, offers a model for the rituals we don't yet have: small, intentional acts for releasing a role with care when life offers no script for doing so.

Letting go of being a man

There are countless roles in our lives that we don't consciously choose. They are written for us by culture, family, and history. They shape us long before we know how to question them.

When I started working on *The Reunion* – a masculinity-themed family-dinner larp I am creating together with Dagmar Slagmolen of the Arts-Based Research company Via Berlin, and Emancipator, as part of the European MEN4DEM collaboration – I realized that the invisible scripts about gender are some of the most persistent roles of all. Like all roles, they can be challenged, but only if we give people a safe frame in which to play with them and explore alternative viewpoints.

The premise of this larp is deceptively simple: a family dinner where cousins meet three times over several decades. At first glance, it's just an ordinary reunion. But beneath the surface lies a structure about the "man box" and the "woman box", two cultural containers that define what "proper" masculinity and femininity are supposed to look like. And because real families aren't limited to binaries, the larp also includes a non-binary character whose story sits outside these boxes altogether – revealing how narrow and artificial the whole framework can be.

In the man box, you find words like *strong*, *assertive*, *rational*, *provider*, *protector*. In the woman box, you find the so-called complementary traits: *soft*, *caring*, *patient*, *emotional*, *supportive*.

They sound balanced, but they're not. Society rewards one box and diminishes the other. Even worse, when people cross boxes, these same traits are rebranded as flaws. A man who's caring is called *weak*. A woman who's assertive is called *bossy*.

This double bind means that men, women, and people who are neither men nor women are all trapped in a lose-lose game. The ideal of the "strong man" and the "soft woman" leaves little room for the complexity of being human.

So our larp invites participants to step inside these boxes, and then to step out. The true alternative, we suggest, is the "human box". A frame where both strength and vulnerability belong. Where being human doesn't require choosing between archetypes.

The larp doesn't preach this idea; it lets players *experience* it. They play characters who gradually shift from rigid gender scripts toward more fluid, balanced expressions of self. The story doesn't tell them how, it lets relationships, tensions, and emotions push them there.

Every scene, every confrontation, becomes a small experiment in what happens when the man box and woman box break.

Capturing change

To make this transformation tangible, we built rituals *into* the role-play experience itself: what we call *diegetic rituals*.

At the start of the larp, participants are invited to pose for a family photo. The photographer arranges them according to the old hierarchy: older relatives in the middle, men front and center, women and quieter characters off to the side. It's not just composition, it's social coding.

Then the story begins. Through the three acts, each separated by several in-world years, relationships shift, secrets surface, loyalties change. Characters wrestle with identity, power, shame, and tenderness. They hurt and surprise each other. They play out the small tragedies of family life that mirror societal dramas.

At the end, after the story finished with the final dinner, they are asked to gather again for another photo. But this time, there is no instruction. They may stand wherever they feel they belong *now*. Just like that chessboard experiment.

The photo captures not just the end of the story, but the reinterpretation of roles. After the photo is taken, the players step out of this family constellation and return to being humans who have carried those characters, learned from them, and are ready to let them go.

We then invite players to write a journal entry in the voice of their character, ten years into the future, another classic larp ritual. It lets the story continue just far enough beyond its boundaries to give you

the distance to reflect on your character’s actions. Then, after reading, you burn the letter and let go of that character’s life story.

When participants de-role this way, they don’t just leave behind a character. They leave behind an internalized societal script. And through reflection, they can integrate what makes them feel fully human.

Autumn as the season of de-roling

Autumn has become my metaphor for the de-roling process. The trees don’t fight the shedding of leaves; they trust the cycle. De-roling, in its deepest sense, is an act of trust – trust that what you let go of will make space for who you are becoming.

In larp, in work, in love, it’s the same rhythm. You enter, you play, you give it your all. And then, when the time comes, you bow, you inhale, you exhale, and you gently let the role fall like a leaf.

The Reunion is an immersive larp-theatre project created by Bruno Setola and Dagmar Slagmolen of the Dutch Arts-Based Research company Via Berlin (<https://www.viaberlin.nl>), developed in co-creation with Emancipator, a Dutch organisation focused on gender justice (<https://www.emancipator.nl>). The project is part of MEN4DEM, a European collaboration exploring how art, research, and civic engagement can support more inclusive democratic futures (<https://www.men4dem.eu>).

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Larp Engines

What They Are and How to Use Them

Alessandro Giovannucci

1. Introduction

The core idea of this article is to explore the concept of larp engines, understood as the elements that drive a larp, whether narrative, spatial, object-based, or social. My approach is to view the larp as an organism in which all parts contribute, each according to its own characteristics. In this article, I'll discuss these parts not so much for their structure, but for how they function. In short, they'll be seen as engines, as machines that can push players to perform certain actions during the game.

Larp engines can be several things. They can be people, rules, objects, dynamics, an explicit set of rules, or a series of implicit social norms. The push they provide can range from subtle suggestions to strong impulses. In this article, they are analyzed across three levels: the designer, the larp, and the players, from a holistic and co-creative perspective.

The concept of a larp engine has been with me for a long time. It haunts me, it escapes me, like a ghost. The question is: what makes people do what they do in a larp? Ultimately, I believe it is a corollary of the concept of agency. Who exercises it? How much is it voluntary and how much is it "forced"?

Due to my studies, I often compare larp to music. What are the engines of music? Definitely musical instruments. The discipline that studies musical instruments is organology, so I believe we need an organology of larp. In short: we need a reflection on larp tools, on engines, to help us understand them, rethink them, and use them.

Every engine has the potential to push the game, but what does "push the game" mean?

It's the ability to propose a direction for players to act. In the best case, this push, strong or not, reinforces the designers' vision.

These pushes can be narrative (when they propose a "what") or design-related (when they propose a "how"). The push can be active or passive, meaning it can push participants to act, or it can be a response to their actions.

An example of an active engine: a new law is enacted in-game to counter the actions of the players. An example of a passive engine: players have done something; this something goes against an existing law, which will be "activated" by the players.

Both cases are valid, as long as they generate action/reaction.

At this point, it's important to clarify that engines aren't just what participants encounter during run time, but also before and after, throughout their participant journey, which encompasses: communication, location description, ticket price, player base, and community.

Larp organisers sometimes may have a design-centric mentality, according to which all forces acting in a larp have been rationally designed, and therefore the larp will follow these paths. Obviously, reality is more complicated and is made up of different forces, some of which we devise, others that pre-exist the design and are characteristics of, for example, the location

or human nature. Therefore, it's useful to clarify that some forces can be adjusted, while others are simply accepted.

2. The designer

This category includes all the engines that have been developed by the designer and consciously placed throughout the various aspects of the larp, understood as a creative and conscious act of one or more authors. Here are some aspects:

- Communication: this is crucial to setting participant expectations. A certain level of communication prepares participants for what they will encounter and serves to establish, or strengthen, the social pact. Communication concerns not only the content but also the tone used. Another aspect to consider is the degree of transparency of the communication. From this perspective, we can say that transparency is a design tool as it puts the player in a certain frame of mind before the larp even begins, and this frame of mind will be reflected during runtime.
- Design: this category includes all the more "explicit" engines, often explained in the design document and practiced in workshops. This category includes meta-techniques, rules, and anything that establishes a very clear action/reaction relationship. An example of a design engine is fate play, which often represents a strong, rather explicit push from designers towards players. This doesn't mean it's a bad thing, but it's simply a less hidden engine than others.
- Interactions: this category includes everything that encourages interactions,

both between characters and with objects. A good interaction engine might be a computer in a cyberpunk larp. From this computer, one could receive news, send chat messages, buy items, or hack a security system. Interactions in a larp are obviously a central element. Interaction engines are often the most "obvious" and those that remain most in the participants' memories and in their post-event stories. From these interactions, we often understand when an action is possible or meaningful and whether a player is active or a spectator. A player might find themselves oscillating between one of these states and the other, and that's fine as long as it's clear. In these cases, it's best to make it clear whether the engine is working or has stopped working, to avoid frustration. For example: a larp with "theatrical" scenes or voiceovers provides brief moments of agency freeze for the players, which may boost their agency immediately afterward. Engines can move at variable speeds during a larp. A very obvious aspect of larp interactions is the bonds between characters. In larps with a tradition of factions or pre-written characters, engines often work internally. That is: the characters already have the potential to send a push to the player. For example: organisers prepare all the elements for a love triangle in three character sheets, which the players must then execute in their own way.

- Another good example comes from Bjarke Pedersen and Eleanor Saitta's article *The Interaction Engine* (2024) that contains useful insight about how to create a larp that "by nature" creates relationships, as a sort of "larp machine".

- Plot: another obvious engine is narrative. In many larps the assumed idea is that the heart of an event is the combination of character and story. The plot often provides external pushes, such as a sudden event that changes the situation in which the characters operate. For example: war is declared.
- Annika Waern in *Storymaking in Larp* (2014) makes a series of good points about the story being the result of the interactions between players and the design.

Following the logic of what drives the game, one could hypothesize that larps can be classified by drive. For example: story driven, character driven, spatial driven, interaction driven.

This is not an invitation to cancel the classical categorizations (by genre, by authors, by style) but maybe starting using both, as we use scientific instrument labels, but also “winds, strings, brass, wood”. Maybe this can be more useful for designers and also for communicating the experience.

3. The larp

In this section, I invite you to do a personification exercise. Imagine the larp as a living being, a person or an animal. This will make it easier for you to imagine that the larp itself is an engine, a somewhat autonomous force and not merely a product of an author’s design. In philosophical terms, imagine that the larp, of any kind, has what is called aseity. That is: it exists on its own, without dependence on anyone.

The larp is itself a complex system of forces and tendencies that must be taken into account. This isn’t always easy, because the general tendency is to believe that the authorial process can bend even reality to its will.

But a larp is always the construction of an alternate reality. And reality, even imaginary reality, is a complex and partly chaotic system that we can’t fully control. Designers can design and start the process, but once the process is started, it’s not easy (and sometimes not suitable) to stop, change, or control it.

- Spatial design: the spatial dimension of a larp is highly impactful. From the perspective of the event’s mood and communication, it is certainly one of the most notable aspects. Players will inevitably be influenced by these aspects, which will serve as a driver for creating expectations and a pre-event emotional charge. The size and characteristics of a location can also generate “forces” that push players to do something or not to do it. Sometimes even against the designers’ wishes. Each venue has its own “personality” and specific characteristics. These characteristics could discourage players from doing something (for example having a meeting if the room is too cold) or perhaps even encourage them to fraternize (contrary to what the designers intended) if the location offers comfortable spaces. Another thing to consider is the size of the location, travel times, and their interaction with the physical needs of participants. It is extremely important not to go against the pressures the “location engine” provides. It is always best to listen to

the location and not try to tame it at all costs. A good practice is to listen to the space and understand what makes that place special. An impressive location isn’t always a good location, and vice versa.

- Affordances: a larp is a complex system of engines. And each engine performs its function through affordances, or physical qualities that suggest the appropriate actions to manipulate it. For example, a door handle, due to its ergonomics and our cultural heritage, is as if it were telling us “grab me and twist me to get out.” Now imagine that every object, every space, every time has its own affordances. Every larp is a mediation between what the designer has in mind and the affordances of the place and objects that make this larp “real” and effectively playable. Sometimes when a larp isn’t going well, it’s because organisers didn’t think about the affordances. Obviously, it’s not possible to list all the possible elements and how they can drive the game forward, acting as engines. But it’s always good to remember to mentally evaluate all these elements to see if they’re helping the larp and reinforcing the project’s vision. If not, you’ll have to force yourself to admit that this location or prop, however fantastic, doesn’t contribute to the project.

4. The player

At this level, we need to ask ourselves: how do the participants perceive the larp? How are they using the engines and with what level of awareness? Are they following instructions or are they also creating something? And is this co-creation, if any, going

in the intended direction or proceeding in other directions?

Players are often conceived of as executing the designer’s instructions and as people who must try to make the larp and the location work as best as possible. But organisers must remember that players are also engines. And just as the larp can work to the organisers’ advantage or against them, so too can the players. To use another musical metaphor: we could say that if melody is the character, harmony is the plot, rhythm is the design, then players are the timbre. That is, they are the factor that brings quality to these things: the element that can hold together the aspects that until now we have presented as separate.

In various gaming traditions, the player is the most important element. You’ve often heard the phrase, “With such expert players, we could even not write anything and the larp would still work.” This is possible in certain types of events precisely because the player is an engine that can self-generate its own gameplay impulses. In some cases, they can act as an “on-the-go design machine.”

Players can also be your game engine, especially when your larp is primarily melody and harmony. But to what extent are they larp engines?

- Alibi: is the dialectics between individual action and social acceptance. Alibi allows the player to interact and (re)construct a socially acceptable spectrum of play. Alibi is a fundamental requirement that must be calibrated well to enable the player to be an engine. If it’s not well calibrated, the boundaries are not very

clear, and a player can be either too “free” (to harm other participants) or not free enough, so they can freeze out of not knowing what to do. From this perspective, we can consider alibi as a subparameter of agency.

- Juhana Pettersson’s article *Engines of Desire* (2021) has interesting thoughts about players acting as “desire producers” and therefore being an engine themselves.
- Agency: how can players know about agency? Here are some important elements: pregame communications, community values, and/or the designer’s reputation. Other ways are explicit instructions from the designers (e.g., in this larp, you will be required to do this and not that). NPCs can also act as living examples of what is acceptable or unacceptable in a particular larp.
- Character: this aspect is important if we imagine the character as an interface for social interactions. An engine that can be used to drive the social aspect of the larp and the person-to-person interaction. Usually, in a larp, the freeplay part is delegated to the player in terms of how they can move their character within the social fabric. The character can be defined as a toolkit, an engine that produces interactions and possible narrative twists. It is usually the main tool in the hands of the players. It’s a machine that situates the players in the narrative context and connects it with the possibility of agency. It is what Pierre Bourdieu would have defined as the “habitus,” or our way of decoding and acting in the relevant social context. *The Narrative Experience* by Jesper Heebøll Arbjørn (2018) contains a good list of

the ingredients that a player can use to shape their own journey during a larp.

5. Conclusions

The idea of a larp engine is not new, but I think it can be an interesting starting point to understand that in a larp there are many elements and each one influences the experience. It is therefore useful to take these elements into consideration in their active nature, capable of collaborating with our purposes as larp organisers, remembering that:

- Larp engines are elements that can push, orient, and characterize a larp
- Larp engines are in different “places” of the larp (design, rules, plot, space, objects, social dynamics in and out of game, characters)
- Larp engines work together as a chain or in clusters
- We should be aware of larp engines’ “natural” tendencies, and should not work against them; and we should choose the more consistent ones to make them work together

But if larp has engines, then where is the fuel? What makes the mover actually move?

Maybe it is not something we can guess easily. But what we can say is that co-creation is important to make all of that work. Maybe this is the fuel of the engine. Co-creation is about exploring the interactions and their complexity.

When something happens in a larp, can we say who really did it? Probably no one did it, probably we did all together. Perhaps the key to entering this complexity, without having the presumption of solving it, is consciousness. We can learn a lot and become more conscious. Maybe it’s the way to become better designers, better players. (By better, I mean: more generous, more focused on listening.) Sometimes we are rational, we design. And it’s fantastic. But sometimes there is nothing better than just trusting who is doing that with us.

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Harvesting Resistance Tactics through Historical Larp

Tara M. Clapper

Over my 20-year history participating in larp, I've engaged in larping resistance against fascism or corrupt authority in several genres, larp styles, and cultures. Larp provides an engaging and immersive mechanism for turning common cultural and coming-of-age narratives present in popular media into personal, enriching, lasting, and conditioned experiences for larp participants.

My general cultural background has exposed me to pop culture and historical resistance narratives largely centering my own country and heritage. I'm a white, cis, disabled woman from the Northeastern United States. Raised near the colonial city of Philadelphia, the American Revolution (American War of Independence) and the American Civil War were especially important focuses of my upbringing – I attended the same preparatory school as the son of my country's first president and military commander, George Washington. Additionally, my grandparents' generation sacrificed and served in World War II towards the end of the war.

My paternal grandfather served in the United States Navy in the Pacific theater. On my maternal grandmother's side of the family, themes of resistance, struggle, and questioning authority were critical to the Irish American identity, with my maternal grandmother having served as a committeewoman for John F. Kennedy.

As a child, my media influences included pulp content like the *Indiana Jones* movies, educational content, fiction and nonfiction, about World War II. I attended school with many Jewish students and met some of their grandparents, who were Holocaust

survivors. Combined with rebellious hyperindividualism that very much centered my own culture and region, I was taught that questioning authority and self-reliance are particularly patriotic, in the more wholesome sense of the word.

Like all larpers and participants in art (see Barrett 2020), I bring that background with me as I engage in the hobby and interact with other larpers in and out of game.

At first, it was naively "just a game," as I participated in creating an empowering narrative for players and their characters at the American fantasy boffer larp *Seventh Kingdom IGE*. In the game, an imposing force of elves imposed sanctions and restrictions on all characters in the town, creating unreasonable taxes (a historically incendiary point in American history) and requiring characters to purchase and show paperwork on demand to occupying agents. While we could have executed the plot with more sensitivity, it drove the players and their characters to invest in creating and deploying tactics of rebellion against dictatorial authority, played out monthly for a campaign that lasted a couple of years, approximately 2010–11, before real-life fascist undertones in US politics became overt to the more privileged members of the player base.

There was a deep satisfaction to it, playing alongside people who enjoyed acts of resistance and rebellion. Sometimes playing a non-player character (NPC) role to aid and encourage the players, I created a conditioned response for my character. She always knew what she'd say when asked to produce her papers. She knew how to delay or what skills to use if she had to stall the

'bad guys.' She stocked critical components and other resources. This type of behaviour united the characters and their players.

This story isn't simply appealing because it feels like the right thing to do. Rebellion is a natural, psychological act involved in many coming of age stories. Culturally, operating as an independent and often precocious decisionmaker is also part of those stories. As a girl born in 1981 and coming of age in the 80s and 90s, I admired rebellion narratives in entertaining Disney films such as *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*. The historical and cultural contexts of acting with hyperindividualistic authority were underscored by the characters in the *American Girls* series (which accompanied very expensive dolls). As a preteen and teenager, Jane Austen novels and the Canadian *Anne of Green Gables* series provided examples of obstinate young women who liked to read from beyond the United States as well.

When the electorate of the United States chose Donald Trump as president just before 2016, I recalled the rebellion narratives while my nights were filled with dreams of the politician himself drowning or assaulting me. Rebellion narratives became more prescient in the regional larp scene, in boffer larps and in the parlor scene, which I'd become engaged with in the intervening years.

And then there was wizard school larp. Inspired by the Nordic larp *College of Wizardry* (Poland, 2014), *New World Magischola* (NWM) (USA, 2016) provided a school structure during the larp event (Bowman 2016), setting players up to engage in rebellion and resistance narratives by

evoking the feeling of the coming-of-age narrative, even though student characters and players in the larp are all adults. (I eventually experienced *College of Wizardry* in March, 2024.)

Some larp cultures and designs, such as those like NWM which became largely classified as Nordic-inspired, rewarded calculated and inclusive rebellion in play. While the narratives can be serious, somber, and difficult, the joy in playing them (especially when expressing marginalized aspects of our real-life identities), is present.

Following the election of Trump in 2024, I questioned how to embrace joy as I saw many marginalized constituents doing in defiance of the onslaught of fascism. But I eventually recalled the joy in celebrating another day of existence as resistance as portrayed repeatedly in wizard school larps, and I saw it in my fellow players.

My journey in larping for resistance became more deliberate when I signed up for *SOE: Resistance* (UK, 2024) by Open the Box Productions. First put on in September, 2024, the larp heavily included aspects of reenactment through respectful treatment and portrayal in a WWII-era experience about the ordinary civilians of the Special Operations Executive in Britain, trained to disrupt the enemy's transport, communications, and overall success at great personal cost to these operatives.

While most real-life SOE participants were from the United Kingdom, the organisers generally encouraged us to play characters from our actual countries. Although this deviated from history to a degree, it allowed players to engage with their own cultural

identities and how the war shaped their cultures and families. While I won't share specific stories that aren't mine, I learned about, empathized with, and observed players and characters consider the effects of their countries being occupied by Germany and then Russia.

As a character, I experienced an air raid on the British estate where we trained, noting the Jeeps and US-supplied petrol and other supplies on the ground. However, my character's companions were rightfully disdainful: their countries were being attacked and occupied, while the US still refused direct involvement in the war (this took place months before Operation Overlord or D-Day in Normandy, during which the US provided substantial forces alongside Allied forces from the UK and Canada).

Through this immersive larp, I learned that resistance is most effective when it's conditioned and automatic. There's practice, rehearsal, knowledge, field testing, and instinct, and none of those components can fail if the operation is supposed to be successful.

I did all of this while very aware of the potential fallout from the pending election at home.

Portraying an agent, I learned about the hyper-individualistic nature of operations for a member of the SOE, necessary to avoid being compromised. But I also learned that wasn't a healthy natural state for most people, and the extreme nature of the self-reliance required forced me to examine that as a cultural feature of the United States. Hope, joy, and community sustained

many of the characters; others began their SOE training as Europeans already deeply traumatized by war.

I learned to make a decision instead of freeze – and then make sure it's the right decision – and that I may be able to survive an interrogation. I also experienced an intersection of spirituality and play, revering ancestors by respectfully exploring their stories.

As the Trump Administration continues to “flood the zone” with dramatic repeals of rights and bombastic statements, I've learned that the aversion to overwhelm isn't compliance in advance: It's a space to keep room for birthdays to happen still, to focus on a narrative topic of concern, and to harvest resource and plan.

If others around me had the educational larping experience of resisting fascism, it wouldn't feel like starting from the beginning. While we debate the appropriateness of putting on Jan. 6 insurrection larp, situations deteriorate around the world, even into prolonged genocide.

The biggest lesson that I've taken from larping resistance is that it's practiced – not just in war-time, but always. Not only during waking political actions, but in sleep. Going back to the boffer larp sequences that play through my mind in a more playful formation of learning resistance, I also remember that effective fighters rotate out of a shield wall for healing before they go back in. This isn't a matter of resilience as much as strategy, and of harvesting the lessons we need from this practice every day, across oceans and cultures.

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Dancing with Monsters

How to Play Toxic Characters

Without Being a Toxic Player?

Mike Pohjola

Since I started larping, I've gravitated towards playing negative characters: they could be rude, untrustworthy, manipulative, megalomaniac, selfish, abusive. I never idolized these characters but found them appealing to play, perhaps as a contrast to how I tried to act in real life.

This essay focuses on stories, tips, and tools gathered over the decades I've played such characters. My aim is to provide other characters a nemesis, a villain, or a foil to play off on without being a toxic co-player to others. (And while enjoying it myself immensely.)

In some larp scenes it is frowned upon to tell others about your character without buying them a drink first. You, dear reader, will have to provide your own drinks, as I tell you about four different toxic characters I've played in Finnish larps, and then go into the methods and observations from them.

It's outside the scope of this article *why* I personally have been so drawn to the darkness, but I have come to consider it a form of shadow play where a player can explore hidden or suppressed parts of their psyche, such as are not welcome in regular life. Shadow work is a way of exploring one's hidden self, dubbed "shadow" by Carl Jung. For more on shadow play, see Bowman (2022).

These are all different reflections of dark authority figures. Prince Magnus is a rock star vampire ruler, Prince Yusupoff the richest man in Imperial Russia, Simeon Susi an abusive patriarch of his family, and Lord Alistair a noble vampire in Regency-era England.



Photo: Laura Turpeinen.

Prince Magnus Stenvall, Åbo by Night

A deranged autocrat perfectly fits my brand of weird authority figures. However, a karaoke vampire larp wasn't something I thought would be my thing. Nevertheless, when asked to play the Prince in *Åbo by Night* (2007), I succumbed to peer pressure and flattery.

In the book *Nordic Larp* Mika Lojonen wrote an article (2010) about the long-running *Vampire: The Masquerade* chronicle in Helsinki and concluded it with a short mention of this larp:

"In 2007, there was an epilogue for Finnish *Vampire*: the karaoke larp *Åbo by Night* was a loving, humorous and nostalgic look at the absurdities of the genre, portrayed through vampires expressing their feelings and intrigues through singing karaoke. *Åbo by Night* was a eulogy as well as an epilogue: the genre had given all it could give, and it was time to move on."

The larp's idea was, indeed, to set a vampire court in a karaoke bar where instead of making speeches, people sing. Diegetically, this was justified with the court being ruled by a mad prince who thought himself a great artist, and his magical aura made everyone not just accept the karaoke but willingly partake in it. Thus, vampires sang about their secret plots and deepest feelings via cheesy Finnish schlagers.

In another article, Lojonen writes: "The risk of the game becoming a prisoner of its basic concept was enormous and the thought of a pure World of Darkness parody wasn't appealing, either – larps meant to be funny rarely are. [...] the writing team solved the problem by deciding it would be a seriously made game, although gently winking at the clichés of WoD (and vampire larp chronicles)." (Lojonen, 2007)

Many players, myself included, were self-conscious about their singing voice, or lack thereof. This was solved by giving the characters with the highest diegetic power to the players who rated their own singing skill the lowest. Since I was cast as the Prince, the reader can surmise I estimated I couldn't sing to save my life – or unlife.

The starting point was that the character of Magnus Stenvall would be somewhat crazy

but also the ruler of Åbo, which is the Swedish name for the city of Turku where the larp took place. He couldn't be completely off-the-walls demented but his madness would have to be powerful enough to force everyone to think karaoke was a great idea. In the lore of *Vampire: The Masquerade*, he was from the Malkavian (mad) clan but he believed he was from the Toreador (artist) clan.

The main plot of the larp was that Prince Magnus was looking for a new Seneschal, a chief advisor. Different clans and factions had their candidates and they tried to make their cases both in private negotiations and by singing on the stage. The audience of both vampire PCs and mortal NPCs was instructed to be ecstatic as each singer would portray incredible, superhuman charisma.

As part of the Prince's toxicity I wanted to dodge all responsibility, come up with excuses to leave meetings early, give impossible demands to my assistants, and ask for Seneschal recommendations from important figures and then cross out any names suggested.

Prince Magnus wanted to be a rock star and that's certainly what it felt like, especially when I was on stage with the audience cheering. Others shared this feeling: "The larp had offered most players a unique opportunity to perform to a fifty-person audience who cheers and sings along." (Lojonen, 2007)

The climax elevated the larp above many others, and while I claim little credit in it, it couldn't have happened without that specific context, larp design and writing, mood, and ensemble.

Loponen writes:
“From the past ten years of larping I can only remember a few scenes which with their intensity can rival the climax of choosing the Seneschal: Prince Stenvall on stage making his subjects scream in unison in the name of the dictatorship:
‘This is not a democracy!’
‘Yea!’
‘This is a dictatorship!’
‘Yea!’
‘And you love your dictator! Scream if you love me!’
‘YEAA!’”

After screaming together, Prince Magnus promised to name the Seneschal after he had sung one more song. I’d chosen it almost as a joke, the corniest 80s disco hit I could think of, but as the lyrics were about Genghis Khan who dominates other nations, it fit the mood perfectly. Everyone sung the chorus together, indicating that their Prince was, in effect, equal to Genghis Khan in might.

“The scene was absurd, incomprehensible, demanding of sarcastic commentary – and incredibly, numbingly impressive.” (Loponen, 2007)

Odd details

A teacher has a giant hat and speaks in a weird growl through clenched teeth. A father wears clothes that are slightly too small and makes a fool of himself on social media. A ruler demands nobody mentions milk near him. A socialite refuses to take anything seriously and loves to wear drag. A commander tends to sing alone and smokes a cigar on a spaceship. A ruler

tries to escape all meetings and dresses like a rock star. A theatre manager dresses in a night robe and speaks with a horrible accent. A vampire loves his own shadow. A servant runs around in his underwear, trying to seduce everybody.

In another character such aspects might be funny or peculiar, in some cases more suited to children’s theatre or burlesque performance. But their nature is slightly different in toxic characters and I argue they are an important part in playing to lose and in making the toxic character human.

Some of those features might still be funny to everybody else, but to the toxic character themselves there’s nothing humorous about them. He carries them with deadly seriousness. Through all of his failings, he manages to exert power, signaling two things: He’s powerful enough to overcome his own failings. And if you want to drag him down, start with these!

The character is made more human by taking them down a notch. Instead of just being evil or nasty, they have other attributes. Perhaps the character has peers or oppressors of their own with where the other attributes are more in focus. Or perhaps those oddities are just coloring there, too.

And at the same time, including oddities that don’t amplify his power but undermine it, signals that you as a player are not 100% in favor of the toxic character.

Prince Felix Yusupoff, Redemption

Most of my toxic characters have been very socially dominant. Playing Prince Felix Yusupoff, the richest man in the Russian Empire and the future murderer of Rasputin, in *Redemption* (2021), I wanted to explore toxicity from the opposite point of view.

Despite his incredible privilege, my version of Yusupoff would be the epitome of social and sexual submission, provoking others to put him down, asking for attention, and dreaming of being put down by the revolutionaries. He fell in love with Rasputin, was physically trampled by the Empress, and constantly broke etiquette, slightly disappointed every time he got away with it.

I’d read a lot about Yusupoff prior to signing up and asked for that specific role. I modeled my interpretation in part on the character Roman Roy from the HBO series *Succession*, where he serves a very similar beaten puppy type of dynamic with his family as I imagined Prince Yusupoff to have with his *maman* (who wasn’t a character in the larp, many others being forced into surrogate roles).

It wasn’t difficult to combine toxic and submissive since this allowed me to provoke others into the types of shadow play I’ve often conducted. The social dynamics and the scenes could be very similar but the roles were reversed. I played the victim of abuse, not the perpetrator, and if abuse was not coming, I would milk for it, providing others an alibi to treat Felix poorly.

As the richest character in the larp and closely tied to the Imperial family, I could also drop random comments about my wealth and privilege, something to which Yusupoff himself was oblivious, but which I intentionally did to make him even more annoying to other players and characters. And even myself.

As a historical person Felix Yusupoff was quite the character. He used to dress in women’s clothing and seduce officers at night clubs. He owned villages and thousands of serfs but found it tedious to travel around Russia overseeing his possessions. He claims to have had supernatural experiences. After the revolution he would go around Europe bragging about how he killed Rasputin despite the prophet’s demonic powers. He also claimed to have been offered the Imperial throne but having refused it. All of these things he writes about in his autobiography.

There was already so much in the character that I felt it provided an interesting contrast and the needed “curious weakness” to make him socially subservient to anyone who would try to take the upper hand. But if no one did, he could be insufferable.

One time I failed to provide a co-player enough impetus to boss Yusupoff around, or perhaps their character was disinclined to do so. All characters at the cult retreat were instructed to gather in small groups to discuss their sins. Yusupoff didn’t want to do that, rather complaining about the staff. This was my way of giving the co-player a chance to assert their dominance over Yusupoff and the meeting, but instead they asked what Yusupoff wanted to discuss and he managed to veer the entire group

in listening to him talking about himself. I hadn't prepared for this possibility and accidentally steered the entire scene in an unintended direction for our whole group.

As Rasputin was also a character in the larp, and in real-world history Yusupoff would soon become famous as his murderer, Rasputin's player and myself felt it necessary to create a strong positive bond between the two curious men. Even though this foreshadowed events after the larp with dramatic irony, it proved meaningful and touching during the larp.

Capability for change

When one plays a toxic character, it is more interesting if they have the possibility to change, to at least slightly mend their habits, or even have a full breakdown as they come to terms with their own horribleness and then seek to redeem themselves.

Often it is enough for this possibility to be there to provide angles for the other characters to approach and sway the toxic character, and for its player to have fodder for emotional character immersion. It doesn't need to happen in the larp, as long as the possibility is there.

It is a matter of one's personal larp style and aesthetics whether it is good to leave outcomes of such possibilities up to the improvisation of the larp or to plan them beforehand. Personally I am against scripting scenes and defining ends as I feel it takes away from the freedom of the larp and the immersion into the character's personality but participants should discuss beforehand how they want to approach such possibilities.

Whether a redemption arc is suitable for the character also depends on the themes and styles of the larp. In a children's larp the villain should be defeated either by driving them away or having them change their ways. In a subtle family drama for adults, more nuanced changes or the inability to change work better.

In both *Hamlet* and *Inside Hamlet*, players had been instructed to determine whether they as players thought their character deserved to live. If not, the character would perish in the Third Act, perhaps shot by the revolutionaries storming the castle in the final scene.

Syksy Räsänen discussed the redemption of the villainous characters in *Inside Hamlet* and compares it with Aristotle's definition of tragedy wherein the downfall of the utter villain should not be exhibited. "*A plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy the moral sense*," writes Aristotle, but it wouldn't be tragic. (Aristotle, 1895)

"Indeed, rather than tragedy, *Inside Hamlet* was a morality tale, where the wicked were punished in the end, and those who deserved to live were spared. One can hardly imagine Shakespeare, or Sophocles, concluding a tragedy with an escape route for the virtuous." (Räsänen, 2016)

A cathartic morality tale is no worse than a harsh tragedy and Aristotle's view has been criticized as focusing too much on the ending and too little on the substance of the play. If you play a tragic character for 47 hours and have them redeem themselves in the last minutes, your experience will be mostly tragic. In that sense, it could be argued that *Hamlet* and *Inside Hamlet* were

tragedies even if they don't meet Aristotle's definition. And in similar fashion, a toxic character provides an experience of toxicity for its player and others whether or not they do transform in the end.

But for a player who prefers to see where the larp takes them rather than planning scenes beforehand, imbuing the toxic character with the possibility of change or redemption will create a more interesting dynamic both internally and externally.

Simeon Susi, Piiri

The Susi family appreciates tradition, money, fashion, and the fatherland. They very much embody conservative Finnish values and way of life, or at least pretend to.

Together with two other extended families, they formed the core cast of the larp campaign *Piiri* (2017, Eng: *The Circle*) played in and around Helsinki. The families were intertwined through history, business, several marriages, and an endless list of grievances from the past. In Finnish style, characters were pre-written by the organisers and contained secrets and pre-made relationships. Family drama was very much at the centre of *Piiri* and for that to work, toxic relations, traditions, and characters are needed.

Simeon Susi was a fifty-something father who desperately tried to teach his rebelling teenagers to honor the family traditions, to bear the legacy of his fathers, and to keep the family business in operation at whatever the cost.

Such was his view of himself. How others

perceived him was as a monstrous, violent dictator, a chauvinist feared by his own children, who made a fool of himself on social media, had unpredictable bouts of anger, and dragged the family business's reputation into the dirt.

The larp campaign consisted of four weekend-length larps and was sent in the current era.

As Simeon, I wore my own grandfather's wrist watch and used the shoeshine kit my father had presented me with to ground the experience in my own family dynamics. In one weekend, my real-world house presented our in-game family's home. The experience was literally "close to home."¹

Unresolved tensions in our family unit included Simeon's power struggle with his wife, their adopted son's attempts to be approved by the father, one twin daughter's constant rebellion and the other's hope to be noticed. Simeon had abused his son's need for acceptance by having him conduct criminal acts to advance his business ventures. The quiet daughter published a thinly veiled novel about the family, and the two other children revealed they're in an incestuous relationship. These were plots pre-planned by the organisers.

Where the toxicity really shone was in the mundane details: having brunch with the family, going into therapy, having public meltdowns, being interrogated by the company's new CEO, posting on the in-game social media, humiliating the children in front of others.

¹ In the book *What Do We Do When We Play*, playing close to home is defined like this: "Playing with themes, situations, experiences, or personae that one is very familiar with from everyday life." (Saitta et al (eds.): 2020)



Photo: Tuomas Puikkonen

I was far from the only person playing on the toxicity although many were more on the victim side. As we planned our family dynamics, I had my seven-year old son with me in the café and he heard us discussing what horrible customs we could have. He suggested if someone cries they won't get any dessert. At first we nervously laughed at this, because it was just so horrible. Then we decided to use it.

I want to mention one detail in the first larp of the series. I had brought the shoeshine kit I got from my real-life father who keeps commenting on the state of my shoes. In full view of everyone hanging outside the party venue, I demanded to see my adopted son's shoes.

"You haven't shined them."

"Well, yeah, but I didn't have time," he said

sheepishly.

"A Susi always has time," I told him.

"Yes, father."

I gave him my car keys and told him to fetch the shoeshine kit from the trunk and bring it back. He went away with one of his sisters and returned soon enough. I told him to open the kit and explained in detail how he should shine his shoes, as if he didn't know, and as if the characters hadn't had this discussion countless times before. The onlookers were embarrassed to witness this but all of them were left with a lasting memory of this. (Ever since then, whenever I meet this player, we look at his shoes, and break into laughter without saying a word.)

I played Simeon Susi as a very uptight man but I also wanted to signal to the other

players not to be afraid of playing against him or taking him down. The speeches he gave were delivered with businessman-like trained style but were pure embarrassment. In one of them I'd agreed that another character was my PR consultant and he sat in the audience miming what I should say next, which I then delivered with patriarchal confidence. When the speech didn't result in Simeon being elected CEO of the family company, he started screaming, throwing things, and physically attacked the speech writer for costing him the position.

Some of his traits were, I think, classic toxic man traits, but also served as curious oddities at the same time.

When plotting for votes, he would only resort to bribery and threats, never persuasion. When playing petanque and losing, he would fake an injury to get an exit. When expected to console someone, he would tell them to pull themselves together.

These details were so deliberately included in his characterization that they served the same purpose as more caricaturish and exaggerated traits on other characters in less realistic larps. Playing in the modern day allows for a level of detail and cultural literacy where even small minutiae have meaning in a manner different for historical or fantastic larps. Andie Nordgren writes about high-resolution larping and although her examples were from science fiction and fantasy, the aspect of playing every mundane minutiae was very much true here. (Nordgren, 2008)

Opt-in oppression

When you abuse others in a larp, it's important to be sure this is what they want.

Some larps provide meta techniques for calibration but they are often useful for individual acts like kissing someone on the cheek or grabbing their wrist. Calibrating the mood and relationship is difficult to do with simple safewords and, I've found, is best done out-of-character.

In some larps this is not always necessary as the whole theme and mood of the larp requires difficult family relations or withstanding a certain amount of oppression. Even in such cases, calibration of a good level of abuse and toxicity is best done before the larp and in-person. Sometimes this is not enough.

An abused character breaks into tears, flees the scene, or freezes perhaps reliving some traumatic flashback. In such cases it can be very difficult for the player of the abuser to know if this is the player suffering a flashback or just brilliantly playing a character who is going through one. How can you tell?

The easiest way is for both of you to drop little hints that ground the action clearly in the world of the larp. Focusing on the toxic character's little oddities can do that, or referencing some recent event or plot from the larp. Likewise, the abused character can bring up something from a shared background, comment on the oddities (or play on their own), or bring up some other play-related instrument.

As a hardcore immersionist steeped in Finnish larp style, breaking character for any reason is a big taboo. But there are times when it has felt necessary to make sure the other player is having a good time. Even if there have been no problems, they

have appreciated the check-up, a reminder that we can steer away or stop entirely if we want to.

One such case in the larp *Piiri* had Simeon Susi and one of his daughters were in the train on the way home. (My real-life family wasn't home, so we used our house as the family's house and had planned to have a big brunch there the next morning.) The daughter was incredibly awkward and visibly distressed by having to endure the train ride with her domineering and socially clumsy father, and I realized that this might go on for hours as we made her bed, drank tea, woke up, prepared brunch, and whatnot. Was that too much?

I realized the in-game power imbalance as well as the out-of-game situation of her staying in my real-life house meant I bore the responsibility to make sure she was ok. Sitting in the train, I briefly broke character reminding her that we can stop anytime if this gets too heavy. She smiled a little and said she knows and would love to continue. So we did.

Such check-ups and even dialogue can also be discreetly done through digital messages, which are often sent and read when the play is less intense and interaction is down to a minimum.

There's an aspect of calibration that is sometimes overlooked. While there are many techniques to turning the intensity down, there are less for turning it up. If you want more physicality, more emotions, more fun or more horror, more abuse from your abuser or toward your abusee, it's an aspect that can also be calibrated with an off-game chat just as easily as limiting it or

making sure the other one is still on board.

The most important thing is that all participants opt in to the abuse from the toxic characters, just as they opt in to everything else that happens in the larp. Sometimes it is the player of the toxic abuser who has to set the limits if things get too uncomfortable for them. This is also a part of responsible playing.

Elin Dalstål (2018) gives several more pointers on what to avoid when playing a nasty character. This one deserves to be repeated: "Never attack out-of-character traits. For example, someone's body shape, appearance, real-life disabilities etc." This is how you keep the toxicity firmly inside the fiction.

Lord Alistair, Vereen Sidotut

Vereen sidotut (2025, Engl: *Tied in Blood*) is a century-spanning Finnish-style larp campaign about vampires. It doesn't share the lore of *Vampire: The Masquerade*, but it does share many stylistic elements, such as clans, politics, high drama, oppressive relationships, blood rituals, all designed from scratch for maximum playability.

The campaign's roots are less in Nordic larp and more in Finnish larp, meaning players are cast into pre-written characters and relations, each carrying plots, intrigues, secrets, strengths, and flaws. Players are encouraged to calibrate but individual scenes are typically not planned in advance. This is still a 2025 larp so concepts such as player safety, metatechniques, act breaks, shadow play, and escalation mechanics are brought to play by both organisers and players.

Interestingly, I started writing this very article a little before the first larp in the campaign, and had the opportunity to employ my observations and analysis in interpreting the character of Alistair, a noble lord of the English vampire clan Exaltes, a powerhungry psychopath, and a narcissistic father figure to the younger vampires he had created.

Signing up for the larp, I had clicked on radio buttons expressing an interest in exploring the leadership, plotting, inscrutability, and romance (both positive and negative). In the free text part I'd written, "I'm particularly interested in wrestling with all sorts of powerful, twisted emotions, not just romantic ones." I hadn't mentioned anything about playing a toxic patriarch but combining leadership, twisted emotions, and a male character can result in that outcome.

Character as written

Sometimes pre-written characters in Finnish larps can be extremely long. My character writer for *Vereen sidotut*, Laura Kröger, is known for providing the players of her larp *Varjot ajassa* (2021, Engl: *Shadows in Time*) with an intimidating 60–80 pages to read. The written character description here was a breeze at only 11 pages and written in a mix of prose and bullet points, focusing on what I can best use in the larp. (In addition, there were numerous group briefings and a 30-page larp manual of the most essential reading about practical information, lore, and such.)

The character's personality is not discussed directly but there are hints, both subtle and underlined. I quote two passages, one detailing Alistair's relationship with his

partner Ophelia, and the other with his vampiric offspring Evander.

"[Your future partner Ophelia] may have thought you as a pointless dandy at first, but as you planned the revolution, she began to see the logical, calculating, ruthless side of you, and that appealed to her. ... You don't believe you can control Ophelia enough to let her rule. For long enough have you followed others, now it's your time to lead the orchestra. Your quarrel hasn't diminished the lust you feel for Ophelia, rather the opposite. You have decided to find a way to get everything you want."

"During Evander's first years, you let him have more freedoms, but every now and then it's important to return him back to your control. At one point you realized your actions as a creator resembled those of your own creator Lucien, but it didn't make you change your ways. After the death of [your previous offspring] Edeline, you have tightened your grasp on Evander, keeping a closer eye on him than before."

Some other histories, relationships and actions proved Alistair to be controlling, petty, and manipulative, but I try to keep myself from quoting the entire eleven pages.

He has also been actively plotting the murder of his superiors, including assassinating his own creator, so one can surmise he's driven by vengeance and the hunger for power. The larp would start with Alistair, Ophelia, and other key rebels from various clans ritually murdering the last vampire of the previous generation with blood magic and good old stabbing in the heart, setting the tone for the larp and the characters. Certainly not the pure heroes

they considered themselves to be, but still with plenty of room for interpretation of the style and amount of their deranged evil.

Preparing to Interpret the Character

Getting ready to larp the character, I focused on three things: props and costume, relationships, and demeanour.

Props and costume are a part of most larps and the preparatory work of all larpers in them. I'm not much of an arts-and-crafts person but fortunately had a reasonable Regency-era vest and coat in our clan colors and bought a wig, pantaloons, and a puffy shirt that I could use in other larps as well. I tried to come up with a feature in his look that could stay as the centuries and fashions changed, such as a visible scar or sunglasses, but in the end that one didn't happen. Nor was there anything particularly "odd" about Alistair's appearance: he dressed as a nobleman of that era because he was one. Other players had colored contact lenses, fake nails, sharp canines, and other impressive props, while I had to leave projecting my vampire-ness up to my interpretation.

Since the character descriptions were only eleven pages, we were encouraged to deepen our relationships with other characters by coordinating and calibrating with their players. Several phone calls, and hundreds of chat lines later, the pre-written relations had been fleshed out and plans had been made for the directions that the players found interesting. As this is a Finnish-style larp, we didn't reveal our secrets or plan scenes beforehand, only coordinated the level of intensity, our wishes, and the specifics of the connection.

Alistair's offspring Evander was a brilliant Mozart-style composer. With his player we agreed this would mirror the relationship between Elvis and the Colonel, a genius artist and his controlling manager without whom he wouldn't be a star but with whom he couldn't live a full life.

With Ophelia's player, we agreed we wanted to play a doomed romance wrapped in grandiose madness and immeasurable passion, both fueled and poisoned by mistrust, jealousy, desire, spite, and the misplaced belief that love conquers all.

Playing such flawed, tragic relations requires a lot of trust between the players, so a part of the communication was reserved for establishing that, and making sure the other's real-life lines wouldn't be crossed or traumas triggered. And at the same time, it is the elements one can recognise in one's own psyche or history that make playing such characters and relationships such powerful experiences.

Finally, I tried to think of how my character's demeanor could differ from that of others at the larp, and of mortal noblemen of the era. He was certainly not this larp's only crazed power player with problematic behaviour. I decided he had a really strong bond with his own shadow, wherever it's cast. He might take slight if someone steps on his shadow and he always stood and sat in places where he would cast the best possible shadow. Sometimes he would ask people to kiss his shadow. (I brought in my own lamp just to make sure there was a suitable place for shadow posing.)

While this didn't take up a lot of play time and probably wasn't picked up by outsiders,

most of his close contacts got at least a whiff of Alistair's interest in his own umbral silhouette. Other vampires who hadn't seen him for centuries could take notice and understand the long years had changed him. It also provided me with a suitably demented anchor to focus on whenever I was immersed in the character by myself. Talk about literal shadow play!

Character as played

I and my co-players started the larp, playing characters as we had planned them, slowly exploring the relations and the dynamics, until we hit the groove that best worked for us.

With Alistair's offspring Evander this started with Evander constantly complaining about his hunger and Alistair barking at him to stop his whining. This didn't feel so much like Elvis and the Colonel but more like a mistreated son and an abusive father. As the larp progressed, that take on the dynamic grew stronger and more powerful.

The symphony increased in intensity to a deafening crescendo where Alistair would tell Evander what a disappointment he was and how he wished he had never made him in the first place. Evander: "Do you remember how you said you never wanted to become like your own creator Lucien?" Alistair: "Why would you possibly bring him up?" "You're just like him!" "How dare you?" "You are just like Lucien!" Alistair started hitting on Evander and shouting at him until he admitted: "You're nothing like Lucien."

Both were visibly shaken by the encounter, where we had with unspoken contract taken on the Jungian archetypes of Wounded Child and Dark Father. In the course of the larp, we had subconsciously steered ourselves towards this more primal dynamic, of which the relationship between Elvis and the Colonel is but one variation.

Alistair and his Lady Ophelia had a relationship no less tumultuous and powerfully charged with psycho-mythic energy. Their love was tainted and strengthened by their shared suspicion, jealousy, greed, and vengeance, a constant dance on the edge of a blade, where neither would submit to the other nor abandon them.

They both wanted to lead clan Exaltes and in a clandestine conversation Alistair promised Ophelia the mortal throne of England if she would give him the clan. She agreed on the condition that Alistair use his power to destroy all her enemies, but that price was too high for him.

He then agreed to give her the leadership of the clan if she agreed to swear a magical and messy blood oath with him. The blood magic turned into an orgy where they professed their love for one another. Such was the nature of their moonlight romance.

Here we more or less subconsciously gravitated toward another pseudo-Jungian² pairing: order vs chaos, masculine vs feminine, shadow vs shadow. With her, Alistair projected authority, control,

² Note that I'm not a psychologist and realise Jung's ideas are not the latest in contemporary psychology. I utilize these concepts as a way they're used in books popularizing and developing Jung's ideas, within both the field of psychology and those of comparative mythology and creative writing.

confidence, and clarity. Ophelia countered with chaos, uncontained emotion, danger, freedom, and emotion.

Powerful archetypes both, the Controlling Tyrant (reflecting the Dark Animus) and the Mad Queen (reflecting the Dark Anima). Which will eventually reign dominant?

Did we just happen to reach such psychoanalytic tropes or was it the result of great player chemistry and skill, and beautiful larp writing and design? Or did the archetypes echo only in my personal experience, which was affected by the analysis I've performed for the purposes of this article, preparations for a future autobiographical larp, and personal growth? I'll leave that question for the reader, but the answer doesn't subtract from the potency of the experience.

As this was the first part in a campaign, relations were left open-ended and conflicts were built, not resolved.

Aftercare for villains

An important aspect of playing a toxic character is letting go of it after the larp. This is important in children's larps where an organiser plays the bad guy of the week but also in adults' larps if some players have seen each other almost exclusively in the larp, as characters.

It's important for the player of the toxic character as well as for all others to make others relax and really let go of the strained relation you had. Debriefing can be a good tool for this.

Really changing your appearance and demeanor is also important. The goal should not just be a return to your ordinary self but to a version of yourself in the opposite extreme. Remove your costume and make-up, of course, but if you always stood straight in-character, sit on the floor or move in a way the character never would, showing that part of yourself, even if standing straight would be a completely normal choice for you. Make yourself as different as possible while staying within the bounds of your everyday style.

Go speak one-on-one to your co-players. In all likelihood they really appreciated having you for a foil but with strangers it's possible there's a residue of their in-game relationship left, and it's on both of you to dilute it by joking, hugging, apologizing, thanking, checking in on the other. "Kiitos ja anteeksi" is a Finnish phrase I often use, meaning, "Thank you and I'm sorry."

Likewise, I encourage players of non-toxic characters to approach the players of toxic characters who (like larp photographers) might feel left out of the cheerful post-larp chatter. Offer them chocolate and positive feedback. Playing a toxic character is often a gift for the whole larp.

Elin Dalstål's paper 'Playing Nasty Characters' (2018) and Nór Hernø's article 'Villain Self Care' (2024) contain some valuable advice on taking care of yourself and other players while playing a villain.

Toxic characters in children's larps

Perhaps surprisingly, children's characters also need adults to play toxic characters. These would be the strict teachers at the magic school, the villains to be defeated at the boffer larp, and on a less intense level, the everyday misguided adults who fail to see the obvious until the children convince them.

When organisers play toxic or evil characters in children's larps, they have to take extra care to remind their young players before, during, and after the event that they are trusted adults and they're only playing a role like this.

It's possible that a nasty leader will be too scary in a one-on-one scene and a child will start crying out-of-character. In such a case, play should be stopped immediately, and the organiser should escort the child to another adult who can console the child player and help them continue play.

In children's larps, evil characters should not be used to promote real-world problematic ideas like misogyny or racism without the guise of fantasy. A baddie being prejudiced against elves is fine and the children will understand racism is bad. But if a villain's problematic behaviour could be interpreted as extending from the magic circle of the larp into regular life prejudices, it can show the kids it's ok to be racist if it's in jest. This is a murky line at best but the comedy advice of punching up instead of down is a good guideline. "It's my character who hates fat people," is problematic at all larps and should be avoided in children's larps altogether.

In many children's larps, at least the ones we run, there are mysteries, riddles, curses, and problems that the adults simply fail to see. So the kids have to solve them. This works in Saturday morning cartoons and kids' book series, and it works in children's larps: the adults are too oblivious to understand the issue or perhaps a part of the problem themselves. In such cases, the adults might fail to act when the kids raise an issue with them or actively tell them not to pursue it. If done with a slightly suspicious attitude or an arrogant smirk, most kids will realise to be critical of this advice and the rest will learn it at some point.

Since drama requires conflict, carefully executed foils and villains are definitely needed at kids' larps.

Not being toxic yourself

Many of the ideas and techniques I've listed are about how to play a toxic character without being a toxic player. There is still one inner risk involved: it can be alluring to behave in a toxic manner, to break taboos, to indulge³ in self-destructive behaviour, to do what you're not allowed to do in real life. In such cases, you might want to take some of that with you from the larp into real life.

All roleplaying has the potential to be transformative and ideally that transformation should make us better people. But the lure of forbidden behaviour can be felt strongly when experimented with in play.

³ Compare with this quote from the TV series *The Chair* (2021, S01E06): "You are using her death as an excuse for indulging in all this self-destructive bullshit."

Playing a toxic character safely is not surrendering to your “shadow,” your dark side. It is reaching your shadow and using it for the larp. Letting it show but keeping it in control.

To make it potent, you may need to use your real life experiences, traumas, psychologies. But when you do that, you can accidentally delve too deep and trigger some hidden mechanisms within you. In playing the monster, did you finally reveal your true self? Can you banish it back into the depths of your subconscious where you’ve kept it under lock and key your whole life? Whitney Beltrán calls this “ego bleed” where “an archetypal characteristic inherent in a character type or role ‘rubs off’ on a player” (Beltrán, 2012).

Such topics should be approached very carefully. Explore evil gradually, increasing intensity larp by larp, keep safety valves for yourself (such as the little oddities), and develop routines and rituals for releasing yourself from the toxic characters.

At the same time, they may carry elements you lack in your ordinary life: confidence, power, sexuality, visibility, authority... It’s possible to find positive elements in negative characters and employ those in your everyday persona without embracing the shadow.

Conclusion

Unlike these characters, I do welcome discussion and criticism on the topic, and will take part in possible discussions around this essay.

I’ve also written about one other similar character in two articles. In three College of Wizardry larps I played a character I had created myself: Bombastus Bane, Professor of Dark Arts. I mean, Defense Against the Dark Arts. I wrote about his emotional journey in ‘Steering for Immersion in Five Nordic Larps: A New Understanding of Eläytyminen’ (2015) and about my experience in more detail in an article in the book *College of Wizardry: The Magic of Participation in Harry Potter Larps* (2017).

A lot has been written about using role-playing for positive transformation. For more on this topic, I recommend Jonaya Kemper’s articles ‘The Battle of Primrose Park’ (2017) and ‘Wyrding the Self’ (2020), Axiel Cazeneuve’s ‘Larp as Magical Practice’ (2021), and Elektra Diakolambrianou and Sarah Lynne Bowman’s ‘Dual Consciousness’ (2023).

Dealing with the shadow and avoiding negative transformation has been discussed far less, but I found Whitney Beltrán’s article ‘Shadow Work’ (2013) quite useful.

Playing with monsters can be dangerous business and becoming them doubly so. In conclusion I must thus step away from the pseudo-Jungian terminology to the field of magic and demonology, and quote a well-known guidance for bringing demons into this world: “Do not summon that which you cannot banish.” Horror author H. P. Lovecraft’s version is no less true: “Do not summon what you cannot bend to your will, otherwise it will bend you.” Whether you summon monsters into the physical world inside a literal magic circle drawn with chalk or salt, or into yourself within the figurative magic circle of larp, these are

sound advice.

With these caveats, playing with monsters, demons, and shadow selves can be fun, educational, and even constructive. Stay safe!

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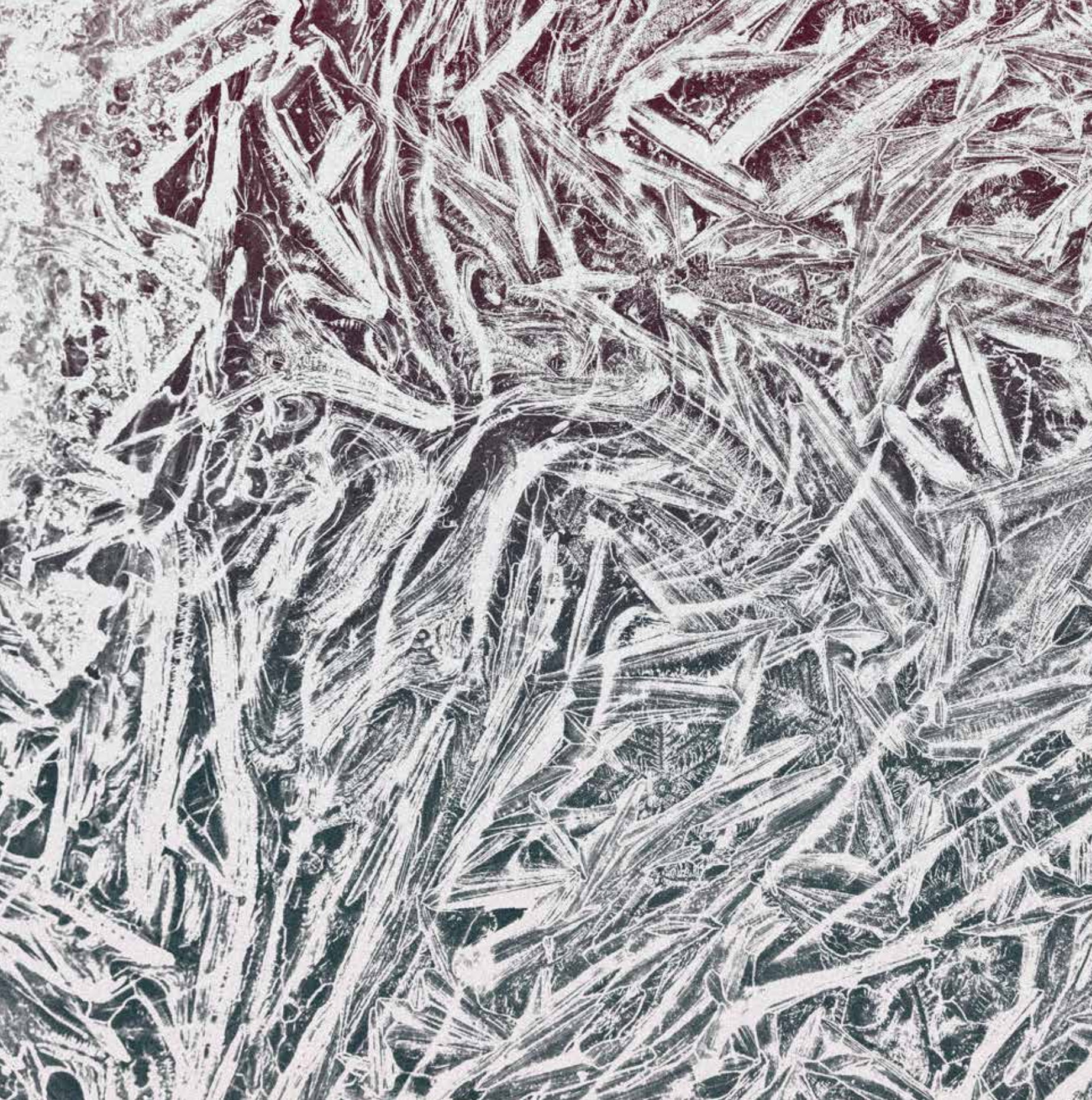
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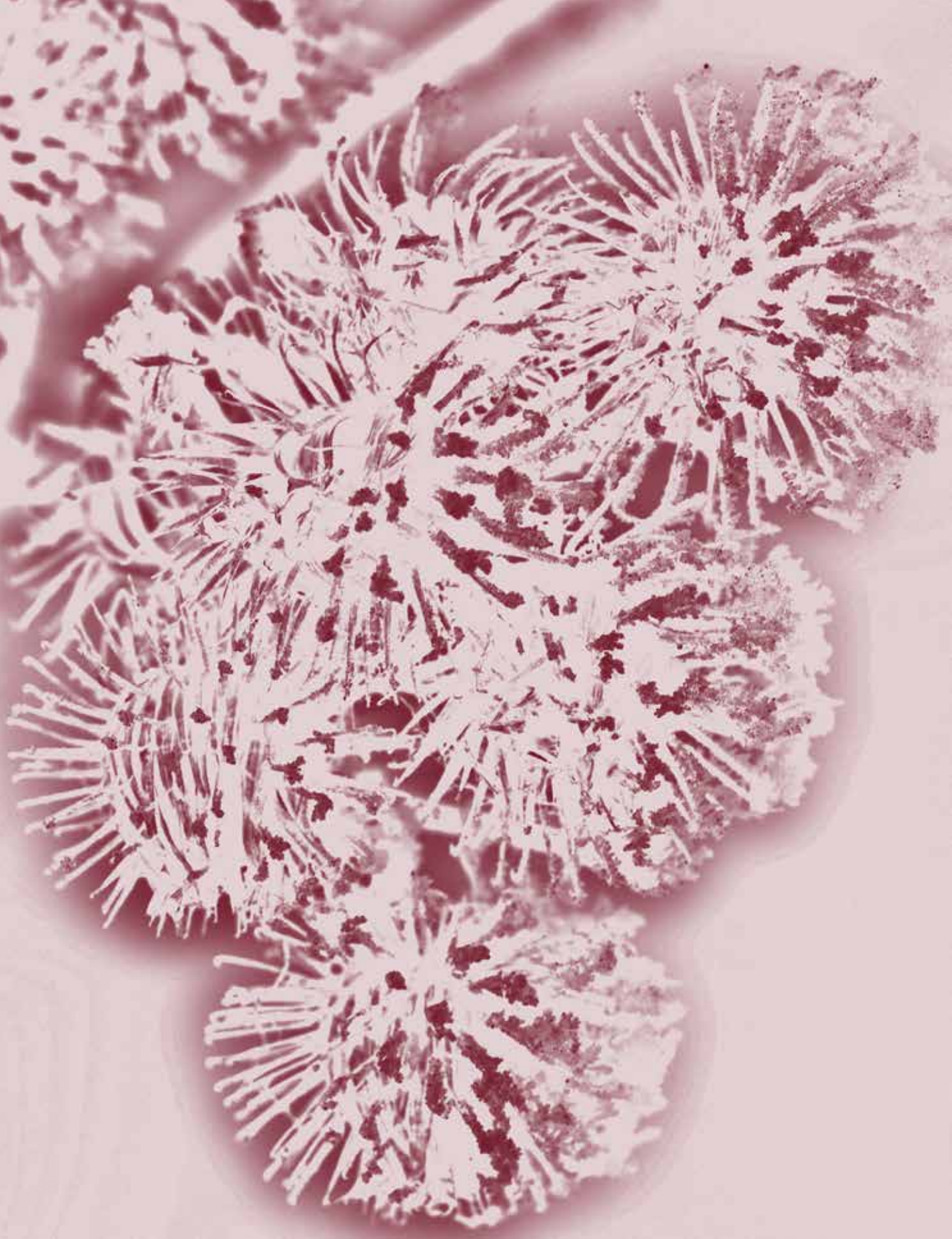


Winter

For many of us, Winter is a season to be survived. The coming of the cold and the darkness, the oppressive loneliness of those hours before dawn; it goes on too long and the promise of spring seems just another lie like someone whispering “it is going to be alright.” I sit and write this a few days before the Winter Solstice. The days are not yet getting longer, and although the frosts have not come to London yet, I am sure that they will; three months of wet winds, frozen fog, and numb fingertips. Yet Winter is a part of the turning of the world and without it we would be no more.

The articles in this section represent thoughts and ideas told around a roaring fire. They are warmly wrapped, carefully curated, and frankly far more joyful than your editor.

“I am just going outside and may be some time.”



Nikolai Evreinov and a Larp for Oneself

Adrian Hon

The closer we look at history, the more evidence we see of role play. Mátyás Hartyándi recently explored 18th century German essays and stories that described dissimulation – people adopting roles to conceal their true intentions – and emotional bleed (Hartyándi, 2025), long before Jacob Moreno’s use of “role play” in the 20th century. Some scholars of late medieval chivalry now refer to “Pas des armes” tournaments (“passage of arms”) as “roleplay games”, with knights knowingly inhabiting fictional characters and co-creating sophisticated multi-day stories (Viallon, 2025).

Often, this evidence sheds light on unsung artists and thinkers, but Nikolai Evreinov is a different case. Pick up any textbook on the history of participatory art or environmental theatre and you’re likely to read about his 1920 work, *The Storming of the Winter Palace*, in which he re-enacted an episode from the Russian Revolution with eight thousand performers, many of whom had been involved in the actual storming, in front of one hundred thousand spectators.

Today, the performance is usually seen as yet another instance of Soviet propaganda, and Evreinov merely its orchestrator. But at the peak of his career, he was internationally famous and considered one of the three most important directors in Russia next to Vsevolod Meyerhold and Konstantin Stanislavski. Evreinov also had another, deeper interest in what he called the “theatrical instinct” – an interest that was decades before its time, anticipating theories of role play and performance studies later developed by Moreno, Erving Goffman (Shulman, 2017), Richard Schechner (Sasse, 2022), Victor Turner, Eric

Berne (Carnicke, 1989), and contemporary thinkers on larp.

The theatrical instinct was Evreinov’s term for the idea that humans instinctively and constantly transform themselves via role play. Leaning on the new psychology and social science of his time, he argued that everyone had a “desire to be ‘different’, to do something that is ‘different’, to imagine oneself in surroundings that are ‘different’ from the commonplace surroundings of our everyday life ... We are all born with this feeling in our soul, we are all essentially theatrical beings.” (Evreinoff, 1970, p. 23). He was very familiar with metaphors of humans as actors on a stage, but to him, this was no metaphor. The theatrical instinct predated religious rituals and was more fundamental than appreciation of art. “In this a cultured man differs but little from a savage, and a savage from an animal.” (Evreinoff, 1970, p. 23). A politician photographed in “working clothes” as if unawares, servants invited by their lady of the house to a formal dinner, a tourist in a Moroccan market – for Evreinov, they are all playing a part.

While transformation was instinctive, that didn’t mean it couldn’t also be voluntary and creative.¹ Evreinov imagines a young girl who plaits a bright ribbon in her hair saying, “You thought I was obedient? But I am dissatisfied; I criticise and amend Mother Nature. She created me without a ribbon! She did not think it through, she was not able! I am not willing to accept this world as it was created by someone or something and I do not accept myself as I was created. I am in the process of

¹ Transformative role-play has been a subject of close study in the Nordic Larp community (Bowman, 2019) and Uppsala University’s Transformative Play Initiative (Uppsala University, 2024).

transformation! I recreate myself! Yes, I am daring. I oppose my natural self in deference to an artificial self. I am different with that ribbon, I recreate myself with that ribbon.” (Romantsova, 2017). It was also not necessarily a social activity; a man on his own posing in a mirror or imagining his future was an actor in his own drama. Crucially, the rewards of role play exceeded anything material. Those who transformed themselves gained “new feelings, new sensations, new conceptions of the world we live in ... we remain the same as we were, and yet we become different ... A new sense of life – is that not more valuable than a new dress, a new bracelet, a new car?”

Evreinov had a habit of living his theories in real life, which goes some way to explaining why his contemporaries found him either extremely annoying or incredibly inspiring. When Futurist poet and playwright Vladimir Mayakovsky came to visit him in the hopes of a free breakfast, Evreinov offered him a meal of cold pheasant, tempting him with appetising descriptions despite the fact he knew full well he had no pheasant. Mayakovsky later said this was a good example of his friend’s “theatre for oneself” (Carnicke, 1989, p. 12). Evreinov had been a performer his whole life. At seven, he built a theatre at home; at ten, he wrote his first novel; at thirteen, he performed as a clown in a travelling circus (Golub, 1984, p. 19).

After his first plays as an amateur writer became popular, Evreinov founded The Antique Theatre in 1907 in St. Petersburg. There, he reconstructed theatre traditions from the past, beginning with medieval miracle plays and ending with Spanish theatre of the 17th century. Unusually, these plays focused on how historical audiences

interacted with performers – behaviour that historians were aware of, but not most artists or audiences. For his 11th century drama *The Three Magi*, on-stage medieval audience members got so involved that when the fictional Herod gave the order to kill the children, the audience stormed the cathedral (Golub, 1984, p. 113). Evreinov’s goal was not only to demonstrate the blurred boundaries of older theatrical forms, but to inspire contemporary audiences to become more involved, too.

All his major dramatic works were filled with self-referential nods and direct address to the audience. At *The Crooked Mirror* cabaret, where he worked as principal director from 1910, one of his most popular plays was literally called *The Fourth Wall*. In it, he parodied a director who attempts to stage Faust as realistically as possible. After eliminating the singing, since people don’t sing in real life, he brings in a chalice filled with real poison to avoid “falsifications”. Eventually the director builds a fourth wall on the stage in front of the audience, since all rooms should have four walls (Golub, 1984, p. 172). Another play, *The Inspector General*, poked fun at Stanislavski’s insistence on ultra-naturalism, opening with a sofa with its back to the audience and an actor whose words are completely drowned out the “realistic” tolling of church bells.

While this was all very funny – Tsar Nicholas II enjoyed it so much he gave the director a gold watch – Evreinov had a more serious point. Directors like Stanislavski were driving the theatrical instinct out of one of the last places where people could exercise it. Like so many countries, Russia was undergoing a major identity crisis as the rationality and positivism and social

institutions of the 19th century began to crumble. This shift, combined with the rise of realist theatre,² allowed Evreinov to claim that modern society's strictures were eliminating theatricality from people's lives. If the only roles people could see or play were those deemed critically or commercially acceptable for the stage – stereotypical realists, radical intellectuals, shrewd businessmen, or good sports – their lives would be stunted. Russian Futurists agreed, taking on Evreinov's habit of wearing costumes and inserting performances into real life, but where they looked forward, Evreinov looked to the past.

In *The Beautiful Despot*, one of his early plays written in 1905, a liberal journalist disenchanted with the modern world decides to recreate the lifestyle of his great-grandfather. With the help of his conveniently likeminded household servants, he creates a hyperrealistic, totalising re-enactment with props, costumes, and furniture appropriate for the 19th century. It's only when a visitor arrives in modern dress that the audience realises the entire play so far has been a fiction within a fiction. The journalist – the Despot, and a stand-in for Evreinov – then attempts to justify the value of role play (Carnicke, 1989, p. 87).

Where *The Beautiful Despot* anticipated movies like *Westworld*, his idea for an ultra-naturalistic version of Chekhov's *Three*

Sisters did the same for modern immersive theatre. Once again needling Stanislavski, Evreinov imagines renting a real two-storey house in Moscow and selling tickets for audiences to peer in through the door to see the story unfold in real time over the course of an entire day, until the house is bathed in flames. "The absence of the 'fourth wall' wouldn't shock your reality-loving soul for a minute!" he crowed (Evreinoff, 1970, p. 138). Much to his dismay, a friend pronounced the idea "original and brilliant". He had underestimated the desire to experience drama in an embodied form, even if that was merely as a mobile spectator to what he thought would be a tedious, overly-realistic production, rather than the fantasies of E. T. A. Hoffman he preferred.

But Evreinov had his sights set higher. His ultimate goal, expressed in *The Theatre for Oneself*, was for audiences not simply to wander around an immersive set, as in Punchdrunk's shows, but to become the stars of their own, personalised dramas. "To play, and not to watch others play – that's what we want and need above all!" he wrote. "That's the reason why I condemn the contemporary public theatre: impertinent actors feeding on our money play and enjoy themselves as they wish, while we are kept confined to the gloomy and motionless orchestra! In the future theatre there will be no spectators." (Evreinoff, 1970, p. 256).

Contemporaries were baffled. How could spectators be an actor, writer, and director all at once? Scholars remained mystified well into the 20th century until the comparison could be made to video games, tabletop role-playing games, and larp. As for their other objection – that if such a thing were possible the result would be childish

nonsense – Evreinov noted that even naive play could be a source of deep wisdom. One could make the same defence of *Dungeons & Dragons* today. He anticipated modern criticisms of role play, comparing *Don Quixote* and *Robinson Crusoe's* fantasies: "Don Quixote is dreaming all the time. He has fallen asleep once and for ever to the realities of our life. Robinson is asleep and awake at the same time: there is Robinson, a fantastic dreamer and theatricalizer, and Robinson, a sound realist." (Evreinoff, 1970, p. 95). In his theatre for oneself, you can indulge in and benefit from immersive fantasies without losing yourself entirely.

His examples read like a list of high concept larps. Noting how pleasant it is to recover from an illness through forced bed rest, Evreinov suggests staging an illness with the help of two friends to act as doctor and nurse. Over the course of a couple of days, they take your temperature, chat about the news, and read to you from a novel, all completely in character. Evreinov admiringly relates the story of eminent historian Mykola Kostomarov, who put his cat on trial after it ate his pet canary. Kostomarov assembled a court in which he played the role of prosecutor, with two friends as defence attorney and judge, and his family as the jury (his mother refused, saying "my son has gone mad"). The historian gave an enthusiastic speech, full of fire, involving the role of cats in ancient Egypt and Rome, probing the moral issues of the crime; observers called it the best speech he ever delivered. The attorney for the defence, a well-known writer, argued that the cat had been unduly influenced by his owner's book, *The Last Years of Poland*, in which he tried to prove the weak unavoidably became prey to the strong.

After fifteen minutes' deliberation, the cat was pronounced innocent (Evreinoff, 1970, p. 194). Childish play, perhaps – but not without profundity.

The Theatre for Oneself took existing ideas of role play from creative re-enactments and abstracted them to practically any subject imaginable. It anticipates many key tenets of 21st century tabletop role-playing games and larps, like ensuring participants understand their roles and what will be expected of them. In this respect, it differs greatly from art that seeks to surprise and unsettle participants, notably Happenings³ and a great deal of interactive and immersive theatre. But Kostomarov's scenario is instructive in revealing Evreinov's aristocratic leanings. Where Evreinov's examples are focused on the entertainment and edification of one person – the patient, not their nurse or doctor – the structure of a trial gives multiple people the opportunity to shine. The only way The Theatre for Oneself works is by finding people willing to indulge the "star". Perhaps the idea is that everyone takes turns, though this isn't made explicit. Certainly, it ignores the possibility of designing an experience that gives all participants meaningful agency, where everyone is the main character, as Nordic Larp aims for, though for Evreinov this would be a "Theatre for Ourselves" rather than one that preserves an individual's sovereignty.

³ Happenings are a combination of performance art and participatory theatre developed in the 1950s and coined by Allan Kaprow in 1958 (Kaprow, 1958). They sought to blur the lines between audience and performer in semi-random, fluid, and temporary events, and were highly influential for the 1960s avant-garde and on environmental theatre practitioners such as Richard Schechner (Rodenbeck, 2011).

It is a mark of Evreinov’s charisma and the more open milieu of Russian arts in the early 20th century that anyone entertained his “theatre for oneself” at all, given its rejection of practically everything integral to traditional theatre. But his ideas were soon forgotten, and he did not become part of the intellectual chain linking theatre and re-enactments to Moreno’s psychodrama and Goffman’s ideas of performance in life, and then to co-created forms of role play like Nordic Larp – until, perhaps, now.

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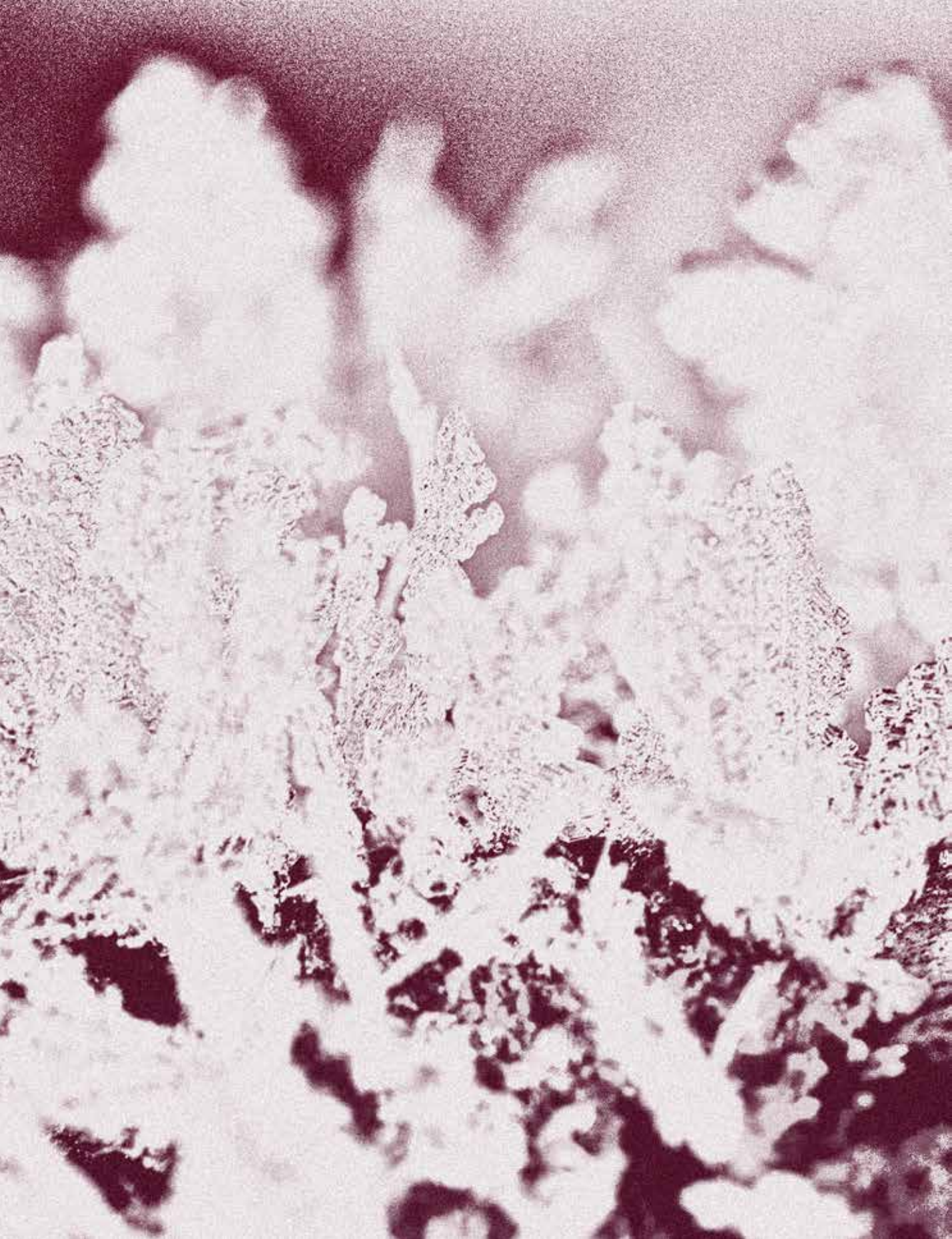
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School of Larp

Jamie MacDonald

If I were to teach other people to larp, one of my lessons would be called The Noodle Bar, which is a technique I have used for a long time, but only recognised it as a technique while playing Where Androids Die (Gothenburg, 2018), where of course there is a noodle bar. All characters can believably be at the noodle bar and they're all after the same thing, so striking up a conversation with "just anyone" is easy. In larps, one of my most important methods to get what I want out of play is to start conversations that don't seem to mean too much at the time, with characters with whom I have no connection. Small talk. It has two payoffs, one immediate and one long-term: small talk is great for fleshing out my character, so I get an immediate feeling of their sense of humour and personality in an everyday, low-stakes interaction. But some of these will, hours or days later, wind up presenting me with sublime moments of larp connection as our characters meet again, and we can be direct with each other, emotionally

raw, because we remind each other of who we were a short time ago before the world around us went mad, and now it is clear we were in fact destined to meet at the noodle bar.

Earlier this year, I was presenting a draft paper about acting and larp in front of larp theorists in Finland.¹ On one slide, I had listed the multiple “schools” of acting I’d trained under over the course of an education and practice in acting. Professional actors and dancers carry on training throughout their lives, typically with a wide variety of techniques, styles, and teachers. The emphasis can be physical, psychological, traditional, or even radical. So-called “eclectic training”, where you are serially immersed in different methodologies, is seen as a source of innovation as well as a recognition of the personal and creative nature of performing arts. Generally, people will have one or two

¹ Where else?



The noodle bar from the Androids universe larp Club Inferno. Photo: Carl Nordblom.

styles that are their home base, the core of their working identity, but they can work in multiple, even contradictory methods. In the end, every artist’s process is completely unique, but they can communicate with other artists by showing or discussing what they know.

One might have studied particular *conceptual methods*, a way of organising action with a theoretical basis, like Laban in dance or Biomechanics in theatre, or have studied *styles* like Commedia del’Arte or jazz dance. A performer may have worked with a *specific director/choreographer*, like Peter Brook or Pina Bausch, who are genres unto themselves. A very clever person in the room in Finland asked “What is the equivalent of this for larp?” Do we have conceptual methods, styles, or auteurs that teach us how to larp? Well, if we decide to focus on *steering* during a larp, we might end up testing conceptual methods for larp. If we play only Nordic larp, then Nordic larp is what we know as larping. And even playing a particular designer’s work may teach us how to play that designer’s larps. At the very least, in every larp we are mutually influenced by other larpers and *their* history. Single larps can affect us so profoundly that we take from the design one or more core ideas about how larp “should be”. Interactions can leave us chasing similar interactions for decades. Where we live and larp influences how and what we play. It seems obvious that larp “training” also follows an eclectic pattern.

The idea of any kind of formalised training in larp, however, is very different. *Schools* of art tend to arise from specific people operating in a specific location, often

studying under the same teacher, and whose output is noticeably similar in key aspects. Particularly in the last century, there is often a political-aesthetic element in that the practitioners are consciously responding to what they feel are needs for reform in the art, in society, or both. Nordic and Jeepform might be as close as we get to “schools” of larp; both are styles heavily influenced by their localities and specific designers, and the design and play principles mix aesthetics with political values.

We do not train in these schools, though we could try if the economic, geographic, and time constraints on players weren’t quite so punishing. We could train things that are good for performance of a character (vocal and bodily plasticity, improvisation, spatial and sound awareness), and things that are good for that school of larp (inclusivity, group narrative, social codes, political ideas).²

Nor are there, alas, many larp gurus selling 6-week courses on unlocking your inner character, or auteur larp designers who are very hands-on with their players’ play styles. We’re on our own, and we only train by doing the thing itself.

Sometimes two larpers are so different in their styles that they find it difficult to calibrate - but this can also be solved through eclectic training. Looking again at theatre, the idea of the actor as the *impossible diva* is a comic stereotype; in reality most actors

² We could just as usefully train social dancing, how to lead a land army into battle, flirting, computer science, or animal husbandry and be able to use it in some larp. Realistically, though, everyone who knows any of this stuff gets it from elsewhere and brings it to their larper’s toolbox. We do not train as larpers.

can calibrate towards each other (facilitated by a director) precisely because of their eclectic training and their understanding that there isn't really a right or wrong way to do it, only *what works*. The less self-assured and experienced the actor, the heavier and more inflexible the reliance on one method as a safety net, and the actor can even get a little spiky when asked to work outside that method, as though it would be "wrong" or "bad art". Are we doing something similar when we play? Should we take our own larping techniques (i.e. our personal larping history) less personally? Might it help us calibrate if we could be more confident and agnostic about *how* we larp?³

I wanted to know if other players would be able to describe the phenomenon of eclectic training, so I asked a diverse but small group how they would describe their own development. I asked:

- 1 How long have you been larping?
- 2 (About) How many larps have you played?
- 3 In what ways are you still larping the same as in your first larp? In what ways have you changed?
- 4 What kind of larp do you find most challenging in terms of fitting in with your play style?
- 5 Have you ever gone to a larp with the intention of consciously examining your larping methods or trying out new ones?

³ I wonder frequently about play style differences and conflicts, and the terrible disappointments I have when going to a larp that I imagine could be played a particular way and be very beautiful, and everyone around me seems to want to play the larp in a way I don't enjoy.

- 6 Do you have any examples of the following that have changed the way you larp: a larp (as a whole), a scene in a larp, a design element of a larp, an encounter with another player in a larp, a theory about larp?
- 7 Are there non-larp influences and activities in your life that you notice are part of your play methods?
- 8 If you were to try to teach someone else how to larp like you, what would be the 3 most important lessons?
- 9 (Finally, one that can be serious or playful) If you had to name your School of Larp, what would you call it?

I'm grateful for the generous responses and I include the questions here, but they were not the right questions: they're too general. If I were to summarise the data, I could say indeed, people *do* go into larps to battletest new ideas about larping; many players report that the skillset over time that improves the most is perhaps related to expanding one's field of attention towards other players and the big picture; players absolutely remember scenes or character relationships that taught them how to do (or not do) something; and that players *do* have small- and large-scale personal techniques, from "paying attention to details" to spilling secrets to "don't plan too much".

I realise now that I wanted to ask other questions. I wanted to ask "Which larps made you and how? How are your core values of larp directly related to the specific larps that you have played?". If it's a given that we don't train and we don't rehearse, we only practice larp by larping, then it would seem reasonable that we learned to larp

specifically through the designs we have played and the players with whom we have been in proximity. A singular design's pacing, narrative ethos, metatechniques, or overall care structure could become your "home base". One of my formative larps was *Just a Little Lovin'* (2011) and I'm sure it resonates in every larp I've played since, but how?

I wanted to ask how it is that you know you are in- or off-game, or in-character or out of character? Or "The larp started 90 seconds ago. What are you actually *doing* in order to *start being in the larp*?" I wanted to ask questions on a much more micro level of what people imagine they are doing, much like I could ask a fellow actor "What do you do to change emotional registers quickly?" but perhaps these questions require more general scaffolding in the form of common vocabulary and consensus about what we know how to do.

Do we know much? In particular, the 2020 Solmukohta book *What Do We Do When We Play?* (Saitta et al., 2020) contains multiple investigations of terminology at a granular level. Magnar Grønvik Müller discusses heuristics in larp, there are new terms like *metareflection* (Hilden), or *maps and loops* (Saitta, Koljonen, Nielsen), but I would say all of these are still slowly making their way from theory to practice. We need applied theory.

And while we're at it: maps, meta, steering, bleed, do these even make sense? This kind of professional shorthand allows creative workers to speak quickly about common but complex concepts, even if the shorthand itself sounds abstract to the uninitiated. When I was studying theatre and acting in my undergrad, I endured my share of good-natured bullying about the contents of my lessons from my friends in both the humanities and STEM. "What



Photo: Carl Nordblom.

did you guys do today? Connect with your lizard spine? Paint the room with your voice? Shave the invisible ball?”⁴

I eventually came to realise that often people think artists and actors are a bit loopy because they say loopy things in complete earnestness, but these images and suggestions are the best ways we have to describe artistic practice and techniques amongst each other; they are necessary for passing on knowledge and troubleshooting techniques. Neither *steering* nor *bleed* makes actual sense until you’ve experienced it yourself, at which point the term becomes obviously useful. The point is not that the idea behind the shorthand is necessarily *true*, but that it is *understood* as a useful concept *by a practitioner*. Once you have a way of talking about this thing you feel, you can also work with it. I think there are hundreds more wacky and pretentious terms we can still discover in larp.

In a sense, it’s a shame we don’t have “let me teach you how to larp” gurus, because while gurus all have their limitations, as teachers of a personal method they will tend to make up words to describe small, actionable and specific processes. Brecht had theoretically interesting ideas about teaching his audiences to notice the ways in which they watched theatre uncritically, but *Verfremdungseffekt*⁵

4 I once worked with a (German) director who instructed us to “breathe out of your buttohole”, which was alarming enough, but when he said “and now out of your other buttohole” we knew he was nuts. But this didn’t stop us from complying with instructions.

5 An effect of estrangement. An example could be a scenography with a pop art painting in a 19th-century fisherman’s hut. Instead of creating a harmonic image that the audience accepts without question, Brecht posited that when objects or actions don’t “belong”, they draw attention to each other and prevent audiences from simply accepting everything they see and hear as an unchangeable status quo.

describes a specific and actionable technique one can do in order to make the theatre experience more analytical.

Maybe one of the closest things we have to the work of a larping guru at present is Caro Murphy’s excellent workshops on Interactive Acting, available on YouTube. They describe the interactive actor’s character (an NPC in our parlance) as having a “heart-shaped hole”. This is a concept to help the interactive actor remember that their interactions and choices should be driven by character needs, and that those needs should involve the player characters. Notice that this metaphor carries with it an aesthetic and artistic value set: it is good practice for an interactive actor to involve the players in their choices and their emotionality whenever possible.

But this is all about learning via praxis, not theory. What about the KP books, are we learning through writing and reading? When I began my acting training, I went through acting books like a hot knife through butter: David Mamet, Viola Spolin, Uta Hagen, trying to absorb the secrets that would translate to my scenes being better in class. I’m not saying that the books were useless, but I would have been better off at *that* stage simply practicing my scenes or watching more theatre. Acting books only started to be really useful to me once I had enough stage time under my belt to be able to *recognise* what they were writing about instead of taking it in as new information and trying to make that thing happen. They put into words what my body and mind had already observed. Now, armed with ideas connected to practice, I could consciously work with those observations.

It’s why I know the Noodle Bar is accessible to anyone who already larps: because it’s probably already happened to them. And now, what can you teach me?

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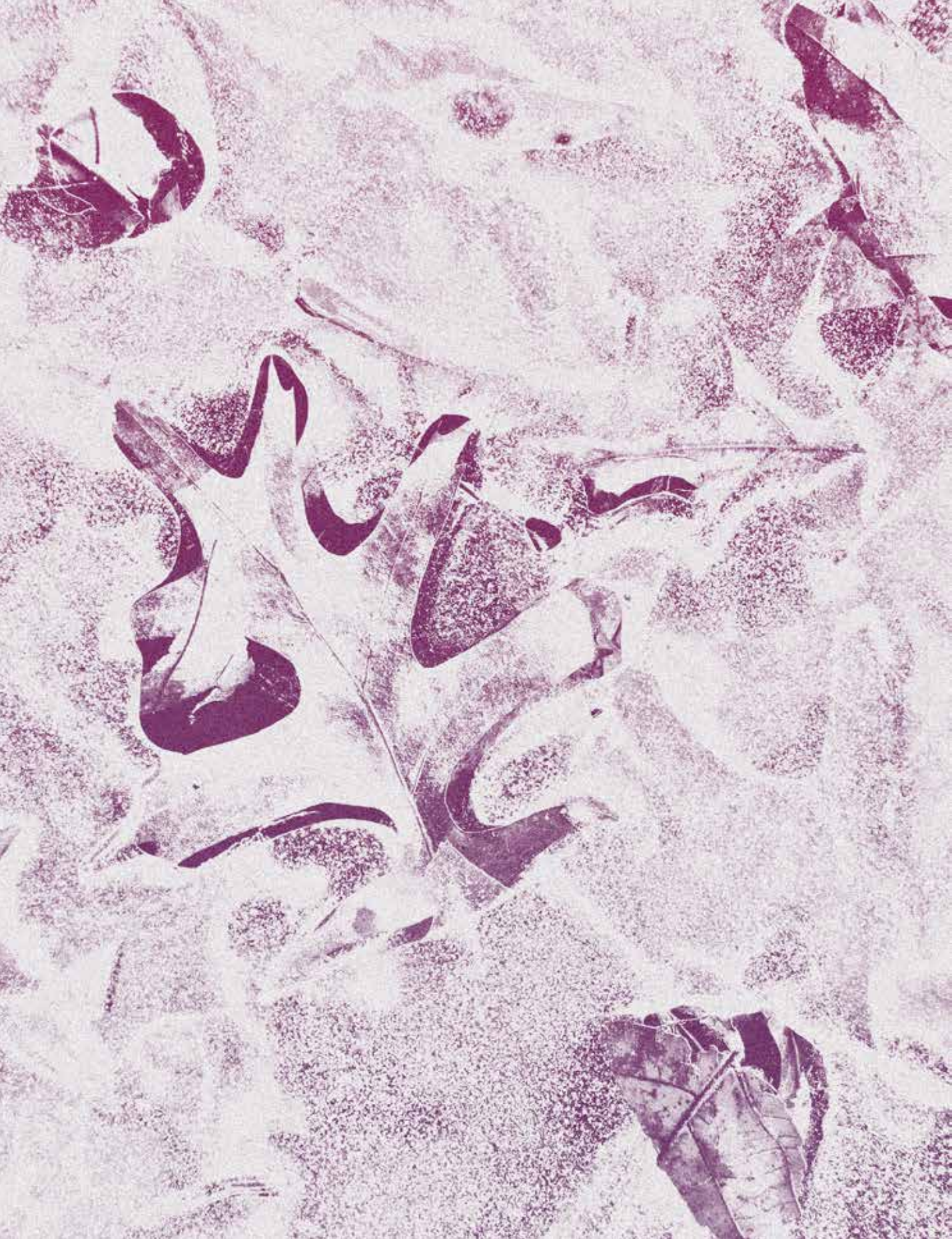
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Cooking up Tasty Games

the Life and Times of The Game Kitchen

Mo Holkar

I'd never encountered larp design so fast, fun, and exciting as The Game Kitchen. It felt like it opened a door to a new kind of creativity, for the people who took part – none of us really knew what we were doing, and we gave each other huge permission to try things and to fail and to learn and to try again. It was a hothouse, in the best sense – and it made us more aware, more responsive, more flexible.

The Game Kitchen was a larp discussion and design workshop event that took place in London, starting in April 2014. It ran approximately monthly up until March 2020. There were intermittent meetings during breaks in the pandemic regulations, and there have been occasional attempts to revive it since: the most recent in May 2024.

The quotes reproduced below were gathered by the author from an informal survey of Game Kitchen attenders, carried out in September 2025.

Beginnings

The Game Kitchen was created by Cathriona Tobin, and was coordinated via [a Facebook group](#). On the right page is an extract from the group's 'About' statement (Tobin, 2014).

The establishment and structure of The Game Kitchen was inspired by *Laiivfabrikken* (The Larp Factory), an organization based in Oslo and Trondheim. October 2013 had seen the publication of *Larps from the Factory* (eds Elin Nilsen, Lizzie Stark, and Trine Lise Lindahl), collecting 23 chamber larps that had been created by Larp Factory members. The book included an introduction describing how the group

operated: attendance was open to anyone, any idea could be pitched, people would work together in groups to develop ideas into larps, and ideally they would be completed in draft and playtested soon after.

This approach was appealing. Anyone could be a larp designer: the organisers would support them through the process, and would team them up with more experienced people as mentors where necessary.

The Game Kitchen compressed the Larp Factory process. Rather than pitching ideas, going away and designing them, and coming back to run them, larp ideas were discussed, developed in draft, and then playtested – all on the same day! The intention was that participants, even when starting from no knowledge of larp, would have the chance of seeing their creations come to life within the space of an afternoon and evening.

Development

Although the group had been set up to look at “Nordic larp, freeform games (UK¹ and American²) and story games”,³ it rapidly came to focus on Nordic chamber larp (including black-box larp) – and on

¹ ‘UK freeform’ is a plot-driven style of chamber larp involving predesigned characters and backstory. Its spiritual home is the UK-Freeforms group, headquartered here: <http://uk-freeforms.wikidot.com/>

² ‘American freeform’ was a short-lived label for a movement creating games in the USA that were inspired by Fastaval-style freeform scenarios. Lizzie Stark writes about it here: <https://leavingmundania.com/2013/11/18/introducing-american-freeform/>

³ ‘Story games’ are a style of tabletop role-playing game where the action is driven by narrative, rather than by resolution mechanics.

The purpose of this group is to meet up and talk about the design of Nordic larp, freeform games (UK and American) and story games, and then – using what we learn from each other, and from what other people have done before us – we’ll create some games, and playtest them where practical. We’ll then share those games, and our conversations about the process, online so that others can learn from what we’re doing.

We know that some of the most interesting developments in game design have come from improv, theatre, storytelling, art and video games so we welcome input from any of those fields. Experience in writing and designing games is not necessary; enthusiasm, open-mindedness and a willingness to experiment are all you need to take part.

As well as maintaining a website at *[no longer exists]*, this group will run events with three different types of focus:

- 1** Workshops. Organiser-led group discussions focused on a particular aspect of game design. These will usually last for three to four hours. Suggestions are always welcome for topics.
- 2** Game design and playtest meetups (the most common kind). These events may follow on from a workshop, and will explore techniques and design aspects discussed in the workshop; or may have a designated theme; or may invite people to bring ideas needing work; or may start from a blank piece of paper; to create a larp, freeform or story game. These will usually last for six to eight hours, with one or more people taking notes.
- 3** Game play meetup. These events will usually follow on from a game design event, although games written by other people will occasionally be run as stand-alone events. These will usually last for three to four hours.

FAQ:

- **Sounds interesting. How do I sign up?** We’ll post up events as they’re created. If you’re interested in the event, accept the invitation and come along. We’ll explain it all once you get there.
- **I’ve got a great idea for a Game Kitchen event. How do I set one up?** Post on the group’s Facebook page and if it sounds like the kind of thing our members would be up for, we’ll make it happen.
- **Can I sell my awesome Game Kitchen game?** All the games we make during Game Kitchen events will be published on our website under the Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-SA license, so anyone can access them for free.

integrating learning and experience from the Nordic larp scene into a British larp context. Participants in the group regularly attended KP/SK, and Nordic larp festivals such as Grenselandet and Stockholm Scenario Festival.

For its discussions, the Game Kitchen drew on published materials from nordiclarp.org; from KP/SK books; and from the Larpwriters' Summer School, which some members had attended. Texts from the larp-adjacent edges of TTRPG, such as *Play with Intent* (Boss and Holter, 2012), were also discussed.

"I remember a session which involved a discussion about immersion and steering, and this was very helpful for me in terms of broadening my understanding of larp." (Anonymous attender)

Meetings took place in various pub function rooms and other such spaces around central London. The key factor was that the space be free of charge to use, so that participants would not need to pay anything to attend. Meetings varied in size considerably: sometimes as few as four or five people, sometimes as many as thirty.

It has to be recognized that the Game Kitchen depended for its success on the enthusiasm of a small core group of participants. Without these keen and involved people – the Larp Factory called their equivalents 'the glue' – it would have been hard to maintain a schedule of regular and predictable meetings, which less-committed attenders could drop into at short notice. Even so, some months saw only the core group present.

"[I]t was hard to sustain the kind of regular participation you need to create a sense of momentum. If you turned up and there were only a few people there – and some people arrived late, or left early – it was hard to energise the activity." (Jamie Harper)

Some of the attenders had extensive backgrounds in UK larp, but most were new to larp in general. The events were advertised in general media, and attracted people from theatre, performance, interactive fiction, and other related artistic fields. There were also a number of attenders with larping backgrounds in Nordic and other countries, either resident in the UK or visiting.

"It was an amazing place to gather with other designers, and it was amazing doing it in a place where we didn't know anybody [...] I also learnt a lot about creating groups, how to use pronouns in all the larp activities, and how to use tools of collective creation. It was really nice to be seen and heard when you don't speak the language well." (Mirella Machancoses López)

After the first couple of years, discussion meetings became less common, and The Game Kitchen focused more strongly on designing and playtesting larp ideas. The start of each such session usually took an hour or so to gather an assortment of concepts: via a mix of blank-page brainstorming (see Holkar (2016) for a technique that was often used to turn these brainstorms into designs), or ideas that attenders had brought with them for exploration. The ideas to be worked upon were decided by consensus, and the group divided up into teams (usually of three or four people) each composed of the people who most wanted to work on that project.

The session coordinators aimed to have a mix of experienced and inexperienced designers in each group: the role of the experienced designers was not to take charge, but to advise and to coherence-check. It was seen as important that even novice designers should feel full ownership of the piece that was created together.

"That session was magical. I think we had a great mesh of personalities and goals, and in hindsight [the experienced people] were great at not setting themselves up as 'the lead designers.' The playtest was fantastic, and I could tell we already had something great." (Anonymous attender)

Not all designs were practical to playtest on the day; perhaps needing more participants, a longer time to play, a different kind of space, etc., than was available. This was not seen as a problem. The point was to be designing without creative restrictions. Sometimes a cut-down version could be played through, or a key mechanic could be tested in isolation, even when a full test wasn't possible. However, a playtest of some sort made for a satisfying and rewarding end to the session, when it could be accomplished.

Part of the initial concept for The Game Kitchen was to generate a collection of finished larps that could be made publicly available for others to use, as with *Larps from the Factory*. This did not happen. A few of the larps did get subsequently run at larp festivals or as one-off events, but the author is not aware of any having been published (*yet...*) This was because of the positive emphasis on creation on the day, during the meeting: it was rare for design teams to do any subsequent writing work on what they

had designed, such as would have been required to get it towards publication.

The intention of maintaining a website that recorded the group's activity was only intermittently followed through. There are just two posts more recent than 2017, one of which is an apology for lack of posts. There was little enthusiasm for writing the meetings up, and there were few visitors to the website, so the task of maintaining it fell by the wayside. The 20 or so posts in the archive can be browsed courtesy of the Wayback Machine, here: <https://web.archive.org/web/20230208233000/https://thegamekitchen.org/>

Legacy

With no collection of larps published, and a limited web presence, it might appear that The Game Kitchen left little of the lasting mark that its founding statement seemed to be seeking.

A number of the larps designed there did go on to provide valuable play experiences for others, at larp festivals and elsewhere: for example *Burn the Witch*, *Life of a House*, *The Baby Club*, *Here Comes a Candle*, *New Life*, and the social larp game *Arsenic & Lies* which had an early playtest there.

One-off larp design workshops along the lines of The Game Kitchen's sessions ran at Knutepunkt 2017 and Knudepunkt 2019, and empowered a wider range of people to create larps. They were also transplanted to other countries: *"I have used the dynamic for creating larps in groups [...] in Spain for our own gatherings and I think it is brilliant. We*

used it both in workshops for EntreReVs and for our [Producciones Gorgona] own weekend event of larp co-creation AvanLARP” (Pepe)

A larp event designed and organised by Game Kitchen participants, ‘In Storage’, aimed at the general public, took place at London’s Victoria and Albert Museum in 2016. Mirella Machancoses López (2016) described it: *“Running workshops for not larpers was really interesting, as you should focus on some aspects that you normally don’t do: how to role-play a character, breaking ice and encouraging them to play...”*

The Game Kitchen’s real legacy, though, was in participants who were inspired to go on and create larps in a different context. UK larp organizations such as Reflections Larp Studio and Larps on Location, which have been responsible for many larp events since, came together through encounters at The Game Kitchen. The Smoke: London’s International Larp Festival (2017–present), and the UK run of Just a Little Lovin’ (2019) would not have been possible without the community that came together at The Game Kitchen.

Attendees speak warmly of their experience.

“I loved the process and I was lucky to be in a great team. The way themes and ideas were put together was great and I really enjoyed myself ... I took away the idea that writing larps, though time consuming, is not impossible and I went on to write two more myself!” (Craig Edgar)

“I remember it fondly as a great space to discuss with fellow larp writers, and being able to test and design without the pressure of creating something that was understandable.

I learnt a lot by just playing around with the concepts and learning about other people’s approach to larp.” (Pepe)

“While I had written plays before and experimented with participatory stuff, I had very little idea about how to design something that participants would effectively write themselves. I gained a lot of insight into many different ways to structure and framework things from The Game Kitchen, and became confident being able to design larps alone and in collaboration with others.” (Willoh Osmond)

Conclusion

The Game Kitchen was created in a wave of enthusiasm for the possibilities that were being opened up by Nordic larp, and in particular by the creativity and accessibility of experimental chamber larp design. It brought people together, many of whom had no previous experience of larp, and helped them to become creators. Many people who subsequently contributed considerably to the development of Nordic-inspired larp in the UK got their start there.

But, perhaps more importantly, it was a fun social activity with a low entry barrier. Sessions were designed to be low-pressure and inclusive, based around mutual respect and support. It can be hard for newcomers to find their way into larp: The Game Kitchen aimed to avoid that feeling of being an outsider in a complex scene where everyone else knows what they’re doing.

“I think being part of the Game Kitchen hugely increased my confidence in running groups

and taking part in creative activities. For example, since being involved in larp design, I’ve taken a bigger role in leading sessions in my community theatre group, designing and delivering training, and in writing characters for a weekend larp, and scenes for a play. [...] The Game Kitchen sessions felt extremely welcoming and inclusive.” (Anonymous attendee)

THE GAME KITCHEN

Speaking, talking, hearing and listening

How can we make sure that we are communicating with each other fairly, clearly and considerately?

Ways of ensuring that everyone’s voice is heard, in an overall mood of safety:

- speak and listen in a spirit of love and trust;
- don’t interrupt when someone’s speaking. Hear them out;
- if you want to make a brief clarifying point or to ask a clarifying question, raise a finger, and the speaker may call upon you and then resume;
- if you want to make a point of your own, raise a hand and the speaker may call upon you once they’ve finished their point;
- to indicate agreement while someone’s speaking, use silent clapping (aka. ‘jazz hands’);
- if you’d like a subject to be immediately dropped, say “Cut”. You need not explain your reasons, and no blame of any kind will attach;
- if you’d like a subject ‘slowed down’ – treated less concretely, less forcefully, less heatedly, etc – say “Brake”. Again you need not explain your reasons, and no blame of any kind will attach;
- seek to involve in the discussion people who seem as though they might be being excluded from it (while recognizing that they may have their own private reasons for being quiet).

Thanks everyone for understanding and cooperation!

This speaking code was developed in order to keep discussions from being dominated by the most vocal, and was on display at all meetings. It was rarely observed literally or in detail, but the spirit was generally effective.

There were plenty of things that The Game Kitchen could have done differently or better, but broadly speaking it succeeded in accomplishing its aims. If you’re looking to create a larp-design community in your own locale, you might like to try something similar.

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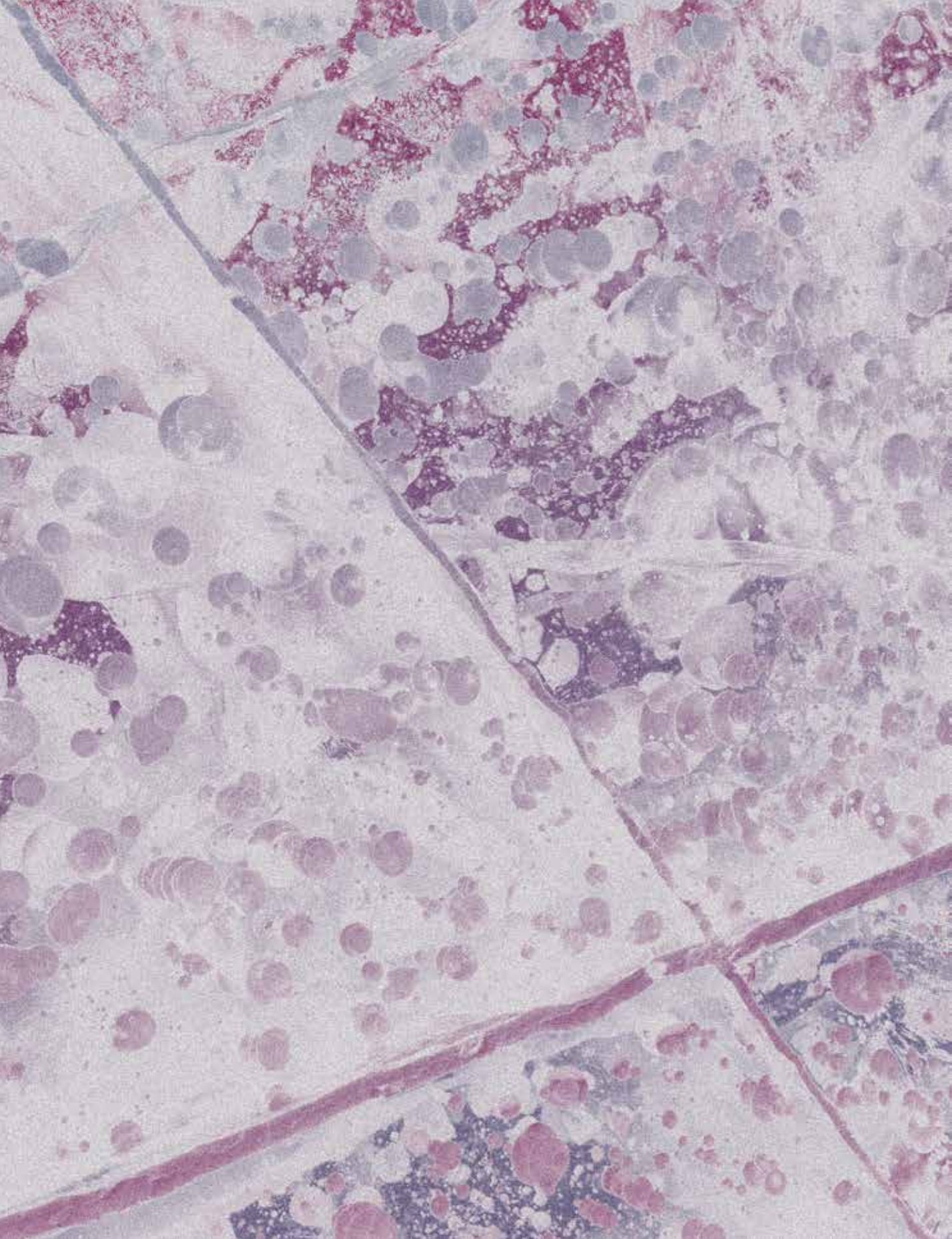
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Dressing a Nation

Josefina-Luisa Jelínková

In Czech larping culture, organiser-provided costumes are a well-established practice. Just imagine it – you send your measurements months ahead, and then a day before the larp starts, you arrive at the location and receive a fully-fledged costume for your character. Perhaps you will adorn it with your own accessories but that is entirely optional. What might sound like witchcraft for many an international larper is something unsurprising for most Czech larpers. After all, this approach for a time dominated the content larp (and the content larp-adjacent) scene – it turned out to be practical, efficient, very often chaotic, but also a powerful tool for narrative design.

The ambition of this article is not to provide an exhaustive history of Czech larp costuming, but we will rather look at one specific instance, dissect it and do a post-mortem of sorts. The case study used within this article is a Czech larp set in 19th-century Bohemia, *Národ sobě* (Czechia, 2019, Eng. *For the Nation*), which was first run in 2019. We will examine how the system works, why it exists, and what it can accomplish that individual costuming rarely can. From the budget to the measurements, from the poor characters to the rich – we will talk about narrative costume design at scale and how it can tell the story you want it to tell.

The very first instance of providing costumes for players at a large scale was the larp *De la Bête* (Czechia, 2013). One of the authors describes the initial motivation behind organiser-provided costumes: ‘We spent quite a long time deciding whether it would be reasonable to write a game from a period where costumes would create a challenge for most players. In the end we

decided to avoid the problem by providing all costumes, weapons and other props for the game.’ (Wagner, 2015) The game itself had 95 characters of different socio-economic backgrounds and countless NPCs. Other larps quickly followed this new trend – just a year later was the very first runs of *Legie: Sibiřský příběh* (Czechia, 2014, Eng. *Legion: Siberian Story*), with more springing up in quick succession. For the larp organisers it meant a whole new set of things they needed to grapple with – how and what measurements to collect, where to source all the costume pieces and where to store them. *De la Bête* set a precedent for how immense a workload preparing this number of costumes is – it takes months of work and even with that amount of volunteer work, the result was not always perfect. It proved, however, that while individual costumes might not be the best thing you have ever seen, you can control the visual cohesiveness better and more effectively.

How to dress a nation: a case study

For the Nation is a Czech content larp.¹ set in the second half of the 19th century, just after the cultural turmoil of the Czech National Revival. The story focuses on the lives of several different families from different social classes who live together in a tenement house in Prague. *For the Nation* focuses primarily on national, political, cultural, and social issues and draws inspiration from contemporary historical events and problems, which it depicts in a

¹ For more details about content larp, you can visit the Content Larp Manifesto, as referenced in the bibliography.

slightly idealised, romanticised manner. It keeps true to the format of a family saga – the game is divided into three acts (1867, 1883, and 1893) which means that most of the players will get to experience their character over three different decades.

For this reason, there is a great emphasis on the development and transformation of individual characters and the social context over time. While the players have freedom of choice in each act, not all their decisions will affect their character’s development for the following act. To keep the story moving forward consistently, at the end of each act they receive a questionnaire where they answer a few questions that influence their and their coplayers’ future (e.g. a young girls’ marriage is influenced by four players’ decisions). This means that each character usually has two or more versions of information prepared for the next act, and that the in-game documents exist in multiple versions. These decisions also influence the scenography, props, and, of course, the costuming. This provides many opportunities to reflect on how the characters are aging, how their relationships to each other are changing, and of course how their socio-economic circumstances change in the context of the new act.

When the development of *For the Nation* started in 2018, we anticipated that the larp would need to be run at least six times in order to break even. The initial investment into the costuming was fairly limited – approximately 30,000 CZK (around €1,250) which covered the acquisition and preparation of at least fifty different costumes both for players and NPCs. In the following runs, additional costuming expenses never went over 5,000 CZK (about

€210). The early visuals were very ambitious, but eventually needed to be reworked – the aesthetic intention had to make way for what was practical and anchored in reality. A massive support in this regard was the warehouse of the association under which this project was helmed, Rolling. At the beginning of the preparation, there was only a small number of garments suitable for the 19th century. The only other 19th century larp by Rolling was set in the 1810s – that proved partially useful especially in regards to male characters, but overall quite insufficient for a larp that required costuming spanning four decades. This meant that we needed to turn to alternative sources to find all the garments needed – from second-hand shops, Vinted, Facebook Marketplace, my own sewing skills, and miraculously, the costume clearance sale of the National Theatre in Prague.

Securing the garments was, however, only one part of the work – we also needed to figure out the sizing of the players, so all the garments would fit as they should. We collected information from players in two waves using Google Forms. In the first form we asked mostly about what they would like to experience in the game – meaning we didn’t ask for food requirements or personal measurements straight away. The goal is to not have to handle too much potentially sensitive information. Only when their place was secured and confirmed, we sent a second form where we asked for additional details. In terms of measurements, we asked for height, bust, waist, hips, ready-made size, and any additional comments that the player wanted to share to make sure they received a well-fitting costume. The measurements were then exported to a specific table per run, where we marked

any outliers. A few months before the larp we double-checked whether we had an appropriate costume, or whether it was necessary to look for something with a better fit outside of the costume stash already secured. Since early morning the day before the players arrived on site, the costumer was then putting the outfits into their final form.

The budgetary constraints thus became quite a challenge, especially when considering women's fashion. The silhouette underwent major changes across the century – 1860s crinolines look very different from 1880s bustles, which look very different from 1890s puffed sleeves. The disparity between each decade became one of the leading reasons why we couldn't simply expect that the players would source multiple different gowns in period-appropriate fabrics and show up with all the accessories their characters could possibly need – shawls, bonnets, gloves, parasols, top hats, canes, etc. Organiser-provided costuming puts the pressure away from the players as well as lowers the threshold for people who might have not otherwise signed up because of the costuming requirements. With the initial investment, the costumer can get certain garments in bulk (shirts, trousers, blouses), select the best cost-effective patterns for new garments that need to be made, and invest in important highly visual pieces that will put the whole thing together. More importantly, it allows for the costumes to be reused across characters and runs, depending on their size, and allot them to characters where they will carry the greatest semiotic weight.

This approach forces you to work with minimax logic – how to maximise

communicative clarity while minimising unnecessary labour and not exceeding the budget. To a certain degree, all costumes must be immediately and easily readable. From the get-go, the costume must indicate the character's social class, age, wealth, respectability, fashion sensibility and of course, in which decade of the narrative the story is set in. This means that the garments need to be expressive enough to convey these requirements, and at the same time give the costumer the space to simplify the details that are too labour-intensive or simply too expensive. The goal is for players to place the character on the hierarchy spectrum. One must consider things like colour palette, decoration, complexity of the garment, how many layers the costume has, fabric quality and the level of maintenance the character would do. This means that wealthier characters would wear finer fabrics and more structured silhouettes and matching accessories, whereas the poor characters would have more worn materials, overall simpler garments and practical aprons or kerchiefs.

Even though this layer of narrative design seems basic and understandable, it cannot be underestimated or overlooked. Mostly because from there we can build on a layer of internal social class variation and the narrative path which some characters may or may not take with each act. For example, the lower-class Prague German family Zingler might either visually rise or fall between the acts, depending on the players' decisions. If they lose their newsstand business, Mr Zingler loses his military uniform which is replaced with a torn-apart coat and waistcoat. If Fanny Zingler decides to leave for America, she gets a brand new dress. If not, she keeps her servant's clothes

which might even get progressively worse. This system allows us to enrich the social texture of the game. In the second act, the character of Valli, a rich Prague Jewish woman, is introduced – and while she marries rich, there is a slightly different level to her, as she is highly fashionable and the only character truly completely a *lá mode* for that particular year, which immediately intentionally sets her apart. Most of the lower-class women act like servants in the upper-class households, but even here we can add a little social texture. The characters of Bohumila and Cecilka might be lower-class servants, but they serve in the richest households, and as such they will be better dressed than other domestic servants. The trick is to make sure that you don't create a costumed monolith, but rather support the nuanced narrative of the story.

Another key narrative costuming layer would be the way how age is communicated. *For the Nation* opted for several age markers to really make the point come across. Younger girls wear either ribbons or flowers in their hair or, in later acts, straw hats, whereas younger boys are then dressed haphazardly as if they had no care for the world (even though a careful *mamá* might force them to dress properly). In adulthood the characters transform into muted-coloured versions of their childhood. E.g. the character of Adelheid who is designed to be very pink-coded. In her girlhood she wears a bright pink gown, but from the second act onwards she changes into a dark-pink and brown gown that settles her into her adulthood, while still pointing out the remnants of the spoiled girl she still might be. Older characters are (unless for a good reason) dressed slightly out of fashion, favouring a cane to help them walk.

These reinforcements are necessary as new decades are introduced and we want to keep the illusion of time passing going.

As mentioned before, the years passing between each act were a challenge, but a challenge that needed to be defeated and trampled to the ground. The changing fashion is to this day something we connect this century with, and it needed to be reflected in the costumes. However, providing new garments for men and women each act was impossible, it was necessary to rely on small but impactful changes. Crinolines are out? Let's put a bustle there and a few safety pins! Bonnets are no longer the height of fashion? Well let's see what other hats we might whip out. If the base garments are good enough, a few well-placed accessories will do wonders. Choosing which characters get entirely new costumes to reflect an important change and how you dress new characters into the act then fully indexes the changing times. The key takeaway is that a minor adjustment of the collective is much more visually effective than a major individual change. A singled-out player in three increasingly elaborate outfits would appear visually inconsistent. A strategic shift across players makes the time progression understandable. And in this case, art sort of imitates life – fashion, after all, is a collective phenomenon and is better understood through small collective changes than individual major ones.

Organiser-provided costuming then reinforces visual hierarchy and in-character nuances, prevents individual costuming choices that might distort the player's perception of the characters, and tightens the relationship between the aesthetics and the narrative. The most visually present person might

not be playing the wealthiest character or vice versa, etc. That being said, we are talking here about larps that are specifically designed with the narrative costuming in mind, and the aim here is not to slam larps that make other choices; yet again, those are designed with that particular individualist line of thought. In *For the Nation*, it is crucial that the visual narrative goes along the same path as the story.

It is, however, not without its limitations. As much as it would be ideal, no costumer with limited resources can cater to fit all body types perfectly. Sometimes the garments you have connected to the characters simply need to be switched out for others. Imperfections are inevitable, even though a lot of it can be adjusted on site directly on the player. You also need to account sensibly and sensitively for plus-size costuming. You rarely get 19th century-like garments in second-hand shops, so sometimes more labour is then necessary to prepare a suitable garment of good quality that would make the player feel like they're on the top of the world. Silhouettes also sit differently on different bodies and even with measurements sent beforehand, things might just not fit perfectly. On the other hand, this is paradoxically also where organiser-provided costuming can help. We aim to guarantee a fit and source what might be otherwise impossible for a prospective player. The commitment to find a solution extends to always having a sewing machine on-site and simply adjusting everything for the player on the spot if necessary – with honorable mention of making a completely new garment overnight. To reach perfection is difficult, but the dedication to do right by the larp and the player is there at all times.

Organiser-provided costuming can provide a communal design language. By using unified cues, a larp such as *For the Nation* can express the socio-economic background as well as other themes more effectively. It is also a race against limited budget, limited time and more importantly, limited labour. To costume a larp like this, you need to put in truly substantial volunteer hours. And that work does matter as much as any other substantial investment into making a larp. But the garments can be reused in different larps, and when you see the players standing all in line with the vision brought all together, it is an investment well worth it.

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10 Years of Reinventing Vampire Larp

Juhana Pettersson

Vampires are not just a popular topic for movies, TV series and novels. They're also the basis for a specific, widespread and popular type of larp, the *Vampire* larp. Although other types of larps have also been designed around vampiric themes, the reason the word *Vampire* is capitalized in this context is because the genre is specifically built around the vampires of the role-playing game *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991-).

The very first edition of the role-playing game mentions the idea of playing the game as a larp. Since then, the game's publishers have also released official larp rules collectively known as the *Mind's Eye Theatre system* (1993), which forms a shared design basis for the vast majority of *Vampire* larps worldwide.

However, Mind's Eye Theatre is not the only way to create *Vampire* larps. Local larp communities have created larps based on the role-playing game's setting according to their own design sensibilities since the 90's.

This article is about *collaborative Vampire larp*, a style of design noteworthy because it was adopted as part of the official toolbox by the role-playing game's publishers. It was offered as an alternative way to create *Vampire* larps, standing alongside Mind's Eye Theatre to provide a different type of *Vampire* experience.

I was one of the co-designers of the first of these official, collaborative style *Vampire* larps, *End of the Line* (Helsinki, 2016). Since then, there have been many others.

Definitions

In a *Vampire* larp, the participants portray vampires and other inhabitants of *the World of Darkness*, the collective name for the world shared by *Vampire* and its sister games such as *Werewolf: The Apocalypse*. For example, the characters might be the members of the different vampire clans, jockeying for the position of the Prince who rules over all the undead in their domain.

The Mind's Eye Theatre larp system attempts to translate the design of the role-playing game into something that can be played in groups, standing up, without dice but still involving great mechanical depth. It's often played in a fundamentally competitive style, where you can leverage the game mechanics to make sure that your character's goals are realised while those of your competitors are not.

In the archetypal conflict of the setting – who gets to rule – only one character can be the Prince.

Over the decades, this has meant that the design of the rules has had to be precise and unambiguous, and events often have teams of so-called Storytellers and Assistant Storytellers present who can be called in to judge various conflicts. Since it matters who wins and who loses in a competitive sense, the players can't necessarily agree on the question amongst themselves.

In Mind's Eye Theatre, the larp acquires a lot of substance and texture from engaging with the mechanics. The latest edition of these mechanics has been published as *Laws of the Night* in 2023. They provide organisers and players a clear framework of

actions, conflicts and outcomes which can be played in a community center or a room at a convention.

In contrast, the Nordic larp -inspired collaborative style of *Vampire* larp is fundamentally about creating the experience together. Nobody is expected to compete with their co-participants. Because of this, the design of collaborative *Vampire* events often place a higher emphasis on production value and creating a desired mood. They're about social interaction and emergent play rather than achieving zero sum goals.

As a result, the collaborative style of *Vampire* larp produces fundamentally different experiences than the Mind's Eye Theatre style. Some players like both, while others prefer the style which best gives them what they want out of *Vampire*.

Vampire larps range from small events of just a handful of people playing their characters in a cafe, to spectacles of hundreds of participants. Larps based on Mind's Eye Theatre are often organised in a continuous series of events called *chronicles*, where the same players portray the same characters for years on end, becoming part of the fabric of the lives of their participants. Collaborative *Vampire* larps tend to be single, one-off events.

The collaborative style of designing *Vampire* larps is not meant to supplant Mind's Eye Theatre, or even really challenge it. Rather, the goal was to expand on the range of possible experiences by creating a new type of *Vampire* larp. In the last 10 years, the Mind's Eye Theatre style has remained the standard for both small community

produced events and large spectacles run by the official licensee By Night Studios.

While the collaborative style could fit larps of various production complexity and scope, in practice events in this style have tended to go big.

Backstory

Vampire: The Masquerade got its start in 1991 as a tabletop role-playing game, but it, and the World of Darkness family of sister games sharing the same setting, have since become a major transmedia IP. There are over 1200 published works released under the rubric of the World of Darkness or its 2004 spinoff setting *Chronicles of Darkness* (confusingly, originally also called World of Darkness).

Vampire's original publisher, the U.S. company White Wolf, released a series of books for Mind's Eye Theatre in the 90's, such as the original *Laws of the Night* in 1996. In 2006, the Icelandic videogame company CCP acquired White Wolf, leading to a period of creative stagnation. CCP planned to release a World of Darkness MMO but it was ultimately cancelled.

In 2015, the Swedish video game company Paradox Interactive acquired the World of Darkness IP from CCP, with the goal of rejuvenating it and getting new books and games released primarily on a licensing model. The new owners of *Vampire* wished to demonstrate that they were serious about their goal, and the fastest way to get something out would be to make a larp. That larp was the first

collaborative *Vampire* larp, *End of the Line*, in 2016.

Many Nordic larp organisers, myself included, played or organised their first larps based on Mind's Eye Theatre before being old enough to drink. I played my first larp in the Finnish *Vampire* larp chronicle *Helsingin Camarilla* in 1995-2004, and later joined the organising team.

The first larp I ever organised, *Kallion Keijut* (Finland, Eng. The Fae of Kallio) in 1998, was a precursor of sorts for collaborative *Vampire* larp in the same way that a lot of organisers in the Nordics and beyond have experimented with creating larps based on the various World of Darkness games using their own, alternate designs and game mechanics. The larp, based on *Vampire's* sister game *Changeling: The Dreaming*, discarded the official Mind's Eye Theatre rules and ran on a simplified, bespoke design at my high school, during a normal school day. I was seventeen years old at the time.

As Kaisa Kangas notes in her 2025 book *Larppi Eläytymisen Taiteena*, larp organising in the Nordics is largely community culture rising from the ranks of hobbyists who run projects on a non-profit basis. This meant that a lot of *Vampire* and World of Darkness organisers in the Nordics and beyond were perfectly comfortable making the game their own, changing the design, adapting the setting, and making any other adjustments they needed.

Because of this, while the Mind's Eye Theatre design paradigm was influential, it has never been hegemonic to the degree that it would have precluded other designs

from being played in the World of Darkness larp community. This meant that when it was time to do something new in a more official capacity, there were ideas to draw from.

End of the Line

The very first title in what would become the 5th edition era of *Vampire: The Masquerade* (2018), so called because of a new edition of the tabletop role-playing game, was the larp *End of the Line*, played in 2016 in Helsinki, Finland. Commissioned by Paradox (under a sub-unit called White Wolf), it was designed by myself, Bjarke Pedersen, and Martin Ericsson, who was the Creative Director for World of Darkness at that time.

We wanted to create something new, drawing from our own experiences as larp designers in the Nordic tradition. We wanted vampires to do vampire things: hunting, sucking blood, being predators. Because of this, we decided not to use the existing Mind's Eye Theatre framework, but instead create a lean design with the minimum amount of mechanics.

As a venue, we had a decommissioned mental hospital, using the hospital building for workshops and a separate, derelict structure for the larp itself. It used to have apartments for the asylum staff, but now it was full of graffiti and filth. We cleaned it up, with Creative Director Ericsson memorably volunteering to handle human excrement. The Swedish techno outfit Suicide Club was brought in to provide the music. The idea was that to make our illegal underground techno party feel authentic, we'd organise it

just like a real one, except with the permits in place.

Because the larp's mechanics were designed to be indistinguishable from normal human interaction unless you were directly involved in the scene, we'd have a real-looking instance of the world of *Vampire* running for a single night. We had three photographers and one videographer documenting the event due to its promotional goals, as Paradox wanted to use them in presentations and other materials.

What made *End of the Line* new was that it was not only officially endorsed by the owner of the IP, but indeed explicitly created to offer a taste of things to come. Many of the core themes of the new 5th edition of the *Vampire: The Masquerade* tabletop role-playing game published in 2018 were already present in *End of the Line*. And no wonder, both Ericsson and myself worked on the 5th edition core book and initial releases like *Anarch* and *Camarilla*.

With *End of the Line*, the owner of the World of Darkness IP officially endorsed the idea that different design styles could be used to create *Vampire* larps. We used the setting of *Vampire* in our larp, but our larp also influenced the setting.

A lot of the design and core concept of the larp flows from the basic idea of vampires as predators who hunt for human blood. For example:

- Because the vampire characters have to hunt, most of the characters are humans unaware that there are undead predators in their midst.

- The larp would be set at an illegal rave held in an abandoned building because that environment was optimal for hunting and being hunted in the context of a larp.

- Game mechanics such as our bespoke rules for vampiric powers required the character to hunt for blood before they could be used again. This pushed the players to play hunting scenes.

- We gave human characters three different scents (implemented with perfumes) to make target selection interesting and to avoid known fail states, such as having vampire characters predominantly hunt humans played by conventionally attractive younger women. For example, a vampire might only be attracted to blood coded to the scent of orange.

In terms of design psychology, we identified the idea that hunting and being hunted could be equally fun, and sought to provide both experiences potentially for all characters. Thus, we had human characters who knew of the vampires and wanted their blood. Everyone could be predator or prey, at least if they leaned into emerging events in the larp.

A world of darkness

Flush from the success of *End of the Line* (later to be rerun in Berlin and New Orleans), we started planning for the next larp. What if instead of creating a single-location *Vampire* larp, we could do a total simulation of a city in the World of Darkness for a single evening? Hundreds

of characters, vampires, werewolves, the whole menagerie of supernatural types engaging in the dynamic, emergent chaos of larp!

When what became *Enlightenment in Blood* was finally played in Berlin as part of the World of Darkness: Berlin fan event in 2017, our ambitions had been scaled down, but only by a little. Instead of aiming to include all the World of Darkness games from *Vampire* to *Changeling* on an equal basis, we decided to focus on vampires, and have a few scattered characters of other creature types to provide verisimilitude. Instead of doing a simulation of the status quo, we'd focus on an event where everything would be in flux.

The Camarilla society of Berlin would fall to the fires of the Anarchs. This was the night of the revolution. There would be blood on the streets and ashes blowing in the wind, as undead who had existed for centuries would run scared from gangs of laughing, young bloodsuckers. All of this would be played in over a dozen locations and the streets of the Friedrichshain nightlife district in Berlin.

For the larp to achieve its aims, it would need to have a vastly larger number of players than *End of the Line*, which featured over 60. In *Enlightenment in Blood*, we had 200 participants, which provided us with a new problem. How do we design a larp with a small, professional team for so many?

To make the production equation work, we needed to come up with a design that could provide a maximum amount of content for the least amount of work. Two design solutions should be mentioned

here: organising words and deconstructed characters.¹

To organise the action of the larp, we decided to build everything around a single keyword. This word would explain what was happening and what the characters should be doing. To do this, we workshoped different words which could give us what we needed.

The word we ended up with was *revolution*. On the night of the revolution, every single character's life would revolve around this one big, central collective event. A Camarilla vampire would try to bargain for their unlife while an Anarch would get revenge for past slights.

There are several qualities required of a good organising word:

- Cannot be reduced to specific characters. If the description of the event involves something like: "The Baron has a problem..." it has already failed. The concept must be collective.
- Must affect every single character. (In *Enlightenment in Blood* we were not entirely successful with this as the game had non-vampire characters less affected by the revolution).
- Scalable from the soul of an individual character to the entire larp.

¹ For more on resource-efficient larp production, see my essay 'The Basics of Efficient Larp Production', published in *Engines of Desire* (2021). For more on deconstructed characters, see 'The Death of Hamlet', published in *Engines of Desire* and *Shuffling the Deck* (2018), as well as the essay 'Designing Characters for Resilience: Reverie Studio's Abstraction Approach' by Ken Pickering and Garrett Kopczynski (2026) in this book.

Because *revolution* answered the question of what each character should be doing, we could then move on to consider who those characters would actually be and how we could get them created.

We wanted to keep the larp thematically focused, so we didn't want to open the event up for players to create their characters completely on their own, but we also didn't have the resources to run a big writers' room. The solution was to deconstruct characters into their constituent parts, letting players assemble their characters from a flowchart of pre-created components.

Larp characters tend to consist of parts such as backstory, personality, goals and group affiliations. Elements related to the Berlin setting and its history, or personality traits and archetypes, could be shared by many characters. Instead of writing 200 motivations for 200 characters, we'd create only 10 or 20, letting the players choose from the same menu. Instead of creating 200 complete characters, we designed character components.

By recognising which text assets needed to be unique and which could be used by many characters, we vastly reduced the amount of work needed. We also turned our labour-saving design into a feature by having an online tool where the players assembled their characters themselves, helping to ensure that their character was to their taste.

An additional benefit of this method is that it makes it very easy to review all the character components and ensure that every single one is in line with the larp's thematic vision, with no outliers or exceptions.

The online tool we used was called *Larpweaver*, built from these specifications by the U.S. company Incognita Limited. They also used it to run their own much-lauded collaborative style *Vampire* larp *The Night in Question* (2019), about a Sabbat mass Embrace. The Sabbat is a sect of monstrous, inhuman vampires in the world of *Vampire*, and they make more of their kind by abducting people and turning them into the undead en masse in a grotesque ritual. Of the collaborative style *Vampire* larps created so far, *The Night in Question* remains the one with the most reruns.

Where it really happens

Politics has traditionally been one of the core topics of *Vampire* larps and the IP in general. In the 5th edition, this has been taken so far as to change the game's tagline into: "A Storytelling Game of Personal and Political Horror".

From its inception, the World of Darkness has threaded the real and the fictional together into a single compelling setting. *Vampire* books have revealed this or that historical character to have been a vampire, perhaps rescued from oblivion by someone turning them undead when they should have died.

In 2017, my wife and co-designer Maria Pettersson and I were living in Brussels. Maria worked at the European Parliament as an assistant to an MEP, and in *Vampire* the undead were often presented as influencing mortal politics. Since Maria worked in mortal politics, we wondered what this undead influence might look like at the level of everyday work.

As a result, we, together with our co-designer Bjarke Pedersen, created the larp *Parliament of Shadows* (2017). It was a collaborative *Vampire* larp about the servants of the undead seeking to realise the will of their masters. In other words, it was a larp about lobbyists.

We used real, actual locations for the larp: venues that real political actors also used for their meetings and events. We even had scenes inside the European Parliament itself, including the Hemisphere where the big meetings in Brussels take place. We also had two actual, real MEPs playing themselves in supporting roles.

In short, we tried to make vampire influence on human politics as real as possible using the infrastructure of actual power as our stage.

In terms of *Vampire* larp, *Parliament of Shadows* featured even fewer supernatural abilities than the already low-powered *End of the Line*. The lobbyist characters were ordinary people addicted to vampire blood.

The other politically themed collaborative *Vampire* larp, *Convention of Thorns* (2016-), can be found at the other extreme of the spectrum. Its characters are the ancient movers and shakers who created the pivotal undead sects of the Camarilla, the Anarchs and the Sabbat, which define the setting of *Vampire*, in a magnificent historical meeting portrayed in the larp.

Convention of Thorns was first produced by the Danish larp company Dziobak in 2016 and later rerun by Wonderlarp. I played in the original version, a spectacular experience as the high gothic of historical *Vampire* came to unlife in grand style. I

played a religious character and got a lot of mileage out of the question “what is the place of the vampire in God’s creation?”.

The larp also demonstrates the design continuity of the larps discussed here. It used and repurposed mechanics and design concepts from *End of the Line*, utilising them for the purposes of a dramatically different experience.

Second line

In 2022, I returned to collaborative *Vampire* larp design, this time with the American production company Reverie Studios. Along with Garrett Kopczynski, we were the lead designers for the larp *Saturnalia* (2022), played in over two dozen locations in the French Quarter of New Orleans. Design-wise, it used many of the same patterns and concepts as *Enlightenment in Blood*, incorporating lessons learned along the way.

Saturnalia had 200 players and it too leveraged both deconstructed character creation and the power of a single organising concept to make it possible to create an experience for so many people. This time, the organising word was *transformation*. It’s a more personal concept, guiding players to think of the experience primarily from their personal point of view. What do I need to be transformed?

We could afford a less communal organising word because the larp’s topic was already a festival, that of Saturnalia, celebrated by the undead in New Orleans the same way normal people celebrated their events in the city all the time.

The city is famous for its second line parades, with the brass band in the front and the revelers walking behind them through the streets. At one point, I worried whether it was appropriate to appropriate local culture for our vampire make-believe like this. My local friend admonished me, saying that nothing was as appropriate in New Orleans as partying in the streets dressed like a vampire.

Because the larp was about a vampire festival, the nature of the event gave players guidance on what their characters should be doing. The word, *transformation*, gave the party meaning, purpose and a goal. One of the great advantages of deconstructed character creation is that you can make sure that the core themes of the larp are present in every single character by hardcoding them into the tool the players use to create their characters.

Traces

The individual collaborative *Vampire* larps and their designers are part of an international ecosystem of influences both leading to and building on the events discussed in this article. An important stylistic predecessor was the Nordic larp *Inside Hamlet* (2017) with its atmosphere of politics, betrayal, sex and death. Many who played it, myself included, remarked on how it felt like the perfect *Vampire* larp, despite not being one.

The reason *Inside Hamlet* resonated was that it successfully achieved the vibe of sordid, deadly debauchery that many of the *Vampire* larps I and many others had

played when we were younger had vaguely gestured towards. The kind of adult design that had been impossible for us in our twenties was suddenly feasible after more experience had been gained.

For me, the memory of that experience was a lodestar in designing my collaborative *Vampire* larps and it didn’t hurt that two of the three designers of *End of the Line*, Bjarke Pedersen and Martin Ericsson, also had key roles in designing and running *Inside Hamlet*.

Pedersen and I also applied lessons from our *Vampire* larps to other larps. With Johanna Koljonen and Troels Barkholt-Spangsbo, we replicated *End of the Line*’s underlying design structure and rethemed it to create the larp *3 AM Forever* (2022), about fae creatures who secretly move among the crowd at the premiere party of a small experimental theatre. It had nothing to do with *Vampire: The Masquerade* or any other World of Darkness game, but contained many design lessons taken from our previous *Vampire* larps.

The original producer of *Convention of Thorns* (2016), Dziobak, was famous for its “castle larps”, played in extravagant castles in Poland. The first and best known of these is *College of Wizardry* (2014-), but they also made a Downton Abbey -inspired larp called *Fairweather Manor* (2015). *Convention of Thorns* was the third in Dziobak’s series of castle larps, building on lessons and ideas from its predecessors.

The New Orleans larp *Saturnalia*, created by Reverie Studios, similarly built in part on their experience from an earlier production, *Eskathon*. Later, Reverie went on to use the

lessons from Saturnalia in another larp project, *Fracture*.

Future Vampires

By 2026, we’ve had ten years of collaborative *Vampire* larps, with more to come as *The Night In Question* is going to have a rerun in 2026, and *Convention of Thorns* in 2027. They’ve tended to be high profile events with ambitious physical productions, whether talking about the Polish castle of *Convention of Thorns* or the wealth of playable locations in the urban larps *Enlightenment in Blood*, *Parliament of Shadows* and *Saturnalia*. In retrospect, it almost looks as if the defining quality of these larps is not only the Nordic design, but also a production ambition typical of blockbuster-style Nordic larps.

One of the classic design ideals of Nordic larp is that of the 360 illusion (Stenros, 2013). It posits that when a player looks around inside the larp, there should be absolutely nothing that would deviate from the fiction. Every character looks exactly like their player, every location like the place it depicts inside the fiction. The 360 ideal tends to favor heavy productions since you want to have cool venues. It drives urban larps because the cities of Brussels or New Orleans are very convincing at representing themselves.

In 2023, I published a book called *War of Ages* about how to make World of Darkness larps in the collaborative style, and how to approach the world of *Vampire* from the viewpoint of larp. I wanted to make these concepts and tools approachable and available to new designers, whether they

wanted to make larps in the collaborative style or something else.

After all these spectacles, it would be wonderful to see the tools of collaborative World of Darkness larp used for smaller, local *Vampire* events as well. Historically, *Vampire* larp has always largely been by and for the community, and there’s no reason the constituent parts of the events described in this article shouldn’t be used for that purpose as well.

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If Your Manifesto's Not Cringe, You're Doing It Wrong

Twenty-five Years Since The Publication Of
The Turku Manifesto (A Discussion)

Rachel Hoekendijk

The Manifesto of the Turku School was published at Solmukohta 2000. During Knutepunkt (KP) 2025, at the occasion of its quarter centennial anniversary, a panel discussed the meaning of the Turku Manifesto, the context of its publication in the late 90s, its effects on the burgeoning Nordic larp scene, as well as its legacy today. The panelists were Adrian Hon, Amanda Gardfors Granberg, Love Ersare, Jaakko Stenros and the author of the manifesto, Mike Pohjola. I facilitated the conversation. Several people from the audience also took part in the conversation, adding precious insights. This is a selective transcript from the discussion that took place: some interventions have been shortened or shifted in place to collect them into topics.

The text of the Turku Manifesto can be found at <https://mikepohjola.fi/turku/>

Origins of the Turku Manifesto

First, word is given to Mike Pohjola, who sets the scene: Turn of the century there was not much of a larp scene. All different, pretty much nothing in common. The only discussion that existed about the philosophy or the aesthetics of larp was a mailing list. It was a mix of this very tongue-in-cheek parody takes on larp, mixed with hardcore theory from people who had been in university for what, three years? And of course knew all about psychology, or whatever. In the Finnish mailing list, myself and another person from Turku talked very highly of character immersion, or *eläytyminen* as we called it in Finnish. He jokingly said: “Mike, we should write the manifesto of the Turku school of roleplaying” and we went “Oh yes,

haha, funny”. But then, the Norwegians Eirik Fatland and Lars Wingård published Dogma 99; like myself they took larping very seriously. They said it could be a form of art if you do it correctly, but they told about it all wrong. I had to reply by writing the Turku Vow of Chastity, the Turku dogma, and publish it as soon as possible to get in on that train. This was later 1999, I started writing the manifesto so I could publish it for Solmukohta (SK), which we did. Johanna Koljonen had a small party at her mother’s apartment and I asked if we could publish the thing there and she said yes, so we did. Then at SK, I saw the people from the party and a friend of mine, Mika Lopenen, brought it and took it outside to burn it in a small bucket for cigarettes. People took photographs of course. And I said: “Get them while they’re hot!” (*Room laughs.*) Then we held a panel where Eirik and I debated it and in truth we became fast friends because both of us were in a way the pioneers of seeing larp as a form of art. A year later, our first cooperation, *Europa* (Norway, 2001), and then *Inside: outside* (Sweden, 2001) saw the light of day.

Jaakko Stenros: For context, I think it is important to realise that we are in the 90s, when there was no social media. If you’re on the Internet, you are a nerd – you know. This sort of communication between different larp cultures was very sporadic and there were a lot of misunderstandings. There was nowhere you could go and find out about the background. You would have to use conversations to try to keep up. In Finland, one of the key places where these discussions were happening, was a mailing list from the national larp association Suoli. There were huge plane wars already before the manifesto was

published about this *eläytyjist* style and whether that is important, or whether the plot is important, or whether the metal weapons are important. Even if you were from different cities in the same country, the scenes didn’t know anything about each other. KP was super important in bringing people together; the first years we were still developing language about what we mean when we say “character” or “immersion” or “role” or “preparation” or “costume”, etc. People used these for very different things. So, once we started to understand how clearly people were doing these different things in different places, the next step was to declare your style, obviously, the best. And this is, I feel, what the age of manifestos was very much about: stating claims of “this is how I do it and this is the best, the right, the correct way”. I think the manifesto genre plays a part here, manifestos is a young person’s game. If you write a manifesto and it’s not cringe, you’ve failed. Manifestos are supposed to make ridiculously bold claims, which I think the Turku manifesto does – very successfully. But at the same time there is a lot of very great thinking in it. It’s pushing it so much further up, if you take it literally and seriously, you will get offended – which is, of course, the point. The point is to create conversation; the early manifestos really did. There is a reason why we’re still talking about the Turku manifesto that was published 25 years ago: it’s not just bold claims but also a lot of very interesting thinking there and there are certain things that you could quote from it today and it would be totally relevant.

Several people share about how they received the Manifesto – in the 2000s or more recently. **Love Ersare:** As a 17 year old theater kid, I came to my first KP here in Oslo in 2001.

Here I met these amazing experienced older larpers who were like 21 years old (*Room laughs.*), and someone probably put the manifesto in my hands. I read it and I was provoked by this line from the Vow of Chastity: “*Hollow pretense I leave for the actors*” – I thought: “What? Hollow actors?!” But I remember being provoked but also it resonated with being honest and not pretending. I was at the time nerding into Stanislaski’s theater, into method acting and the whole thing. I was provoked by it but also had it as a role model; “I’m going to be an *eläytyminen* larper”. I was 17 years old, it was of course very important to be with the cool larpers.

Rachel Hoekendijk: Ho... How “cool” was it? (*Room laughs.*) How was it received really?

Mike: I think many people thought I’m a dork and an asshole.

Jaakko: Yes. (*Room laughs.*) Some people were reading it and were sort of hooked on the idea and also realizing there was *maybe* a little bit of humor in it. I mean the last chapter is basically copied from the Communist Manifesto with a few words changed. That’s sort of a hint, but there were also a lot of people who didn’t read it and got very upset about it. I think division creates engagement as we would say, so it’s very sticky.

Are the manifestos still relevant today?

The Turku manifesto was translated in a couple of languages and people have been outraged about it all over the roleplaying

world. But the discussions lead to clarification with time. The thinking of the Turku school was refined. Mike wrote several forewords to the manifesto, explaining how to take it when it was republished in different venues. **Adrian Hon** explains what it felt like to discover this discussion years later: When I first started reading about Nordic larp it was like going back in time. I started reading *Larp Design* (Koljonen *et al.*, 2019), then the PDFs I could find, and after a while getting to the manifestos. And I was like: What are they arguing about? I don't really understand what the point is here. What's the cause? We're in 2024, doesn't everyone just sort of agree now? What's happening?

Mike: We won! (*Room laughs.*)

Hanne Grasmø notes: These discussions still exist; we're having them again and again and again. Should you immerse or are we playing lightly? "You don't have to feel that deep, it's just for fun." As someone who's been there for a long time, I'm really tired of them. Therefore, that's a good thing about manifestos: you can point to something.

As a late comer to this discussion, **Adrien Hon** really understood what it was about when reading from the *College of Wizardry* book, in a chapter Mike wrote about his time playing professor Bane. He reads: "Friday at lunch, Bane received a letter informing him that his wife had passed away in Azkaban. Bane left the dining room to ponder on this in the dark forest. While I was there, I realized that my natural Turkuist playing style would require several long hours alone, letting their emotions wash over me. I also realized the style of this larp would actually benefit from me making this as public as possible. So I let go of my private immersion and

quickly turned Bane's sadness into anger" (Pohjola, 2017, p.150). Now first of all this is really funny. (*Room laughs.*) When I read it, I went "oh I get it now!": what it's about is how we can play different ways, and this illustrates it perfectly.

Jaakko: I'm just counting how many vows of chastity you broke. (*Room laughs.*) Six or seven, just in this excerpt?

Love: Hollow actor. (*Room laughs.*)

Mike: Don't do what I do, do what I say. (*Room laughs.*)

Jaakko: One thing that we haven't mentioned yet and that was very relevant at the time was the division into gamist, simulationist and dramatist styles (Edwards, 2001) that was very big in the table-top community back then. If you read the Turku manifesto it is very much reacting to that gamist style and dramatist style: "They are wrong. Simulationist is the correct one when it is combined with character immersion, that is the only way to go." It is very interesting to read the manifesto in the sense that the claims that it makes are very strong. It is very pro-art: larp is art, no question about it. It is very pro-transformation: larp is something you do to transform yourself. It is anti-story, anti-game, anti-steering, and then the thing that today would maybe sound like the weirdest one is that it's very pro-game master. The game master is the artist. It's not the larper, it's not the crew, it's not the group: it's the one person that has envisioned the larp. Which is sort of understandable when you come from the table-top scene or the smaller larps where you maybe had only one game master who could have a vision. Today when you have

bigger larps, there are always more people involved. But that's what's sort of clearly inscribed in the manifesto.

The eläytyjist style of larping

Being envious of the immersionists

Love: Amanda and I were going to Immersion¹ and I said "We need to read the Turku manifesto!" and Amanda asked "What is that?" and I replied: "Oh, but it's you!" (*Room laughs.*) Because I larp with Amanda and she has that essence in her that I envy, because *I* am a hollow actor. (*Room laughs.*) I love creating play, creating scenes, doing these parts of larp, but I know that when I truly get immersed that's the best thing, but it's hard for me to get there. Amanda has this kind of thing where she can disappear into the character and I envy it, I think it's amazing.

Techniques and tricks for immersion

Amanda Gardfors Granberg: One thing I was thinking about when I read it is that the Manifesto talks a lot about immersing into character as the goal, but it would be nice to maybe also have a handbook with different techniques and tricks to do that. I feel a lot of people want to, but it's hard. Of course, it's both about the time off-game and how much it is designed for immersing into character and how high on the priorities that is, but also in this Vow of Chastity it says "I will do this!". Ok, but how? I feel a lot of people have different tricks that they do, but it's not shared much. I would just love to know for everyone I meet, when does

¹ Immersion is an international chamber larp festival in Turku, Finland.

it usually click for you, when do you feel that drop into character, and what things make you move out of it. I asked some people about it before and found it super interesting because for me, one thing I do is: whenever I find a mirror during a larp, I look myself in the eyes because then what I see is the character and not myself. And then I immerse into that and I see that's not me, these eyes that are meeting me are not me and it becomes a loop and I can stand and stare for a couple of minutes and I can do a little mantra that is the character's mantra that takes me deeper. But then I heard from a lot of other people that looking into a mirror breaks their immersion because what they see in the mirror doesn't match what they imagine their character to be. It's very personal what makes you go there but all of us that larp and immerse into characters, we have our tricks.

Act breaks, calibration and planning

When asked about how reading the manifesto influenced her in the way she larped, **Amanda** suggests it has helped her move away from shame, even to find pride: It has made me more comfortable in using these tricks I mentioned. Also, one of the things I have a hard time with is act breaks. When they happen, suddenly everyone breaks character and starts laughing and talking about all their cool scenes. But me, my character, is still there. I slip back into Amanda a bit but the character is so much still in my body and feels charged with a bunch of experiences. Suddenly everyone else is just themselves. Even though I know people take it seriously, I interpret it as if people can just throw away their character and leave it at a second's notice and then take it back. For me, it took time to build that immersion, it took me four hours to

start to think like my character and when the act breaks come, I get three hours back in that process, and then shortly I have to go back into character. It's really disrupting. Often, I want to cry or hide or go away, but I've felt like I'm supposed to do this like everyone else. When I read the Turku Manifesto, it made me feel it was ok, I could even feel pride: it's ok to be this way. And it helped me to start talking about it! First, I was ashamed of it, but when I started to talk about it, I realized there's others who also feel like this.

Another thing that you're supposed to often do in act breaks is calibration and the planning of things, which is another trap that I constantly fall into. It's nice to calibrate like boundaries and stuff and get a feeling for your players, but sometimes when I talk with players we come up with things like: "Yeah cool maybe we can have some animosity and then we'd always be competing about this", and we get hyped about that. But then when we start playing, that's not where the characters are; because we didn't know the characters when we did that planning, we didn't know them yet. Then I get very hindered in my mind. Like for me, what would make sense for my character now is that we'd be best friends but we have agreed that we should have animosity. So, I feel bad to play being friends because that's not what we agreed on and it feels bad to play on the animosity because that's not what the character wants, I will not break that vow! (*Room laughs.*) I instead end up not playing with that player/character, I get stuck so I might just avoid them which is a shame.

Another insight I got from reading the Manifesto is the thought of how you

choose to larp. It's a choice I hadn't thought of before, that you can approach a larp with intentionality in how you want to participate, you don't have to do what automatically happens. I think that's beautiful and it talks about larp as art, but also larping as art. Me, as an artist, I created this character that came to life through my body and no one else could have done it the way I did it, it's highly personal and everyone does it in different ways.

Who's the artist? Who has authority on the character?

Jaakko: My journey goes the other way around. Turn of the millennium Finland, immersing *eläytyminen* was the right way to play, it was what good roleplaying was. If you didn't immerse correctly, you were a bad role-player, you wouldn't be respected as much. So, for me, sort of getting over that and finding these other styles; where you would take acts breaks and you would make choices that make really interesting scenes and give you a really great experience but it's not actually fully in line with the character as it was written, that was anathema, in Finland in the turn of the millennium. Finding out that you could do this opened up larping in a completely different way for me. What is interesting is that even the Vow of Chastity sort of recognizes that, because it talks of the game master's vision: "I will play in this way unless the game master is telling me explicitly otherwise." There is recognition for other styles but the only one who gets to make that choice is the game creator. Maybe players can also do that a little bit.

Johanna Koljonen: I haven't really thought about this from this perspective, but I think it's fascinating. In the mixing desk, this

would be called "loyalty to character". The Turku Manifesto was written in the context of a larp tradition where the character writing *was* the larp design. Characters were always prewritten in Finland, which was not at all the norm in Sweden at the time. In Finland, you wrote characters, their relationships, their agendas and dynamics and that was the engine of the larp. If there were plots, they were hidden in the character descriptions. For these larp to work, you had to play the characters as written. This becomes an environmental reason for loyalty to character to become an ideal, it doesn't necessarily require this sort of emotional immersion style, which is an add on. I would like to take a moment to reflect on that because Amanda is also talking about the player being the person who knows the truth about the character. Who determines what is the correct vision for the character? The Vow of Chastity decides it has to do with the author's idea. The creator is responsible for everybody's experience and that is a very good reason I think to give the final say to them. Because the players can become a little selfish, self-indulgent at the very least, and also possibly plot-blocking if you're away for hours, as you said. So even though we have been very aware of the different playstyles, thinking about them from the perspective of how the different designs enable immersion and who has the final say about the character seems like something that we could verbalize and that would help players from different larp backgrounds play the same larps.

Mike: The aesthetic of the Finnish larp scene of the late 1990s is hard to understand maybe. If the larp had a structure like for example a wedding at twelve and a coronation at six, you couldn't tell that to

the players in the briefing beforehand or say "this is how the larp is gonna go". You had to write it in the characters: "You really want to hold the wedding at twelve and the coronation should happen at six". But if the characters decided something else that's what would happen. Nowadays that would be completely trivial to say "the larp has a structure like this; we have scheduled events, please steer towards those while staying true to your characters".

High energy and low energy immersion

Sleeping in character

Anna-Karin Linder notes: As I'm getting older, I'm not twenty-three anymore, when I look at a larp I want to know whether I will be sleeping in-game or off-game. Because if there is no break when I go to bed or if I can't have breakfast by myself, I might not go. It's an energy thing; that kind of sleeping badly and having to larp when I'm not fully awake: I can't do that anymore.

Freya Gyldenstrøm: I think we have a tendency to expect too much from ourselves and think: "When I am immersed into character, I need a certain level of energy. It can be negative or positive but I have to vibrate at a certain frequency". I played *Fragment of a novel* (Sweden, 2024), this sort of return to the roots where we were shockingly allowed to drink as much alcohol as we wanted to. I threw up in character and it was very immersive to have that high energy but also that low energy, be sad and feel antisocial. Normally in a larp, that would make me feel "I'm no longer in character, I'll take a break and then return

into character to have big feelings”. But this also works with you as the character, learning to see the character as being also low energy.

Rachel: Several people have mentioned they needed act breaks because they don’t have the energy to maintain immersion at all times. Is *eläytyminen* some kind of extreme sport that we have to physically prepare for?

Amanda: No! (*Room laughs.*) I am super tired both in the evening and in the morning but I love sleeping in character. I also love having these discomforts: not *too* much, but having my emotions and feelings (e.g. tiredness) coming from Amanda and then I can use that feeling that is true and strong and very present in my body and make it into the character’s. I can use it as a tool for me to be immersed. Like: “Ok, the character should be super angry and is super angry at this person in the morning. There are all of

these things going on at the breakfast table, but I am super tired and I don’t want to engage and shout and play scenes; I want to sneak away and drink tea. Doing that in character and going away and sitting on a bench in the sun and having tea for one hour while having the character’s thoughts, and maybe something happens; that is usually when immersion into character happens for me. It’s also what Freya said about the different frequencies: when you find the low character frequencies then some magic happens.

Love: I went to *Snapphaneland* (Sweden, 2024) for the second time last year. It was in-game sleeping (in tents!) the old-school way. I had these wonderful hours when everyone else had gone to bed and I was the only one to guard the camp in case there was an attack. There wasn’t much going on, I just walked alone, back and forth guarding the village. I was immersed in the character because it was slow. I did that for one and

a half hours in my *eläytyminen*-closet. It was beautiful, it gave me a strong beautiful emotion *and* it was restful. I completely agree with the need for sleep, it’s very important. But if there’s an act break before I go to sleep, my brain will not be able to not go and talk to people. And that break (go out of character and start talking and reflecting), that requires more energy than reflecting in character and slowly heading to bed. I think there is a way, without breaking immersion, to still get a good night’s sleep. We could still have act breaks with calibration and all these sorts of things, but without going into this “oh, that was a super cool scene, and this, and this” because that is super tiring, it’s immersion breaking and it will still be more fun later, during the after party.

Immersion as rest

Hanne: I would like to talk about immersion as rest, and I will not conflict it with “you need eight hours of sleep”: we can always agree that no action will happen in the sleep quarters between then and then. We need sleep, that’s ok, but I’d like to talk about immersion 24/7 as rest: very many of us (and we’re also in our 30s, 40s) are burned-out. From too much information, too much screen time, too much of everything. We are bombarded by this all the time and immersion gives us rest: you can be slow, you can sleep, you don’t check your mobile phone during the night, you leave it for two, three, four days! You tell people “I’m off grid now” and you’re actually just resting, immersing. Beautiful boredom, maybe Jaakko will say something about that. We need that! The moment there is an act break, you take your phone, you think about all the things you are doing next week, you think about your quarrel with your mother,

all these things. But if you can be in your character or halfway in your character, you are just here, in this environment.

Boredom

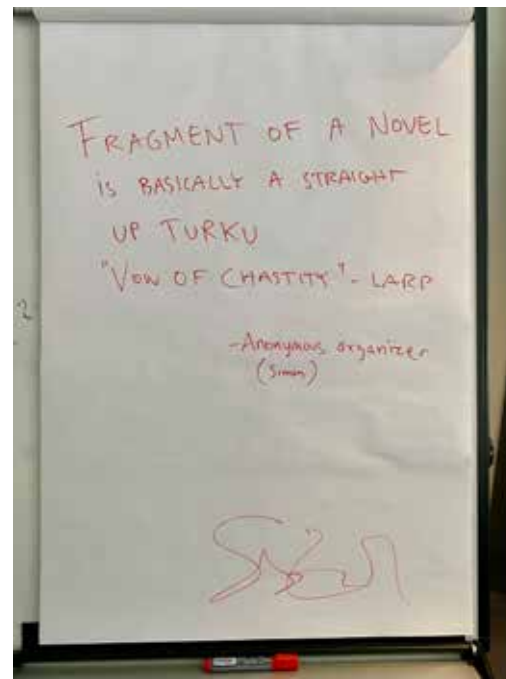
Johanna: I was a few years ago in a retreat with a mix of very smart people, one of whom was then a twenty-two years old young larp designer who said when we talked about boredom somehow: “I was never bored in my life before I started larping. I belong to a generation who has never ever done nothing with no input.” She was very interested also in historical larps and these kinds of environments, and she said it was a skill she had to learn to sit down and maybe look out a window or participate in a very slow conversation or something like that. And it has stuck with me.

Jamie MacDonald: My quickest way of immersing is through boredom. Because if I’m bored at a larp and my character is also bored, then my character and myself have the same emotional state and instantly, I’m in. It might also be a matter of melting into something in a slightly active way.

Jaakko: I talked about beautiful boredom a few years ago. It’s something that often comes up when people talk about these experiences and it connects to what you were saying when Love mentioned walking around the camp when everybody else it sleeping; when you’re sort of slightly detached but you’re still fully there but you’re not really doing anything, you’re observing and being, chilling, vibing in the world. There is something really beautiful in that and often then people talk about these moments, when they are really transported and they are being somebody else



Photos: Rachel Hoekendijk



somewhere else, there is that quality, I think there is more to discover there.

How demanding is immersion?

Adrian: One thing that is very interesting for me as someone who is new to this, is just how demanding this whole immersion thing is in Nordic larp. These days, when you go outside of this space (KP) and you say the word “immersion”, people would most often mean technological immersion, virtual reality and screens. The idea behind that is to create this illusion: you walk inside and you’re just brainwashed, it demands nothing of you. You go inside IMAX or a set of VR; there are no demands on you whatsoever. It’s a very corporate thing: you don’t want anyone bored at home, you want to get people engaged and get money from them as fast as possible. That means that often people who play these games or go to immersive experiences, as opposed to larps, they’re not encouraged to be self-reflective about what they are experiencing. Even to ask people to immerse into a character deliberately as opposed to have it sort of happen to you magically by the process of being in this fictional world; it’s kind of shocking to anyone who is not sort of familiar with this thing. I think it’s very important, because I do actually see the people making these experiences struggling to even express what is talked about in this manifesto. Like: “It’s cool when I get lost in a game, when I get immersed in a game, but nobody knows how to talk about that”. And they mix it up with the visuals of the immersion.

Jaakko: One thing that I find interesting with this idea that the environment is expected to be immersive to you without

you putting in any work is that actually often you have put in a lot of work. If you walk into a Star Wars experience and you’ve spent 20 years watching *Star Wars* media and reading books, you’ve really done your homework to understand what you’re seeing. Of course, we do this in larp as well: putting up a *Galactica* larp or a *Harry Potter* larp or whatever because then you can fill in the gaps. But you’re absolutely right: the Turku manifesto is brutal! It offers no support, it is extremely demanding and it demands things that are impossible for human beings, such as the seventh Vow of Chastity: “You will not fill in any of the gaps in the fiction of the larp with any generic stuff”. (*Room laughs.*) The way our brains actually work is: we have to recognise this, we fill in stuff. It’s impossible. You’re supposed to be super immersed into your character while not drawing on anything, no genre or conventions whatsoever, that’s demand number eight. It’s brutal! (*Room laughs.*)

Adrian: That is what is cool about it, it’s a nice thing to aim for. I think if you’re trying to take a shortcut to immersion by saying “well, I want to play a doctor”, you can base it on *House*, or say you want to base your character on *Sherlock*, as a lot of people do in larp. Larp is kitsch, people get into these grooves of very easy characters to play and who have exactly the same arcs, maybe you’re immersing into character but it’s a flatter character.

Jaakko: Yes, and of course when the manifesto was written, there were a lot of fantasy larps in Finland, and of course, you wanted them to be different. If there were orcs, you didn’t want people to assume that these were the same orcs that they always

are, but they are specific orcs to this larp. You’re not filling in that way. This requires a lot of forward work from everyone.

In response to the 360° illusion

Johanna: I think there is something here that is very interesting because in retrospect, I feel like a lot of these larp design tendencies (1999-2004), they have collapsed in on each other. I think both the Dogma 99 manifesto and also the Turku one are in response to the overall design goal of creating the 360° illusion (Koljonen, 2007). Like this generation had been promised VR already in the early 90s, but it didn’t deliver. Then they were promised that again around the turn of the millennium and it was very clear that that was not going to happen. And I remember super clearly being like: “Fuck VR! We’ll just build-...” (And I’m in VR like, on the regular). There was this huge goal and with no resources we were creating these perfect settings. One thing was better castles or whatever (*Room laughs.*), the other was like “ok, then let’s just play in these hyper realistic environments” so we can have full representation. But what we ended up with, and this was not very long after, I think it was within the same time as when the Turku Manifesto came out, is this understanding that we have achieved this perfection a couple of times. It doesn’t solve the character immersion thing, it doesn’t solve larp. You don’t have a perfect larp if it looks great. And I’ve been listening at work to so many VR panels in the last 15 years who’ve been like: “Yeah but if we could get better, faster rendering, and better resolution, VR will be great!” and I’m like no. I’ve actually called it the hollow man problem: that I can be a character, and it can be in the perfect environment, but I actually don’t know much about

farming potatoes so I’m going to feel very empty on the inside. We have to learn to design characters that are actually kind of immersible, on the inside as well as the outside. I think quiet assumptions inside the Turku Manifesto are about these things. Now, when we look back, it becomes this turning point that opens up the path that eventually will give us the sort of fusion between Nordic freeform table-top and larp, which were very different sports back then. Eventually it’s going to give us black-box larp as well, because of this rejection of the idea that the physical environment is the solution. And that’s what’s so fucking weird now, looking at the whole immersive industry who go “Ok ok, but just hear me out: we could have a better spaceship!” (*Room laughs.*) Yes, we could! And that’s very cool but it’s not gonna help you with this thing, at all.

What is the Turku Manifesto’s legacy today?

Rachel: To give some closure to this discussion, we might wonder what the legacy of the Turku school is. Is there a next generation? Are there designs that we see as spiritual if not literal successors of the Turku school today?

Mike: Even today in Sweden the Turkuist revolution has not reached its full goal but there are pockets in Sweden where individual people and groups have reached that level of roleplaying. (*Room laughs.*)

Love: I see in the program that Atropos is doing a talk tomorrow called “Against good larping” and reading the description, I

thought: “This is a Turku Manifesto discussion as well!”.

Rachel: We actually have an anonymous statement here reading: “*Fragment of a Novel* is basically a straight up Turku Vow of Chastity larp.” (*Room laughs.*)

Mike: It says “Simon”. (*Room laughs.*)

Rachel: So, is there a legacy?

Mike: Many of the back then outrageous claims about how larp should be are now completely mainstream, nobody would contradict them anymore, the idea that “larp can be art”. Many people, when organizing larps, even when they are not considering it an immersionist larp, at least they design it in a way that fosters character immersion. And perhaps, some people might agree that there are several fine ways of roleplaying. And bigger larps can cater to many faces.

Playing in different styles, together?

Josefin Westborg: Being one of the more “I like to build my arc and plan some scenes beforehand” Swedish person, I also have a very strong memory of Professor Bane from when we were playing together. We met before playing the first College of Wizardry together and I asked Mike: “So, I talked to other players and I have kind of an idea of where I want to go, do you want to be included in that or do you want to see where it goes?” I remember how he stopped and he looked at me, saying: “This is the nicest thing a Swedish person has ever asked me.” (*Room laughs.*) My question is: how much of

these playstyles are still different? Because in one way we have talked about how we have passed this, but is this division into different playstyles still relevant?

Amanda: I feel that it is. At the same larp there will be people who have different preferences regarding things like planning specific scenes and knowing what will happen or not. It is a spectrum thing, you can have dramatist tendencies in different amounts. For me, as someone not wanting to pre-plan anything, it doesn’t disturb me that you do. If you’d like to do a scene while being really aware of it, and you position yourself in this particular way so that the families in the house will hear it. I don’t think about that while larping, but you can be aware of that. You can create a cool scene and I can immerse into that cool scene. For me, it can definitely coexist. But I can also see that there can be clashes in it too, also depending on how much people are on the different sides. If I want to immerse deeply with you in a scene and it’s really strong, but I feel that you are trying to push me to a specific spot because from there people might see me, then I would feel it interferes. But I don’t think they need to be opposing super hard.

Love: I think we can cater to both. One thing that I will start doing when going to a larp where there are act breaks is ask the organisers if it’s possible to have an immersion friendly version. Like there is an act break but you can still not entirely leave the character, you can do the important things that the organisers want you to do, that need to be done from the organisers part, but you can keep the middle ground, the immersion flame burning, and then there is a room for the off-game talk and

those who want can sleep in game. That is absolutely fixable.

Jamie: I wonder if we could also borrow again from stage performance because there, we have something that we call “backstage”. The needs of actors and the needs of larpers are not the same, but the backstage is not necessarily a place you go to chat about your laundry, it is a place where you are off but you are ready. And that might be something that can be designed into larps so that there is a way to get in and out of the highest immersive state in a way that feels like you can be ready to take care of your off-game animal needs, but you don’t just drop everything and move on.

Anna-Karin: I played *The Circle* (Denmark, 2024), a larp about a cult that was super intense. There was an hour scheduled in the middle of the day where nothing happened. You can keep on larping but keep it low intensity. This is when you can go and take a nap. And it was beautiful, because then you could go to your room or go to the off-game area if you wanted to, but you could also just sit out and meditate and do whatever. Just have no big scenes between 2 and 3pm. Amazing.

Amanda: I played a larp where there was like a two-hour silence every day. (*Room gasps in envy, someone says “please let me play this.”*)

Jaakko: This is what we crave nowadays! (*Room laughs.*) Basically, what you’re saying is that after Castle larps, we will have Monastery larps. (*Room laughs and claps.*)

Josefin: I realise that maybe my whole not being only-character-immersionist,

but being more of a planning-scenes-in-advance type of person, maybe this is about trust. I realise my most magic moments, they are not the planned ones, but honestly, I think I don’t trust my co-players enough. The planned scenes and at least loosely planned arc will give me a baseline that is really good. And then I might have a magic moment. But if I don’t have that to fall back on, I might have a shit experience all the way through and I really want to avoid that. I think it plays into how I design also, talking about writing it all into the characters. I have seen players who want to immerse, but also don’t do the “at twelve you need to have the wedding” but other players need that for their play, and then it falls apart. So, I don’t trust the players to deliver. I have been part of patching up larps because some were going to play the high-status bullies but then none of them bullies someone because they are not comfortable as players to that level, but they want to try and I’m all for people who want to play that. But then by experience, we can see that the majority of the whole larp, including them, are not having a good time. I guess I just don’t trust people.

Knock knock knock

The KP angels come in and sing “Happy Birthday Turku Manifesto” in several languages. They bring cake.

Jaakko: Can I finish with a quote from the manifesto? Because of how it’s still relevant today and it still resonates: “It’s easy to think you know yourself when you live a very sheltered life and never have any reason to leave your room or, heaven forbid,

question your own way of thinking. To find out your true self or to check if this is really what you want to be, you need to have an outside view on yourself, or an inside view on somebody else. Living the life of another personality, another character, is just the trick to accomplish this. Another name for that is the eläytyjist style of larping, and it is the other style of larping the Turku School promotes.”

Hanne: That aged well!

Mike: Like fine wine.

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The stories we live

Mina Hovland

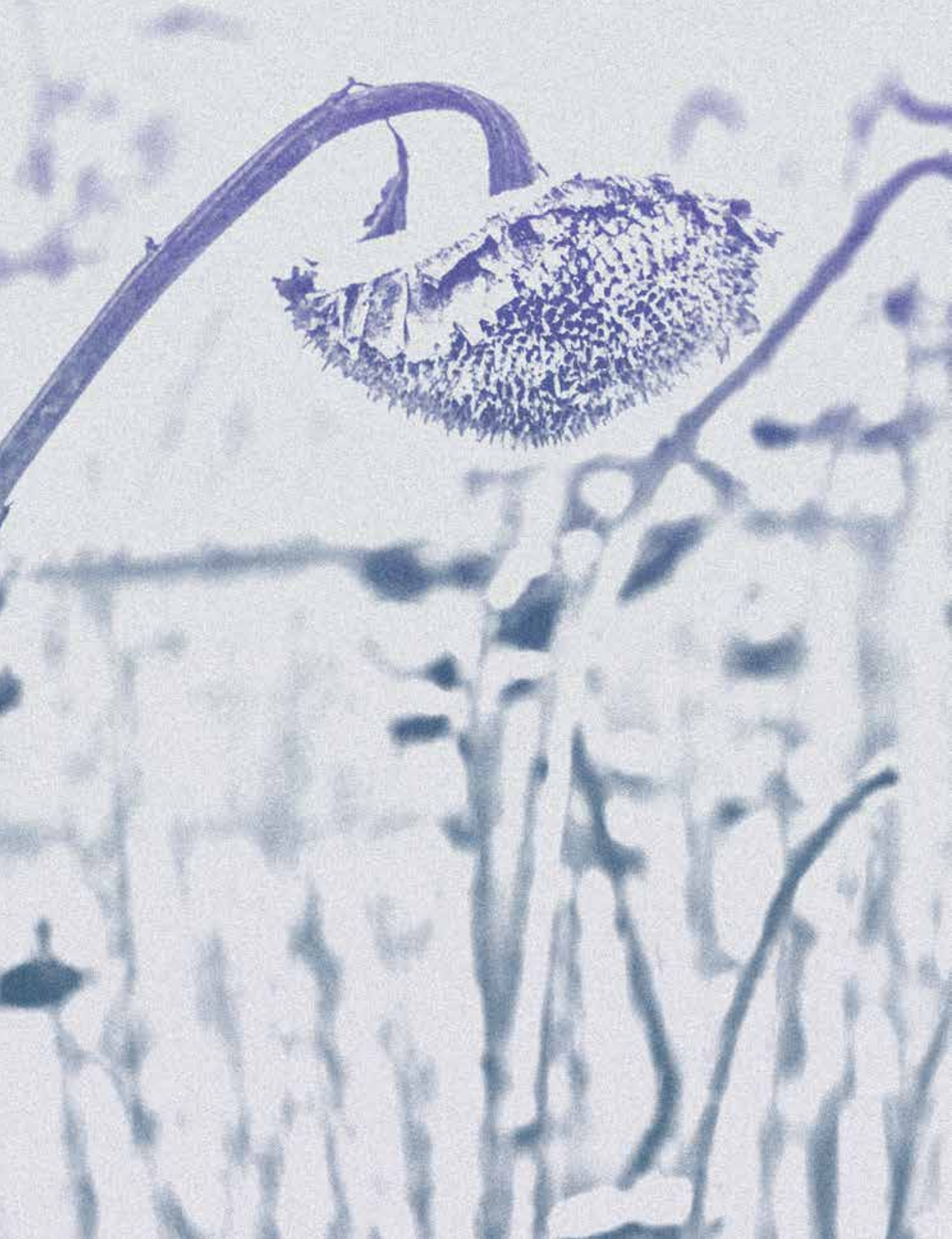
Being a medical doctor is not only about finding the right diagnosis and the right cure for it. It's also about meeting people when they are most vulnerable. That requires listening, empathy, and an understanding of how humans are affected by different circumstances.

I recently asked myself the question: "Why do I larp?" A part of me just wanted to say that it's a hobby; just entertainment and escapism. A way to live in another world and be someone else for a while. Relax and forget my own worries. And all that certainly has a part in it; but I don't think that's all. It's not that simple. I can get escapism and entertainment from reading novels or watching a tv-series, without spending the time and money that I do for larps. There are also a lot of times when I've come home from a larp and don't feel like I've escaped any kind of reality at all – quite the contrary. I might have forgotten my own reality for a while, but instead I've lived in another reality. Sometimes a reality that's worse than my own. So why do I do that? I pondered upon it, and what I found surprised me, because I've spent the last years trying to separate my profession from my hobby. Turns out they might not be as separate as I thought.

During the medical training we didn't just read medical literature. We also read fiction novels, with the aim to give the students a broader understanding of humanity and human living conditions. I usually say that medicine is the most humanistic among natural sciences – but also the most natural among humanistic sciences. It sounds cliché, I know, but that's one of the main reasons why I chose this profession.

Sometimes it's hard to remember that in daily life. I would lie if I said it wasn't. When you meet so many people who are struggling in various ways, it's easy to get stuck in the feeling that you can't help anyone, or that nothing you do matters. It's easier to focus on the logical, medical aspects, and harder to acknowledge *feelings*. And I'm worried that if I don't regularly remind myself of this, I will forget it. So I need ways to hold on to what I believe in, and larping is a part of that.

I would never pretend that what I experience in larps is even close to experiences in real life. I don't want it to be either. But I do believe that larp is one of the most immersive ways to experience life and circumstances in other ways. To see things from different points of view. This is because we don't just read or see the stories – we live them. The story is created by us through human connection. I believe that experiencing so many different stories – in different times and different circumstances – gives me a deeper understanding of the human condition in a complex world. I hope that in the end it makes me a better human, and with that a better doctor. Not only for my own sake, but for my patients' sake as well.



**Now is the winter of our discontent
made glorious summer**

Inge-Mette Petersen



Photo: Sissela Ørnholt Johansson

To play a larp is to tell a story. The story may have a given outcome or involve choices, depending on how the game is designed. But larpers are the closest you come to Fae. They are intelligent, creative, kind, beautiful, and totally immoral. To enter the game, they dance the Dark Morris, silent and dangerous, and sometimes the dancers are not alone when they finish. Something has arrived, an unknown entity, sometimes bright as the sun, sometimes dark as night. But it only arrives when they dance.

A woman like that is not a woman, quite.

I have been her kind.

(Anne Sexton, Her Kind)

Since I started larping I have been the last regent in a crumbling Roman Empire, the matriarch, the poet, the professor, the storyteller, the priestess, and the witch. I have been as old as time itself, young, and on the brink of life. I have been a mother, a father, a mystic, a priestess, an actress. I have learned about myself and met the generosity of strangers. In real life I am an old woman with all the trappings of a life as a wife, mother, and teacher – this is an important part of my identity; it forms how other people see me. But in larp I can become another character, showing parts of myself that were hidden from others and sometimes myself, and see them mirrored in my fellow players.

Mirror, mirror on the wall / Who is the fairest of them all?

My greatest nightmare as a child (apart from watching the Wicked Witch melt in *The Wizard of Oz*) was the time I got-lost in a mirror maze. Watching yourself walking around from a thousand angles but at the same time bumping your head into glass panes was terrifying. I never forgot. And sometimes life and larp can be like this maze.

We use mirrors every day; they hang on bathroom walls or in hallways and we look for them if they are missing. This is especially important if you identify as a woman, as the mirror shows you if your face and hair are perfect and your clothes are impeccable before you walk out the door. How we look is still important. But mirrors can also be like other people in how they perceive and react to you. It is a very physical notion. You smile and the person in front of you smiles back. We read other people like mirrors and internalise what we perceive, taking the good or the bad to heart. If you are a woman, you know that it is not just the face, but everything from your physical appearance to how you address the person in front of you that counts. We read the signs, the small signifiers that define who and what we are and reflect them in our responses, always trying to be perfect in the eyes of others.

*“And since you know you cannot see yourself
So well as by reflection, I, your glass,
Will modestly discover to yourself
That of yourself which you yet know not of.”
(William Shakespeare, Julius Caesar I:ii)*

When we larp we reflect the other players and are reflected by them. Larp is a physical

experience. The characters we play may represent ideas or stories far from the real world, but they must be manifested in our physical bodies, not just our minds. Often there is a road to be taken, or decisions to make before you enter the final game. You prepare your mind by reading the character sheet and larp materials, from player guides to Discord channels. The next step is to prepare your body. The costume must fit your character – but what do you carry in your hand? Every part of your costume and accessories are signifiers that will be reflected by the other players when you enter the larp. In this context, gender also has a part to play. Your choices will reflect the gender and mindset of the character, but also your own ideas and prejudices, thereby showing who you really are. Sometimes we make the wrong choices, the wrong outfit or accessories for the character, and our character fails to manifest in the larp. You are the dowager duchess, but you dress and move like a young woman. Or a prisoner in detention for years who looks as if they had just entered the prison. Larp is an illusion as is the character we portray. The choices we make are dependent on what we have learned about gender and age, sometimes to an extent that ends up making the character into a caricature. This can be done on purpose, but if not, it shows our own prejudices about gender and age.

“I speak without knowing it. I speak with my body, and I do so unbeknownst to myself. Thus, I always say more than I know.”
(Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*)

The work is done, and you enter the room. But who are you? The organisers probably already have an idea about who your character is and what relations you

have. But so have you. And you will show it not just in the words you say but also in your body language. You will have made conscious choices and unconscious ones. In the larp *Indenture* (Denmark, 2025) my character was defined as gender-neutral, so I decided to play the character as a man, dressed in a suit and tie, my long hair swept back. When I looked in the mirror, I saw my father. The gender was a conscious choice, but the mirror image of my father showed the unconscious choice.

When you start to play a larp, the other players will read you like a book, taking in the signifiers of your costume and accessories and use it in their play. But as always, the devil is in the details. We are also a product of the society we grew up in with its prevailing ideas about gender and class. Being well behaved, pleasant, and docile are expected from women; only when you become a crone are you allowed to become angry and outrageous. This is what society expects, but sometimes it also seeps into how women are represented in larp and how we as players show them. But why should we? A character is a sketch; as we play it may be possible to change the story, to change how the old tropes about women are represented. But this requires conscious choices from us and from our fellow players.

*I am a plaster doll; I pose
with eyes that cut open without landfall or
nightfall
upon some shellacked and grinning person,
eyes that open, blue, steel, and close.*

(Anne Sexton, *Self*, 1958)

So, who are the women we portray in larp?

They come from all aspects of society and history, some strong, some weak, antagonists and protagonists. Reaching them we must draw on our own experience as women and of women we have known: how they dress, move, and talk. But do we really know them, or are we just reproducing an image of who we think they are? Throughout history women have been vilified or sanctified, depending on how they have behaved according to the standards of society. What we show in larp are mirror images of authentic and imaginary women; the real women remain invisible, hiding in our mind. But they will show in how we choose to dress our body, or in the small, improvised signifiers that we seemingly choose on a whim. Take a good look at them. Maybe it is a string of pearls you saw your mother wear on a special occasion, or your teacher’s tired grey cardigan. We replicate images and ideas, not always consciously and not always in a good way. But without them it would not be possible to tell the story.

*“Because stories are important.
People think that stories are shaped by
people. In fact, it’s the other way around.
Stories exist independently of their players.
If you know that, the knowledge is power.”*
(Terry Pratchett, *Witches Abroad*)

So, we dance the dark silent dance together, playing a game of make-believe that is life and death, transformation and stagnation. We meet in bright halls and dark corners, mirroring each other, and reading the signs. We are of no gender and all genders, playing with our bodies and our minds.

So, whom do we really meet when we play? We are caught in a mirror maze, always

seeing images of ourselves in others. So are the other players, who for a short time are our spouse, lover, child, servant or king. We meet each other, dancing the dark Morris, mirroring each other as we pass through the lines, moving in ever more intricate patterns. Sometimes we are lost in the maze, bumping our heads into glass panes and mirrors. But if we are lucky we will reach that mystic place in the center of the maze where mind, body and spirit meet, and we experience *jouissance*.

*“I am spacious singing Flesh: onto which
is grafted no one knows which I – which
masculine or feminine, more or less human
but above all living, because changing I.”*
(Helene Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman*)

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Authors

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UK

Adrian (he/him) is Associate Artist at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh, and a game designer, author, and former CEO of Six to Start. At Six to Start, Adrian co-created *Zombies, Run!* and won Best of Show at SXSW. Other works include the Perplex City alternate reality game and *You've Been Played*, a critique of gamification. Adrian is currently writing a book about the history and future of immersive experience.

Alessandro Giovannucci

Italy

Alessandro is an award-winning Italian larp designer and 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 *Eclipse*. His articles and chamber larps have been translated into several languages. He is often invited to give lectures and workshops on larp and related topics. Curious, friendly, and proudly antifa.

Amanda Rose Villarreal

USA

Amanda is a US larper, scholar, and intimacy choreographer based in California. Having begun larping in the early 2000s, they support US larp designers as a consent consultant and risk consultant. With a PhD in Performance Studies, they are the founding editor of the Journal of Consent-Based Performance, guiding faculty with Theatrical Intimacy Education, and associate professor at California State University Fullerton, where they sponsor a student larp organization.

Anna Erlandsson

Sweden

Anna is a journalist, community manager and Media Lead with one foot in the video game industry and the other in everything else that can be nerdy. She is a passionate larper and writer that loves to discover new worlds and adventures. She loves talking about inclusion and diversity and also dwell into how roleplaying and gaming can make our world better.

Anna-Karin Linder

Sweden

Anna-Karin is a game designer and larp writer, she enjoys playing useless men, collecting perfume and historical knitting.

Anne van Barlingen

Netherlands

Anne is a coach, trainer and Serious Larp designer. Alongside her partner, Gijs, she designs creative games based on Live Action Learning, a method to use larp for personal development. As a coach, she works one-on-one with people to help them find different versions of themselves: and as a trainer, she does the same with individuals and teams.

Annika Waern

Sweden

Annika is a professor in Human Computer Interaction at Uppsala University and scientific coordinator of the Larpocracy project. Annika has studied larp, games and play for over twenty years. She is a DiGRA (Digital Games Research Association) distinguished scholar and a HEVGA (Higher Education Video Game Alliance) fellow. She is also an active larp designer.

Bjorn Long

USA

Bjorn is an educator, researcher, and actor from Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States. He received his Masters in Media Studies from Columbia University in 2023, where he studied the use of mental framing in interactive narratives. Bjorn writes professional audio description, works as a research assistant for Professor Alison Griffiths, and at Adventures in Cardboard, a larp summer camp for ages 8-16. He

performs across Minneapolis, recently telling interactive folktales on a frozen lake for the Art Shanty Projects.

Bruno Setola

Poland

Bruno (1973). I am a game thinker. I look at everyday interactions as if they were games — systems of roles, rules, rituals, and expectations. Through a game designer’s lens, I help people reshape these interactions so they become more intrinsically motivating, humane, and engaging. I draw from larp, board games, theatre, and world-building to create playful formats that open space for new ways of relating and collaborating. If a game isn’t worth playing, change it. playspace.cc

Charles Bo Nielsen

Denmark

Charles (he/him) is a prolific Danish larp-wright, organiser, book editor and has been teaching larp design and theory at several larp writer summer schools. He has been actively organizing larps since the early 2000s.

Charlie Haldén

Sweden

Charlie (they/them) comes from Stockholm, Sweden and has been larping for twelve years. They have also done emotional safety, character editing, translation and crewing for different larps. Charlie is a creative in the fields of writing and music, and has a background in theatre as well as in queer organizing and activism They are passionate about advocacy for and discussion around mental and emotional health.

Cheryl Bates

Malaysia

Cheryl is a teacher by trade but prefers to apply herself in crafty pursuits such as making weapons for larp, leatherwork, and dice making. She is the founder and organiser of *Minutes to Midnight* larp, and enjoys gaming, crafting, art, and sword fighting in her spare time.

Elin Dalstål

Sweden

Elin (b. 1986) has been a larper and organiser since 2002, based in northern Sweden. She has organised larps and conventions and been on the board of several larp organisations. She has recently organised the horror larp *Dom Som Överlever*.

Evan Torner

USA

Evan (he/him) is a professor of German and Film & Media Studies, as well as an active larpwright and producer. He co-founded the Golden Cobra Challenge and the journal *Analog Game Studies*.

Frederike Sofie Bech Høyer

Denmark

Frederikke is a larp designer with a master’s degree in communication studies. She works at the larp school Østerskov Efterskole in Hobro, Denmark, creating and facilitating larp events. She is responsible for training and coordinating volunteers, and also teaches larp and larp design. Frederikke has designed several black-box scenarios and larp events, including conventions, and she has been an organiser at the larp campaign *Fladlandssagaen* since 2010.

Freja Gyldenstrøm

Denmark

Freja has been a Nordic larper for about 19 years and a larpwright for 17 of those, sneakily contributing to larps like *Inside Hamlet* (2018), *The Forbidden History*, *Cyberpunk: Night City*, and many more. She has an MA in Comparative Literature and earns her living as a (script)writer, copy editor, and developer of branching narratives and tabletop roleplaying games.

Frida Lindegren

Sweden

Frida is a larping psychologist and interaction designer. Her work includes portraying sexual activities in larp, designing for rest and exploring repetition. Her main contribution to the larp scene is introducing nap time.

Garett Kopczynski

USA

Garett (he/him) lives in Boston, MA, USA and co-founded Reverie Studios in 2016. He has produced, designed, written, and labored on many large-scale larp projects. He is always open to collaborations and opportunities to advance design theory.

Gijs van Bilsen

Netherlands

Gijs is a speaker on the use of imagination, a Serious Larp designer, and an organizational development expert. Together with his partner, Anne, they design creative learning interventions based on Live Action Learning. On stage, Gijs entertains his audience by having them actively use their imagination to imagine a shared future. And by allowing them to play to discover more sides of themselves.

Ilan Norwood

USA
Ilan is a United States larper and kinkster based in New York City. He has been involved in larping since 2005 and plays in a number of varied larp styles with a focus on high emotional intensity freeform play in the United States and Europe. He has also been a member and educator in the NYC public kink scene since 2010, where he has been on educational panels on lifestyle 24/7 kink and protocol.

Inge-Mette Petersen

Denmark
Inge-Mette has been larping for 9 years doing international larps all over Europe. She is an education officer at the Danish Open Air Museum where she has been part of the reenactment for many years. She has an MA in pedagogy and is currently finishing a Masters degree in Transformative Game Design.

Jamie MacDonald

Finland
Jamie is a Finnish-Canadian stand-up comedian, performance artist, and curator of queer performance. He is the co-creator of the symposium for art-larp practitioners Sublime Pretense, and has written several pieces on theatre and larp crossovers, aesthetics, and politics in larp.

J.D. Lade

Switzerland
JD (they/them) is a larp designer and organiser based in Zurich, Switzerland. Under their design project name Quicksandbox, they have been publishing and running events for 10 years. Their work outside of organising larps focuses mainly on establishing safety

tools such as flagging in communities where it’s uncommon to use them, intersectional feminist discourse, as well as queer-focused as opposed to queer-friendly designs.

Josefina-Luisa Jelínková

Czech Republic
Josefina-Luisa is a Czech larp and costume designer with a decade of experience in organiser-provided costume design and a member of the Czech larp association Rolling. She has worked on bridging the gap between Czech and international larps, running Muriel Algayres’ *Harem Son Saat* in the Czech Republic and facilitating international runs of *Legion: Siberian Story*. She is the author of *Sorrow & Bliss*, a Regency letter larp, and *Národ sobě (For the Nation)*.

Juhana Pettersson

Finland
Juhana is a Finnish writer, novelist and game designer who’s worked in larp, role-playing and digital games. His best known larps include *Luminescence*, *Halat Hisar*, *End of the Line*, and *Saturnalia*. He’s the former Lead Designer for World of Darkness at Renegade Game Studios.

Julia Greip

Sweden
Julia (she/they) is a Swedish larper and organiser based in Gothenburg, and has larped for nearly two decades. She has a BA in behavioural sciences, and is now a UX Designer. She is a member of Bread & Games, and has worked a lot with Atropos Studios as a character writer. She is best known for the larps *Libertines*, *Pleasing Women* and *Stenrike*.

Julia Leśniewska

Poland
Julia “Julka” (she/her) is a Polish larper, designer, and larp researcher. She has a history of conducting larp projects as her thesis, including her current PhD study on shaping social attitudes towards sexism through larp. She is an educator, theatre practitioner and technician, and a lecturer of game studies at University of Silesia. She is involved in edu-larp work with Nausika Educational Foundation and designs and facilitates chamber larps locally and at larp festivals.

Karin Johansson

Sweden
Karin is a larper finalizing her PhD in Human-Computer Interaction at Uppsala University. She is active in the Larpocracy project and has co-authored several academic publications on larp in recent years. Karin also runs a design company that creates playful educational experiences, such as larps, interactive exhibitions, and games. She has a background as a teacher and as a larp educator at LajvVerkstaden.

Karolina Fairfax

Poland
Karolina is a larp designer from Poland with sixteen years of experience in playing and creating larps. A translator by education, a developmental editor by trade, she specializes in narrative design and character writing. Currently, she works as Creative Lead at Wonderlarp Foundation, collaborating with writers and organisers from all over the world.

Katrine Björklund Svela

Norway
Katrine is a designer by trade and a larper by heart. She loves delving into new worlds and characters, and organizing meeting spaces to discuss and expand our wired and beautiful hobby.

Katrine Wind

Denmark
Katrine has designed the Nordic larps *Daemon* and *Spoils of War* as well as co-designed *Helicon*. She also designed a number of Danish speaking larps including a yearly four day edu-larp for the Danish larp boarding school Epos. Katrine has brought her larps to the US, UK, Belgium, Czech Republic, and Finland in collaboration with local producers. Katrine is a political scientist working as head of Digitalization & Administration at a worker’s union with a focus on leadership and methodology.

Ken Pickering

USA
Ken (he/him) lives outside of Boston, MA, USA and co-founded Reverie Studios in 2016. He has been a key design contributor and writer for their larp productions. Prior to that, he was a writer for Darksteel Games and a member of the LIONE non-profit larp Board of Directors.

Kes Ward

UK
Kes is a Trustee of the Friends of Pardshaw Quaker Centre and is supporting its use for community larp projects as a way to bring larp and spirituality together.

Lara Hartung

Germany

Lara is a German larp designer, writer, and science communicator with a passion for magic realism and the intersections of natural science, story, and emotion. As a member of the design collective Fractured Reality Studios, she was a lead designer for *Blankspace* and worked on *Greylight 2142*.

Lorenzo Lin Angeli

Italy

Lorenzo “Lin” (he/they) is Assistant Professor at the Department of Information Engineering and Computer Science of the University of Trento, Italy. Lorenzo’s work investigates social impacts of computing, combining computing, sustainability, sociology, hacker culture, and innovative pedagogies.

Lyssa Greywood

UK

Lyssa (She/They) is a queer, non-binary writer based in Stoke-on-Trent, UK, who has been larping since 2019, and wrote the larp *Descendants*, which ran in March 2026. They are undertaking a PhD exploring gender and sexuality in larp at Manchester Metropolitan University, and are a published writer who also contributed to KP 2025. Their cats, Apollo and Calypso, have been steadfast companions in their journey to live forward. bsky: @fireboundfox, X: @fireboundfox, FB: @lyssagreywood

Marijke Van Hauwaert

Belgium

Marijke/Mary (she/her) has been larping and crewing (mostly administration, workshops, cooking, and bartending) at various larps, national and international, since 2016. She is

currently researching the effects of role-play and immersion on knowledge retention in teenage and adult learners, and anything to do with edularps while working on her Master of Training and Education Sciences at the University of Antwerp.

Marlies Kok

Netherlands

Marlies (She/They) is a Dutch larper and organiser who started in 2004. With a background in linguistics and a master in translation she specialises in communication, both in effectively sharing information from organisers to players and in strengthening player skills to communicate and negotiate between them. Within her designs she enjoys exploring both local and international history.

Martine Svanevik

Norway

Martine is a larp designer, writer and player of all kinds of games. She lives in a crooked old loft, surrounded by howling winds, city noises, dying plants, two wildlings and an old typewriter. A founding member of the Avalon larp studio collective, she is interested in how we use play to build empathy and experience a larger range of emotions.

Mátyás Hartyándi

Hungary

Mátyás is a leadership trainer, change management consultant, psychodramatist, lecturer, and PhD in role-playing and leadership development methodologies. His research focuses on the history, theory, and application of various pretensive methods, including multiple forms of role-playing, applied drama, and gaming simulations, with the aim of bridging and integrating their differences.

Max Metzger

USA

Max (he/him) is from Boston and has been writing larps for eight years. As a software engineer, he has worked on a variety of games-based research projects. He is currently working on both software and writing for *Neon Void 1984*.

Mia Kyhn

UK

Mia (she/her) is a larper and larp organiser based in London. She has co-organised a number of online larps, and her latest organising work includes being the character lead for the larp *Bonds Unbroken* in the UK. Outside of the larp world she has worked professionally with editing, translating, and copy writing for more than eight years.

Mike Pohjola

Finland

Mike (He/They) is from Finland and has been larping and organizing larps for thirty years. His Master’s thesis was about understanding the Chorus in Greek tragedy as a participatory drama like a larp. He has created dozens of larps, several tabletop roleplaying games, and multiple novels, and was the narrative designer and writer of board game *Agemonia*. He’s also known for writing the Manifesto of the Turku School, where he makes the case that character immersion is the central aspect of all roleplaying. He considers playing larps as large a part of his art as making larps.

Mikkel Funch Brunberg

Denmark

Mikkel is an on/off-organiser since 1997 and made gloomy, serious kids-larps in the 2000s. He enjoys physicality in his characters and uses roleplaying to learn more about

himself and to experiment with what’s within. As a game-designer he loves creating those possibilities for his players too.

Mina Hovland

Sweden

Mina (they/them) lives in Gothenburg, Sweden. They have been larp-ing regularly since 2016, and recently dipped their toes into organising for the first time as part of a duo called Mimosalajv. They enjoy writing characters, and have helped with proof-reading for other larps. At KP 2025 they gave a talk about playing with religious themes in larps. They work as a medical doctor specialising in rheumatic diseases.

Mish Liddle

UK

Mish is a witch, occasional artist and enjoys running larps involving art and spirituality.

Mo Holkar

UK

Mo (he/him) is a larper based in the UK. He is a former organiser of The Game Kitchen and of The Smoke, and is a member of the editorial team of NordicLarp.org (and of this book). He is part of the Larps on Location design collective, and some of his chamber larps can be downloaded from holkar.net. At the moment he is mostly interested in larp as a tool for exploring different ways of being a person.

Nór Hernø

Denmark

Nór (they/them) is a Danish larper and larp designer with more than 25 years of experience. Throughout the years, they have lectured in narratology, larp and workshop

design, and worked professionally with process facilitation, learning- and experience design. On a volunteer basis, Nór organises community events, teaches at the Danish larp designers’ summer school, and is dedicated to supporting other larp designers and local communities.

Olivia Fischer

Austria
Olivia is an Austrian larp designer and re-researcher in larp, edularp, education and HCI. She has been designing larps since 2001 and her current research focus is exploring the co-design of edularps as a means to foster empowerment and future skills in education and design thinking processes.

PerOla Öberg

Sweden
PerOla is a professor of political science at Uppsala University in Sweden. His research focuses on trust, political participation and behaviour, civil society, deliberative governance, and deliberative democracy.

Piper Fraser

UK
Piper is from the UK, and has been playing at larps for 24 years, crewing them for 16 years and organising larp events for 5 years. She runs the game *Beyond Ragnarok*, under the company Meta Games Studios Ltd. Piper is an event management MSc, her thesis pertaining to motivations for attendance at larp events; and is now undertaking a PhD on the organisation of larp events around the world, at Chester University.

Rachel Hoekendijk

Belgium
Rachel is a larper, scholar and activist from Belgium. She is working on tying together knowledge and experience across groups, generations and larp cultures. She graduated in Philosophy and later in Social Sciences. Currently her main activity is as a facilitator, a feminist educator, and a conflict mediator. Her more recent topics of interest have been the phenomenology of immersion, group dynamics, flagging, and workshops about conflict or gender.

Sandy Bailly

Belgium
Sandy (she/they) is a Belgian larp designer and organiser. She’s interested in small, collaborative and altruistic play in larp, as well as in emotional care, inclusivity and accessibility. Sandy passionately believes in re-imagining reality through play and in building communities of care. In their games, they strive to design for empowerment, hope and transformation.

Sean Wang

Malaysia
By day, Sean is a marketing executive in the data center industry. Off the clock, he dives into all things nerdy, from leading the Malaysian larp community to co-running a local game store for TTRPGs and enjoying *Magic: The Gathering* as a player and a Level 1 Judge.

Severin Quell

Germany
Severin believes method-larping is a thing and has played, written for and organised larp for more than 25 years. He identifies as a Nordic larper and despite being a gentle

soul, he repeatedly ends up in complicated, toxic relationships in larp and really enjoys exploring that.

Sheila Poor

Austria
Sheila (she/her) is based in Vienna, Austria, and has been larping since 2013. She holds a Master’s degree in Business Administration and works in the media industry mainly as a project and event coordinator, booker, location scout and fixer for TV productions. She is currently writing her thesis on the benefits of larp for personal development as part of her counselling diploma.

Simon Brind

Britain
Simon (He/Him) is a writer, academic, and larp designer from London in the UK. His PhD thesis was about the emergent narratology of and moments of narrative crisis in participatory fiction. He is a part of the Avalon larp studio collective. His current research interests are modes of performance, and story shapes.

Siri Sandquist

Sweden
Siri has been organising larps since 2014 often with a specific interest in historical settings and female narratives. With larps run in both Swedish and internationally such as *Suffragette, 1912*, and upcoming *The One without Sin*, she has felt the difficulties of translating historical contexts first hand.

Sophie Green

Ireland
Sophie (She/Her) is from Ireland and has been part of the VR Roleplay space since 2021. She has been a GM, developer, and designer on several large-scale projects. She has also written several short scenarios specific to VR RP, in collaboration with Toolshed and Scenario One.

Suus Mutsaers

Netherlands
Susan “Suus” (They/She) is a Dutch larper and organiser active since 2008. With bachelor’s degrees in social work and education their work often seeks to help players develop skills to help improve and steer their experiences. Her immersive experience design work often explores isolated communities and the relationships within those.

Tara M. Clapper

USA
Tara (she/her) is a storyteller: from social media to serial fiction, guided meditation, and character-driven self-discovery experiences, she’s been writing and editing for decades. Her career includes the publication of a dozen analog games (live action games / larps), larp and tabletop role playing game (TTRPG)-related content, and high-performing SEO blogs. She’s known for popularizing the digital larp format during the pandemic.

Teddy Karlsson

Sweden
Teddy (They/Any) is a Swedish larper and scenario designer who has been larping for about 10 years. They are a drama pedagogue who has studied cultural sciences, history and curating.

Tia Carolina Ihalainen

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Tia is a Finnish freelance artist with a decade of experience working professionally. She has been a larper since the early 2000s and worked at nearly every role in larp creation. For the past over a decade she has illustrated for several larp related events and organisations.

Trine Lise Lindahl

Norway
Trine is an experienced larp designer, communicator and community organiser based in Oslo, Norway. She has co-designed multiple notable larps, including *Mad About the Boy* (2010), *Play the Cards* (2012), *KoiKoi* (2014), and *1942 – Someone to trust?* (2017). She produced, edited and wrote for the anthology *Larps from the Factory* (2013) that pioneered the rerunnable chamber larp as a viable format of Nordic larp. She has a background in history, education, and content design.

Weronika Szatkowska

Sweden
Weronika is a PhD candidate in Human–Computer Interaction at Uppsala University, where she is developing her dissertation on the integration of trans-formative experiences. She collaborates closely with the Larpocracy project and runs her own game design studio, creating purpose-driven games that engage with culture, dialogue, and urgent societal issues.

Graphic design team

Graphics and layout

Anne Serup Grove

Denmark
Anne is a service designer specialising in interactions and communication across both the private and public sectors. Starting with the 2019 volume Larp Design as a significant contributor as its graphic designer, co-editorial team and writer, she has been a part of multiple KP publications. With a background in fashion design, she has a keen interest in costumes and the role they play in larp. She is an activist in the field of costume design inclusion, raising awareness about the challenges that clothing sizes and costs represent for many LARPers. She has lectured on the topic at e.g. Knutepunkts and the Nordic Larp Talks.

Maren Wolf

Germany
Maren is a designer and artist who creates participatory experiences that blend rituals, playfulness, and co-creation, with a focus on eco-consciousness. She works with immersive experiences, collective storytelling, experimental sound, artefacts, and spells. Investigating the weirdness of human and more-than-human performances in the complexity of our shared narratives, she currently lives in an eco-village in Andalusia.

Illustrations

Kirsten van Werven

Netherlands
„Kirstie“ is a queer artist, writer and larper based in the Netherlands. With a background in animation and narrative design, roleplaying games have always informed her artistic practice. Currently, she is exploring how personal larp stories can be documented and told through comics and illustration. When she’s not drawing, writing or playing games, she can be found in thrift stores hunting for a new trinket to add to her collection.

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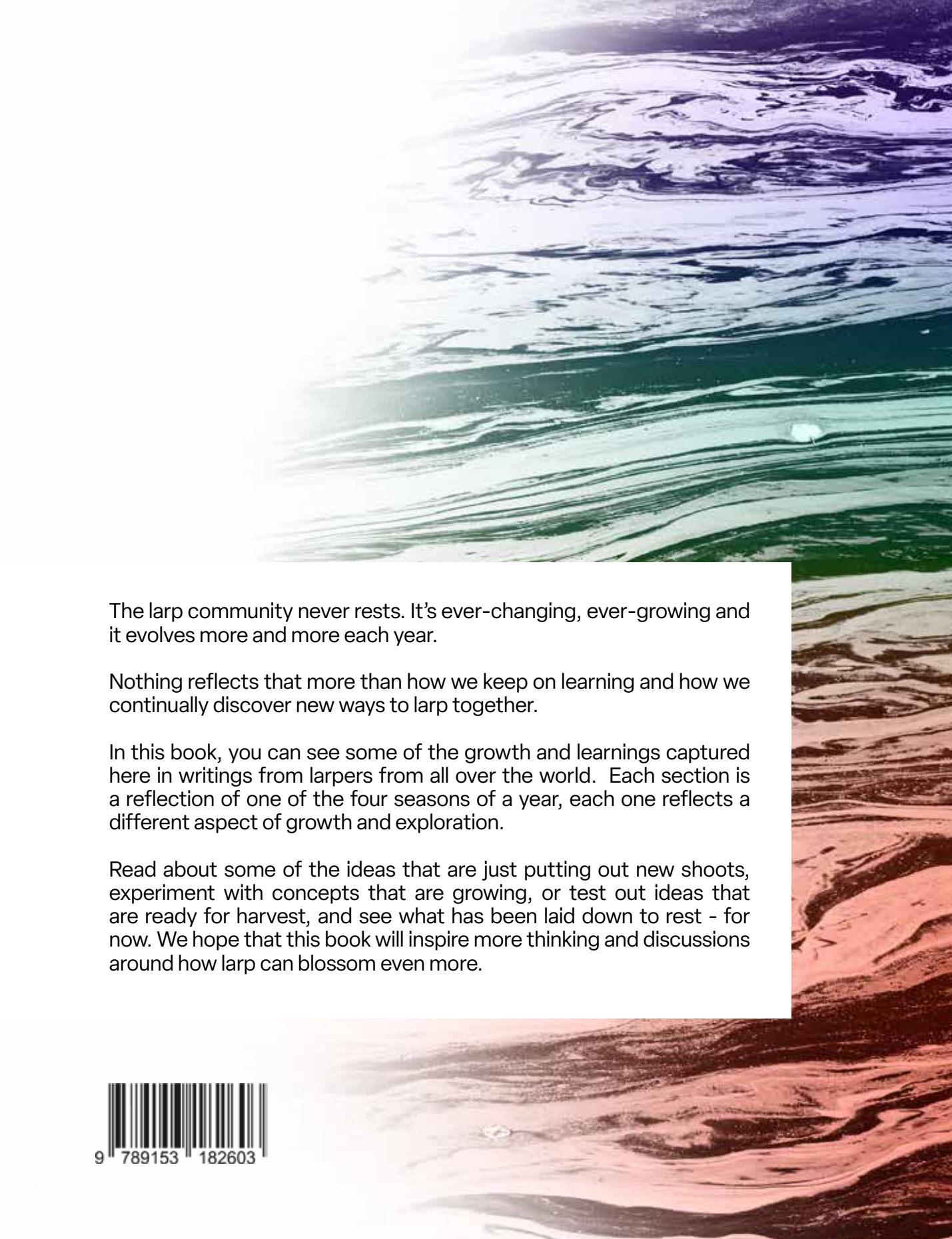
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The larp community never rests. It's ever-changing, ever-growing and it evolves more and more each year.

Nothing reflects that more than how we keep on learning and how we continually discover new ways to larp together.

In this book, you can see some of the growth and learnings captured here in writings from larpers from all over the world. Each section is a reflection of one of the four seasons of a year, each one reflects a different aspect of growth and exploration.

Read about some of the ideas that are just putting out new shoots, experiment with concepts that are growing, or test out ideas that are ready for harvest, and see what has been laid down to rest - for now. We hope that this book will inspire more thinking and discussions around how larp can blossom even more.

