

LIMINAL ENCOUNTERS EVOLVING DISCOURSE IN NORDIC AND NORDIC-INSPIRED LARP

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Evolving Discourse in Nordic and Nordic-inspired Larp

Edited by Kaisa Kangas, Jonne Arjoranta and Ruska Kevätkoski

SOLMUKOHTA 2024

Liminal Encounters: Evolving Discourse in Nordic and Nordic-inspired Larp
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Introduction

Kaisa **Kangas**

Often, new ideas and approaches are born when we face the limits of our current ways of doing or venture into the boundaries between different realms and notions. Larps can provide novel insights when we explore the liminal spaces between reality and fiction, between off-game and in-game relationships and communities, between character and self. Liminal encounters in larps leave their marks on real life.

The past decade has seen the internationalization and diversification of the Solmukohta/Knutepunkt/Knutpunkt/Knudepunkt larp scene and discourse. Whether we conceptualize the larp landscape in terms of geography, style or tradition, our scope of interest is now much wider than just *Nordic* larp. We also cover various other larps that have been influenced by Nordic larp and are in dialogue with it, so it makes sense to talk about *Nordic and Nordic-inspired larp*.

It has been a tradition to publish a book like this one in connection with SK/KP – a tradition so honored that the lack of an official book last year caused a small outrage (see Pettersson 2023). Even then, there was an underground pdf book known as *The Secret Book of Butterflies* that consisted of short essays by anonymous writers. I have decided to republish some of them here.

In this book, there are 52 articles by more than 55 authors. Some of the articles are only a couple of pages, often in the style of opinion pieces or journalistic contributions; others are long and sometimes in an academic style. There are two article types that are visually distinguished in the table of contents and marked with ribbons in the text – *debate pieces* where

the authors present their opinions, and *how to* articles focused on practical knowledge and instructions, a legacy of *Larp Design* (Koljonen & al. 2019).

The book is divided into six thematic sections – *Design and Analysis*, *Experience and Critique*, *Players and Play*, *Borderlands of Larp*, *Community and Narratives*, and *Risks, Dangers and Brave Spaces*. Several articles could have fit more than one section, and when organizing the articles, I have put attention on how they converse with each other. Each section has a brief preface that introduces the articles in that section and may help the reader find the articles most relevant to their interests.

Design and Analysis

Design has become prominent in recent Nordic larp discourse. We talk about *designing* larps rather than *creating*, *making* or *writing* them. Much good has come from the design thinking, but it has its limitations, as Andrea Nordwall and Gabriel Widing point out in their article *Against Design* that opens this book and the *Design and Analysis* section.

Nordwall and Widing juxtapose *design practice* with *artistic practice*. Outside the larp context, art pieces are rarely spoken of as *being designed*. Instead, art and design are often treated as two separate spheres. Design is seen to be driven by the goal of achieving a specific, often functional and practical purpose: for example, spoons are designed to be used for eating. Art, on the other hand, is frequently seen to be driven by the need to evoke emotions, thoughts, and ideas.

As Johanna Koljonen has said, design is the opposite of tradition (see e.g. Rodley 2017). However, Nordic larp itself is a tradition. All art lives within a tradition – perhaps challenging its limits but always in conversation with it. Nordwall and Widing ask whether we should turn our attention to our traditions and honor them instead of design. They argue that overemphasis on design leads to optimized user experience feedback loops and to recycling and refining tried and tested ideas instead of creating original, innovative, and experimental new works. Feedback loops and user experience optimization are, in their view, connected to the trend of treating larps as *commodities* (see Seregina 2019). Thus, I have placed Usva Seregina's new analysis on the topic, *Readdressing Larp as a Commodity*, right after Nordwall and Widing.

Design thinking can, however, be a valuable tool in larp creation, when treated as a means and not an end in itself. Several articles in the *Design and Analysis* section provide useful and

interesting insights on the topic. Frederikke S. B. Høyer shares her wisdom on designing larps for children, and Bjarke Pedersen and Eleanor Saitta explain how Pedersen uses a concept called *the interaction engine* to create larp environments where participants actively generate interesting and thematically relevant play. The section also contains some brilliant analysis such as a look into nudity in larps by Karin Edman and Julia Greip, and an investigation of how objects and bodies represent – and sometimes fail to represent – other objects and bodies in larp by Jaakko Stenros, Eleanor Saitta and Markus Montola.

Experience and Critique

The second section features articles where the authors analyze and reflect on larps that they have played – and occasionally on their own practice of making larps. Writing critique and critical reviews of larps is a complicated and controversial topic. However, I believe that we need them for larp to develop as an *artistic practice*. Criticism will help us push the boundaries of our artform and to overcome current limitations.

Thus, I am happy to present several articles that surpass a narrow design-oriented focus that only evaluates larps based on how well they succeed in creating the experiences they were aiming for. Instead, these articles make deeper inquiries such as what the meaning and message of the larp were and whether it had the potential to change its players. For example, Eirik Fatland connects the larp *Before We Wake* (Denmark 2015) to philosophical questions about the nature of role-playing and about the relationship between dreams and reality.

Like all art, larp also reflects the culture and society we live in, and functions as a medium to process the vital issues of our times. Climate change is the largest, most pervasive threat to both the natural environment and the survival of the human species. The *Experience and Critique* section ends with three articles that discuss climate themed larps. Syksy Räsänen reviews the blackbox larp *End(less) Story* (Norway 2022) about human extinction. Elli Leppä writes beautifully about the interplay between her player experiences in ecological larps and her climate activism. The section closes with Maiju Tarpila's powerful *The Manifesto of Playing to Live Elsewise* that might and should make the reader feel uncomfortable: she argues that we are “experience addicts on a burning planet”.

Players and Play

Lately, the Nordic larp community has begun to think more about how we play and what skills we develop and apply when playing (see Saitta & al. 2020). A larp is not (only) the work of an auteur designer. The final outcome depends heavily on an ensemble of players. The third section moves the reader's attention to practices and experiences of play.

Our real-life experiences and who we are as players always affect our play and how we experience the larp. This becomes clear, for example, when Chris Hartford examines how player age and memories affect and limit how we play and what we get out of larps set in recent history. Niina Niskanen points out that contacts and relationships are crucial to a good player experience. She challenges a design practice where creating them is left primarily to players, arguing that this makes it difficult for introvert players to feel included.

The articles in this section also discuss how player limitations – such as disabilities and mental health problems – affect play and what are the best approaches for larp organizers to take them into account.

Borderlands of Larp

Larp is a multidisciplinary endeavor that has connections to many fields. The fourth section looks at the liminal spaces between larp and other pursuits. Larp has an obvious relationship to theater and performance arts, as seen in Rasmus Lyngkjær's article about SIGNA's performance installations and their similarities and differences to larps. Larp also has points of contact with film and even academic endeavors like anthropology and history, as Katri Lassila, Mike Pohjola, and Jenni Lares, respectively, point out in their articles (see also Sophia Seymour and Martine Svanevik's piece on filming larp).

Community and Narratives

The fifth section is dedicated to social critique of design and play practices, and community dynamics – something that has long been an important part of Nordic larp discourse. It opens with Laura Wood and Mo Holkar arguing that historical larps risk reproducing a popularized narrative of history that omits uncomfortable issues such as colonialism.

In addition to critique of problematic narratives built into some larps, the section offers several debate pieces about community issues. For example, the author of *Nordic Larp is Not "International Larp"*, an article originally published in last year's book, explains the differences between the two and suggests that they should be separated into distinct events instead of using SK/KP as a common gathering for both. The author argues that this could benefit both international and Nordic larp.

We are living through an era of conflict and violence, and the international SK/KP community includes people directly affected. The lives of larpers have been shattered by war in Ukraine, a country currently resisting a Russian invasion. Palestinian larpers in our community are forced to deal with tightening oppression under the Israeli occupation on West Bank and the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Maria Pettersson interviewed the Ukrainian larp organizer Anna Posetselska and the Palestinian larp professional Tammy Nassar to find out how it is to make larps in these environments.

Risks, Dangers and Brave Spaces

Larp has been sometimes described as a social or emotional extreme sport. Designers of Nordic and Nordid inspired larps have thus come up with a variety of safety and calibration mechanics. Emotional and psychological safety have been an essential part of the discourse. The final section of the book is dedicated to issues related to the psychological risks involved with larps and related topics.

The articles in the section convey the feeling that we are perhaps moving away from conceptualizing the problem in terms of "safety". The authors in this section note that safety does not really exist – in the end, safety is a feeling, and you can never be truly, completely safe. However, as Juhana Pettersson points out, larping is not inherently unsafe – it is probably more dangerous to go on a real-life date than to larp a date. To the contrary, many larps seem to employ unnecessarily many safety mechanics. Pettersson argues that it would be better to talk about "calibration tools" rather than "safety tools".

Practitioners of physical extreme sports – like scuba diving or rock climbing – tend to discuss their activities in terms of *risk* rather than safety. They accept that there are risks involved and develop ways to *mitigate* these risks. The risk discourse is also a possible alternative to the safety discourse in the larp community. Along these lines, Sergio Losilla provides a toolkit for

managing risks to players and David Thorhauge gives tips for mitigating organizer risks such as that of burnout or social media shitstorms.

The section also offers criticism on some safety-related practices and ideas. There is, for instance, a widespread belief that romantic or erotic play between players with a significant age gap is inherently problematic and possibly predatory. In the closing article of the section and the book, Ruska Kevätkoski challenges this idea. They argue that limiting romantic and erotic play to within the player's own age group will not automatically create a safer space and can lead to new problems such as normalization of neo-puritanism and fostering a culture of timid play instead of safer and braver play.

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DESIGN AND ANALYSIS

This section begins with the thought-provoking debate piece *Against Design* by Andrea Nordwall and Gabriel Widing. They argue that overemphasis on design leads to optimized user experience feedback loops that encourage us to recycle and refine tried and tested ideas. Looking at larps from the viewpoint of user experience is related to the trend of *commodification* of larp. Usva Seregina addresses the newest developments of the phenomenon in their analysis *Readdressing Larp as a Commodity*.

Sometimes, everyday life limits how much we can larp, and at times things like work and parenting can make it impossible to take part in longer larps. Evan Torner sees these limitations as just *constraints on design* and presents the online one-hour role-play as a solution. Karin Edman and Julia Greip turn to the analytical side. In their article *Naked at Nordic Larp*, they take a view on what we can get out of larping without our clothes on. Continuing the analysis track, Karolina Fido writes about different ways of using supporting cast in a larp and presents a distinction between *non-player characters* (NPCs) and *supporting characters*.

Frederikke S. B. Høyer discusses a topic that has not been previously much covered: designing larps for children. In her illuminating article *Designing Power Dynamics Between Adults and Children in Larps*, she gives concrete advice on how to avoid reproducing the real-life power dynamic where the adults are always in charge. Changing it can create interesting play for children.

Sandy Bailly argues that more attention should be given how larp workshops and debriefs are designed. Juhana Pettersson gives tips on how larp organizers can design how they communicate and present themselves before, during and after a larp event. Bjarke Pedersen and Eleanor Saitta illuminate the *interaction engine* that Pedersen uses to design larps where participants actively create thematically interesting situations.

In larps, we sometimes run into problems when we do not know how to interpret objects and bodies that represent other objects and bodies. If someone is wearing a worn-out business suit to a larp, is it meant to be a worn-out suit or just as a suit? Does the player want to present the character as sleek and businesslike or messy and scruffy? Jaakko Stenros, Eleanor Saitta and Markus Montola analyze the problematics of these issues in detail in the final article of the section, *The General Problem of Indexicality in Larp Design*. They argue that all strategies for representation in larp in some way limit what can be presented and by whom.

Against Design

Andrea Nordwall & Gabriel Widing

Larp in general, and Nordic style larp in particular, is often claimed to be an artistic practice, a frontier of participatory arts. However, discourse on larp by larp organizers, larp participants and game studies researchers has, in recent years, started to frame larp making primarily as *a design practice*. By that logic larps are now *designed by larp designers* using *larp-specific participatory interaction design methods*. Discussions on these design methods have become the mainstay of larp conferences such as Knutpunkt/Solmukohta. Let's discuss what this hegemony of design thinking does to our practice.

The overall project of design thinking is constructive. Design has lowered the thresholds of participation as well as enabled and structured larp organizing. In the best case, larp designers evaluate best practices and share methods. Although every step in this direction seems like a small success of self-understanding and self-improvement, we argue that the long-term consequences do not necessarily benefit larp as a culture nor as an artistic form. The current hegemony of *larp as design* does the groundwork for an ongoing reification and commodification of larp. Design transforms larp participants into larp consumers.

New larp projects are now pitched to participants with methods catering to various larp audiences (or rather *intended target groups*). Post-mortems of past projects serve the function of user experience (UX) evaluation examples to optimize the design of future projects. The design methods are reevaluated based on past successes in relation to informally segmented target groups (such as *fantasy-chillout*, *dystopian-play-to-lose*, or *post-apocalypse-over-the-top* larp consumers), combining *setting* with *interaction style* to form specific and recurring audiences. These target groups can then be matched to tried and tested larp design methods

to successfully form an iterative and recursive feed-forward UX loop. In practice, this leads to repeating ideas and design elements that have proven to be successful, at the expense of new innovation.

In their marketing, larps can “attach” themselves to commercially successful and well-known IPs and franchises to pitch projects with similar names, using brand recognition to drive participation, forming a secondary volunteer-run streaming service experience. The success of this strategy indicates an environment where even the overall set and setting for a larp is purposefully used as a design method to drive interest in and communicate intended participation. Adopting commercially successful mass media culture is the optimal strategy for producing predictable participation.

There was a time when mass media enviously glanced at the rich culture and engagement surrounding Nordic larp. By now, the roles are reversed. When larp designers take turns riding on various commercial successes in mass media, larp becomes a cecum of Hollywood film and streaming culture. Such an approach would be highly unusual in artistic fields, where originality merits artistic value.

We argue that larp as a form is being restricted by its own success as a participatory design practice and that innovation in larp is over (other than sporadic and local). We see several reasons why *larp as design practice* hampers larp innovation.

Firstly, design thinking avoids conflict at all costs to deliver a product. Any kind of conflict or disagreement is considered a failed interaction design. But culture can be nurtured by conflict, and we would argue that Nordic larp developed through cultural and subcultural clashes, not through consensus-based “everything is okay as long as you know what you want” design thinking. Bring back dialectics; it’s not smooth, but it’s also not harmful.

We are concerned that larp as a field at this point is emulating some of the worst aspects of experience design commodity culture: start-up ambitions among organizers (including burn-out syndrome) and reification of participants’ social interactions: social interaction becomes a “product” that is delivered by the larp through strategic employment of larp design methods.

The idea of clarity of purpose that design brings makes larp a “readerly” practice – a practice where interpretation (and interaction) is “prepared” for the participant, rather than a “writerly” or artistic-oriented practice, open for the plurality of interpretation (and potential conflict).

Clarity of interpretation is optimal for designing and delivering predictable and serviceable interaction for a defined target group. This results in predictable and shallow cultural practices and artifacts.

Remember, there are many ways to make larps. Norwegians use the word *lage*, a verb that could be utilized for larp making as well as for cooking a soup. Larps can be written, created, organized, dreamt up, or they can be born from artistic practice. We want to encourage a plurality of ways of creating larp.

Think about larp as a culture. It has been said that design is “the opposite of tradition.” Then maybe it’s time to value some of our subcultural traditions, the mutual knowledge of gathering and making stories come alive through our community. Here, we have to understand the limits of design thinking. For example, one of the key features of Nordic larp is trust. We have developed trust in our subculture by nurturing it for many years and events, to the point where we can say trust is *part of our tradition*. This makes some scenarios possible that would otherwise not be possible. However, *you can not replace the tradition of trust by design*. The harder you try, the further you fall when something goes wrong.

We argue that larp should not be reduced to a streamlined, well-designed experience product, but rather nurture an aesthetic field, an artistic form in dialogue with the participants as well as the culture at large. The reason larp fails to claim a culturally relevant position is because the primary focus on *design optimization* reduces our capacity to form an aesthetic or artistic field in dialogue with the wider culture. As an artistic form, larp makers should look for autonomy and integrity in our practice.

Stop using experience product delivery as the primary factor when evaluating larp projects. *Instead, focus on how it innovates the form and how it can reshape culture by doing so.* The latter is not necessarily realized through “good design”, but through good art.

Know that there is a difference between feedback and critique. We know how to give and get the former, not the latter. When engaging in society, larp will become criticized for how it, as a participatory form, approaches important issues. Be ready for, welcome, and enable criticism, not just on how well participatory methods worked out or whether the experience delivered quality time, but on how the form of larp itself can interpret and address cultural issues relevant to society in a wider context. Instead of targeting cultural and societal matters, larp has become a recursive product design improvement loop that is increasingly optimized for a decreasingly creative field.

If we consider larp-making as an artistic creation process, it does not necessarily involve problem-solving or a user-centered approach. Larps can happen through community building, collaborative creation, or even *serendipity*.

Author bios

Andrea Nordwall is a long-time larper, with a background in art and theatre and a Master's degree in interaction design. She produced the first commercially available blackbox larp *Force Majeure* with Gabriel Widing in 2001 and co-authored *Deltagarkultur* in 2009 with the now defunct participatory art collective Interacting Arts.

Gabriel Widing is an artist and game designer, interested in performance, play and participation. His recent works include the mobile based scenarios *Ekstasis* made with Nyxxx as well as *Mobilized* and *Inferno Speeddate* made with Nea Landin. At the moment he is working on a performance based on medieval mystic Hadewijch's poem *Love's Seven Names* in collaboration with Áron Birtalan. gwid.se

Readdressing Larp as Commodity: How Do We Define Value When the Customer Is Always Right?

Usva **Seregina**

At the end of 2019, I wrote an article on the commodification of larp (Seregina 2020), suggesting that larp has become a commodity and analysing the activity from a commodification point of view. The topic felt timely and sparked a lot of interesting and important discussions. In this article, I return to the topic of larp as a commodity, taking a look at it in a context that is defined by numerous crises. We are at a point in time where financial resources are becoming scarce for many, while a need for communal activities is high.

Before delving any deeper, it is central to note that the development of larp into a commodity is, in many ways, a logical development within contemporary society, a society which largely functions around consumption-oriented logic. This forms what is commonly referred to as consumer culture (see Slater 1997; Baudrillard 1998; Bauman 2001; Cohen 2003). Hence, the commodification of larp, in itself as a development, is neither good nor bad. It merely follows the development that has become commonplace within contemporary society. In fact, commodification comes with many positive aspects.

For example, a commodified larp becomes more accepted and legitimised in wider society, as it takes on familiar legal and financial forms, as well as clearer producer and consumer roles. Thus, in reflecting structures common in society and taking on a financial element, larp becomes a more 'acceptable,' 'worthwhile' use of one's time. Commodified larps also gain more streamlined production processes, as elements become optimised and repeatable. Hence,

creation and production of larp can become easier and faster (for more on this, see Seregina 2020). However, it is important to be aware of what these developments do to larp as a practice in its entirety, as the positives do not come without the negatives (no matter how hard we try).

The terms consumer and commodity can often feel cold and removed, and hence larpers often do not want to think about their beloved hobby as part of the market economy. However, ignoring the fact does not address any of the issues that the development of larp into a more commodified form brings with it, and may potentially even make them worse. While I do not believe commodification in itself is bad, I do believe that it can result in negative outcomes for our community if left unchecked. Hence, I would like to re-address the topic of larp as a commodity and reflect on what it means for larpers to become consumers.

Co-creation of a commodity

What exactly does larp as a commodity mean? Commodification is often incorrectly equated with paying money for something, as well as with passively interacting with something. However, it is more about the form of and attitude toward a thing (Campbell 1987; Slater 1997): larp becomes a commodity, as it becomes a resource within the exchange economy. In other words, it becomes valued not for what it is, but for what capital (whatever form this may take) it provides in exchange for people engaging in it. This capital is aimed at fulfilling a want or need, and can be financial, but also cultural or social capital, such as status or experience. The latter would be more common in the context of larp.

Following the above, co-creation or active participation does not exclude something being a commodity. Commodification rather becomes an issue of what participants (or now consumers) expect from the activity, and what their attitude toward it is. In fact, many traditional commodities are becoming co-created or gamified, as it has been shown that an actively interacting consumer is more engaged and thus more invested (for example, Oli Mould (2018) talks about the commodification of creativity overall). In that sense, larp fits perfectly into how contemporary markets are progressing.

As I explain in my 2020 article, larp has developed into a commodity via various characteristics and circumstances, including increased media coverage, rising growth and demand, as well as inclusion of elements from the market economy (such as catering, cleaning services, etc.). The latter ties into the idea of us 'buying back' our leisure time in order to use our time and resources more efficiently (following Frayne 2015). In essence, many convenience commodities, such as

microwave meals or cleaning services, allow us to free up the time we would normally use to engage in their creation (such as cooking or cleaning). While 'buying back' time allows organisers and participants of larps to focus more on the larp itself instead of all the chores that come with it, it also means that we engage less materially with the practicalities of the event, thus tying larp into consumerist norms. In other words, as we 'make' less of the larp ourselves and together, it becomes created for us and thus removed from us as a commodity functioning through forms and structures of consumer culture.

Another important aspect of how larp becomes a commodity is rooted in how we talk about it. The past years have seen us change a lot of terminology and description of larp toward a more commodified and consumerist logic. Society in general is extremely performative, in that social meanings exist merely because we have decided to collectively give them these meanings, repeating the same meanings over and over (following Austin 1962, Turner 1987). Coming from this logic, things have meaning and status and value because *we actively give them* that meaning and status and value. For example, something is posh or stylish only because we have collectively decided that these things are posh or stylish. Hence, when we call larp participants "customers" or when we call sign-ups to larp "ticket purchases", we further instill the essence of consumerism onto larp through wording it as such.

The customer is always right

If an activity becomes approached as a commodity, its user naturally takes on a consumer or customer role. This is a role that we are extremely accustomed to in today's society, as we are acculturated into it within consumer culture, and take it on in many contexts (such as service and shopping situations, but also governance, education, and culture). Hence, we slip into the role of a consumer very easily, without necessarily recognising it as such.

The consumer role comes with its own preset modes of interaction with the service provider (in this case, the larp organiser), other service users (other larp participants), and the product itself (the larp). A consumer is driven by their wants and needs, and fulfills these by consuming products (Campbell 1987). While attending a larp may have a multitude of underlying goals (which I will not go into here), we could roughly sum these up as the want to have a good experience (whatever that is classified as). However, the consumer is only driven by *their own* needs and wants. This does not mean consumers become passive or exclusionary: as I mention above, a consumption experience can be very interactive and co-created. However, the end-goal of such an experience will always be one's own experience, with other participants

becoming a part of the background or potentially even seen as service providers along with the larp organiser. The co-creation will thus not be on equal terms, but rather as a consumer and producer, with the former holding a lot of power over the latter in terms of expectations and demands.

At the same time, the consumer relinquishes any responsibility over the product (following Slater 1997; Ritzer 2001; Cohen 2003). The product is created by the service provider, and hence its value is created during its production. However, the complex issue with larp is that its production and consumption are, in many ways, overlapping processes that cannot be distinguished or disentangled. We create larp as we consume it; forever an ephemeral process. As I noted in my 2020 article, in the long run, this loosening of responsibility may lead to collapse of communal larping as everyone merely focuses on their own experiences.

In itself the consumer role is in no way problematic, as long as it does not undermine the organiser and the other players. However, one big issue I see arising is what happens when someone has a bad time. Obviously, if it's a safety concern or another similar matter, these need to be dealt with properly by the organiser. But what happens when someone does not have an experience that has lived up to their expectations? Or they don't feel they've got their money's worth? From a commodification point of view, the organiser should be fully responsible for the consumer having a good time, yet this is not necessarily feasible in the way larp is set up now. I address this further below.

Moreover, who will be seen as the producer? A larp organiser naturally falls into this role, even as they may not have as much power in it as a producer would traditionally. But what about the crew and the volunteers? And potentially even more active players participating alongside? This set-up may result in some players falling into the role of a service provider without actually having anything to do with the organisation of the larp, skewing power relations in dangerous ways among participants.

Pressure to professionalise

There has been a strong push to organise larp more professionally and to view larp organisation as work (not to be confused with labour¹). This is, once again, a very logical development in

¹ Following Maria Mies (2014) work can be seen as a formalised, organised version of labour. Work is labour that is exchanged for capital and follows clear legal rules as well as exists within clear power structures. While

contemporary consumption-oriented society, in which work is the ultimate form of status and legitimisation. No matter whether we like it or not, work is how we largely define our identities and our value within contemporary capitalist society (Frayne 2015; Mould 2018). Consequently, many fields such as larp that are initially not commercialised see a movement toward 'careerisation' of their practices (Seregina and Weijo 2017). When something becomes work, it also becomes more productive and profitable, and hence a more legitimate use of time. Simultaneously, the product of this activity also becomes more legitimised and a valuable use of one's resources in the eyes of others. It is important to talk about professionalisation of an activity in the context of its commodification because consumption and work are two sides of the same coin, with one pushing the other.

Professionalisation can be seen in a few main ways within larp. Firstly, many directly want to turn larp-organising into a job. Secondly, professionalisation emerges in higher production value and use of support services. This includes a higher level of scenery, lighting, catering, and costuming, among other things. Lastly, larp is more and more often documented and merchandised. A lot of events are photographed and sometimes even filmed, and we also see a rise in possibilities of buying add-on products like t-shirts that advertise the event and/or can be used in-game. Such elements solidify what is otherwise an ephemeral performance, making it more of a produced material entity.

The result of professionalisation can be higher-value events, which can create amazing experiences for participants and organisers alike. The processes involved in it can further help make larp organisation easier, putting it into an easily and conveniently reproducible form.

At the same time, professionalisation of larp in many ways *presents* the activity as a commodity to those planning to attend. This means that (mostly indirectly) participants are getting the message that they *should* be approaching the event as a commodity, altering their expectations and attitude toward it. If larp organisation is presented as a for-profit job and larp takes on easily reproducible, mass produced characteristics, we cannot expect participants *not* to approach the event as something with which they have customer expectations and consumer rights. As a result, it becomes natural for the participant to focus only on their own experience and demand that the experience matches what was promised, cementing larp's place as an element of market exchange within a capitalist system.

labour is a way of engaging with the world, work usually results in a commodity that can be exchanged for capital by consumers. For example, doing your dishes at home is labour but it is not work.

Professionalisation further requires streamlining and standardisation of activities, repeatability of events (or elements of events), as well as higher larp ticket costs in order to become economically viable. The first characteristics are central for pushing down costs for the organiser in order to attempt to make a profit, but run the risk of changing the nature of larp as quite ephemeral, interpersonal events. The latter is necessary to be able to pay organisers and crew for labour that is now their work. In reality, however, organisers and crew are rarely paid a wage, especially a fair one, often because of budgeting reasons. Hence, even for-profit larps largely rely on volunteers or low-pay workers, which, in turn, creates ample possibilities for misuse of labour (as well as potential legal issues with taxation and labour laws), once again skewing power relations within the community.

When organising a larp, it is important to reflect on how the event itself as well as the forms of production that it has involved impact larp as a community. The professionalisation of specific larp events reflects on the community as a whole, raising standards and expectations for all future events. This growth and expectations that come with it puts an immense amount of pressure onto larp organisers to provide events up to par, potentially creating organiser stress and burnout (something discussed a lot previously; see e.g., Lindve 2019, Petterson 2022).

The value of a larp

In the above described context, monetary value becomes extremely complicated and potentially problematic. To begin with, higher cost of a larp easily becomes interpreted as the event providing a 'better experience' to the larper. In a consumer culture context, higher cost is generally associated with higher value and higher demand in our society. Moreover, limited access to larp in general makes the activity a scarce commodity, immediately making it intrinsically more valuable. This results in higher expectations on personal experience: participants feel that they are investing more financial capital and hence are entitled to reap more social and cultural capital from it.

The issue for larp specifically in this setup is that the organiser, in the long run, has limited capacity in making sure the player's experience is of high value, as I've already noted. A good larp experience can depend on a large number of ever-changing elements, including but not limited to personal investment, engagement, and preparations; other participants and their contribution; weather, terrain, the venue, and associated travel. In a professionalised set-up, the service provider becomes responsible for all of this despite having little control over many elements that feed into a good experience.

Moreover, because larpers as consumers relinquish much of their responsibility over the event, they are more likely to focus on their own experience rather than aid others'. Hence, the inherent value that we gain from larp in some ways can be seen to actually *go down* in a commodified form because a good experience in larp largely relies on the interaction among and support of other larpers. In focusing solely on our own experiences, we expect more, but also give less. Other larpers easily become seen as a part of the commodity we are consuming, while organisers as well as any crew, volunteers, and NPCs will become seen as service providers.

Financial inaccessibility

With raised costs of larping, a big issue that arises is financial inaccessibility. This is an extremely difficult subject, especially in light of everything else discussed, such as fair labour, and thus easily becomes the elephant in the room. Moreover, we, in many ways, have little control over rising costs, as overall rise in cost of living undoubtedly has its effects on larp organisation as well, reflecting in the prices of venues and catering to name a few things. Yet because any inaccessibility is viewed as bad, we seem to steer away from this conversation as a community.

It is important to stress that a costlier larp should not in any way be seen as bad. Most of the time, the attendance costs are merely covering any investment organisers have put in, which is only fair to ask for. However, if someone's choice of whether or not to attend a larp is mainly or even solely dependent on the costs associated with that larp, that is, indeed, textbook financial inaccessibility. And we should not ignore that. Many support systems already exist for financial inaccessibility, such as discounted and tiered tickets or payment in installments. These are definitely helpful and make larp more accessible to those with lower means. However, costly larps will remain costly (and most likely become even costlier); oftentimes even discounted tickets remain inaccessible. Sadly, there is little we can do about high costs, as I already noted. What we can do and what we *need to do* is be able to discuss these issues.

In line with a commodity point of view, a more expensive larp easily becomes viewed as better. Following this, those attending costlier, larger, better advertised, and thus 'higher value' larps can easily become seen as 'better larpers,' which creates problematic hierarchies and power structures within the community. Larps with higher production value also come with more hype, more discussion, and more coverage in media and social media, and thus, inadvertently, more social and cultural capital. Simply put, those who go to costlier larps and those who create costlier larps accrue more capital within the community (be it cultural, social, financial).

Thus, while the fact that we pay more for larp does not directly make it a commodity, the fact that we reap more capital from costlier larps and use that capital within our community does.

At the same time, we see a certain subsection of larpers becoming priced out of the activity. More and more people are having to limit how many events they attend, or even stop going to larps entirely, due to financial reasons. We also see more and more of those from lower economic strata crewing and volunteering at events. While this is a great way to make an event financially accessible, if these roles are seen as service provider roles that attendees can demand from and take their frustrations out on, it will further skew power relations among larpers. Hence, financial inaccessibility runs the risk of creating wildly different ways people with different economic means can access larp, and they may be unable to access it at all.

Concluding thoughts

Following my brief analysis of larp as a commodified activity, I'd like to wrap this article up with a few thoughts and suggestions. I want to begin by reiterating what I stressed in my 2020 article. Commodification in itself is not good or bad. However, we *cannot* reap its positive qualities without its negative characteristics, as many seem to try. Hence, we should question why we structure things the way we do – as larp organisers and as larp participants. As organisers, we should consider: what kinds of audiences do we reach, and what audiences will be able to access our larp? How are participants viewing the larp? How do they view their own role as part of the larp, and how do they view others attending the larp? What does commodification of larp bring to the event specifically? Is it valuable to you? And to the players attending, as well as the wider larp community?

As participants, we should similarly reflect on our role within the event. How am I taking part in the larp? How am I taking into consideration the organisers? The crew? Other players? What do I want to get out of the experience, how am I obtaining that, and who do I think is responsible for that?

We should also reflect on why we are pushing for professionalisation and thus commodification of larp. What is the purpose of this? Is it to create better events? Is it to gain legitimisation within wider society? Is it to create jobs?

In 2020, I noted a fear of fragmentation of our community. Today, I definitely see more economic, social, and cultural inequalities within larp, as well as a growing divide between high

cultural capital and low cultural capital events². I think we need to push hard for giving value to different kinds of larp, independent of their cost and production value or ‘type’ of larp (be it so-called Nordic larp, boffer larp, international larp, or localised larp groups, among various other types). We are running the risk of creating a hierarchy of larps in terms of what are seen to be ‘better’ larps than others: something that, at this point, often coincides with the market and production value of the event. In other words, costlier larps are currently associated with being higher culture and thus better than lower culture, cheaper larps.

Along with this divide, we bring growing class differences and potential skewed power relations among those attending and those who are organising; among those attending different types of events; among those who are attending on different terms (be it different ticket types; as volunteers, crew, players). We are already a very white, very middle-class activity, but with the cost of living crisis we are becoming even more so. Hence, it is critical to be aware of, reflect on, and aim to address these issues in organising larp. What’s more, all of the discussed issues will further tie into the acculturation of new larpers. What kind of community are we welcoming them into, and what kinds of roles will they be learning to take on?

Reflecting on one’s roles and actions can be difficult, especially for topics of commodification, which come to us quite naturally and unintentionally, yet can feel alien and cold, with people tending to push away or disassociate from them. But denying these issues does not remove consumption as a central structuring force of contemporary society. Its ideology remains, reinforced by our own actions. The aim of the reflexive actions I am suggesting is not to judge anyone, but rather to get larpers to understand their own choices when engaging in larping. Perhaps the reflection will not change anything, perhaps it will only change things a little, and perhaps it will change someone’s approach entirely. But I believe that by being conscious and aware of what we are doing as well as how our actions affect the activity of larping and the larp community as a whole, we will create a more inclusive and communal entity.

² Cultural capital dictates one’s position in societal power structures. Higher cultural capital holds more power within one’s context and is often seen to have more value, while lower cultural capital holds less power and is thus less valuable (Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1998).

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Usva Seregina is a trans non-binary visual and performance artist, art educator, as well as an interdisciplinary researcher with a background in consumer culture studies. Their artistic and academic practices currently focus on exploring lived experiences of immigration and queerness. Usva is interested in harnessing larp as a political and educational tool, which emerges as larp design that makes use of artistic approaches and academic research.

Accepting Limits: The One-Hour Online Role-Play Experience

Evan **Turner**

“An hour?!” someone asked me the other day, incredulous. “How can you run a whole tabletop RPG session in an hour?!”

I’m all too happy to answer that question.

My recent practice of running one-hour-length role-playing sessions over voice channels on the online social platform Discord apparently baffles people. What else can I say? I *am* proud of the format and, furthermore, know of many folks who might benefit from adopting it as their own. In this short piece, I describe how I run one-hour sessions, whilst also painting a portrait of what “role-play” looks for me now at present.

Let’s start with the “why.” Why do this brutally short format with my players? Don’t I enjoy their company? Isn’t role-play supposed to be a many-houred, luxurious affair, with chips and conversation aplenty?

As with anything, we can blame society for my current constraints. With the advent of not only the Covid-19 pandemic but also pressures of modern parenthood of two small children under late capitalism, it has been difficult for myself and others to larp or even schedule regular RPG sessions. Larp seems largely consigned to a life I once led, now rapidly receding into the past.

Nevertheless, I’ve refused to give up role-playing the past several years, as I’ve kinda devoted my life to it and am disinclined to give up my favorite medium in the world. Moreover,

Nordic larp design principles emphasizing that “everything is a designable surface” help us accept our seemingly-impossible limitations as simply *constraints on design*. Live-action online games (LAOGs) have also normalized this form of play, for which Gerrit Reininghaus and the Open Hearth Gaming Community (formerly known as The Gauntlet) can take credit (see also Reininghaus and Hermann in this volume). And almost no one in my circles can find a proper 2-4 hours to spend online and role-playing, but *everyone* seems to, at least, have an hour to spare.

The simple constraints of compressed time and remote play have forced me to prioritize the following principles:

- *Scheduling*, the great beast that every successful role-playing group must slay
- *Grace in negotiation*, or assuming the best and remaining affirmative with the group
- *Efficiency of play*, in which the group voluntarily adopts different norms of speaking and turn-taking to facilitate a memorable hour of role-play
- *Minimalism*, both in the systems used and in “special time” situations, such as combat
- *Externalized memory*, because you never know when you might play next

Putting these principles into practice means choosing to accept the limits on one’s time, energy, and format, in exchange for regular, rich hours of role-play with folks all around the world.

It works as follows. I gather everyone who has communicated interest in playing in a regular one-hour session into a single private Discord channel. This “general” chat will be used for scheduling, logistics, meme-posting, etc. A second Discord text channel is created for campaign notes, which will become the externalized memory of the group. A third “voice” channel is created for the actual play of the campaign. In the “general” logistics chat, we then attempt to find a shared hour in our schedules within the next month.

Scheduling happens with the pre-understanding that it is a difficult task, often crossing many time zones! If one month doesn’t seem to have availability for everyone, we skip it and go to the next month. For example, a recent game went on hiatus for 18 months on account of a baby’s birth, and then resumed as soon as players gradually found a shared hour to resume play. Because the time unit is only an hour in length, no major child care or babysitter needs to be pursued, and any players who need to drop the session last-minute are easily forgiven: a game that’s one hour in length can always be rescheduled, no questions asked. This is what I call *grace in negotiation*, which always assumes the best of others. Players should in no way be punished or shamed for scheduling issues. It should remain a pleasure to show up, sit down, and play.

Play itself will be regulated by the principles of *efficiency of play* and *minimalism*. Players cannot make overlapping table conversations on Discord, so everyone must wait their turn to speak. Contributions must therefore be kept short, meaning that one should think about one's 1-3 sentences of description beforehand. Dialogue is conducted like a fanfic table read, with players being very transparent about their characters' motivations and actions as they speak. Dramatic irony is a great tool to create tension between what a player knows and what a character says and does.

Above all, the facilitator must keep track of time. Resolve any fights within 30 minutes, or maybe within two full character actions by a player, whichever way is quicker. Your own system of distributing player agency over combat, and the fiction in general, is worth far more than following the letter of the rules for every game. Every player should get the spotlight on their character at least once during a session, and that spotlight should be reasonably evenly distributed. This also means the maximum group size is usually four or five players. Short scenes that are cut abruptly are magnitudes better than ones that drag on in the hopes of more drama.

Critical to this model is the *externalized memory* of writing down the general results of a session in the appropriate Discord channel. Who knows when you'll get your next hour together? Preferably on the same day as the play session, you will write down a brief summary of what "happened" in the fiction during the session, tracking in particular characters, locations, and actions taken. Make sure there's an easily accessible link to any shared character sheets, either on a platform such as Roll20 or an online character keeper.

In summary, the one-hour online role-play experience helps us busy adults "fit in" role-play while accepting limits on our time, money, patience, and memory. It acknowledges care-givers, overburdened employees, and neurodivergent adults. It celebrates the fact that even smaller campaigns shared among a few people are just as valuable as more-ambitious projects and, for some isolated by their circumstances, can indeed serve as a lifeline to the hobby and communities they cherish. Open your Discord and see if anyone is up for an hour of role-play.

Author Bio

Evan Torner (b. 1982) is an American professor of German and Film & Media who began doing larp theory and design over a decade ago. He co-founded the Analog Game Studies journal and the Golden Cobra Challenge.

Naked at Nordic Larp

Karin **Edman** & Julia **Greip**

Disclaimer: We understand and respect that nudity is not for everyone, and it is certainly not for every larp. There are several reasons to not feel comfortable being naked, or being around naked people, and that is perfectly alright. However, in this article we will focus mainly on our positive experiences of nudity in larps.

This article is written from the perspective of two people with fairly similar experiences and relations to nudity: we are both Swedish, and in our cultural context there are situations (sauna, public changing rooms and the occasional skinny dipping in secluded natural lakes) where naked bodies are completely ordinary, undramatic and usually not sexualised. While we both exist somewhere on the genderqueer spectrum, we are perceived by the outside world as women, and politically identify as women¹. Since societal beauty standards often contribute to how people feel about showing their naked bodies, it is relevant to mention that we are both able-bodied, and fairly average-looking. Karin is fat, whereas Julia is pear-shaped and of average weight. Whereas it would be interesting and helpful with more diverse perspectives, they would not fit within the scope of this article. In any case, it is our firm belief that *all* bodies are suited to being naked in larps, no matter how close or far they are to living up to societal beauty standards. We hope to include more diverse voices and opinions in this discussion in the future. We would like to see more people writing from different perspectives about their own experiences with nakedness in Nordic larp.

¹ It can be explained as fully supporting being counted as women in the politics of social justice and not distancing ourselves from women's issues even if we lack an inner gender identity.

Why be naked at larps?

Nakedness in larps is usually not sexual. If we want to be sexy or sexual at larps, we will usually go for a costume that is sexy. In none of the situations where we have been naked at larps, or witnessed others' nudity, has it been particularly sexy. Instead, nudity has made us feel other things, including, but not limited to: vulnerable, powerful, fearful, otherworldly, small, confident, helpless, innocent and natural. Provided it makes narrative and dramatic sense, we have found that being naked or witnessing nudity can make a scene much more intense and immersive, and result in a more impactful experience.

In *The Forbidden History* Julia played a scene involving a ritual with her character's friend group. The beginning of the ritual was emotionally taxing. The characters tore into each other and pointed out and criticized each others' weaknesses and insecurities. After this, the characters were each, in turn, undressed and gently bathed and washed by the others. The stark contrast between the sting of the cruel words and the tenderness of being washed gently, was made all the more palpable by having barely any clothes on. Being undressed and physically exposed, after being emotionally exposed by the cruel words, complemented and enhanced the emotional impact of the scene. This offers a clear example of how nudity can deepen immersion and imbue a feeling of vulnerability.

In, off or if?

For many of us larpers, costume is an integral part of how we embody our characters. Through costuming we can modify our appearance and make ourselves look prettier, uglier, more athletic, majestic or however else we want our character to look. We may do this to distance our own identity from that of our character, or to adapt our appearance to fit a character physicality different from our own. Costuming provides cues for ourselves and other players on how our characters should be perceived and reacted to, and aids in immersion for ourselves and the players around us. Without the camouflage of costume, our nude body offers little separation between our own appearance and that of our characters, and few prompts for how our characters should be understood. One could argue that our bodies, once in costume, are 'in-game' and that being out of costume signifies we are 'off-game'.

We find this argument limiting. In the same way that being out of costume could signify we are 'off-game', when naked, there is nothing to signify that we are anyone other than the characters we are embodying. Most characters are also in possession of a naked body beneath



Photo: Karin Edman

their clothes, and this body can be represented by our own naked bodies just as easily as their attire can be represented by our costumes. Clothing or costume is not the only way in which we embody characters. Elements such as make-up, accessories or mannerisms can be just as effective in portraying elements of our characters, and their effect is even more profound when adorning an otherwise naked body.

Karin first came to this realization when re-running *The Witches of Åstad Farm* (Sweden 2016). She describes the scene, in which nudity at first appeared to be just a solution to a practical problem, but ended up being an important part of the experience:

“A character summoned the mythical Morrigan (a figure from Irish mythology, appearing as a crow, and often portrayed as a trio of sisters). We as crew wanted to do the scene, but did not have fitting costumes available. After some consideration I exclaimed that ‘being naked is always in-game’. We decided The Morrigan would arrive with two of their aspects as ravens who would shapeshift into human form. As ravens naturally do not wear clothes, neither would we. We used grease paint to create black wings on our backs and adopted weird, otherworldly and bird-like behavior as we ‘landed’ alongside Morrigan at a midnight ritual on that chilly autumn night. The only prop used was an apple, which we tossed between us and then to the other players.”

In some situations, nakedness in larps is for practical reasons, and has no strong part in play. A typical example of this is in Swedish fantasy larps, where it is not uncommon for people to cool off by skinny-dipping in a creek or lake. In these situations, the naked bodies are viewed as neutral, undramatic, and these situations sometimes have an air of “if” (the liminal space between in-game and off-game). Important scenes rarely happen in these situations, and players usually do not feel deep immersion and emotions.

Vulnerable, yet protected

The experience of being naked, whilst those around you are clothed, can be particularly affecting and enhance the psychological and emotional state of our characters. In *Libertines* (Denmark 2019) Julia's character was forced to undress by her oppressors, admit to humiliating things she was accused of, and then sit down to dinner, still naked. Being completely naked in this situation made the scene extremely immersive – the oppression felt much more threatening, and the small acts of kindness and compassion deeply moving. It was an incredible way to experience vulnerability, to let the larp come up close and personal.

However, in our experience being naked also has a sort of protective effect. When a person is wearing little or no clothing, any kind of physical contact feels more intimate or intrusive. As a result, other players tend to avoid touching you, or at least do so with more forethought and deliberation that they might otherwise do.

This effect also works in tandem with the 'underwear rule' that is used in many larps, especially those that have techniques for sex scenes that are realistic looking (such as theater style sex). The underwear rule says that you must be wearing at least underwear when playing out a sex scene. As a result, we have felt quite safe when being naked at larps, because we know that it will act as a clear signal that other players should not engage in sex scenes with us until we are dressed again.

Liberating and empowering

So far, we have mainly focused on the short-term effect nudity has on the experience of the larp itself. However, it is also relevant to explore the effect it can have on our off-game experiences of our own bodies. Overall, our naked bodies are only relevant in our private lives either as neutral (when we are bathing or changing, etc.), and in intimate situations. We often view them with critical, evaluating eyes, gauging our fitness or attractiveness. We rarely have opportunities for our naked bodies to take up space without being judged or evaluated. In larps, it is possible to create such a space, and to reap the benefits even after the larp is over.

The larp community consists of individuals with all sorts of body types, genders and sexualities. Acceptance of differences, and recognising people as they wish to be recognised, are behavioral norms amongst most larpers, and an intolerance to any sort of -phobic or body-shaming

comments is often written into the rules and policies of larps. This openness has made larp events ideal places to experience the ‘sauna effect’ on how we view our naked bodies.

The ‘sauna effect’ is said to happen when you regularly go to spaces where people with a diversity of bodies are naked and relaxed, such as saunas or gym changing rooms. Working to become comfortable in these settings, and normalizing nudity in neutral and non-sexualised settings can have a positive effect on our self-image and mental health.

The ‘sauna effect’ makes us feel that naked bodies are quite normal, that we can relax and be ourselves, that nakedness is not something to take much note about. However, being naked at larps can also have a completely different, but equally empowering, effect on how we view our own bodies. It can offer the opportunity for our naked bodies to take up space in dramatic and impressive ways, allowing us to feel powerful or otherworldly in our nakedness – a feeling that we rarely experience in everyday life. We can tell you from experience, that despite the risk of ending up scratched and bruised, running naked through the woods, screaming and cursing can be a surprisingly raw and healing experience.

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Author Bios

Karin Edman works full time with game culture for adults, and thus is one of few Swedish “professional larpers” with the privilege to have organized two of their dark and sapphic larps professionally. She runs a blog about larp theory and is published in several KP/SK books. They focus on queerness, physical experiences, disability, and body acceptance. Edman is a talented project lead and communicator with a Master’s degree in Library and Information Science. Pronouns are she/they interchangeably. Karin’s blog can be found at <https://wonderkarin.wordpress.com/blog/>

Julia Greip (b. 1992) is a Swedish larper, writer, designer and organizer (best known for *Pleasing Women*, *Stenrike* and *Libertines*). The fine line (or long jump) between social realism and the sensually divine makes her tick. She is passionate about historical undergarments, meaningful eye contact and finding what truly connects people. She has a B.A. in behavioral sciences. She shares reflections on larp and other relevant subjects on the blog Flickers: <https://flickers-blog.blogspot.com>

Strings and Rails: NPCs vs Supporting Characters

Karolina **Fido-Fairfax**

“For larps [Non-Player Characters] (...) exist at the service of the larp, and their existence and agency are secondary to those of the player characters.” (Brind 2020)

In many larps, Non-Player Characters (NPCs) are diegetic tools for larp designers and runtime gamemasters to set specific events in motion, to convey important messages and to anchor story beats in the timeline of the larp. Their psychology is often simplified compared to other characters, and they are single-minded in their pursuit of the given task. NPCs are a bridge between the plot and the player characters, and their primary goal is to serve the story.

Sometimes, however, the game benefits from the presence of Non-Player Characters with more complex personalities and agendas; characters who must remain on the runtime gamemasters' strings, but who can no longer be on rails. For convenience, I call them *supporting characters*, and I separate them from the NPCs, even though there may be various degrees of overlap in their design.

Where NPCs serve the story, supporting characters serve the players. Their interactions with player characters are paramount to their personal agendas, and they are often used as a litmus paper for how the game is going and what aspects of it need to be tweaked on the go. Supporting characters bring out the internal struggles in player characters, draw them deeper into the story; not for the story's sake, but for the characters'.

The Polish larp *Fallout: Xanai's Revenge* (Poland 2023) used both NPCs and supporting characters with great success. The larp's plot centred around a small village that drew in

travellers from various conflicted factions, and with them - all sorts of trouble. NPCs were the overt antagonists who made the other characters' lives difficult – they were thugs on the roads, raiders attacking the village, one-dimensional villains with straightforward agendas and one simple task: to pose a challenge to the players. They set the tone for the game, and their actions clearly communicated the level of danger facing player characters.

Simultaneously, each faction at the larp contained a supporting character, some openly introduced as such, some hidden among the players. Their role was more complex: they were expected to provide play to their respective factions, to incentivise players to develop their personal stories, and to provide a living and breathing world where the players could feel at home. Those supporting characters had their own allegiances and agendas, but they were allowed to change them and even switch sides if they bonded with the player characters, or if the direction in which the game was progressing didn't seem to appeal to the players.

They were still on the larp designer's strings – the potential change of their goals was written into the design and had to be consulted with the designer, but the freedom of action set them apart from the single-minded NPCs whose actions and goals were set in stone.

An important trait separating NPCs from supporting characters is their “screen time”. NPCs are typically one-off appearances. They serve a specific role and then they disappear, or in the case of random encounters, they respawn into equally one-dimensional roles to repeat the same task. Meanwhile, supporting characters are either present throughout the game, or recurring at specific times. Since their role is that of supporting the players' stories, their availability is crucial for the formation of emotional bonds, the building of stakes, and the escalation of conflicts. Supporting characters are there to encourage players, to create spotlight for them, and to weave the player characters' personal stories into the overarching story of the larp. They are the manipulative antagonist who tempts the heroes with the promise of power and glory; they are the vulnerable rookie who needs guidance and protection; they are the dying elder who brings out the worst in the relatives fighting for their inheritance.

Sometimes, all the larp needs are one-off NPCs. The larp *Paler Shade of Black* (Poland 2013) introduced NPCs whose only job was to incite riots and let themselves be captured by the palace guards to be made an example of. The game focused on a small kingdom surrounded by inhospitable lands, whose survival depended on the absolute trust in the ruthless but effective rulers. Civil disobedience was a major theme there, and the NPCs served as both its enablers and primary victims. Their off-game goal was to provide play to the guards and play up their authority, but because their “screen time” was so short, they didn't require extensive

backgrounds or personalities. Despite this, the cast of the NPCs decided to add flavour to their roles. With the runtime gamemaster's approval, they wrote quasi-backstories for their characters, weaving them into letters and pages from diaries that could be found on them once they'd been captured.

These props didn't turn the NPCs into supporting characters, but they sprinkled their one-dimensional roles with a little more personality, providing the guards with something new to engage with. Had the NPCs survived and used their backstories as alibi to interact with the personal stories of the player characters, their conversion to full-fledged supporting characters would have been complete.

When designing a larp, it is crucial to decide which of the roles will be needed, and to clearly communicate it to the cast who will be playing them. While NPCs mostly stay on rails and depend on the runtime gamemasters to direct them, supporting characters require thinking on their feet and a level of selflessness that allows them to cater to the players' needs while keeping the overarching plot in peripheral vision. Due to their recurring nature, full-fledged personalities, and often complex backstories, supporting characters carry an emotional investment that needs to be recognised and approached with proper care. The supporting cast may experience bleed just like the players, which means that regular check-ins and a thorough debriefing is just as important for them as the pre-game briefing.

NPCs and supporting characters set an example of generosity, serving the plot and the players alongside the gamemasters. Distinguishing between the roles we perform in larp and the implications they carry is just another step to creating a safe, generous, and wholesome experience for everyone involved.

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Author's bio

Karolina Fido-Fairfax is a Polish larp designer with 13 years of experience in collaborative storytelling. She is the lead narrative designer for the Wonderlarp Foundation and a member of teams working on larps such as *Adventurers' Academy*, *College of Wizardry*, *WereWar*, *Conscience*, *Odysseus*, and *Wards of Czocho*. As a larpwright with a vast experience in game design and crew coordination, she holds Nordic larp as an example of inclusivity, creativity, and collaborative spirit.



Designing Power Dynamics Between Adults and Children in Larps

Frederikke S. B. **Høyer**

When every part of a larp is a designable surface, we as designers are faced with both the opportunities and the responsibilities that this implies (Koljonen, 2019). As a wide age range exists in the larp community, it is essential to design for softening up the impacts that off-game power dynamics born from participants' age and experience level can have on the interactions. This article deals with why and how you design balanced power dynamics between adult and child participants. This design approach is practice-based, utilized at the mythical fantasy larp campaign *Fladlandssagaen* (Denmark 2006-, Eng. *The Flatland Saga*) as well as the edu-larps and leisure larps I have run at Østerskov Efterskole in 2023.

Why design spaces that allow children to influence the larp?

As a *co-creative, collaborative medium*, larp becomes breathtaking when its participants experience co-ownership as the larp unfolds. In larp, different age-groups' perceived areas of agency and social legitimation to participate in the activities of the larp are formed by our design choices – absence of design maintains status quo and ensures that those with the off-game social power to define acceptable social behavior will do so in-game as well; in this context, adults will define the larp's social frame for children. Counteracting this requires conscious design of in-game spaces in which the children have agency and power to influence the larp, without alienating the adults. I recognize that there are differences between adults and children, and that adults ultimately bear off-game responsibility for everyone's safety and experience throughout the larp. I argue, however, that we can create a framework in which

children can be allowed to explore, lead, mentalize and be taken seriously, to let them expand their social skill set and experience being a part of the associated community.

A framework for designing balanced power dynamics

The following section reviews the design strategies I use to create balanced power dynamics in larp. Each design step describes how, and is followed by an example, marked with an arrow, from the player-group Umbrafalkene (Eng. The Umbra Falcons) at *Fladlandssagaen* (Denmark 2006-, Eng. *The Flatland Saga*):

The participants play former soldiers and children of former soldiers, who try to make a new life for themselves in a troubled area. Throughout their storylines and plots, the players face situations wherein they learn to deal with anger, sorrow, loss and a craving for revenge. The themes were selected because our young players find it difficult to recognize and deal with the associated feelings in their own lives.

1) Set concrete design goals for the power dynamics and social interactions in the larp. Define and formulate the intention, so you can communicate, measure, and test your choices.

The goal was to create a dynamic in which the children address the team's difficulties through collaboration, their courage to be honest and their willingness to act together, while the adults escalate the problems through their old habits and stubborn beliefs.

2) Designate a coordinator that knows how to work with children. The person needs to be introduced early and be readily available, so that the children know where to find them in case they need help. It is advantageous if the person discreetly checks in on the children during the larp, asks about their experience and offers to help them reflect on their experiences.

We usually have multiple coordinators who share the responsibility. When we have the resources, we divide the children into smaller groups so we can interact with them on their terms and facilitate play accordingly: one of us has the youngest players (4-8 years), one has the slightly older children (9-12), and one has the teenagers (13-15 years).

3) Then, design the overall narratives and dynamics. The narrative reasoning and legitimation for the dynamics must be experienced as meaningful and authentic to play on for both the adults and the children. Significant design areas that you can focus on are,

among others, defined standards for social interactions that grant both agency and alibi, rites of passage, easily usable safety measures, and formed spaces. Within these spaces the players can explore their chosen themes by themselves or with each other, without excluding or invalidating the focus of other players. Design who wields the social power, as well as when and how the characters handle in-game conflicts across age groups so it doesn't break immersion nor default to the off-game power dynamics. Remember both groups' needs.

The children are staged as experts in how to live peacefully as a part of a community, while the adults are staged as experts in conflicts and making tough choices. The children wield the social power to de-escalate situations, while adults steadily escalate scenes towards the point where weapons must be drawn. Furthermore, the children are the only ones who can handle the mythical creatures living in the nearby dangerous magical forest, while the adults are the only ones that can carry titles and be punished by law.

4) Create character development, plots, and tasks that support, maintain, and necessitate the chosen dynamic in basic routines, keeping both adults and children in mind. Players need meaningful activities during the larp that serve a purpose in the larp as a whole (Kangas 2019). Here, you shape the children's areas of agency; their plots and actions must be important for the overall larp with consequences they can take responsibility for and react to during the runtime. It is essential to prioritize explanation of the context and consequences of a scene, so the children understand their agency and choices, for example through a narrative voice where the facilitator meta-communicates what will happen if they follow through with their actions. This teaches the children how they can navigate and decode a scene. Creating an alibi for making the choices together and sharing the responsibility, connected to an explanation of why the adults cannot help, is beneficial.

The Umbra Falcons had been asked to help in a nearby battle. The children were in doubt. Before they made a decision, one of the adults, who was their facilitator and knew that there would be fighting in that plotline, said: "If we go to battle, it will be dangerous. Maybe, there will be fighting, in which case we could die. But our help is needed, and we do not have time to find others instead. What should we do?" Here, the theme and the impending actions were meta-communicated to the children, so they knew what they were getting into if they chose to follow through with the plot.

Plotlines created specifically to our teenagers and adults are played on when there are no children around. When a child joins a scene, everyone will adjust their playstyle to make room for the child's perspective, rather than forcing the child to adopt a grown-up perspective on

matters. In-game, the narrative explanation is that the adults try to protect the children from the darker aspects of the world – they will get to know it in time. This clearly marks the space for adult plots.

5) Communicate the design before, during, and after the larp through both shared and divided briefings, workshops, intro-scenes, and debriefings. This makes it easier to form consensus and calibrate collectively, while ensuring safe spaces wherein both adults and children can express their thoughts and difficulties and practice the dynamics among peers while supervised by a facilitator. Debriefings and post-play activities, in which everyone can reconnect, reflect and recuperate their experience together (Brown, 2019) and establish a narrativized tale are essential factors in building a sense of community afterwards.

We have a collective briefing for all players and a briefing for The Umbra Falcons in which we coordinate the day together. Sometimes, rules are mentioned again (for example that children, who don't understand that game masters dressed in black are invisible, can interact with them as their "imaginary fantasy friends", while the invisible spirits are ignored by the rest of us). After the play, we do a follow up talk with the children individually or together with their parents.

The most important thing you can do when you design these larps is to focus on building a trusting culture in which your participants can play and explore together. It requires respect, patience, and curiosity from everyone involved, but if we as designers design a safe space, adults and children will conjure up larp magic together.

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Additionally, setting the mood like this can be an integral part of managing the expectations for a larp. Workshops have the advantage of offering a moment of direct dialogue between the facilitator(s) of a game and its participants, which is an opportunity for making sure expectations are set and mitigated. In addition to explaining the setting and the intentions of a game, workshops can be used to create a space where expectations are shared and negotiated, and where feedback is shared with an open mindset.

Finally, workshops can also be used to make a larp more accessible. The tendency to fall back on known formulas for workshops bears the risk of falling into the trap that we keep designing workshops for the same returning audiences. This raises the threshold for people from outside of that audience. For example, line-up exercises can seem easy to many larpers but they are not simple for people who do not know them. When I used them in coachings, I at times had to do more explaining than I expected. Moreover, it seems that they are sometimes added to larp workshops just because they are seen as one of the “standard” exercises, while they are also easily taken over by the participants and turned into overly long discussions instead of the planned five minute exercise. So, honestly, does your larp really benefit from yet another line-up exercise?

Simple and easy to understand workshops that contribute to the game and absorb the participants into the whole of the larp should be an aim, and not just an option. Moreover, accessibility for larps can easily be increased with simple measures, like having a moment of stating the agenda of the entire larp before starting the rest of the workshops, or by having a short moment to put people’s minds at ease if they are non-native speakers playing a larp in English or if they are playing a Nordic style larp for the very first time, etc.

Debriefs as tools for closure

To the same extent in which we overuse workshops and at times make them redundant by resorting to well-known workshops which don’t necessarily fit the intentions behind our larps, we tend to underuse and underdesign debriefs in our larp design. Debriefs have the potential to improve the experience as a whole, as they can become anything from a soft landing spot to a space for venting and leaving behind negativity, or a last resort for expectation calibration.

If we want to consider framework design an essential part of larp design, then it is a logical consequence to consider closing that framework in the form of a debrief as essential. This doesn’t mean that we should (re-)turn to extensive debriefs with a whole array of exercises,

as that risks falling into the same trap as we do in our workshops. However, leaning on some basic exercises that are repeated and never questioned neglects giving the experience a sense of closure.

In the same way workshops are the building blocks in shaping the larp experience, debriefs are the place where we give the experience a sense of closure, and hence, where we wrap up and tie everything together. It serves to look at debriefs as more than just an optional emotional safety tool. They can serve as a tool for making the flow of the larp end coherently and in a way that fits the whole of the experience, rather than leaving the participants hanging in a space of tension and unfinished business.

If we neglect our debriefs, we not only neglect the emotional safety of the players but also fail to hold on to our engagement to design the entirety of an experience for them. We have brought our participants to a high point by bringing them to the end of the game and the story but we are not catching them after. We have to be there to offer them a way and a space to land, and to wrap up their experience and take home only the parts they wish to.

For the chamber larp *Equinox Retreat* (United Kingdom 2021), I designed a slow visualisation and breathing exercise that gives players time to digest emotions and to remember a positive moment in the larp experience. Such an exercise can be a valuable last part of a debrief and help people get in an energy and mindset to step out of the larp and into the everyday world again. Hiding ourselves behind optional debriefs with the same exercises that are constantly repeated and never improved or designed specifically to fit the design and experience of the game does not serve our players and their experience.

Workshops and debriefs as evolving toolboxes for designing the larp experience

If we want to employ workshops and debriefs as elements that help building the larp experience as a whole, we need to rethink how we tackle them and put adequate care in designing the right workshop and debrief tools that fit our larp, instead of leaning on our current perceived traditions of doing things and instead of going for the hype of the moment. We shouldn't just be maintaining our existing toolboxes, but we should strive to also make them more accessible and easy to find. Moreover, we have to dare to add to them and to experiment more with the format, and to be more open to new approaches.

If we want to attain this point of creating big workshop and debrief toolboxes for designers to roam in freely for the creation of their larps, we also need to be more open to share and exchange best practices and lessons learned. We need to have more willingness to share as well as to reflect about what worked and what didn't, as well as an openness to take inspiration from each other and to offer this inspiration to others. Moreover, we need to accept that these tools can be tweaked in function of the designs that are being created instead of holding on too rigidly to already established formats.

Workshops and debriefs shouldn't become inert holy houses that we stick to for the comfort of it. They have the potential to be an engine of creativity, care and change in the larp design process.

Ludography

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Author Bio

Sandy Bailly (b. 1986) is a Belgian larper who occasionally also crews, writes, designs and organises larps. She is a firm believer in restoring people's self-confidence and autonomy, and aspires to carry this out in the mundane world as well as to do this for herself.

They are interested in small, collaborative, feelgood and altruistic play in larp, as well as in movies, books and food. Sandy believes in re-imagining reality through play and in building communities of care.



Designing the Designer

Juhana **Petterson**

“Everything is a designable surface”, as the larp designer, writer and theorist Johanna Koljonen (2019) says. This means that every single aspect of larp can be designed for particular effect: scenography, characters, workshops, communications, costumes... Even the absence of design can be designed. You can make the conscious design choice to leave a particular aspect of the larp open to the chaos of emergent play.

In many larp productions, the designer of the larp is visible to the participants. Perhaps they post about the larp on Facebook, run workshops or chat with players arriving at the venue.

If we take Koljonen’s maxim seriously, we have to conclude that the person of the designer is also a designable surface: how they dress, talk, come across. Is the designer stressed and angry or relaxed and reassuring?

The second run

In 2021, we made two runs of the larp *Redemption* (Finland 2021) and in 2022 we did two runs of another larp, *3 AM Forever* (Denmark 2022). I was working with different teams but there was a subtle yet noticeable phenomenon in both larps: the first run had a nervous edge and the second run was more relaxed. This is one of those qualities that’s hard to quantify but when you run a lot of larps, you learn how to read the energy of the crowd. Running the larp twice back to back makes it possible to subjectively compare the vibe of two sets of players. So what could cause such a difference?

For the players, the run they played was their first experience of the larp. Although there were minor adjustments, neither larp underwent substantial revision between runs. It was just the same larp, played twice.

However, one thing was different. Me. Us. The organizers. Talking with participants preparing to play the first run of both larps, I was nervous. We'd never run the larp before! Would it work? Of course I tried to keep cool but humans are often very good at picking up subtle social cues, especially in groups undergoing an intense process of socialization.

At the workshop of the second run of both larps, I felt relaxed, buoyed by the knowledge and experience gained from already running the event once before.

I started to wonder: was the nervous edge of the first run caused by the nervousness felt by us, the organizers? Did the players pick up on our emotional state and mirror it, the way humans often do?

Designable surfaces

What are the different areas that can be designed for in terms of how the participant interacts with and experiences the designer?

Examples are social media, workshops and runtime, and discussing the larp after the event, for example at conventions or on messaging apps. There's also a difference whether the organizer who's interacting with a participant is someone tasked to do that, or a team member whose main function is something else.

Social media. In many larp productions, the first interactions are online. Social media posts, answering questions on Discord and Facebook. Maintaining a friendly persona is easier when communications are not immediate. If a prospective participant gets on your nerves, you can take a break, breathe, and then respond instead of going with your first reflexive take.

It's a good idea to agree in advance who speaks with the voice of the larp in public, online spaces. This can be done by one person only, or several, depending on your chosen communications strategy. What matters is that everyone who speaks to participants projects a friendly persona and knows what they're talking about. You should avoid disagreeing with each other in public as that damages the credibility of all communications very quickly.

The tone of online communications also matters. Going full corporate can backfire because it makes the larp feel sterile and unfriendly, not the communal experience so many larps strive to be. The question of the right tone varies by the individual but I usually try to go for a personable but somewhat official persona.

To be official, it helps not to reply to messages late at night and to keep the language and syntax correct instead of casual. You should avoid sharing personal emotions unless they're positive ones related to organizing the larp: "I'm so excited to meet you all on site!"

To be personable, you can share carefully curated personal emotions related to the running of the larp: "I love seeing player creativity bring the larp to life!" You can empathize with individual players in a positive way and share updates from the larp team's process: "We're meeting with the team today!"

You have to find a way to use your own personality in a manner that feels natural to you, otherwise you risk sounding fake and alienating. If your communication feels forced to you, it might be a good idea to re-evaluate it.

On location. I recently played in the larp *Gothic* (Denmark 2023). The venue was a mansion in the Danish countryside and each run had only ten players. When we came to the venue, there were organizers busy making the larp run but always also someone whose job it was to talk to us. To sit down with us in a relaxed manner, asking after how the journey to the larp went. The workshops all followed this pattern, leveraging the larp's limited number of players to make each interaction friendly.

This is an example of designing the designer.

When players arrive, they often feel nervous and jittery. They haven't yet settled into the flow of the larp and they're worried about all kinds of things, from their own play to food or accommodations. It's enormously helpful if there are relaxed organizers present.

Chatting with the players is an organizer task. It should fall on those team members who have slept properly and maybe even enjoy talking to players. Meanwhile, the stressed-out scenographer should be allowed to build in peace.

Workshops are an obvious area where organizer presentation matters a lot. The energy projected by those running the workshop carries over to the larp. It's important to feel that

the experience is in safe hands, that you can trust the people you're with and that everyone is friends here.

In situations like that, designing the designer means sending out the team member who can put on the most convincing facade of reassurance to talk to the players.

After runtime. The period after the larp event is the trickiest one in terms of designing the designer because of the question of how to set boundaries. When does the responsibility of the larp designer end?

Excess

It's easy to be idealistic when designing the designer: we should always be accessible to participants, respond to every need and be available for emotional support forever even after the larp has ended.

The problem with this approach is the limited nature of the human being. If we demand everything of ourselves, we risk exhaustion and burnout. Because of this, part of the process of designing how you come across is about boundaries.

Before the larp, perhaps you're only reachable via a specified channel, such as an organizer email address. You won't do larp business on Messenger in the middle of the night.

During the larp, perhaps issues related to the wellbeing of individual participants are handled by a dedicated safety person. This way, the stresses of running the larp won't cloud handling the needs of individual participants.

All of these design choices are about the wellbeing of the organizer. That too is part of how to design the designer. The best way to appear relaxed and cool in front of the players is not when you learn to fake it, but when you're genuinely not suffering from intense stress. When you feel good, your participants feel good.

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Redemption (2021): Finland. Maria Pettersson, Juhana Pettersson & Massi Hannula.

Author Bio

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The Interaction Engine: A Method to Engage Your Participants in Meaningful Encounters

Bjarke Pedersen & Eleanor Saitta¹

I am lying on the big double bed in the middle of the living room, all clad in white. A glass of whisky in hand and Ray-Ban Aviators on to conceal where I am looking. The memorial for Lena who committed suicide earlier that year, is ongoing. Her widower Wilhelm is giving a tear-ridden speech about how wonderful a wife and mother Lena was.

House-Wilhelm, a ghost-character portraying both the House they are in and a previous incarnation of Wilhelm, is forcing the fingers of his son down his own throat, trying to throw up as a comment to the speech given by his human counterpart. In between, he screams that Lena was never supportive of him and that he hopes she burns in hell. None of the human characters react to this. They can not see or hear the twelve House-ghosts that are in the room with them.

The ghosts, on the other hand, applaud Ghost-Wilhelm's effort to throw up and laugh scornfully when he fails. He falls sobbing to the floor in front of his human counterpart while repeating "I am sorry, Lena!" over and over.

The human characters step over him and go to get coffee and cake in the adjoining room. This scene will repeat itself in new and equally exciting ways for the next seven days when the human characters will be absorbed into the house by midnight and become the House-ghosts for the new family that will come to stay in the house.

What I just described is a scene from the erotic horror larp *House of Craving* (Denmark 2019). I was there playing one of the House-ghosts as a non-player character. The larp was created by

¹ Although the article has two authors, it is written from Bjarke Pedersen's perspective.

Danny Meyer Wilson, Tor Kjetil Edland, Frida Sofie Jansen and myself. Eighteen runs have been played since the premiere, and the original freeform (Længslernes Hus, 2017) has run countless times since its premiere at Fastaval in Denmark. The larp runs for eight days straight, with twelve new participants arriving each day, reiterating the story lived by the characters. On the first day, you play as the family who has come to spend time at a haunted house. Around midnight, your character is absorbed into the House, and the next day, you play a House-ghost version of your character.

Each run is uniquely different but feels much the same. The structure of the larp is based around a few repeating fate play scenes each day that gather people together. One of them is a memorial service for Lena, the mother who has committed suicide. The fate play scenes and the ending for both the Family and the House characters are predetermined. Everything else is created by the participants on the fly, together as an ensemble. There are no quests and little connected narrative or story per se. The participants are encouraged to prepare as little as possible besides reading the larp materials and getting their costumes. The larp becomes better without preparation. With less preparation, there will be fewer assumptions about what the larp will be, and the participants are better equipped to react in the moment.

This works because the larp is designed around what I call an *interaction engine*. The interaction engine is a specific type of larp design where the primary focus is on enhancing playability by ensuring that every action generates new possibilities and emotional impact. Other larp design styles may foreground structured narratives, fighting simulations, or realism, for example. These can exist in engine-driven games, but they are always in the background. The main focus in an engine larp is on what creates interactions between participants. Specifically, interactions that intensify the larp experience – the aim is not to create intensity for the sake of it, but intensity that moves both the individual and the ensemble experience in the direction of the themes of the larp. This way, the journey through the experience by the player will be way more dynamic than a plot or narrative written months before the participants arrive at the location. Scenes and experiences that players create themselves on the fly will fit better into their context and into what they want to experience.

The interaction engine will help the players create engaging interactions that are both emotionally and physically intense, and that always lead to more interactions rather than fewer. The goal is to get the players to connect with the themes of the larp in as many ways as possible, so their actions resonate with not only their own dreams and desires but also with their cultural identity, experiences in their own lives, and how they see themselves.

I came to this design method out of frustration. Early on in my design career, I realized that a big part of the work that my team or I had done was never used. If it was a plot or story, then the players went in another direction than I anticipated. Or if it was character relations, then the chemistry of the players was off, or the relationship was not something that was interesting for the people involved. All the hard work creating what I felt was good content for the larp, was wasted time I could have used on other aspects of the larp.

The most scarce resource you have in larp is the organizers' time, closely followed by the participants' time. When a large part of the material created for the larp is not used, you have wasted both. What I realized was that to create the best possible larp and not waste time, you need to let go of the narrative control and hand it over to the participants. Instead of controlling their narrative journey in great detail, an interaction engine guides the players to understand what the themes they are supposed to explore are, and the chosen larp mechanics help them to do that in the best available way. You could say that an interaction engine larp controls the emotional arc of the character's story, rather than the narrative arc.

When you design a larp, you often start working on the parts that are the most exciting to you. While this can be rewarding and motivating, the design of an Interaction Engine larp needs to begin with laying down a core foundation that must form the basis of all your future decisions. In an engine design approach, you have to start with the theme or themes for your larp. You then map out the actions that your participants can do that support the exploration of those themes from as many angles as you can think of. By actions, I mean very specifically the things that the players actually will be doing during the larp. What verbs describe the actions in the best possible way? For *House of Craving*, some of the verbs are *flirting*, *controlling others*, *lounging*, and *masturbating*.

These actions define the focus of your larp. All other design choices should be made to support them. If you want flirting, then flirting needs to be front and centre in the workshop, to be sure people trust each other and are comfortable with each other – and even more trust and comfort are needed when it comes to masturbation. For *House of Craving*, we had a masturbation mechanic that included clear jelly dildos as penis replacements, and we workshoped it extensively before the larp. The *ghost-penises* as they were fondly called by the players, could be used by the players no matter their character's gender. We also instructed the players to always bring a ghost-character with them if they went to their room to masturbate. The actions we wanted to see were supported by the mechanics of the larp and the workshop design, helping the players play with otherwise private and intimate actions that are very difficult to do without support from the design.

There are larps with themes where an interaction engine is probably not the best fit. You need the themes to be focused on emotional and relational actions for the interaction engine to truly shine. An example of a larp where an interaction engine would be less ideal could be a larp centred around detail-oriented and rules-heavy diplomacy, where the actions have to follow a predetermined structure to achieve connection to the themes.

Building a larp around an engine demands that all elements, from scenography and food to characters, relations, and motivations, are aligned toward the themes and actions of the larp. Everything else should be removed from the design. When done well, this makes the theme of the larp accessible and playable for all. The player does not have to be at the right place at the right time to access the important plot – they can create access for themselves at any given time by being in the setting and engaging with the design and mechanics.

When designing a larp this way, any main plot steps into the background and the potential for meaningful encounters between characters is brought to the foreground. When all the verbs or potential actions available to the players are clearly defined and understood, the players can choose the ones that make the most sense to them at any given time. If the participants understand the themes, and it is clear how the verbs connect to the themes, all the participants are able to steer their experiences in the same direction, each individually choosing the best possible path for themselves.

The larp mechanics allow the participants to push their actions (described by the verbs) beyond what is possible without mechanics. Moreover, the mechanics make it easier and faster for the participants to take the actions described by the verbs. Thus, the mechanics work as tools to create or support powerful moments. Giving participants the responsibility and trust to follow their own desires (through the lens of their characters' motivations) as to what to explore gives room for their imaginations to shine. Given space, they will tell far more gripping stories than you as a designer can ever create for them.²

This, of course, demands a lot from the players. A high level of herd competence is required for the engine to run smoothly. With less experienced players, more workshop time is needed for a smooth larp experience. The extra workshop time should primarily be used to create trust within the ensemble and to help individual players calibrate with the norms of the ensemble.

² To be clear, gripping and meaningful are not always the same thing – engine-driven larps do away with a lot in the pursuit of engagement. That said, in my experience more games have failed because the players have been disengaged than because the deeper meaning of the larp did not resonate deeply enough in the lives of the players.

Another use for it is to ensure that the players understand what they are personally comfortable with and what they are interested in experiencing.

Juhana Pettersson writes in his excellent article *Engines of Desire*:

“When I conceptualize the process of larp design, I see it as working with the players to give them the desires required by the design and help them get in touch with their own desires so they can use them to drive action. When a player does something they’ve always wanted to do, they bring energy and power to the larp. You can see it in the way people play, carry themselves, speak, act. It’s a powerful thing and generates so much meaning.” (Pettersson 2021)

The most important thing for an engine-based larp is to create a space where the participants feel safe and seen and where they feel they have the possibility to explore and engage with the themes of the larp without fear of being ridiculed or having their boundaries breached. In this mind-space, the participants feel empowered, with all possibilities open for them to choose. Many of my participants have told me that being in this space feels both overwhelming and totally safe. In these moments, larp can be transformative. You learn something new about both yourself and the world when you dare to step up to the edge of your safe interaction space and into unknown territory.

That the participant feels like they have all possibilities open to choose from is of course an illusion created by well-crafted larp and participation design. This design starts way before the participants arrive on site.

“Everything is a designable surface” is the mantra for all of my design work. It was coined by Johanna Koljonen (2019), and it means that all the design decisions you make or that are made for you by e.g. time or monetary constraints, a protected historical location, or anything else beyond your control, will have an impact on the success of your larp. For instance, if the temperature in a room is a few degrees too cold the characters will not take their coats off or sit still for very long, and your well-planned physical boudoir interaction space goes out the window – as happened in a 2018 run of *Inside Hamlet*.

As a designer, you literally need to think of everything – or, more practically, you need to accept that you are responsible for all aspects of the larp even if they are out of your control. At any given moment when designing or running a larp you should ask yourself the question “What are the consequences of making this decision and not another one?”

Use the themes you have set for your larp as a guide. If all of your decisions are aligned to support the themes, you are well on your way to creating an interaction engine larp.

But what is the interaction engine? Can you point at it? Just like a real engine, an interaction engine is made of hundreds of parts (which we don't have room to describe exhaustively), and no one part can be said to be the whole thing. To start identifying the core of your engine, ask yourself the following question: "What is the main part of the design that drives participants to actions that are connected to the themes of the larp?"

The answer to this question is the core of the engine, and you should put your design effort here to support this part of the design in as many ways as possible. The more time and energy you use here, the easier your design decisions will be.

To be able to answer the question above, you need to analyze the themes of your larp and describe them in detail – an example will follow below. With your themes locked down, you then need to figure out what design elements will most efficiently drive your participants to perform actions that connect directly to those themes. This is the core of your interaction engine.

Once you have the core of the interaction, you need to iterate through all aspects of the design with your themes and the core engine in mind. This means looking at your larp mechanics, your set and spatial design, costume guidelines, your workshop structure, how food is served, the website, participant communication, and everything else. All of these should be focused on supporting the themes and the core engine to drive participants to take actions during the larp that explore the themes in the ways that you think will be most worthwhile. As you make new decisions about different parts of the larp, you need to continually cross-reference with all the other decisions you have made to ensure that you do not make choices in one place that push players toward an action that you have made harder for them in another place.

As you are doing this, you may identify actions that your design pushes participants to do that are not connected to the themes of the larp. In a few specific cases, these might feel necessary to make the larp feel coherent to some players, allowing them to access the rest of the game, but this is rare, and almost without exception you should remove them from your larp. If you do not, these actions will feel disconnected from the rest of the larp and be uninteresting to engage with for your participants and may lead to participants falling out of play or being confused about the things that they should be doing.

For example, if you are making a larp about a decadent court and some of the characters are guards designed to stand still and guard the court, then you will have a group of characters that are not able to engage with the themes of the larp. At *Inside Hamlet*, we solved this challenge by making the royal guard more like celebrities that the members of the court wanted to become or to bed. These celebrity guards did not need to stand guard at all.

An example: *PAN*

PAN (Denmark 2013) is an example of an engine-based larp. A group of couples from various walks of life are at a couple's therapy workshop retreat run by a new-age husband and wife. Over the course of a weekend, the participants go through various exercises trying to save or improve their relationships. In one of the more new-age exercises, the workshop leader does a seance, trying to connect with people from the other side. This fails spectacularly when the Great God Pan enters our reality and possesses her. Pan then starts to jump from person to person over the next few days until all notions of reality and identity are stripped from the characters and all characters are willingly destroyed.

The themes of *PAN* are an exploration of self-actualization in a couple structure, what ethics, morality, and being civilized actually mean, and what happens when this is stripped away. What is then left of a person's humanity? Some of the actions that are connected to the themes are *possessing*, *indulging*, *taking control*, *losing control*, *being shameful*, *being fearful*, *exploring the self*, and *destroying your relationship*, among others.

The core of the engine in *PAN* is the possession mechanic. The Great God Pan is symbolized by a necklace. The necklace is only visible to participants, not their characters. Wearing the necklace, and seeing someone else wearing it, both have specific interaction scripts.

When you are wearing the necklace, you become possessed by Pan and must pursue your biggest basic needs as soon as possible – if you are hungry you must eat and if you are horny you must find release. Pan does not care for what is proper or in good taste.

If you see someone wearing the necklace, your character will ignore everything around themselves, and the possessed person becomes the single most interesting thing in the world. You will do anything at all to get their attention, to have them see you, touch you.

This leads to mayhem. The necklace leaves broken and embarrassed characters in its wake, with each possession adding a new and different layer of emotional chaos to the characters impacted by it. Every possession is unique, driven by what the participant wearing the necklace wants and desires from the larp at that moment. The agency goes both ways, too – if a participant around the possessed doesn't find their desires in the interactions around the necklace, that participant leaves the room and pursues play somewhere else.

The only planned scenes in the larp are the seance where Pan enters the world and the ending where everyone follows the god into oblivion. All scenes that arise because the necklace travels from participant to participant are unscripted. They evolve and change in each iteration like a beautiful fractal pattern. This way, the participants tell stories that we the designers never could imagine in our wildest dreams.

Conclusion

Creating a larp designed around an interaction engine demands more design work at the beginning of the process, but it pays off later by giving you a guiding light for every decision you make. When you identify the core themes and verbs for your larp it helps you focus on the actions and larp mechanics you should be designing, leading your participants to do engaging and coherent things together.

Finally, this essay includes some of the questions you can ask yourself to help you design an interaction engine larp. As an example, I will in the next section answer some of the relevant questions for my larp *PAN*. Please add your own questions to the list as you work with this design style:

- What are the core themes of your larp idea?
- How would you describe each theme in such a way that every participant will be able to understand it?
- Why these themes and not other ones?
- What actions explore the theme? How many different types of actions can be used to do so?
- Are there any actions currently in the larp design which do not connect to the themes? Can they be removed?
- How can you support the core actions by planning secondary actions around them?
- Are the core actions accessible to all characters and participants? If not, why?

- What affordances in the design, site, mechanics, characters, or costumes are required to make those actions possible and legible to participants?
- How can you design all aspects of the physical space to support the actions that you want and make them desirable to participants?
- How can you shape the use of time, either the participants' time on site or before the larp or the structure of time inside the larp, to support those actions?
- What communication strategy will best support the interaction engine?

The origins of *PAN*

The design of *PAN* began when my co-designer Linda Udby and I were sitting and complaining that there were no larps to sign up to that we were interested in. After some time we ended with a conclusion that I can highly recommend: we decided to make our own damn larp!

I was really interested in exploring the, at the time, new idea that you need an alibi to be able to play a larp that is intense and outside your comfort zone, and that you can design such an alibi. We wanted to make something quick and dirty that would not take a year to design and produce nor require endless preparation from the participants. This restricted what kind of larp we could make in many ways. For example, we needed a location that we could use as it is without having to build or dress.

I had just read the gothic horror story *The Great God Pan* (Machen 1890) and was fascinated with the idea that there was merely a thin veil protecting us from a reality so alien that seeing it would shatter our morals and beliefs and drive us insane. With these restrictions and ideas, we came up with the core idea for *PAN*. The larp is set in the present day since this choice made it easier for us to find a location and to produce the larp and easier for the participants to find costumes. We chose a summer house as the location. The number of characters in the larp was decided based on the number of beds at that summer house.

Back in 2012 when we designed *PAN*, I would have answered the (relevant) design questions from the previous section as follows (as far as I can remember).

What are the core themes of your larp idea?

Exploration of self-actualization in a couple structure; what ethics, morality, and being civilized actually mean, and what happens when this is stripped away.

How would you describe each theme in such a way that every participant will be able to understand it?

The experience of *PAN* will take your character through working on your relationship in a new age therapy weekend in a group with people you have never met. Suddenly you will be face to face with a god that will slowly strip you of everything you know. You will end up betraying yourself and your partner in the most heinous and terrible ways.

Why these themes and not other ones?

They fit this specific larp very well, they are themes that I am very interested in right now, and they will expand my knowledge of designing and running larps. Moreover, the themes can be explored within the time and production restrictions we have set.

What actions explore the theme? How many different types of actions can be used to do so?

The actions available are grouped into two different categories. The first is a group of actions that are connected to the self-actualisation and therapy part. Here the verbs are going to be: *engage with therapy, argue, expose shame and lust, meditate, perform relationships, help others to open up*, etc. The second group of actions are the ones that the god forces upon the participants via the game mechanics and instructions on what to do when possessed or seeing someone who is possessed. Here the verbs are *indulge, scream in terror, give in to lust, and abuse others and yourself*.

How can you support the core actions by planning secondary actions around them?

Since the larp was so small (8–12 players), there was little room for secondary actions. Each couple in the larp had their own story that had some secondary actions embedded. It was not a priority to make this consistent across all characters during the design process (the larp would be better for it, though).

What affordances in the design, site, mechanics, characters, or costumes are required to make those actions possible and legible to participants?

To play *PAN*, you had to agree to play the larp in a very physical style, and you needed to understand that you are not in control of the character's journey. Even if the ending of the larp was predetermined, neither the participant nor we the designers were in control of what would happen during the larp. This was due to the chaotic narrative the possession mechanic enforced on the larp.

How can you design all aspects of the physical space to support the actions that you want and make them desirable to participants?

The location needed to be open and small, with few places to hide and be private. We needed to be able to hear where the participants were and where the participant that was currently possessed by Pan was moving.

How can you shape the use of time, either the participants' time on site or before the larp or the structure of time inside the larp, to support those actions?

The biggest challenge in a larp like *PAN* is to make the participants feel safe enough to fully engage in the actions the larp is aiming for. This is why we decided to use more time in the workshop to create trust amongst the participants than in many other larps. It also meant a quite harsh casting process. You needed to sign up with the person you would play partner with. We did this to make sure that there would be trust between the players of couples already right from the beginning.. The whole ensemble was chosen based on a signup form where you had to motivate why you wanted to participate.

What communication strategy will best support the interaction engine?

We had a simple website with enough information to understand what the larp was about and what was required from the participants. We deliberately avoided creating hype around the larp, since we wanted to make sure that only people who were truly interested in the themes and actions would sign up.

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Eleanor Saitta is a writer, theorist (larp and otherwise), artist, and engineer focused on how sociotechnical systems and stories fail, and how we can change them so they fail in ways that are more useful to us. She has been larping since 2011, and edited *The Foundation Stone of Nordic Larp* (2014) and *What Do We Do When We Play?* (2020). She lives in Helsinki and runs a space there for queer live art and politics called *The Attic*.

The General Problem of Indexicality in Larp Design

Jaakko **Stenros**, Eleanor **Saitta** & Markus **Montola**

A frequently told origin story of larp goes as follows: A group of people was playing *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), when someone asked: “Wouldn’t it be cool to do this for real?” In that moment of eureka, with these imaginary people standing up from around the table, live-action role-playing was born from tabletop role-playing. This apocryphal origin story captures the central aesthetic of larp that remains prevalent even today: *doing things for real* in an embodied manner is, for many people, preferable to the improvised verbal storytelling of tabletop role-playing. However, when things are done “for real” there is always some confusion on how real is real, as there are numerous different levels of simulation, representation, and performance.

In larp we dress up as our character, use our bodies as our character, and inhabit the space that stands in for the fictional world. Sometimes larping is symbolic, abstract, and gestured, and the difference to tabletop role-playing performativity is only in standing up and moving around a bit. However, it is also possible to strive for the aesthetic of authenticity, where characters, actions, props, and sites look, feel, and function as they would in the fictional world. In larp – specifically Nordic larp – there are long standing aesthetic traditions that value this kind of “realness” (see e.g. Koljonen 2007, Stenros & Montola 2010). These are aesthetic traditions that encourage fidelity, authenticity, and actuality. While the dream of a comprehensive illusion of a fantasy world is seldom a goal in larp design or play, the longing for “more real”, whatever that means, does influence creating and enacting larp.

Yet, how do we portray skills such as sword fighting or dancing in a larp, if as players we are not nearly as good at it as our characters? What does it mean to create a fantastic-looking, broken and dirty, yet machine-washable, outfit for a post-apocalyptic larp campaign? How are these questions connected to the challenges of portraying oppression inspired by the real world, and the questions relating to what player bodies are allowed to stand in for what fictional entities? We can never completely “do things for real” in a larp. It is an interesting and alluring design goal to create “fully real” props, costumes, actions, bodies, and sites, but it can never be achieved. The level of representation is always uneven – some things always have a more authentic representation than others, partly because some representation is impossible (magic is not real), partly because we do not want some things to be fully real (we do not want to harm other players), and partly because symbolic representation is sometimes more powerful in allowing players to engage with an experience.

Being fully real can be cumbersome, expensive, dangerous, and socially unacceptable; and it leads to countless barriers of entry around players’ resources, skills, minds, bodies, and lived histories. When representation is uneven, it means that there will be more inconsistencies in players’ interpretations of what is happening. Even so, the longing for the real and the aesthetic of authenticity often guide choices made by both larp designers and players.

In this article we aim to make sense of larp in practice. We put into writing common structures of larp that “everyone already knows”, examine them, and explain why these features have the effects that they have. To do this, minimal tools from semiotics are borrowed. We discuss this aesthetic of doing things for real from the angle of *the general problem of indexicality*: all strategies for representation in larp carry inherent trade-offs in terms of what can be presented, how, by whom, to whom, with what likely interpretations, and under what circumstances. Since the (general) problem of indexicality has two sides – the difficulty of similar enough interpretations, and the deeply contextual assigning of meaning – we first look at why uniform interpretations are hard to foster, and then move on to the practical challenges of striving for authenticity in larp locations, setting, actions, knowledge, and finally the living bodies of the players. On the way, we also discuss indexicality as an explicit design ideal.

The way we outline the general problem of indexicality sheds light on what we perceive as a root cause of many critiques of Nordic larps and Nordic larping we have read over the course of the last few years relating to conflicts in player cultures, accessibility, and differences in design aesthetics. The article does not attempt to solve the problem, or even propose strategies to negotiate it, but seeks to articulate this foundational challenge of larp, and to explore some specific trade-offs that have caused problems. While the problem of indexicality is general,

affecting everything from props to bodies and from actions to histories, there unfortunately is no general answer to the difficulties it creates – even ditching the entire ideal of indexicality is no solution.

Indexical representation in larp

Fundamentally, *role-playing* can be seen as a practice of creating a world together with other people, and then enacting changes to that fictional world in a way that produces narrative content (cf. Montola 2012). Give a kid a tabard and a sword, and she can pretend to be a knight in a fictional world. When others also start to pretend that she is a knight, and possibly pretend to be adversaries for her to encounter, a shared world starts to emerge. This joint pretense, *inter-immersion* (Stenros 2015; originally Pohjola 2004), is the cornerstone of sociodramatic role-play. As the knight and the adversary fight or hug, a sequence of events takes place that can be narrativized after the fact, while also producing meaningful consequences – emotion, identification, simulation, and so forth.

In larp theory, this fiction is called *diegesis* (cf. Montola 2012), a highly subjective understanding of an individual player about the state of the co-created fictional world. Larp theory has long used philosopher Charles S. Peirce's second trichotomy of symbols, icons, and indices (Peirce & Wiener 1958; Everaert-Desmedt 2011) as an analytic framework to understand how real-world material signifies fictional things in the diegesis (Loponen & Montola 2004). These categories help in understanding how the shared imaginative space is constructed.

Symbols are signs that refer to their objects through arbitrary *convention*. In larp theory, symbolic representation happens when players use agreed-upon symbols to signify things about the diegesis. For example, an *off-game symbol* can be marked on an object to signify that it does not exist in the diegesis, or a *metatechnique* can indicate that a player doing a particular gesture may speak out her inner thoughts without her character actually doing so in the fiction.

Icons are signs that refer to their objects through *similarity*. A foam sword covered in duct tape counts as a sword because it resembles one. A player with green makeup counts as an orc, as she resembles the earlier portrayals of fictional orcs in popular culture.

Finally, *indices* are signs that refer to their objects through a *direct connection*. For Peirce, a pointing finger refers to its target through the direction of the pointing, and a weather vane refers to the direction of wind through its causal orientation. In larp theory, indices refer to

their fictional objects by *being the same thing*. A ballpoint pen is a ballpoint pen in fiction simply because it *is* a ballpoint pen.

Players' interpretation of the symbols, icons, and indices are not identical. Thus being a symbol, an icon, or an index is not a property of an object, but an interpretation a person does of the relationship between the sign and what it is seen as pointing toward. There is always variation, and as new information emerges, players tune their interpretation. Each player has their own reading of the diegesis. However, for the shared imaginary space to remain playable, the interpretations need to be similar enough. They need to be *equifinal* (Montola 2012), meaning that even if the routes to interpretation vary, the consequences are indistinguishable enough that material conflicts in the interpretation of reality do not derail play. For example, when two characters talk about "their past poker games" during the larp, only for the players to realize that one was talking about *Texas Hold'em* and the other about *Five Card Draw*, the interpretations during play are equifinal enough without being identical. Indeed, it is common for players to speak broadly about characters' shared past to make room for this. On the other hand, if one player believes their character is holding a gun, and the other player believes their character sees a gun-shaped piece of wood, there is an equifinality conflict and coherent play cannot continue.

Superficially, indexicality appears simple. When things stand for themselves in the fiction players need the least amount of context and little imagination, and misunderstandings are seemingly rare. However, a closer look reveals a far more complicated reality.

First, it is often not simple to determine whether something was *intended* as an index or an icon – or *in what sense* some object is an index or an icon. For example, if a player uses chemicals to produce a worn sweater for a post-apocalypse larp, the sweater is probably intended to be read as an indexical representation of a sweater that has been used through an apocalypse and beyond, but not as an indexical representation of a carefully crafted shirt with acid and paint stains. A participant might choose to wield a metal sword for its indexical qualities, but still make sure it is properly dulled to avoid dangerous situations. This renders it into an icon of a sharpened blade.

Second, icons can appear *more real* than indices. Kent Grayson and Radan Martinec (2004) studied the consumer perceptions of authenticity in the home museums of William Shakespeare and Sherlock Holmes. Their surprising finding was that the highly indexical Shakespeare museum was sometimes perceived as *less* authentic than the completely iconic home museum of Sherlock Holmes. Similarly, the reason why creating a dirty sweater for a

post-apocalypse larp is often done with paints and chemicals, is that mere ordinary dirt would not make it visibly dirty enough to convey the proper *Mad Max* aesthetic. Choosing paints and chemicals over dirt also allows gear to be washed between larps while remaining iconically dirty.

Third, indexicality might imply more or less of the object's sociocultural history. The item in question is not just like the item, or even that item in general, but that very specific item with the exact history. In the pervasive larp *Prosopopeia Bardo 1: Där vi föll* (Sweden 2005, Eng. *Prosopoeia Part 1: Where We Fell*), it was intended that fictional objects were not only materially identical to their indexical signifiers, but they were intended to be the very same objects. "[E]ven though in a regular urban larp a jacket may signify a perfectly identical jacket, in *Prosopopeia* the jacket signified the exact same jacket owned by the exact same person" (Montola & Jonsson 2006). This is most obvious when it comes to locations. If a larp takes place in a castle, it can take place in a castle, in that specific castle, that specific castle with an altered history, or even that very castle with its exact same history.

While indexicality can support the feeling of "being there" and "doing things for real", it can also hinder it if there is confusion as to *how and what exactly does an object represent and signify*. In larp we are aware that symbols and icons are not specific in their signification and require negotiation. An action, object, site, or body can be presented with some vagueness; often a sketch is enough to communicate the underlying idea, as we are competent in filling in the gaps to achieve an equifinal result. However, with indices there may be a false sense of clear signification when in fact indices also require negotiation.¹

¹ A note on semiotics. We are knowingly operating here with a concise, even reduced, toolset. In the field of semiotics, and in literature and cultural studies more generally, there is a wealth of tools that could be brought to bear on reading larp. We could dwell further into Peirce's work, beyond his first trichotomy. Alternatively, we could begin the analysis with Ferdinand de Saussure's *signified* and *signifier* and continue to tease apart the literal meaning (*denotation*) and the meaning given by community (*connotation*) as outlined by Louis Hjelmslev (Barthes 1964). Indeed, we could dwell much deeper in interpretation: What work does the reader do to fill in gaps in the larp text or performance? We could unpack this with the works of Marie-Laure Ryan (1991), go further into untangling the creation of coherent fantastic diegeses as outlined by Matt Hills (2002) and Michael Saler (2012), and the help provided by *paratexts* as outlined by Gérard Genette (1987). Juri Lotman's (2005) concept of *semiosphere* could probably be usefully mobilized to bring some clarity to challenges of cultural contexts, just as Judith Butler's (1993) *citationality* might be an interesting addition to this discussion, and obviously Stuart Hall's (1997) work on representation and stereotype could also be applied on larp signaling.

However, we have consciously chosen a sharp focus in this article: we have set out to describe the general problem of indexicality in larp with as little theory as possible. Our idea is that by describing the general problem in the abstract and with contextualizing examples, we render this foundation feature of larp communication clearly visible. Thus our project here is more semiotic than discursive: "the semiotic approach is concerned with the how of representation, with how language produces meaning - what has been called its 'poetics'; whereas the discursive approach is more concerned with the effects and consequences of

The general problem of indexicality is that all design strategies for direct representation within a larp carry inherent trade-offs in what can be represented. Thus far we have concentrated on the side of the interpretation. Now we move to the other side, assigning meaning.

Indexicality as a design ideal

The aesthetic of indexicality seems to allow for a powerful *suspension of disbelief* of being able to inhabit the world (and “immerse” into the character) without disturbance. This kind of ideal has been often celebrated and endorsed as a desirable aesthetic within the Nordic larp movement (e.g. Fatland & Wingård 1999, Pohjola 2000, Montola & Jonsson 2006, Pettersson 2018; Koljonen et al. 2019). Sometimes the ideal is rooted in indexicality, while at other times *strong iconicity* suffices, allowing spaceship interiors to be constructed from warships, through a mixture of partially being the real thing and partially just looking-the-part with high production values and perfectionist fidelity.

The clearest expression of striving for indexicality can be found in the *360° illusion* design ideal, formulated by Johanna Koljonen (2007; see also Waern, Montola & Stenros 2009). This design ideal stipulates that the surroundings in the larp should look, feel, and function in full accordance with the fiction. This means that the larp location should look like the diegetic location, the players should look, act, and react like their characters, and all the props should be functional.

However, a *fully indexical larp* is impossible. To quote Alfred Korzybski (1958/1933), “the map *is not* the territory”: A larp that aims to ‘reproduce’ a fictional world fully, and aims for a 1:1 representation, is bound to fail, since the players would then also have to be exactly who they are. The concept of role-play is lost without pretending. Indeed, if larp is viewed as a simulation, and a simulation is a representation and a simplification of another system, it is this gap between the real and the representation that allows for pretend play.² We believe that you cannot actually larp in a fully indexical situation.

representation - its politics” (Hall 1997, 6). The two cannot be fully separated in practice, but in this article, we lean towards poetics, not politics.

² Indexicality is not the same thing as *simulationism*, although they do share a number of similarities. Simulations and simulationism are about modeling real world situations, events, or behavior, and simulation always requires simplification. Indexicality is representation and signification that is connected to the thing being signified or represented.

Larps set in or near the present day can aim for *historical indexicality, except for the characters*. This is the level of detail already suggested by the Dogma 99 manifesto, which stated that “No object shall be used to represent another object”, used by larps such as *13 til bords* (Norway 2000, Eng. 13 at the Table), which is a very minimalistic larp about thirteen characters eating dinner and having an improvised conversation. As there are no instructions to the contrary, there is nothing preventing players from bringing in all the history of material objects, except when they relate to the player characters. As long as the characters do not want to do anything that the players are not willing or able to do, the actions of the characters can also be indexical.

However, when we move away from realistic larps in contemporary settings, we can, at most, aim for *material indexicality without historical or character indexicality*. In the highly indexical aesthetic of the larp *1942 – Noen å stole på* (Norway 2000, Eng. 1942 – Someone to Trust), portraying the German occupation of Norway, the organizers did recommend using authentic gear from the WW2 era – but a pair of authentic army boots were not intended to carry their vintage status as artifacts from the previous century. While *1942* perhaps did not reach an extreme degree of material indexicality (it was played in present-day homes after all), historical re-enactments played in the wilderness can reach this state with enough focus on authentic artisanship.

Finally, larps with supernatural content can at most have *partial material indexicality without historical or character indexicality*. An extreme example of a larp aiming for indexicality was *Parliament of Shadows* (Belgium 2017). The larp addressed lobbying for and against the legislation establishing the European Travel Information and Authorization System at the European Parliament. The larp was played in the actual European Parliament building, with members of the European Parliament, lobbyists, and other parliament staff. The ETIAS legislation is also real, and the larp used the actual documents. Indeed, *Parliament of Shadows* was particularly strongly connected to reality, using the actual contested issues, places of power, and people of influence to stand in for themselves. Yet *Parliament of Shadows* was also an official *Vampire: The Masquerade* fifth edition (2018) larp that features all sorts of supernatural beings – who obviously were not indexical. The level of indexicality need not be homogenous through the design of a larp.³

³ It is important to note that the 360° illusion and the drive toward indexicality, while strong design ideals in Nordic larp, are not universal. Other ideals are, for example, *clarity* and *material independence* (Stenros, Andresen, & Nielsen 2016). Larps that aim for clarity tend to reduce the complexity of fictional elements, having for example only three elaborate chairs and a beautiful table. Such larps also tend to have very little visual noise, and are often played in empty, monochromatic rooms. Clarity as a design ideal is strongly associated with the genre of *blackbox larps* (e.g. Koljonen et al. 2019). While actions may still be strongly indexical, the environment and the player bodies and costumes are not.

As these examples show, the problem in assigning meaning starts to emerge here. While it is work-intensive and possibly very expensive, it can be possible to have indexical items and locations. However, once we populate these sites with characters, connected to culture and history, the general problem of indexicality can no longer be ignored. Next, we move on to considering how compatible indexicality is with character bodies, actions, and histories.

Being real (enough)

There is an old larp rule: “Kan man, så kan man”, *if you can, you can*. KMSKM is intended as a shorthand for rules-light larps describing what characters are able to do in the fiction. If you can run, climb, and fight, then your character can do so as well. This is a foundational element of indexical play. However, the downside of this indexical model is obvious: *If you can't, you can't*.

When indexical representation is the goal, then the player's skills and abilities set the limits for their possible actions. Most people cannot play indexical archers or indexical hackers, or pull off performances as indexical rappers or indexical gourmet chefs. Most people do not want to larp indexical penetrative sex or face the legal ramifications of indexical use of intravenous drugs, even if they could perform the necessary actions. Sex, violence, and wealth are areas where simulation is frequently used to allow groups to tell stories where the consequences of indexical representation would inhibit play.

Sometimes indexicality is not desired, as it might damage the larp on a structural level. A canonical example is indexical lying in larps. It is difficult for a player to have their character tell a lie in a game that is not obviously verifiable as a lie. So much of the diegetic reality of a larp is created through speech acts, that good lying is much more likely to generate equifinality conflicts than interesting plot twists.

Material independence as an ideal is most strongly connected to tabletop role-playing games, where the physical environment does not matter for the fictional world. In larps this is common in *chamber larps* run at conventions and in the Fastaval freeform tradition. As such, role-play is mostly symbolic and iconic, with possible moments of indexical speech or action, the problems of indexicality are not an issue here.

To explain this using the map metaphor, larps aiming at a 360° illusion want to have a map that is the world, maps that have 1:1 reference. Larps aiming for clarity want maps akin to the most beautiful transit maps: the map is very useful for a very specific purpose, more so than a 1:1 map, but for most things it is useless. Larps that aim for material independence have maps that look like maps, but they are more like artistic interpretations of the terrain.

We are also not only limited by what we cannot do, but also by the things that we can. Many skills and abilities are very hard to turn off. This is most obvious when thinking about social skills, such as attractiveness, charisma, and oratory skills, that are hard for a player to leave outside a character performance. As each player is unique, with a personal history, a specific set of skills, knowledge, and experiences, each player will also interpret the larp differently. A professional entertainer may feel alienated by incongruent nuances of backstage banter in a cabaret larp. A professional banker may have a hard time in a larp where the control of a company becomes an issue but the co-players are oblivious to the intricacies of equity and power in publicly held companies. When players have conflicting, non-equifinal readings of the shared imaginary space, we have *interpretive friction*.

Furthermore, when players are limited by what they can actually do, they tend to fall into familiar patterns. Play can end up being less imaginative. Indexicality enforces real-world behavior (see Stenros, Andresen, & Nielsen 2016), and it can also reduce interpretive friction if it is extreme enough. If all orcs in the game world are strong and scary, and all players cast as orcs are selected to be taller than any of the non-orc players, the limbic systems of non-orc players will likely manage the diegetic interpretation of emotional response to orcs, when the game material makes the reputation of the orcs clear. This limbic response reduces the interpretive friction around non-orc players' reaction to the orcs, at the expense of rigid casting requirements.

The rush of larp is in doing things for real, in pretending to be something you are not: but at the same time the player and the character cannot and will not be the same, unless the circumstances are exceptional. Indexical representation also means that not only do the players need to be able to do a thing, but they must actually do it. They need to speak Quenya, they need to convince another character, and they need to cook a gourmet dinner. Some actions are not only hard, time-consuming, or dull, but can also be dangerous or undesirable.

Doing things for real requires practice. *Pre-larp work* is the non-play-time preparation, which includes things like costuming, the establishment of in-game character relationships, and workshops or skills training. For example, a player might train every other weekend for a year for a larp with boffer combat in which they will play the king's champion. Similarly, a spymaster might memorize the names and backgrounds of all characters in a game, trying to produce an indexical portrayal of creepy omniscience.

Authentic gear

The drive toward making props as indexical as possible is strong in some low fantasy or historical reenactment larps. Authentic gear, making it, finding it, and taking care of it, is an important aspect of the hobby for many people. Striving for indexicality as an ideal can be useful, but the idea that all props, costumes, equipment, and locations must be real – or at the very least they should look, feel, and act as if they were real – carries endless challenges. Some props are dangerous (weapons), others are expensive (jewelry), difficult to find (antiques), impossible (warp drive), or very time-consuming to make (period clothing done with period methods).

Experienced indexicality is a function of the perception of the player: if a player has never touched or seen a real gun before, an aluminum replica might pass as an indexical representation. On the other hand, if the player has carried a service weapon every day for years, a replica is unlikely to feel real, even if other players do not notice and it does not affect play. Historically military gear feels more authentic if you know it to be actual army surplus from the 1940s.

The indexicality of any object is evaluated in the context of its surroundings. An object that is significantly more or less indexical will attract specific attention. Introducing an indexical object into an otherwise symbolic experience makes those objects seem more real than their surroundings, allowing focus to be shaped. In a sufficiently indexical environment, iconic objects will be more difficult for players to ignore – an obvious Nerf gun symbolizing a real gun in a contemporary café will be hard to take seriously. The more familiar the players are with an environment, the larger the experiential breach of non-indexical objects. Hence, high-resolution contemporary environments tend to have the highest bar for indexicality.

Since neither full indexicality, nor uniform reading of signification can be achieved, negotiation of representation is always necessary. Interpretive problems can happen in both directions: an act or a prop can be read as more indexical than it is (imperfect make-up on a character interpreted as intended to be diegetically imperfect make-up and not just make-up), or it can be read as less indexical (a replica gun is read as a gun when it is meant as a replica).

Like any strict propping standard, a requirement of indexicality easily turns into a question of classist gatekeeping. The requirement of a high-fidelity royal ball gown would prevent some players from signing up to a larp, or make them choose to play lower status in order to avoid costuming expenses. Participants with less money, time, network, and social and cultural capital can have a hard time participating.

Labor and money can be traded off against each other for indexical propping, and most games using it see a variety of player strategies. However, if a player wants to indexically represent, say, a perfectly fit post-apocalyptic tribal warrior and run for miles to perform the gamemaster-given quests of that larp, they have to actually participate in a pre-larp training regime; there is no monetary shortcut to indexical abilities.

We can analytically divide pre-game work into *labor in the world* (earning money, making objects), *labor on the self* (learning skills, physically changing one's body), and *labor on the game* (rehearsing metatechniques, studying the fiction). Different players often have preferences among the different kinds of pre-game work and may see some as presenting a higher barrier to participation than others.

Players in context

The ultimate limit for the players is not their knowledge or skills, nor even their monetary means. The practical limit is the physical, living player body. This is also the area that is often most contested as it can be very painful to individual players. Tall people cannot be indexically short, just as young people cannot be indexically old. If the requirement of indexicality increases, the possible roles available to players shrink.

To a certain degree, *all larp is inherently ableist*. Opting for non-symbolic representation always places at least *some* players at disadvantage. When we choose to do things for real, we must acknowledge that there is virtually nothing that *all* of us can do for real.

Furthermore, a player body does not float as a *tabula rasa* in a vacuum, but it is situated in a specific culture with histories of meaning and interpretation. The further you choose to map the player's body to the character's body, the closer you venture towards sexism, ageism, racism, colorism, transphobia, and other discrimination (see e.g. Kemper 2017). Indexical representation tends to reproduce real-world power structures. When players are physically identical to their characters, diegetic body shaming, racism, or misogyny touches the players as well as their characters.

Some larps specifically forbid diegetic insults targeting players' or characters' bodies (or other attributes that the character might share with the player) to avoid this – which can in turn make it difficult to meaningfully portray some character identities that have been shaped by oppression in ways that are important to players who share those identities (Saitta &

Svegaard 2019). For example, if a larp world is designed as egalitarian in regards to sexual orientation – if there is no significant difference between being straight, gay, bi, or pan – then lived experience connected to the pressures of staying in the closet and coming out becomes largely meaningless (cf. Stenros and Sihvonen 2019). It is hard to construct a fictional world that is free of oppression, yet renders identities shaped by oppression in a legible manner.

Talking about the body of a player as a brute fact, as something that has a specific, historical, and physical existence is uncomfortable. Yet that is very much the point here. When attempting to design a larp that is accessible and inclusive, yet also contains visual, physical cues rooted in the actual players (appearance, gestures, actions), we cannot ignore the body of the player. In that design work, we must attempt to address the problems inherent in the body as an indexical object, separated from the player as a whole. This abstracted perspective can be dehumanizing, yet ignoring it means we also ignore the very real challenges relating to the indexicality of bodies in larp. We lack polite language for this because we often go through a lot of effort to not see this, to overlook it; in part because of the harm caused early in the history of the medium when communities were still understanding this territory. It can be uncomfortable to look at these issues as they are distinctions that are tied to violence, trauma, and shame, both inherited and personal. However, when we construct ways of seeing that let us not reproduce this trauma, they may obfuscate problems. When we play, we react both to the other embodied player, and we react to our conception of this other player. Both matter.

Let us break down some of the power structures that have an impact on the people who participate. First, *the bodies of players are always present in the larp* in some form, but not always indexically. A player might play a character with their exact physical appearance, or they might play a character whose body their body only represents, as an icon. For instance, a young person might play an old character, or the character might be a supernatural being. In all cases, however, the player is present in their specific, living, breathing actual body. When the body of a player becomes a representation of the character's body, some translation, interpretation, and negotiation is needed.

Humans carry their history in their bodies. As a particularly important and complicated example, trans bodies might require accounting for or explaining marks such as scars, tattoos, and surgery within the larp – or agreeing to omit them from the fiction. Even when a trans body represents itself as a biological index, the production of that body is intricately tied to a specific history, specific power relations, technologies, and legislation. For the body to be indexical, the player and designers would need to create a parallel set of fictional structures. While this is possible, it is rarely done, as accounting for diegetic oppression would be a major

task of world-building that most larp designers are not equipped to carry out. Even if it were done, the result would not always be desirable for players who might want to avoid oppression by playing with an iconic body instead. Consequently, the labor falls onto trans players, who bear the burden of rereading their bodies in such a way that they can fit into the game while performing the character, re-establishing their existing relationship with their body afterwards, and managing the reactions of other players to a non-indexical body throughout.

Secondly, *the player and the character body unavoidably share physiological emotional responses to events*. A player can portray emotional responses that do not exist in their body, representing them iconically in the game. Without this the sociodramatic pretend play that is larping would be very hard. However, when emotions are performed iconically, the physiological response to portraying an emotion will (at least for most players) lead to the body feeling some degree of the portrayed emotion. This is one of the roots of *bleed*: indexical sorrow is real sorrow, which does not simply vanish because the players step out of the liminal space.

Often, players choose to steer for the emotional responses of which they want an embodied experience. Attraction between players is a key example here. Portraying an intimate relationship with a player with whom you have no chemistry is hard emotional labor, often resulting in a flat portrayal. On the other hand, allowing the responses of the players' bodies to filter into the game can result in stronger portrayals. Karete Jacobsen Meland, Ane Marie Anderson, and others have even experimented with a *smellcasting* technique, where players would be cast into intimate relationships based on their preferences of each other's body scent – evaluated blindly based on anonymous white T-shirts (see Anderson 2015).

Thirdly, representations also carry specific histories. While from a formalist point of view all signs that point to a meaning are equally valid, some signs have very loaded cultural histories attached to them (see Hall 1997). The obvious example here is blackface, the act of painting a face with a dark color to signify that a white person is portraying a black person. However, this abstract description of blackface is almost useless in practice, as blackface has a history of use as a tool of ridicule and oppression that is so strong, especially in North American context, that players cannot be expected to interpret it benevolently. In the last few years there have been endless discussions on social media about the use of black face paint to portray fantasy races, such as the Drow from *Dungeons & Dragons*. People who advocate the use of black paint for Drow tend to see this as an iconic representation of dark elves, where they attempt to create a specific visual surface. However, the practice of painting one's face to look like a dark elf is the same as doing blackface – indeed, Drow make-up is (usually) white people in blackface. Today, blackface is widely considered unacceptable even when used to portray

fantasy races, and consequently many larps in the United States require Drow makeup to be blue rather than black or brown.⁴ In some cases, white players' unfamiliarity with the history of the practice have caused conflict with those who live with that history, and sometimes insistence on ignoring that history has become a form of racist gatekeeping.

Other representations that carry history include stereotypical camp narratives for queer characters, representations of sex work grounded in Victorian moralism (and equally, Victorian pornography) rather than lived experience, the antisemitic portrayals of treasure hoarding goblins in fantasy fiction that can be traced back to Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* (1605), and indeed most traditional racialized monsters in fantasy fiction (see Lopenon 2019, also Hall 1997).

Some of these aspects of the general problem of indexicality fall under the header of social justice. This is because in larp we are dealing with actual, individual people, and not abstract, ideal players. If the design goal is to create a formalist larp where players are interchangeable, it may make more sense to go for symbolic representation. Indexicality and "doing things for real" requires that actual players are considered.

The challenge of indexicality can be restated as a friction in larp design "between wanting to be real and wanting to be meaningful". This is how Stenros, Andresen, and Nielsen (2016) formulated one of the two key challenges in larp design in an article about the Mixing Desk of Larp:

"The second key aspect is the negotiation between, on the one hand, naturalism, plausibility, immediacy, and authenticity, and, on the other, structure, curation, predictability, and artificiality. The larp experience should be as real as possible – without having the drawbacks of reality, such as being boring for long stretches of time, being very exclusionary based on skills and appearance, and being not only dangerous but often devoid of meaning. Indeed, it is important to remember that realism is an "-ism." It is an artistic movement dating back to the 19th century. Similarly, simulation is never complete, or it stops being a simulation." (Stenros, Andresen & Nielsen 2016)

⁴ However, it is important to recognize simultaneously that histories of representation are always culture specific. Assuming the universality of, for example, a United States based reading erases all other local cultures and histories. That said, the discourse on blackface in particular is broadly understood in similar ways across the Nordic region too.

Striking a good balance between symbols, icons, and indices is about striving to be visually pleasing, immediate and immersive, and satisfying of the aesthetics of authenticity, while still being legible, accessible, and practical within the production frame chosen for the event. If larp is about doing things for real, then the question is how to be and to do “real enough”.

Specific and communal solutions

At the heart of the general problem of indexicality lies the inherent drive for *authenticity*. Authentic props, sites, and actions are a *practical* challenge. In the search for an indexical environment, we must make choices that ensure that the larp remains understandable and playable. And this, at the very latest, is the point where *interpretation* becomes an issue as well. Actual players are not interchangeable, but they have different skills, bodies, and lived experiences. Player backgrounds strongly influence what we read as authentic: pretending to be a stage magician is very different for a person who has never done a magic trick in front of an audience, and for a person who does that for a living.

Players come to a game with a variety of backgrounds and of both real-world and player skills. This results in them reading an identical representation in different ways. This happens with played actions as much as with props or characters. The *fidelity of the experience* is thus also a key ingredient – and the related problems cannot be solved without considering the *actual players* of the larp.

The general problem of indexicality does not have a general answer, just situation-specific, contextual answers. Design, larp design included, is always about making choices within constraints. While the general problem of indexicality cannot be escaped, there are numerous ways to address it. Indeed, each larp addresses the problem in its own way, often guided by design traditions. Each larp will present its own partial solutions to the problem, creating a field where different kinds of experiences are available.

Unfortunately, there are areas that are seldom addressed, the black hole areas of design, such as when the drive for indexicality always ends up creating a barrier of entry for the same people: adherence to a narrow reading of historical gender roles is a recurring problem for women in larp, and wheelchair accessibility is a recurring problem in authentic historical palaces.

The only way the general problem of indexicality can be tackled is *communally*. No larp can solve the problem, but every larp can choose parts to solve and parts to accept – and in a

healthy larp culture, different larps choose different parts of the puzzle, providing play to everyone.

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Author Bios

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Eleanor Saitta is a writer, theorist (larp and otherwise), artist, and engineer focused on how sociotechnical systems and stories fail, and how we can change them so they fail in ways that are more useful to us. She has been larping since 2011, and edited *The Foundation Stone of Nordic Larp* (2014) and *What Do We Do When We Play?* (2020). She lives in Helsinki and runs a space there for queer live art and politics called The Attic.

Markus Montola (PhD) is a Helsinki-based games scholar, game designer, gaming entrepreneur and game programmer. He has published books on role-playing, pervasive games, larp, and ludology, most notably *Pervasive Games* (2009), *Nordic Larp* (2010) and *The Rule Book* (2024). He has worked as a lead designer on mobile games such as *Shadow Cities* and *The Walking Dead: Our World*. As a cofounder of the mobile game studio Playsome, he currently works as the lead game designer of *Friends & Dragons*.

EXPERIENCE AND CRITIQUE

In this section, authors analyze and reflect on larps that they have played – and occasionally their own practice of making larps. Eirik Fatland discusses *Before We Wake* (Denmark 2015), where the players larped dreams that they had recorded in a diary in preparation for the larp. He describes the game as a possible peak of Nordic avant-garde larp. Syksy Räsänen tries to find deeper meaning beyond the sensual surface of the erotic horror larp *House of Craving* (Denmark 2019). Thomas B. reviews the camp sexual rococo punk extravaganza *Disgraceful Proposals – In the Garden of Venus* (Finland 2022).

We live in an era of luxury larps that cost hundreds of euros to play. There is a trend for larp organizers to market their work as commodities (see Seregina in the previous section). As a refreshing alternative, there are also events that are so co-creative that there is no distinction between organizers and participants. Katharina Kramer writes about the German festival *It's Full of Larps* (iFoL) which functions on the principle that everyone is an organizer. Astrid Budolfson discusses another community-based event that has strongly affected the Danish larp scene – the battle larp campaign *Krigslive* (Denmark 2006–).

Markus Montola analyzes a type of larp design that he calls *clockwork larp*: characters need to accomplish interdependent tasks that feed into each other like gears in a clockwork to progress the story. As a central example, Montola uses the space opera larp *Odysseus* (Finland 2019). He claims that the larp succeeded in the near-impossible task of building a functional clockwork despite the design being vulnerable even to minor disturbances.

In recent years, we have seen the emergence of ecological larps that process our greatest existential threat: climate change. The final three articles of this section are dedicated to this phenomenon. Syksy Räsänen reviews the blackbox larp *End(less) Story* (Norway 2022) that centers on human extinction. Elli Leppä writes beautifully about the interplay between ecological larps and her climate activism. Some of the larps she reflects on were part of Maiju Tarpila's *Kaski* trilogy (Finland 2021–, Eng. Swidden). The section ends with Tarpila's powerful *The Manifesto of Playing to Live Elsewise* where she hammers on her theses on how to play and design in a time of ecological crisis.

Ludography

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End(less) Story (2022): Norway. Nina Runa Essendrop.

House of Craving (2019): Denmark. Participation Design Agency.

Kaski (2021–): Finland. Maiju Tarpila.

Krigslive (2006–): Denmark. Various organizers.

Odysseus (2019): Finland. Laura Kröger & al.

Did We Wake?

Eirik **Fatland**

I have not yet met the woman who is a crab.

drrr. drrr. drrr.

Awakening to a smartphone, dumbly vibrating.

Below me, in that murky swamp from which I (the one who thinks) am emerging, there are silhouettes of moments, echoes of emotion, the kind of shadows that colours cast. *A boat? A canoe? A sailing ship?* Yes. But. *A dream.*

I fumble, sluggishly desperate, for the pad and pencil that I know to be there, somewhere, on the nightstand.

The weird thing about dreams is that they live only in the brain's short-term memory, which expires after roughly 10 minutes. If you don't capture them, they're gone. *Sailing down the creek beneath the schoolway concrete bridge.* My hand finds the pad but loses the pencil, nervous system still booting up. The pencil dinks onto the floor. Rolls. *Someone is with me on the boat, rowing. Someone significant.* I search for the pencil with my hands under the bed, find it, grab it, bring it to the pad.

The organisers of the larp *Before We Wake* (Denmark 2015) will not give us pre-written characters of any kind. We know only that the larp will be "surreal", that it will be played on a black box stage, and that there will be workshops in advance. The only thing we can do to prepare ourselves as players, is to record our dreams. *The woman who is a crab lunges for me, strange reflections in her obsidian claw... no. Not yet!* With the pencil finally in a hand that does not shake, I write:

- The creek by the school at Greverud, except it is a river.
- We are paddling down it.
- Large mountains on either side, wilderness. Boulders amongst the trees.
- I am exploring together with ...

The other person on the boat is someone I knew in childhood. But who? Already, the dream is ... sinking ... The creek under the concrete bridge is, in reality, barely wide enough for a toy boat. I crossed it every day, on my way to school. It leads to the swampy area by the garden-supply store. Yet in the dream, *me and...* Christian, my closest friend? No. And suddenly, I know: *Me and Asgeir*. My brother, 3 years my junior¹.

- I am exploring together with Asgeir.

Where are we heading? Did we arrive there? Echoes fade. Silhouettes soften. Shadows disintegrate. *An impression of calm ocean? strings of light beneath the beaches? the distant sound of storm-waves breaking towards boulders (not yet!).* The harder I attempt to grab the memories, the more thoroughly they slip away.

I let the pen drop.

Irrevocably, the dream has gone.

Untangling

Is it possible to understand a larp without distance?

Larps are complex, intense affairs. A great tangle of new and old relationships, creativity, creation, emotional affect and intellectual growth co-occurring. A community comes into existence for a brief while to create something trivial, entertaining, that can also, possibly, be moving and meaningful. *Playing* a larp is immediate and intense. *Understanding* a larp, however, requires the unravelling of all those threads. Which you can only do, properly, if you played it yourself, if you yourself became a thread to untangle, thereby losing all claims to objectivity.

¹ I have a younger brother in reality as well as in dreams, but his name is not Asgeir. Apart from that, the stories I have shared in this article are as true as memory permits.

Did We Wake?

Untangling takes time. The more ambitious the larp, the more complex its tangle of experiences, the more time will be required.

So I find myself, in 2023, reflecting on *Before We Wake*, a larp played in 2015, a larp which refused to let go, which insisted on being untangled, not just for the mystery it left behind (more on that later), but for how it managed to be, simultaneously, a textbook example of “live roleplaying”, and utterly unlike any other larp ever played.

This is what it looked like

Københavns musikteater.

A room. Industrial-scale. Many metres from floor to ceiling, many more metres between the walls. All painted black. Large, empty, regions of black floor. But also clusters of props of unclear function and meaning – pipes interwoven with threads, stairs to nowhere, platforms that are not stages. Above and to the sides: stage lights, loudspeakers, projectors.

It smelled of chalk. Of old house, summer sweat, and smoke machine.

There was always sound. Sometimes a discrete melodious ambient, sometimes sirens wailing and wars being fought.

Things changed. Gradually. Organisers moved things around, weaving together

Before We Wake

CREDITS: Jesper Heebøll Arbjørn, Kirstine Hedda Fich, Kristoffer Thurøe, Mathias Kromann Rode, Nina Runa Essendrop, Peter Schønnemann Andreasen, Sanne Harder and a team of 8 technicians and helpers.

DATE: August 5–8, 2015

LOCATION: Københavns Musikteater, Copenhagen, Denmark

DURATION: 6 hours + 1 day of pre-larp

PARTICIPANTS: 2 runs, each with 25 participants

pieces of scenography with white thread. The room's state at larp's end was entirely different from its state at the beginning.

And (of course) there were people. Hippie-like, cult-member-like, in similar flowing white clothes, perfect canvases for the stage lights or video projectors.

Imagine being there. Seeing them. Seeing us: we behave in ways that people do not usually behave, even at larps. One sits, head in hands, crying, while the person next to them giggles and blows soap bubbles. Three people, back to back, arms locked together, make the same strange humming repetitive noise. Someone in the corner is plausibly pretending to vomit. A dancer impersonates a bird. Each person, or group of people, entirely in their own social worlds, pretending that the others are not there. Except when they want them to be.

There is a tremendous freedom in this room – the freedom to not care that your tears might ruin the mood, that your childish giggles might lead people to think worse of you. An alibi even more powerful than that usually granted by larp. But an alibi for strangeness, and vulnerability.

Here is one of the things that happened

As I walk through the forest, lost, I find the woman. Bound between two dead trees.

Excuse me! Can you help me?

Sure! I respond, What seems to be the problem?

Well, as you can see, I am a crab.

And so she is. Her enormous claws are bound with rubber bands, but I still take a step back, out of fear.

Please, she begs, please, please don't go away. I won't hurt you. I promise! This is very new to me. I've never been a crab before. I just need a little bit of help.

OK, I say, cautiously, stepping forward.

Please untie me!

Did We Wake?

OK, I say, again, cautiously – very cautiously, removing the rubber band from her left claw.

The claw clacks loudly, centimetres from my neck. I take three steps back. She is attacking me, with her free claw. But the other claw is still bound to the tree.

Sorry! I didn't mean to hurt you! She pleads, as her claw continues to grab for me. Please untie me!

Absolutely not! You're attacking me!

I'll stop. I promise! This is just very new to me.

And as tears flow from her crab-eyes, as she pleads for someone to please help, as her free claw stabs at me again, I walk away.

The dreamer, imagining

At the workshop before the larp, we trained to perform the three different roles available to us in play: the dreamer, the envoy, and the weaver. We could alternate between these roles as we wished. At the second run of the larp, the run I attended, the Envoy (a kind of director-of-dreams) did not see much use. The two other roles, however, did. The Woman Who Was a Crab was a player in the dreamer role. So, in that scene, was I.

The dreamer was a person, dreaming. But which person? Was I to pretend I was Eirik, dreaming, or merely a human who dreams? This was left ambiguous. We were instructed to use the dreams from our own diaries as source material, but also permitted to improvise, and encouraged to join in the dreams of others. Other players would not necessarily know whether we were making stuff up on the fly, or revealing our most profound hopes and anxieties.

At some point during the second act, with no particular thing to do, I notice a large empty space on the floor. In my mind I make it *the river under the schoolway bridge, the river that leads past the garden-supply store and towards unknown shores*. I sit down / *I climb into the canoe* on the floor and start paddling. Imagining the oar. Imagining the presence of Asgeir, my brother. Except. Another player, also in the dreamer role, sits down next to me, and begins paddling with me. Was he simply reacting to my play, joining in to reinforce it, or did my co-player have a boat-dream of his own? *Asgeir is here, now, next to me, paddling, downriver, through the rapids, into wilderness, between ancient boulders.*





Photo: Mathias Kromman Rode

Who was I in his dream – stranger, colleague, father, wife? I do not know, and it did not matter. While we pretended that our characters coexisted in the same reality, the same fictive world or *diegesis* in larp theoryspeak, we likely had different mental and emotional images of that reality. This is true of all roleplaying. Players of *Dungeons & Dragons* form different mental images of the orcs and dragons their characters fight, different ideas of what it means to fight them. The role of Dungeon Master and the copious rules of the game help establish shared truths about the diegesis when they are needed, but the remaining truths are left to the individual interpretations and imaginations of players. This is also true of larp, even of larps that aspire to the 360° illusion (where everything that you see, touch, smell, hear, feel is entirely in-game; see Koljonen 2007), as that illusion is never perfect. Players must still imagine that their bodies are the bodies of characters, that the aeroplane is not there, and that the characters have memories from lives that the players have not lived. And where we must imagine, we will imagine differently. All diegeses, to paraphrase Markus Montola (2003), are subjective. *Imagining* is a core player skill. Without it roleplaying is not possible.

Before We Wake, brilliantly, made a virtue of that which to most larps is a necessary evil. Each player experienced their own dream, pursued their own dream-goals, using their imaginations to paint entirely different realities onto the same scaffolding of scenography and player actions.

Thereby the larp allowed us 25 players to engage in hundreds of mini-larps, overlapping with each other in space and time like some surreal four-dimensional Venn diagram. You did not need to understand this to play the larp. Playing, itself, was enough.

The weaver

The third role available to us players, the weaver, was a nonverbal creature of the dreamworld, a force of nature. Two or more players could make a weaver by finding a shared rhythm, humming or drumming or chanting, and a shared movement, and going with that flow, creating impulses for other players to follow.

The weavers I played in arose organically: two players interacting, discovering a pattern to our interaction, and emphasising that pattern until we were a weaver. To play a weaver, I recall, was pleasant, trance-like, reminiscent of drum-circles and unstructured ritual improv. To meet a weaver, however, could be terrifying.

After a long journey, past the garden-supply store and great mountains, we come at last to the mouth of the dark river. Before us: an ocean in twilight, the silhouettes of islands drawn by the sun's last rays, strings of light beneath the beaches. Uninhabited, undiscovered, begging to be explored.

At this point two additional players have joined the boat, sitting behind me and Asgeir's player. I interpret, imagine, them as childhood friends, who had been on board since the beginning, though I would later call one of them "the Chef" and forget him. Three other players have formed a weaver, and as we paddle they approach us, making windy sounds, wave sounds, moving their arms as if to illustrate an ocean, with increasing intensity.

Abruptly, a cold gale hits our boat. Dark clouds from the east, quickly sliding across the sky. Asgeir reacts. Paddles with fear, and vigour, hoping to escape the storm. I join him. My oar-strokes are strong, exhausting. Sprays of sweat and salt water.

The weaver is gesturing, violently, from floor to ceiling. And then. *And then.* My co-player throws himself to the left. *A great wave washes across the boat, taking Asgeir with it.* I panic. *Shout his name. Asgeir! Asgeir! But he does not hear me. The waves are impossibly tall, our voices in the gale are impossibly small. I throw a rope into the ocean. Grab this! I shout / I whisper. I can see him. Trying to swim. Another great wave hits, and when it has passed, he is gone.*

Did We Wake?

The co-player who portrayed Asgeir has let his character drown and moved on to another dream. The weaver, having achieved catharsis at the peak of their Aristotelian arc, calms down, disbands, the three players seeking out new dreams to participate in.

Wreckage drifting in calm waters, stars reflected in the deep. I stand there, alone. A real person in the midst of an imagined ocean. Dealing with the death of my brother.

Of butterflies and REM sleep

Your dream home. A dream come true. These “dreams” are things that are good, but perhaps unattainable. Real dreams are not like that. They may be happy, indulgent, erotic, beautiful, but also terrifying, awkward, guilt-ridden, anxious or just plain strange. Dreams bleed. You can awake from them devastated at an imagined loss, terrified at a hallucinated monster, emotions so strong that no amount of repeating “it was only a dream!” will remove them entirely.

The Chef died because we forgot him. He had been with us, on the canoe, paddling. But no-one looked at him, all my attention went to my brother. And so the Chef died. Someone explains that “If you forget someone, they can die”. It made perfect sense. It meant I now carried with me the guilt of two deaths.

Neuroscientists have plenty of explanations for the strange sensations of dreams – neurons firing at random, REM sleep as the trash-removal function of the mind. But just as the discovery of oxytocin (“the love hormone”) has not saved any marriages or given us better love poetry, the neuroscience of sleep is surprisingly useless when we wonder why dreams feel the way they do, or why a given dream resonates so strongly with us.

The mourners congregate, the pall-bearers lift the body. The minister intones the eulogy. We play a funeral that is (of course) 15 different funerals, for 15 different people, 15 diegeses overlapping. But in my diegesis, we are burying the Chef, and I am guilty of his murder-by-forgetfulness. One of the mourners is my brother. Asgeir is alive! I notice with deeply felt relief and gratitude. But he has become enormous – a mountain-sized person in the distant ocean. All is well with him, but we can never meet again.

The Chef, too, isn't actually dead. He just needed a hug. In the midst of his funeral, the Messiah appears and resurrects him. She cheerily tells us that she is a new Messiah, she only found out this morning, and asks us to please be patient with her as she figures out how to messiah properly.

“Was I a man dreaming he was a butterfly,” the sage Zhuangzi asked following a particularly vivid dream, “or am I now a butterfly dreaming that it is a man?” In 2300 years, no philosopher has been able to conclusively answer Zhuangzi’s question.

To play at *Before We Wake*, to bring our dreams out of sleep and the subconscious and into shared play, was to enter into that ambiguity. To be unsure of whether one was larping a dream, or dreaming a larp. All larps invite this kind of doubt, but many larp cultures treat it as something undesirable. To risk losing oneself? To mess up one’s grip on reality? Never! Here too, *Before We Wake* made a virtue out of an inherent fault line in the larp medium.

For: if this reality is a dream, then all possible realities might be there when we truly wake. And even if it is not so, then acting as if it is may allow us to see our reality as changeable, improvable, open to creativity. *Strings of light beneath distant shores, numinous with meaning.*

50 shades of ultraviolet

There can be no doubt that *Before We Wake* was a significant achievement – a bold idea, beautifully executed, pushing the boundaries of what roleplaying can be. The peak, perhaps, of the Nordic avant-garde larp movement.

50 players. 50 different larps. 50 different meanings and evaluations. In my circle of contact, the players with the least experience as roleplayers were the ones who were the most adept at enjoying *Before We Wake*. The larp lacked characters, coherent narratives, and causality. *What would my character do?*, we experienced larpsers ask when stuck, *what does the genre suggest? what is the logical thing here?* To which this particular larp replied: *There is no character! No genre! The most logical thing to do is one that doesn’t make sense!*

As the organisers, beginning the larp, told us to pretend to be asleep, I was attacked by pre-larp anxiety, and desperately deployed my meditation practice to ward it off. *Have I prepared well enough? Breathe in. Does my costume suck? Breathe ouut. Will I be able to meet their expectations? Breeeaaatheeee iiiinnnn.* This never works. Except, it did. I managed to find that place of calm and slow breathing where thoughts and anxieties could just float by. I later wrote in my notebook:

Did We Wake?

I have woken into the dream as a small child awakens into the world, awed by existence, captivated even by the wriggling of fingers. I lean against a tree. A web is woven above me. I watch the web materialising. I play with the strips of cloth, blowing at them. I, too, have a piece of white cloth. My white cloth is taken away by the wind, and I follow it, knocking on the trunks of trees to hear whether it is in there. Sometimes I can hear it reply, but before I can grab it, it is blown away again, laughing.

The “wind” in this scene was, I think, another player. My notes from the larp are not entirely coherent. But I recall the feelings evoked from this larp; child-like wonder, the weight of adult responsibility, *saudade*, relief. The strangeness and vulnerability of us sharing dreams. And the mystery.

Awakening

The end, of the larp and of this untangling, is another awakening. An awakening into “the real world”, and an awakening into the mental twilight between the end of roleplay and the beginning of debriefs, where I can sit writing down my memories of the larp, free from the tyranny of consensus.

I have spent roughly 10 minutes writing about the boat, and the storm, and the funeral. I have written about the woman who was a crab. But there were many more moments I had wanted to capture. *A door, thunder, the people lost in the forest ... clouds.*

Echoes fade. Silhouettes soften. Shadows disintegrate. Strangely, I can feel these things, but no longer see them clearly. *Gunshot wounds in the flesh of trees. A wise man perched below the spider's peak. The small thing, beneath your foot...* The harder I attempt to grab the memories, the more thoroughly they slip away.

I let the pen drop.

Irrevocably, the larp has gone.

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Author bio

Eirik Fatland is a larpwright, theorist, and founding member of the Nordic larp movement. He is known as a designer of dark, ambitious larps with political themes (*Europa, Inside:Outside*, and *PanoptiCorp*), strongly narrative and occasionally comedic larps (*Moiras Vev, Marcellus Kjeller*), and as a speaker and educator specializing in matters of larp design. He is in possession of a Norwegian passport, a Master of Arts degree from the University of Art and Design Helsinki, and a job in financial services.

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Searching for Meaning in *House of Craving*

Syksy Räsänen

In the past decade there has been an upsurge of sensual content in larp, brought to spotlight by international productions such as *Just a Little Lovin'* (Norway 2011), *Inside Hamlet* (Denmark 2015), *Baphomet* (Denmark 2018), and others. With this focus, the sensual has at times eclipsed the intellectual, and *House of Craving* (Denmark 2019) provides an example.

The larp has a trim structure. Twelve characters are friends and family who retire to a newly inherited summer house for a few relaxed days. Unknown to them, the house is self-aware, and evokes twelve ghosts to control the characters. The ghosts vicariously play out carnal desires and delicate disappointments through the humans for a few hours, until their personalities are broken and the house absorbs the humans into itself, remaking them into ghosts.

On the next day, the same human characters freshly arrive into the house again, portrayed by new players. The previous characters continue as ghosts of who they were, locked into repetition, haunted by echoes of life, and driven by regret. Their players now embody the manipulative house, as the ghosts try to make good their lives through the humans, before facing final passage into darkness.

The ghost players are dressed in white, and their characters are wholly invisible to the humans. They can take hold of and move human players and objects. The humans can only initiate interaction with the ghosts by treating them as objects of the house, or as participants in their masturbation fantasies.

With six consecutive runs, the players (first and last set aside) get to experience the same day and the same characters twice: first from the point of view of the victimised humans, then as the shattered ghosts. It is a clever composition that, for me, tapped into the *l'esprit de l'escalier*

of larp: regret born from realising too late what I should have said and remorse over how I should have played. In *House of Craving* this self-reflection is sublimated into the emotive mechanism of the ghosts who revisit their lives, hopelessly trying to repair the fragments.

The instrumentalisation of the humans also has a slapdash side to it, as the ghosts exploit them for instinctive ends. In a set-piece scene, the ghosts interject themselves into human affairs for the first time over formal lunch. My run featured a competition of ghosts over which human could eat the fastest when food is stuffed into its unwilling mouth.

The scene highlights how *House of Craving* used physical play to depict the horror of being manipulated, being violated, the horror of taking actions that are not your own, whether in the course of eating or sex. The small group of characters makes for an intimate game, and the larp earned its place in the self-described genre of erotic horror.

Although the larp sported a surfeit of sex, there was also some gravitas in the proceedings. The human characters were rather shallow in personality and interest, and the ghosts had more substance to highlight very human horrors. The ghosts enter the larp in a fractured state, and there is something frightfully moving in their sterile replay of old scenes, reaching out for closure and meeting only the encroaching dissolution of memory and sense.

Compared to the setup for erotica, the existential horror sadly received little attention in the game materials and the workshop. The designers – Danny Meyer Wilson, Tor Kjetil Edland, and Bjarke Pedersen – instructed the players that the larp is “mainly designed to be an entertainingly horrible experience. A premise for this, is that we all agree that we are doing this for the fun of it, and that it isn’t more serious than that.”

These words curtail and contextualise the erotic elements in the larp to build a safe environment, but they also speak of an abridgment of ambition. There is no shame in entertainment, but *House of Craving* had material for a more meaningful enterprise.

Especially when playing as a human, the sexual content often felt like an end unto itself, too unmoored from things of import to have the impact it deserved. Existential horror can enhance erotic elements, providing context and counterpoise and turning them from the default mode of play into meaningful trespasses. More than that, looking not only into the body but also at a wider context could make for a more intellectually satisfying engagement.

For example, if the new family are real people, does that mean that the ghosts' memories of last night are false, and the ghosts are echoes of people yet alive? Or do the ghosts remember true, and the family are only untamed memories of the recent dead? If the player takes their character down this road, they will soon run into the edge of the narrative set by the organisers. There is a limit to how far players can inject meaning into a larp designed just for fun.

The problem is that the setting has been manufactured as a vehicle for social dynamics and an alibi for physical interaction, not as something to stimulate the intellect or support reflection. The casually instrumental approach to setting may be a counter-reaction to old-fashioned plot-centred writing, but the pendulum swings both ways. Superficiality of story invites the haunting question of meaning: what is it that the designers want to convey?

Building a setting with intellectual depth that players can seriously engage with is hardly a new idea, but it has rarely been artfully mixed with the strong bodily experience design seen in larps like *House of Craving*. *Inside Hamlet* attempted this, although, as I have written elsewhere (Räsänen 2016), not with unreserved success.

In contrast, *Just a Little Lovin'* provides an example of a robust design in this regard (with quite a different take on physicality). One reason for the effectiveness and lasting impact of that larp is, I would argue, the balance between its physical, social, and intellectual elements. The design approaches the themes of friendship, desire, and fear of death from multiple points of view, and the game facilitates exploration in any direction: not with a set of answers to be discovered, but with a full-bodied setting to interact with and reflect on.

One critic characterised the author Yukio Mishima's lesser stories as "fine gems roughly polished", a comparison that also encapsulates my feelings about *House of Craving*. There is untapped potential for more multi-faceted work, more comprehensive immersion that would not sacrifice meaning on the altar of sensation.

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Kickass Rococovid Kitsch: A Review of *Disgraceful Proposals – In the Garden of Venus*

Thomas B

Rocoquoi?

Compared to other time periods, the 1700s have not inspired many larp settings. Even putting medieval fantasy aside, way more designers attempt to emulate *Pride & Prejudice* than *Dangerous Liaisons*. And when Nordic larpers do indulge in tricorns and powdered wigs, they seem to opt for a serious and dark tone like *St. Croix* (Norway, 2015) and *Libertines* (Denmark, 2019). I did not attend either of these, but I did attend an international run of *De la Bête* (Czech Republic, 2017). While clearly reminiscent of the monster-hunting film *Brotherhood of the Wolf*, the larp avoided the film's kung fu fighting and video game weaponry. Instead, it focused on the recreation of 1700s village life, using plotlines more inspired by French literature than by pop culture.

My interest for the “Lace Wars” era probably started with an 18 minute-long, *Barry Lyndon* inspired, lavish music video: *Pourvu qu'elles soient douces* (Farmer 1988). But I also loved less polished mashups, like the presence of an electric bass player in a supposedly historically costumed orchestra (Rondo Veneziano 1983), and a Marie-Antoinette inspired performance of *Vogue* at the MTV music Awards (Madonna 1990). I wasn't alone: from *Rock me Amadeus* in Austria (Falco 1985) to Spain's *Locomía* (Loco Mía 1989), it seems the combination of ruffled shirts, embroidered frock coats, glitter, sequins and synth pop was extremely popular throughout late 80s and early 90s Europe. But in larp, this type of 1700s kitsch crosser has been even rarer than more historical options. So when Kimera Artist Collective announced



that they would open their Finnish Rococo-punk-camp-queer larps to an international audience, I immediately signed up.

Serious fun

For *Disgraceful Proposals – In the garden of Venus* (Finland 2022) to be successful, every participant must faithfully adhere to the composite, yet specific visual style. Luckily, as its name implies, Kimera Artist Collective includes several professional visual and performance artists. They used multiple types of media for visual communication, from original art to hacks of historical engravings, to a video trailer and finally a full music video that ensured every interested party understood what they were aiming for. Importantly, Kimera also quickly realized that the online excitement about the visual style, and peer pressure of wanting to look fabulous, could also generate stress among the players, so they later released the following statement:

“Many of you have been planning outfits already and thinking of what to wear. Don’t stress. The point of all this is to have fun. If you think your choices are fun and cool, they are! Go wild! Be extravagant! This is not a costume competition, this is crazy fun play with friends. You will not be judged. The guidelines are just for inspiration, not rules to stress about. Each and every one of you will be adored.”
(Kimera, 2022)

This serious-but-not-*too*-serious approach permeated beyond the costuming advice, and was at the core of the the fictional 1700s setting:

“The larp takes place in a place called Venusberg somewhere in Central Europe. Venusberg is an independent principality ruled by the Princess Bishop, a self-proclaimed Venus and goddess of love. They hold their court in the famous Party Orangerie, a beautiful winter garden on a mountain top. The Orangerie parties attract a wide variety of revelers: pretty peasants from the nearby Village and fierce Dandy Highwaymen from the Forest, as well as more outlandish visitors and creatures. And they all party like there’s no tomorrow. The night our larp takes place is a very special night, as the Great Six-Tailed Comet of 1776 is coming tonight.” (Kimera, 2022)

From my French cultural frame of reference, the Germanic flavour of Venusberg (see character names below) instantly amped up the kitsch factor: this was neither gilded Versailles, grimy London nor mysterious Venice: this was queer Baron Munchausen high on Mozartkugel candy.

Textual healing

To my surprise, Kimera put in as much style and intent in their written content as in their visuals. How often do larp info letters put a smile on your face? One started with:

“Dear fluffy shiny pufflings! You glorious diamonds of meringue sparkles! (...)
Peekaboo! Your character is waiting for you! You can find your character in this folder(...)” (Kimera, 2022)

Character text was transparent for all players to read if they so chose, with succinct public descriptions that were equally hilarious:

“Name: **Count/ess Frou-Frou**

Position: **Boudoir Designer**

Countess Alexandra / Count Alexander Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Plön, or Count/ess Frou-Frou is Venusberg’s most wanted boudoir designer. They are married to Porcelain-Dolly, and they both love to hate each other and have an intense rivalry on seducing others. Lady Bee, the leader of the teen girl gang the Powder Puff Girls is their daughter who tries to outdo her parents in scandalous notoriety. Good luck trying, girl.” (Kimera, 2022)

Individual character texts were in the same vein, consisting three pages full of whimsical flourishes, but also directly usable info, such as suggestions of “Whims, ideas of what to do in game” (make-your-own-fun sandbox style of play was explicitly discouraged). More classical connections between characters were called “Liaisons”, and beyond the jokes, backstories also included opportunities for deeper connections and more serious scenes during the game.

“Wolfgang jr. was born as a bastard child of Papa Wolfgang and the well-known porcelain polisher Leonora Möller. Papa Wolf did send money for his son but spent his time hanging out in the Forest in pursuit of manly sports and activities in the forests with the rugged Dandy Highwaymen, and never understood his son’s sensitivity and love for pretty things.” (Kimera, 2022)

To encourage play across social classes, characters were also part of “Hobby groups” with ludicrous names and goals, from the “Cake Crowning Society” to the “Water Fairy Appreciation Club”. They were actually neither jokes nor useless fluff, but accurately described what would happen during the game. A group did crown a cake in the center of the dancefloor, another group then really guillotined said cake, water fairies were very present, sociable, and appreciated.

Staying power

I kept wondering how Kimera would maintain the announced “intense larp comedy” energy for the full duration of an international destination larp, i.e. much longer than a pop song. The designers had thought it through:

“It is a three-day event that includes the pre-larp workshops, the larp itself (estimated length 6 hours), a debrief and the option to hang out afterwards. The actual larp time might seem short, but we want to be able to keep up high energy for the whole duration of the larp. These six hours will be a breathtakingly delightful exhilarating spiral into silliness – trust us, more would make it less.”
(Kimera, 2022)

This short in-game duration was a good indicator that the organizers knew what they were doing. They had a clear vision, and clear expectation of how long people can keep up a certain type of play. This became crucial to me, as a global event was about to affect my energy levels for years to come.

Not your average Knuteflu

Disgraceful Proposals was announced at the end of 2019, confirmation of participation was swift, and info letters started flowing, for an intended run at the end of March 2020. But the pandemic hit, leading to the following email:

“Mar 12, 2020, 6:36 PM Dear players,
It is with heavy hearts that we make this decision. Today the Finnish government issued a ban on all over 500 people events until May and a recommendation to also reconsider all smaller events due to the COVID-19 pandemic. And in the current situation we just can not justify holding an event like this, with a lot of

physical contact which is a high risk no matter what we do. Even if it breaks our hearts, and it really does, we have to do the right thing and decide that this will not happen now. We need to do our part in slowing the pandemic down to protect the weakest ones.

But we are not forgetting you, sweet cream puffins. We will rearrange the event at a later date.” (Kimera, 2020)

This cancellation increased my confidence in the organizers: for them, participants – and innocent bystanders, i.e. society at large – indeed mattered more than games. Even though they weren’t forced to do it by law, they refused to organize an event that could inherently become a Covid cluster, at a time when no vaccines were available. I did catch Covid in early 2020, and never fully recovered. I stopped crafting my costume, sheltered in place, and hung tight while at least 3 million people died worldwide. Fast forward to 2022, and another email felt like the return of spring:

“Fri, Apr 15, 2022, 12:41 PM Dear disgraces,

It’s been two years since the world changed with the Covid-19 pandemic and we all had to let go of the frenzied expectation of Disgraceful Proposals. Today, the world is still not okay – not by far – but we want to believe that in six months we can come together and frolic again.

And so we are back and we’re having another go at this. Disgraceful Proposals – In the Garden of Venus will run in October 2022 in Hauho, Southern-Finland.”
(Kimera, 2022)

The larp world had changed too, and there were not enough sign-ups anymore to fill several runs. But both organizers and remaining players seemed ready to make that one run an event to remember.

Since my initial infection, I had developed a series of chronic symptoms now referred to as Long Covid. This means that I regularly lose cardiopulmonary, muscular and cognitive abilities in a very unpredictable manner. I often need to prioritize using what energy I have left for work, rather than for hobbies. So shorter larps are more important to me than ever. Exhaustion did affect my play, but *Disgraceful Proposal’s* design proved to be rather Long Covid friendly.

A clockwork Orangerie

First, the organizers recognized that Covid-19 was a current, ongoing threat:

“Covid-19

There is still a pandemic going on, but at the moment it looks like it is possible to larp in October. But please only come to the larp if you’re healthy, and preferably take a covid test before the event.

If someone gets sick during the event, we have rooms where you can isolate yourself apart from the rest of the players and rest.” (Kimera 2022)

Second, the three days were very well planned. The numerous workshops took things slow, step by step, and had breaks in between, long enough to rest (I could go lie down regularly in my room) or to get to know the other players off-game. Particular emphasis was put on safety, repeating there would be no nudity, no touching the bikini zone, and that participants should focus on co-creative appreciation, adoration and stepwise intimacy. The collaborative spirit translated beyond the workshops: players helped each other putting on their costumes, calibrating to play each other up, or just lending nail polish remover.

Third, spatial design was also extremely precise, and well thought-through. All the pre-game activities, workshops, meals and sleep happened in a building that was large and comfortable enough to avoid overcrowding, including a large number of bedrooms with private bathrooms to avoid any dormitory or tent camp feeling.

Players only discovered the in-game location at runtime, and even more spatial design had gone into it. The Orangerie was a large, multi-level wooden barn, with a main dance floor surrounded by a bed and couches, shelves with rococo kitsch porcelain ready to be worshipped, a portrait of Mozart with a “Rock me Amadeus” graffiti etc. This space provided many options for public play, from socializing to performances, happenings etc.

A basement room had refreshments, including a dizzying array of meringue flavors (some vegan, and one of them the oh-so-Finnish salmiakki), tea and alcohol-free bubbly, which provided enough calories to keep the energy going. It also had plenty of comfortable couches, pillows, and macramé braided cords hanging from the ceiling. Literally turning these iconic kitsch flower pot holders onto their heads transformed them into ropey curtains/cages suitable

for more private dance performances. Upstairs were more pillows in a mezzanine, as well as a “winter garden” that was actually cold, decorated with a magnificent silk paper cherry tree and a rococo sofa. As announced in advance, some doorways and stairs were not wheelchair-accessible, and proved a bit difficult to navigate for my giant wig made of EVA foam. Attention to prop detail extended to the character name tags, made from those lace-like paper things usually placed under small cakes, i.e. perfectly matching the theme.

Showtime!

When we all gathered in costume on the dancefloor, my jaw dropped and I had to do a 360° turn to take it all in. Per the announced rules, I knew there would be no in-game photos, but what stood before my eyes was a visual orgasm of kitsch and camp: polyester corsets, outrageous makeup, piercings, proper lace lingerie, funky colored wigs, gigantic fake eyelashes, panniers with skirts, panniers sans skirt, two halves of a birdcage as panniers, sea creatures wearing fishnet stockings, sea creatures wearing actual fishing nets... you name it. I was also impressed by the Peasants characters, who somehow managed to go all-in in the meek and innocent direction, including a shepherd boy with a cotton-wool-like wig.

Then, what actually happened? The groups mingled, gossiped, betrayed and worshipped each other, there was some gentle flogging, foot rubs, rivalry between teen gangs, some theatrical kidnapping, a lot of yelling... So not a full six hours of frantically running around and laughing hysterically, but quite a lot of it.

Kimera presents: Disgraceful Proposals - In the Garden of Venus

CREATIVE AND PRACTICAL WORK: Kimera, e.g. Tonja Goldblatt, Vili Nissinen, Kirsi Oesch, Nina Teerilahti

CHARACTER WRITING: Kimera, Jade Heng, Ernesto Diezhandino

INFO, SAFETY AND SUPPORT: Joonas Iivonen, Arhi Makkonen

SCENOGRAPHY BUILDING HELPERS: Tia Ihalainen, Milla Heikkinen, Joonas Iivonen

MERINGUE MADNESS: Kirsi Oesch

CAKE GUILLOTINE: Arhi Makkonen, Mikko Ryytty

There were also those very classic larp moments where multiple groups tried to take center stage to each have their 15 minutes of fame, or when everyone ran to achieve their secret society objectives or resolve their personal conflicts just before the end of the game. There was also co-creation, such as when a hobby horse race was made more participatory by using non-rider players as obstacles. And there were also slower moments, as well as opportunities for those deeper scenes that were hinted at in the character text. I did feel the eponymous disgrace when one of the main inspiration songs, *Crucified* (Army of Lovers 1991), played just as my character was being betrayed by his prophet, in front of everyone.

Rococovid

Long Covid did affect my experience, but it didn't spoil it, thanks to a steady supply of medications and energy drinks, my co-players' support, and Kimera's inclusive design. The off-game safe room was very quiet, and had comfortable beds, plus chocolate to snack on. I visited it within 20 minutes of game start, because I had to lie down and take an actual nap. In any larp, experiencing fatigue makes it hard to do justice to a character written as being "the life of the party". Now try making a dramatic entrance when at least 30 of the other players are already busy being *very* dramatic.

I quickly realized I was doing a pretty poor job as the leader of my character group. One of the players was friendly, but had chosen a very different direction compared to the other members, both in terms of costume choice and of the amount of hanging out with the group vs. going exploring on their own. The other player, who was playing my sidekick, yes-man, and planned to repeat every witty thing I was going to say, was extremely kind and supportive... but I didn't provide many punchlines or cool moves to mirror. Both of these players seemed to have enjoyed themselves, but for me it was a missed opportunity. I did not play the character as intensely as it was written, or as I had intended to. In retrospect, based on that latter player's impressive energy and creativity, I would have done a better job as their sidekick.

The comet is coming!

The lights dimmed for the final scene, as the comet came down on the Orangerie (the giant chandelier-feather-boa-string-lights contraption attached to the ceiling lit up). The players gathered as practised during the workshops, first dancing separately, then closer, turning into a giant group hug, a progressive vertical cuddle puddle of silk, sweat, glitter, perfume, and those musty smells typical of rented theatrical costumes made with furniture fabric. We gently

swayed for four songs, which was really long. It reminded me of calibration workshops where you practise hugging a person until it gets uncomfortable and you use the safeword. Except we were doing it in a human mass made of all the players. I was definitely uncomfortable by song two, especially as this was the first time in years that I was within centimeters of multiple people's breaths. But it was the final scene of the larp, and I eventually gave in to loudly singing what I could remember of *It's All Coming Back To Me Now* (Dion 1996) – and I did not catch Covid. The magic of larp, I guess.

Pillow talk

After this sensory overload, I needed some alone time, fresh air and to remove my makeup. People debriefed gently, and chilled in small groups, as both buildings provided multiple spaces for it.

While my main regret was my own lack of energy and leadership, the main criticism about the larp that I heard from other players was that they expected more intimate sensuality, and felt burdened by the sheer amount of safety measures. I agree that it felt a bit like every single safety meta-technique in the book was workshopped, from lockdown to taps, to squeezes to two different safewords. These were intended to let people explore in a safe way, but they may have actually discouraged some players, who interpreted the organizers' intention differently. Or maybe the players just had different expectations – I was OK with the level of sensuality I experienced.

These minor gripes aside, I think *Disgraceful Proposals* was a resounding success. Starting from a very niche concept, organizers and players from multiple countries and different larp cultures pushed themselves in the very same creative direction. They were sensual but not sexual, and they took this intense Nordic larp comedy very seriously – but not *too* seriously. So since you're asking, yes, I'd gladly get disgraced again.

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Author bio

Thomas B. is a French roleplayer who lives in Switzerland. He wrote for Backstab, Casus Belli, Larpzeit International, Roolipelaaja, multiple Knutebooks, Radio Rôliste and the In Nomine Satanis / Magna Veritas RPG line. His 1997 larp script *La croisière s'accuse* (a Love Boat murder mystery) is still being run to this day. He later co-designed the larps *In Cauda Venenum*, *Technoculte*, *Shadowrun* and *Afroasiatik*. He stopped making his English-language larp reviews public in 2014. This book is an exception.

On Co-creating Experiences: iFoL

Katharina **Kramer**

If you ask ten people what larp is for them and why they do larp, you will probably get at least eleven different answers. For me, it is all about meeting my dearest friends. I recently turned 30, and all the people I invited to my party were people I met through larping. Unfortunately (or fortunately) due to how global our hobby is, a lot of those people live all over the world, and I only see them at larps. However, when I go to a typical weekend larp, though I get to enjoy an amazing larp, I never have enough time to talk to all the awesome people.

That's one of the main reasons why I love an *iFoL*. iFoL, standing for "Its Full of Larps", is typically a long weekend from Thursdays to Sunday, dedicated to short form larps (1-6 hours) played at a rented large house. Between the larps, there is lots of talking, cooking, board games, sometimes a sauna – in general, just having a good time together. It is like only experiencing the big moments of a larp while spending most of the time as yourself, not as a character. Or like being at one of the KP/SK conferences, but without panels and in a way smaller venue. This gives the participants more time to really get to know each other and spend time together between the games – instead of only having a short time for socialising at an after party after a larp.

Apart from the social aspect, the organisational design of iFoLs is quite different compared to a lot of larps these days. Since a couple of years ago, we have seen quite a big trend of commodification in larps (see Seregina 2019): the larper is more of an attendee than a participant, and larps are often more about buying experiences – not co-creating them. At an iFoL, the opposite applies: everyone is part of the organising team. This is emphasised in the design: an iFoL usually begins with the people who organised the venue and registration saying the iconic phrase: "Our part is over – now everyone is organising." This shows the importance of co-creation at an iFoL.

This also means that the participants must be ready to volunteer to guide larps, to organise time schedules, to cook, to help with the logistics, and so on. And everyone must be involved in keeping the space clean. If you want something to happen, you must organise it yourself. Usually, these roles are not appointed up front. Instead, people volunteer on the location. Apart from a food plan (due to needing to buy the groceries before), the final schedule of the event is decided spontaneously. Most of organising is done ad hoc; for example, to sign up for larps, participants may stand in a line after dinner to get a spot at a larp, or room corners may be reserved for different larps, with people gathering at specific corners to sign up for specific larps. These on-the-fly mechanisms make it easy to find out which larps still have open spots and which are full. Signups tend to be organised just a few hours before the games to allow people to arrive and organise their schedules flexibly.

The system of self-organising and co-creating works surprisingly well, though there are also some challenges. In an ideal world where responsibilities would be shared equally, the main tasks that need to be done before the event would be shared between all participants. However, in our non-ideal world, this does not work. To make the events happen reliably, there usually must be a smaller organising team that decides to facilitate an iFoL. This team manages the preliminary tasks such as booking the venue, handling participant registration, and organising the food for the event.

Additionally, there are always small things that require coordination – an ingredient missing from a meal, a participant needing to be picked up from the train station, or a person feeling lost at the event. The goal is to share these responsibilities between everyone, but usually the main organisers tend to be the first who are asked to provide help. They can then coordinate with the other participants and ask them to help with the tasks.

The events do not work well with too few or too many people. If there are less than 25 people, experience has shown that this leads to not many games being played, and people get disappointed for not being able to larp. Not everyone wants to play all the time, and if there is already a bigger larp with maybe 15 people attending, there might not be enough willing participants to play another larp simultaneously. Likewise, with over 35 people attending, self-organising does not work as well. In larger groups, people tend to rely on other people doing the required tasks and no longer feel responsible for the co-creation.

The participation fees of iFoLs are divided equally between everyone. Since iFoLs started, the tradition has been that everyone pays the same amount to participate, and this includes the main organisers. This was based on mutual co-creation – even the main organisers are just

participants, and all participants are equal organisers. The main organisers have tasks before the event, but ideally they would not have to do anything anymore once at the location (though as said before, this ideal does not fully hold). However, equality is not the same as equity, and having everyone pay the same amount of money does not give everyone the same chance to participate. Thus subsidised and sponsor tickets have become available during the past years.

What I have written above have been my experiences on participating in iFoLs – and organising one. Even though the main idea is written down in the iFoL manifesto (Deutch & Kasper 2015), at the end iFoLs are about creating an experience together. They are not about attending as consumers – they are about co-creation and organising together. They are about spending time with old and new friends in a safe and welcoming environment to play larps, to talk, and to have fun together.

To have an iFoL work out well for all, you need to trust your fellow larpers. There are enough of us who want to co-create events together instead of buying experiences, and enough of us who are ready to take the responsibility. Over all my years of attending iFoLs, this mentality of co-creation and co-organising has permeated the events – and it is the main reason why I love iFoLs. In the end, this is what our community is about at its best: friendship.

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Author Bio

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17 Years, 18 Runs, Broken Records: Why *Krigslive* Just Won't Quit

Astrid **Budolfsen**

The first time I participated in *Krigslive* in 2011, I was 16 years old, and despite the mud, the bruises, and the bad sleep, it was one of the best and most immersive larp experiences of my life. I was enraptured by the thrill of the battlefield. The adrenaline and bloodlust made me fearless to storm players twice the size of my short, skinny teenage self alongside my likewise skinny, teenage brothers and sisters in arms. At that larp, in those moments, I forgot the real world, and I was at one with the experience of a warrior in battle.

Today I am 28 (which in the Danish larp community is ancient). I have organised one *Krigslive* by myself and co-organised the most recent (in 2023) with my 19-year-old co-organiser, Tobias Ritzau, for a record-breaking number of participants. My favourite larp of all time is older than ever, and alive and kicking.

What is *Krigslive*?

Krigslive is a Danish battlelarp, that was first organised in 2006 by Thomas Aagaard (but there were other similar smaller events preceding and inspiring this event). Since then, it has been organised approximately yearly, and *Krigslive XVIII* took place in 2023.

A battlelarp is a larp where battles and fighting with boffer weapons takes center stage and is the main source of entertainment and action. Other examples of battlelarp are *DrachenFest* and *Conquest of Mythodea* in Germany, *Krigshjärta* (Eng. War Heart) in Sweden and *Sotahuuto* (Eng. War Cry) in Finland.



Krigslive 18 in 2023. Photo: Rekografica

General Eisenfaust, played by Nikoline Gilså (29), Krigslive 18 in 2023. Photo: Rekografica



A number of things make *Krigslive* unique as a battlelarp. It is inspired by the *Warhammer Fantasy* tabletop miniature games, and the rules of *Krigslive* reflect that. The rules are revised each year by the new organisers, effectively making it a collective creation in its 18th iteration. The rules are the core of the *Krigslive* formula, as the setting of the larp can change (although it is most often *Warhammer* fantasy). They were contained in a few pages in the beginning and have by now developed into a text of 16+ pages. They centre the principle of “fighting in formation”; that all members of a unit must stay within an arm’s reach of each other during battle. If you are separated from your unit and cannot immediately rejoin, you are demoralised and destroyed. If a unit is split in two, the part that stands with the banner survives and the other is destroyed. If a unit falls below five people (including bannerman) they are demoralised and destroyed. Everyone in a unit must carry the same weapons and armour, be visually distinguishable as a unit, and they have the same hit points from the onset of the battle. Everyone is individually responsible for counting their own hit points as they diminish. These rules structure the battles and promote cooperation within the groups.

The rules are published on the website prior to the game, and also sent out in participants’ letters. At the last *Krigslive* a simplified one-page version of the rules was made and posted on the inside of the bathroom stalls. Many veteran players have developed a strong memory of the rules. *Krigslive* organisers have less agency to design their event because players have such a strong sense of ownership over the concept. A common disagreement (and source of organiser stress) between organisers and players is the introduction of new rules or alteration of old ones. Likewise, a common disagreement between players is when old rules from old iterations are thought to still be in use.

The larp focuses on portraying soldiers at war; usually there are two enemy camps at the location, and there has thus far never been an in-game town. *Krigslive* is organised as a relay within the Danish larp community; different larp organisers from different Danish larp organisations take turns organising *Krigslive*. Newer organisers are prioritised over ones that have organised *Krigslive* before. To date there are more than 20 former *Krigslive* organisers (sadly, two have passed away). I love this relay structure because it gives everyone the opportunity to organise *Krigslive*, and it gives the whole community ownership. However, it has been difficult at times to recruit new organisers, or any organisers at all, and it is sometimes a very stressful experience to be a *Krigslive* organiser. Although the organiser(s) do not need to spend a lot of time on recruitment, they do have to navigate a community that has very strong and sometimes conflicting expectations of what *Krigslive* and its rules should be.

Krigslive has no individual characters. Everyone participates as part of a group, and groups organise all their tents, costumes, transport, weapons, armour, background story, and usually also their food.

What *Krigslive* has meant to the Danish larp community and what the community has meant to *Krigslive*

Krigslive has been a sizeable part of the Danish larp community for so long that it has shaped the community itself. The most obvious way is that by knowing that *Krigslive* will be around every year, always, *Krigslive* has made it easier for people to invest in more expensive larp gear. At least two different larp organisations, one a feminist larp organisation, *Piger i panser* (Eng. Girls in Armour) and its sequel-in-spirit *Feminister i rustning* (Eng. Feminists in Armour) (see Eriksen 2015), and another organisation from southern Denmark, also started out as player groups at *Krigslive*. Less obvious probably is that *Krigslive* has provided a way for players all across Denmark, from many different larp organisations, to meet and connect. In that way it has fostered a sense of national community for the Danish larp scene.

The community has also shaped *Krigslive*. The first *Krigslives* strived for a high level of realism. Battle plans were made on location in-game, and there was little to no off-game communication or coordination between the opposing sides. In time, this was changed to pre-planned battle plans and set schedules to cut down on waiting time and time lost searching for the enemy, as well as allowing players more rest and downtime. At the latest *Krigslive*, battle plans were shown to the generals beforehand, so the only task at the larp was to decide which units would do which tasks. A schedule for the larp with times for battles, meals, setup, and game ending etc. was published beforehand, sent out to all players, and printed and hung on the inside of bathroom stalls.

Krigslive is unique among Danish larps. It is the longest running larp in Denmark. It averages 300 players every time, with some *Krigslives* reaching 350 or 400 players, and hitting 530 players in 2023.

The biggest *Krigslive* ever

Krigslive XVIII in 2023 was absolutely record-breaking in terms of number of participants, and that was not anticipated by anyone, not even the organisers. The larp was to be in mid-May,

Krigslive: number of players

Estimates for number of signed up players Krigslive 1-18		Setting of that Krigslive:
Krigslive 1	200	Warhammer Fantasy
Krigslive 2	250	Warhammer Fantasy
Krigslive 3	180	Warhammer Fantasy
Krigslive 4	400	Warhammer Fantasy
Krigslive 5	460	Warhammer Fantasy
Krigslive 6	400	Warhammer Fantasy
Krigslive 7	400	Warhammer Fantasy
Krigslive 8	400	Crusaders vs. Vikings
Krigslive 9	300	Warhammer Fantasy
Krigslive 10	440	Warhammer Fantasy
Krigslive 11	300	Vikings
Krigslive 12	350	Warhammer Fantasy
Krigslive 13	300	Warhammer Fantasy
Krigslive 14	290	Game of Thrones
Krigslive 15	No data - but probably 300	Warhammer Fantasy
Krigslive 16	300	Warhammer Fantasy
Krigslive 17	277	Age of Sigmar
Krigslive 18	530	Warhammer Fantasy

and in April, we realised that we would reach at least 400 players, and that sent us into a weekend-long crisis about the weight of expectations, joy over success, and worry about our logistics. Two weeks later, the signup sprinted past 450 (another crisis), and one week after that we closed the sign-up with 530 (yes, another crisis). Why did this happen?

My first instinct is to credit my co-organiser, Tobias Ritzau, for it and refer to what I call the Ritzau effect.

I feel that Tobias Ritzau is a wunderkind, and everything he touches overperforms. This is an irrational idea but I want to believe it is true because I support my friends. For a more rational explanation, my theory is that three things happened.

First, we made a number of lucky decisions. We reduced ticket prices for a number of groups, including one travelling from Poland. Completely by chance, we scheduled the event so it did

not coincide with events in Denmark or Poland. *Krigslive* usually does not have an age limit, only a restriction on how old you must be to participate on the battlefield. We lowered this age by two years from 16 to 14. We managed (again mostly by luck) to have good teamwork with the group leaders who organise the participating groups. We had a popular choice of setting and set-up. For the setting we chose Empire vs. Empire in the Warhammer fantasy world. Most potential players have the landsknecht-inspired costumes that characterise Empire soldiers, which lowers their cost of participation. Also, most *Krigslives* have been set in the Empire in Warhammer Fantasy, so it is a familiar setting, and a lot of *Krigslive* traditions have been built in that setting. For a setup we chose a training camp, instead of war between two enemy armies. This allowed everyone to camp in the same location, so that all players could easily interact with each other. We made an open call for two players to portray the generals for each side, and the players we chose, Nikoline Gilså and Carl Munch, were popular choices and good at building hype.

Secondly, we were generally lucky. We had players who did most of the hype for us by making videos and memes. We had some great group leaders, who recruited people in unprecedented numbers. This luck was not limited to just getting signups. Many situations made me think that the universe seriously conspired in our favour (Ritzau effect again).

Finally, *Krigslive* is an evergreen, robust concept, and we are getting ever better at showing the game to the world by having some seriously awesome photographers at the event.

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Ludography

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Author Bio

Astrid Budolfson, Denmark, she/her. Born 1995. Holds a Master's degree in accountancy and has been working for the Danish state for the past two years. Astrid is an Østerskov Efterskole alumna and has been larping since 2008. She is a volunteer larp organiser who was the sole lead organiser of *Krigslive XIV* (2018) and lead organiser of *Krigslive XVIII* (2023) together with Tobias Ritzau. She is currently working as the lead organiser of *Endure and Survive* (October 2024) together with Andreas "Esso" Jensen and will also be the lead organiser of the larp talks event Forum 2024 together with Hans Walmar. Astrid has written a book about Krigslive. If you want a copy, you can contact her at astrid@budolfson.dk

Odysseus: In Search of a Clockwork Larp

Markus **Montola**

Odysseus (Finland 2019) was an ambitious attempt to create a fully functioning spaceship in the spirit of the TV series *Battlestar Galactica*. The dream was to create a sense of a perfectly working spaceship, where every aspect of the ship would have a part to play in the collective success and failure of the crew. The *Odysseus* had 104 characters onboard, running the ship in shifts for 48 hours. The larp aimed for a high-fidelity illusion of being on a spaceship, full with interactivity, scenography, sound and light to create a plausible feel of being inside an episode of a space opera.

Played in the Torpparinmäki school in Helsinki, *Odysseus* was about making every aspect of a space opera into playable content: bridge crew fighting space battles, landing parties exploring planets, fighter pilots engaging enemies in combat, med bay patching up injured soldiers, science lab solving mysteries, and engineering crew keeping the bird in the air.

Odysseus pursued the dream of a *clockwork larp*. Clockwork larp is a larp where characters work on diverse and sequential interdependent tasks that feed into each other, forming loops that progress the story and the dynamics of the larp.

The beauty of a clockwork is in the immersive sensation that comes from dozens of players working together to overcome a challenge. Your job might be tedious in itself, but as your performance impacts everyone, it becomes imbued with meaning and significance. When an injured soldier comes to the medical station, she arrives with actual historical details on where, how, and why she got hit, and all those details are shared by all her comrades. As a medic, you are just patching up a soldier, but if you do your work badly, it might lead to dramatic repercussions further down the line.

A properly interdependent clockwork is a fragile device. For every task to matter, *every task needs to matter*. Every wheel and spring must be doing its job or the gears grind to a halt. The characters must be reasonably successful in their tasks. The players must be reasonably timely. The larp technology must work smoothly. The marines must be on board when the cruiser jumps. If something goes wrong, the entire larp might be in danger of falling apart.

While naval vessels and space stations are the obvious themes, any larp requiring coordinated success of diverse character groups can approach the aesthetics and face the challenges of a clockwork. To understand whether you should think about a larp as a clockwork is all about interdependence and fragility. If there are multiple player groups performing multiple tasks that could completely ruin the larp, it might be valuable to think about the larp in terms of clockwork design. In this paper I seek to describe how *Odysseus* approached the central clockwork-related design problems. This is not a review of *Odysseus* as a whole, but an attempt to distill the essential elements of its successful execution of the clockwork aesthetics.

The *Odysseus* engine

The ESS *Odysseus* is a starship escaping a devastating attack on her home planet. As in the *Battlestar Galactica* TV-series that inspired the larp, the only hope is to find a safe haven by following an ancient path through the stars. In order to succeed, the crew must fend off relentless enemy attacks, deploy landing parties to collect long-lost artefacts, and decipher clues to discover the way to safety.

The *Odysseus* clockwork loop (see figure 1) starts with the ship escaping combat with a hyperspace jump, and landing in the relative safety of a new star system. After the jump, the medics and the engineers have to take care of injured crew members and damaged machinery. At the same time, the scientists and the bridge crew use scanners to figure out which planet to visit next.

Then, the marines are deployed to the planet, with a mission to obtain ancient artefacts for the scientists. During the ground mission, they encounter enemies and other dangers (see photo 5), and thus need to have their injuries treated by the medics. While this happens, the pursuing enemy fleet unerringly catches up with the *Odysseus*, prompting a space battle between the ship, its fighter craft, and the enemy fleet.

Odysseus: In Search of a Clockwork Larp

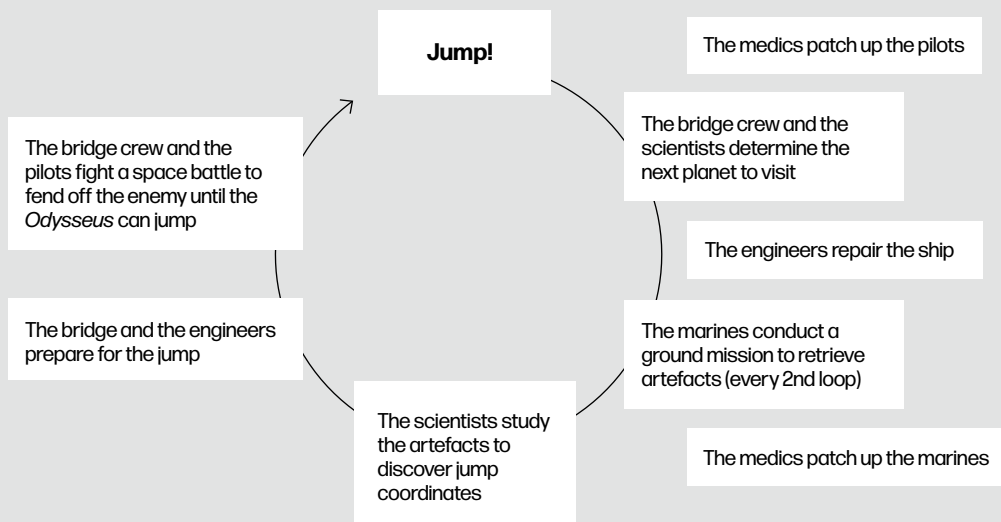
The fight lasts until the scientists researching the artefacts figure out the next star system to visit, at which point the engineers prepare the jump engine and the bridge officers perform another hyperspace jump to safety. As the *Odysseus* escapes to a new star system, the loop starts over, and it is time to take care of injured crew members and damaged machinery.

Every other loop was a ground mission loop, where a landing party was deployed to recover artefacts, and every other loop was a more relaxed waypoint en route towards the next ground mission. While *Odysseus* was traveling, the scientists studied the artefacts further and determined where to land in the next star system to find more artefacts.

Odysseus was played, in shifts, for 48 hours straight. More than half of the players were awake at any time to run the ship (see *Odysseus* crew). During the larp, the *Odysseus* went through 16 clockwork loops, which included 6 larger and 3 smaller operations for the marines.

Figure 1: The clockwork loop

The clockwork loop of *Odysseus*. Ground missions were only done during every other loop, giving scientists more time to figure out the artefacts while traveling. Each revolution took about 2 hours and 47 minutes to complete. Jump drive cooldown requirements prevented players from rushing the loop, and the pursuing enemies prevented players from slowing it down. The clockwork loop was sequential, not simultaneous, so there were always some character groups off-duty and others hard at work: the scientists, for instance, had no clockwork duties during the marine ground missions.



All the while the clockwork was relentlessly grinding onwards, the *Odysseus* runtime gamemaster team was throwing spanners in the works: Enemy boarding parties attacking the *Odysseus*, marines getting mysterious parasite infections on planetside missions, critical resources running out, and so on and so on. As the escaping *Odysseus* was accompanied by a flotilla of civilian vessels, the politician players had to figure out political issues and conflicts relating to the entire fleet.

As the journey of the *Odysseus* progressed through the clockwork loops, the various plotlines of the larp advanced as well. Characters and groups brought an endless amount of plot twists to the mix, from small personal plots to grand revelations. Often it felt like none of the clockwork revolutions were played out cleanly, as there were always some twists to accompany them. Sometimes you picked up a group of refugee players, sometimes you hosted a group of NPC visitors from the civilian fleet for a political summit. Sometimes there were massive space battles, and sometimes the crew had to take various precautions to prevent disease from spreading onboard.

***Odysseus* crew**

Out of the 104 players, 60-70 were playing the characters directly involved in the clockwork operations of the larp. As the crew worked in two shifts, approximately the following amount of characters were on shift at any time.

- 6 bridge officers, who commanded the *Odysseus* in space battles
- 5 fighter pilots launched to space to defend the *Odysseus*
- 6 marines ready to be deployed to the Finnish woods on ground missions, plus the officers managing their equipment
- 4 engineers operating the jump engines and generators, as well as repairing the ship by physical actions such as replacing fuses
- 4 science lab personnel who studied alien artefacts recovered from planets
- 4 med bay staff to patch up sick and injured characters

The remaining 30-40 characters were not directly involved with the clockwork operation, and mostly slept at night and played during the day:

- 9 political leaders who engaged in political play with the accompanying civilian NPC fleet
- 14 Velian refugees, survivors of a mysterious colony, rescued early in the larp
- 27 other civilians, such as refugees, journalists and clergy

These numbers do not add up for many reasons. Primarily, the crew consisted of two shifts, supported by a reserve of "Ghost Shift" crew who joined the clockwork when needed. Some characters were always on shift. Some characters belonged in multiple groups. All in all, this is the author's rough estimate informed by the organiser team.

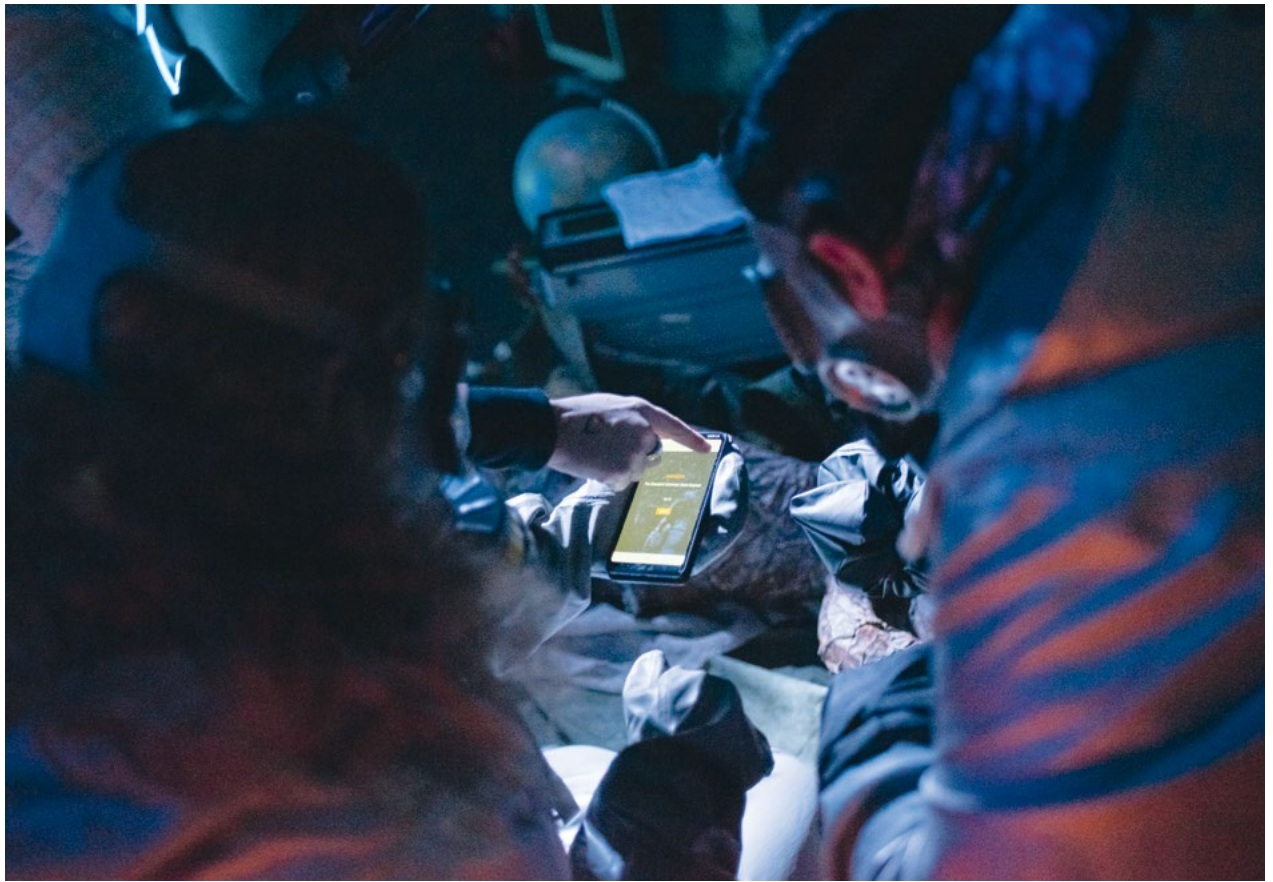


Photo 1: HANSCA handheld scanners combined off-the-shelf Android phones with custom software. In the initial plans, they would have been used a lot by scientists, engineers, and medics to read RFID tags and provide information for the game mastering systems. In the actual runs they were primarily used by engineers.

Photo: Santtu Pajukanta



Photo 2, left: The big main hall was the central communication medium of the larp. All essential crew functions had an easy visual access to the lobby, and as it also served as a bar and a restaurant, civilians spent a lot of time there. Consequently, as all visual and auditory information was clear in the lobby, it was clear everywhere in the larp. In this picture, an enemy boarding party has just penetrated the *Odysseus* and an indoors firefight is about to start - in the central lobby.

Photo 3, right: Engineer changing a fuse. The game masters could blow fuses around the ship to represent damage to the *Odysseus*. Blown fuses could have further physical consequences, such as screens going black until they were fixed.

Photos: Santtu Pajukanta

Small cogs in the large machine

It is not a simple task to ensure that all players understand what is happening in a larp. However, in a clockwork design it is almost mandatory: when your ship gets shot, or performs a hyperspace jump, or receives visitors from another vessel, this needs to be obvious to everyone on board. This is not an easy task, even when a substantial amount of computers, lights, and loudspeakers can be used to do the job.

Some earlier larps going for clockwork aesthetics discovered magnificent pre-existing larp locations: *The Monitor Celestra* (Sweden, 2013; see Karlsson 2013) was played in the cramped steel corridors of the HMS *Småland*, and *Lotka-Volterra* (Sweden, 2018) took place in a large underground bomb shelter near Uppsala. These gorgeous locations came with fundamental downsides: they were labyrinthine, they were difficult for rigging all the cables and gear, they were impossible for wireless connectivity, and they heavily limited the time the organizing teams could spend on-site before and after the larp.

Odysseus rented a convenient modern building in Helsinki for six weeks. Before the first run, the team spent three weeks on site, transforming a school into a spaceship with sets, lights, audio, ICT systems and more. They laid down six kilometers of cable, installed 34 loudspeakers, and rigged dozens and dozens of lights. This was a very expensive solution in terms of workload, but it provided the team a controlled, dry, warm, safe environment where they could spend a lot of time before the larp to set things up. This was possible because *Odysseus* had a huge organiser team, with some 160 people credited on the game's website.

All the main systems of the ship were connected to semi-automated light and sound systems, creating a powerful illusion of being actually on a spaceship. Klaxons screamed, jump engines boomed, fuses blew, screens blinked, all coordinated with sound, light, and smoke. The technological infrastructure created not only a convincing illusion, but also a critical communication medium that ensured that everyone understood the state of the *Odysseus*, and allowed the game masters to direct the larp. One clever design choice was that whenever the *Odysseus* performed a jump, all her computer systems went momentarily offline, with all monitors everywhere only displaying static. Together with all the other audiovisual cues, this ensured that even deeply engaged players had to take a pause and register that a new clockwork loop had begun.

In a clear contrast to the maze-like corridors of the *Celestra*, the *Odysseus* team intentionally designed all the spaces to be inclusive, open, and accessible (Makkonen 2019). Almost all the



Photo 4: The *Odysseus* bridge and *Empty Epsilon* -driven command screens portrayed through a glass wall from an adjacent corridor. All important areas were positioned behind glass walls from the main hall, allowing the crew to focus on their tasks while still being easy to observe from the outside. At times crowds would gather outside the bridge during a space combat, or outside the medlab during a dangerous surgery. Photo: Santtu Pajukanta



Photo 5, left: Marines and pilots often ended up in combat situations on their planetary missions. When they returned, the stories of their heroic deeds fueled play onboard.

Photo 6, right: The hangar bay and the smaller ships were built with less fidelity for a 360° illusion, as the smaller vessels were built from fabrics. The 3 fighter craft, on left, were used in the space battles during the larp. The diplomat vessel *ESS Starcaller*, in the middle, could only be repaired in time to participate in the final mission.

Photos: Santtu Pajukanta

facilities were placed around a large, open main lobby, which served as the primary channel of audio and light information: Even if your work area did not have lights or loudspeakers for a red alert, you could not miss it when it took over the main areas. Most rooms had windows to the main lobby, so everyone could see what was happening (see photo 2). Areas like the bridge and the med bay were separated with a glass wall, allowing anyone to see all the action (see photo 4). The brig was adjacent to the security room, and designed to allow prisoners to “incidentally” see the entire play area through surveillance cameras.

The ship was not a backdrop in *Odysseus*: it was a relentless force controlling your play at all times. Depending on whether you were on shift or not, a red alert could be a startling backdrop to an intimate moment, or a rough shake-up pulling you back to combat. If you chose to sleep in the in-game berthing area, you probably noticed every single jump and red alert.

Running on rails

Odysseus was a larp about a military vessel in a crisis situation. The majority of characters were members of a military hierarchy, and as the crisis was acute for the full duration of the larp, civilian characters did not have much say on the big picture. Thus, the larp’s themes would be better characterised by *discipline* than by *agency*, and the *Odysseus* team took a very negative stance on individual players choosing their own styles of play. This tight design was adopted as a perceived necessity for a clockwork larp: since the aesthetic was portraying interdependent characters working in unison, there was limited room for anyone getting out of line.

“The larp is designed to be a tunnel not a sandbox, so although you have many decisions you can do completely independently there are [a] few elements we hope that you follow as it gives you most to play with. We have tried to also give your characters ingame reasons to do this. So if you get a distress signal, go and save those in need! ... The game relies rather heavily on solving the puzzles and completing the following land mission in timely manner, so this should be supported from the top as well. ... This is not a game to be hacked, won or overachieved.” (*Odysseus* play instructions, 2019)

It was important that every clockwork character did their part with a reasonable amount of success and in a timely manner. This was non-negotiable, as the organisers had scheduled the full larp with a 15-minute timetable.

The primary strategy for this was to make sure that all the key characters were suitable for keeping the train on the rails. As in many Finnish larps, character descriptions were long and detailed, containing the most important relationships, personality, agendas, personal history et cetera, and these character writeouts were written to create the everyday heroes the larp needed. I played the chief scientist, who was intentionally established to be a fair but demanding leader – precisely what was necessary to run the lab in a way that would get the artefact puzzles solved in time. According to the organisers, this micro-level design was used in other leader characters as well, in order to minimise the chances of, for example, the captain going rogue and rebelling against the fleet command.

As an additional strategy, players were given explicit responsibilities. For instance, the organisers provided the marine officers with specific instructions on which characters to send on particular ground missions. This allowed organisers to distribute planetary missions evenly, and ensured that particular characters would be on missions related to their personal plots.

The organisers actively sought to avoid player boredom, as bored players frequently make their own fun in ways that could be disastrous to the overall working of the clockwork. According to the main organiser Laura Kröger, one reason why the larp had tons of action, secrets, revelations and plotlines was to keep players busy, specifically in order to avoid emergence of disruptive plots such as unplanned mutinies or unwanted larp democracy.

The last line of defence was brutal old-school railroading. If the scientists failed to solve a puzzle in time, one of them would get a whisper in the ear from a game master. If a bridge officer plotted incorrect coordinates into the jump engine, the ship AI would double-check and reject them. If the ship was about to explode, the onboard AI would suggest heroic last-second shenanigans to engineers who could miraculously save the ship, often at the cost of ending up in the med bay. Railroading was necessary, because *Odysseus* had no contingency plans for players ending up exploring incorrect planets.

Although a lot of larpers shun this kind of railroading, this probably did not harm most players' experiences of the larp. In terms of agency, the enforced hierarchy of a naval setting concentrates all decision-making power to very few characters in any case. For a player of a junior engineer it matters little whether the route of the *Odysseus* was planned by the admiral or by the game organisers, as the setting forces most characters to follow orders anyway. The organisers also worked hard to ensure that the players had reasonable in-character reasons to follow along their plots. Similarly, offering a miraculous feat to an engineer or a critical tip to a

scientist might detract from one player's experience, but at the same time allow the clockwork to keep on ticking for the hundred other players.

Ideally, of course, this kind of a larp would weave a story of natural successes and failures, incorporating important decisions made by the players. However, the workload of creating even a single path through the larp was massive, so it seems unfeasible to create all the redundant content that would be required for a branching narrative – let alone one where players could freely explore the galaxy.

In comparison, *The Monitor Celestra* team also realised the fragility of a clockwork machine when faced with diverse playstyles. Just like *Odysseus*, the *Celestra* organisers explicitly gave the players of key characters various responsibilities to keep the game running. While the *Odysseus* key playstyle message was *play along* – check the distress signals, solve the puzzles – the *Celestra* key message was *play to lose against other players, play to win against outside enemies*.

The *Celestra* still allowed a lot more freedom to players. The main thing that was explicitly forbidden was covert sabotage: clockwork play is challenging even on a good day, and it is practically impossible to keep an eye on everyone working in various duties. I remember trying to command a space battle while the engine room was staging a strike, preventing us from maneuvering or shooting. Although such a scenario might work perfectly on the silver screen, no larp space battle is long enough to accommodate negotiations over working conditions. The *Celestra* was also hijacked by a lone gunman at some point, creating an experience where all agency was transferred from everyone onboard to one player for a moment, until the crisis was resolved.

This genre of larp is not resilient against larphacking, sabotage, popular uprisings, or larp democracy. All clockwork larps have to make their peace with some amounts of railroading. They have to clearly specify supported styles of play, and to figure out how to restrain player agency in order to keep flying. I believe there is no other way.

Turning the gears

Clockwork design depends on in-game work, and designing a labour-intense larp has its own challenges (see Jones, Koulu & Torner 2016). The work needs to be interesting, there needs to be enough of it, and there must not be too much work. Finally, the labour should support character play, instead of taking attention away from it.

The *Odysseus* clockwork was designed to be sequential, rather than simultaneous. None of the clockwork functions required more than half-a-dozen players contributing simultaneously, which made it easier to get the crew in stations and to focus on the tasks. The characters were split into two main shifts, with a third shift consisting of reserve characters that could relieve characters that were on shift, or jump into action if crew members were missing. As the larp lasted for 48 intense hours, exhaustion became a part of the play: some jobs needed to be done, regardless of whether the players fancied doing them at the moment. Although working in character was a central pleasure of the larp, there were definitely some occasions where tired players genuinely wanted to avoid their shifts. Personally, for me it is hard to stay in character when exhausted, so there is always a danger of robotically doing my job without really *larping* while doing so.

Designing diegetic work is a difficult multidisciplinary design task that connects larp design, digital game design, scenography, engineering and other hard skills. If you want to create a handheld HANSCA scanner (see photo 1) that relays information between engineers, medics, scientists and game masters, you have to interface with the tech systems to get it working, with plot design to add content, with props to make sure they can be properly scanned, and so forth. As this kind of task requires many people to accomplish, it becomes complex and time-consuming.

Bridge officers, fighter pilots, engineers and marines had *close-to-indexical*² jobs, meaning that the *player* tasks were very closely aligned with the *character* tasks. For example the bridge officers and pilots were actually fighting the enemies with *Empty Epsilon* combat simulator, the engineers were mechanically changing fuses (see photo 3) and fiddling with the jump drives, and the marines were physically shooting aliens with nerf guns.

The medical staff sometimes reverted to *iconic work*, where you pretend to do something in a way that looks and sounds right, but you are not actually doing the work itself. For instance, they acted out performing surgeries. Often the injuries and ailments were well-propped to improve the experience of medical treatment.

The scientist work often felt *symbolic*. Deciphering the ancient artefacts to figure out the path of the *Odysseus* was done through puzzles which resembled escape room puzzles. Although

² See e.g. Stenros & al. (2024) in this volume for more on symbols, icons and indices.

they were fairly well designed, it was at times hard to explain why some ancient folks used a geometry puzzle to encrypt stellar coordinates.

Designing the difficulty level of diegetic teamwork is not easy. You might end up with players who have no idea of what they should be doing on a spaceship bridge, or – like I did in one run of *Celestra* – you may end up with a professional naval officer who can both run the show and teach others at the same time. In *Odysseus*, at least some bridge crews mitigated the risk of incompetence by practicing space combat with *Empty Epsilon* before the larp. This is of course possible only if you can play the simulator online in advance.

The gold standard of labour in clockwork larp is work that consists of tasks that uphold the 360° illusion (see Koljonen 2007) perfectly, while having a difficulty level easy enough to allow players to role-play while barely succeeding. Ideally, the tasks should enable narrative granularity: binary success/failure tasks do not produce the most interesting narrative inputs down the line in the clockwork. Similarly, symbolic tasks can be hard to turn into social content – if *Odysseus* would have literally expected scientists to solve sudokus, it would have been very hard to narrativise success and failure in that task to create social play.

As *Celestra* before, *Odysseus* included a lot of characters without clockwork tasks, such as refugees, civilian administration, religious leaders, and politicians. The risk is that regardless of the quality of the game content created for those characters, they may feel left out from an experience centered around the clockwork. This risk is connected to player expectations, for instance if players sign up to experience a clockwork, but end up cast as civilians.

Odysseus sought to alleviate this by creating tons of important plot content for civilian characters. Based on the quantitative evaluation in a post-larp player survey, this was a mixed success. In general, the players of civilian characters did state that they had a great larp, but the players of military characters were still quite a bit happier with their experiences.

The invisible machine

Behind the scenes, another fragile and interdependent machine was ticking away: The organiser team was busy at work. They were setting up space battles with *Empty Epsilon*, answering characters' messages to the civilian fleet, prepping antagonists for the land missions, deploying artefacts in the woods to be soon retrieved by the marines, shuttling marine players from the main location to the planetside play areas, answering endless queries from medics,

scientists and engineers on behalf of the ship's AI... and much more. At any time there were a couple of dozen organisers at work.

The runtime game mastering was based on a pre-planned schedule, where everything was broken down to 15 minute slots. This allowed the game masters to adapt their plans based on the status of the larp. For instance, if the *Odysseus* was planned to suffer an unexpected glitch during a jump that would damage the ship, but the ship was already heavily damaged by the enemy fire, the event could be skipped or postponed. Or if the *Odysseus* had enjoyed smooth sailing for a while, the game masters could trigger a larger and more dangerous space battle. According to Laura Kröger, the team had many backup plans for various scenarios in which the larp would have been derailed.

Although much of the technology was automated, the light, audio and code had to be manually operated whenever the *Odysseus* performed a jump – every 2 hours 47 minutes, around the clock. As the organiser team had no capacity to train substitute game masters to run the larp, there was very little redundancy available. For example, Kröger herself had to be woken up to orchestrate every jump, and she was also the person directing all runtime game mastering, meaning that team members had to consult her on details constantly.

There were numerous indispensable organisers who would have been very hard to replace on a quick schedule. While the in-game machine only had to run for 48 hours, the organiser side also had to operate smoothly through all the phases leading into the larp and taking place after it.

Where possible, the *Odysseus* team mitigated technology risk by using off-the-shelf hardware and software. Lights and audio are relatively easy to operate frictionlessly if organisers are professionals who can use the same tools they use in their daily work, and *Empty Epsilon* is a reasonably stable piece of space combat software. With the more ambitious custom tools, like the HANSCA hand scanners, custom-programmed Android phones that were intended to relay scan data to game masters, minor glitches and problems were frequent – but they were still more robust than any custom wireless hardware I have ever seen in larp. Half a dozen professional programmers spent more than six months on building and integrating the various systems used in the larp. The larp had some 20 different IT systems running, including a custom backend, engineer repair system, the datahub used for ingame emails, the warp engines, airlock doors, surveillance cameras, info screens, and so on (see Hautala 2020 and Santala & Juustila 2019 for details).

Odysseus

CREDITS: Laura Kröger, Sanna Hautala, Antti Kumpulainen, and a team of over 160 volunteers. Illusia ry. Full credits in www.odysseuslarp.com/team_original.html

DATE: 27-30 June, 4-7 July & 9-12 July, 2019

LOCATION: Torpparinmäki Comprehensive School, Helsinki

PLAYTIME: 48 hours

PLAYERS: 104

BUDGET: € 85,000 (three runs total)

Participation fee: €200; sponsor tickets €300

It is a small miracle that everything worked out pretty well in all three runs, and it is trivial to imagine incidents that would have been extremely detrimental to the play experience: main organiser falling ill, or a key piece of technology breaking down, as simplest examples. It is far from certain that the larp could have recovered from such an incident at all.

Although the *Odysseus* team successfully pulled it off, anyone planning a clockwork larp should consider whether the dangerous and difficult aesthetic is truly worth the effort and the risk. Unless the point is to deliberately create the sensation of a fragile and interdependent system, there are easier ways to provide players with intense experiences of challenging labour. Succeeding and failing together does not require interdependence, and working in parallel can also be an equally great generator of social play.

A fragile contraption

The art of running a clockwork larp is largely *an art of not failing*. In principle, you only have to design meaningful interdependent jobs, build the architecture and the IT systems to allow proper communication, and fuel the system with events and plots to keep it running. But in practice the operation of the clockwork machine is fraught with existential risks: players can fail in their tasks, technology can break, bored larpers can start a mutiny, or someone can simply walk to the bridge with a gun and hijack the entire ship.

The *Odysseus* team successfully mitigated these risks. They established a railroading playstyle before the sign-up to eliminate larp democracy and to stop random rebels and saboteurs.

They ensured that players succeeded in diegetic tasks by creating necessary fallbacks to sustain the clockwork. They spent a lot of time building the larp on-site, to ensure that all the IT systems running the game worked. They designed a space that facilitated communication, and augmented it with light and audio, to create a shared understanding of what was going on in the larp. They avoided dangerous player boredom by firehosing the characters with action and plots day and night. And they had a lot of luck in that none of the critical personnel or technology risks actualised.

Running a clockwork larp is a fool's errand, because the very point of a clockwork is interdependence, and the very point of a larp is agency. The *Odysseus* team invested a massive amount of skilled labour to take this paradox head-on. While they had to accept some design tradeoffs to make it work, they ultimately prevailed, and crafted a beautiful 360° illusion of a spaceship ticking with clockwork magic.

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Author Bio

Markus Montola (PhD) is a Helsinki-based games scholar, game designer, gaming entrepreneur and game programmer. He has published books on role-playing, pervasive games, larp, and ludology, most notably *Pervasive Games* (2009), *Nordic Larp* (2010) and *The Rule Book* (2024). He has worked as a lead designer on mobile games such as *Shadow Cities* and *The Walking Dead: Our World*. As a cofounder of the mobile game studio Playsome, he currently works as the lead game designer of *Friends & Dragons*.

Extinction Now: Coming to Terms with Dissolution in *End(less) Story*

Syksy **Räsänen**

We live in an apocalyptic age. The collapse of highly developed and precariously connected civilisation is a recurrent feature in human history; examples range from Bronze Age Middle East to Mesoamerica in the Classic Maya era. Today the disaster is global, and the unfolding climate catastrophe and newfound affection for nuclear weapons bring the terror of disintegration closer to home week by week. The blackbox larp *End(less) Story* (Norway 2022) by Nina Runa Essendrop taps into this mortal dread unapologetically and with compassion.

The participants (the larp is designed for 6-15 people) play the spirits of the last humans. The characters gradually remember fragments of their life and grapple with their foregone death, which also marks the end of humanity. The characters' means of interacting with each other, always personal and ever ambiguous, first grow as their minds open up. They are then severed as the spirits approach either oblivion or the unknown beyond, the memory of our species erased or transformed with them.

The larp pointedly leaves the cause of extinction unspecified: climate catastrophe, war, asteroid impact or other terminal events are for the players to inject if they so choose. Short larps – *End(less) Story* is four hours long, including workshop and debrief – necessarily leave a lot of background to the players' discretion, which can result in loss of coherence in the shared world and mutual narrative.

End(less) Story sidesteps the problem by denying the players verbal communication. The larp is played in three rooms. In the first room, where the characters awake, the players can converse with each other by body expression, touch and movement. As lights turn on in the second room, the players can go there and interact by shadows cast on white fields with hands and sundry objects. The third room, which opens last, has a large sheet of paper with a single

sentence written on it. The players can process the characters' sensation by writing, but must incorporate a word already on the page, and cannot directly reply to or address each other. This elliptical linguistic intercourse makes for a creative contrast with the unmediated sensation of connecting by touch and movement.

Communication by touch is well adapted to the theme, as it steers the players to build a narrative on emotive currents rather than precise events. Absence of verbalisation also enables scenes that are significant for the story arc, but whose narrative meaning can radically differ from character to character, as the players individually frame their own story on the structure prepared by the organiser.

The rooms become dark and close off one by one, starting with the text area, and the spirits are forced back to their starting position. There they must relinquish their tenuous existence, whether or not they have been able to come to terms with their past history and immediate condition in this short time.

The entire experience is supported by an informally ritualistic soundtrack of non-verbal Meredith Monk pieces. Three times her voice is punctuated by shots of loud brown noise, during which the characters recall their destruction with increasing clarity.

It's a beautiful design, neatly implemented. After playing *End(less) Story* at the Grenselandet larp festival in Oslo in 2022, I was deeply moved and left with admiration for the composition. But reflection led to doubt.

Apocalypse and coming to terms with mortality are themes nearly as old as recorded fiction, featuring prominently already in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In the 1970s, post-apocalyptic fiction had particular resonance due to fear of nuclear devastation from runaway superpower competition. Climate anxiety of the 2000s is a more persistent variety of trauma, as now impending destruction is contingent on evident societal inaction, not on possible misaction by a handful of leaders.

This is reflected in works of art shifting their focus from life after the apocalypse to accepting the end of the world. For example, while the 2021 film *Don't Look Up* may have been intended to coax people into action, its climax features the characters accepting their fate as they are annihilated together with the rest of humanity. In *End(less) Story*, the apocalypse is equally total, with no one left to pick up the pieces. This heightens the somewhat transcendental experience of the larp, but also raises questions.

Human extinction is inevitable. But collective conduct will determine whether it comes soon or waits in the far future. Art is made from the material of its day, and *End(less) Story* lives in the troubles of our era.

End(less) Story may be effective as desensitisation therapy for climate anxiety, helping either to resist paralysis in the face of insurmountable odds or to remain unperturbed in the face of extermination. Interpretation of larp is arguably more subjective than other narrative art forms, especially with a figurative work like *End(less) Story*. I felt *End(less) Story* to carry the message that even if you rage, the light will die, and wise people at their end know dark is right. Tranquility in the face of personal deadly disease or lethal injury may be a philosophical virtue, but granting people the serenity to simply accept the things they could change is a different lesson altogether.

The question that hangs over *End(less) Story* is whether terminal illness is an apt metaphor for the present state of civilisation. As a counterpoint we may note that climate catastrophe is already here, it's just not evenly distributed. Human existence is ending on a day-to-day basis, and we can make things worse or better.

The British politician Tony Benn famously said that progress is made because there are two flames burning in the human heart: the flame of anger against injustice and the flame of hope that you can build a better world. We should pause before reaching for the extinguisher.

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Author bio

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Seeds of Hope: How to Intertwine Larp and Ecological Activism

Elli Leppä

What could we bring into larp from the climate crisis and what can we take home that could have an actual influence on how we act to mitigate the disaster we are living in?

I awoke late to ecological conscience, relatively speaking. Despite all the available information about climate change, I felt pushed to action only after the scorching summers from 2017 onward. At that point I became interested in ecoactivist groups and started speaking out about the climate catastrophe as well as including it in my poetry. Contemporaneously ecological themes were taking root in the Finnish larping scene. The first ecologically themed larp I played in was *Ennen vedenpaisumusta* (Finland 2019, Eng. Before the Deluge). The larp designed by Minna and Mikko Heimola was a story about a Christian ecotheological present-day community; the members were seeking a way to live in balance with the ecosystem and exploring what it would be like to extricate themselves from modern society and modern ways of thinking. Many characters had plot lines that placed them in contrast to the society they had left behind, and everyone had to make their peace with the separation of their past lives from the new way of life they had chosen to be a part of.

The general aim of the community was to decrease individual value and egoistic ideals and consequently to strengthen the ties between community members and the ties that connect humans to other beings. My character Halma had already gone to great lengths to change her mindset and aimed toward a kind of dissolving of her sense of self as an individual human being, up to and including rejecting the use of words “I” and “mine”. The community we brought into being was vibrant and the location of the game, a remote country villa with expansive woods, fields and seashore in the vicinity supported the themes seamlessly. We as players were responsible for the care of a small herd of sheep for the duration of the larp, and there were beehives in the yard for honey. The characters had no particular antagonism

toward the wider society, but nevertheless set themselves clearly apart from it. They were planning sustainable and self-sufficient ways of energy and food production. The group had an independent set of rules for self-government that relied on altruistic ethics based on religious beliefs.

What made the experience so particular to me was the implicit, calm acceptance that the characters would not be able to make a huge difference in the world as a whole; but that by resolutely living differently they could make our shared home a little bit healthier, despite not turning the global tide of destruction. That not having the final key to everything was no reason to stop doing what good they could.

This is essential.

A year later I started in the larp campaign *Kaski* (Finland 2021-, Eng. Swidden). *Kaski* is a three-part series, in which two larps have been played and one remains in the future. In

Ennen vedenpaisumusta (2021): caring for sheep. Photo: Mikko Heimola





Kaski: Tuhka (2022): Sarka didn't wear shoes.. Photo: Elli Leppä

the co-creative larp, facilitated by the creator of the campaign Maiju Tarpila, the players have significantly built and influenced the fiction, milieu and characters in discussions, workshops and short ingame scenes preceding the larps. The end result reflects the ecological attitudes, thoughts and values of the players in a major way. The stated aim of *Kaski* is to explore the eco crisis and find methods to manage the manifold emotions that arise from the darkening times we are living in; and also, importantly, to ask what kind of action could result from the possible conclusions the participants arrive at.

The first part, *Roihu* (Torch) centered around a group of eco activists preparing for an action against a forest industry company. For three days we planned the action, discussed its moral and ethical legitimacy, disagreed, argued, came to agreement and grieved the necessity of having to take direct action at all. The personal histories and interrelationships of the activists heavily affected the process and provided the backdrop for the community. Compared to *Ennen vedenpaisumusta*, where I felt the direction of change was inward, toward the community itself, in *Roihu* the aim of the characters was very much to incite the world surrounding them to change. This also affected the lessons I took home from each larp.

In *Roihu*, real-life activist methods were brought into the planning by characters experienced in the field. What to consider if you want to climb up a high building, how to plan a subvertising campaign. Where to put your phone while you are planning an illegal action so that it can't be used to tap you. Based on the pre-game workshops in which we had pooled all our player knowledge on these subjects, my older character Sini was able to instruct the overeager youngsters in the dangers of being underprepared. As a player I was not at all familiar with the topic. The youngsters' questions were sobering: What to do if you are taken by the police, how to treat facial burns from tear gas, what to look out for when blocking a street? Using this real world information in-game felt serious and grim, while at the same time world-weary Sini had gone through these things innumerable times already.

During the preparations for the first *Kaski* game, members of the Finnish Extinction Rebellion got attacked by the police during a nonviolent street block. We all read about it in the news. A person in the *Kaski* co-creation group was involved and injured. Due to our prolonged focus on activist themes we players were shocked and devastated to see the fiction play out in front of us, as it were. For me it brought home the realism of the situation: the themes we would be covering in the larp were harsh. Climate change is here, it's happening, and we can't escape from it. Our society isn't taking the necessary action to mitigate the effects of the change, and those who try to raise awareness are persecuted. From then on it would be increasingly difficult to close my eyes or look away from these things.

After a lengthy preparation phase in which we had planned and fleshed out our community in several workshops, the larp was played, late in August of 2021 (coincidentally in the same location as *Ennen vedenpaisumusta*). It was very good. Coming out from it I felt changed, as can happen after any particularly poignant experience. As a larp, *Roibu* was excellent, with devoted, skilled players who paid particular attention to the cohesion of the community. This time however, the warm but transient glow of post-high feelings gave rise to something different and more permanent. Immediately after the larp we were contextualizing our experience as a group, when in a polite and casual side note some players extended everyone an invitation to come join Extinction Rebellion, which they already were a part of. I usually make a point of not making far-reaching decisions right after a larp, when my head is still full of fumes from the game, but this time I overruled my habit and decided to accept the invitation.

Since then I've participated in a number of road blocks, demonstrations, flash mobs and other types of protests. Stepping from the curb into a blocked street for the first time was electrifying. It felt like my hair stood on end. At the same time I felt strong echoes from what Sini had been doing her whole adult life. I was such a newcomer to the scene, while she had seen and done so much. In a very concrete way I was following where she'd already been and finding courage from having portrayed her. The threshold had been lowered by my imaginary experiences.

While this is undeniably larper naivetë, imagining you have an actual grasp of real world situations after merely having played them, at the same time it's still taking action for something I believe in, action which may have effects in the real world, spurred by the ingame fiction.

Ecological larps, as well as other larps that deal with the current ills of the world, are exceptional in that they can be so tightly enmeshed with the prevailing reality as to have actual, concrete influence for good, by how players are changed during them. Whether the

players purposely use their participation to accelerate their existing sympathies or whether they arrive at new convictions unbidden as a consequence of their experience, the changes can be real and long-lasting.

The second part of the *Kaski* campaign, *Tubka* (Finland, 2021, Eng. Ash) was situated in a near future when ecological destruction had rendered large parts of Finland uninhabitable. The characters were a different group from those in *Roibu*, but thematically part of the same chain of events. In the fiction, cities were struggling, infrastructure had collapsed and small rebel communities called Beacons were hanging on by their fingertips in remote areas, trying to incite action against the system, which even while collapsing was still perpetrating crimes against its citizens as well as the ecosystem. We portrayed inhabitants of the Seventh Beacon, a ragtag company of survivors ranging from radio technicians and soldiers to sea captains and students. My character Sarka was a Buddhist mystic trying to find universal connections in a world that was changed beyond recognition and was in the process of shaking humans off its back.

The Seventh was an impossible home, a temporary haven in a darkening landscape. We practiced living differently, making conscious choices that would take us on a new course, away from the society that had driven itself off the cliff. We argued vehemently over what kind of roles would be needed in the new world we hoped would come in time. We came to agree that not everyone had to be a fighter; some could focus on gardening, some on building solace and maintaining connections. We found that to share a touch, a song, a breath, could be enough to fan a fluttering hope. Even though we were not able to stop the catastrophic change, we could survive and adapt. After the larp, this felt like an enduring truth.

Because larp is embodied, the insights that are reached can be personally real to players. They can carry over as something more than what we usually call bleed.

Taking part in ecological activism after having played it is exciting. It feels like entering the fictional glamour our characters were in the middle of. Going back to playing ecological activism after having engaged in it for real is eerie. The larps can take you to dystopic vistas that lie at the end of the road our society is currently traveling, and the experiences of character and player mingle until they seem somehow parts of a single continuum. The interweaving of character and player mindsets can produce odd feelings, particularly concerning hope. Only hindsight will show whether the real-life road blocks, mass demonstrations and other actions will have changed anything; whether I'll have been a part of something historic.

Working toward change, as a player as well as in-character, feels gratifying, feels like accomplishing something. In the fiction of the *Kaski* campaign what the characters did wasn't enough, they failed in reversing the direction of the change. The *Tubka* characters were living in the middle of the devastation the earlier generation had left them. The only option they had remaining, besides giving up, was adaptation. Any hope that the previous activists may have fostered had evaporated, it was a luxury the people of the Seventh Beacon could not afford, so they continued onward without it.

My experiences in these games have been tangible enough to produce a glimmer of a vision of what it would be like to strive towards these communities in real life. Immersing into these mind-scapes, I've felt such sorrow for the atrocities we as a species have committed, but also joy: if a small group of players can imagine ways of living differently profoundly enough to make them come alive for the space of a few days, it will not be impossible for us as a society to find our way there when we finally must.

(I say *when*.)

I think there's going to be a crash.

In the work of trying to mitigate it we need goals that are both realistic and reassuring. We need to believe that there are good times ahead, and that despite, or even because of, all the comforts we will have to give up, there are lovely things awaiting us. But they might look very different from our current idea of comfort and loveliness.

Some things I've come to realize and accept as a result of participating in ecological larps and concurrent ecological activism: There are no easy solutions. If there were, the problems would have been solved already. I've learned that activists are not some other people somewhere else, with a complete dislike and disregard for the way people around them are living. Activism can begin in the middle of everyday life, with small choices, small acts of daring. It can stem from deep love and deep sorrow, a thorn in your side, a persistent discomfort that can only be alleviated through acting for what you love.

I've realized that authority need not always be obeyed. That by engaging in civil disobedience I did not suddenly become a hardened criminal, an immoral person. That sometimes the most moral thing you can do is disobey.

There is no consensus of the best way to go forward, of the scale of the changes that need to be made. The crises are an interlinked web of vicious problems which may not be resolved in our lifetime, or ever. The downhill may continue until the landscape is unrecognizable. There might not be any hope that we can salvage our present way of life.

But there will still be beauty and joy. After letting go of hope, the work still continues. Making food, fixing radios. Sowing seeds, picking berries. If there are ruins, we will live in ruins and make our gardens there.

Ludography

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Author Bio

Elli Leppä is a Finnish larper, poet and pharmacologist. She has published four poetry collections and writes reviews of scifi and fantasy books. She has a particular interest in slow larping, transformative larping and playing emotionally close to home. In her experience the smallest and subtlest of gestures can have immense significance.

The Manifesto of Playing to Live Elsewise

Maiju Tarpila

Experience addicts on a burning planet

This is what we know: we are dying. As a species, as a collection of complex ecosystems, we are dying. Not even slowly as one might think, but with exhilarating velocity, with violence, with a chaotic mess of unjust systems, of deadly consequences falling first on those least responsible.

We are dying from hunger and from drought, dying from overconsumption, dying from wars starting from the lack of water at the same time as water is dripping from our eager mouths and polished bodies, billions of gallons of fresh water being washed away with literal shit that we don't have the capability to use in fruitful ways, because we rather not deal with. We have become a living wasteland, this species with such promise, such beauty, such utter ignorance, desire for bliss.

It's not that we don't know or believe the facts of the eco-crisis happening. We struggle with it, because we don't want survival, we want meaning, we want ecstasy, we want a story. We want an ending that sends shivers through our spine so we can put our lives in the context of something that begins and ends, that is not a continuum, because we don't understand continuums. We understand short spanned time frames and the taste of coffee and the way our lover tilts their neck. Yet we cannot bear the pain of the havoc we are causing, so we try not to think about it. We cry or consume, we become cynical or overwhelmed. We all have our excuses and they're all valid. But with the utmost love and compassion I say: they are all still excuses. We can all be forgiven, but none of us are excused.

As larpers, players and game designers, we are escape artists. We find cracks in reality and call them fiction, dwell in them, live in those worlds for a while. It's brilliant. The fact that we want to, proves my cynical side wrong – we should be saved, this species so anxious for self-destruction. The fact that we know how to escape fills me with awe, but also disappointment. We are world builders, imaginers, multitalented community leaders... And what do we do with that? We consume. We create experiences for the consuming mass that we have become. We go from larp to larp, experience to experience hoping to feel something, hoping to be shaken, hoping to be excited, transformed even. Transformed how? To what?

In our well justified desire to escape we have become experience addicts. And who doesn't love a high? We are all junkies of sorts, driven by our various desires. We long to experience, to feel, but our hunger for distraction is blindsiding us from our capacity to imagine better futures, to live sustainably, to live elsewise.

What we have is a need for both individual and system change before we all die in this bonfire. For most, this seems obvious. Even the ones regularly enjoying the air-conditioned bliss of airport lounges and the feel of grown to be killed juiciness of flesh in their mouths, or that sexy leather car seat or whatever it is that the bourgeoisie get up to these days – maybe playing some blockbuster larps – have an eerie feeling that there is something not quite right in the world.

We all need a revolution, even if we don't want one. To have one, we need to want one and to want one, we need to understand what the alternatives to this shitshow we are participating in at the moment are and *how* we can embody those alternatives, make them real.

The beauty of larp, as an art, as a spark for a revolution, is that the whole core of larp is exploring other ways of living and being. Taking these other worlds and moving in them, tasting, smelling, touching realities that before seemed impossible. What magnificent magic we have the ability, the capacity, the desire to do. We need to look at what we want to create, what kind of world we want to live in and then take this magic seriously.

The worlds we dwell in and how these worlds come into being matter. In the times of eco-crisis, every game we play, no matter how far the fiction reaches, still happens in the context of a burning planet.

Playing elsewise

So how to play and how to design in the times of the eco-crisis? The following theses suggest a starting point.

The deep ecological framework - We need a community whose art is based on the deep ecological understanding that we are not separate from nature, that we have no right to use it to fill our secondary needs. To live and play by this framework is revolutionary. We need to understand our interconnectedness with the non-human world and transform the way we live in it by making larps that are based on this understanding. We need to start all larp design with a deep ecological framework to readjust the worlds, the attitudes, the habits we have. The deep ecological framework should be the baseline for everything we do, the truth telling mirror we ask whether our deeds are just.

The embodied practice - We need to profoundly embrace that larp is an embodied practice. Fiction and reality come together in our skin, in our muscle memory, in the way my very real heart races in the fictional world as we touch hands, as we fight, laugh, cry, take care of each other. This is the greatest advantage of our art form. We need to learn how to play with and in our bodies, to focus on understanding and learning tools for preparing our bodies for larps, for what happens to them in-game and how we take the embodied knowledge we learn with us. The way we move in the world changes the world. The actions, tastes, ways of living we teach our bodies in fiction stay with us in reality. What do we want to bring back with us? How do we want to move in this world we are constantly shaping?

Playing with desire - As players, as designers it's time for us to get intimate with our desires. To understand them better than the algorithms do, better than capitalism that's playing us for fools. To live is to desire and there is no shame in that, but as long as we don't understand or are afraid to admit what it is that truly lies underneath our actions, there is no fulfillment, there is only hunger. We don't need a six-hundred-dollar larp. We need to be loved. We need connection, self-worth, safety, beauty, meaning. If we start truly playing with our deep desires, whatever they are for each of us, we will understand not only how, but why we want to live and find ways to transcend our hunger.

Intention and integration - We need to get serious about intention and integration, find tools and space for it in our games and play styles. Any game has the potential to be transformational if we do this. Why am I playing/designing this game? What do I want to happen and why? What tools do I need to give my players or myself as one of them to process,

to integrate the experiences we go through, to find places for these experiences to settle into our lives, to change the way we think and move in the world? Intention makes us conscious of the whys and the hows. Integration puts that consciousness into action.

The deep minimal - We have become desensitized by all the stimuli in- and off-game, we have become greedy and needy, waiting to be impressed. We don't need more plots, bigger castles, complex game mechanics to feel and understand more. We need less. The deeper we want to go, the less extravaganza we need to have in our games. Let's make larps that tune out the noise so we can hear what's actually going on. Let's build worlds not out of props or fancy venues, but out of commitment to each other, to the world we are building, to the nuanced detail of how we listen to each other and ourselves during play, how we tend to the fragile, powerful desires we have in us. Let's play slowly, deeply and trust that when we leave space for things to happen, they will – and we will notice.

Non-consumerism - Larp is not a product, and we are not consumers. Stop selling experiences, stop consuming them. Find ways of gifting larps that not only challenge consumerism, but the whole system it's based on.

Agency and raising awareness - We yearn for agency in-game but struggle with it off-game. Let's make larps that help us find agency, that empower us, that inspire us to remember and notice that our actions matter and that we have the power to do things differently, to rebel against unjust systems, to resist oppression, to invite care, joy, sustainable action. Let's make larps that help us become conscious of the systems we are part of, of the values we base our actions on, of the things that are stopping us from living sustainably.

Slow travel or no travel - Stop flying. Now. Participating in larps that promote flying or designing games that encourage the players to do so is destructive. If we cannot play in ways that are sustainable, we shouldn't be playing at all. If we can make up fictional worlds, we can figure out other ways of travelling or participating. Larp is not just about the run-time, our responsibilities reach beyond. Designing the whole larp process on a basis of slow travel or no travel should be an essential part of that.

Find new stories to create new worlds - No pre-existing system will save us. If it could've, it would've. Let's challenge ourselves to tell and experience stories that are not a repetition of our old and toxic ways, of oppressive and destructive lifestyles. As players and games designers we tend to strive for the drama, dark themes, painful fun and many times we are more than flirting with dark tourism. We should approach darkness with care. It's good that we want to

investigate all shades of life, but can we find the drama, the feels, all that we love in unseen places, in stories not yet told, stories that help to shape reality into new ways of being. No future – even a brighter one – is uncomplicated, the possibility of exploration is endless if we are willing to go there. Let's rehabilitate our imagination, let's get weird, unprecedented.

Building communities - We need each other now and we will need each other even more in the futures to come. The bigger the transformation, the more we need to do it together. Resilience is a communal effort. Larp is a shortcut to building communities and we need to take care of these communities, work with our differences, with affection as well as with the annoyance. To offer and to ask for help. Don't compete, we're all on the same side. Learn to listen to those you disagree with and answer them with care, with compassion. Let's build in-game communities that teach us ways of living together despite all the factors that would come in between us, and let's cherish the off-game communities that sprout from these experiences.

Staying with the trouble - Let's stop searching for those quick highs and start finding ways to bear the uncomfortable, the devastating, the messy feelings of grief, shame, anger and hopelessness that come with the ecological destruction we are living through. Let's work with those feelings and from that complexity look for the beauty and all the imaginative escape routes.

Pleasure and joy - We need to learn to desire for things that don't destroy us. Living and playing elsewise doesn't mean enjoying less. We are hedonists by default, and we should work with that. Let's play to find joy in the acts of living elsewise. Let's make games that challenge the idea that sustainability means giving up play and pleasure (and still not fall into a trap of green washing our larps). Let's work less and play more. Let's imagine and embody worlds where sustainable life equals joy and beauty.

In conclusion

Our climate, our ecosystems, our societies, the ways in which we live are already in the midst of vast transformations. For there to be a future filled with play, there needs to be a huge shift in how we play.

I want this community to feel all there is to feel, the joy and the anger of the world as it is, and then to get really, really excited about confronting these struggles, excited about all the possibilities that not only lie ahead, but can and should manifest here and now. With love and

rage I ask us to imagine and embody post-capitalist and post-fossil futures, playful, wonderful realities. Let's imagine living, breathing, ecstatic, socially just, non-destructive systems that honor all life. Let's make these realities livable, show that there are alternatives.

We are imaginers, world creators, loving, thriving beings filled with infinite possibilities to live and play elsewise. Let's do so.

Author bio

Maiju Tarpila is a Finnish artist and pedagogue. She designs, writes, facilitates and teaches collective artistic practices and playful participatory experiences especially through larp and theatre. Her work is often centered around questions of community, resilience and the imagining body as an experimental platform of living elsewise in times of ecocrisis.

PLAYERS AND PLAY

This section shifts the attention to practices and experiences of play. On some level, our real-life experiences always shape our play and our experiences of the larp. In *Experience vs Imagination*, Chris Hartford discusses how our age affects and limits our play in larps set in recent history. Inge-Mette Petersen continues on the topic of age and gives sound advice to larpers who are growing older and facing the limits that come with aging.

Josefin Westborg, Janusz Maxe and Gabriel March take a turn to theory and present a framework for different levels of larp participation. Alessandro Giovannucci assembles wisdom from the international larp community and gives tips on what you can do as a player when a larp experience is not working out. Niina Niskanen reflects on the responsibilities of players and larp designers. She challenges a design culture where players are expected to do character and contact design primarily by themselves – a process that can be frustrating especially for introverted players. According to Niskanen, better results are achieved if the designers coordinate and take charge of the process.

This section also discusses player limitations – such as disabilities and mental health problems – and the best ways for larp organizers to take them into account. Beatrix Livesey-Stephens and Bjørn-Morten Vang Gundersen argue that larp creators should think about accessibility and disability right from the beginning. Björn Butzen dives deeper into the issue of players with disabilities and advocates an intersectional approach where people with disabilities are trusted to be able to do things – just like other players are – and where designers and organizers engage in discussion with players with disabilities instead of making decisions for them.

The section ends with Anna Erlandsson's brave, personal account *How I Learned to Stop Faking it and Be Real*. She highlights the importance of communicating about mental health issues as a player.

Experience vs Imagination: Effects of Player Age

Chris **Hartford**

Larp is a broad-ranging hobby, covering a plethora of subjects and every situation and scenario under the sun, with participants aged from 8 to 80. It is often stated that imagination is the limit – that anyone can play any role – but is that the reality?

We rely on the alibi of larp to allow us to play different roles, the acceptance that the reality of the characters and the setting may diverge from our perceptions. Young can play old and a school can be a spaceship, because we agree it is so.

However, while in a fantasy larp the difference from our reality applies equally to all characters and their players, for larps set in the recent past this disconnect may be less clear-cut. One player's fictional reality may be something that other players have actually lived through. In these larps, the player's age and/or experiences may alter their experience and thus the actions of their character.

Are age and generational experience something players and designers need to take into account, and if so, what impact do such factors have on play experience?

Emotions and knowledge

The 1980s and 1990s serve as the backdrop for a number of larps. In some, like *Just a Little Lovin'* (aka *JaLL*, Norway 2011), which is set in the early years of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, the era is an integral part of the game narrative.

For many designers and players, these years are just a retro era that provides a cool setting, something they have heard of from older members of their family, seen in TV shows like *Stranger Things* (USA 2016), or played in tabletop role-playing games like *Tales from the Loop* (Sweden 2017). But older players may have actually lived through these events, so their significance and the emotional associations older players have with them may greatly vary from those of younger players. Such associations may alter the play experience, leading to a bleed-in of personal experiences and emotions that in turn shape the character's responses.

A personal example from the UK run of *JaLL*: a 20-something co-player said the music of the early 1980s was cool and retro, but to me it was the music of my teenage years. It brought back personal memories and emotions of the era and its events and wasn't just a piece of atmospheric set dressing. Another example is *The Sisyphus* (UK 2018), set in the early 1980s during the Falklands War. Many Brits experienced the conflict first-hand – I was a teenager and recall the news coverage – but for younger co-players, or those from overseas, it was a more abstract idea. My personal experience, my familiarity with the themes and events of the conflict coloured my perceptions of some aspects of the larp.

In both *JaLL* and *The Sisyphus* I had prior knowledge of and an emotional connection to the setting that went beyond the material provided by the larp designers. In some regards that helped deepen my immersion – I didn't need to imagine my response to these events and could draw on personal experiences to shape my character's actions.

However, the players' personal connections to the events – e.g. knowing how they played out in the real world – can also be a distraction to the actual game. From a player perspective, the ideal would be to play only off what the character knows. But separating what the character knows (e.g. from briefing notes or workshops) and what the player knows (from personal experience) may not be a straightforward process. It's also worth noting that strong emotional resonance with the setting of a larp isn't limited solely to older players, but deeply personal associations are often more difficult to prepare for.

Designing a larp set in a near-contemporary setting may require some consideration of the impact on players who actually lived through that era. Conversely, some larps may seek to exploit this personal connection. One example is the larp *Reunion* (UK 2023), which is set in both the late 1990s and modern day, with middle-aged players and characters. In such cases, the challenge may be to create an even experience between those players who lived through this particular period and those for whom it is a more abstract piece of history.

Technology

The social and technological changes even within the 21st century can also lead to wildly different perceptions and experiences among players. Players in their 20s and 30s have had easy access to such modern technologies as mobile communications, the internet, and digital music their whole lives, which is not necessarily the case for older players. Going back even 25 years involves a massive shift in the availability of these technologies, making some near-contemporary larp settings almost an alien world to younger players. By contrast, older players may still recall those days and the challenges and activities associated with them, such as postal orders or cheques to send money, collect phone calls, dial-up modems, and library index cards.

If these kinds of older technologies are to feature in a larp, designers may need to take steps to bridge the knowledge gap between younger and older players. Much like workshops explaining the social etiquette in a 1920s high society larp, there might need to be workshops for using the now obsolete technologies in retro-modern larps. A good example of this is *Midsummer Disco* (Germany 2023), set in the eighties, which had workshops explaining how to use some technologies of the era, such as how to use a cassette player – and how to rewind cassettes with a pencil!

Physicality

Player's age has yet another impact on their play experience through their physical abilities. In school larps, such as *College of Wizardry* (Poland 2014), many play characters that are significantly younger than themselves. When larps have major physical elements such as sports matches, the players' physical abilities may become a factor to consider. Can all such obstacles be cleared by imagination?

In some larps, such as *Legion: Siberian Story* (Czech Republic 2014), this is clearly not an option. The physicality of marching and fighting in hostile conditions is an integral part of *Legion* and the physical reality of the player is the physical reality of the character (a significant challenge for this 50+ year old).

But in other larps, imagination can be used to circumvent physical reality. In *Avalon* (Poland 2018), teenage characters raced to the top of a hill, fighting monsters, to capture a flag. Many of my younger co-players ran up the hill, but as a fifty-year-old player less physically capable

of that feat, I instead slowly ambled up the hill. My 17-year-old character would have raced up that hill, and when asked about it later, no one disputed it when he said he had. Similarly, at *Sahara* (Tunisia 2020), some players did not participate in a long desert march but instead travelled to the next location via modern transport. It was agreed by all that these characters hadn't vanished and miraculously reappeared, but had always been there with the others.

Conclusions

We should acknowledge that age can be a factor in play, be it because of differences in knowledge and experience or in the physical capabilities of the players. The ideal that anyone can play any role is a good aspiration, but it may not always be attainable. As a broad generalisation, it would be good to accept that older players may have more real-world experience to draw on in near-contemporary settings, whereas younger players may often be more physically capable. The ideal larp will blend the two, allowing players of all ages to combine their knowledge and experience into something greater than the individual parts.

Ludography

Avalon (2018): Poland. Avalon Larp Studio.
 College of Wizardry (2014): Poland. Dziobak Larp Studios.
 Just A Little Lovin' (2011): Norway. Tor Kjetil Edland & Hanne Grasmø.
 Legion: Siberian Story (2014): Czech Republic. Rolling.
 Midsummer Disco (2023): Germany. Poltergeist LARP.
 Reunion (2023): UK. On Location.
 Sahara (2020): Tunisia. Chaos League.
 Tales from the Loop (2017): Sweden. Nils Hintze, based on the art of Simon Stålenhag. Free League Publishing.
 The Sisyphus (2018): UK. Carcosa Dreams.

Author Bio

Chris is a British larper and gamer in his mid-fifties. He has worked in the tabletop role-playing games field since the early 1990s, notably on BattleTech but also Dark Ages: Vampire, Heavy Gear and Crimson Skies. He began larping in the 1980s, D&D games leading to fantasy larps in the Sherwood Forest of his native Nottinghamshire. He returned to larp in 2017 after a long break, playing or crewing many larps in the following years as well as helping with character and story writing for several.

Filmography

Stranger Things (2016): USA. Duffer Brothers, Netflix.

Words of Advice from an Old Witch to Aging Larpers

Inge-Mette **Petersen**

I started larping late in life. In the last eight years I have played with larpers of all ages, some of whom are now facing the passage of time. I hear them lament the fact that they can no longer play as they used to do. Something has changed.

I am old. As I have grown older, I hide behind layers upon layers of knowledge and experience. Like a carapace it hides me from prying eyes and hurting remarks. It will happen to all of us. Like Kafka's Gregor Samsa we will suddenly wake up one morning as a monstrous vermin. Or at least that is what we think will happen as we grow old. But is it true? Do we have to end up as a petrified version of our younger self?

The answer is no – but if you want to change you will need to recognize that your current self is a construct born of social circumstances and the expectations of family and society. There is a certain power to this construct. You are allowed to say and do things that younger people will not get away with, but to do so you must stay inside the boundaries expected from someone of your age and gender. And your body has betrayed you - your hurting knees, sagging boobs, and wrinkled skin. You cannot be young again, but larp is make-believe. If you play a young character nobody expects you to actually be young, but to act young.

When you play a character, the knowledge you have gained during a long life will help to create a deeper understanding. Often you will be surprised by what is useful for character building, no matter what age the character is. The character may be a person interested in poetry, and suddenly your old interest in romantic poets is useful, as happened to me in

Forbidden History: Paradise Lost (Poland 2023). Perhaps the character is a cult member, and suddenly your tarot cards, bought when you were twenty, come into use like in *Lord of Lies* (Sweden, 2021). Your knowledge of how a prison panopticon constructs your mind according to the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1987, see also Foucault & Rabinow 1991) can be surprisingly useful when you create your character for a prison larp such as *The Quota* (United Kingdom 2018). It may all sound banal, but as you grow older your repertoire grows bigger.

When you age, you will have had more firsthand personal experiences than a young person. You may have had a child and seen them grow up with all the joys and worries that entails; lost close personal friends; had good or bad work experiences. This is part of what makes you into a real person, even though some of these experiences may be painful. Using your personal doubts, fears, and failings when you play a mother lost in a dysfunctional family – such as the one in *A Nice Evening With the Family* (Sweden 2018) – can be a powerful and transformative experience. It is part of what makes you human – and being human is what makes us able to play. I may no longer remember what it is to be young, years of experience has taken that from me. But I know how to create the illusion of being young because I know the consequences of my good and bad choices. It brings depth to a character, even when the person you portray is much younger than you.

Larping is a collaborative experience where all the players must interact to create magic. In the best games all are equal. Old players may think that it is their responsibility to create possibilities for play for younger players. It is not. The most demanding thing to do as an old larper is to let go of the power that age gives you – including the power that helping others gives you. But that is what you must do if you want to play. You must be vulnerable; you must shed the layers that you have built around the person you are deep down. You must be human. So, what does that mean? We are all human – right? Yes, and as humans, old or young, we are at the same time powerful and impotent, depending on circumstances and choices. This is even more true in a larp. Anni Tolvanen and James Lórien MacDonald (2020) talk about ensemble play and how important it is. But they are also aware of social bias in larps, and age is certainly part of it. No matter what you do you will meet players biased about your age. It cannot be avoided. Just like a lack of chemistry between players or bad weather, it is a part of life. But most of the time your co-players will be generous and kind, always remember that.

So, when you play, remember this:

- Be selfish – after all it is your own story in the larp that you are here to play.
- Be kind – kindness is always important, repay the generosity of your fellow players.
- Be curious – you think you know everything, have seen everything – but there is always something new to learn, new experiences to be had.

And as a much wiser old witch informed a young friend of hers:

If you want to amount to anything as a witch, Magrat Garlick, you got to learn three things. What's real, what's not real, and what's the difference.¹

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Author bio

Inge-Mette Petersen was born in 1958. She is a trained teacher with a degree in pedagogy and has worked as an education officer at the Danish Open Air Museum since 1998. Inge-Mette has been larping since November 2016. She almost solely plays international larps and has played all over Europe.

Ludography

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¹ The quote is from Terry Pratchett's *Witches Abroad* (Discworld 12) (Unfortunately I am closer to Nanny Ogg than Granny Weatherwax.)

Six Levels of Larp Participation

Josefin **Westborg**, Janusz **Maxe** & Gabriel **March**

Introduction

This is an attempt to provide some theoretical structure to the different, but in practice often intermingled, levels of larp participation. While some of these levels possess a more readily available terminology – like distinguishing between player and character – the corresponding expectations, responsibilities, purposes, and activities often still remain unspoken. Other levels are still most often overlooked, or maybe not even recognized as a part of the design and experience, much less discussed or communicated. By sorting and clarifying these different levels we hope that our framework can be a useful intellectual tool for both participants and organizers.

As for all models, our framework is clearly a simplification: an attempt to separate concepts, actions, and ideas where no clear boundaries actually exist, where cultures, play styles, and preferences overlap, shift, and are context-dependent. Since larp as a cultural expression continually breaks the norms and often tests the established boundaries of the format, it isn't hard to find examples that not only contradict the framework but also do this as a central design choice. This is only natural for a work such as this that tries to be very generic.

The framework

A framework is the more or less collective definition that participants in an activity have of the situation. According to Goffman (1961, 1986) it is the unspoken answer that participants could give to the question: what is going on here?

The meaning of things like an object or something you say or do is dependent on which frame is currently established. When Fine (1983) looked at role-playing games he ended up with three different frames. The first was everyday life, the second was the game level where your actions were affected by the rules such as whose turn it is, and the third was the fantasy frame that we would call ‘in-game’ in larping.

When talking about larps we realized that there is more going on within each frame. By looking at what the individual does, why they do it, and for whom they do it, we could identify six different levels of larping. As we see it, levels 1 and 2 both go into Fine’s first frame, levels 3 and 5 go into his second frame, and levels 4 and 6 match his third frame. These levels interact and influence each other, providing opportunities and limitations. We found that the levels are not only descriptive: there is also a hierarchy to them. In general, the lower-numbered levels have a higher priority than the higher-numbered ones. By level, they provide the groundwork that the following levels rely on to work and to be meaningful. Below you see a table overview of the framework with its different parts, and short examples.

Level	Who The Participant acts as a/an [...]	Action to [...]	Purpose [...]	Beneficiary for [...]	Example
1.	Person	Take care of	Off-game Needs	themselves	sleep enough
2.	Attendee	Perform	(a) Task	the organizer/s	cook food
3.	Co-creator	Uphold	(the) Shared Fiction (and play culture)	the other Roles	use in-game names, only play in-game songs.
4.	Role	Provide	Functions	the other Players	be the bully everyone fears
5.	Player	Steer	(their) Experience (through the character)	themselves	solving the plot, all the drama
6.	Character	Portray	their Personal Fiction	themselves, other Characters and Players	dress to stand out, swear, and challenge norms

Table of the levels of the six levels of larping. Important terms are capitalized. Read the table as “On level 2, The participant acts as an Attendee to Perform a Task for the organizers”.

The levels

First, let's start by taking a look at the different levels of the framework. We will describe each level and also give some tips to think about for participants and give some insights into what this can mean for an organizer. You can probably come up with many more examples yourself.

Level 1: Off-game Needs

‘The Participant acts as a Person to Take care of Off-game Needs for themselves.’

As a Person signed up for a larp, you have to make sure that your basic requirements will be met. This might include things like warmth, food, medicine, sleep, security, and trust. These are things that you also would need to take care of outside of a larp. If at any point higher levels challenge your ability to fulfill your Off-game Needs to your own person, the Needs should take priority. They are more important than narrative and character coherence or the Functions your Role is Providing. This doesn't mean that you should drop everything immediately because you are getting tired, but pushing yourself over your limits because “the plot demands it” isn't the right thing to do. If you have an Off-game Need to handle that will affect higher levels such as Function (level 4), then please make sure to tell affected organizers and co-players, and maybe help them find a working solution to your absence.

To think about

Go through what you need to have your Off-game Needs filled, and see what the organizers take care of and what you should handle yourself. Remember that we can have different Off-game Needs. Some people work great even on very little sleep, while others can't operate at all. It can also be good to have backup things if someone else forgot, like an extra blanket for warmth or some energy bars.

For the organizer

Be clear with what you can offer and what you expect participants to take responsibility for themselves. Are there off-game sleeping areas for people if they need them? Will you accommodate all dietary demands or only some? Also, be clear about what is part of your

design and what is not: maybe scarcity of food is part of the larp, and you want participants to also be hungry off-game.

Level 2: Task

‘The Participant acts as an Attendee to Perform a Task for the organizer.’

On the 2nd level, we have the Tasks that an organizer asks you as an Attendee at their larp to Perform. This may be cooking food, waking everybody up, making sure no one stands in the wrong place when the pyrotechnics go off, letting the organizers know what the council decides, and so on. In many cases, if these Tasks are in some way vital to the larp, they are performed by a non-player character or an organizer with a thin cover character, but it’s not uncommon to see these kinds of Tasks handed out to regular Attendees. It can be hard to know how to prioritize these if there arises a conflict with other Purposes without clear instructions. For example, can your character get fired from the kitchen, or quit voluntarily to go join another group? Can they be taken prisoner? Since working in the kitchen might be a Task you (hopefully) agreed to Perform, your obligation is to the organizers who asked you. In this case, you must check with the organizers before abandoning the Task. If the obligation is to yourself for level 1 reasons – maybe you need to get dry clothes or handle an off-game situation – you should still inform the organizers, if it can affect the Task in a significant way

To think about

Give some thought to what the Tasks that the organizer asks you to Perform will entail, both for your gameplay and for your Experience of the larp. Consider how much time they will take, and how much energy they will require. Are there reasonable backup plans in place if things don’t go as intended? How crucial are the Tasks assigned to you, for the larp to Function at all? Will you be able to carry them out while managing your other commitments to the gaming group and fellow Players? Can you foresee a conflict of interest? Will the Task bring you out of the central playing area or isolate you from the action, and is this something you are fine with?

For the organizer

As an organizer, you should consider how crucial the Tasks that you assign to the paying participants are, since they will also anticipate a fulfilling game Experience. Also, consider whether there are alternative solutions if things don’t go as planned, and whether you have clearly communicated your expectations to the participants in question. It’s not automatically evident that the Role of a “guard” entails actual patrols and being on fire watch, or that a “principal” should prepare and lead recurring teacher meetings as a crucial part of the design.

Level 3: The Shared Fiction

‘The Participant acts as a Co-creator to Uphold the Shared Fiction for the other Roles.’

Level 3 is about how you, as a Co-creator, Uphold the Shared Fiction and play culture. Here we find things like the game’s genre, mood, and type of play. If the game is a horror larp, then playing it like slapstick will not be suitable. In a game about a harsh oppressing system, can you start treating everyone equally? While some things might be very obvious, others might not be, and this can also vary between different play cultures. Is it ok to play a well-known off-game ballad in-game? Will it help with setting the mood or will it break the immersion? Can you invent a witch-lord in a fantasy world if none is mentioned in the background fiction? And what consequences will this have for other Players, their Experience, and their Roles/ Characters? In short, what can you do without shattering the world and the make-believe you create together?

To think about

Read the necessary material to understand the expectations. Try to consider the broader implications that may arise when you introduce changes or modifications to the narrative. Engage in discussions with other Players about their perspectives on the larp’s theme and the Experiences they desire. Be mindful of whether any forms of discrimination are inherent to the larp’s design, and which ones the organizer has explicitly stated as unacceptable within the larp. If you’re uncertain, you can always verify with an organizer.

For the organizer

Ensure your communication is explicit. This includes elements like a checklist outlining the anticipated types of gameplay, what is not desired, content summaries, mood boards, and references to other elements of popular culture. Clearly specify whether specific sensitive topics will be incorporated into the gameplay, and whether there are any that Players can expect to be protected from encountering. If you prefer greater transparency, be sure to clearly articulate what is planned to occur, including any external boundaries for fictional events. Can Characters die during the game? Can they be exiled? Is revolution a conceivable aspect of the gameplay?

Level 4: Function

‘The Participant acts as a Role to Provide Functions for the other Players.’

At level 4, there are two aspects that can sometimes be separated, but in most cases are so closely interconnected that we handle them together here: Role and Function. Role refers to the social position in the fiction that your Character occupies – a title, profession, or distinct trait – which Characters can refer to and discuss. Examples include “captain of the hockey team”, “the new student”, or “village elder”. Function, on the other hand, is about the possible play opportunities your Role creates for the other Players, within the game. Examples include “the bully others should fear” or “the one who leads the council and makes sure everyone has their say”. As you see, these are implicit positions in a social interaction, perhaps an integral part of the experience design of the larp. It’s not a given that the captain of the team is a dangerous bully; that Function could be fulfilled by someone else. However, it’s likely within the formal responsibilities of the village elder to convene the council. A Role can provide several separate Functions, and a given Function can be provided by several characters. Things are not clear-cut, and ambiguity in this area paves the way for misunderstandings and gaps in the design.

What is needed for the story/scene/situation to work? If, at a larp about oppression and a dog-eat-dog environment, enough Players of high-status Roles don’t fill their Function to bully others, the power dynamics of the whole larp will change. This leads to problems both with the Characters not being bullied, and thereby the Players not getting the Experience they were after (level 5), and Upholding the fiction of a competitive world getting harder (level 3). Another example is if you said you would fill the Function of love interest for another Player, and then during the larp you focus on other things, leaving your co-Player with an unfilled Function. As seen here, you as a Player can have more than one Function at the same larp. You can have different Functions in different groups and situations, or towards individual Players.

Having a responsibility to fill with your Function doesn’t mean that you can’t change what your story is about, or go for other gameplay if you wish to: but you need to make sure that the Functions you are assigned will be handled in some other way. It is usually good to start by talking to the affected Players. Maybe the Player you were going to play a romance with is happy about their gameplay, or has already found someone else they would like to play it with instead? Then your dilemma is already solved. But if the change has an impact on a larger group, it might be good to check with the organizers. They might have someone else who can fill the Function in a good way to still make it work. Maybe they know that the Function is already covered by other Players and you don’t need to worry. Either way, you should make sure that your Functions will be handled adequately, and not just leave other Players, that are depending on you to Provide a Function, hanging.

To think about

Understand the Role and Functions you Provide, either by reading instructions from the organizers if they have clearly articulated such, or by conversing with your fellow Players and aligning expectations. Keep in mind that a small personal relationship can be a part of a larger design where it's intended to contribute to gameplay for many others, like the romantic plot of Romeo and Juliet, for example.

Level 4 is closely connected to the personal skills of ensemble play and “reading the game” To learn more about this we recommend the articles *Do You Want to Play Ball* (Westborg & Nordblom, 2017) and *Ensemble Play* (Tolvanen & Macdonald, 2020).

For the organizer

Carefully consider the Roles your larp features and requires, along with the Functions they Provide, whether explicitly stated or implied. Can they be communicated more clearly? Are some Functions particularly vital and demanding of a substantial amount of time or energy? If a Function is particularly vital, it can be good to divide it among multiple Players. This way, the design can more easily withstand absences, distractions, or other instances where a Player might not fulfill their intended Function. Alternatively, it might be necessary to elevate a particularly significant Function to a Task, and assign it to an instructed Player or NPC.

If there are Roles within the larp's structure that involve stepping into another social Role or occupation in the event of a vacancy, such as a crown prince or second-in-command, do you, as the designer, hold such expectations of the Players too? Be clear in your communication about this. Should they, as Participants, prepare in the same manner as their Roles are expected to? Should they even *anticipate* that type of gameplay, since it's very different to play the Role of an heir to the throne biding their time, or one that during the game is thrust into the Role of a ruler and the Functions that entails?

Level 5: Experience

‘The Participant acts as a Player to Steer their Experience for themselves.’

At level 5 we find the Experience of the larp. Just like in level 1 (Off-game Needs), this level is about the requirements for the individual. But where level 1 concerns itself with the Needs that also exist outside of the larp, level 5 is about desires that are specific to the larp. It's connected to the participant's playstyle and wishes about their Experience. Do you want to Experience

solving the plot, playing out big drama, running around doing physical things, exploring the world, or having a deep relationship with your Character? What type of gameplay do you like and how can you get it? We use the term steering (Montola & al. 2015) here since it guides your character towards the kind of play you are looking for. This might be playing with another specific participant because you find them interesting, even though your Character does not really have a strong motivation for speaking with them. Or it might be going on all the quests, since you find solving problems and puzzles very thrilling and rewarding.

To think about

Be honest with yourself and be clear about what you want from your Experience, and take responsibility for making this happen. Coordinate with other Players to get the best Experience you can. Remember to check with other participants about how they prefer to communicate about this: maybe they like to do an off-game check-in each morning, or maybe they prefer to talk it through before the game. Try to accommodate each other. Approach the organizer if things aren't working, or if you feel stuck. If you sense that your Character's personality and internal logic are hindrances to your game, contemplate the changes needed and execute them. However, also consider the Experience of other Players and any commitments you have toward them that still need to be fulfilled. Your desire for a specific Experience shouldn't lead to neglecting assigned Tasks, the Shared Fiction, or your Role's Functions.

For the organizer

As an organizer, you can help by asking Players at signup what type of gameplay they are after, and then try to match that to the groups or Characters.

It helps to be explicit about the types of Experiences that might be available and how Players can ensure they either engage in or avoid them. You can also assist participants by being accessible off-game during the larp to support those who might find themselves stuck in gameplay they don't enjoy, or who are unsure of where to find the kind that they are seeking. By matching Players' desires with each other, you can guide them towards someone who would likely appreciate that particular type of gameplay they are looking for.

Level 6: Personal fiction

'The Participant acts as a Character to Portray their Personal Fiction for themselves, other Characters and Players.'

The 6th level is about the Characters inside the story. Where level 5 is about the Players and their experiences, level 6 is all about the Characters. Here we find things like the inner coherence of your Character, aesthetics, personalized movement, and quirks. It can also mean latching on to well-known archetypes, or deviating from them. “Does this make sense for my Character?” and “What would my Character do in this situation?” are relevant questions at this level. It’s not just about filling a Function or Upholding the Shared Fiction, it’s also about making that Shared Fiction into something intimate, emotional, and unique, about adding your personal flair to it, your interpretation of your Character, and to an extent also the other Characters.

The 6th level is often closely connected to and restricted by the 4th level (Function), but doesn’t have to be.

The Character Kim holds the Role of the village elder and is Tasked with the Function of equitably distributing the floor in the council, ensuring all Players have a chance to speak. If the Player finds that the inner coherence and narrative of Kim leads them towards Portraying that Kim has an internal crisis that leads to Kim stepping down as village elder, this works fine on level 6. But it will have consequences on level 4 (Function) that need to be handled, since there is not only the Role of the village elder that should be addressed but also the Function of leading the council. This Function and what it entails has to be communicated clearly to any intended replacement, to prevent the larp’s council from being affected in a manner that the organizers have expressly attempted to avoid.

To think about

This level is where you create and Portray your Character. It is where you add your personal twist and go deeper into what the Character would do. It encompasses everything else not defined or confined by the foundational lower levels. However, even here, it’s beneficial to reach out to the organizer and co-participants before and also during the larp for inquiries regarding your Character, calibrating Portrayal, and visual representation.

Let’s say you have planned to Portray (level 6) a punk rocker with clear aesthetics that break the norm because the Experience you are Steering (level 5) towards is to be alternative and an outsider. If it then turns out that several other participants also choose that their Characters will be punk rockers, you risk not getting the Experience (level 5) you desire. You don’t need to change your level 5 priorities, since a change of direction at level 6 can solve the problem. Maybe playing a very religious Character now seems to be the more alternative choice.

For the organizer

This level is mainly relevant to the individual participants, but things you could do as an organizer include running workshops to help participants develop their Characters, adding guidelines on how to Portray the Character to the Character text, and being available and open to questions from the participants.

Examples

Here we will give two short examples of how you can apply the framework as a participant. By thinking about the different levels you can analyse what choices are available and assess what consequences these choices might have. There isn't one right choice; it depends on the situation and what change you are striving for, but the framework might help guide you with your decision.

Example 1: Theodora the head chef

The Character Theodora is the head chef and is responsible for the distribution of the food on the ship. Every mealtime she keeps order in the line, shouting threats and insults to the crew, making sure everyone gets some food and no one gets too much, reminding them that they are critically short.

What part of this situation is the Participant (playing the Character of Theodora) free to change and what can she ignore or add to when next the mealtime comes around? Can she choose to serve food at a different time? Start rationing the food even more so everyone goes hungry? Start being nice and lovely, telling everyone that everything will be ok? Give up the position of the head chef and join the marines instead?

By applying the framework, we can deduce that distributing food is a Task (level 2) that the organizers have asked the Attendee to do. Therefore it has a very high priority. Unless there are pressing Personal Off-game Needs (Level 1), food distribution according to the schedule designed by the organizers shouldn't be disrupted. Serving less food than agreed upon would also mean changing the Task, impacting the Off-game Needs of many participants. Even if there are very good Fictional reasons (level 3), like that the food storage of the ship has been damaged, any change in the Task should only be implemented once it's been checked with the organizers.

Theodora's reminding of the dwindling supplies is part of the Shared Fiction (level 3), while her harsh attitude and jargon towards others is a Function to Provide a feeling of military discipline and a tough oppressive command system (level 4). There might be good reasons for Theodora to change these behaviours. Maybe because the Player (level 5) got tired of being a bully and would like to feel well-liked instead, or maybe the Character (level 6) found a new way of dealing with her insecurities and worries by being much more positive. No matter the reason, if the designers placed Theodora in that Role with the explicit Function of being dominant and harsh and reminding people of how rough the times ahead will be, the Player of Theodora should ensure that these things will still happen, probably by someone else shouldering the Function, even if the Role of head chef is not transferred. Or they should at least check in with the organizers to see if the game has reached a point where that Function does not need to be Provided anymore.

Example 2: A high-status character

It is not uncommon to be anxious about playing a high-status Character that will work in the larp, say a king or a high-rank officer. The fear is about blocking play for others, or maybe disrupting the larp by not being believable enough. Let's now apply the framework to break this down.

Blocking play is connected to level 4, Function. One of the most common Functions to have as a high-status Role is play distribution. Being high up in the hierarchy, a lot of information and many decisions end up in your lap. If you keep all the information to yourself and want to make all the decisions, you will create a bottleneck where everyone else is waiting for you and their play is blocked. You might also block others by having long meetings and not being available. High-status roles often have the responsibility to see that the Function of distributing play is fulfilled, either by you or by someone else.

The next fear is about disrupting the larp, which is a concern at level 3, Uphold the Shared Fiction. This is a responsibility everyone shares. All Co-creators have the responsibility to by default treat others as would be fitting for their position. It's not one Co-creator's job to make everyone else treat them in a certain way. As long as you try to treat everyone else's Characters in a fitting manner, like inviting the most prestigious people when you are holding court, you have done your part. Also, note that the Shared Fiction isn't static and can change during the larp. If a war is declared, or an attempt on the life of the king is made, the Functions of the Role would change as the Shared Fiction adjusts to accommodate this new development. Holding court would probably be canceled, as handling the new threat demands focus.

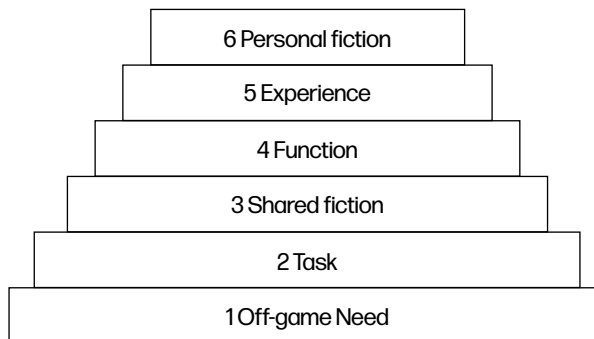
The last part of the fear is about not being believable enough. That is level 6, Character. Many people think that they must Portray their character with authority and realistic mannerisms in order to get others to listen to them. But as we just established, having others listen to you is part of Upholding the Shared Fiction. How you Portray a Character can be done in many different ways and is not crucial for whether the larp will work or not. As long as you fill your Function, in this case, distributing play and holding court, you don't have to be demanding and authoritative. You can also Portray your Character as confused and incompetent, stating things like "My head hurts from all these words, let the oracles decide". Both could work equally well.

By using the provided framework we see that Portraying a Character is not nearly as important as Providing the Functions of the Role.

Conclusion

What we have shown here is a hierarchy of things for you as a participant to do and take care of for the larp to work and for all the participants to have the Experience they want. The levels are not separate: they interact and interfere with each other.

Even though we spent most of this article talking about the levels and what they entail, what we find most important is not what level something belongs to, but the consequences of the choices we make in larps.



We find that adding new initiatives, making changes, and handling problems would benefit from considering the framework to better assess the available scope of action and possible solutions. Since the lower levels (1–4) affect many participants and/or your personal off-game wellbeing, they need to be prioritized. This doesn't imply that changes or initiatives on the higher levels (5–6) should be sidelined, but rather that players should make sure that these do not generate large undesired effects on lower levels before implementing them. If you do not consider this, you might commit one or more of the cardinal sins of larp (Koljonen 2021). You do not want to break the trust placed in you, just like you do not want others to break the trust you have in them. Nordic larp is not about rules, it is all about trust.

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Author Bios

Josefin Westborg is one of the world's leading designers in edularps. Her background is in game design and pedagogy and she is one of the founders of Lajvbyrån/LajvVerkstaden Väst. As part of the Transformative Play Initiative at Uppsala University, she has helped create the world's first Master's programme with a focus on analog role-playing games. She has also taught game design at Chalmers University of Technology and the University of Gothenburg. Throughout her career, she has met thousands of students of all ages, and run and designed larps for them.

Janusz Maxe is from Gothenburg, Sweden. He has been larping since the larp *The Monitor Celestra* (2013), because it was run in his hometown AND provided costumes. It turned out well since he promptly attended both runs 1 and 3 and a decade later he is still here as part of our community. Janusz is one of the creators of *Ensemble* - an online tool for larps, and one of the designers behind the larp *The Devil You Know*.

Gabriel March has been larping since the nineties, mainly French Mind's Eye Theater and fantasy larps before discovering Nordic larps and the international scene 7 years ago. Professionally, he's been a Navy Sailor and an IT technician for various government and civilian agencies. His hobbies include board games, tabletop role-playing, video games, goth and alternative parties, genre cinema and of course larping.

A Short Guide to Fix Your Larp Experience

Alessandro **Giovannucci**

Introduction

Sometimes, when participating in a larp, things just go wrong. But where is the problem? How can you fix it? This article provides a quick guide that condenses the international larp community's knowledge on techniques to remedy a larp gone wrong, and to fix it during the event.

The core of larp, perhaps the concept of larp itself, is co-creation. It is collective and improvised, often based on an emergent narrative with a strong experiential impact. All of these aspects make larps unique and powerful, but also open to potential risks. Their performative nature makes it difficult for participants to stop for a moment, analyze, and fix what is going wrong for them.

Larp as a triangle

A larp can be divided into various elements, and these elements can be adjusted on the go. But one important thing to keep in mind is that a larp is always bigger than the sum of its parts. There is something difficult to understand: a ghost, a hidden melody. That's why when things don't go so well, it's not always easy to figure out exactly why. For the purposes of this article let's imagine the larp as a triangle formed by the larp itself, the community, and you, the player. Usually a larp goes wrong when one or more of the sides of this triangle do not work.

What can go wrong

Following our triangle-based model, here is a list of possible issues:

The larp: unclear communication, poor game design, wrong logistics, temperature, insufficient or inadequate food, hard sleeping conditions and accessibility in general. Lack of meaningful plot and narrative, unclear larp structure.

Community: different play styles, lack of chemistry with the players or the community, lack of in-game connections with other characters, lack of things to do or meaningful actions, or a sense of being left out.

The player: your personal state, your expectations, difficulties in feeling/portraying your character, social anxiety, your commitment to the game.

How to fix your larp on the go

Rather than a comprehensive guide, I collected a series of practical tips from my own experience and the collective knowledge of the international larp community. I read articles, asked for opinions, and listened to stories. Then I tried to synthesize it into a set of tips and tricks, aimed at a quick resolution and getting the larp back on track in a decisive, though not always elegant, way.

Not all of these techniques can work for everyone. Use them as you see fit. Put them into practice as soon as possible, as soon as you begin to realize that things are not working for you.

The goal is always to relocate. This is because the experience does not work when we are out of place. Following our tripartite scheme, we can be out of place regarding the larp, the community, or ourselves.

The tool to relocate in all of these three aspects is communication: nothing can be fixed without talking with the right person. Whenever the problem is about the larp itself, the person to speak with is the designer or the runtime crew, in order to relocate yourself within larp dynamics that better fit your needs. Here are some possibilities to calibrate your expectations with the organizers' design goals. If possible do this during breaks, in order to have more time.

- Ask for advice and how to fix plots and relationships.
- Ask about the core of the larp, the dos and don'ts.
- Ask how the game will continue.
- Ask about the play style they had in mind for the larp.
- Offer your help to organizers (as an NPC or other roles)

When the problem lies with the community, the people to speak with are the other players, in order to relocate yourself within more positive social dynamics. Here are some possibilities in and out of the fiction, all meant to stimulate a quick change in your – and other people's – character's beliefs, social status, behavior. Here are some possibilities (see also Grønvik Müller 2020) :

- Offer someone a favor
- Ask for a favor
- Get in trouble
- Make bad choices
- Spread your secrets
- Show your character's vulnerability
- Make up and confess a deep love for someone
- Change your mind on something
- Remember something
- Die!
- Create things or situations (draw, write songs, start a cult)
- Take the details you like in the game, and make a storyline out of this.
- Involve more interested players
- Sit down and let the game come to you (other lost players are searching for people to play with)
- Search for some "lost player" and interact with them
- Get involved in situations you want as a player, don't worry about character consistency (see Nielsen 2017)
- Go and play with the people you know/like to play with
- Do your favorite/relaxing hobby
- Stop your game and go calibrate with other players

When the problem is with your experience, the player to consider is yourself. The aim is to relocate yourself within your own personal dynamics. These techniques tend to affect other

players less than the previous ones. It's more about working on your personal experience, and tricking yourself a bit, in a good way. Here are some possibilities:

- Calmly plan your return to the game
- Play more with themes and elements within your comfort zone
- Reset your expectations: accept the larp for what it is NOW, not what you wanted it to be
- Do self-care
- Take distance from the game for the time you need
- Reduce the sense of failure

These tricks have to be used wisely. They can save your experience, but destroy the experience for other players and/or organizers in a sort of butterfly effect. For this reason it's always good to talk with players and organizers before using them, if they involve other people. Some hacks (Brind & Svanevik 2020) and steering (Montola & al. 2015, see also Kemper & al. 2020) choices can blur the line between organizers and participants. A larp and your experience of it are not the same thing, so sometimes saving the experience means killing the larp.

Possible perspectives

From this brief guide we can draw some useful suggestions for the future, in order to make the best use of these correctives, while being mindful not to damage the social contract that underlies every larp. Designers, for example, could make space in their design for steering and hacking, clearly communicating which parts of the larp can be modified and which parts can not: possibly in the pregame communications, in player materials, and game guides or design documents. It would also be possible to workshop this.

On the other hand, as participants, we can train ourselves to reframe our expectations in a quicker way, trying to reduce the sense of a larp "being wrong", since in most cases this is just a matter of our perception. We are not out of place at a larp: we are the larp, we are exactly where we want to be, where we belong. Larp is interaction: it's a collective work we can do only together, as a community. And we will.

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Alessandro Giovannucci is an award-winning Italian larp designer and larp theorist. He co-founded the larp collective *Chaos League* and wrote the *Southern Way Manifesto*. His well-known international larps include *Sahara Expedition*, *The Secrets We Keep* and *Miskatonic University*. He is regularly invited to hold talks and workshops about larp and immersive experiences. His chamber larp has been translated into several languages. Curious, friendly, and proudly antifa <https://chaosleague.org/>.

Thank you to: Sarah Lynn Bowman, Bjarke Pedersen and Juhana Pettersson for private conversations, and to all the participants in the thread that I opened in the Larpers BFF facebook group

Organisers usually choose their players from a pool of applicants, based often on an extensive background information form. The character is chosen for each player with their personal wishes and experience in mind. I call this the micro-level of character design.

Micro-level character design operates on the level of individual players and characters: What does this particular player want and wish? What are they capable of? What can they personally bring into the game? What is the dramatic arc of the character? What kind of tensions does the character have with other characters; what are their desired outcomes? What are they going to do in the game? Do they have balanced plots that support their personal story?

Many big, international blockbusters use either brute force design (see Fatland & Montola 2015) that relies on the maxim "*More is more*" and offers the players a well-supplied smorgasbord of plots, or sandbox design where players are invited and often expected to create their own content. These are cost-effective ways to create large commercial games. Some of these games offer well-constructed and carefully thought out characters, but often the players are given only a loose draft of character and their network. The personality and contacts are more like suggestions, and they might be open for change if the player feels like it. Players can even choose to discard them entirely. This I call the macro-level of character design.

Macro-level character design operates on the level of groups and bigger constructions: character groups, big plots in the background, public scenes open to everyone, action free to join.

In my 25+ years of larping, the strongest element to either build the game to excellent heights or make it fall has been contacts and inter-character relationships. Thus, choosing very light, sketch-like character design or making contacts fully flexible according to players' ideas, inspiration, or time, burdens me with potentially pointless shovel-work and increases the chance for the sand cake of the game to collapse.

My argument is that when game designers lead character designing work or, if players are given responsibility for it, facilitate its processes, the experience is more likely to be successful for a bigger number of players. This is because purely player-driven character and contact design potentially has several problems and challenges.

Embrace the chaos?

Next I will discuss four specific problems and challenges of macro-level character and contact design. Many of my points echo Anni Tolvanen's (2022) Nordic Larp Talk on dance card larping.

It's easy, fun and safe to play with friends and people with similar play styles. Players can plan their character relations and plots together, and make use of their previous common play history: whereas contacting several strangers, feeling their play styles, negotiating content, and trying to fit it all to the larp can be much more stressful and time-consuming. Playing with friends is natural and understandable and, at least to some extent, one of the points of larping: but it can, however, lead to exclusivity. My first point is that players who have no friends to gravitate to in the game or who feel difficulty making new contacts, may be left out from designing game content.

Secondly, player-driven contact design can also lead to collecting as many interesting contacts as possible. This is also known as contact shopping. In the process, common content is brainstormed, inter-character history drafted, plots agreed on and even scenes planned. But in the game, the contact shopper has no time to play with all their contacts, so they have to choose: maybe the most interesting ones, those with friends, or those easily at hand. To co-players, these pre-planned relationships can, however, be crucial. These players may not have their friends aboard, or they may not be prepared for the play culture of contact shopping. The content now thrown overboard may play a big role in their planned game content or character story, which now deflates.

Thirdly, when there is no coherent, personal story and view of the character's arc during the game, play can easily become chaotic and coincidental.

In many Finnish larps, each plot is specifically designed for a certain character or group of characters. However, in some international larps, it is a choice of design to provide many potential plots that are not tied to any particular character. The player can then freely choose which ones they want to engage with during gameplay. When this design choice is communicated to potential players, they can choose whether they feel up to it or not.

If players find themselves in this situation unexpectedly, they can try grabbing whatever plot or action they can get in the fear of missing out and being bored, whether it is something the character would do or not. Personally, in these kinds of situations as a player, I have felt

pretty desperate. I've tossed aside all logic and the story of my character, and I've just tried to squeeze myself into anything. Immersion is long gone, numbness and indifference linger close. Embracing the chaos might keep me from getting bored, but it seldom offers impressive experiences or feelings of meaningfulness for a player, who is seeking a personal story.

As a fourth and combining element: players are not equal when it comes to social capital, skills, and status. When the organiser's hand doesn't balance characters' weight in the fiction, the most popular, charismatic, socially and verbally skilled players often reign. That can offer little or at the worst case no room to more subtle tones, quieter players and more delicate stories.

Not easy for everyone

Larping is an extreme social sport. Contact creation and plot design with a dozen strangers from other play cultures can be fruitful and awesome, but it can also be socially extremely straining and strenuous. Introverted or shy players, players with bad experiences or occasional problems with social situations, or players who know no other players in advance, may feel really anxious and uncertain. Also, players who can't use hours of their free time for pre-larp random contacting in the hope of finding plots, can struggle.

Behind my text are my own experiences from international sandbox or brute force blockbusters. I spent a lot of time contacting, brainstorming and plotting. From some players I never got answers. With many of them, I didn't succeed in communicating the balance and equal weight of our content plans or character relationships. With some, I never ended up playing because they seemed too busy with other stuff. That made me feel meaningless and disappointed. I was also ashamed: I couldn't follow the plans I participated in making, and I was unsure if I should push more or just give up. Diegetically, I felt not welcome in several plots, or, when suggesting hooks or action, didn't necessarily get an enthusiastic response. When I gathered my strength to force myself in, my character was often merely a bystander, the audience witnessing others' play. Here, despite the fear of missing out, I started to realise that these design styles are sadly not for me – or, rather, I am not for them.

My larps were saved by friends with whom we had pre-planned contacts, and with whom we had an understanding that we are really going to play the planned content. I've also been lucky to have several really nice encounters and meaningful play with new acquaintances.

For an introvert with some insecurities in social relations, the trying, the uncertainty, the negotiating, the forcing, and the continuous alertness for potential content was exhausting. I longed for knowing where to concentrate, being able to trust that there is a reason for my character's existence. I felt envious and missing out: I did not get in or feel like an essential part of the cast.

As far as I know, operating on the macro-level of character design is easier, lighter and less laborious, and that's why it's practised in big games. As a designer, though, I can't help observing how things could be done a bit more inclusively. In each blockbuster I've attended, I have noticed many places where organisers could relatively easily have connected the spots to insert inter-character content, such as: both of these characters have nubile children, they should absolutely meet and discuss marriages! This character has violated a member of a leading gang, the information has to be shared for drama to happen! These characters have both recently lost someone important, the players would get a kick out of a séance session!

Creating together or purchasing an experience?

I see larping as creating together. Thus it also includes player responsibilities, not just rights. Especially in commercial blockbusters, some participants may see themselves as paying customers, and game designers as customer service providers. Can customers be asked to mind their co-players' experience, answer messages in time, stick to pre-planned contacts, drop their immersion to help others, do something that doesn't feel fun? Usva Seregina's (2019; see also Seregina in this volume) article on commodification of larp discusses this and related topics in more detail.

Personally, I fear that commercial games may lack the true communality that comes from committing to supporting other participants' play and stories, and the vision that comes from comprehensive, dramatically solid, designer-led character arcs. I'm aware that I'm not purchasing an experience but a possibility of one. If I get a spot and choose to participate, I don't expect to be fully catered, but I wish to know how to focus my available time and energy.

Safety and stability make a better cake

To decrease the problems and challenges of exclusivity, contact shopping, vacuous chaos, and inequality in social status, I, an introvert player, need some information or guidelines about

these things: Why is my character important in this game, what can I expect from the game? Which players are my most important contacts and do we have time to play together? What kind of tension is planned inside the relationship? In short: I want to be as sure as possible that my experience is going to be as good as possible. I'm also willing to work for it, as long as I know what are the tools best for this playground.

Compared to free player-driven contact creation, contact design by the organisers is a stronger promise to me and other players struggling with uncertainty on whether we too will be relevant and included. Knowing that designers have created full, meaningful characters and their relationships, I'm much more confident that the cake will stay whole.

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Author Bio

Niina Niskanen is a Finnish writer, larp designer and larper. She has been larping and creating games for over 25 years. In addition to acting as lead designer and organiser for such applauded street larp series as *Neonhämärä* (Neon Twilight, 2008-2012), *Tonnin stifat* (Thousand Mark Shoes, 2015) and the Covid-stricken *Ihmisen näköiset* (Kinds of Human 2020), she has written and lectured about different aspects of larp design, larp safety, and using literary techniques in larp design. She is a professional writer and has authored three novels.

Player Limitations and Accessibility in Larp

Beatrix **Livesey-Stephens** & Bjørn-Morten **Vang Gundersen**

If you are a larper with any kind of limitations that affect your ability to play, the first thing you may think of when you see a listing for a new larp is not whether it is exactly your kind of thing, but whether you would be able to participate in it at all. Not for reasons of schedule clashes, but because of these other limitations.

Players with limitations, be these physical, mental, psychological, or something else entirely, will often feel like they are missing out on the full experience of the larp they are attending. Many larps – even larp as a hobby in general – are known to be physically, mentally, and psychologically demanding, and players need to know in advance if they will be able to engage with the larp to the same extent as everyone else, or to an extent that they are happy with. Transparency in larp design is what makes it possible for players to judge these things, which is why, for us, it is one of the most important tools for accessibility.

Accessibility is about looking out for people. Players come to your larp because it looks interesting and they want to have a good time. Thinking about accessibility and disability from the very beginning of your larp design, as well as communicating it clearly from the beginning, signals to players that they are explicitly included and that the designer has put thought into the wide range of people who might want to play it. Accessibility is about showing responsibility for players and the player experience as much as you can and should as a designer. Of course, you can never be wholly responsible for everything that might happen within a game, but to paraphrase Maury Brown (2016), you have power over what your larp allows, prohibits, and encourages. You control what the larp expects from players and whether this is reasonable for everyone who might want to play.

Ideally, accessibility should be proactive, not reactive. Disabled players often have to do the work themselves to figure out whether a larp will be accessible to them, rather than being able to rely on clear accessibility information from the organisers. This can be very draining and can make disabled players feel discouraged from larping at all. When accessibility information is not included, disabled players can feel that they haven't been considered and that their experience at the larp is bound to be lesser than their abled co-players. Implementing accessibility proactively into your larp means that you consider what is and is not absolutely essential to how your larp is run, and you consider what you need to implement to make sure people with varying levels of ability and different limitations can participate in the larp to the greatest extent that is possible. A side-effect of this, as an organiser, is that your vision for the larp becomes much clearer.

Accessibility in larp is (and isn't!) many things, depending on what your larp is about. If your larp's foundation is about players being in the dark and all unable to see, lack of light would not factor into your larp's accessibility in the same way as it would if the larp was not based on physical darkness. However, if a fantasy larp is set in a fairy glade with dim lighting, and if this would pose a problem for larpers with reduced vision, the lighting could be increased since this is not essential for the larp's vision.

When you design a larp, it does not have to be accessible to absolutely everyone. For example, *Legion* (Czech Republic 2014), a Czech larp, takes place over a 25-kilometer hike over two winter days and, according to the larp's website, hunger and tiredness are at times an "inevitable" part of the larp. This means that someone who uses a wheelchair, or someone with a chronic illness, would very much struggle with the essential parts of the larp and would not necessarily be able to participate. This does not make *Legion* a bad larp or brand it "inaccessible." No larp can be accessible to absolutely everyone, whether that be due to themes of trauma, the amount of physical activity it requires, or something else. But designers should be intentional about their design. It is ok to exclude people if the heart and goal of the larp simply would not ever be able to accommodate people with certain limitations – such as someone with severe asthma trying to play *Luminescence* (Finland 2004), a larp in a room full of flour. But if designers are able to open up their larps to people without compromising what the larp is actually about, they should bake that accessibility into their design.

You should be able to explain the state of your larp's accessibility to yourself – what is it about the heart and soul of your larp that means some people will not be able to play it? Ideally, the people that your larp excludes are the same people who would not want to participate in your larp anyway and would agree that the larp would always be inaccessible to them, such

as how *Legion* necessarily requires walking 25 kilometers as an intrinsic part of its design. Accessibility in larp is not about making every larp accessible for every person, but making them as accessible as their designers' intrinsic visions allow them to be.

Of course, navigating player limitations takes different forms depending on the medium of the larp, whether it is played in person or online. Some people may experience severe concentration fatigue when larping over video chat, meaning that live-action online games are inaccessible to them due to the nature of the medium. Others have a much better experience larping online in the comfort of their own home, and find that they are less able to concentrate or larp "well" when attending an in person event.

We would be remiss to not also explicitly acknowledge psychological safety in this article. Accessibility is also about what a player can expect to experience during a larp, which becomes difficult if the larp has hidden features. In our opinion, knowing a secret beforehand will not diminish the ingame experience of keeping it or having it exposed. At *Høstspillet* (Denmark 2023, Eng. The Autumn Game), every character's background and all lore material was open to everyone – their secrets, traumas, deals, alliances, ambitions, relations and topics. During sign-up, people could tick off boxes with what topics they didn't want to play on. At the briefing, the organisers emphasized that "a safe larper is a good larper." We believe that by helping players manage their expectations and giving them the agency of playing within the framework but also around individual pitfalls, you create not only safer larps but better larpers too.

There are as many limitation combinations as there are larpers. Ultimately, the decision on whether the larp is not accessible for someone comes down to the individual larpers themselves. People love knowing exactly what level of control and agency they do and do not have, and transparency in design choices will help each larper decide if a larp is accessible to them. Accessibility is not binary, even for one person. People can have different limitations at different times, and they have to make the choice on whether they can or cannot participate in a larp for themselves. Players want to be able to get everything that they can out of the larp experience, and satisfying play is achieved by having the access and agency you need to get the play you want, within the constraints of a larp that could allow for that play. Disabilities complicate this, but if the organisers have given thought to accessibility and how to support players in different ways, it will be much easier for all players to participate in the larp to the extent they wish to.

As a larp designer, it is not your responsibility to make your larp accessible to absolutely everyone. But you should try to make it as accessible as its core vision allows it to be. If the larp excludes someone, it should be because the heart of the larp truly cannot be realised in a way that allows them to participate, not because their needs were not thought about at all in the design process. Hopefully, the future of larp is one where the only reason someone would forgo a larp is because they simply wouldn't want to participate in it in the first place.

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Author Bios

Beatrix (Bea) Livesey-Stephens is a researcher studying the perception and application of player calibration and consent in analog games, particularly those pertaining to romance and sexuality. Another of her main interests is the intersection of accessibility/disability and play. Bea is the recent recipient of the Optimist Award at the Canadian Game Studies Association Conference for her work on reimaginings of accessibility and calibration in play. She hopes to contribute further to understandings of player calibration, trust, and consent wherever she can.

Bjørn-Morten V. Gundersen (b. 1990), a graduated teacher (in 2016) and a larp-designer. An avid spokesperson of prioritizing to record the design document for your larp. It takes time, but it's definitely worth it. Most recently created and designed Høstspillet (2023) with Mads Havshøj (and the amazing helpers), and currently creating Sunkissed Affairs (2024).

Inclusion in Larp: Between Challenge and the Experience of Limits

Björn Butzen

Personal note: In this article, I give my personal opinion. In doing so, I must refer to the article by Shoshana Kessock 'The Absence of Disabled Bodies in Larp, as it addresses some basic things regarding game design which I wholeheartedly support, especially the point about the representation of disability by non-disabled people. What is needed is not more non-disabled people in larp portraying disability (whether to make the character cooler and more interesting or something else), but more people with disabilities larping.

Our world is becoming more and more diverse. Realities of life can finally find a place and we are every day socially responsible to deal with and react to people's most diverse needs. This hard-won achievement does not stop at a hobby like ours.

This means that all those who are active in the field of larp, as organisers or players, have to face the fact that needs arising from diversity have to be recognised and accommodated. It is irrelevant whether a person is disabled or not. Every person has needs arising from their background. Our task as larpers is to meet these needs as best we can, provided that we have the opportunity to do so.

In this article, I try to show that the limit of my imagination due to the awareness of my self means a break with immersion and has an impact on inclusion in larp in terms of self-determination and informed choice. In the course of the article, I draw attention to

communication and expectations from the perspective of the vision of a larp event and the resources of all participants, and which courses of action can result from this.

So let's have a look together at what points we still need to work on.

At the limits: our imagination

A central element of our hobby is the oft-praised immersion. We can immerse ourselves as completely and holistically as possible in situations we encounter in the game and not be distracted. Immersion is an element that is supposed to help us get as close as possible to a realistic experience or feeling.

It is a fact that we succeed in immersion to a greater or lesser extent depending on the situation, location, participants, or unexpected events. The fact that we often portray supernatural beings and abilities and have to imitate these abilities without actually possessing them is already a break with immersion.

So on some meta-level we are fully aware that what we are doing is a game. Yet we engage with it and ignore the fact that it is merely a representation. So we build representation into our immersion for the benefit of the flow of the game. Why is it nevertheless possible to get the impression that this is a bigger problem in interaction with disabled people than, for example, in the representation of a superpower?

My personal experience and assumption is: because despite immersion, we think of ourselves mentally on the meta-level as the real me and thereby include social contexts, assumptions, as well as learned knowledge and ignorance in situations. We are moving in ableist systems, which, in addition to the disability itself, constitutes the *true* core of disability: non-participation in society.

Ableism is the “discrimination and social prejudice against people with disabilities. Ableism characterises persons as defined by their disabilities and as inferior to the non-disabled” (Kessock 2017).

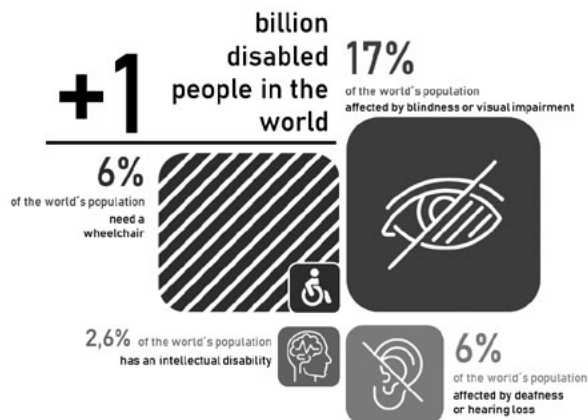
The lack of accessibility is a central element of the non-participation of disabled people in social interactions. It is irrelevant whether this discrimination happens consciously or unconsciously.

The decisive factor is whether measures and actions are taken to eliminate this situation once the discrimination has been recognised.

In doing so, we realise that in many cases we have little contact with disabled people in everyday life. This realisation often brings with it insecurity, which then shows itself in play and interactions. However, we also fail to realise that disability is not a condition that prevails from the beginning of life. Only 3% of disabled people are disabled from birth. All other disabilities are acquired in the course of a lifetime. We fail to realise that at some point in our lives we ourselves may belong to the group of people with disabilities that, according to the WHO (2023), makes up about 16% of the world's population. That is roughly one in six of us. This figure does not stop at larpers and is not linked to a specific population stratum.

It is beyond our imagination to suddenly no longer be able to do things we were previously good at, for whatever reason. This limitation of abilities is often understood as a loss of quality of life. It is accompanied by assumptions about what disabled people are able to do. This is where the greatest danger of acting ableist lies: we cannot imagine what disabled people are capable of doing, and also we think we have to make decisions without including disabled people in the discussion.

Often the boundary between external responsibility and personal responsibility is crossed in an encroaching way. A supposed protective space is built up for disabled people that protects no one but ourselves – from experiences that could take us further.



The diversity of forms of disability is obviously a big problem for many people. Facing many forms of disabilities means that I cannot develop a patent remedy for dealing with them all. As a result, I have to reposition myself in every situation, at every event, in every conversation, according to the needs of my counterpart.

Even though this last sentence applies to practically every situation in my life, even without people with disabilities, it takes on a special meaning for me when dealing with people with disabilities. In this context, if inclusion would be really implemented, it would mean that it is just not a special event. I deliberately avoid the term normality here, because this is a fallacy regarding the diversity of people we encounter in the course of a lifetime.

The special nature of the situation is made clear for many by the fact that they are afraid of possible embarrassment in direct contact with disabled people. They are afraid that they could do something wrong out of ignorance. Therefore, they often do not do it at all and thus deprive themselves of the opportunity to learn and to overcome that very limitation of imagination.

At the limits: communication

If there is no meeting or exchange, larp will not be able to develop in this area. One often feels that disabled people are not taken into account at larps. For example, if I can't find any information in advance of an event that helps me as a disabled person about the location, the game, the expectations of the organisers, etc., I have to expend additional energy on top of my personal effort, which is regularly caused by my disability anyway, in order to be able to make an informed decision.

What does informed *choice* mean?

According to the NC Department of Health and Human Services in North Carolina,

“individuals with disabilities have the right to make choices over where they work and how they spend their days. However, people with disabilities too often have limited experiences on which to base choices. Informed choice is what we call the process of choosing from options based on accurate information, knowledge, and experiences. Core principles include:

- Everyone is capable of making choices, regardless of their limitations, and needs opportunity, experience, and support to do so.
- Choice means selecting among available options, and clearly defining what those options are.
- Choices have consequences and it is important to clearly understand what those consequences are.
- Choices are made within the overall context of cultural and societal expectations and some choices are viewed as more acceptable and more positive than others.

Informed choice occurs when a person, with or without reasonable accommodations, understands all the options available to them, including the benefits and risks of their decisions. The process of informed choice doesn't have an end and doesn't just occur one time. Informed choice is part of an ongoing process of engaging people in person-centred conversations about their goals.” (NCDHHS 2023)

Especially with regard to organisers, it is desirable that people with disabilities can be involved in the run-up to an event. This means that I either have people with disabilities in my environment that I can integrate into my team, or I make an effort to recruit people with disabilities as experts for my event.

Here I should just briefly point out that counselling, in the sense of “I educate myself further”, is something I pay money for in my working life. It should be noted at this point that disabled people owe nobody free education.

Low-barrier access to information on the event's website is also something that not only benefits people with disabilities. Clear structures of the page layout, bundled and brief information, pictures of the location, and references to the sanitary facilities are just a few examples to help people in general make informed decisions.

It seems to me that an important point is the agenda of the organiser.

As a disabled person, I want to be able to get an idea of who I am dealing with on the organiser's side:

- *Personally, I would like to meet people who have not already made up their minds about me and my disability.*

- *I want to meet people who trust me to do things, as they would trust non-disabled people.*
- *I want to meet people who trust that I can make decisions for myself just like non-disabled people instead of organisers who have already made decisions for me without knowing what I am capable of.*
- *I want to meet people who want to look at situations with me and find a solution together.*
- *I want to meet open-minded people who are aware in their communication that they don't have to know everything (and probably can't), but are willing to learn and educate themselves*
- *I want to meet people with whom I can build a trusting relationship in order to be able to discuss needs that may also require more intimate knowledge in one situation or another. For this I need a protected space.*
- *I want to meet people who recognise where there is a need in play situations (be it through physical barriers or in interaction with other participants) and are not afraid to solve the problem with the necessary knowledge and calmness and above all, clarity and unambiguity.*

This sounds like a lot of work at first, but on closer inspection it turns out to be demands that we in the field of larp already implement in many other things and that we try to incorporate into our thinking and actions on diversity issues anyway. Often, experiences of marginalisation arise from the same or at least similar behaviour of counterparts in encounters, so intersectionality is a clear building block of a diverse world for marginalised people, but one that needs to be remembered again and again.

Nevertheless, we need to be aware that there are people who are already overburdened by these demands.

At the limits: our own vision and our resources

Does this mean that I, as an organiser, can no longer organise an event that is not barrier-free, such as a castle larp? Does every event I organise have to be inclusive and diverse?

Those who ask themselves such questions have failed to understand what inclusion and diversity actually mean and what added social value their own events derive from them.

First of all, there are not only physical hurdles when I organise a larp in a castle. Running a larp in Czocha Castle in Poland, for example, has driven an organiser bankrupt and ticket prices have risen out of reach for many larpers.

One question I should ask myself as an organiser is whether the location I have chosen is a compelling element for what my larp will ultimately be. In the course of developing a larp, I have to think about which of my visions will ultimately become reality due to various circumstances. Sometimes the process involves painful decisions. Inclusion can seem like another hurdle that prevents me from realising my visions.

Even though I personally find this assessment regrettable, it seems to me to be a valid attitude if I am eager to implement a certain vision. Here it is important to know that I can (and should!) also communicate this accordingly, but then also have to face consequences and counter-positions. This means above all that I have to be prepared for criticism and accept it, listen to it, and process it.

But maybe I also have to admit to myself that my own resources may not be sufficient to implement inclusion. This also needs to be communicated. It would be important to remain open to the process, to accept help if necessary and to include people in my team with whom I can better implement inclusion. However, if my resources are not sufficient, the most important advice is not to promise what I cannot deliver. This only leads to frustration on both sides, as expectations and implementation efforts clash and cannot be resolved. The worst-case scenarios are that someone is at an event that I, as the organiser, cannot help or I, as a disabled person, am sitting at an event and cannot take action because the circumstances are not as they were announced to me.

In my opinion, organisers must be able to clearly communicate what resources they have available for which processes. They must provide resources in their event organisation structures to be able to address the issue of inclusion appropriately and provide contact persons. In my experience, it helps enormously if this person is a person with disabilities themselves, as this already offers a less barrier-laden approach, which can be of great importance for communicating the own needs of people with disabilities.

Beyond the limits: accepting the challenge

Perhaps the most important conclusion that can be drawn from this article is that there are no easy answers to how best to implement inclusion. The human species is diverse and each of us, regardless of whether it is a person with a (visible) disability or not, or if it's just personal preferences that matter to us: we have to try to engage with our counterpart.

When it comes to disability, both Shoshana Kessock (2017) and Lizzie Stark (2014) have made suggestions years ago about great ways to implement their own game design as an organiser and take further steps from there. For example, the idea of an avatar taking the place of the player in certain situations is one way to create an element of participation in certain situations. Lizzie Stark rightly writes: "Since the world is big and people and their needs are complex, it's unlikely that any one technique is going to work for everyone all the time" (Stark 2014). Dann Lynch (2023) has also given suggestions on how to make larp more accessible.

People with disabilities will not give you a one-size-fits-all answer to the question: what do I have to do to be inclusive? None of us can avoid thinking about it ourselves in exchange with affected people.

There are already many people with disabilities in the field of larp – but not all of their disabilities are visible. These people must be allowed to gain the courage and be offered the opportunity to talk about it without prejudice and in a self-determined way. Larp designers must credibly and honestly assure and emphasise that disability in larp is treated neither as a cool feature of a character such as an eye patch nor as a burden regarding the efforts I have to put in my larp because someone is disabled, but as a part of the personalities that live in the game world in which I currently find myself.

Real participation means that people with disabilities can also immerse themselves in play worlds in order to have new experiences like everyone else, and to escape from everyday life for a while.

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Björn Butzen is an educational consultant for volunteer services. He has been playing larps since 2014 and mostly co-organises events related to Minilarps. As a participant in workshops on the topic of safety in larp, he contributes the perspective of disabled people, especially with regard to the tension between personal responsibility and heteronomy. Among other things, he also advises larp organisers on design documents and concrete implementation in order to find inclusive ways of enabling disabled or restricted people to participate in events.

How I Learned to Stop Faking It and Be Real

Anna **Erlandsson**

In my opinion, one of the most important things in being a good larper is to have self-awareness. This means knowing one's strengths and weaknesses and being able to provide play for other players - but also knowing what one wants out of a larp and how it aligns with the vision and themes of the larp.

After larping for some years, I thought I had a good perception of my strengths and weaknesses. For example, I knew that I was lousy with directions, so I should not try to play Aragorn. However, I knew that I was really good at organizing things and playing a leader, so I thought I should actually try to play Aragorn.

It all came down to balance and knowing that I could play most of the characters I wanted to as long as I tweaked them, had trusted friends around, and communicated well with the organizers. In addition, I was very good at making sure that my body was strong enough to carry heavy things at a larp if a character demanded it and letting the organizers know if there was something that needed to be adjusted or not played on. For example, I could tell them that I am really bad when it comes to close combat since I am short and lazy.

Over the years, I learned more about what kinds of characters I could give the most for and what characters I could grow into. But while I was great at communicating about my practical skills and all my larp needs related to them, I was not up to par with being transparent about my health. Or rather, my mental health.

As all people, I had ups and downs. But to tell it bluntly, there were some years when I was in a

downward spiral. While I had been very outspoken to my friends about my mental health and the importance of self care, I was adamant that it would not impact my larping.

Mental health issues can range from depression and PTSD to anxiety, self-harm, and eating disorders (to only mention a few examples). All of these should be taken seriously and treated as reasons to get help. It does not matter *what* my mental health issues were. What is important is *how* they impacted my larping. The biggest thing they brought to me was shame over feeling the way I did and having the issues I had.

I wanted to play pretend in my hobby and to be strong without letting my issues bleed over to my co-larpers. And I was hesitant to communicate what I needed to my co-larpers since I did not fully know what I needed. Was it sympathy? Maybe concrete hands-on help if I would not be able to play out a scene? Understanding if I needed to break the game for a time? Underneath these thoughts there was a fear of being rejected. What if people thought I was too broken to play with?

With that, I made a promise to myself to basically take care of myself, to be a great larper and be open in every way – but not when it came to what I needed from my co-larpers and organizers with my trauma and mental health issues.

Of course, in retrospect, that was a horrible idea.

When things got hard or triggered something in me, I had to hide it. I rather pushed it down than caused trouble. I pushed myself to the breaking point when it came to organizing and being available to my co-players – just to prove that I was not broken. I did not cancel a single larp, but in the end, I played for my co-players, not for myself. I tried to make sure that they had fun but ended up having less fun myself.

On the other hand, I was adamant in advising my friends and co-larpers to do the opposite of what I was doing. I always encouraged them to be open with all their needs and health issues. I was the one who took people aside to sit down and have a chat. I was the one who offered a shoulder to cry on during larps.

Then something happened a couple of years ago. It was a standard larp with no hard themes — and played with trusted friends. I was responsible for a small group and all was well. Apart from that it was not. Around this time in life, I was struggling more than ever. I wanted to stay

at home all the time and the only thing that pushed me to the larp was the knowledge that I had people relying on me.

There was a scene, some larp fight – and suddenly I blacked out with over ten minutes of which I have no memory of. People told me that I did a great scene with screaming and fighting, and that they were surprised over seeing me get that physical.

I have no memory of this. The next thing I remember is sitting in the darkness by a lake and silently crying my eyes out. I felt so ashamed and broken. Most of all, I did not know how to handle this or how to reach out to friends. So I cried a bit more and then went back into the tent and took care of my group.

The big change came only recently. I had gotten used to hiding how I felt at larps or conferences and just faking it all the way. Always smiling, always acting like I did not care, doing my best to be the steady port for others.

I thought I had a great system for handling myself in the larp community. And then came a larp when it just did not work anymore. I had, again, the responsibility for a small group. I should have been able to keep it together, so I just ignored the feeling of terror. But for the first time, I could not push myself anymore.

I contacted my group. I told them that I had limited energy and told them to make sure to steer their larp away from relying on only me. I told them that I would need breaks but that I could handle it.

Then I contacted the organizers. I told them everything. On how I was at my limit but that I really wanted to give the larp a try. I told them what could be done, both for me and my group. They were wonderful in assuring that things were ok and that I was welcome with limited energy and all my brokenness.

The larp was a bit of a blur. I was really tired and had to rest a lot. I cried off-game in an organizer's arms. I was sitting and resting on a friend's lap and had her pat my hair until I could breathe again. But I had the energy to give my everything and to feel into myself. I created magic for my co-larpers and for myself. And for the first time in years I felt I was larping for myself.

I went home from that larp with a sense of sadness and peace. Sadness over how easy it had been and how many years I had robbed from myself. Peace in knowing that it would be so much easier from now on.

That experience changed larping for me. I no longer take on responsibilities for groups alone. I put myself first when it comes to how I travel to, sleep, and eat during larps. I share my needs before and after a larp, both with organizers and with my friends. I try to be open with my co-players if things are hard. When they ask how they can support me, I answer their questions honestly.

During any larp, I take the time to rest, and I step off-game when I need to. If I feel I don't have the energy for something, I cancel it and try to do it in good time. After a larp, I take the time to land. I might not always succeed in it but I do my best. And I give myself that time.

A while ago, I went to a very challenging larp. Even before the larp, my sleep pattern was non-existent and I had mental health issues that were acting up. I opened up to a co-larper when she asked if I needed anything and that helped a lot. Then after the first part of the larp, I just crashed. There were no triggers or bad things involved. I had just pushed myself too hard and too much.

The main takeaway was that I could accept the help from organizers who just sat together with me in a dark room while I cried. I managed to explain my needs and reached out to a loved one who came and held me. And with those small means of accepting help, speaking about my needs and just being honest, I could breathe and pick myself up for the rest of the larp.

Looking back, I have come very far in how I handle myself, and I try to make sure to take care of my needs. Does it make me feel better? Absolutely not. I feel more vulnerable than in years and so broken. But I hope that it will pass in time. I will rather do this than go through another 20 years faking it.

Author bio

Anna Erlandsson is a Swedish larper, roleplayer and nerd who loves to discover new worlds and adventures. She loves talking about inclusion and diversity and also dwelling into how roleplaying and gaming can make our world better.

BORDERLANDS OF LARP

Since larp is a multidisciplinary pursuit, it meets other fields in borderlands and liminal spaces. Larper are eager to look for similarities between larp and various other practices such as process drama, sociodrama, simulation games and improv theater. Sometimes these activities are even referred to as larp or larping. This section begins with a debate piece where Mátyás Hartyándi argues that it is harmful to label as “larp” neighboring fields whose practitioners do not consider them larp.

Filming larp has often been viewed as a difficult, if not an impossible, pursuit. A larp is not a performance created for an audience, and on camera, larping can seem like bad acting. However, Sophia Seymour and Martine Svanevik managed to successfully create a documentary that consists of Seymour’s film material on Svanevik’s larp *Remember That Time* (UK, 2020). Their article *Remember That Time... We Tried to Film a Larp* illuminates the process in the form of a discussion between everybody involved.

Katri Lassila continues this journey into the borderlands between larp and film. As the artistic part of her Ph.D. thesis in arts and design, she made the short film *Jyrkänne – The Cliff*. When directing and shooting the film, she used larp methods to immerse herself and her spouse (they were playing themselves in an alternative reality) to the landscapes of the film.

Immersive theater pieces sometimes have larp-like elements. Rasmus Lyngkjær ventures into the region between larp and theatre in his article on SIGNA’s performance installations’ similarities and differences to larp. Sometimes new kinds of works are born from the documentation of larp. Gerrit Reininghaus and Adrian Hermann write about the phenomenon of making recordings – Actual Plays – of online larps. Nadja Lipsyc takes the topic of combining larp with technology further and discusses the possibility of creating immersive mass media with VR technologies. She discusses in depth the ethics and aesthetics involved. Lindsay Wolgel describes the larp innovations she has made in her classroom practice as a drama teacher.

The section ends with two articles where larp meets academic fields. Mike Pohjola describes the collaboration between cultural anthropologist Victor Turner and theater director Richard Schechner to combine theater and experiential ethnography. With students and colleagues, they performed ritual dramas that have many larp-like aspects. Finally, Jenni Lares discusses the *Talvikäräjät* (Finland 2022, Eng. Winter Ting) project where she first designed a larp strictly based on historical research and then did further research on the larp.

experienced and identified in non-larp activities. J. Tuomas Harviainen (2011, 176) attempted to capture this phenomenon with his famous criteria of “larping”:

- “Role-playing in which a character, not just a social role, is played.
- The activity takes place in a fictional reality shared with others. Breaking that fictional reality is seen as a breach in the play itself.
- The physical presence of at least some of the players as their characters.”

In this sense, “larping” happens at most larp events, while it can also exist at non-larp events (Harviainen cites re-enactment, bibliodrama, and other activities). It is unfortunate that instead of choosing a neutral name for this universal behavior, we call it larping. This use of language subtly undermines identity: “Sure, your events are not larps. But you are still larping.”

As we identify more and more activities as larps, and create a new category for “those larps that are not aware that they are larps,” we are imposing our language and terminology on these independently established fields. History shows that this could lead to the suppression, undermining, and erasure of their origin, tradition, and identity. And this is not just an unconscious bias, *it is a decade-old open agenda*, called larpification: “Call it larp and others will follow” (Raasted 2012).

Larp as a super-umbrella term has caused confusion and mental harm. At least to me, a role-player with multiple backgrounds in the above-mentioned activities. Larppers often behave like embodied personality-playing had been an uninhabited virgin soil discovered first by them. I find it profoundly unjust that they trample over other traditions while attempting to emancipate the meaning of larp in the public discourse. This is why I always find myself on the defensive at larp theory events, if I dare to speak, which is frustrating.

While I do not suggest that changing our insider language usage is the most pressing issue in the process of furthering equity, diversity, and inclusion, I propose that cross-activity umbrella terms should be as neutral and analytic as possible to minimize linguistic and cultural oppression. Simply speaking, we should not use larp or larping to describe things outside of our domain.

It’s good that the larp scene is constantly pushing its own boundaries, but it should not try to do so by conquering or colonizing its neighbors.

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Remember That Time... We Tried to Film a Larp

Sophia **Seymour** & Martine **Svanevik**

Is it possible to capture the magic of larp on film? This was the question filmmaker Sophia Seymour and larp creator Martine Svanevik decided to explore in the spring of 2023.

As we write, we are three months into the edit, and the workings of a finished film is on the horizon. This article is part confessional, part conversation, and part inspiration for those of you who want to join us in trying to document and create something more permanent when we play.

We are the *Remember that Time* players and film crew, and we tried to create something new.

In 2019, Martine designed the larp *Remember that Time*. It's a bittersweet piece about a group of friends that have stayed together through good times and bad. The friends meet up to reminisce after the death of one of the key members of their group, and the experience lends itself to feelings of reminiscing, grief, and catharsis.

Both Martine and Sophia felt that the larp had film potential. It was small and self-contained: and it dealt delicately with a tender yet important issue of grief, which lent itself to exploring the breadth and width of emotional bleed on film.

To film a larp - you have to play it

Remember that Time was written as a blackbox larp and it only takes three hours. It can be played without costumes and has very few props. Originally, Martine wanted to lean into this

blackbox nature of the larp, to shoot it on an empty stage with only a table. But after playing, Sophia and Edward, the cinematographer, had a different idea.

Edward Hamilton Stubber (Cinematographer): After going out to Oslo to meet and play *Remember that Time* with Sophia, I was super inspired by the idea of filming a larp to see how far we could push the idea that something doesn't need to be real to be felt. This is obviously true when we watch films as they are by their very nature dramatisations of fiction, yet we still feel something. But larp seems to offer a more visceral and personal experience of a given story, as instead of watching the story passively, you are part of it. I thought that if we could showcase the journey that participants go through in a larp, in a way that blurred lines with fiction filmmaking, then we might offer a reflection on why it is that we want to experience these emotions, in films and beyond.

Sophia: After playing the game in Oslo and seeking counsel with some very helpful veteran larpers, we knew that comfort and safety were key to the success of the project. We knew we only had one chance to film the larp (larpers are not professional actors and there are no retakes) and so creating a safe environment for the larpers was key. This started well before we turned on the cameras and fed into every decision from where to film, how to film and what the eventual story would be. We had to treat the filming very carefully and had two somewhat contradictory main goals: to capture all the micro interactions and dynamics unfolding in the larp, and to make the larpers feel as comfortable and as little under observation as possible.

Edward (Cinematographer): The challenge for us was that we were going to be trying to create an atmosphere in front of the camera that didn't disturb the authenticity of the larp. In conventional filmmaking, there is often a menagerie of different pieces of equipment and crew just outside of the frame lines, that are put in place to create a look and feeling that elevates the emotion of a given scene. But we knew that we couldn't do this in the larp. We had to give all five participants the freedom to move around and explore the space without restriction, whilst also maintaining a look with lighting and camera movement that felt cinematic. This meant I had to put a lot of thought into where I would be placing cameras and lights, much more than I would have done in conventional film. It was a good challenge and I think it bore something unique.

Moreover, we decided to invite both crew and contributors to stay for the whole weekend in a large country house in the South of England to create a unique atmosphere of trust and collaboration. We played group bonding games and made sitting down for meals together a priority. By the end of the weekend we all felt like we had gone through an experience together,

with each member of the crew and cast feeling like they were a part of a collaboration. This all contributed to the authenticity of the footage and veracity of the emotions on screen.

Martine (larp designer and facilitator): Unlike fiction film, the larp could only be shot in one take. How did you manage to capture all the dynamics while also filming so that the players didn't feel the presence of the crew and kit?

Edward: We knew that we needed different camera angles in the edit to allow us to fit the three-hour game into a short film length. So as not to disturb the atmosphere of the game, we chose a room that had two adjoining rooms either side of it, which meant that I could light the game room and then have operators in total darkness operating cameras on sliders in the two other rooms, hunting for close-ups as the game developed. We also had three stationary cameras inside the room that were unmanned, which we used as broader catchall angles to use as a back-up in the edit.

This constellation kept the operators out of the eyelines of the participants, and I made sure to pump the main room with light so that once their eyes had compensated, the rooms either side appeared entirely dark. Myself and another colleague operated the cameras and it was quite thrilling – it felt like a mixture between live TV and fiction.

To translate the story - you have to chop it up

Sophia (Film director): Larp has sometimes been portrayed in a rather trite or negative light – were you ever nervous that the same might happen with this film?

Martine: Not after I met you. I thought the pitch for what you wanted to accomplish – to explore why we chase emotions when we experience art - was beautiful and interesting, and that you were approaching it in just the right way, so I wasn't worried you would make the larpers look bad. What did worry me, however, was how moviemaking is about telling one story, whereas this larp – and most good larps, in my opinion – are about making every story equally important.

Since it's difficult for audiences to equally care about everyone in a piece of fiction, I wondered how you would choose to frame what went on in the larp. Who would become the villain of the piece? Whose story would be told and whose would be lost? The larp lasts for three hours,



Up: Documentary film stills

Down: Backstage. Photo: Olivia Song



and we were making a twenty-minute documentary. A lot of things would end up on the cutting-room floor, so what story would remain?

Although I never worried that you would approach it as a reality TV producer would, I was aware that the cutting, framing, and focus of the piece would change the story.

Sophia: I was also really concerned about where the editing process would take us. You often don't know what is going to materialise in the cutting room and how to make sense of more than 20 hours of footage. My aim was to explore the impulse in Nordic larping to seek out emotional bleed through play. I knew there would be people who were unfamiliar with larp who might find it odd to play make-believe grief, but I was determined to make something that underlined how normal it is to seek out environments and situations that allow for feeling – be it at the theatre, in the cinema, or playing a larp.

To do this, I knew I did not want to sensationalise the game. It was about following the players' emotional journey as faithfully as possible, rather than projecting my own version of events onto the film.

Martine: Do you think the documentary tells the story of the larp in a true way? What happened in the editing room? How do you feel about editing and changing the story to make it fit into a 20-minute documentary and tell a story that others can understand?

Mariana Moraes (editor): The editing of this documentary was the most difficult I've ever experienced, because in the footage the larp looks like bad acting. In movies, people rarely talk over each other and no-one stumbles looking for their next line. In this piece, the conversations were closer to the way real people speak, but that made them seem less truthful on camera.

Since the goal was to get the viewer to empathise with the emotional journey of the players inside the fiction, while also showing them that this was a game the players played, we had to find the balance between it feeling real (in a fictionalised way) and not real (since it is a game), without throwing off the audience. We struggled in early versions of the film with the 'real' feelings of grief that came off as fake or badly acted. So, in order to make those feelings feel as real as they were for the players in the game, we ended up drawing on the tools of fiction and cutting together the most 'real' moments.

It's common to find the story of a documentary in the editing room, but in this case we had to experiment a lot more to find the film. The film plays with the audience's perception: we had

to experiment a lot with the drops of information we would release or withhold about what was happening. We wanted the audience to think in the beginning that the emotions they were watching were real, and by the end understand that emotions were real but not triggered by real events.

The balance between over-telling and under-telling was our main challenge. At one point we had a conventional cut where we catered to an audience that had no understanding of larp. The focus in this cut became the players themselves – why do they play, how do they play, and what do they get out of it. This cut was an interesting showcase of why someone might larp, but it failed to take the audience on an emotional journey with the players.

Therefore, we ended up going with a version that required more active participation from the audience to fill in the blanks in order to understand the story. This lets us show more of the larp and join in with the players' journey. We hope that the audience will still understand what is going on, even if they know less about what larp is and what exactly is happening.

Our hope is that we have created a comment on the power of storytelling and the way filmmaking and larping trigger emotions – be they real or not. It's interesting because this version also allows the audience to project their own emotions and stories onto the film.

Martine: How did you approach the editing as a director?

Sophia: How to capture the essence of something and not get too bogged down in the minutiae of details and story threads became a huge question. I had to stay true to my vision that I wanted the audience to experience the larp rather than look at it. This was my compass.

We eventually landed on the idea that Martine would guide both players and audience through the game through a voiceover that takes us through the film. We realised that the audience needed to feel close to the players by relating to them as a group of old friends on a broader level, instead of following intricate story lines. We chose to include more abstract conversations – laughter, a little quip or a joke, a glance or a touch, which lent itself to feeling more immersive. We then intercut the larp with interviews with the players telling us how they were feeling during the larp, allowing the audience to follow the players' emotional bleed.

Martine: One of the things I loved most about this process was that I wasn't just running the larp, I was also invited to give feedback on the different cuts of the film and to join in the decision-making of the eventual story we were telling across the different mediums. This made

me a more active part of the filmmaking process than I initially thought I would be, and I believe it is a strength of the final piece to have the larp designer's input on the editing. I tried to always have the vision of the larp in mind when I looked at the footage, and tried to be the advocate of the larp inside the film.

We had to make hard choices about losing interesting stories in order to fit the documentary into 20 minutes. But at the same time, it was a good exercise in focusing on the essentials to build the narrative. For example, all the contributors had recent grief experiences in their real lives that influenced their bleed in the game, and those added a lot of nuance to the story. There wasn't space to include all of them, however, and including one and leaving out the others felt like it shifted the focus of the story too much to what was happening with one of the players outside the larp.

The hardest for me was to come to terms with the fact that there wasn't space for everyone's emotional arc. Even though there were a lot of stories in the larp, the film did have to focus on one of them to keep the audience invested. However, we tried to balance it by showing more of the interviews and conversations happening during play, and I believe that we got the balance right, eventually. Nevertheless, if there's ever a 90-minute version of this documentary, the story will be a lot more nuanced and many-faceted, and that is going to be even more beautiful.

Is it possible to play authentically while being on camera?

We knew the presence of the cameras and crew would be the main obstacle for us. We kept coming back to the same questions – would they make the players play differently? More stiff and awkward? Would they feel the need to perform in a different way than they normally would? Would the crew as an audience change the feel of the piece?

This is what our players said.

Frederik Hatlestrand (player): It was a little bit surreal at first, but when I started playing, I kind of ignored the cameras because I'm used to playing in spaces where you have to ignore stuff. I'm just used to ignoring things that aren't in there, so surprisingly I had some moments where I saw a camera and I was like, "Oh, yeah, it's a camera. Okay, I'm looking another way now."

Anna Emilie Groth (player): To be honest, I actually forgot pretty quickly (about the filming) because you did such a great job with hiding the cameras in the dark. I think there were only a few moments where I thought about it being a film set. It felt just like a black box larp. However, the experience that I had in the larp will not be what's on the film, because it will never show the whole thing. But I'm really curious to see what the camera caught. I want to see what you can see from the outside. I'm not an actor, so I'm not used to seeing myself on film.

Simon Brind (player): I was super nervous about it for a number of reasons. The biggest reason was as I've said this before, that we're not actors, we're not used to performing. We're certainly not used to cameras but incredibly I didn't see them. It was very strange because when we went onto the set, there was a boom at head height which meant I had to be careful where I stood up, and there were cameras hidden by the windows and at the doors. But once the larp started they pretty much ceased to exist. I don't think the filming affected what I was doing in the end, which makes me excited to see the end result.

Erik Winther Paisley (player): Maybe larp is not impossible to film. I don't know yet. I have not seen it yet. The impossibility for me, I think, is whether our private states will actually come through enough, whether those little glances and moments that mean something for us will show. The example I give you is karaoke: you could document karaoke, but I think the worst possible way you could do that would be just to release an album of people's karaoke singing.

Can we capture the magic?

Martine: Do you think we captured the magic of larp on camera?

Sophia: I hope so! We wanted the film to connect with both larpers and audiences who knew nothing about larp, and so have trod a fine line between throwing the audience into the deep end of the game and providing clues as to what this is all about. My secret is not in the filming of it – although Edward did a fantastic technical job in hiding the crew from the larp space – but the emphasis I placed on creating the right environment. I wanted to film in the perfect location where everyone could stay together to feel comfortable and safe.

Larp can be such a personal and vulnerable process that one of my priorities was to dedicate a large proportion of our budget on lodging and catering, to create a homely environment

where crew and contributors could be together, sit around chatting, and get to know each other before filming. I firmly believe that these behind-the-scenes comforts meant that when we did begin filming there was a lot of trust between everyone involved. This in turn meant less nerves, less performance anxiety, and much more fun. I had the sense that we were all collaborating for a collective vision of the film, which I hope has translated on screen.

Sophia (film director): By the end, did you feel that we had captured the larp? What were your hopes and concerns?

Martine: I think the way you filmed the larp gave us a very good position to start from, and that it would be possible to tell many stories from the footage – all of them true even if none of them were real. We had to create an emotional story that the audience connected to and related to, while explaining what larp is to those that have never heard of it.

I got to watch every second of the larp on camera as it was played, and I know how beautiful the whole piece was, and there were of course stories that got lost in the translation from larp to film. However, the film shows the artform in a cinematic way, despite having to focus on only one or two character threads.

There are many possible stories you could have made from the footage, but I think you made the right editing choices in the end to create a cohesive whole. I am very happy that we stayed true to the vision of wanting to let the audience experience the larp and the emotional journey, rather than explain via the more traditional cut simply what larp is. Here, I think we might have captured something that speaks to how we all seek out and need to feel – perhaps even more than we tend to allow ourselves in everyday life.

Sophia: Where do you see this heading in the future?

Martine: I am super keen to try more transmedia stuff now, to try VR in game, to try filming parts of an experience and show it to players in different areas to see how they react, to have in-game confession booths active during play, etc. I think there are possibilities here to create something that transcends art forms. Nadja, one of our players, put it so well.

Nadja Lipsyc (player): I think it's impossible to film what it is to larp. Because larpers are not actors. It might look just like bad acting and bad dialogue and cringe interactions on screen while the interaction in the larp feels entirely different. However, I think having larp as a layer in an artistic project is very interesting and very promising.

Remember That Time... We Tried to Film a Larp

Martine: Would you do it again?

Sophia (Film director): Definitely! We learnt so much, the next time will be even better!
Who's up for it?

The documentary *Remember that Time* was released in February 2024.

Author Bios

Sophia Seymour is a British journalist and award-winning documentary filmmaker living between Naples, Italy and London. She co-directed *Teranga - Life in the Waiting Room*, a documentary for the Guardian and BBC Africa Eye in 2020 and has since completed her masters at The National Film and Television school in the UK and produced documentaries for the Guardian, Netflix, BBC and Vice.

Martine Svanevik is a concept and content developer, game designer and writer. A founding member of Avalon larp studio, she is currently working for one of the largest publishing houses in Norway. She is published in both English and Norwegian.

***The Cliff* – A Case Study of Interdisciplinary Larp Methods for Artistic Research Practice**

Katri Lassila

Introduction

In this article I outline the methodology behind the creation of the film *Jyrkänne – The Cliff* (2022), which is the artistic part of my doctoral thesis, *Näkymä ajan ulkopuolella. Maiseman apokronia ja valokuvallinen affordanssi elokuvassa* (2023, Eng. Beyond the Temporal Horizon. Apochrony and Photographic Affordance of the Landscape Image in Film), from Aalto University. The production of *The Cliff* played a pivotal role in shaping the methodology of my artistic research. Specifically, it explores the distinctive temporal aspect of landscape imagery within the realms of photography and film. Artistic research, by its nature, is an open-ended process that often necessitates the development of innovative methodologies, unique to the artist's work and research. To bring *The Cliff* to life, I harnessed immersive techniques borrowed from larp, integrating them into my artistic photography process.

Introduction to the work

The Cliff is a nine-and-a-half-minute short film, consisting mainly of black-and-white photographs. Categorized as an essay film, it features a narrative composed of fictional notes and letters. The film's narrator is also its creator, or rather, the creator's alter ego – a common feature of essay films (e.g., Rascaroli 2017, 183) which often lean on the filmmaker's subjective experiences. The textual inspiration for *The Cliff* draws from the films *Trans-Siberia – Notes*



Photo: Katri Lassila

from the Camps (Cederström 1999) and *La Jetée* (Marker 1962/64¹). Additional sources for the text include films *Le Sang des bêtes* (Franju 1949, Eng. The Blood of Beasts), *Night and Fog* (Resnais, text by Cayrol and Marker 1956), *Lettre de Sibérie* (Marker 1957, Eng. Letter From Siberia), *Hiroshima, mon amour* (Resnais, text by Duras 1959, Eng. Hiroshima, My Love), *India Song* (Duras 1975), and *Two Uncles* (Cederström 1991).

The inspiration for *The Cliff* stemmed from the political situation of 2015, labeled as the "Refugee Crisis" in Europe. This crisis saw the number of asylum applications in the EU more than double compared to the previous year (Pew Research Center 2016). In response, Finland tightened its asylum policies (Finnish Government 2015, 1; Bodström 2020). *The Cliff* was born out of the need to address a situation where human suffering was dehumanized into a "refugee crisis," turning those in need of help into a faceless mass, an "unmanaged flow" ("hallitsematon virta" in Finnish) in the government's program (Finnish Government 2015, 1). In Europe, especially in Northern Europe, there is a prevalent expectation that others – labeled as the outsiders – would seek help from us. I wanted to imagine, even on a superficial level, what it would feel like to be in a situation where I had to flee for my life. Using methods often used also in larps I contemplated being a refugee in a foreign land, where I didn't understand the language, and a situation where I had lost contact with my loved ones. I read first-hand experiences from refugees and began creating a character of myself – writing simple notes about my background and about the character's feelings and thoughts.

¹ 1962 is the release date usually given to *La Jetée*, but according to film researcher Chris Darke (2016, 25), the accurate year would actually be 1964. Marker signed the contract to make the film in 1962 but the work was not finished until two years later.

The film narrates the journey of a woman compelled to leave her homeland due to an unspecified crisis, leaving her beloved behind. She ends up as a refugee in a foreign land that they have previously visited together. Traveling by train with a group of fellow refugees, she writes letters to her partner, yet never receives a response. Upon reaching a bustling city, she breaks away from the group and stumbles upon an ancient pilgrimage route. Overwhelmed by the smoke from sacred fires, she loses consciousness and experiences a vision of her spouse. Moved by this apparition, she resolves to embark on a journey to a cliff etched in her memory from a prior visit to this same country with her partner. On the way to the cliff she experiences the landscape becoming alive around her. Finally reaching the destination she sees herself and her spouse kissing on the cliff. The last image shows a partially exposed film frame of just the cliff, with the couple disappeared.

In my dissertation, I propose (Lassila 2023, 162–163) an interpretation of the ending in which the woman realizes that she is looking at her own memory. She understands that interfering with the memory would shatter it, so she decides to stay on the cliff, becoming a part of the landscape, and preserving the memory to maintain a connection with her beloved, whom she will never meet in the real world again. In line with Deleuze's (2005 [1985], 66–94) philosophy of the time crystal, time fractures at the cliff, branching in different directions: into the past and the future, cyclically complementing each other.

The inspiration for *The Cliff*

A significant source of inspiration for *The Cliff* was Chris Marker's iconic short film, *La Jetée* (1962/64). *La Jetée* unfolds in a post-Third World War dystopian future. The victorious faction conducts experiments on prisoners of war from the defeated side, seeking to harness a new source of energy from the future for the world's reconstruction. With the aid of a serum, time travel becomes possible, and the film's protagonist is first sent back in time, guided by his vivid memory. The memory from the man's childhood features a young woman at Orly Airport in Paris, with a terrified expression. Using this memory as a temporal anchor, he embarks on multiple journeys into the past to reunite with her, ultimately also succeeding in traveling to the future and accomplishing his mission. Instead of remaining in the future, he yearns to return to the past to be with the woman. As he arrives at Orly Airport to meet her, armed enemies who followed him shoot him before he can reach her. It is revealed that the powerful memory of the woman's horrified expression represents the man's own death, etched into his childhood recollections.

La Jetée is composed of photographs, with only one brief sequence featuring moving images. Most of the film's images were captured in a single afternoon, according to Chris Marker (Darke 2016, 25–26; Film Comment 2003) himself:

”It was made like a piece of automatic writing. I was filming *Le Joli mai*, completely immersed in the reality of Paris 1962, [...] and on the crew's day off, I photographed a story I didn't completely understand. It was in the editing that the pieces of the puzzle came together, and it wasn't me who designed the puzzle. I'd have a hard time taking credit for it. It just happened, that's all.”

Upon closer examination of *La Jetée's* production process for my dissertation, I found reproductions (Bellour 2018, 218) of its contact sheets². These sheets not only revealed to me the type of camera used³ but also suggested the method employed to capture the images. Marker was already an experienced photographer during the production of *La Jetée*, specializing in documentary-style photography. Upon examining the contact sheets, it became evident that Marker's shooting technique for *La Jetée* closely resembled that of a documentary photo essay or a picture story (Lassila 2023, 105). In a photo essay, the photographer commits to the theme by photographing often several images of the subjects, thus treating the issue from various angles (Monteiro 2016, 495). In *La Jetée's* photographs, the characters' movements and expressions flow seamlessly from one frame to the next. For instance, the film frames used in the scene where a woman witnesses the man's death depict the woman in several photographs in nearly identical positions. This led me to conclude that these shots were captured rapidly, one after another, without lifting the camera from the eye between frames. Rather than instructing the woman in individual photographs, Marker seemed to have encouraged her to immerse herself in a specific emotion, which he then captured through multiple consecutive shots.

This shooting technique, combined with Chris Marker's account of the filming process of *La Jetée*, suggests an approach more akin to an alternative art form than traditional cinema. I interpret the creation of *La Jetée* as a collective immersion into the characters and a form of larping documented through photographs, rather than traditional filmmaking.

² A contact sheet is a darkroom print where all the film negatives from one film have been printed side by side on a single photographic paper. Contact sheets are often used by darkroom photographers to choose the negative to be enlarged.

³ The camera was a Pentax 35mm still photography camera, although the exact model remains a mystery (Lassila 2023, 101).

The production process of *The Cliff*

Artistic research has been actively developed in Finland since the 1980s, with that specific term gaining prominence instead of "practice-led" or "practice-based research" (Arlander 2013, 7–8). Artistic research typically revolves around the artist's own experiences, art, and insights generated throughout the artistic process. The first artist-written doctoral thesis in Finland was accepted at the Sibelius Academy in 1990 (Arlander 2013, 9), coinciding temporally with the rapid growth of role-playing and larping culture in Finland. Despite being a relatively recent addition to institutionalized academia, artists have been conducting research long before it was part of degree programs. Similarly, the roots of larps extend further back than the 1990s, and may be traced to performances, 1960s happenings, and artist-driven immersive events, even though these cannot be fully compared to larps (Stenros 2010, 304).

The production process of *The Cliff* employed larp techniques to immerse the participants, myself and my spouse, into the narrative. Larps often emphasize emotional engagement with characters and their feelings. Jaakko Stenros (2010, 306) notes that, "While books tell and theatre shows – the experience is conveyed through sympathy and empathy – larps make you enact and experience first hand." In my own experience, weighty and emotionally charged themes especially benefit from collective exploration within larps, fostering understanding



and emotional acceptance within the game and beyond. Themes such as fear, uncertainty, war and societal upheaval, inequality, and disasters have inspired for instance the larps *Ground Zero* (Finland, 1998), *Europa* (Norway, 2001), *1942 – Noen å Stole Pää?* (Norway, 2000), *Halat hisar* (Finland, 2013) and *Seaside Prison* (Finland, 2022) to address topics like refugee experiences, impending nuclear war, the Palestinian conflict, and humanitarian crises.

The production process of *The Cliff* was unconventional for a film production. It was designed to immerse the participants into the experience of a refugee, fusing larp elements with filmmaking and photography.

Here are some key aspects of the production process:

- 1. Larp-inspired immersion:** A fundamental element of crafting the film involved the use of larp techniques to immerse both myself and my spouse in the narrative. This immersive approach aimed to evoke authentic emotions, deliberately blurring the lines between fiction and reality.

Photo: Katri Lassila



- 2. Improvisation:** I left the narrative storyline open and undefined in advance, allowing room for improvisation. Filming locations were not meticulously planned, enabling the surroundings and landscapes to naturally shape the final outcome, rather than the other way around. I looked for natural and constructed surroundings which would remain ambivalent. I wanted the places to remain somewhat detached from time and space, so that the viewer couldn't deduce right away the filming year or specific location. I wanted the film to look like it could have been photographed at almost any time, either in the past or in the future. The film was shot in remote locations across China, Tibet, and Finland, accentuating the characters' isolation and the uncertainty they faced.
- 3. Temporal experimentation:** The utilization of black-and-white analog film introduced a temporal dimension to the project. I opted for a 35mm Leica M3 to capture rapid sequences of images, in contrast to my usual camera, a Rolleiflex, which could only fit 12 negatives on a single film roll. The only moving image sequence in the film was recorded with a digital camera and deliberately slowed down to blur the distinction between still and moving images.
- 4. Narrative structure:** The Cliff incorporated narrative structures influenced by *La Jetée* to delve into the subjective experience of time. The film's structure, particularly in the final scene, mirrored the disorienting nature of the characters' journey and blending of the reality with memories.

Methods of immersion in *The Cliff*

In the production process of *The Cliff*, I embraced the shooting method of *La Jetée*, capturing a significant portion of the film through the same continuous shooting technique. The pivotal scene of the film features the main character's spouse walking across a frozen lake, pulling a heavily laden sled behind him. It's a scene that the main character envisions on the pilgrimage route. I directed this scene by asking my spouse to immerse himself in the character's experience, portraying a war-weary individual leaving the battlefield in search of his beloved. The journey is long and fraught with peril. My spouse, also an experienced role-player, wearing my grandfather's military coat from the Winter War era⁴, effortlessly channeled the desired atmosphere. We did not rehearse the scene in advance; instead, we sat silently in a dimly-lit

⁴ The Winter War between Finland and the Soviet Union took place as part of World War II between November 30, 1939 and March 13, 1940.

old smoke sauna, allowing ourselves to absorb the atmosphere and prepare mentally before venturing onto the ice.

The Cliff was primarily an emergent creation, devoid of a polished script or detailed shooting plan. In the film I reversed the gender roles compared to *La Jetée*, following the Adventure Romantic ethos (Lassila 2008, 110–116; see also Kalli & Lassila 2010) developed by myself and Laura Kalli in the early 2000s. The film's main character is a woman – an agentive figure who decides to break away from her group of refugees and embark on a journey to the cliff of her memories. I immersed myself in the story and continued to develop it throughout the filming in China and Tibet in 2016. My immersion was primarily based on observing the landscape and recalling genuine memories while studying it. I summoned shared memories with my spouse, reimagining our moments together and approaching the landscape with fresh eyes, as if I were a refugee rather than a tourist. My inability to understand the language spoken around me added to my sense of alienation. The long train journey from Xining to Lhasa facilitated the deepest immersion into my character. During the multi-day train ride, especially on the brink of sleep, I sometimes lost track of time, uncertain about the time of day, the day of the week, or even the year. It was as if I were slipping out of time and place. Altitude sickness, causing nausea and dizziness as the railway reached altitudes of over 5000 meters, may have contributed to this disorienting experience.

The development of the final scene of *The Cliff* was shaped by the landscape where it was set. The concluding scene unfolds by Nam-Tso (གནམ་མཚོ་ – The Heavenly Lake) in Tibet, situated at an altitude of nearly 5000 meters. We spent the night in a small shack by the lake, but during the night, I began to feel unwell. I didn't know yet that I was pregnant, and maybe because of that I experienced severe altitude sickness, to the point where I could not stand upright on the morning of the shoot. Eventually, I was unable to walk to the chosen filming location. The final shots of the film were shot by my son Aarni on a low hillock, before our concerned guide insisted we leave. Immersing myself in pain, loss, and conflicting emotions during the final scene of *The Cliff* was simultaneously straightforward and challenging. Physical discomfort intermittently severed my immersion in the narrative, but at the same time channeled these intense emotions as part of my immersion. Ultimately, the experience and its unforeseen circumstances emerged as a more potent story in real life than in the one I had written for the film. Our daughter Meri entered our lives like a miracle during this journey. In the end, this expedition transcended its role as a mere component of my doctoral thesis – it became a voyage during which we brought our daughter home from the Heavenly Lake of Tibet.

In conclusion, *The Cliff* is an artwork that explores the convergence of three art forms at their intersections. It is a film composed of photographs with one short sequence of moving image, and its fictional-documentary narrative was conceived using larp immersion techniques. An essential facet of the narrative's development was the natural environment and landscape where it was shot. The process of creating *The Cliff* ignited new artistic inspirations, not solely within the realms of photography and film, but also in the domains aligning landscape and larp. The environment in larps, which is often scrutinized primarily for its temporal incongruities with the fictional setting, can also be a powerful source of immersion and engagement.

In my doctoral dissertation, I introduced the term "apokronia" (Eng. apochrony) derived from the Greek words από (apó) and Χρόνος (Khronos) (Lassila 2023, 73–74). Apochrony signifies the positioning of something outside of time. In my dissertation I explored apochrony in the context of landscape imagery in film. According to my interpretation, an apochronic landscape image in a film can depict any possible time or even all times simultaneously. Since an apochronic landscape image typically lacks discernible signs of a specific moment in time, it can be utilized to represent any time. The application of similar apochronic landscape

Photo: Katri Lassila



utilization is also achievable in larp. If a landscape lacks clear signs of a specific moment in time, the landscape seamlessly functions as the event environment in connection with any possible time: the present, the past, or the future. However, the role of apochronic landscape in larp, as in film, goes beyond being just an event setting. It may be argued that internal immersion may be catalyzed by the external world so that the surroundings have a strong effect on the player's overall ambience during the larping experience. This however may be experienced even further so. During the filming of *The Cliff* I felt the ambience of the surrounding world and the landscape to become one with my inner experience. This, in turn, changed the way I experienced my surroundings.

The apochronic landscape opens the path to interactive immersion in a setting where the landscape is akin to one of the characters in the larp. Engaging with the landscape in larp allows interaction not only with other players' characters but also with the landscape itself, offering a unique reflective surface for immersion. The "Rückenfigur" or "back-figure," an image often used in films, stemming from the art of Caspar David Friedrich, provides one fruitful model for interaction with the landscape. When positioning myself to view a landscape unfolding before me from a high vantage point, I can direct my emotions towards the landscape and let them reflect back to me, thus fuelling, for instance, the feelings of longing, sorrow, anger, or love. In the spirit of Deleuzian time crystals, immersion may flow in multiple directions simultaneously, with the surrounding landscape serving as both a source of inspiration for immersion and a reflective canvas for its expression. In this understanding, the post-humanistic agency of the landscape extends the repertoire of larp techniques, promising novel possibilities for future immersive experiences.

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Author Bio

Katri Lassila is a photographic and film artist, who explores the phenomenology of landscape through analogue photography and film. Lassila has exhibited her works in Finland and abroad since 1999 and completed her artistic doctoral thesis at Aalto University, Finland in 2023. Lassila has written and directed larps since 1998. In the early 2000s, she collaborated with Laura Kalli in developing the Adventure Romantic larp genre, which included a feminist approach and creative concepts later known as “rule of the greater drama” and “play to lift/lose”. In recognition of their contributions to Finnish role-playing culture, Lassila and Kalli were awarded The Golden Dragon by the Ropecon Association in 2020.

SIGNA's Performance Installations: Walking the Liminal Border Between Larp and Theatre

Rasmus Lyngkjær

In the narrow hall of an old county hospital building, two rows of people stand facing each other. The Open Heart organisation has sent out an invitation to the general public to meet and stay with the people in their care. To foster empathy, they say. To become compassionate. The people in the hospital's care stand in one line; The Sufferers, they are called. People on the fringes of society. Drug addicts, homeless people, criminals. Every single sufferer is a tragic tale of how life can beat you down. In the other line, the Compassionates stand, looking around with mixed emotions; curiosity, pity, regret. The Sufferers will each choose Compassionates to live their lives. Wear their clothes, sleep in their bunk, and become them for the evening and night to come.

This is the opening scene of the performance installation *Det Åbne Hjerte* (Eng. The Open Heart), created by the artist collective SIGNA in Aarhus, Denmark 2019. The sufferers are paid actors and the compassionates are their audience. You might, like me, see the similarities this performance piece bears to larp. The experience requires active participation from everyone, which eliminates the border between actor and audience that is usually found in theatre. If I replace the term “actor” with “non-player character” and “audience” with “players”, it would look like a larp. Both groups exist fully within the fiction, but while the audience are there to experience it, the actors are there to facilitate and steer the experience.

In this article, I aim to look into the overlap between larp and theatre, with SIGNA's performance installations, that bear resemblance to both practices, serving to guide my exploration of this liminal space. In addition I aim to tease out approaches SIGNA use, that might be gainful for our development of larp. To gain insight into the methods and intentions

of how SIGNA creates what they term *performance installations*, which I will introduce in the upcoming chapter, I asked them for an interview, which they generously granted.

The performance installation

When I experienced *Det Åbne Hjerte* in 2019, I was chosen by a young, too-skinny man with bleached hair and pale skin, named Blondie. While I was being dressed in his clothes, he told me about himself, and his life. He was open, brutally honest and believable. I quickly forgot that Blondie was a fictional character.

“Our point of departure is to create universes that are a sort of reality simulation. Not necessarily copies of reality, but simulations of hermetically sealed universes [...] These universes are then populated by characters who improvise with the audience in processes that, depending on the given work, are more or less planned. However, what they say is up to the individual participant in accordance with the framework.”

This is how Signa Köstler describes the artform of performance installations, a concept of her own devising. With her background as an art historian, she had previously worked with the concepts of performance and installation, and the combination of these seemed to encapsulate what she did.

The power of performance installations, according to the Köstlers, lies in the heightened engagement they elicit. This emerges from three factors: participants navigate labyrinthine spaces, experience sensorial stimuli, and build relationships with characters. In *Det Åbne Hjerte*, the old county hospital had doors open into washing rooms, offices, cantinas, bedrooms and so on, and it was full of smells, sounds and actions. These were tied together through the relationships. As my sufferer, Blondie, chugged a whole beer, puked all over the floor, mopped it up with his shirt and led us through the tunnels of the hospital to the washing rooms, all senses were stimulated. The unique quality of these interactions allows for genuine emotional connections, akin to the impact of cinema or theatre but with the added dimension of direct engagement from the audience. These real emotions and feelings, created by deep immersion and interaction with a fictional universe, begin to sound exactly like what we argue for, when we talk about the value of larp. In fact, when Simo Järvelä (2019) describes the magic circle and alibi in the article *How Real Is Larp?*, he writes:

“Designing a larp is about constructing an artificial situation that is completely real. The players treat it as fictional – which it is – but it is also something fully embodied by the players.” (Järvelä 2019)

That these two descriptions line up so well, gives us a look into the landscape where theatre and larp can meet. It is interesting to look at how the audience's relationship to the characters are formed. Is it passive, as with traditional film and theatre, where an audience relates to the situation happening on stage, or is it active, as with larp and performance installations, where the audience builds relationships based on the actions they personally take in the fake reality?

There isn't a clear cut between these two categories. In the more experimental forms of theatre, the audience often has an active role that comes near to larp or performance installations. For example, in Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* (London 2003), the audience is allowed to move about freely in a six-storey building transformed into a set for Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, though they are separated from that reality by plastic masks. Although the audience members have little actual power to influence the experience, they are not just passively sitting and observing. This illustrates how temporal media – that is media which we experience live – can range from traditional theatre to sandbox larps.

Manipulation of the audience

After arriving in the afternoon and moving among The Sufferers, learning about their pain, it is time for bed. We Compassionates share bunk beds with our Sufferers. It quickly becomes clear that this will be no easy night. Many of the Sufferers have difficulties, mental or otherwise, that trigger at night. The worst comes in the middle of the night, as one of the Sufferers starts screaming. It startles me awake and as staff rush past, my curiosity battles with tiredness. As the screaming continues, curiosity wins and I drag myself out of bed to find the source.

SIGNA employs diverse strategies to guide the audience through specific scenes and emotions. The masterplan is a carefully orchestrated framework that serves as a roadmap for performers to interact with participants. SIGNA has different approaches to the masterplan depending on the performance installation. Sometimes the masterplan includes instructions for sending the audience between performers in predetermined patterns, other times it is almost like an itinerary that the performers follow, while the audience are free to move around in the spaces where the performance happens, as was the case with *Det Åbne Hjerte*. Interestingly, Signa

Köstler notes that more recent plays have proven that the most optimal format is for the audience to be attached to specific performers:

“... Audience members are attached to one or two characters, whom they will always gravitate towards. When this attachment has been created, either of loyalty, security or the like, they [the audience member] will always come back to it. Then they can be set free a little, and they can be with others, but you can always pull them back in again pretty quickly. Then you can move about with an invisible masterplan, while they are satellites you can pull along with you.”

The Köstlers say that the actors need to be in a “hyper-aware” mindset when they follow these master plans. Their focus is split between ensuring the picture of the scene stays in place, that the acoustics of the installation are balanced, and that the minds of the audience are engaged with the fiction. In other words, the actors need to keep in mind how the audience sees a scene and hears a scene, and to be aware of how engaged they currently are. Reading the body language of the audience becomes a crucial skill to balancing the experience, as this is a core tool in understanding what the audience currently experiences emotionally. As Signa puts it, the constant mindset is “What can I contribute with? What needs do the audience members I am responsible for have, right now?”

This relates interestingly to another scale of variances between larp and traditional theatre. The performers don't need to improvise reactions to audience responses unless the audience actually has a certain degree of freedom to respond to the stimuli. In traditional theatre, the audience is expected to sit still, and clapping or crying out are the strongest responses the audience is expected to have to the events on the stage. The smaller, more nuanced reactions are usually visible only to other audience members. While they may create liveness in the room, they do not directly affect the action on stage.

Experimental theatre and performance installations have a higher degree of audience freedom, which introduces an element of uncertainty into the artwork. Most larps fall into the opposite end of the scale compared to traditional theatre. In larp, audience interaction is expected and needed for the artwork to progress at all. *Det Åbne Hjerte* performance installation is slightly more towards the larp extreme on the empathic response scale, as the audience participates actively in the action. However, it is slightly more towards the traditional theatre extreme on the audience influence scale, as the plot is made for the audience to explore it, rather than to influence it. An audience member might try to influence a cast member's actions, but usually the cast member will still be at the next spot on their master plan itinerary.

Character handling

One of the Sufferers sits in a hallway, with a blanket with random low-quality goods spread out before her. Plastic toy dinosaurs, old DVDs and lighters. I strike up a conversation with her. She wishes to sell the goods, not to profit from it herself, but because she is at the bottom of a pecking order that The Open Heart has allowed to persist amongst the Sufferers. The meagre profits she gets from selling her wares go to another Sufferer. Seeing this suffering, upheld by the system of The Open Heart, I get angry. I storm into the manager's office to tell him off.

In SIGNA's universes, there is a rule we rarely see in larp: no-one ever breaks character. I first assumed there were exceptions, but there aren't any. The rule can be upheld, because the performers have a lot of practice before stepping into character, and because safety is mapped out in advance. In fact, I asked the Köstlers if they could give one tip to the roleplaying community, based on their experiences. Their answer was to try this out. There are two parts to safely upholding this rule. Allow the characters to be fallible and take responsibility for any action you take: and have an order of command in the fiction, that allows for safe response to real-life emergencies. First of all, the character is seen as a whole, and should be made to withstand any emotion, action, and the like. The situation they wish to avoid, as Signa puts it, is to "feel that the character only exists when you have everything under control". The character should be allowed to have any response you could have, from being tired or overwhelmed, to having a headache or an upset stomach. If the character can take responsibility for those situations – that is, if it can still be the character who feels them and acts upon them – it allows for a flexibility that can ensure that the fiction is a whole, simulated world. Or, as Signa puts it:

"And maybe it's also about, when working with these forms, being prepared to let go of control and let go of perfectionism."

Secondly, SIGNA has procedures that allow staying in fiction when an emergency strikes, for example if someone breaks a leg or the building catches fire. They have carefully planned these in advance. In any given universe, accidents like broken bones or fires can occur. Creating a chain of command that is ready to handle these kinds of problems, just as they would in real life, makes it a natural part of the story being told. If there are hospitals in the storyworld, an injured participant's character will be taken there within the fictional world of the performance installation. If the installation is set in the front lines of a war, the performers would speak about the hospital as a lazaret. As a part of the administrative preparation, SIGNA makes sure to keep all the health insurance certificates alphabetized in a box, along with money enough for taxis and lists of relevant phone numbers, so that the character who is responsible in the

fiction can access and efficiently handle the out-of-character parts required without breaking the fiction. This also extends to audience emergencies.

“When it happens to the audience, we have experienced that it is worse to go out of character for them. When they, for example, have an emotional breakdown or the like, it is much better to take care of them in-character. We have a room, where you can sit down with them and make them a cup of tea.”

When someone gets aggressive, they meet them with an equal measure of calm, to de-escalate the feelings. Arthur Köstler especially promoted the concept of being prepared to nip any breakdowns in the bud – reading up on communication theories and learning about body language to see potential breakdowns coming.

When I heard this, it felt like a very high bar to aim for, but SIGNA noted that they do have a significant advantage to most larps. They have five weeks to practice up to the performance installation itself. When talking about it, I explained that we often do workshops before a demanding larp. Using the *Sigrísdóttir* 2018 run in Denmark as an example, I explained the day-before workshoping for internalizing the gender-norms we were to play, as well as for introducing the storyworld and setting common boundaries for the larp. The Köstlers noted that their practice corresponds to five weeks of constant workshops, attending to all the potential need-to-knows of the performers and forming the installation together. The interview left me inspired to see how I could work all that I had learned into my larp praxis. With time, we will hopefully be able to find more points of connection between artforms, to explore how the borderlands and liminal spaces are formed and how we can use them to create unique, creative experiences.

As I barge into the manager's office, he meets me with a calm expression and tone of voice. I yell about how fucked up the system is, how unfair it is to allow the discrepancy in power to persist among the Sufferers and how The Open Heart should take responsibility for the people they are claiming to help. In a slow, measured cadence, the manager answers all my worries with corporate speak. It only makes me more angry. But his tone of voice, and the cup of tea he offers me, gets the edge off and at some point I sink into the futility of trying to convince these people that they are doing anything wrong.

Later, I talk to the Sufferer who chose me and express interest in helping. He gives me his phone number. He texts me once, after the performance installation is over, but nothing comes out of it. Weeks after the final performance, I hear from another audience member, that a blonde sufferer had dropped out of the program and died from a drug overdose. I text to hear if Blondie is okay, but in the end he never responds.

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Actual Plays of Live-Action Online Games (LAOGs)

Gerrit **Reininghaus** & Adrian **Hermann**

Summary

This article introduces the reasoning for making recordings of larps played online. We present our core concepts and provide a categorisation of motivations, followed by an overview of the historical development of LAOG Actual Plays (APs). We also discuss some theoretical concepts and design goals around AP-informed play, and point to some further avenues of exploration.

What are Live Action Online Games (LAOGs) and LAOG Actual Plays (APs)?

Live-Action Online Game – LAOG

One of the truisms of larp design is that “everything is a designable surface” (Koljonen 2019, 27). It is not surprising, therefore, that different communities have used the specific characteristics of the online medium to design games that can be considered a larp. The term LAOG stands next to similarly used terms like online larp, digital larp, VORP (virtual online role-playing) and others. We suggest that something should be considered a LAOG if it corresponds to the components of the abbreviation: it is to be played as live-action, with a sense of a full-body experience; it is designed specifically for an online context; and it is a game (however one wants to define that term). LAOG as a term was first established in *A Manifesto for Laogs* in 2018 by one of the authors of this essay (see Reininghaus 2019).

Actual Play – AP

An Actual Play is a representation of game play – either live or recorded – that is prepared and made available for an audience. Actual Plays of digital and analog games have become a significant aspect of today’s popular culture. Platforms like Twitch and YouTube provide space for creators to host their own APs, some of them live, others pre-recorded. Actual Plays can present board games, video games, tabletop role-playing games (TTRPG) – or larps.

The history of and some current community perspectives on LAOG APs

The history of AP recordings is connected to the development of technologies that make live-action online games and their recording possible. For some time, Skype was the most popular software that offered possibilities for online play, but this required paid accounts and had some technical drawbacks, like limited screen-sharing possibilities. TeamSpeak, as an audio-only platform popular for massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), offered possibilities to play online but to our knowledge was only used for TTRPG online sessions.

The introduction of Google Hangouts provided a video chat platform which can be considered a game changer. Google Hangouts was a service offered by Google from 2013 to 2022 without any financial cost to users. It brought playing TTRPGs online to a wider audience, and allowed players from all over the world to connect and play together. Recording and hence making APs was easy, as the direct connection to the YouTube platform allowed users to stream or record and later publish their games with a few clicks after doing an initial setup. For example, Google Hangouts enabled the growth of *The Gauntlet* (now known as *Open Hearth Gaming*), an indie TTRPG online community, where for many years it was used as the main medium of play. The resulting large library of APs is still available on YouTube.

Already before the rise of Google Hangouts, in 2012, Orion Canning and Robert Bruce designed and played *The House* online. It does not fall within our narrower definition of LAOGs as it is not played synchronously, but players are invited to upload videos recorded in-character as inhabitants of a Big Brother-like reality TV show to a YouTube channel offered by the creators. Other players then react to these videos, again by recording their reactions and uploading them. The game is entirely based on the “confession video” format popularized by reality TV shows, in which participants of the show are talking to the camera by themselves, without the other participants present, about their motivations and strategies. As an AP, it is

difficult for the audience to follow the exact stream of events, which possibly replicates the feeling of the source material quite closely.

ViewScream by Rafael Chandler came out in 2013 and became the cornerstone for LAOG APs for the next six years. The game referred to itself as “Varp”, or “video-augmented role-playing”. In *ViewScream* players play people on a spaceship doomed to destruction. The mechanics guarantee that not all characters can get out alive. The video call setting is an in-game element: not only the players but also the characters are all in a video call together, calling in from different areas of the spaceship. The run time is approximately one hour. The game provided virtual backgrounds, several scenarios as variations of the game’s story, and included a captain role with some typical game master functions in the sense that this player was specifically asked to help create a dramatic story. All these ingredients and the novelty of the format helped to create a small *ViewScream* community and the creation of at least 30 APs.

Interestingly, *ViewScream* did not emerge out of a larp community but was developed in the context of a TTRPG community, mostly active and connected on the platform Google Plus, which at the time was important for indie TTRPG creators.

In 2017, Gerrit Reininghaus started creating APs for LAOGs on his YouTube channel “betafunktion”, with Jason Morningstar’s *Winterhorn* (2017) as the first AP. Soon after, in 2018, Reininghaus published *A Manifesto for Laogs* and established the genre. Today, betafunktion contains the largest collection of LAOG APs, presenting more than 20 games by different creators (see Reininghaus 2020). The YouTube channel has become a reference point for LAOG creators, with the recordings with the largest view count making it to more than 1.6K views (of *So Mom I Made This Sex Tape*, 2016) at the time of writing.

The pandemic brought increased attention to online larp. Many creators have since then entered the design field and shared design ideas (see e.g. D. & Schiffer 2020; Marsh & Dixon 2021). However, few APs have been created during the pandemic. The LAOG *The Space Between Us* (2020) became an underground hit and its APs and fan productions went viral in interested circles. Why LAOG APs did not become even more popular during this time of elevated attention for online play is a question that cannot be fully answered here. One suggestion the authors can offer is that larpers have a) a more rigid understanding of the social contract in larp, specifically that a larp shall not have an audience, b) that familiarity with the technology required to make APs was not immediately available, and c) that one platform which became a home for many designs during the pandemic was Discord, which – unlike

Google Hangouts – does not allow for simple recordings. However, Zoom, which also became popular during the pandemic, does (see Otting 2022).

Over time, the larp scene has recognised the existence of LAOG APs. For example, the German association of larpers (Deutscher Liverollenspiel-Verband, DLRV) awarded the FRED Award in 2020 for advocating larp to a larger audience to the aforementioned YouTube channel betafunktion.

Why should we make APs of LAOGs?

There are many reasons to produce Actual Plays of Live-Action Online Games. We provide a structured overview here that hopefully reflects most motivations. In any concrete project, there often will exist a combination of different reasonings for producing AP recordings.

APs as entertainment

Currently, the most prominent form of role-playing APs are productions to *entertain an audience*. Actual Play video shows like *Critical Role* or podcasts like *The Adventure Zone* have become part of the entertainment industry. But even shows without large profit ambitions have created their own style and offer high production values. *Nameless Domain* is a producer of such APs, now award winning for *GUDIYA*, a *Bluebeard's Bride* (2017) one-shot. *The Magpies*, a *Blades in the Dark* AP-podcast by Clever Corvids Productions is another example. Some of these APs can be both watched live and in recorded forms, with the recordings usually edited and enhanced for a better audience experience. Live shows make use of the entertainment format and excitement present in something like live sports – with the unexpected lurking behind every corner. The actual game play is just one contributing factor in APs for entertainment, while participants' performances, the production values, and pre-written story arcs often play a similarly important role for the end product.

While TTRPG-APs have today become part of a growing entertainment industry, as far as we are aware not many LAOG APs have so far been (professionally) produced purely for reasons of audience entertainment. However, some of the larger commercial TTRPG shows like *KO//OK* have recently included live-action elements with success (when measured in terms of public appraisal and audience size).

AP production can also be part of a LAOG's design concept. The recording can be a diegetic feature of the game as in a reality show larp. Or, if watching or listening to a recording of (parts of) the game is itself considered an element of gameplay by the designer and hence it can be a source of entertainment for the players. In *The House* (2012), for example, directly interacting with the camera in-character is a central design element.

APs for demonstration purposes

APs can also be produced to demonstrate *how to play*. The teaching of games through play itself has always been an important part of play cultures, and assumes that people best learn about a game when they see how the rules work in practice. This is especially true for role-playing games and larps, which have a large body of implicit rules of engagement not laid down in scripts or rulebooks.

In a certain sense, recording LAOGs for demonstration purposes allows non-larpers access to a first-person perspective of a larp. The audience sees exactly what the player themselves has seen during play. Such APs also provide insights to the designers about how their game works “out in the wild”. Designers can benefit from seeing specific mechanics and techniques in play, for example to analyse player engagement and dynamics, and their effects on pacing.

Play cultures in larp differ significantly: another proper reason to produce APs is to showcase your own playstyle, although this is often a side effect rather than the intended production reason. One exception might be if larp production companies want to showcase their specific playstyle, making it easier for potential players to identify if a larp is right for them.

APs as a community contribution

We do not larp alone. As *larp communities*, we share our joy, we like to engage in discussions of games, and of our play experience. We like to see people we have played with in other games, and we watch out for each other.

Recording a game for the community can happen to establish facts about how the community is playing (safety, inclusivity). This is not the same motivation as demonstrating game play or showcasing play culture as previously described. APs from and for a community are revealing community norms in less intentional ways.

Producing an AP from and for the community is sending a signal on what is played, who is playing, who is visible, and consequently who is relevant. It is a way to emphasise community structures and relationships.

APs for posterity

Making an AP can be an *artistic expression*. In this case, the game itself might be designed around the AP concept or the production might be focused on turning the game into an artistic expression.

APs can make contemporary play culture visible, and that might also be a goal: to help future generations understand how live-action games were played online, who was playing, and what unwritten or undocumented elements were relevant to players at the time. Archivists and researchers will be grateful for live recordings of games from past decades.

When participating in a LAOG, recording it can also be motivated by the idea of creating a personal memory. Just like taking photos at events, an AP is a form of conserving an experience in some form, to be able to return to it later in life.

Audience in online game design and LAOG facilitation

Making an AP of a LAOG is in most cases different from documenting a larp played in physical space. The recording button is not as intrusive as it is to have a person with a camera circling around the players in-character. Even when the camera is an in-game element, recording has a more direct effect in physical larps.

It remains an open question if recording, both live-streamed or published later, is a violation of a central aspect of the sort of social contract (also called the “role-play agreement”, Stenros & Montola 2019, 17) often seen as a unique and required ingredient of larp: the fact that play is not performed with an audience in mind. Some players have reported that they cannot enjoy being in a recorded play session, as they start playing performatively. Other players explain that playing in a recorded session does feel different to them during an initial short period of time, often just minutes, in which they get used to the situation. This is similar to the inhibition expressed by players towards non-diegetic LAOGs (see Reininghaus 2021). Non-diegetic in this context means that the characters of the game are not speaking through a

video call to each other but in the shared imaginative space might be physically close together. Some players report that they cannot enjoy the dissonance between the players' distance and their characters' potential closeness.

From a safety perspective, recording online play requires a couple of specific considerations. The following procedure can be considered good practice:

1. Announce in the sign-up process for the game that a recording is planned.
2. Remind players at the beginning of the game that the session is going to be recorded and offer an Open Door, i.e. the option to drop out at any time for this reason (or any other, without having to offer any justification).
3. Break debrief into two parts: a recorded and an unrecorded part.
4. Do not stream the game live, instead offer a 48-hour hold-off period before publishing the video. Inform players that they can express a veto after play, meaning that the recording is not going to be published as an AP.

From a game design perspective, APs offer an interesting additional creative dimension. A game designed to be recorded for AP purposes has specific requirements. If the video call's chat is used as a communication dimension in the game, for example, a typical recording will not capture this and hence the AP will present only an incomplete version of the session.

Games which assume that players move between different virtual video rooms require choosing the recording perspective. The audience will either follow one player through their experience of the game session in multiple rooms, or experience everything that happened in only the one virtual room that was being recorded. If more than one player is recording their play, the audience can shift between views and create their own experience of the game. The APs of *End Game* (2016) allow for such an experience, as players are shuffled between the two in-game rooms exactly every ten minutes, allowing the audience to choose whose story to follow next.

Gerrit Reininghaus designed the game *Last Words* (2019) with an "audience first" approach in mind. Some players play the game muted, some without a camera or sound, due to the asymmetrically-designed communication setup. While during the game no player therefore fully experiences what is happening, an audience can have access to this experience – in a single recording.

Conclusion

Both for players of larps and for future researchers, an archive of APs of contemporary larp play styles online could turn out to be invaluable. This alone should encourage more community members to consider recording their games.

We also see plenty of potential avenues for further theoretical and practical explorations around APs of LAOGs. For example, we do not know much yet about the concrete effects that being recorded has on online play. We equally should consider the possible ethical implications of recording and distributing records of LAOG play, like a near-future use of public video libraries for training generative AI models. On the positive side, APs could positively contribute to making minorities in the larp and LAOG communities more visible.

Regarding future potential design avenues, we are excited – as facilitators, designers, players, and audiences – to further explore how LAOGs can be designed to make AP production easier, how the recording and re-watching of APs can be a tool for iterative game design, and what APs as a designable surface can contribute to larp. We are looking forward to seeing these questions explored in the future.

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Comments on VR, Larp, Technology, Creation: Aesthetics, Possibility and Ethics of an Immersive Mass Media

Nadja Lipsyc

This article is a personal commentary on a few major topics I picked up throughout the past six years of creating for VR/new media and larp. The principal aim of this text is to touch on philosophical themes related to industrial technology, as our community gravitates closer and closer to new media and A.I.. I also wanted to address the main question I have been asked by larpers: why VR, when we can just larp? This article thus blends thoughts on common grounds between larp and VR, impressions from VR experiences that I found inspiring, nostalgic rants, and speculations on the future. Finally, it opens a discussion on the possibility of larp contributing to an emerging immersive mass media.

an.other_reality

One of the first things I associate with larping is the idea of some sort of trip. If not in kilometers, it feels like a travel in time, consciousness or fantasy; a displacement from oneself and one's own reality. If our perception of the world is called *lifeworld*¹, we attempt to travel to a *storyworld* – a fictional reality that we perceive together.

¹ Husserl (1936) calls "lifeworld" the evident reality that we perceive and experience together. A fiction-based reality that is experienced collectively as a group can be referred to as "storyworld". Others also use the term "storyworld" to refer to a worldbuilding method or in previous larp literature (Brind 2019), but in this text it is purely a deviation from the phenomenological concept.

When experiencing larp in non larp-spaces – arts spaces, tech spaces, video games spaces etc. – I realized that such ability to travel to a storyworld relies as much on the larp design and environment as it relies on the culture nurtured by the larp community. In the way larpers interact, relate, find activities, open-up while playing, they help each other suspend disbelief and co-create the storyworld (Bowman 2017). In other words, larp designers and players alike tend to have a creativity that spans across fields. It is through this interest and ability to seek out fine details of reality building that we create levels of illusion, making the event feel more special and intricate.

Such attention put into layering ideas to engage ourselves or our players is what makes VR a promising ground for larpers: VR is not a medium, or a media, it is a *milieu* – which in French refers to environment, setting and social environment at the same time.

As such, VR has its own creative tools, that are ambidextrous², 360 degrees and embodied; it is close to what our bodies can do and experience, and therefore it is more intuitive than our usual screen-keyboard-mouse tools or even our digital pads. For example: a few days ago, defeated by my inability to explain an exhibition concept to a collaborator, I hopped into the 3D VR software *Gravity Sketch* and drew the rigging I imagined. Visiting the exhibition's life-sized model and looking up at the suspended objects, I realized from my own physical sensations that some ideas didn't pan out as I had intended, and I corrected them.

Other than a creative tool, VR can be a sensational spectacle. Earlier this year, I was at a Fatboy Slim concert, dancing while free falling. From the sky, along with the rest of the audience, I overlooked his perfectly modeled Pioneer deck, before landing on the oversized table of an American diner. On the table, we could ride cockroaches alone or with someone else, towards the gigantic face of Steve Buschemi. As I was teleported from one impossible setting to the next, I felt the thrill of being effectively transported into someone's unhinged imagination. (*Eat, Sleep, VR, Repeat* (2023))

For some, VR spaces can also be the avenue to explore transcendence; and I have met VR practitioners who have been exploring the similarities between traveling in VR and reaching other states of consciousness – through spiritual pursuit, drugs, or both. Today's state of the technology is already allowing “VR shamans” to guide volunteers through digital spaces as

² VR headsets, like a minority of game consoles, generally include two controllers, one for each hand, which frees movement potentials for both limbs. Consequently, VR apps and games make use of these ambidextrous possibilities.

though those were the meanders of their own consciousness, and some even explore the creation of VR psychedelic trips, like *Ayahwasca VR* (2020).

VR is certainly not perfect; not the “customer friendly” headsets at least. Despite the skyrocketing progress of VR graphics and playability in the past 10 years, I am still hearing the same comment: “*I won’t be sold to VR until the pixels are invisible.*” It can be cranky, it can be laggy, it can be obtuse or even painful. But if we can convince ourselves that a latex sword is Excalibur or that a green patch behind a parking lot is a lush forest, shouldn’t we also see giants as we ride jittery horses towards pixelated windmills?

I like inviting VR newcomers to lean into how conspicuous and ugly those spaces can be – firstly because you might discover you can get used to it as comfort adjusts, and secondly because these might be a few precious years before we enter an avalanche of hyper-realistic or hyper-convincing virtual realities. In fact, there might be questions to consider beyond the aesthetic appeal or revulsion of this imperfect VR. Adorno (1938) developed a praise for “dissonance” in musical aesthetics, as a disturbance that allows the listener to see the material “truth” behind harmony. Dissonance keeps us critical, while a perfectly harmonious music piece lulls us into accepting whatever purchase or ideology comes with it. (Adorno, 1938) In this state of pleasant artistic immersion, we become “acquiescent purchasers”, ready to be mouthfed with an advertisement or a lifestyle. This praise of dissonance is similar to the “epic theater” developed by Brecht and used to describe “meta-awareness” in larp by Hilda Levin (2020). Somehow though, for some, realism seems like a *sine qua non* of VR, rubbing out entirely the question of keeping an awareness that we are in a virtual milieu. And so, I wonder: do all these people who told me VR wasn’t realistic enough really want to be fooled? And if so, why is that, and are they quite sure of themselves?

an.other_body / no.body

Have you ever wondered what your larp experience would have been like if you hadn’t felt limited by your body ability, appearance, normativity, humanness?

One of the first VR games I played was called *Drift*. It was a “*die and retry game*” developed by my highschool friend Ferdinand Dervieux. In *Drift*, you are a bullet sent out in full speed in a brightly coloured cubist world on hard electronic beats. If you touch something (a wall, an obstacle etc) you lose and restart. Throughout the experience, only your head movements control your trajectory and only the position of your head matters. After being reborn a

projectile again and again for 30 minutes, a metonymic transformation happened: *I was fully my head.*

Experiencing *Drift* made me first wonder: how long would it take for us to get fully used to not being a human body? And what are the spaces we would crave, un-bodied in worlds that obey impossible physics rules? I regularly reopen the book *Mind in Architecture* edited by Sarah Robinson and Juhani Pallasmaa (2017) that accounts how we conceive and build spaces based on embodied sensations. What we perceive as sheltering and comfortable, or towering and divine, or angular and dangerous, is an immediate physical reaction. Supposedly, we learned to create spaces based on those evolutionary instincts. As a projectile, almost annihilated, I craved movement, I sought feelings of orbiting and my comfort came from always sensing a spatial opening somewhere. Had there been other bullets, I would have wanted our trajectories to flirt with each other; for our interaction to be confrontational collision, cheeky scraping, avoidance. What spaces will we create for our other-bodies? Who, or what, can we discover we can also be?³

Some abstract forms of larp already invite us to imagine ourselves as non-human or more-than-human⁴ and there is a prodigious potential in VR to explore our ability to transpose our mind into different bodies. In particular, we can already reroute our motor functions via *puppeteering*⁵. VR pioneer and technical artist Rikke Jansen colloquially uses the word puppeteering to refer to a finer way of controlling the motions and visible emotions of our avatar, by assigning them to a variety of physical gestures that are recognized by controllers or sensors. For instance, a sensor on a foot could control a cluster of your avatar's tentacles, another one at your waist could stretch out your outer membrane, raising your right index finger could get your helix to turn etc. In other words, digital prosthetics do not have to be thought of in terms of achieving a normative, valid body interpretation, but can be conceived as ways to experience full other-bodiedness. Puppeteering is likely to be a transitory device, as the technology is fast evolving towards image recognition through camera, full haptic body suits, and perhaps even EEG controllers⁶. However, it is a functional current solution to explore the sensations of our mind being connected to another body.

³ To connect the praise of dissonance to queering bodies, you can look into the *Glitch Feminism* manifesto by Legacy Russell (2013).

⁴ See the work of Nina Runa Essendrop, Jamie Harper, Alex Brown, Nilas Dumstrei, to name a few.

⁵ Puppeteering commonly means manipulating the limbs of a puppet to make it lifelike.

⁶ Creating controllers that are directly connected to our "thoughts" by measuring our brain activity through electroencephalogram or EEG has been a longstanding area of research. Despite some misleading commercial communication, they are not functional yet. See Padfield et. al (2022).

Other than those extreme examples of being other-bodied, there is a more obvious point to emphasize about VR bodies in conjunction with larping or any other form of VR socializing: we can create or find whatever body we want. I have raved as a very large astronaut, held a speech as an orb of light, walked around as Laura Palmer, I have been the gray default robot avatar and an uncanny rendition of my IRL self.

What this also means is that we can make our VR body as conforming and valid as we wish for it to be, and VR social spaces are a testimony of it.

Discussions around ageism, lookism, fatphobia, racism, ableism etc. regularly arise in the larp community. Like in any part of our flawed society, presenting as normative as possible will grant us better social capital, integration and play opportunities (van der Heij 2021). If we push the thought experiment far enough, we land in a potential digital future where what our bodies are in the lifeworld does not matter socially anymore, as long as our avatars conform. Let's stay with that scenario a bit longer: the dominant aesthetic might not be available to us in the real world – body type, skin color, hair, fashion, etc – but it is in the virtual world. All of us get to access valid-presenting bodies, publicly celebrated bodies, or even a gender representation that might alleviate some personal pain. Dissociated from our own body, our mind fully identifies and appropriates these virtual bodies. *Is that the body equality that we crave?*

This question should linger on throughout the process of designing a VR larp: which avatars are available to the players? What normativity do they shape? How can design and facilitation frame our relation to these digital bodies? Sometimes of course, budget or technical limitations will restrict design choices, as I experienced with my VR larp prototype *Lone Wolves Stick Together*⁷. We were only able to develop one avatar model for all six players; a half body, vaguely female, vaguely dark and masked. In this case, the larp is very discursive, and players' voice coats those basic avatars with more embodiment and personality.

I won't expand much on the topic of voice, but I'll let some of my thoughts reverberate here. Voice recognition and voice alteration are still marginal in VR and in online spaces, despite already being technically achievable and available to the public. As such, voice remains the one close-to-intact physical impression of another person – a particularly vulnerable shadow that lets our mind speculate on what body could withhold it. This is quite mysterious to me and I wonder: is our ease of recording and transmitting live sound (compared to recording and transmitting 3D bodies) the reason why we do not disguise our voices in digital spaces?

⁷ VR Larp for six players designed by Nadja Lipsyc and inspired by the film *Stalker* by Tarkovsky (1979). The design was prototyped as a physical larp in 2018, then as a full VR prototype in 2023 in collaboration with Breach VR.

Would we default to avatars of ourselves if scanning ourselves convincingly was easier? Has our cultural obsession for visuals simply raided all our workforce? Or, perhaps, is there a particular attachment to sending our own naked voice out there?

technical difficulties / \ the cult of the technical

“The app crashed. My headset died. The controllers are not recognized. You’re so glitched. I fell through the floor. I have no idea what’s happening. I feel sick. I’m lagging so much.”

We lack a word to describe the specific flavor of pain that we experience when technology fails us. We are so close to our devices that we flirt with being cyborgs: the immediate reactivity of our computer or our phone feels just like any other action that happens seamlessly from intention to execution. Grabbing a plate from the cupboard, aligning pens on a table, and juggling through dozens of tabs and apps require a similar level of effort. However, at times, we might attempt what feels like a simple digital action, such as fixing the alignment of a paragraph in one click or connecting our computer to the only printer in the area, and it fails. Something imperceptible stops us – and this is *infuriating*. How to explain such fury, while we are aware of the complexity of the technology we use? Could it be connected to the profound sensation that technology should be easy, intuitive; the perfect extension of our will? These expectations of perfect performance and immediacy are in line with our expectations of high resolution when it comes to VR. If it pretends to be a digital reality, then the technological interface ought to be a perfect continuation to our experience of the world.

Graphic quality aside, technical difficulties in VR are still dissuasive to many, as there is a heightened risk of bug/crash/undiagnosed issues compared to the platforms we are used to. One way of alleviating the anxiety one can feel when facing technical issues is to learn enough about the machines not to feel completely helpless – should it be VR, a 3D software, a synthesizer, etc. To many of us, this seems difficult to prioritize, and we would rather wait for simpler interfaces. However, I do believe we should examine our passive (or even avoidant) posture towards the efforts required to understand technology. Such passivity could have worse consequences than keeping us frustrated in front of a stubborn printer.

Günther Anders’s (1956) concept of *Promethean shame* points at the inferiority complex we experience when we face the intricacy and performance of the technologies we have created. We escape that shame by avoiding any comparison to those machines – including our attempts at understanding them. We get used to machines thinking and executing for us, to the point

we also lose track of our pragmatism and our faculty to foresee their impact on our lives. Our human abilities, both cognitive and emotional, cannot conceive the scale in which the things we create can operate. Anders takes the example of the nuclear bombs used in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 as a result of the gap between our understanding of concept and use.

With bringing more advanced technologies in larp, we can also question the gap between what we understand and what we might end up creating. As we merge larp with VR and with A.I., perhaps with little incentive to get more technologically educated, what use of our creations can we get blindsided by?

”(...)we are incapable of creating an image of something that we ourselves have made. To this extent we are inverted Utopians: whereas Utopians are unable to make the things they imagine, we are unable to imagine the things we make.”
(Anders 1981)

Rather than being defeated by the fear of future technological monstrosities, we can take Anders's analysis of industrial times as a call to stay active and involved when dealing with new technology. Rather than distancing ourselves from how things work and rather than constructing inconspicuous technologies, we can learn to keep discomfort, emotions and difficulties a part of human-computer interactions. In fact, *our human limitations and anxiety must remain part of the future if we want the future to have room for humans.*

poetics of >presence< / <presence>

“But why VR, when larp is about being there together?”

Fragments of VR presence:

A distant voice calls, I turn the other way, just in time to see a silhouette of light vanish.

Notes on Blindness, Ex Nihilo, ARTE France, Archer's Mark

I pick up a pen and draw around me the roots of a tree 4 times my size. The ink pulsates to the repetitive rhythms of a track I chose.

Tilt Brush, Google

I mute myself and approach my players as discreetly as possible. The sound is local, so I need to get close enough to hear them and judge whether it is a good time or not to trigger a flashback scene.

Lone Wolves Stick Together VR, by Nadja Lipsyc and Breach VR

In a karaoke room where 20 people with accents from all over the world sing on top of each other, I notice that someone is trying to get my attention. Their avatar is small and doll-like and they jump around me. I open my wings wide and cover them entirely.

The furry karaoke room by Duustu (VRChat)

I am playing with the animated locks of my co-actor's hair, while laying on a bed by the sea. Our avatars are almost spooning. The warm light is softly reflected on the mediterranean stones, and red curtains gently move with the breeze. The director yells "Cut!", I remove the headset and find myself lying alone on a wooden platform, in vast and austere black film studios.

Dates in Real Life, Maipo Film production.

I already miss larping, the way it felt "to be there together" 15 years ago, and that is widely due to technological changes. I miss larping before the avalanche of websites, before we checked our smartphones in our beds after playtime, before social media tipped us on the best and the worst, and before a plethora of pictures would mold my mental representation of larps.

Most of all, I miss larping when we had few enough opportunities to play that most of us were full of anticipation and entirely *present* at each event. This first flavor of presence is related to a mental and emotional availability; an ability to bring focus and commitment to the current experience that is perceived as an exceptional occurrence. In a form relying on togetherness, the unavailability of some will impact the sentiment of presence of all.

This longing doesn't mean I am not fully enjoying the options, media and discussions that I now have; but larp already feels different than it did when it comes to this quality of presence – both because of technology and of commodification (Seregina, 2016). Whether the larp is physical or virtual, I am interested in discussing how we can create, participate, organize and self-organize for that sort of presence. I am making this point first, because I do not believe that digital interfaces are the main obstacle to nurturing it.

"It's not the same as being in the same place as someone else, it will never feel like a larp."

The term *teleabsence* (Friesen 2012) categorizes the lack of bodily flow of information that prevents us from fully understanding and enjoying one another online⁸: I cannot look you directly in the eyes, sense the warmth of your skin when we are close, see a chest inflate and deflate or perhaps catch onto a loud deglutition. All of these clues are what allow us to react to one another in subtle and intimate ways. In this sense and as of now⁹, VR is more mediated: there is a stronger need to represent or magnify our emotions if we want to convey them. Much like roleplaying with masks, our body language doesn't disappear, but we must make it bigger to be understood. Although we can get accustomed to it with practice, and although some can experience *phantom touch*¹⁰, it is undeniable that VR larping takes us away from these finely sensual encounters and confabulations. However, it can be intimate, raw, and strange too.

Co-creation between VR players can flower just as much into the moments of beauty which Stenros and MacDonald (2020) also refer to as *presence*: “being sensitive to the emotions around you, understanding the exact situation, creating the right character response, feeling the emotion.” Presence in VR also has its signature poetics which lie in the expressive fluidity of spaces and bodies, in the playfulness of planes and perspectives, in the richness of sound integration and in forbidden intimacies.

Space and scale become potentially expressive and reactive as both the environments and the bodies you chose can be molded following your emotions or intentions: they can be gigantic or minuscule, they can form a vast open field or the most angular of cells, etc. We rarely intentionally fully design physical larps taking into consideration the perspectives of our space, where people are, how they can hear one another. VR spaces can be fully understood by the designers, either because they built them, or because visiting them and learning all their nooks and crannies is only a headset away. This option opens a more filmic or theatrical relationship to larp creation, which calls to refine our relation to larpmakers' artistry, artistic emergence, and players' creative agency.

But a rather easy and crucial element that I want to highlight is the potential that lies within VR larp sound design. Surround sound with outputs all around the space can create an

⁸ See Lindemann, Schünemann (2020) for more discussion on the concept of presence in digital spaces.

⁹ We should of course imagine a near future where most of our perceptible biofeedback can be transmitted to our avatars.

¹⁰ Phenomenon when a VR user gets physical sensations from perceiving a virtual touch or impact. VR is frequently used as a treatment for phantom pain or as exposure therapy due to its ability to trick our sense of reality.

“immersive” soundscape a lot more easily than by using physical sound sources or speakers in real life larp. On top of this immersive soundscape, you can localize sound sources as expressively as you desire: to bring objects to life, to bring participants’ attention to a specific spot, etc. And finally, you can create player-specific sound cues: whisper directly to the ear of each of your players, have them hear individual musics or, like in *Lone Wolves Stick Together VR*, have individual streams of thoughts for each character. This larp is about contradictory desires and introspection, and the streams of thoughts are triggered between each roleplaying scene to represent or prompt an evolving mental state. The soundtracks therefore help to guide the players going from act to act: from doubts to nostalgia, to disillusion, despair, and then finally, truth.

Sound alone can induce sensations of variation, call back previous moments, and give spatial and environmental impressions. Blackbox larps often rely on soundscapes and music to displace the fiction to a different place, and, with VR sound design, this trick is all the more potent: we can recreate the acoustics of an immensely tall building, make the players’ footsteps sound wet or frosty, create a musical space that reacts to players movements, etc.

There would be a lot more to explore and describe when touching upon the poetics of presence in VR, but the last trail I will allude to here is that of *forbidden or impossible intimacies*. VR lets us be where we shouldn’t be: in places that are inaccessible to the public, in places where sustaining life is impossible, in voyeuristic points of view. This emotion of looking at an impossible artifact from up close, of being a ghost, of being a speck of dust in a piano, of seeing someone from behind another person’s eyes, triggers an uncomfortable and shy curiosity that I have found to be a VR-specific source of inspiration.

The possibility of larp as mass media

“It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.” Donna Haraway (2016)

Larp has changed a lot over the past decade. It has become more international, more professional, it has blossomed into a vast array of players’ aspirations and of creative styles, it has even become mainstream in China (Shuo & al. 2022) and commonly played as an



Figure 1: VR Chat world *Wind and Grass* by Byanka.

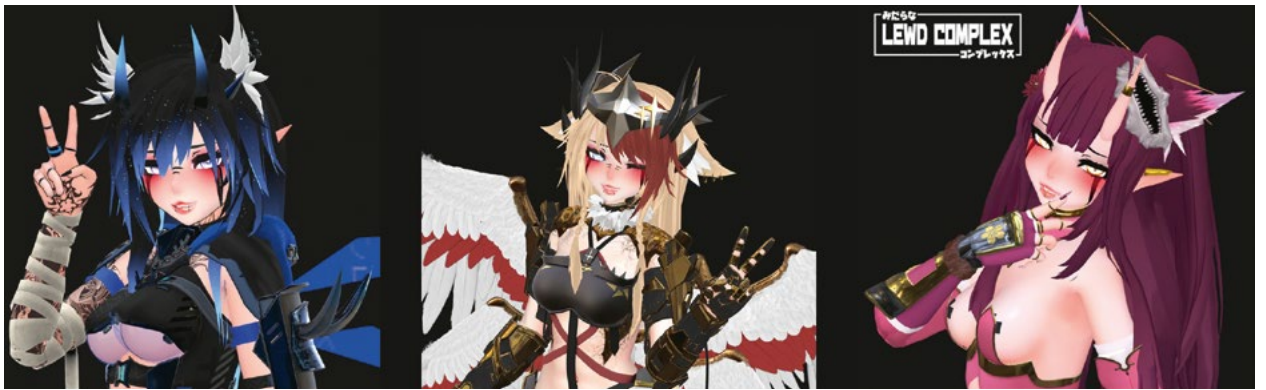


Figure 2: Popular type of commercial avatars used in VRChat by Godfall's Kamui.



Figure 3: VR Chat avatars demonstrating avatar skinning issues and tracking glitch.



Figure 4: Screenshot from the prototype of *Lone Wolves Stick Together*, developed by Breach VR.

online form (Otting 2022). Industrial media and mainstream entertainment have had a more or less distant eye on larp; from big tech companies to audiovisual studios and theme parks. This proximity with the industry reinforces the expansionist dream that is a source of both excitement and trepidation among larpers. As someone working professionally with larp and VR, the first question I am asked when talking to game studios or stakeholders is: how can we reach more players or sell more copies? It is a question which generally turns into: how can we automate the game mastering or facilitation, massify the experience?

VR, like many new technologies, is connected to an all-encompassing need to massify. Its biggest actors, which are Facebook/Meta, Google and soon Apple, operate on a mass level, with only widespread adoption being able to stomach the developmental costs of their technologies and projects. Similarly, massification is what would allow more larp designers to live off their craft, and perhaps even *prosper* from it – an unprecedented potential.

I have been thinking that larp and VR were a match made in heaven due to their common affordances and potentials for presence, interaction, spatial creation, etc. (Lipsyc 2017). Retrospectively, I wonder how much of my initial excitement came from contemplating those creative potentials, and how much came from another sort of intuition: that larp could be the most appropriate form to create an immersive mass media.

With immersive technologies being more and more customer friendly and with the ascend of creative A.I., larp will potentially be able to rely on procedural¹¹ environments, scenes and characters. Similarly, our most brilliant designers might train digital automated facilitators, which could be combined with massively multiplayer immersive digital spaces and even possibly persistent open worlds¹². This might thus be the way for larp creators to land an industrial career, but what are the other implications?

Who's getting paid for larp?

Larp is not *free* as is – it comes with a lot of labor, which in our society must be paid by someone (in this case, the designers and their direct support network for non-profit larps, as well larper-customers for commercialized ones) – and it is not *free* to attend, with continuously

¹¹ Procedural generation combines human-crafted assets with algorithms to automate and randomize the creation of large amounts of content, for instance entire game environments.

¹² Persistent worlds are digital spaces that are maintained online for all players to join and leave as they please without losing any data.

inflating participation costs. The cost is mutual, just like the quality of a larp *experience* relies sometimes almost equally on designers', organizers' and players' competence and engagement. (Torner 2020; Castiello Jones, Koulu & Torner 2016) Altogether, larp has been dependent on the goodwill and gratefulness that exists between designers, organizers and players.

However, this goodwill might collapse like a house of cards if larp effectively leads to *some people* becoming individually prosperous, famous or ascending socially thanks to the free labor of many others. The digital age has been normalizing free creative labor that people do at home: social media relies on its own customers' content creation, creative A.I. is growing thanks to the free training its customers provide, and a mass media based on larp is just as likely to run thanks to the free contribution of its players. In other terms, many of us are or will be working a daytime job in order to be able to pay to work a creative job.¹³

Larp as a sustainable practice

A wonderful quality of larp is that it can be a very sustainable activity, given that we do not order cheap Chinese merchandise for costuming and that we do not fly ourselves to faraway countries every time we're given a chance to (Brown 2022). As such, the environmental costs and political questions that come from working with technology are still unforeseen in larp. From relying on A.I. which demands extreme amounts of energy to train, to persistent multiplayer digital spaces, the maintenance of which also depends on keeping powerful computers churning at all times, and to supporting the electronics industry where mere components are obtained through excessive mining of rare materials at the expense of ecosystems and underprivileged workers in South America, Africa and South Asia (Asher 2022).

To remain sustainable, must we oppose the development of larp in the industry? Or, by excluding ourselves from those chances out of moral purity, do we also exclude ourselves from decision-making and shaping what this artform can become? How to react and act in the face of the climate crisis and what to do with industrial capitalism are questions that vastly exceed the scope of this article, but the possibility of industrial development should always come with self-reflection.

¹³ Günther Anders (1956) writes: "In a certain way, each individual is employed and occupied as a domestic worker. [...] Whereas the classical domestic worker made products in order to assure himself of a minimum of consumer goods and leisure, today's domestic worker consumes a maximum number of leisure products in order to collaborate in the production of the mass-man."

What other realities will we create?

If larp makers are potential creators for a future mass media, their influence and creative choices will radiate beyond our small community and pervade the general society. Both for the sake of our current community and our future practices, we must examine the realities we have been creating and plan to create. In particular, we must interrogate our tendency to reenact a glamourized dominant history (see Wood & Holkar in this volume). Nietzsche (1874) warned us against the temptation of over-studying history and fetishizing the past; such a tendency to “idle in the garden of knowledge” prevents us from taking action to bravely shape our lives.

Not only can a fantasy based on historical fallacy further cut us from the desire and ability to impact the current history, but our romanticisation of history is also contributing to making larp a space perceived as white and exclusive. Larp is not a diverse form for many reasons, one of them being that it ceaselessly recycles eurocentric history, representation, and codes of conduct. This isn't to say that larp is particularly flawed as a form or a community. In fact, larp has more representation of gender and sexual minorities than most tech fields¹⁴. Yet, larp is profoundly biased¹⁵. What body we wear, what space we create, those are not simply a creator's preference or some fan service; those are statements on the digital future we are vouching for, and we now have very concrete options to challenge our usual aesthetics.

Massification's impact on the artform

As a mass media, larp wouldn't be the form that we now know – it would not be, feel or look the same, and we might never recognize it as larp. We might call it worldhopping, sim, VR MMORPG or VR gaming, and this immersive mass media might even mostly ignore the larp community's praxis and reconstruct its own independent history towards storyworld-building and roleplaying.

In all cases, massification calls for mainstream content: less room and visibility would be given to experimental forms, but a bigger number of people would be getting *something* out of it. If it is anything like other mass media, an immersive mass media would be a constant flux of standardized content, of adaptations and of franchises. A.I. content creation being a condition

¹⁴ We now see the impact of these population biases on the technology these fields create (Zalnieriute & Cutts 2022, Buolamwini 2019)

¹⁵ See on YouTube the *Larpers of Color Panel - Unlocking the Spectrum* from Knutpunkt 2018 with great insights from Jonaya Kemper, Mo Holkar, Clio Davis, Aina Skjønsfjell Lakou, Kat Jones & Ross Cheung. See also Kemper (2018) and Holkar (2020).

to massify larp, we are likely to witness a new degree of standardization¹⁶ in larp and across all artforms.

Another consequence of using A.I. in our creative processes is that it can go as far as removing the dialectic we engage in with our creative materials: instead of dealing with the limitations that come with mastering a media, a material or an interface, we generate references and tweak them to get closer to our intuition or what we imagine. These limitations are what allow us to think of original solutions: it is because I cannot program the physics system I have in mind that I am adding the extra jumping power to my character which turns out to be the most fun part of the game, it is because the pigments I can access are not the right shade of blue that my sky is a bit green and all the more evocative, it is because I cannot find the right drum set in my sounds library that I recorded and distorted the sound of a bottle floating on the shore, relentlessly hitting a rock. Originality often comes from that friction between what we desire to create and what we can achieve. In a world of automated combinations of references, not only are we losing control and mastery over the creative technologies we use, we might accidentally lose one of our greatest creative tools: our ability to find ways to overcome difficulties.

Recorded larps

An additional disruptive potential for the larp form is the possibility to fully record a runtime: from all the players' points of view, from all corners and angles. As of now, larp can contain a lot of secrets and privacy; a confession far away at the edge of the playscape, a joke that would only be appropriate for your good mate to hear, an off-game discussion to talk about a personal trigger, etc. In a virtual space, larp can be recorded, witnessed or re-lived. A larp recording can be an immersive reality roleplay TV experience for an external audience, or a pilgrimage through our own memory for returning players. Challenging the ephemeral and private attributes of larp, immersive mass media could become a persistent form, a voyeuristic form, and a place of collective memory. (Yasseri & al. 2022)

¹⁶ Usva Seregina (2019) already pointed at the standardization that stems from commodification.

Much customized such me wow

Streaming platforms, e-commerce platforms and social media all rely on learning and predicting customer preferences. Any digital mass-production is going towards data-driven content. As such, we can easily imagine that commercial data-driven larp would be informed by our recorded player behavior. Characters could be customized for us – with the tensions, surprises and alien elements we need, with the themes and flamboyance we want to address, with the aesthetic variations that feel the closest to our deeper selves. Although cultural products are already sold to us using the familiar language of our cultures, subcultures and social class, roleplay and identity play add the use of our own individual data: biofeedback, idiosyncrasies, fantasies and aspirations, furthering the ability to customize our online and offline experiences.

How to remain critical without being left out?

A larp mass media could also be extraordinarily connecting, enriching and educational. Larp has allowed a lot of us to explore our identity, to overcome personal limits, to develop a sense of community, to expand our knowledge and creativity – why not open those wonderfully enriching opportunities to everyone? Why deprive ourselves of contributing to a field that might make larp creators prosperous? Why shield ourselves from the excitement of discovering more immersive forms that might enthrall and stimulate us?

Automation, sustainability and accessibility are complex and abstract concepts that are close to impossible to grasp and handle at an individual level. However, we can aim to develop tools to measure impact and risks, and balance out our contributions. We can ask what our environmental budget is. Or how much do we use free labor for our own interest? And how much do we truly return to the wider community?

This isn't a radical solution to oppose the changes of the world, but to keep in touch with our complex realities and remain alert enough to make decisions for ourselves and as citizens. Industrial arts and new technologies are defined by a rapid progression, a rush to new projects and new ideas in order to “make it”, with little breathing time spent on forming critical opinions. Such speed, combined with the massification of our expression and desire to constantly create more and more content has been flagged by thinkers contemporary to the rise of fascism in Europe – the school of Frankfurt, Günther Anders, Hanna Arendt, Guy Debord (1967), etc.

Walter Benjamin (1936) ends his famous text *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction* with the following sentences:

“Fascism attempts to organize the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves.”

He urges us to remain critical thinkers and active actors, as opposed to creators and consumers. Similarly, Hannah Arendt (1953) argues in *Understanding and Politics* that fascism does not build on the radicalization of masses, but in deconstructing their ability to form opinions. With the possibility of our community being closely involved in immersive mass media and disruptive technology, we must confront one another, debate, take stances, and use the democracy tools accordingly, however eroded and illusionary they seem to be – voting, protesting, rioting.

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Dates in Real Life (2024): Series partly shot in VR, directed by Jakob Rorvik and produced by Maipo Films for NRK.

Drift (2015): VR die and retry by Ferdinand Dervieux and Aby Batti.

Eat, Sleep, VR, Repeat (2023): Fatboy Slim Concert by EngageVR.

Gravity Sketch: VR native design software that allows you to model 3D objects with collaborators.

Lone Wolves Stick Together VR: larp designed by Nadja Lipsyc as part of the Norwegian National Artistic Research PhD program. Developed with Breach VR and playtested in 2023. Older prototypes were tested in 2020 and 2018.

Notes on Blindness: Into Darkness (2016): short film directed by Arnaud Colinart, Amaury La Burthe, Peter Middleton & James Spinney and produced by Ex Nihilo, ARTE France, Archer's Mark.

VRChat (since 2014): social online virtual world platform that relies on Unity-based user-content. VRChat worlds mentioned in this article: *Club Babylon* by Rikke Jansen (private), *VR Furry Karaoke* by Duutsu (public), *Wind and Grass* by Byanca (public).

Further relevant VR experiences

Ancient Hours (2023): a hybrid VR larp using VRChat, collaboration between Nadja Lipsyc (Design) and Josefine Rydberg (Production). Playtested at Grenselandet 2022 and premiered at The Smoke 2023.

Oxymore (2022): Jean-Michel Jarre Concert by Vrroom.

The Under Presents: Tempest (2020): immersive theater piece directed by Samantha Gorman and produced by Tenderclaws.

Welcome to the Respite (2021): immersive theater piece by the Ferryman Collective.

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Innovations in the Drama Classroom with Larp

Lindsay **Wolgel**

In September 2022, I began a new job as the middle school drama teacher at a school in upper Manhattan, New York City. In the months before, I had been picturing a dream job in which I was teaching both theatre and larp. When I accepted this position I imagined that after a year or two, I could create an after-school larp club.

To my surprise, during orientation, my principal told me that he had complete trust in me as an artist. He said I was free to design my curriculum however I saw fit. What a gift that turned out to be!

New Heights Academy Charter School has about 100 students per grade, split into four sections. I taught ages eleven to fourteen, and had a different section of children each quarter. This meant I had opportunities to start fresh, adjust my curriculum, and ultimately, experiment with utilizing larp.

The first larp emerged as a result of unexpected behavior from one of my 7th grade students (age thirteen), whom I'll call J. He walked into class with a sweatshirt stuffed in his shirt, making him appear pregnant. He walked slowly holding his big belly, modeling the exact gait and posture of someone close to giving birth. I complimented his physical acting and asked how he was able to portray that so realistically.

"Is someone in your family pregnant?" I questioned. "No", he said simply, and gave no further explanation.

The next day, he did the same thing with his sweatshirt as he entered. "So when is the baby due?" I asked.

"Soon", J said, and I commented in front of the class that someone should really be helping carry J's heavy backpack.

This continued (but never disrupted class), and by the fourth day I laughed and said, “I think we need to throw you a baby shower or something!”

A lightbulb went off in my head. I hadn’t yet assigned this class’s final project, and realized J had inadvertently created the perfect inspiration for a larp.

The larp lasted one period, and followed the format of a baby shower. Students could choose to play J’s family, friends, or co-workers. As their final project grade, everyone had to participate in the larp. However, there were a number of ways to achieve this. The goal was that the students would be in character throughout the class and interact with others. For my introverted students, I also offered credit for creating costumes, making a gift for J, bringing snacks/supplies, being the DJ or creating a song list, serving snacks during the party (in character) etc. There were hilarious speeches, different kinds of snacks, and dancing.

The Baby Shower was a huge success, and the halls were abuzz in the days that followed with talk of the party. Over the course of the year, I created two more larps with other classes. One was a birthday party for a 47 year old man named Theodore who had moved to Europe, and the other was called *Leprechaun Academy*, about a group of preteen Leprechauns who went to the same school.

All of these larps were born out of my focus on emergence. This is a tenet of devised theatre, which I was exposed to during my time in a conservatory theatre university program at The University of the Arts in Philadelphia. The Oxford dictionary defines emergence as “the process of coming into existence or prominence”.

I will next explain some of my methods used to create these larps.

There are many benefits to using the setting of a party for larps. Kids know how to act at a party and alibi is already present, since the guests are there for a reason. Relationship ties are already partly established, meaning that my students knew exactly how a grandmother would greet her grandson when she walked through the door. Two boys instinctively knew that if they played cousins who were the same age, they could get into trouble during the family function, until they were caught by the girl who played their Tia (*Aunt* in Spanish). Another benefit to this setting is that school higher-ups are familiar with classroom parties. My principal and deans knew they could expect to hear some music and extra noise coming from my room, just for that one period.

Over the course of the year, I found a method that allowed students to quickly co-create the details of the larp in a fun way. In the U.S., lessons often begin with a “Do-Now”, a quick, five-minute activity to get students sitting, quiet, and focused. I always assign my Do-Nows on Google Classroom. Students respond to prompts on their laptops, and once they click submit, I can show all of their answers in a list on the Smartboard in my room. For those without Google Classroom, this can be accomplished using other programs, such as Google Sheets.

For my second larp, I had my students brainstorm the details of a birthday party we were going to throw in class on Google Classroom. Students came up with who the birthday child was, where the party was taking place, who the guests were, and many more details. It is very fun to read the different answers aloud, and I would choose my top three favorites. The class would vote, and voila! We had designed all of the details around the larp setting. We even co-created plot points that would occur during the party.

Creating larps specifically for certain classes was highly enjoyable for me, and I loved the challenge of finding inspiration from the students themselves. Children are full of idiosyncrasies and love to make jokes. In the case of the baby shower, I would consider J’s behavior a *bit*, which is a repeated joke. Rather than shutting him down, I deemed this silly “bit” the seed of something special, and J became the center of the larp. I am guessing that him acting pregnant was attention-seeking behavior. It was very special to funnel that into something creative, and he got a chance to be the center of a larp. More than that, he experienced having a baby shower thrown for him, which he described as a once in a lifetime experience.

I found that I was able to bring role-playing into classes, even when we did not co-create a full larp. My most successful and well-received activity was called “The Drama Club Podcast”. We recreated the recording of a podcast in class, where I played a host who would invite students up to play guests. The secret benefit to this setting is that it requires everyone in the “audience” to be quiet, since we were “recording”. This detail is crucial with classes that fall on the chatty end of the spectrum. We didn’t actually record a podcast, though due to the hilarity that would often ensue, I began to record videos on my phone. I said we were “creating behind-the-scenes content for the podcast’s YouTube channel”.

This is a very scalable activity, because students can play characters close to themselves or not, they can impersonate celebrities etc. The topics discussed and characters can also be connected to content being covered in class. The podcast can run for a few minutes or a whole period. I found that the possibilities are endless! Even more reserved students could participate as callers from the audience, who would pretend to phone in and ask questions of the interviewees. I

also enlisted volunteers to come up with Tweets that our “listeners” were tweeting in response to our episode.

I realized that my discoveries from this past year could be helpful in the overall mission of bringing larp into classrooms in America. While there are numerous individuals and organizations achieving this in Scandinavia, it is much less common in the U.S., especially at this age level. Some schools offer Drama/theatre classes where larp could be utilized, but not all.

An obstacle to bringing larp into the general classroom is that core subject teachers have so much material to cover, and must prepare students for state exams and standardized testing. However, I found that by using only five minutes or so at the beginning of class over a few days to flesh out their characters, students were able to successfully larp, with no workshop other than practicing safety mechanics. Even my eleven year-olds, who had never taken drama before, successfully larped from the beginning.

My next steps will be to continue to iterate using these methods to create not only larps, but edularp with specific learning outcomes in mind (cf. Westborg 2023). In the coming year, I hope to use my methods of co-creation with my students to create larps that directly correlate with what they are learning in other subjects, with specific learning outcomes. I hope to collaborate with my students’ other teachers, and I look forward to seeing what we will discover.

If you enjoyed what you’ve read so far, you can head to Nordiclarp.org and search my name or “Adding Larp to a Drama Teacher’s Curriculum – Year 1”. There you can watch the talk I gave at the Knudepunkt 2023 conference on this exact subject! You will find many more details on the topics covered here, as well as a live demonstration of my Drama Club Podcast Activity.

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Larping Anthropology in the 1970s and 1980s: A Look into the Birth of Performance Studies and Experiential Ethnography

Mike Pohjola

The historical precedents similar to Nordic larp range from ancient Egyptian ritual dramas (Pohjola 2015) to psychological techniques in the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Fatland 2016), from the war gaming associations of American campuses (Peterson 2012) in the 1970s to Hungarian children's camps (Túri & Hartyándi 2022). Sometimes a trail of influence can be drawn, at others it is a question of parallel evolution. Yet, no matter how distant the relation, lessons can be learned across millennia by studying similar practices earlier on.

One such example is the fruit of the auspicious friendship between anthropologist Victor Turner and theatre director Richard Schechner. Their mutual fascination towards aspects of their respective fields which we might now consider larp-like led to the development of performance studies and experiential ethnography.

The work of both pioneers has been cited in works exploring the lineage of Nordic larp, such as *Play To Love: Reading Victor Turner's "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual; an Essay in Comparative Symbolology"* (Ericsson 2004), *Chorus Novus: Or Looking for Participation in Classical Greece* (Pohjola 2015), and *The Classical Roots of Larp* (Pohjola 2017). However, the interaction between Schechner and Turner and their experiments actually aligning with larp has not been discussed before.

Victor and Richard

Victor Turner (1920–1983) was a British cultural anthropologist best known for his work on symbols, rituals, and rites of passage.

The focal point of his extensive field studies were the Ndembu, a Bantu ethnic group in Zambia, with whom he and his family lived for fifteen months in grass huts. Victor and his wife Edith, also an anthropologist, would study the Ndembu and home school their children. At nights Victor would read the freshly published *The Lord of the Rings* to the kids (Baer 2016). The Turners' son, poet Frederick Turner describes his parents:

“They went there as traditional, structuralist, functionalist anthropologists with a Marxist background. They were both Atheists ... Their primary interest was studying the structure of roles, statuses, and relationships – kinship – in the culture, and seeing them as a system for survival. They had expected to find that economic factors would be the primary forces in the culture, but they discovered, instead, that it was really ideology, ideas, religion, ritual, and ritual symbolism that were running the society... So my parents were struck with the power of religion and ritual in the Ndembu culture, and they became world renowned experts on those subjects.” (Baer 2016)

Meanwhile, Richard Schechner (1934–) is a theater director known for his radical interpretations of classical plays, the editor of *The Drama Review*, and a performance theorist with a major interest in rituals.

Schechner's seminal work had been the participatory play *Dionysus in 69* staged in New York. It was based on Euripides's play *The Bacchae* but deconstructed the text, and invited the spectators to become active participants. Schechner says they wanted to transform an aesthetic event into a social event and managed to create “an atmosphere in which participation ranged from clapping and singing to spectators stripping and joining in the ritual celebrations and dances” (Schechner, 1973).

If *Dionysus in 69* sounds suspiciously like the rituals that take place at Nordic larps and larpers' gatherings, it is no coincidence. Both Schechner and Turner have been a major influence on many larp designers and scholars. The three rules for participation Schechner (1973) detailed were:

1. The audience is in a living space and a living situation. Things may happen to and with them as well as “in front” of them.
2. When a performer invites participation, he must be prepared to accept and deal with the spectator’s reactions.
3. Participation should not be gratuitous.

These rules are not met by all contemporary immersive theatre productions, but they are met by most, if not all larps.

When Turner was studying the Ndembu and when Schechner was transgressing Euripides, they had not yet met, but they were certainly aware of each other’s work. Schechner (2020) described their first meeting like this:

“Turner and I first met face-to-face after he phoned me in the spring of 1977. “I am in New York to introduce a lecture by Clifford Geertz at Columbia,” Turner said. “Why not you and I go out for a beer after?” Knowing Turner’s writing, I was eager to meet him. When we did, what should have been a 45-minute getting-to-know-you chat turned into a 3+ hour seminar-of-two. Really, we were made for each other: inquisitive, good sense of humor, wide-ranging interests, not afraid to go out on a limb, rampant with appetites. And, of course, performance. What Vic called “process” I called performance. It was social drama, liminal-liminoid, communitas, ritual, and more. Vic’s mother was an actress; theatre was in his upbringing. He had an urgent belief in the efficacy of human enactment, and a delight in it also.”

This first meeting quickly grew into a collaboration that lasted until Turner’s untimely death in 1983. They worked together on three conferences sponsored by The Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, and crucially, on a two-week workshop sponsored by School of the Arts, New York University (Schechner 2020).

The symposium in which they first collaborated, *Cultural Frames and Reflections: Ritual, Drama and Spectacle*, was held at a castle in Austria. The symposium was “a performance in itself” (Stoeltje 1978, 51), bringing together “anthropologists, literary critics, folklorists, a historian, a semiotician and impresario, a dramatist and stage director, novelist, poets, and an ethnopoetian – participant observers and observer-participants preoccupied with many

kinds of cultural performance” (MacAloon 1984b, 2). Interwoven with the conference papers were poetry readings, dramatic techniques, storytelling, and viewings of Fellini’s *La Strada* and the film version of *Dionysus in ’69*, the avant-garde play that had established Schechner’s reputation in theater. ... the symposium altered the models of reality that the participants brought to the table in the first place (Stoeltje, 451), and each of them returned to their work at least slightly transformed. (Brownell & Frese, 2020)

The groundbreaking workshop

The symposium resulted in a workshop which was held at Schechner’s Performance Garage in Soho, where Schechner’s company, The Performance Group, had given groundbreaking performances such as *Macbeth*, *Tooth of Crime*, and *Dionysus in 69*. This summer workshop was a key point in the development of their art.

Schechner invited Victor and Edith Turner, anthropologist Alexander Alland, and sociologist Erving Goffman to join himself and 27 participants to take part in a two-week workshop (Schechner, 2020). The participants were graduate students, professors, performers, and devisers of performance, and numbered 16 women and 11 men.

The participants had applied based on an announcement where the workshop was described like this:

“This is an intensive workshop – two sessions daily, 5 days per week with all faculty participating in most of the sessions so that there will be maximum interaction among faculty and among faculty and students. The workshop will explore the interface between ritual and theatre. [...] The aim of the workshop is to shatter boundaries between performance and social sciences and between art and cognitive studies. [...] participants will be selected to ensure a balance between artists, scholars and scientists.” (Schechner, 2020)

The workshop turned out to be groundbreaking for the participants and for the fields they presented. It also seems to have many parallels to early forms of American larp and quasi-larp that were already in existence in the late 1970s such as Society for Creative Anachronism, the Model United Nations, and Society for Interactive Literature.

According to Schechner (2020), they “talked, performed, partied (some), took a weekend trip to Baltimore for a theatre festival, and dove deep into each other’s ideas and felt experiences.”

Victor Turner himself describes the workshop in great detail in his article “Dramatic Ritual/Ritual Drama: Performative and Reflexive Anthropology” (Turner, 1979):

“Even the best of ethnographic films fail to communicate much of what it means to be a member of the society filmed. ... How, then, may this be done? One possibility may be to turn the more interesting portions of ethnographies into playscripts, then to act them out in class, and finally to turn back to ethnographies armed with the understanding that comes from “getting inside the skin” of members of other cultures, rather than merely “taking the role of the other” in one’s own culture.”

Turner emphasizes the difference between playing a character of one’s own culture and playing a different culture altogether. Later on, he would also find joy and enlightenment in the former.

This is similar similar to the language that is used of playing characters in larps: “Most players report having the phenomenological experience of immersion in role-playing games, using phrases such as ‘losing myself in the game’ or ‘the character took over’” (Bowman, 2018).

Turner continues:

“...at Schechner’s summer institute, I tried to involve anthropology and drama students in the joint task of writing scripts for and performing ethnographies. It seemed best to choose parts of classical ethnographies that lent themselves to dramatic treatment [...] But time being short (we had only two weeks), I had to fall back upon my own ethnography both because I knew it best, and because I had already, to some extent, written a script for a substantial amount of field data in the form I have called social drama.” (Turner, 1979)

The “script” in question was two social dramas Turner described in his book *Schism and Continuity in An African Society (1968)*, describing life in the Ndembu village.

“Schechner sees the actor, in taking the role of another — provided by the playscript — as moving, under the intuitive and experienced eye of the director/producer, from the “not-me” (the blueprinted role) to the “not-not-me” (the realized role), and he sees the movement itself as constituting a kind of liminal phase in which all kinds of experiential experiments are possible, indeed mandatory.” (Turner, 1979)

The “not-me” or “the blueprinted role” would traditionally mean a role described in the play text, and here, a person from the ethnographical description of village life and ritual. In a larp context, it would refer to a character description provided by the larp designers. The “not-not-me” or “the realized role” in a larp would be the larper’s interpretation of the character, the character as it is actually played.

Turner uses the word “liminal” a lot. It comes from the Latin word *limes*, meaning “border”. Liminal events happen when crossing a border, entering the world of the ritual or enacted social drama or larp. Participants leave behind their everyday identities and “absorb a new ‘liminal’ identity for the duration of the ritual, and relate to each other through that identity. ... [O]ther participants have a similar role, and only see each other through that role” (Pohjola, 2015).

To get things started, the group had read the social dramas by themselves, and then Turner read them out loud, offering necessary commentary along the way. The dramas dealt with “Ndembu village politics, competition for headmanship, ambition, jealousy, sorcery, the recruiting of factions, and the stigmatizing of rivals” (Turner, 1979). These are key components in many a larp plot, as well.

But how does one turn a larp script or a social drama script into something that lives and breathes?

“When I had finished reading the drama accounts, the actors in the workshop told me at once that they needed to be “put in the right mood”; to “sense the atmospherics” of Ndembu village life. One of them had brought some records of Yoruba music, and, though this is a different musical idiom from Central African music, I led them into a dancing circle, showing them to the best of my limited, arthritic ability, some of the moves of Ndembu dancing.” (Turner, 1979)

The second social drama contained a name inheritance ritual (*Kuswanika ijina*), and the group decided to try to recreate it with the limited props available at the Performance Garage. This impulse turned the workshop into what seems very much like a larp festival. The ritual

“marked the temporary end of a power struggle between the stigmatized candidate for headmanship, Sandombu, and Mukanza, the successful candidate. Sandombu had been exiled from the village because he was accused of killing his cousin Nyamuwaha through sorcery. Sandombu had been gone for a year and sympathies had turned for him. In a b plot there was illness in the village and at the same

time many dreamed of Nyamuwaha. The Ndembu interpreted this to mean that Nyamuwaha's shade was disturbed by the troubles in the village, and used this as a pretext to invite Sandombu back to ritually plant a tree that would appease Nyamuwaha. Officially the ritual would involve Nyamuwaha's eldest daughter Manyosa inheriting her name, but this was the context for it." (Turner, 1979)

As any amateur game master would, Turner cast himself in the key role, playing Sandombu. He then had to find someone to play Manyosa. "Someone whom we shall call Becky, a professional director of drama, volunteered" (Turner, 1979).

"I asked Becky to give me the name of a recently deceased close female relative of an older generation who had meant much in her life. Considerably moved, she mentioned her mother's sister Ruth. I then prayed in Chilunda to "village ancestors." Becky sat beside me before the "shrine," her legs extended in front of her, her head bowed in the Ndembu position of ritual modesty. I then anointed the shrine-tree with the improvised mpemba, white clay, symbol of unity with the ancestors and the living community, and drew three lines with it on the ground, from the shrine to myself. I then anointed Becky by the orbits of her eyes, on the brow, and above the navel. I declared her to be "Nswana-Ruth," "successor of Ruth", in a way identified with Ruth, in another replacing her, though not totally, as a structural persona. I repeated the anointing process with other members of the group, not naming them after deceased kin but joining them into the symbolic unity of our recently formed community of teachers and students." (Turner, 1979)

The workshop participants had discussed the ritual enactment for hours and agreed it was the turning point after which they understood both the factions and scapegoating within the village and also the sense of the village belonging together, as well as the affectual structure of the social drama (Turner, 1979). The physical and mental motions enhanced their collective and individual understanding of the conflict situation.

This was their first foray into "larp", and it led to many more. They wanted to stage the ritual dramas in their entirety, not just individual rituals. One question was whether this would be a realistic larp or a fantasy larp: "some events ... would be treated realistically, naturalistically; but the world of cultural beliefs, particularly those connected with sorcery and the ancestor cult, would be treated symbolically" (Turner, 1979). They talked about making a film to be shown in the background. Whether the end goal of the enactment would be to perform to a regular

theatre audience or for the participants to understand the culture by exploring the rituals, was also up in the air.

It is clear from his writing that after these exercises Turner himself started to strongly identify with and root for the character he played: “In capitalistic America, or socialistic Russia or China, a political animal like Sandombu might have thrived. In Ndembu village politics, however, a person with ambition, but procreatively sterile and without many matrilinear kin, was almost from the start a doomed man”. (Turner, 1979)

The workshop was over before they could portray all the social dramas they had planned, but a spark was ignited, something that would continue in further conferences, and in the works of Schechner, the Turners, and many of the students who were present. “There is nothing like acting the part of a member of another culture in a crisis situation characteristic of that culture to detect inauthenticity in the reporting usually made by Westerners and to raise problems undiscussed or unresolved in the ethnographic narrative,” Turner writes (1979).

The workshop was a turning point for Schechner, as well:

“I made more than 50 pages of notes. These tell me of vigorous discussions among Turner, Goffman, Alland, and I — especially during the [three] days Goffman was there. ... Turner was a transgressive superstar for sure. The takeaway, 41 years later, from that workshop is a flash of memories. Sitting in a circle on the second floor of The Performing Garage in SoHo. Participating in, evoking, and responding to Vic’s ebullience, brilliance, jouissance, and appetite to go where few if any anthropologists have ventured. This in contrast to Goffman’s profound skepticism and irony and Alland’s academic probity. And to recall that Edie [anthropologist Edith Turner] was there with Vic, coaching and coaxing, sometimes critiquing, never passive, a player.” (Schechner, 2020)

Subsequent larps, I mean, enacted social dramas

After the two-week workshop in Soho, Victor and Edith Turner kept exploring what is essentially larping. With New York University drama students, they performed Central African and Afro-Brazilian rituals, “aided by drummers drawn from the appropriate cultures or related cultures” (Turner & Turner, 1982).

The Turners continued these experiments at the University of Virginia where they taught anthropology. The social dramas were enacted in the large basement of the Turners' home in Charlottesville.

“Our aim was not to develop a professional group of trained actors for the purposes of public entertainment. It was, frankly, an attempt to put students more fully inside the cultures they were reading about in anthropological monographs. ... What we were trying to do was to put experiential flesh on these cognitive bones.”
(Turner & Turner, 1982)

They had already moved away from the constraints of stage play with an audience and clearly were only interested in the experience itself. In a way, ritual drama turned into larp, showcasing the similarities between the two forms.

The Turners' own analysis of what went on has been contradicted by the experiences of some of their students who have since become anthropology professors in their own right:

“I was not a member of the inner circle of faculty and graduate students who prepared and organized the reenactments. ... I had the impression that Vic was less interested in how the reenactments complemented ethnographic texts and more interested in whether the ritual itself had an impact on the participants even if they were not immersed in the culture from which it came” (Brownell, 2020).

This sounds very much like a newbie coming to their first larp and feeling left out of key plots and social cliques. But also like someone recognizing a nascent art form and wanting to make it even better by inventing their own way of doing it better. This, to me, echoes the sentiments of the early Nordic larp scene in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

The social dramas enacted included the Cannibal Dance of the Kwakiutl, a First Nations group in Canada, a ritual of the Barok people from Papua New Guinea, the midwinter ceremony of the Mohawk of Canada, and a completely made-up fake ritual created by students. Douglas Dalton, then a student who participated in the Cannibal Dance and now a Professor of Anthropology at Longwood University, commented after the experience:

“As the ceremony progressed I felt not so much the antagonistic rivalry that was overtly expressed in the ceremony between the bear clan and the killer whale clan, but the fact that we were collectively doing something really important—

something essentially correct. There was so much power flowing all over the place in the longhouse (the Charlottesville basement) that night! The spirits were really at work that evening and we had to keep everything in line so all that power wouldn't destroy everything!" (Turner & Turner, 1982)

These narratives bear a striking relationship to people coming back from their first larp and wanting to explain everything that happened and flailing at articulating just how meaningful it all was.

A Virginian wedding

It was not all about exploring "the other", however. Richard Schechner famously sees almost every mundane task as something that can be viewed as performance, echoing Erving Goffman's previous observations (Goffman, 1956). In that spirit, one of the Turners' graduate students, Pamela Frese, designed and ran a performance about a contemporary Virginian wedding in 1981. This was a topic of her own anthropological studies.

The entire anthropology department were cast as participants. The Turners played the bride's parents. According to the Turners, "the bride and groom were identified primarily because they were not in the least a 'romantic item'" (Turner & Turner, 1982). According to Frese herself, the opposite is true: "[the students playing the bride and groom] did joke about this afterward since they really were a 'thing' as my students would say today. The Turners apparently didn't realize this at the time, but their relationship was why I asked them to play the role in the first place" (Frese, 2020). And indeed, the bride's player had reservations about her own marriage. Talk about playing close to home.

The other participants played wedding guests with roles such as "bride's sister", "groom's ex-girlfriend", "groom's grandfather", "bride's drunken uncle", and so on. The minister was a graduate student of Religious Studies. A relationship map was pinned up in the department office several weeks before the event and people started filling out their loosely sketched characters and relations.

"One of the faculty members declared, as father of the groom, that his "side" of the wedding represented \$23 million of "old New England money". ... Victor Turner was an old proletarian Scots immigrant who made vulgar money by manufacturing

a cheap, but usable, plastic garbage can, and who quoted Robbie Burns, often irrelevantly.” (Turner & Turner, 1982)

Note that the Turners do not write that Victor played the part of a proletarian immigrant but that he *was* a proletarian immigrant. The character had taken over.

The wedding ceremony took place in the Turner’s basement which this time had been turned into a church and was followed by a reception upstairs with real champagne and festive foods (Frese, 2020). All the guests had brought gifts to the happy couple, presented by hand-made item cards. As the evening progressed, some stayed in their characters continuously while others reverted to being out-of-character and only “larping” when something exciting happened.

“Others were taken over, “possessed” by what Grathoff and Handelman have called “symbolic types” — priest, bride, bridegroom, and so on, in the domain of ritual liminality; Drunken Uncle, Pitiful Lean and Slipped Pantaloons in the play domain (the “bride’s grandfather” — a student played this senile type; in the middle of the service he shouted, “Battlestations! Battlestations!” reliving old wars.)” (Turner & Turner, 1982)

The Turners worried that such improvisations disrupted the social drama, as they were not a part of the ritual script. Frese disagrees:

“And why did another graduate student and friend, acting as a senile old man waving his cane, suddenly erupt with angry outbursts exchanged with invisible people during the ceremony? ... They were endangering the success of the event!! But were they? Now in hindsight, these unplanned, improvisational acts actually created a more successful ritual performance than I originally planned and illustrate well what liminality can engender.” (Frese, 2020)

Indeed, much more takes place at a wedding than what is officially described in the program. Without such human elements any event would feel thin and theoretical instead of lived-in and real. Since everyone is the main character of their main story at larps, we rarely have an issue with this. And clearly the same is true of enacted social dramas, too, even if the Turners at first did not recognize it.

One can imagine how intimidating it can be for a student to run a *larp* at superstar faculty members’ home and cast them in it. But once play starts, such social distinctions disappear:

“One of the most obvious dimensions of this liminal experience was the reversal of social roles that emerged through the performance of the ritual and the embodiment of reversals as faculty and students came together as “fictive kin,” temporarily erasing hierarchical power relations within the department.” (Frese, 2020)

Criticism

The Turners’ method of performative anthropology has drawn its share of valid criticism since the 1980s. Issues such as cultural appropriation, emotional safety, ethical research, research on human subjects, elites using the power of ritual to further their own interests, and the transformational power of ritual, are all valid concerns (see e.g., Brownell & Frese, 2020). Such criticism is familiar to many larp organizers, as well. And like many larpers, the field of experiential ethnography has taken this criticism to heart and learned from it:

“[Professor Mark Pedelty’s] answer to the potentially troubling dynamic is to incorporate the problems of cultural appropriation and ethnocentrism into the course, making them central both to inquiry and to the analysis of the performance itself (p. 250). We also advocate for the explicit discussion of these issues in preparation for a classroom performance as well as in the post-performance debriefing and written analysis by the students.” (Brownell & Frese, 2020)

One now common strategy of mitigating cultural appropriation is planning re-enacted social dramas with members of the groups being studied. Or having international students play the parts of elders when performing a ritual they themselves had been a part of (Brownell & Frese, 2020).

An interesting possibility for larp designers wary of cultural appropriation but interested in exploring real-life cultures other than their own is to, instead of avoiding those topics altogether, to deal with the question in the workshops surrounding the larp or within the larp itself. And possibly collaborate with members of those cultures when designing and running the larp, as was done at least in the Palestinian-Finnish collaboration *Halat hisar* (Finland, 2013). Kaisa Kangas (2014) wrote, after having played the ritual-heavy hunter-gatherer larp *KoiKoi* (Norway 2014):

“For me, KoiKoi was successful as a playful attempt at experimental anthropology, and I got many new thoughts and ideas about culture. However, we should be cautious. It would be tempting to make conclusions about real-world hunter-gatherers based on the game. ... That is nothing but an illusion. You don’t learn about real cultures by playing larps inspired by them. Definitely not if there are no members of these cultures in the organization teams. There is only one way to really come to understand a different culture: you learn the language, you go there, you live the life. ... The ankoï culture doesn’t allow us to draw conclusions about real hunter-gatherers. However, it can become a mirror to reflect our own, industrialized 21st century Nordic culture, and that is valuable by itself. There lies the merit of experimental anthropology as a larp genre.”

It seems real-life anthropologists still walking in the Turners’ footsteps are less skeptical of the possibilities of larping ethnographies than Kangas was. On the other hand, the ankoï in *KoiKoi* were a fictional culture based on several stone age societies, not a serious attempt at a specific ethnography.

Legacy

The seismic waves caused by Victor Turner’s and Richard Schechner’s collaboration are still felt today. According to Susan Brownell and Pam Frese, their “pioneering blend of theater and anthropology gave birth to performance studies and reinvigorated other disciplines, such as folklore, communications, linguistics, and education” (Brownell & Frese, 2020).

Many of the Turners’ former students now use these methods in teaching anthropology at universities across the United States, sometimes even using the term “role-playing” (Brownell & Frese, 2020). They may not call it edularp, but they might just as well. Similarly, a week at Østerskov Efterskole where students larp ancient Romans and read all about Rome to better get into character, sounds very much like Turnerian experiential ethnography.

Richard Schechner’s (2002) introductory book *Performance Studies – An Introduction* is mandatory reading in theatre academies across the world. His theories have directly influenced many high-profile Nordic larps, such as *Hamlet* (Sweden 2002) and *Mellan himmel och hav* (Sweden 2003, Eng. Between Heaven and Sea). Their work is also central in our understanding of the precursors of larp in history and current larp-like practices in different cultures all over the globe. Martin Ericsson muses, “[h]ad Nordic-style live-action role-playing been around

in New York in the sixties, it would have been the natural focus for their studies and would have been hailed as the key, the missing link, in their quest to understand humanity's constant creation of performances" (Ericsson, 2004).

In the end, the friendship between Victor Turner and Richard Schechner lasted for only six years. Turner died of a heart attack in 1983. There were two funerals, attended by Turner's family, friends, students, colleagues, and of course, Schechner. The first was a requiem at a Catholic church, the other a basement ritual based on a Ndembu chief's funeral ceremony.

"[Edith Turner] went into the [Ndembu seclusion] hut and we collectively performed the rite for the passing of a headman. I could hear Edie weeping, wailing, suffering her enormous loss. Outside, people were telling jokes, singing, dancing, describing Vic, enticing Edie to step from her isolation and rejoin her community. To transform mourning into celebration; to combine the two; to enact the ritual process. Wife of 40 years, mother of five, anthropologist, and now widow, Edie brought herself and the Victor she both lost and incorporated from the hut back into the world." (Schechner, 2020)

Edith Turner and Richard Schechner continued their collaboration for decades, delving further into the strange liminal realm between theatre and anthropology. I end this essay with a comment from Victor Turner after his first larp-like experience:

"The group or community does not merely "flow" in unison at these performances, but, more actively, tries to understand itself in order to change itself." (Turner, 1979)

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Author Bio

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Possibilities of Historical Larp: Court of Justice in 17th-century Finland

Jenni Lares

Introduction

Talvikäräjät (Finland 2022, eng. Winter Ting) was a larp set in an imaginary village in Western Finland in the 1660s. It was designed as a part of my research project bearing the same name, where I studied the use of history in larp. The larp aimed high in authenticity: the game design was based on authentic court cases and on the most recent research on 17th-century court practices. In this article I present how we, the larpwrights, used history in game design. I will also discuss historical authenticity and how the lessons from *Talvikäräjät* could benefit the community for historical larp.

Historical larp and reenactment

Historical larp shares its roots with historical reenactment. Historical reenactment as a hobby emerged in Finland in the 1990s, and it was inspired by international practices, like the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA, in Finland Suomen keskiaikaseura). Many Finnish reenactors were active also in the newborn larp scene, and vice versa. Differences between these hobbies were not always clear, and the traditions had many similarities. (see Harviainen et al. 2018; Stenros & Montola 2010; Harviainen 2011; Salomonsen 2003; Mochocki 2021)

Later, both hobbies grew and became more distinct. During the 2000s, both also received academic interest. In Finland, academic studies of reenactment have concentrated on material culture (Sundman 2020; Vartiainen 2010), and the study of larp has gotten more attention

than reenactment (on larp studies in Finland, see Stenros & Harviainen 2011). Internationally, the academic focus has been on reenactment rather than historical larp. Historical games have been studied, but academic interest in them has mostly been on digital games (Mochocki 2021, 7). Michał Mochocki's *Role-play as a Heritage Practice* (2021) is the first monograph concentrating on historical larp.

Unfortunately, larp is usually seen as less authentic or more fantasy-like than reenactment (see, e.g., Agnew et al. 2020, 3). One of the main goals of the *Talvikäräjät* project was to bring together these different traditions and show how historical larp is and can be reenactment. However, it is important to remember that there are many styles of historical larp: some are more fantasy- or alternative history -oriented, and not all larps set in the past aim for historical authenticity (on different historical role-playing genres or categories, see Mochocki 2021, 93–95).

Historical larp is a reenactment practice, although larp and reenactment are usually discussed as distinct hobbies. If a larp attempts “to copy the past” (Agnew et al. 2020, 2), it is, by definition, historical reenactment. In practice, however, reenacting and larping are two different activities: to put it quite roughly, larpers play a character in the context of larp, and reenactors are being themselves during reenactment. Reenactors can have an alter ego or depict a social role in their reenactment, but these reenactment personas are usually much lighter than larp characters (Mochocki 2021, 16, 33–35, 75; Harviainen 2011).

Key differences between historical reenactment and historical larp can be found in game design and in the narrative. Larp tells a story formed in the game by its participants, but if a reenactment tells a story, it is usually scripted and does not encourage individual play. Most reenactors only depict a social role and are not actively playing a character in their reenacting, whereas character play is an important feature in larp. J. Tuomas Harviainen has noted that reenactment and larping have many similarities, and their essential difference is in the naming and framing of the action rather than in their nature. (ibid.)

It must be noted that any presentation of history is an approximation. A historical larp cannot grasp all aspects of the past: this is not a lack but a feature of all historical presentations. Artistic presentations of the past are not academic contributions, and they should not be treated as such. Since a historical presentation cannot include or “get right” all historical features, the important questions are: what kind of choices were made in the design process, what kind of history is depicted, and how is it depicted. Presentations of the past can and should be discussed also on their historical accuracy and how they relate to academic understanding of

historical phenomena, but low-level “is it authentic or not”-dualism fails to see how a work of art depicts people and cultures of the past, their motivations, and historical processes. It is important to recognize that the presentation of the past is an active choice, and these choices contribute to our understanding of the past as well as the present. (see also Mochocki 2021, 7, and Chapman 2016, 6–11.)

***Talvikäräjät* research project**

The idea to study historical larp stemmed from my own experiences in historical reenactment, larp, and academic research. I participated in my first larp in 2002, and a couple of years later started also with historical reenactment. In 2006 I began studying history, which eventually led to doctoral studies and gaining my PhD in 2020. All this time, I participated in various larps, including historical, and was involved in designing them. I also reenacted Finnish Iron Age, Middle Ages, and early 17th century, and dabbled in some other periods as well.

During my PhD, I noticed how my sources, 17th-century Finnish court records, could provide a good setting for a larp. First I thought about designing the larp as a hobby, but then I also found out about the growing academic interest in reenactment practices and historical games. The study of historical games had concentrated on digital games, and reenactment studies seemed to exclude historical role-play as mere fantasy. A research project started to form, and luckily, I was able to secure funding from the Finnish Cultural Foundation in 2021. The project was conducted in the Game Studies Lab in Tampere University, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank all my colleagues there for their valuable comments and encouragement.

The grant covered one year’s work, to design a historical larp and to do research on Finnish historical larps. By designing a larp based on my historical research, I wanted to examine how academic research could be turned into creative work. The research part, which took place after the larp, involved a questionnaire for *Talvikäräjät* participants about their experiences both in the larp and in other historical larps as well. I also did interviews with larprawrights who are or have been active in organizing historical larps in Finland. The academic results of the study are still under publication, but it would seem that larp is an excellent tool for reenacting some aspects of the past which are harder to grasp with other forms of reenactment. In larp, there is a difference between the player and the character, which enables playing with social dynamics and power. It is also possible to design religious or magical experiences and encounters, which would have been an integral part of worldviews in many past cultures.

In this article, I describe the design process and the outcome of the historical larp, also named *Talvikäräjät*, designed in the research project. I will also reflect how the lessons learned in *Talvikäräjät* could help others design and/or play historical larps. I'm aware that similar grants are very hard to get, and being both historian and larper is quite rare in Finland. I'm certain, however, that having experience in academic research, historical reenactment, and larp, can give unique insight and can help both lay and academic discussions on historical larp and experiencing the past.

Designing the larp

As mentioned, the early modern court of justice seemed already at the beginning to be a good setting for a larp. In the past decades, academic research (Österberg 1987 being one of the pioneers) has highlighted the role of 17th-century rural lower courts as social arenas where various power structures and strategies interact, and everyone is, in principle, able to join and follow the proceedings. In Sweden, which present-day Finland was a part of from the Middle Ages until 1809, lower court gatherings stemmed from prehistoric practices of coming together to decide on common affairs and settle various disputes. During the early modern period (ca. 1500–1800), these prehistoric court gatherings (sw. *tinget*, fi. *käräjät*) slowly changed into modern courts of justice, when the role of local communities and their leaders was diminished, and the role of professional judges and unified practices was increased. The 17th century was the turning point, since the local community still played an active part in the court, but the crown wanted to unify legal practices and demanded very detailed records from local courts. Nowadays, these lower court records provide valuable information, not only about judicial proceedings, but also of everyday life, social relationships, and cultural practices in 17th-century countryside. (Andersson 1998, Toivo 2008, Taussi Sjöberg 1996, Miettinen R 2019)

Contemporary research has highlighted the role of various power structures and different voices and strategies in the court gatherings of 17th-century Finland (Toivo 2008 & 2016, Miettinen R 2019; for Sweden, Andersson 1998, Taussi Sjöberg 1996), so these were taken as leading features for game design in *Talvikäräjät*. Early modern proceedings relied heavily on oral testimonies, where the practices of remembering, storytelling, and interpreting played an important role. Thus, the main themes of the larp were memory, power, and community. Stylistically the larp was a court drama with systemic injustice and occasional absurdities.

The production of *Talvikäräjät* larp began in Spring 2021, as soon as I was granted funding. Firstly, I gathered a group of larp organizers with whom I had previously designed historical larps. We discussed my role as a grant researcher, but since other organizers were volunteers, the production was very similar to our previous larp projects. I would act as the main organizer and be responsible for the overview and historical accuracy: I could just use more time and resources than the average volunteer organizer. Other organizers chose their roles in story and character design and taking care of the practicalities.

We designed an imaginary village set in the Satakunta region in Western Finland in 1666. This year was chosen because the year before, ecclesiastical courts were merged into rural lower courts, which made it possible to include more varied cases in the larp. The mid-17th century also belonged more clearly in the transition period than the late 17th century, which also saw the emergence of witch trials and a new church law in 1686. Satakunta was chosen because the sources for my dissertation were from there. I wanted to highlight the centrality of the region, and not to have to explain cultural practices with peripheral location. In the village, there lived 35 player characters, who belonged to different families and groups, and had various amounts of social and economic capital. The larp was run at a weekend, and the event lasted from Friday evening to Saturday night.

The court proceedings

The court gathering was designed according to historical examples: the local community would gather to a session with many different cases. On Friday evening, we played different scenes which were connected to the cases discussed later in court. The aim was to give players the experience of being there, rather than only reminiscing about something that was written in their character profile. We also wanted to simulate the process of memory-making and remembering. These scenes took place in various timelines, and after the scenes, the game was paused for the night. On Saturday, the game was played linearly from the opening of the court until closure and punishments, with some in-game breaks for playing, socializing, and eating. Historically, court gatherings could last several days and not everyone would be so actively engaged in so many hearings, so the larp proceeding could be described as compressed reality.

Some contemporary judicial practices were included because they supported the role of communal decision-making. Historically, twelve local farmers would act as lay members of the court (sw. *nämbdeman*, fi. *lautamies*). They would help the judge, inform them on local circumstances, and vote in unclear proceedings. For the sake of power balance among the

characters, the number of lay members was reduced to five: almost all land-owning male characters acted as lay members of the court and decided on cases involving one another. The owner of the richest farm acted as a local officer, sheriff (sw. *länsman*, fi. *nimismies*), who historically helped to organize the court gathering and had various tasks in local administration. Contrary to later periods, 17th-century sheriffs were elected among the locals to a position of trust, and only later did the post become a public office. In the larp, the sheriff also had personal storylines with his family, and he was torn in several directions in the local community.

With unclear proceedings, a practice of communal oath was used both historically and in-game. The accused could swear that they were not guilty, and if they could get enough people to take the oath with them, the judge could declare them innocent. Historically, the number of required co-oaths was usually eleven, but we lowered it to two. Thus, if some members of the local community believed the accused to be innocent, or not deserving a legal punishment for their actions, they could free them. This proved to be a very fruitful and dramatic opportunity in the game.

The judge was a non-player character, which was designed to lead the game forward and press legal solutions to the cases, but simultaneously support gameplay and the role of individual and communal decision-making. Also, when choosing authentic court cases for the larp, we preferred complex cases without clear solutions, or cases where the characters' choices played an important role. Although the law stated a clear punishment for every crime, every character could influence the outcome. Would they testify against their neighbor, friend, or relative? Could they embellish their account, explain that they had not seen properly, say that they didn't remember – or, more straightforwardly, lie? What outcome did they prefer? The testimonies and the verdict were then written down by a non-player scribe, resulting in an in-game court record.

Usually in Finnish larps, where characters and plots are pre-designed by the organizers, a lot of time and energy is used in cross-checking. In a game where different experiences and memories are part of the gameplay, the stories don't need to be as coherent, and they can also change during the game. This also happened when some characters declared that some events went completely different than how they were played in the Friday scenes, simulating the formation of memories and reinterpretation of previous events, or twisting the truth.

Most of the cases were serious, but we also included potentially funny or absurd cases. When the priest was asked whether he was drunk during a sermon, or when the innkeeper was accused of selling drinks on a holy day's eve, many players saw the hearings as humorous, and



we can't really claim it to be unhistorical. People of the past also had their quirky sense of humor. Another severe but absurd case dealt with two farmers, the owner of a wealthy freehold estate and a new settler, who, during a very drunken evening, had agreed to switch farms. This was, of course, for the settler a possibility to expand his possessions and raise in social position, but a disaster for the estate owner and his family. The estate owner tried to explain the switch as a drunken joke and eventually bribed the settler out of his claims. In the original case the court deemed the switch unlawful, since the settler had previously agreed to make the new farmstead profitable in exchange for tax reductions (the original case is discussed in Finnish in Lares 2020, 179).

Some cases were criminal, but some were disputes that the characters could settle in court. We hadn't scripted any outcomes, only the requirements for conviction if they were proved in court. All court cases had some effect on the participants' life or place in the community: some were disgraceful or made the accused look ridiculous or incompetent, some outcomes or punishments hit hard physically and economically, and even death sentences were possible, although the characters ended up avoiding them.

We chose to leave out court cases involving witchcraft. This was also communicated to players before the registration began. We felt that witchcraft cases would draw too much attention from other cases. Since there are many prejudices and popular opinions about 17th-century witch hunts, playing witchcraft proceedings in an authentic manner would require a lot of background information and a different kind of game design. This could be done later in another larp (see, e.g. *The Witch Experience* (UK 2022)), but for *Talvikäräjät*, we decided to concentrate on other aspects of early modern society.

Going beyond historical records

When we had decided the cases that we wanted to include, the design team started to build a social network around the cases. Although historically plausible, it would be boring for a character to be a random witness in just one case: so we made all characters involved in several cases as plaintiffs, defendants, witnesses, or in close connection to them, feeling the weight of possible outcomes.

Although historical sources are our only way of gaining knowledge about the past, they also affect the image that we form. Many early modern historical records concentrate on land-owning men and the elite, leaving out other groups in the society. In 17th-century court

records, however, many groups who are not visible in other sources, are present. Women, children, workers, landless, and the poor are involved in various court proceedings, since everyone could, in practice, bring their case to the court and testify on their own behalf. Sometimes the head of the family would plead the case, but not always. (Miettinen R 2019, Miettinen T 2012, Toivo 1998, Andersson 1998, Taussi Sjöberg 1996)

Although the larp was based on authentic court cases, we wanted to reimagine what the community around official records would look like. In the past decades, a lot of research has been done about the various groups in the early modern countryside (see previous note), and we could lean on that in character design.

Most of the characters belonged in a family who owned a bigger or smaller farmstead. Some had taken service in them. There were also soldiers of the Crown who were originally recruited from the countryside, some even from the village where the larp was set, and who were commonly stationed in the farmsteads during a period of peace. Some characters were outcasts: not belonging in any land-owning family, and getting their living in various legal and illegal activities. The new settler, who was mentioned earlier, had gotten himself and his servant an abandoned farm, and they worked hard to make it profitable and to raise their social standing. In addition to family ties, all characters belonged to a social group and had friends, if only just a few. Court records are written to document proceedings, but alongside that, they describe various cultural practices and networks. With close reading, they can reveal friendship networks and sociability (Lares 2020, 275, 289–293), which we wanted to include in the larp as well. Thus, all characters had various amounts of social, cultural, and economic capital and power, which they could utilize in their gameplay and find the best possible solution for their cases, if the character or the player wanted to do so.

One historical phenomenon which has mostly escaped court records is same-sex couples. How could they have existed in the 17th-century countryside? Early modern court proceedings about male sex are sparse, and they usually involve violence and abuse. A typical male couple would probably be something different, so, in *Talvikäräjät*, the previously-mentioned new settler and his farmhand were also lovers. There was also a female couple consisting of two unmarried young women looking for a solution to live together. The meaning of these same-sex couples was not to put into history something that has not been there, but rather to imagine how an undoubtedly historical phenomenon of same-sex love could be present in the early modern countryside. Same-sex love and affection was not understood in the period as romantic but rather as friendship. (For later examples in Finnish folklore, see Pohjola-Vilkuna 1995.)

Gameplay

The larp was played at the beginning of March 2022. The whole design process was overshadowed by the Covid-19 pandemic, but luckily in February, the restrictions were gradually lifted, and we didn't have to postpone the game. We had, however, advised players not to come if they were feeling sick, and some late cancellations did happen. The Russian attack on Ukraine also resulted in a couple of cancellations, since some participants felt too shocked to play. However, we were very happy that we were able to cover the late cancellations and run the larp as planned.

The structure of the game worked very well, and the schedule for court hearings led the game forward. Many cases were dealt quite fast, because the players had been advised to discuss their cases in-game before their scheduled hearing, and thus the characters only presented a shared story to the judge. In some cases, the accusations and testimonies were saved for the court hearing, which led to a longer proceeding. Although it was optional for other characters to follow court proceedings where they were not involved, many chose to sit in the room and listen to other cases.

Friday's scenes received a lot of compliments from players, since they were an easy way to provide a lifelike experience rather than reading about past events. Some scenes worked better than others, and in hindsight, their design could have been given more attention. Players could choose whether they participated in the Friday scenes, which resulted in some uncertainties about which scenes could be played. Splitting players into groups which would begin on Friday or Saturday, or making pre-played scenes mandatory for all, might have solved the problem. For some scenes, the played-out scene formed too strong a basis for what had really happened, which limited individual perceptions and the possibilities for later reimagining. In some scenes, such as a tavern fight between soldiers that was based on an authentic description and rehearsed beforehand, the witnesses did not know what they were seeing and were thus given more space for interpretation and organic memory-making. Pre-played scenes worked best when concerning intentions and individual actions: what was said and done, what was meant by it, and how it was interpreted by others.

Although we had not scripted any outcomes for the court cases, most of them went as we had anticipated. The characters were usually reluctant to push for severe punishments, and wanted to find solutions that would suit the most. Families and friends defended and protected their own, which resulted in concentration of power and partial exclusion of the outcasts. Similar

processes have been present in historical court cases. In many proceedings, the outcome was the same both in the historical example and in the larp.

The last cases of the day dealt with the aforementioned tavern fight and a theft. The tavern fight, which was planned and rehearsed beforehand, resulted in the death of one of the soldiers, who was played by one of the larpwrights. In contemporary judicial practice, manslaughter was punishable by death, but if the victim's family would agree to financial compensation or the act was done in self-defense, the punishment would be a fine. The characters who had seen the fight chose to testify that the dead soldier was known to be extremely violent, and the soldier who had given him the final blow had done it in self-defense. Thus, the soldier was not sentenced to death but was given a severe fine, which locals helped him to pay.

The suspected theft was not solved before the court hearing, and the injured party accused an old soldier with quite loose evidence. Since the accused had been seen with an unusual amount of money which he could not convincingly explain, the judge ordered the soldier to swear his innocence with two co-swearers. He asked his fellow soldiers and old friends to take the oath with him, but none were willing to do so. Therefore, he was sentenced to cover the stolen money and pay a fine, which he could not afford, so the fine was converted into corporal punishment. The old soldier had in fact stolen the money, but he did not confess nor was his conviction based on evidence: only his reputation and his place as an outcast. For many players, this was a defining moment about systemic injustice and the cruelty of judicial practice, which they reflected in the after-larp questionnaire.

A similar thing happened with two poor sisters, who were given fines for selling drinks illegally but could not pay for them. The sisters could not get anyone to pay their fines, although most local men had been drinking in their cottage, so their fines were also converted to whiplashes. After the whipping, shortly before the end of game, one family offered to take the sisters' children into their custody, because members of the family had fathered both children. The children did not have to live in poverty anymore, but the price was that they were separated from their mothers. This also highlighted social and economic injustices.

Aftermath

The themes of the *Talvikäräjät* larp, memory, power, and community, were present in the gameplay and produced the most touching experiences which were described in the questionnaire after the larp. Systemic injustice and different economic possibilities led to

dramatic outcomes, which were supported by contemporary court practices. The feeling of being an in- or outsider in the community was present.

Many larp designers know that players are usually drawn towards democracy and compromise and are reluctant to push towards conflict. This might not be a lack but a feature of human sociability. Playing oppression and inequality might teach us how these processes work and are kept up also in our world, and might help in dismantling them. In *Talvikäräjät*, communality and the avoidance of conflicts led to injustice and systemic oppression, when some people were not seen as equal members of the community.

When designing historical larp, or making other source-based work of art, it is no surprise that the outcome resembles the source. Following modern-day historical research, *Talvikäräjät* highlighted the role of reputation, community, and wealth in early modern society. We managed to create a multivocal community with various needs and hopes, some of which were met in various manners. Some of the accused escaped a sentence with the help of powerful friends and their own status in the community, and although some received blows to their reputation, it did not affect their position. Economic inequality became an important theme, since some characters could pay their fines or get somebody else to pay them, while others had no choice but to receive corporal punishment.

In addition to historical content, we also wanted to explore how court drama would work in a larp and how to get the cases tangible and meaningful for players. Some cases would have benefitted from a pre-played scene. For example, in one case the court had to decide whether a local farmer had killed himself or if his death had been an accident. Suicide was illegal in 17th-century Sweden, and suiciders were not given a Christian burial, so conviction would affect the handling of the body and bring shame onto the deceased and their family (on early modern suicides, see Miettinen R 2019). A scene with the deceased could have helped with family dynamics and in making the possible conviction and following shame more tangible.

As mentioned earlier, the pre-played scenes were really beneficial for some storylines, but for some they limited the possibilities for remembering. In hindsight, the role, meaning, and script of these scenes could have been given more attention. But, altogether, the structure with pre-played scenes on Friday and court gathering on Saturday with predetermined slots for cases and breaks worked surprisingly well. Some players mentioned in the after-larp questionnaire that following others' cases was a bit boring, and they zoned out or became sore from sitting; but many specified that this just added to their immersion and gave a much-needed break from playing their own storylines. We designers occasionally worried

whether players were bored or if they had enough playable content. However, many players later convinced us that they had very much enjoyed following others' hearings and seeing how their friends and relatives managed.

When using historical sources for game design, it would be beneficial not only to start from those, but also at the middle of the process return to sources. After the game, we realized that some storylines had drifted quite far from the originals, or that the originals had some points that were lost in the process. At the same time, this evolution is the result of a creative process, and helped us to create something unique.

Conclusion

I would like to encourage designers of historical larps to trust their sources and to read updated research on the subjects they are interested in. Contemporary historical research, which highlights multivocality and intersectional approaches, social and cultural history, history of emotions and experiences, and the processes behind communal decision-making can be an enormous help in the design process and can bring up themes already suitable for larp. They also help in seeing behind the sources and building the game world. There is no need to include everything from the past, and it is sufficient to choose the themes one is most interested in. This will also help the players in their preparation for the larp.

In historical larp, we can experience historical phenomena and activities. Gamifying history requires historical knowledge and, at some point, imagination beyond it. Historical knowledge puts the sources into their context and helps to create a world around them. When a larp, or any other work of art, is designed based on historical sources and research, it adds to its authenticity and makes it historical reenactment. Authenticity is not just about material culture but also about actions, experiences, and mentalities: and larp is a good tool for reenacting those.

Although historical larp cannot make us fully understand what people of the past experienced, it might give us a glimpse. Larp is very suitable for playing multivocal communities and many-sided storylines, and these features are easily utilized in historical larp design as well. Larp enables players to reenact historical processes and mentalities which might be contrary to modern beliefs because of the distinction between the player and the character. This is also something that makes larp an unique form of reenactment: the ability to simultaneously reenact individual characters and the community formed by them.

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Author Bio

Jenni Lares is a historian at Tampere University. She is interested in social and cultural history, history of food and drink, and public history. In her PhD thesis (2020), she studied social meanings of drinking in 17th-century Finland. In 2021–2022, she led a postdoctoral project on the use of history in larp, *Talvikäräjät* (eng. Winter Ting), funded by Finnish Cultural Foundation. She is also an active larper, larp designer, and historical reenactor.

COMMUNITY AND NARRATIVES

This section continues from where the previous one ended: historical larp. Laura Wood and Mo Holkar argue that larps risk reproducing popularized narratives of history that avoid uncomfortable issues like colonialism. Kristel Nyberg discusses marginalized people in history: why should and how can we treat them with respect in larps?

We then move to community practices and their critique. Sebastian Utbult demands better and more systematic documentation of larps. Thomas B. requires more critical reviews of larps to serve potential players. He argues this would help remedy the power imbalance between players and larp organizers who currently have the means to control the public image of their works.

The author of *Debauchery: Meh*, an article originally published in last year's secret book, claims that the larp community overpraises larps where debauchery and sex are the main topic. According to the author, these larps steal the spotlight from genuinely interesting works. Another article from the secret book, *Nordic Larp is Not "International Larp"*, argues that international larp is cannibalizing SK/KP and that both scenes – the Nordic and the international – would benefit from separate events.

As the SK/KP scene has grown more international, it has come to include a diverse base of larpers some of whom live in more challenging or difficult environments than others. The two final articles deal with the lived experiences of larpers from the Global South and from conflict areas. Leandro Godoy interviewed Brazilian larpers about the limitations they face and about how they perceive limits and boundaries in larps. Finally, Maria Pettersson writes about making larps under war and occupation. She interviewed Anna Posetselska who organizes larps in Ukraine, and Tammy Nassar who works as a larp professional in Palestine.



Challenging the Popularized Narrative of History

Laura **Wood** & Mo **Holkar**

What is the popularized narrative of history?

There is no such thing as an objective narrative of history. The context of the present-day, the lens of hindsight, and the impossibility of knowing or understanding the true thoughts, feelings, and motivations of people in the past, all conspire against it. Furthermore, any presentation of history is necessarily selective, and necessarily imposes a frame around those historical facts that are included – a frame dictated by the writer’s perspective and agenda. However, it can still be the case that some narrative approaches are trying harder to be objective than others; and that some are more successful at it than others.

By default, unless you are trained as a historian, you will be receiving what we would like to call ‘the popularized narrative of history’. This is a mashup of what you typically learn at school, what you encounter in popular culture, and what you are told by those around you – both from their own experiences of recent history, and from the popularized learning process that they went through themselves. It may be that you were fortunate enough to have had an enlightened education, or to have grown up among people who had an informed view of history, or to have been trained to think critically about popular culture. But for most of us, this will not be the case. We will emerge into adulthood having imbibed a historical narrative that includes a range of stories about the history of our own community; about other peoples with which it has interacted; about the ancient world; and so on.

This popularized narrative, as well as not being accurate, is not neutral: it serves a social purpose. The object is to bind citizens together in a communal national story. It may favour incidents in history when ‘we were the good guys’ – it may avoid situations where the behaviour of our forebears was more difficult for our modern selves to accept. It may stereotype, and it may harmfully ‘other’ – treating groups of people as different from ‘us’, and so not deserving of the same consideration. For example, in the popularized narrative in colonial nations, colonized people are said to be primitive, barbaric, and inferior – justifying the historical colonization process as one of bringing civilization and enlightenment to them. In general, we can characterize the popularized narrative as a top-down oligarchic narrative, dictated in the interests of those in power – so that they might rule us more effectively by controlling our view of ‘us’, of our historical role, and of our present place on the world stage.

Through popular culture, a country’s popularized historical narrative may spread far outside its own borders. People from outside France understand the reign of Louis XIII through the lens of *The Three Musketeers*; people from outside the UK understand the Regency period through the lens of Jane Austen – or, more usually, from the host of films and TV shows based on or inspired by her work. And then, they (we) design larps about it.

Politics of larp

There is a traditional view that larping is just harmless fun – a form of entertainment, apolitical in nature, without responsibility towards its subjects. We believe that this is at best naive, at worst disingenuous: it works to undermine the unavoidably political nature of choices made within an ideologically-contested cultural sphere.

What we choose to larp about, and how we choose to present it, are inherently political. Each option taken serves to exclude other possibilities. Each decision represents a commitment to one set of values, and a denial of another.

If we design a larp set in the Regency period, what are we saying about gender roles? – about social class distinctions? – about racism? – about sexuality? – about slavery? The popularized narrative contains heavily-loaded answers to all of these questions. For example, it teaches that the UK’s relationship to slavery was a noble role of leading the world in abolishing the practice and in fighting to bring it to an end – ignoring the fact that during the Regency period, a large part of the country’s wealth, and that of the characters in Jane Austen’s novels, was derived

from the ongoing exploitation and subjugation of enslaved people (see for example Ferguson 2003). We must not just accept these answers blindly.

Mindful historical larping

The narrative of the Regency era through Jane Austen and the TV show *Bridgerton* has spawned larps such as *The Social Season* (Germany, 2023) and *Pride without Prejudice* (UK, 2018). Both these larps represent a popularized version of the history of the Regency period for upper-class people. These versions of history ignore the reality of life for anyone who isn't upper-class. In the world of the *Bridgerton*-style Regency era, money and success are symbols of status, not survival.

The fact that the wealth of many families was gained through enslaving people is a topic that also has no place in either of these larps, despite being a real-world historical factor. The two larps mentioned take a different approach to handling this. *Pride without Prejudice* is set in an alternative reality where people were not enslaved and where queerphobia didn't exist. *The Social Season* design document (Dombrowski Event UG 2023) states that play on racism is not allowed and that "conversations about slave plantations in the New World or the lucrative human trafficking that you or your imaginary friends engage in are also undesirable."

Fairweather Manor (Poland, 2015) is a larp inspired by the TV shows *Downton Abbey* and *Upstairs, Downstairs*. It focuses on key themes of gender and class, in a similar way to the ways they have been depicted in these shows, and aims to "balance the atmosphere of a historical setting with a highly immersive and playable experience" (Fairweather Manor website 2023). The larp ignored the reality of the class division meaning that it would be unlikely that the servants and the upper-class families they serve would be friends and confidants, as well as ignoring the impact of the British empire and the way it was celebrated during this time period.

This is not intended as a criticism of these larps: all of them state that they are representing a fictionalized account of history which is necessary for playability, and acknowledge the choices made about what to include and what to exclude.

So none of this is to say that creators of larps are acting immorally by using a popularized, or otherwise limited, view of history to create larps. We are always making choices when we decide what the main focus of a larp is, and with limited time and a limited number of participants we can't hope to explore all aspects of a historical period. And even if attempted,

it is likely that our own biases and lack of information would lead to some aspects being missed anyway.

Instead we need to make mindful choices about what to include, and about the statements we're making with what we exclude.

This is not an argument that all historical larps should be exercises in exploring historical oppression. It is totally fine to create an alternative history where racism, or queerphobia, doesn't exist, in order to focus on another aspect of the experience (see also Holkar 2016). In fact, choices to include things (e.g. a strict gender binary, sexual violence) because they are deemed to be historically accurate should also be made meaningfully.

An important question to ask ourselves as designers is, if we are exploring a historical period that is portrayed in a specific way in the media and in general public understanding, are we leaning into that portrayal? If so, what has been omitted from that portrayal and should that be communicated to participants?

For example *Unnatural Allures* is “a fictionalized and heightened version of the late Victorian and Edwardian era” (Design Document, Kraut.tales 2023) and plays with eroticism and horror. The writers acknowledge the nationalism, colonialism, and orientalism of the period, and suggest that there will be some play around it, although it will be framed in a negative light; while stating that racism is not a theme of play. They also include suggested readings in the appendix of the design document for potential players who want to contextualize the period.

Just a Little Lovin' (Norway, 2011), set in the 1980s, engages heavily with the time period. The themes of the larp are desire, in part represented through queer spaces and cultural movements of the time; and death, represented by the AIDS crisis and the social response to it. However, in the majority of runs of the larp, themes of racism – which was prevalent within and outside the queer community at the time the larp is set – were largely ignored, generally as a conscious design choice not to shift focus or add another axis of oppression. But in a run in the USA (2017), play on racism was included, as the designers then felt that it was essential not to erase the experiences of people of colour.

Conclusion

To state that all larps are political is not to state that all larps have to engage in difficult topics, to evoke negative emotions, or to be an exploration of the deeper injustices of society. However, we believe that there is a responsibility for designers to consider what they are including in, and omitting from, their larps; and what statements are being made by those decisions.

The popularized narrative of history will always be tempting to draw upon, because it is what is most accessible and familiar: it requires the least work on the part of the designer. But it brings a load of cultural baggage and assumptions that may be unwanted – and that, we feel, should be investigated and challenged.

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Author bios

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Mo Holkar is a UK-based larper, and a member of the Larps on Location design collective. He is an editor at NordicLarp.org, and was formerly an organizer of *The Smoke* chamber larp festival and of the *Game Kitchen* larp design workshop. His chamber larp scripts, and links to his writings, can be found at holkar.net.

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History is Our Playground: On Playing with People's Lives

Kristel Nyberg

Introduction

The first time I larped, sometime around 2001, I played a governess in a Jane Austen inspired regency romance. A lot of that game – such as the name of the game or my character – have been lost to me, but I do remember the feeling of being lost and bored. My character's status required her to be present at the party of the gentry, but was too low for any hope of a romance plot. She couldn't sneak into the kitchen either – and she was sternly turned away when she tried – because her status was too high for the servants to risk her finding out about the drama going on downstairs.

To be clear, this game was a genre romance based on fiction, not meant to be a look into the social history and real lives of the people in regency Britain, and I as a player did not consider the real lives and social status of actual governesses of the era. When we roleplay, we often see history as our playground, and the stories of people of bygone eras as inspiration for our characters. In many cases, we find the stories that most pique our interest on the edges and in the margins: it's often much more fun to play drama and hardship than ordinary day-to-day life.

This paper explores questions of ethics when playing with the lives of real, sometimes marginalized, historical people. How can we treat the lives of people who lived and died centuries ago with respect? How much context should we expect the players to study in order

to respectfully portray lives of people in the past? In what detail should we communicate the changes we make for artistic or playability purposes?

A personal interest

The question of how we treat people of bygone times recently became relevant to me, as I joined the research project *Tieteen ja taikuuden rajamailla* (abbreviated *TiTaRa*, the name translates to *Between Science and Magic*), funded by the Kone Foundation from 2023 to 2025. In the project, the three people working as researchers have a background in English historical linguistics. My own merits as a researcher come from looking further back in history: I majored in New Testament Exegetics, and have studied people in vulnerable and marginalized positions in the Biblical World – prostitutes and slaves (Nyberg 2000). More recently, I worked in the field of local cultural heritage for nearly a decade.

My role in the project is one of a designer. I will be writing a roleplaying game – a tabletop game tentatively titled *Tähtiin kirjoitettu* (forthcoming 2025, Eng. *Written in the Stars*) – based on the research that my peers in the project publish. This means that the sources for my game will be examples of real people and their lives in medieval and early modern England. The research project concentrates on the vocabulary used of witches, astrologers and alchemists – and by them, of themselves – in that time period. These people were all set apart from regular society in some way, and at least in the case of witches also feared and sometimes persecuted. As the game I am designing will be published as part of a research project, and as the aim is to make the information accessible to a wider audience, I am concerned by both historical accuracy and playability. This paper was prompted by considerations of portraying the lives of the medieval subjects in a way that does not diminish their experiences, but that allows for enough common ground for the modern players to be able to identify with their characters.

A history of stereotypes

In role-playing games studies, there has been some discussion about *misery tourism* during the past few years. Many games draw inspiration from current or recent historical experiences, often those of marginalized people. Some of these games have been designed in co-operation with groups affected by the real-world issues they depict, such as *Halat hisar* (Finland 2013, Eng. *State of Siege*). Others, such as the Polish *4th of July* (Poland 2022) larp about trashy

trailer park living in Ohio, have been mostly inspired by media and there has not been contact with any actual poor trailer park residents in the design process.

In recent years, the roleplaying community has also started to acknowledge large problems pertaining to depictions of race especially in the D&D derived tabletop tradition (Loponen 2019) but also in larp . Roleplaying games have a long history of *orientalism*, in portraying Asian or Middle Eastern inspired roleplaying cultures as other, exotic, naïve and mystical (Trammell 2016). Roleplayers of color have made it clear that appearing in *blackface* or in exoticized dress or gear to portray someone who is Black, or of Arab, indigenous, or Asian descent is not a homage, but a continuation of a long legacy of racism. (Kemper 2018, Eddy 2020)

The discussions concerning misery tourism, or different racist stereotypes in roleplaying games, are far from finished, as these themes are important in making the roleplaying hobby in all its forms more welcoming and accessible for people of different backgrounds. What seems to be missing, though, is a discussion on games using history that goes beyond the 20th century. There has been discussion about historical and historically inspired games, but these discussions usually revolve more around how accurately history and historical events are represented, and what alterations have been made to make for better playability (Salomonsen 2003).

Quite a few roleplaying games, starting from the earliest D&D, are set in pseudo-medieval worlds. This makes the concept of *medievalism* relevant. For the purposes of this paper, medievalism refers to idealized or stereotypical views of the medieval world. In the roleplaying game context, it's usually more important to build a setting for adventures, not portray the world in a historically accurate way. In the process, these games more often than not end up quite Eurocentric, even when creating fantasy worlds, and colored by a romanticized view of medieval times (Konzack and Dall 2008). This idealized, romanticized medievalism is also something that can attract the interest of conservative nationalist groups – with ideals directly opposed to the ideals of openness and accessibility mentioned above (Mochocki 2022).

Outside the roleplaying community

The discussions on racist and colonialist stereotypes, as well as treating the heritage of people with respect, have not arisen in a vacuum in roleplaying game studies. The same discussions are ongoing in both other fields of study and in broader public discussions. For the purposes of

this paper, I will only cite a couple of cases that are pertinent for the issues of history, heritage and respect.

In July 2023, as I was working on this paper, the Dutch king Willem Alexander gave a speech in apology for the part that the Netherlands played in the history of slavery (Willem Alexander 2023). At the same time, artefacts that were taken from Sri Lanka and Indonesia during the Dutch colonization are now being returned home (Bubalo 2023).

Museums that work with cultural heritage and store historical artefacts also participate in the discussion. In Finland, the National Museum repatriated Sámi artefacts from their collections to the Sámi community and the Sámi Museum Siida in 2021. I myself visited the powerful exhibit *Máccmõš, maccâm, máhccan – The Homecoming*, which according to the National Museum “showcases the significance of cultural heritage to people and identity and encourages us to think about the control and ownership of cultural heritage”. In the exhibition *Egypt of Glory – The Last Great Dynasties* in 2020 to 2021, in the museum Amos Rex, located in central Helsinki, questions of respect and of displaying the bodies of the dead, who had been mummified and buried according to their religious customs, were included in the exhibition texts for the public to read. The part of the exhibition where the human mummies were displayed was somber. The acoustics were created to shield the area from crowd noises, and the visitors were asked to be respectfully quiet. Both exhibitions mentioned above made the exhibition materials available in the relevant languages, in the case of the first in Sámi languages, and in the second in Arabic.

These cases are but a few examples of the discussion about history, heritage, and respect, in the context of which we operate both as scholars and as creators of roleplaying games and larps.

Voices of larp writers

For a closer look into the subject at hand, I talked with the writers of two Finnish historical larps from the 2010s: *Completorium* from 2012 and *Jotta vahva ei sortaisi heikkoja* (Eng. So That the Strong Should Not Harm the Weak) from 2018. I had a personal discussion with Minna Heimola, one of the authors of *Completorium*, and interviewed Aino Haavisto and Ada-Maria Hyvärinen about *Jotta vahva ei sortaisi heikkoja* by email. In these talks, I asked these larp writers the same questions that I posed in the Introduction of this paper: How can we treat the lives of people who lived and died centuries ago with respect? How much context should

we expect the players to study in order to respectfully portray lives of people in the past? In what detail should we communicate the changes we make for artistic or playability purposes? Both these games hail from the Finnish historical larp tradition, which has been greatly influenced by the reenactment and larp association Harmaasudet (The Greywolves). This game style is characterized by an ambition for authenticity, and a lot of discussion and research into historical sources goes into the writing of these games. There is also an educational undertone, and players are expected to read background material put together by the organizers (Sahramaa 2010). Before historical games, there are often possibilities to join in crafting sessions for sewing costumes or making other gear. For my first larp, the game mentioned in the Introduction, a game in either the Harmaasudet or Alter Ego tradition, I participated in several dance rehearsals to learn recreations of historical dances of the era – and I also learned to play whist, a card game that was popular in the regency era.

In addition to Harmaasudet, several prolific Finnish writers of historical larp are alumni of Alter Ego, the University of Helsinki roleplaying association. This means many have degrees in subjects such as cultural heritage studies or folkloristics, and have gone on to careers in, for example, some of the most well-known museums in Finland. Some have also completed doctorates – an achievement that translates into ever-more professional background research. *Completorium* (Finland 2012) was a game set in a medieval Cistercian monastery. The authors have already published texts about the game, from the point of view of considering gender in historical larps (Heimola and Heimola 2016) and also from the point of view of reenacting history (Heimola 2012). In the case of this particular game, the main organizers had recently completed or were just about to complete their doctoral studies in theology and in comparative religion – and during my discussion with Minna Heimola I was shown a respectable pile of books that represented just some of the background research done for *Completorium*.

In our discussion, Heimola reiterated that the organizers wanted to respond to a dual issue: one of the most common complaints about Finnish historical larp in the 2000s was that female characters often ended up as being boring and feeling like side characters, but at the same time – and this is something that still persists in Finnish larp – most of the people signing up for the games were non-male, and wished to play non-male characters. Hence, the main consideration of the organizers was not a respectful treatment of any historical subjects. Rather, they wanted to portray a historical setting that fit their mostly-female player demographic, in a way that allowed for meaningful play and character agency within that setting.

Heimola mentioned that they also dived into historical sources for what the characters were supposed to do during the game: the day-to-day cycle of monastic life with both services and daily labor, scenes of religious visions, as well as more action-oriented plots such as attempts to steal relics for another church.

Jotta vahva ei sortaisi heikkoa (Finland 2018) was a larp set in ancient Mesopotamia, in the context of a judge's visit to a fictional small town. Also in this case, the authors have written about the game and their thinking around the themes and of making history playable (Haavisto and Hyvärinen 2020). Again, the historical background of the game was well-researched: Haavisto has a degree in languages and Asian studies, with a minor in Assyriology.

In my interview, the authors told me that they had a clear division of labor, with Haavisto being in charge of the actual historical background, and Hyvärinen taking more responsibility of changing things around to create a better and more playable story. From the start they agreed that playability comes before historical accuracy. Initially, the plan had been that every character would have had some connection to actual historical materials: tablets on court cases of the era, letters and the like. This did not quite come to pass, and the final result was that around a third of the characters had these direct connections to the ancient material. As an example, the authors described using actual ancient court cases that pertained to one or two people and then filled in details such as family members – so those family member characters did not have a direct link to historical materials. No characters were directly and fully based on actual historical persons, though one character did impersonate Ea-Nāsir, the copper merchant of the clay tablet UET V, 81 (Figulla and Martin 1953).

The authors said that in their experience the Finnish larp culture surrounding historical larp expects the players to read all materials in order to understand the genre and the vision of the game at hand, and to act accordingly when playing. As such, they were not concerned about their players being disrespectful of the material presented – and also, as they point out, the events of the game were set so far back in history that any information we have is based on archeology rather than any living cultural heritage. With a 3000+ year gap in time between the time represented in the game and the people of today, we cannot really call the ancient Mesopotamians close cultural ancestors of anyone alive now.

This does not mean that history was taken lightly. In the background information section of the game homepage, details for which there were no sources in research, or which were changed for better playability, were clearly marked in cursive. The authors told me they felt it was important that the players, when preparing for the game, would be able to see right away

what was based on historical research, and what was not. It was also communicated to the players from the start that they were engaging in a decidedly feminist take on history. On the point of contextualization, the authors also said that many of the plotlines for the characters were age-old, and deeply rooted in being human and not representing a particular era: fairly sharing inheritance, being involved in a love triangle, or the balance between fulfilling parental wishes versus taking your own liberties.

In all, the organizers of both *Completorium* and *Jotta vabva ei sortaisi heikkoa* agreed on that players needed enough onboarding and contextualization to grasp the setting and game vision. The Finnish style of historical larp expects players to be prepared to put in some work into understanding the era the given game is set in, and to dress and act the part. In both cases, if historical accuracy and playability were in conflict, playability was prioritized.

Of course, even though styles of play have evolved during the years, Finnish larp has a long history of prioritizing immersion into character, and acting as you believe your character would do in any given situation or social setting. Even though it's been over two decades since the debated *Manifesto of the Turku School* (Pohjola 2003), the ideals of strong character immersion being central to the larp experience still linger.

The authors I interviewed felt that taking into account the style of play in historical games that has evolved in the Finnish tradition, they had every reason to believe that their players would treat their characters respectfully, and would do their best to represent the lives of the characters in an as authentic fashion as they could, *based on the background material they were given*.

As I myself have experienced this tradition and style of play firsthand, I understand the position of these authors. The question is: How much do the players actually know about history, and how much do they *think* they know? There are pitfalls in trusting the historical knowledge of your players.

History, heritage, and roleplaying

The authors of *Jotta vabva ei sortaisi heikkoa* mentioned heritage, and the fact that the very ancient history their game was set in isn't directly lived and experienced heritage for anyone today. When considering this, I ended up looking into questions of heritage. I found the

vocabulary of heritage studies very helpful when considering the issues of using the lives, experiences and accounts of real people as material for games.

According to Rodney Harrison (2013), *history* is about the past, whereas *heritage* is concerned with the present and future. This means that we make sense of past events concerning our social or ethnic group, about our nation or about a minority we belong to by giving meaning to things that our predecessors have done or experienced. It's a process of social meaning-making. In his book *Role-play as a Heritage Practice* Michał Mochocki (2021) combines heritage studies with historical game studies and roleplaying game studies, and discusses authenticity and historical accuracy in the context of games, as well as immersion and experiencing. He notes that the discussion in the field of historical game studies often distinguishes between accuracy-based authenticity, and behavioral and psychological authenticity, which leads to a dualism of accuracy-of-facts versus authenticity-of-feeling.

As someone who has played both tabletop RPGs and larped in historical settings, I recognize the thought of authenticity-of-feeling from my own experience. I would not expect historical accuracy, or accuracy-of-facts, in every detail of a game. Instead, when going to a historical larp, I want to experience something of the era the game is about. If the game had an educational goal – such as highlighting the experiences of marginalized groups in the era and setting – I would expect proper contextualization through workshops, talks, or written information provided.

Above, in *A history of stereotypes*, I noted that we tend to shift from questions of ethics and respect to more general questions of accuracy and authenticity when we go further back in history. The viewpoint of heritage studies sheds some light on why that is. When there is a direct link of living *heritage* between the era or events we portray, and people alive today, we need to take this into account. This is where the questions of respectful treatment of the past and the people and events we portray are important. When we go into *history*, the link is often broader – such as the *Dzikie Pola* (Poland 1997) portrayal of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which describes the history of whole nations rather than any marginalized groups (Mochocki 2022).

The pitfall of history is that we often think we know what it was all about, but what we are taught at school is in the end quite superficial. If we play striving to be “authentic”, it is easy to erase marginalized identities, or repeat our prejudices time and again. Having studied historical times and people myself (Nyberg 2000, 2006), I know from experience that we very often just cannot know for certain how people – especially people who were not in politically significant

positions – really lived, as the further back we go, the more we rely on what kind of materials have been preserved. If we have a collection of Roman laws, for example, we do not know for sure how strongly they were enforced, unless the information is extensively backed by other sources such as court rulings and contemporary written accounts. Defending discriminatory design choices by saying “this is historically accurate” is very often not a sustainable argument. When we move from themes of heritage to themes of history, it is well justified to use the principle “the players are more important than the game”. We are not disrespecting the people of bygone eras by considering the safety and well-being of our players today. If we design for what we *imagine* was historically accurate rather than for playability, we will very likely be placing roadblocks for people from marginalized backgrounds joining the game (Jones, Holkar and Kemper 2019).

Conclusion

The questions of respectful treatment of historical subjects have not been raised very much in roleplaying game studies. We visit the past and play with people's lives not only to experience their struggles or marginalization, but to find the human connection between them and us. Even separated by nearly four millennia, we can sympathize with the client who complained about the quality of copper provided by one Ea-Nāsir – or, as we do not know if the complaint had merit, the poor salesman. What we need to remember is that when we create a game set in history, we always create our own interpretation of it. It is not necessary to repeat every oppression and injustice – and not considering these in the design but just including them by default damages playability.

The farther back in history we go, the less information we have on what the everyday lives of people were really like, or what the thoughts and feelings of the average person were. What we do have, however, is an ongoing discussion about the respectful treatment of people's *heritage*. Living heritage makes sense of events of the past and how they pertain to the events of the present and the future.

The current discussion on the history of racism, the legacy of colonialism, and the respectful treatment of cultural heritage is ongoing not only in the context of roleplaying games, but in society at large. This article is only a quick dip into these issues as they are relevant for roleplaying in historical settings, and I hope to be able to expand on this and go deeper into the questions of history, accuracy and authenticity, and respect, at a later date.

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Jotta vahva ei sortaisi heikkoa (2018): Finland. Ada-Maria Hyvärinen & Aino Haavisto.
Tähtiin kirjoitettu / Written in the Stars (upcoming 2025): Finland. Kristel Nyberg

Museum exhibitions

Egypt of Glory - The Last Great Dynasties (2020-2021): Amos Rex.
Mäccmõš, maccâm, mähccan - The Homecoming (2021-2022): The National Museum of Finland.

Author bio

Kristel Nyberg is a Finnish author and RPG designer. Her academic background is in New Testament exegetics, but she has recently taken an interest in role-playing games studies, and was among the first to complete the Certificate Track in Transformative Game Design at Uppsala University in 2022-23. Her upcoming projects include a supplement on religions to the Finnish tabletop RPG *Praedor*, and designing a roleplaying game for the University of Turku research project *Between Science and Magic*.



Tears in the Rain

Sebastian **Utbutt**

*A version of this article was originally published in the Knudepunkt 2023 underground book *The Secret Book of Butterflies*.*

I've seen things you people wouldn't believe... Larp forum threads on fire off the shoulder of phpBB... I watched instamatic photos glitter in albums near the Immersionist Gate. All those... moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time... To die.

I'm old, so this might come across as `old_man_yelling_at_cloud.gif`, but hear me out: we suck at documenting our larps these days. There are no central larp calendars for what larps have been run and which ones are upcoming. Photos end up not in public larp galleries or forums but in personal photo albums on social media sites or closed places like invite-only events on Facebook, Discord servers etc. Discussions take place on personal social media walls or feeds, or in said closed larp events/groups or chatrooms. Amazing larps (and disastrous ones) come and go, and the only traces they leave are scattered on the social media platform breeze.

Don't believe me? As an exercise, (without doing a shoutout on your Facebook wall) try to come up with a list of 10 larps organized in your country from a couple of years ago, let's say 2019. Or even 2022. How do you do it? Where do you look for information? How to find out who organized those larps, at what venues were they run? What did they cost? Where are the stories from that larp, or discussions about what happened there, the interesting techniques used or the bad design choices? Try finding photos from those larps. Where are they, and how do you find them?

Existing initiatives to archive larps

<https://alexandria.dk> - An extensive archive of (primarily) role-playing scenarios and conventions, but also larps, fanzines etc.

<https://lajvhistoria.se> - A Swedish larp archive

<https://larpovadatabase.cz/> - An archive of Czech & Slovak larps

<https://www.laivgalleriet.no/> - A gallery of Norwegian larps

<https://nordiclarp.org/wiki> - The wiki of Nordic larps

I've done this exercise over and over, trying to piece together clues and compiling the scant information into lists. It's exhausting work that requires not only extensive research and time, but also for you to reach out (often on social media) to complete strangers - who may or may not even get notified about your message or may even miss it completely in the constant algorithm maze that is social media these days - to get a hold of even the basics: who organized the larp? Did it even happen or was it canceled? What was the larp about?

Believe it or not, but this task is much easier for larps way back - even from back in the dark 1990s, before everyone had internet, you can still find archived forum threads, cached web pages and paper fanzine articles, that allow you to study larps that few have ever heard of. The larps of 2023? Who knows, it's all lost in the Facebook fog of war (or even worse, buried deep in an endless stream of text on some Discord server or another). After 2012 it gets progressively harder to find information about larps, and after 2020 it's basically a black hole. Plot the information available on a graph and you'd think larp basically died out in 2018.

So, who cares, you might ask yourself. What do I care about photos from that Finnish viking larp back around 2018, or about who organized that nordic noir slash fae power struggle larp in Copenhagen last fall? Well, we *should* care about our history - not only the "old" history from the 1990s or the early 2000s when "everything" happened, we should care about writing our history today for the decades to come - or it will just be a blank spot on the map, a gaping hole in the traditions and evolution of this strange hobby of ours. We should care about where we've been, what we've tried and experienced, and not only that - we should be proud and celebrate all of our larps - the good, the bad, the ones that pushed the limits or expanded the borders of our hobby, the ones that tried but failed, and the ones that perhaps didn't leave a mark in the halls of fame but still reside in the collective memory of their participants.

We should care, and we should find a way to not only preserve that history, but to make it publically available. How do we do this? I don't exactly know, but since we are a smart and entrepreneurial group of weirdos, we should be able to come up with solutions. Don't let these tears be washed away in the rain.

Author bio

Sebastian is an occasional larp organizer, amateur archivist and science fiction buff. He regularly needs his dose of flashing lights and pounding basslines to feel alive. He has organized larps like *Ingenmansland*, *Lotka-Volterra*, *Terra Incognita* and *Simbelmynë*,

and produced a couple of issues of the larp fanzine *Sanningen*. If at all possible he wouldn't mind seizing the means of production.

- public and easily accessible (neither requiring sign-up to a closed Facebook group or Discord, nor having to search for each individual larper’s blog)
- in English (international larps have a global audience)
- online (not everyone can afford to travel to Solmukohta to hear feedback in person)
- free from organiser control.

There are no print larp magazines with global reach, and there is not enough space in a single Knutebook per year to review a significant portion of the scene. The *Nordic Larp* website (nordiclarp.org) is receiving more submissions (see below), but it is still nowhere near a RottenTomatoes / GoodReads / TripAdvisor / Google Reviews of larp. The last two are indeed not art review websites: in my opinion, a larp event cannot just be a work of art, it is also a real-life physical experience, often paid for, and should also be reviewed as such.

If you end up being beaten by a cast member at an immersive theatre experience that advertised “no physical contact”, poisoned by a chef in a restaurant, or if your AirBnB had bed bugs, your review would probably mention it. All three can happen in a larp, and could therefore be in the scope of any public larp feedback. Most larp organisers are not paid professionals, and this should be taken into account, but neither are many AirBnB hosts. The monetary transaction to an unknown party can make larp a different activity than just “doing art with friends”.

One of the reasons there is so little public larp feedback is that these articles may have unintendedly discouraged some players from writing any. First by emphasising intrinsic challenges overtly, second by using passive art criticism as a benchmark. For example, the requirement to put things in context of the artform bans any first time larpers from writing a critique – and might discourage them from writing a review. Even an old fart like myself cannot be bothered with carefully referencing other games in his reviews or thinking about his reader’s cultural environment, and thus the messy walls of text stay in friends-only Facebook posts. As Kangas writes, larp criticism is a “thankless process”, and the final straw is the fear of retaliation. No novelist can prevent reviewers from reading their next book once it’s published. A larp organiser can totally ban a reviewer for life.

But why would anyone want to review larp events anyway?

For both Ahlroth and Kangas, the main ethical conundrum around larp reviews is that, to fully experience the larp, the reviewer needs to participate, hence will be a co-creator, the “violinist reviewing the orchestra’s performance”. Kangas also discussed the effects of active decisions

from one participant that may *not* even have been part of the larp's initial design (e.g. steering). But both authors concluded that larp critique is really required for larp to be taken seriously as an art form.

I do not care whether larp gets taken seriously as an art form. What I do care about is participants – they matter more than the games. Right now the discourse is controlled by only one type of participant: organisers. From pre-game online material to sign-up/casting process, to highly curated audiovisual content (sometimes posed, off-game photos, or highly edited video clips), organisers control most channels. Even talks at Solmukohta about specific larps are usually given by the organisers themselves. When players are invited to speak, they are usually sandwiched between two organiser speeches in which the organisers get to introduce and reframe the testimonies.

In private conversations with organisers and unrecorded Knutepunkt presentations by larp scholars, I have heard about structured before/after assessments in two famous Nordic larps that were intended to be transformative. One was found to be no more effective than a dance class, and the other one was sometimes actually detrimental to the values the larp intended to foster. The organisers just did not include this key player feedback in their post-game communication. For a scene that prides itself on transparency and free speech, there sure is a strong culture of *omertà*.

But I don't want to be trashed as an organiser!

First, this is not about you. If you want private feedback as an organiser, read Waern's (2017) great article on this very topic. This is about *players*. I have been both a player and an organiser. As a player, I have given candid feedback to larp organisers, in person, by private email, and in public blog posts. As an organiser, my larps have been both praised and trashed by their players, to my face while still at the game site, in private emails, and online. I know full well that organising larps can be extremely taxing physically, mentally, and financially. Any negative feedback about something you have invested so much of yourself in can feel extremely painful. Does that mean organisers should get away with everything? With lying in their pre-game communication? With unethical behaviour during runtime? There will always be people who comment negatively on events, so it might as well be people *who were actually there*. Looking back at 10 years of Knutebook articles, it seems acceptable for authors to comment at length on larps that they did not attend, that were run in countries that they have never visited, and that were played in languages that they do not speak. Would we accept all three from

a book or opera critic? Sometimes these authors have not even talked to any of the larp's actual players: they based their articles only on curated audiovisual documentation and on the organisers' word.

To level the playing field, player feedback should be available on a platform where it could be useful for both organisers and future players, who can then decide if they want to participate in reruns or in new events run by the same team. Consent is only truly consent when it is informed.

Some organisers have said that if such a central repository existed, they would stop organising. I do not want anyone to quit, but the current situation of hidden backchannels to obtain candid reviews reinforces cliqueishness, in-crowd phenomena that excludes newcomers. This is far from the oft-professed Nordic goal of inclusivity and learning as a community.

But it's not objective!

There are several ways to document things that actually happened. Both Waern (2013) and Kangas (2022) describe ways of taking notes during breaks in the runtime, while Axiel Cazeneuve describes how they mentally put themselves in “recording mode” during runtime and write everything down afterwards (Cazeneuve & Freudenthal 2021). But technology can also help. Tiny cameras are now affordable, and they can be used to unobtrusively photograph or film an entire short game if other participants provide informed consent.

Years ago, I time-lapsed *Le Masque de Boba Fett* (Switzerland 2015, Eng. Boba Fett's Mask), a Star Wars larp, with a tiny GoPro, from arrival on site to post game chats. The photos not only made for fun memories, but they also showed me how much I drank, and how alcohol affected my experience – positively in this case. I was also wearing a research-grade medical device that tracked my movement, blood pressure, heart rate, and sweating. This allowed me to confirm that tense scenes (even when immobile) triggered objectively measurable stress responses, but that my pre-game period was actually even more tense than runtime (B. 2016).

Nowadays, consumer-grade smartwatches can refine this data collection through unobtrusive experience sampling. I am not saying that all reviewers should always revisit hours of play on a screen without the magic of imagination, nor that they should wear wireless electroencephalograms. But both handwritten notes and recording devices can help verify

whether fast-paced action was actually as constant as advertised – or whether most of the game actually consisted in boredom/quiet reflection?

Even without any technology, if people leave the game before its planned end, it is an objective event that I want to hear about as a potential player of a rerun, especially if any of these were ragequits. Objectivity can also be positive: these Star Wars larp photos showed me details I had no memory of. And even if photos do not quite look like how you remember a scene, that very difference is part of the effect of the larp. What made it different from the raw visual?

Non-anglophone examples of public larp feedback

Before it was killed by the rise of social networks, the website *Au Fil du Jeu* (Eng. In the Course of the Game) acted as a main portal for the French-speaking Swiss larp scene. Organisers would announce their games, and participants would often write post-game feedback under the initial post. While post-event debates sometimes got heated, they were extremely useful to me, a newcomer in the Swiss larp scene. Was it really a big deal for me that some non-player characters were unkillable, or that there wasn't enough roasted boar for every player? Maybe not, but it allowed me to learn about the local organisers and their game styles.

In France, the largest larp review site is *L'univers du huis clos* (Eng. Chamber Larp Universe; <https://www.murder-party.org/>), a repository of more than 170 larp scripts. People who have downloaded and played a script sometimes write public feedback in the comments section of its page. Some reviews are very short, others provide details about how actual runs went, but they remain mostly written by organisers rather than players.

For a more thorough journalistic review site, the French website *Electro-GN* (Eng. Electro-larp) provides both larp previews by organisers, and reviews of games by players. As many of these larps are rerun regularly, reading about how the organisers' vision actually panned out is extremely valuable. These reviews help me assess the odds of having a satisfactory experience after taking a day off from work and 8 hours of travel to a remote game site to co-create with people I have never met.

The Czech website *Larpová Databáze* (Eng. Larp Database) is a larger review repository, in which larpers can comment on games. I do not find the 1-10 rating feature informative, but the most reviewed game, *De la Bête* (Czech Republic 2014, Eng. Of the Beast), has 192 written comments of various lengths from individual players. Now compare this to *Parliament*

of *Shadows* (Belgium 2017), a high profile international larp with so few public reviews that the most sobering one is available only in Polish and on a Polish website (Skuza, 2017).

So, are such sites reserved to larpers from fiery Romance or Slavic debating cultures? Can people raised with protestant moderation under Jante's law do it in English for the whole world to see?

Elements I would appreciate in a larp review

First of all, there is a lot of excellent advice in English out there. The recommendations that Waern (2013) provides for larp historians are also useful for reviewers:

“PLAY!

Talk to both players and designers (and game masters)

Collect multiple views on key events

Collect media”

Unlike Waern, I am not looking for neutral larp history. I *do* want to know what you, as a player, liked, what you did not like, and why was that. I *do* want to hear whether the larp was run as advertised. Kangas provides additional tips and tricks, such as using a pen name or providing group feedback. Stark and Roberts proposed a structure for larp critique, but it could be useful for any larp feedback: “Theme, Setting, Tone, Pre-game activities, Structure, Techniques/Rules/Mechanics, Facilitation/GM Role, Post-larp activities”. They also advise to show compassion, assume the best and avoid snark. However, I think some snark is OK, especially if the organisers treated you badly.

It seems like the *Nordic Larp* website has also noticed that meeting art critique standards may be one of the reasons they have not been receiving much reviews, and thus they decided to call this public feedback “larp documentation”, specifying:

“Does it have to be a critique/criticism/review? No. We are very happy to publish those, for sure, but what we mostly want is straightforward accounts of people's experiences. We don't need you to say what you thought was wrong about the larp, or to suggest how to improve it, or so analyse it within some critical framework. Just what it was like, and how it was for you, will be perfect.

Should I write a long narrative about my character’s journey? A documentation piece is not a long account of your character’s narrative arc, but rather discussion about your overall experience and your reflections about it. Ideally, you will be able to provide some details about the basics about the larp setting, themes, and organisation, along with a brief account of your experience, and any takeaways. Bonus points if you can connect the larp to other texts, larps, or theories in the discourse, but this is not required.” (Nordic Larp 2023)

Since participants matter more than the games, I would also love to read about player well-being.

Corporeal well-being

A book may give you paper cuts and move you emotionally, but a larp will by definition affect your body, potentially up to bodily harm. Players’ pre-game health affects their experience and could be relevant to it. I started *The Monitor Celestra* (Sweden 2013) with gut issues and cut my scalp open on a doorway – literal pre-game bleed. An eye infection at *Conquest of Mythodea* (Germany 2004) required immediate antibiotic treatment, making me miss a full day of game. To avoid sweat dripping into my eye, I could not wear the silicone mask that fully covered my entire head and neck, and therefore had to change character, which affected my experience.

Quite often, organiser choices affect players’ physical well-being, so it makes sense to write about those experiences in a review. One example is hygiene: were there enough bathrooms for everyone? Could people change their sanitary products and contact lenses in the bathrooms? Also, did you get accurate information about the conditions where you would be living and playing? For example, pre-game information about *De la Bête* mentioned that I would sleep in a castle, but not that it would be so dusty that my black costume would become grey every day. It was honestly not a big deal, but it could be relevant for future players. When discussing health related issues, you should obviously only share what you are comfortable with, what is relevant to your experience at the game, and you should always respect the privacy of other participants.

Emotional well-being

In *Fat Man Down* (Denmark 2009), a 2-4 hour jeepform/freeform scenario originally designed for the Fastaval festival, players consent to roleplaying scenes from the life of a fat man and the people making his life miserable. Just before going in character, players are told by the

organiser (without the player of the “fat man” hearing) that his use of the safeword should be ignored. Meanwhile, the player of the “fat man” is given the real safe word and will therefore get to observe the other players breaking a game rule.

This constitutes bait and switch as the players did not consent to participate in an experiment testing their willingness to break agreed-upon rules and to potentially abuse a co-player. In a scientific setting, this type of “forced insight” experiment, without the oversight of an external ethics committee, would get the organisers fired or disbarred. But in the Nordic larp scene, several larpers have told me: “Sure it’s a bit unethical, but it’s an innovative design! It’s great art, so it’s OK!”. Parts of the Nordic freeform/larp scenes may have moved on from this “provocation first, people second” approach, but how many players have signed up for this game without even having the option to read player feedback?

People often joke about type II fun and extreme emotional sports, but do larpers sign up to get abused? I need to see whether limits are clearly announced on a larp’s website, but I would also like to hear whether they were actually respected. Not just by the organisers, but also by supporting casts and co-players. And if all of the above was perfectly healthy and safe, well, that’s a great thing to know for future players too!

Financial well-being

Since the advent of international blockbuster larps, sign-up fees have been getting closer to the median monthly income of several European countries. It would be only fair to get some accurate information about the larp before spending such an amount of money (plus costume and transportation). Furthermore, personal time investment for larps that rely heavily on co-creation by the players can mean allocating weeks into online pre-play. Before investing these resources, it would be great to be able to check whether the game is a good fit for the player, and not have to rely solely on the organiser’s website. An ageing population of players may have more money, but also less free time. Between raising children and minding their carbon footprint, a lot of people are ready to larp less – if they can larp better.

Creative well-being

Once all of the above have been considered, I want to hear about the game itself, but not just in a neutral, descriptive manner. Did the themes come to life as communicated? How? Did

cheesy aliens with green antennae crash the *Dangerous Liaisons* larp that was announced as historically accurate? Did the much-touted lavish set and prop design live up to the hype?

If your own character's plot was not satisfactory, what happened? Do you think it was because of your own playing, a confusing character text, or other players refusing to play to lift? Or did an interdimensional demon portal "main plot train" run over the intimate love stories that were supposed to be the core of your experience? Conversely, if you had ecstatic, life-changing scenes, how did they happen? Did they resonate with your own, pre-game interests, or did you discover an entire new side of your personality? And what about the other players? Did they seem bored or did they seem to get more out of the larp than you did? Any of this information could be useful. And the best part is that you do not have to actually include *any* of it for your public written feedback to be more valid and useful than the current silence.

Just do it. Please.

Two of the *Nordic Larp* website's latest player "documentation pieces" perfectly illustrate the value of ignoring the strict requirements of artistic critique. In his "documentation" of *Gothic* (Denmark 2023), Juhana Pettersson (2023) discusses his past personal interest in the topic, takes a behind-the-scenes look at specific aspects of the design, and describes some key scenes and his feelings about it all. Simon Brind's (2023) documentation of the erotic horror larp *House of Craving* (Denmark 2019) is self-described as "a gonzo attempt to make sense of what the fuck just happened", but both pieces are really useful.

These two are great examples of reviews/testimonies/public larp feedback, and we need more (including on the very same games, even the very same runs) to hear more perspectives. We especially need reviews by people who are less known in the Nordic larp scene and may suffer from impostor syndrome.

If none of the advice above helps, you can always start by just writing down three things you liked, three things you didn't, and then explain why you did or did not like them. That would already be better than the current situation. Other future participants would thank you, and again, they, like you, matter more than the games.

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Author bio

Thomas B. is a French roleplayer who lives in Switzerland. He wrote for *Backstab*, *Casus Belli*, *Larpzeit International*, *Roolipelaja*, multiple Knutebooks, *Radio Rôliste* and the *In Nomine Satanis / Magna Veritas* RPG line. His 1997 larp script *La croisière s'accuse* (a Love Boat murder mystery) is still being run to this day. He later co-designed the larps *In Cauda Venenum*, *Technoculte*, *Shadowrun* and *Afroasiatik*. He stopped making his English-language larp reviews public in 2014. This book is an exception.

Nordic Larp is Not “International Larp”: What is KP for?

The child is devouring the parent.

The same thing can be seen at KP. Not so long ago, it was a 200-300 person event that was 80% Nordic: now, it’s a 500-600 person event that’s majority non-Nordic.

And, although the superstar system ensures that keynotes and other high-visibility items are still in Nordic hands, the bulk of the programme is provided and presented by international larpers, for an international audience. Is this good or is it bad?

All we can really say is: it’s different.

But is it time to recognize that international larp is its own thing, and deserves its own annual get-together – rather than progressively cannibalizing KP?

Why not a conference that rotates around the countries where international larps take place – or that’s at one fixed location centrally within Europe?

It would probably be cheaper to hire a suitable venue and accommodation in a non-Nordic country, for one thing. And it would probably be easier for most internationals to get to.

And then, what might it mean for KP to get back to being focused on Nordic larp, in the Nordic countries?

Of course, it shouldn’t be oblivious to the rest of the larping world.

But nor should it be dominated by it.

International larp is a tremendous thing, and it deserves to thrive and grow. But not at the expense of the Nordic larp that it borrows so heavily from.

And perhaps KP should not be facilitating such a takeover.

In the Limits Below the Line: An Interview with Brazilian Larpers

Leandro Godoy

Leandro Godoy, one of the founders and producers of the larp group Confraria das Ideias (Eng. Brotherhood of Ideas), conducted an interview with a diverse group of larpers, players and designers from different regions in Brazil. He seeks to understand the limitations faced in Brazil, both inside and outside the games.

The people interviewed were:

André Sarturi, 45. Actor and university professor, founder of the Enigma larp group. Curitiba - PR
Carolina Scartezini, 40. Witch of the word. Creator, actor and artistic advisor at Tudo Teatro group. Itaberaba - BA

Effe Schmidlin, 29. Multi-artist and teacher. Member of the Sangria larp group. Belo Horizonte - MG

Henrique Marins, 44. Teacher. São Paulo - SP

Larissa Forchetto, 28. Video editor. Sao Paulo - SP

Luiz Falcão, 36, Designer, Visual Artist, Set Designer and Art Educator. Founder of the group Boi Voador and NpLarp. Sao Paulo-SP

Rafael Silva, 32. Realtor. Member of the Sangria larp group. Belo Horizonte - MG

Raissa Alonso, 32. Historian. Sao Paulo-SP

Tadeu Rodrigues Iuama, 39. Teacher. Member of the Coral Amarelo larp group. Sorocaba - SP

Thais Pistorezzi, 43. Journalist and actress. Maceió - AL

Vanessa Mayumi, 29. UX Designer. Sao Paulo-SP

Viviane Silva, 40. Art Promoter. Member of the Matilha da Garoa rpg group. Sao Paulo-SP



Photos: Personal files

On factors limiting participation in larps

Luiz Falcão: For a long time, what limited us was that there were no larps to play. Organizing or running a larp is a lot of work. There was a time with a greater variety of larps (between 2010 and 2016), but today we are somehow back with scarcity once again.

Larissa Forchetto: For me, the biggest challenge is exactly this – there aren't that many larps to go to.

Luiz Falcão: There was a time when we knew there were larps out there: there were the *Graal* larps, *São Paulo by Night* (and other vampire larp groups), and *Megacorp*, for example. However, sometimes there are games, but they are not always for our player profiles. (see e.g. Falcão 2014).

Luiz Falcão: In 2013 there were a series of initiatives to change the situation, such as Luiz Prado's larps. But it wasn't enough.

André Sarturi: I don't know many people in Curitiba who larp. The ones I know are much younger than I am, and I'm not really involved with the scene. If there were more larp groups, I would end up playing more larps.

Thais Pistorezzi: I moved from São Paulo to Maceió, and there are no larp groups in the region.

Luiz Falcão: Parenting, its complexity and all its invisible work. I work on the weekends (because I work with art and culture), and during the week I am at my daughter's disposal. I don't even have weekends for free time.

Henrique Marins: Family and professional commitments require, for example, traveling more frequently on weekends.

Tadeu Rodrigues: Calendar. And adding to this the issue of logistics and the main thing for me, the demands of day to day life. I have to put a lot of things in my daily life aside to be done during the weekend – besides, of course, spending time with my daughter. And these are everyday things, cleaning the house, cooking for the week, etc. Having more weekends participating in larps would mean having fewer full weekends to take care of these everyday demands.

Rafael Silva: Adult life consumes our time, leaving little space for pretend play.

Carolina Scartezini: I don't play that many larps, basically for reasons of time and logistics – these are the only reasons why I've never been able to go to an in-person larp at the Confraria, for example.

Viviane Silva: For me, transportation and larp schedules are very relevant factors.

Vanessa Mayumi: My biggest impediment is transportation, combined with the calendar. The city (São Paulo) is huge and transport takes a long time, so when I go to a larp I have to reserve the whole day just for that. If I have more things to do during the day, I am not able to go to the larp. The sooner I find out about a larp, the more likely that I can plan.

On themes and great larps

Raissa Alonso: Currently I also prefer more reflective themes, like in the larp *Último Dia em Antares* (Brazil 2016, Eng. Last Day on Antares) or in the incredible larp inspired by *Tommy: Cegos, Surdos e Mudos* (Brazil 2017, Eng. The Blind, the Deaf and the Dumb).

Leandro Godoy: In *Último Dia em Antares*, a family has decided to flee to a planet orbiting the star Antares (on a one-way trip) to escape a catastrophic crisis on their own planet, but upon arrival, they discover that the star is about to explode. They wait for the end of the world, dealing with frustrations, the feeling of impotence, the fear of death, and trying to enjoy their last moments together. The larp is non-verbal: participants must interact with their bodies, by miming, and via facial expressions – without saying a single word.

Cegos, Surdos e Mudos was inspired by the rock opera *Tommy* (The Who, 1969) and the episode *Apenas Bons Amigos* (Just Good Friends) from the Brazilian tv series *Comédia da Vida Privada* (Private Life Comedy; Guel Arraes, Jorge Furtado and Luís Fernando Veríssimo, 1995). The story begins with a group of friends who get together at the end of high school and decide to test the legend that, by listening to the *Tommy* album with a lit candle, a person can glimpse their own future. From then on, the players begin to play the group's meetings from time to time, permeated by the history of Brazil over the last sixty years. The group has to deal with their own traumas, constructed from the lyrics and characters of the songs on the album.

Photo: Thomaz Barbeiro, larp "Cegos, Surdos e Mudos" - Sesc Pompeia



The larp's delicate design combines music, Brazilian history, and the characters' personal relationships as they search for new meanings for past events and learn to value the friendships we make in life. (see Godoy 2021)

Vanessa Mayumi: The topic is very important to me. If the theme doesn't motivate me, I end up thinking it's not worth the effort of organizing everything to be able to go.

Luiz Falcão: I'm not interested in boffer larps, just as boffer larp audiences sometimes aren't interested in the larps that I like. Nor in campaign larps that often try to simulate character evolution in electronic role-playing games. To me, they seem to try to reproduce a certain capitalist game where hierarchy and meritocracy are mandatory and relationships are mediated based on the accumulation of points. I also do not like larps that are based on established intellectual properties such as Vampire, Harry Potter, etc. Even though I might really like the IP itself, these games tend to have issues around canon. They generate hierarchies and conflicts... and they reduce the creative potential of the experience in favor of reproducing familiar narratives.

Lack of larp culture and resources

Luiz Falcão: One limiting factor is that larp is not seen as normal and socially accepted the same way many other activities are. We don't even have a scene, a subculture. Soccer, cinema, theater, and video games are everywhere. There are cinemas in every shopping mall, films appear on TV, on YouTube, there is a hype. Your colleagues at work play soccer. Your father takes you to the soccer stadium. And there is no Brazilian larp community or the community is very small. Furthermore, the cost of living in Brazil is very high – and most players are not in the upper classes of the population.

Rafael Silva: The term “hunger larp” is not for nothing. There is a lack of transportation, food, and costumes to participate in larps. If you can't afford it or don't have a support group or network, you're out.

Luiz Falcão: And there was the dismantling of culture from 2016 to now, with the Coup d'Etat, accompanied by a destruction of the economy for the poorest and an increasing precariousness of work (with the imposed labor reform that dismantled workers' constitutional rights), with a drop in purchasing power, galloping inflation and a reduction in leisure time.

Leandro Godoy: You are referring to the sad incident of President Dilma Rousseff, who was impeached in 2016 despite being innocent of the charges and who faced misinformation and hatred in the media. The process followed the rites of the congress but served the interests of a ruling class unhappy with social reforms and the loss of economic power.

Effe Schmidlin: And this gets in the way of finding resources to create scenography. Even accessing more private locations is difficult. Meetings in Belo Horizonte city take place mainly in parks and public squares.

Luiz Falcão: Even if you are working with art and culture, it is very difficult to work with larp – because it is not a recognized artform. It is no exaggeration to say that larp was on a rising tide until the 2016 Coup d’Etat – and after that it has been in a downward spiral. The reported problems of lack of money, time and health, all or almost all, are directly related to the precariousness that has been ongoing since 2016.

Leandro Godoy: And unfortunately, this led directly to the fascist government of Jair Bolsonaro between 2018 and 2022, which greatly compromised social relations, and had the dismantling of culture as a government plan, among other terrible policies. (see Prado & Godoy 2022).

Luiz Falcão: It is also worth highlighting the role of social media networks (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter), from 2016 to now. Aggressive behavior on these networks has increased at the same time that the reach of dissemination has decreased. Participating in online communities (not just larp communities but all kinds of online communities) or publicizing activities on these networks is no longer productive. The publicity doesn’t reach the players, but the haters are always there, ready to attack.

Leandro Godoy: I think we can observe some patterns: scarcity of larps, themes, difficult urban mobility, social inequality... Any and all of these can end up limiting players in one way or another.

Do limits in larp restrict or support players?

Luiz Falcão: It depends on the game. There is no difference between support and restriction. Freedom without limits is the freedom of the oppressor. The guardrail, on the balcony, supports you and restricts you. The problem with restrictions is when they are not well applied. Beyond

limits, without any limits, there is oppression. Going beyond the previous limits is alright. Beyond the current limits there is always a new limit. Every larp is a game of subjection. The question is “what do I agree to subject myself to”.

Larissa Forchetto: I think that when I’m playing, the word *limit* captures both things. If it’s a limit of what I know or what I can do, like acting or knowing the subject, I can push myself to overcome it. However, I feel limits are also an important support for me. They help me know how far I can go with certain things within the game itself.

Raissa Alonso: It’s a dialectical relationship. I think it boosts and supports. I feel safe when we define the limits of what we feel comfortable with in the game. I prefer it to playing blind. I think limits can be built based on consensus. When there is conversation, I feel driven to test things within larps. When there are no limits, I always prefer to be cautious, because I don’t want to be invasive with other players.

Photo: Thomaz Barbeiro, larp “Grimm Agreste” - Sesc Interlagos



Henrique Marins: I have always found it very important, in the larps I have participated in, that the organizing team has been concerned with people's physical and emotional safety. Knowing that there are limits increases confidence that this security is maintained. You can play freely, within the agreed limits. At the same time, knowing that the limits are there and that they can be activated at any time supports your play.

Thais Pistorezzi: I believe that an open dialogue is necessary, at least to clarify doubts. If there is a restriction in a larp, players are allowed to question it. When it is properly explained, it will be respected by the players, and it can boost ideas and even character and story building. A limit can also be a form of support. It helps us understand how far we can go, so that everybody respects each other's boundaries. When a person knows there is a restriction, they are not supposed to ignore it and cross the boundary it defines.

Luiz Falcão: It's an ethical issue. Who guarantees compliance with a limit during the game? Who guarantees that a security code works? The best way for shit not to happen is to not do shit. It isn't difficult to give a false feeling of security or participation. Sometimes, the rules say something, but unwritten rules produce conflicting interpretations by players, leading to unexpected things.

André Sarturi: I'm an artist and I think there are ethical limits, but at the same time art shouldn't have limits, so in my understanding limits should be negotiated. I currently run larps for students at the university I work in, in an environment where people are linked to the arts. We have been able to explore 18+ themes in the larp *O Baile do Cara de Cavalo* (Brazil 2022, Eng. The Horse Face Ball), and we are studying e.g. cabaret and urban violence.

Rafael Silva: Limits are created in dialogue. They are social agreements. And as such, they enhance the larp experience. I have few limits when it comes to larping, but I understand those who need more space to enjoy the experience.

Viviane Silva: Restrictions that are there to guide the game stimulate much more than they limit. I believe they should not be or treated as a dead end.

Carolina Scartezini: When I'm playing, a limit serves both purposes: it is an inspiration (in the same vein as a creative restriction) that drives me, and it gives me a feeling of security. In general, I deal well with limits. I think they are important both to provide clarity and security and to instigate creativity. In my view, when the people participating feel that they can simply do anything, without any restrictions, they end up doing nothing as they are lost.

Tadeu Rodrigues: When I'm participating in a larp, I think the word *limit* means a parameter. I think it can support play. But above all, I think it gives parameters to the participants' experience.

Effe Schmidlin: In some situations, safety rules and meta-techniques allow me to go further. In others, limits prevent me from causing problems for other people by playing. The ways in which the limits are drawn define how I will engage in the game, and how the magic circle where the game happens is built.

Limitations in the game

Leandro Godoy: What limits you during a larp? Knowledge of themes, language, resources for creating costumes, time to study characters and plot beforehand, or any personal limits?

Luiz Falcão: Text, rules, and rituals have to be available for consultation somewhere since an excess of rules and symbols can contain too much information to remember. Or too many mechanics, like in Vampire larps – consulting the rules can interrupt the larp and does not increase dramatic tension.

Leandro Godoy: I have a lot of difficulty remembering many of the rules during a larp. In fact, after I started playing more larps, I started to reduce the amount of text in the larps I organize.

Luiz Falcão: Assuming that players know or handle something that they don't necessarily know or handle is a problem.

Tadeu Rodrigues: It limits me if the larp requires a lot of time to read and memorize the character and the plot. Brazilian larps don't typically require much prior preparation but if a larp does, it becomes a barrier for me. So if I need to invest time before the larp, it bothers me a little, which limits me.

Leandro Godoy: Larps in Brazil don't often require much preparation from the players. We try to make participation as practical as possible, because everyday life leaves little time to read a lot of materials for a larp or to obtain complex costumes. But sometimes larps require greater preparation from players.

Henrique Marins: I think I have had the most fun when I have had more time to prepare for my character – to come up with a costume, to study the materials, and to plan some action for the larp. Of course I've also had really good experiences in larps where I jumped aboard almost at the last minute.

Raissa Alonso: Time needed for reading and internalizing the character depends a lot on the larp – its design and atmosphere. Sometimes it is nice to have prepared beforehand, sometimes the fun is in the improvisation.

Thais Pistorezzi: *Limitation* is a word that brings so much anxiety. I don't remember feeling limited in any larp. There have been situations in which some points in the story or the characters' costumes have caused difficulties because of a design problem. However, everything has always been resolved and worked around so that the larp could continue smoothly.

Raissa Alonso: I think it's cool when resources are offered by the organization, so that no one feels limited. When I have to bring costumes from home, I always feel like people are comparing me to others.

Larissa Forchetto: The costumes and customizing them are the issue that limits me most at a larp. However, finding them is not something that I consider impossible. It's a limit that I can work with.

Tadeu Rodrigues: Costumes are not really an issue in our productions, but there can be issues with ready-made costumes – I'm big! And often when there is a larp that has ready-made costumes, I know in advance that there will probably not be an outfit in my size. When there is a ready-made costume available, it often does not fit me which creates physical discomfort. Of course, this is a question of resources. We are a third world country, so investing a lot in costumes is not something that is in the spending priorities.

Effe Schmidlin: Resources for creating costumes are a problem.

Raissa Alonso: I think the strongest personal limit I have is the body issue. It needs to be negotiated, always. It can be really cool to explore it, but at the same time it is a really sensitive topic. I hate it when I feel pressured to do something, which can happen a lot when you play in a group. I think that when the game pushes you into doing something exceptional with your body, there should be a content warning. I wouldn't play a larp blindfolded, for example,

without having complete trust in the organizers and without having very clear limits on what is allowed to be done.

Luiz Falcão: Body, affection, sensitivity, sexuality, all of these need to be well discussed. Depending on how it goes, they can be issues for me too.

Henrique Marins: In some cases, the character can limit the player's performance in a larp. For example, if the character is an introvert, you might need to avoid more intense scenes.

Tadeu Rodrigues: Interpersonal issues also limit me at larps. I don't feel comfortable participating if there are people whom I don't like spending time with. If there is somebody who makes me feel rejected or refused, then I often don't even participate. And if I do participate, I keep my distance during the larp. If I don't like somebody outside the larp, I don't feel comfortable playing with that person.

Carolina Scartezini: Until now, only two things have made me not want to participate in a game: if the theme and the way it works do not interest me (generally, this happens with boffer larps or larps that seem too pedagogical to me) or if I know that something about the topic actually is a painful trigger for me (like in the larp about the military dictatorship *Soldier Pereira and his school friends*).

Vanessa Mayumi: My biggest limits are my health (physical and mental) and how much the activity will affect me and others. Of course, if I'm sick and contagious, I stay home. But beyond that, if I'm not mentally healthy to interpret the character and the themes, if the topic affects me personally, or if I'm not well enough to socialize with other people, I end up not going.

Viviane Silva: What limits me is my health. It is difficult for me to see in dimly lit locations. Moreover, I find it hard to stand still for a long time.

On resources, collaboration, and interdisciplinary larp

André Sarturi: Resources limit me the most. Even though it is possible to organize larps with minimal resources, it can be interesting to do something that requires elaborate technology – for example video projection, video mapping, and electronics prototyping platforms. These are not necessary, but it is cool to be able to try another experience inside a larp design and to

test the limits. The question is how to acquire and manage these resources. You also need to consider whether using technology makes sense for the game or not.

Luiz Falcão: I feel it is quite limiting to try to larp when you are filmed or when there is an audience watching but it is not properly included in the design. If you're offering something to the audience, it is theater, not larp. In the larp *Grimm Agreste* (Brazil 2014), the relationship between the players and the *Grimm Agreste* exhibition – a beautiful installation inspired by the tales of the Grimm brothers reimagined with the aesthetics of the Brazilian wilderness and countryside – and its audience worked well because of the costumes and the design of the game. However, I have seen other experiences where this relationship did not work well, frustrating not only the participants but also the larp designer.

Leandro Godoy: In general, it is interesting to see how the practice of larp evolves with these collaborations. Ten, fifteen years ago, we weren't discussing negotiations, costume discomforts, or how much game design and agreements can affect us during the experience. I believe we have a lot to talk about and a lot to experience. As a community, we can evolve beyond the issue of resources needed for games to happen safely and provide incredible artistic experiences.

Thank you everyone for your contribution to the conversation. I hope we meet soon, in a new larp or chat, and that these questions can lead us – participants and readers of the interview alike – to reflect more on the challenges and limits, and to have increasingly inclusive, safe and unforgettable experiences!

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Author bio

Leandro Godoy, 44 years old, is currently a sociology student. He is one of the founders and producers of Confraria das Ideias, a Brazilian NGO that has been promoting the language of larp since 1999. Also known as Confrade Godoy, he was awarded by the "VAI" (project of the São Paulo Department of Culture) in the mid-2000s. He has been advocating for governmental recognition of role-playing games and larp as cultural practices since then, including larp in the cultural programme of the city and state of São Paulo.

“We won’t stop the larp if it’s just an air raid.” Organising Larps during War in Ukraine and Palestine

Maria **Pettersson**

When war erupts, larps come to a halt. The same holds true for various other cultural activities. Society is in a state of suspension. Individuals are fixated on their phones, doomscrolling through the news and social media. Larpers stay connected, checking in on each other – has someone we know died, have the bombs struck a town where our friends or relatives reside?

However, in the subsequent weeks, months, or even years, larp returns, even if the war persists. This occurred in both Ukraine, grappling with the Russian invasion since February 2022, and in Palestine, where the recent war in Gaza started in October 2023. Ukrainian larp designer and organizer Anna Posetselska, along with Palestinian larp professional and designer Tamara Nassar, provide insights into what it is like to organise a larp during times of war.

Larping during wartime in Ukraine

One of Anna Posetselska’s players was a real-life battle medic. She brought her enormous medical kit to the larp in case the venue, a holiday village about 30 kilometers from Kyiv, would be hit by Russian bombs.

“The small places around Kyiv are rarely targeted,” Posetselska says.

“We were prepared to move the larp if the situation became too dangerous.”

During play, there were air raids, but the game was not paused.



“We won’t stop the larp if it’s just an air raid.” Organising Larps during War in Ukraine and Palestine

“We won’t stop the larp if it’s just an air raid,” Posetselska says.

“We experience air raids in Kyiv all the time; just last night, there were explosions. They are part of our everyday life now; we have grown accustomed to them, at least to some extent. We don’t rush to a shelter every time we hear an air raid alert because if we do, we’ll sit there half a day many times a week. That way, you lose your sanity much faster than you lose your life. The chances of losing your life in an air raid while larping are rather low.”

Posetselska’s larp *Nevermore: Family Issues*, was played in May 2023. The 60-player larp was loosely based on the Netflix series *Wednesday*. The story about a high school for special kids who are taught how to live with ordinary people was both accessible and safe.

During war, people have many things on their minds, and just surviving from day to day can require a lot of mental energy and resources. That is why a larp should be easily accessible, Posetselska explains. She needed a ready, playable world that the players could grasp easily and without too much effort. Watching a couple of episodes of *Wednesday* was enough.

Another reason to choose the world of *Wednesday* was that Posetselska aimed to transport the participants as far away as possible from the war.

“There’s an ongoing discourse about larp as a form of escapism and the extent to which players engage in larp to distance themselves from reality. In our case, the answer was evident: participants genuinely sought an escape from their daily lives. We urgently needed to transport them to a different place and persona,” Posetselska says.

The setting had to incorporate dramatic elements and challenging questions and relationships, yet avoid overly sensitive themes.

“When designing a larp during a war, it’s crucial to ensure that people are not further traumatized or confronted with themes too close to home,” she emphasizes.

Could players detach from their everyday concerns and immerse themselves in the lives of high school students and personnel? Yes and no, Posetselska says.

“Players conveyed afterward that the sense of community was robust, and they experienced relaxation. Not everyone could fully immerse themselves in the game – it may not have necessarily been attributed to the larp or their fellow players, but rather to the exceptionally

challenging situation they were in outside the larp. They expressed having a good time, but were unable to completely set aside the worries from the outside world.”

During breaks in the game, both players and organisers scrutinised their social media feeds – had any significant events occurred, had the rockets struck anyone they knew? However, unlike the previous year, individuals managed to stop constantly scrolling through distressing news and concentrate on the game.

Ethical questions

Before the onset of the war, Anna Posetselska made a larp every few years.

“Designing larps is a profoundly significant aspect of my life; I feel invigorated when channeling my mental energy into creating games. I wanted to create something for over a year, but it was impossible due to the war.”

In 2022, the year of Russia’s major invasion, the larp community engaged in discussions regarding the ethical implications of playing larps during wartime. A pertinent question arose: do larpers possess the right to partake in leisure, enjoy and relax while their friends – many of whom are fellow larpers – are engaged in active combat and losing their lives? This ethical deliberation extended to various facets of life, questioning the appropriateness of social activities like dining out and attending plays or concerts when one’s compatriots are fighting.

“But soldiers fighting in the frontlines kept saying that they were fighting and dying so we could live. At some point you attempt to reinstate elements of your everyday life, otherwise you get mentally very unwell,” Posetselska says.

In February 2023, a modest larp involving approximately 20 players was organised in Kyiv. Evaluating the community’s response, Posetselska understood that it was something larpers desperately needed. Those fortunate to participate were elated, while those unable to partake experienced profound disappointment.

“Playing larps constituted a significant component of our lives, and the community ardently yearned for a return to normalcy.”

Posetselska notes that when she announced her larp, it encountered no opposition; rather, it was met with unanimous enthusiasm and support.

Narrow planning horizon

Before 2022, Posetselska typically started the planning process for a larp approximately a year before its scheduled date. Now, she conceived the idea for *Nevermore* in March 2023 and decided to execute it as swiftly as possible. The prevailing wartime conditions added to the urgency.

“In the initial months of the war, we couldn’t plan even a few days ahead. Then, the planning horizon would widen from days to weeks and eventually expand to a month. Presently, we operate on a planning cycle spanning a couple of months,” she says.

Who knows what will happen to you or your friends in half a year? During war, six months feels like an eternity. Posetselska calculated the shortest time the larp would take to design and prepare and decided to run it in May, just over two and a half months after getting the idea.

Prior to the war, Ukrainian larps were predominantly played in Russian. However, the linguistic landscape has since changed, as there is a growing trend towards making and playing larps in Ukrainian. Despite the fact that Russian is Posetselska’s mother tongue, she embraced the challenge of composing for the first time all game materials in Ukrainian. This linguistic shift, while demanding, was important because the Ukrainian language has become a more significant part of Ukrainian identity after the 2022 invasion. Participants, mostly from Kyiv but also from other Ukrainian cities, alongside a few international attendees returning to their homeland for the larp, predominantly engaged in gameplay in Ukrainian, irrespective of their native tongues.

Demand for a larp

Posetselska’s foresight proved accurate: there was a substantial demand for a weekend-long larp. Initially conceptualized for 40 players, the larp was expanded for 60 participants due to overwhelming interest and perceived necessity.

In Ukrainian larps, character creation often involves collaborative efforts between players and designers, and this held true for *Nevermore*. Typically, during times of peace, players engage in

“We won’t stop the larp if it’s just an air raid.” Organising Larps during War in Ukraine and Palestine

preparations for multiple larps simultaneously. This time they only concentrated on *Nevermore*. Posetselska notes that she has never encountered, and likely won’t encounter in the future, the level of engagement and dedication she observed among participants preparing for *Nevermore*.

“People exhibited an unprecedented level of creativity, contributing an incredible array of ideas, and demonstrating remarkable support,” she remarks.

The impact of *Nevermore* extended beyond its immediate context, inspiring other designers to initiate larp events.

“Many designers who had been awaiting a more opportune or secure moment came to realise that the time for larping is now,” Posetselska says.

She knows of several minilarps tailored for small circles of friends, as well as half a dozen larger games spanning 2-3 days. The common objective across these endeavors is to transport players as far away as possible from the grim realities of war.

Political awareness in Palestine

Two thousand kilometers south of Kyiv, in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, larpers have adopted a markedly different approach. Since the latest war in Gaza started in October 2023, all larps in the West Bank have centered around themes of war, occupation, stress relief and political awareness.

Tamara Nassar, a Palestinian larp designer and organiser working for the Palestinian larp organization Bait Byout, asserts, “It would feel disrespectful towards our friends and relatives who are dying in Gaza to play larps for fun.”

Bait Byout collaborates with various organizations, predominantly NGOs, introducing them to larp and aiding them in achieving their objectives by incorporating larp into their toolkit. They are currently running a project, together with the British-founded organization Oxfam International, that addresses women’s sexual and reproductive health education through larp.

With the Swiss charitable organization Drosos Foundation, Bait Byout runs Larp Factory, targeting participants aged 18-35 studying or working in the social sector. The program spans five weeks and involves 22 participants in an educational journey where they acquire skills in

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playing, designing, and organizing larps. Upon completion, participants are equipped to utilize larp as a tool in their professional settings.

Additionally, Bait Byout has in the past designed and run larps for both adults and children in Palestine and Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon.

As the war unfolded in Gaza in October 2023, Palestinians on the West Bank held their breath.

“We knew to expect bad things, but the level of destruction was unimaginable. Everything stopped, the whole society stopped,” Nassar describes. While Israel started bombing Gaza, violence in the West Bank also skyrocketed, Nassar says. Over 300 people have been killed in the West Bank, 80 kilometers from Gaza.

Nassar grimly acknowledges, “We know that Israel is not going to stop in Gaza; we are next.”

New challenges

Bait Byout was looking at opportunities to take larps to Gaza, but those projects are now on hold. The five-week Larp Factory course which was planned to start in October, faced complications due to the war.

The situation in the West Bank has become substantially more perilous. Bait Byout had planned workshops and minilarps across various locations in the West Bank, but had to revise the plans. Several challenges arose due to the war.

First, the Israeli military has closed most of the checkpoints the Palestinians have to cross to move between cities in the West Bank.

Second, Israeli settlers have become more violent. They patrol the backroads the Palestinians were sometimes able to use to move around, and are using firearms more often.

Additionally, since October 2023, daily raids on Palestinian homes and arbitrary detention of Palestinian civilians by Israeli soldiers have intensified. Palestinians can be detained without formal charges for extended periods, sometimes spanning months or even years. Violence and arrests had increased even before the war, but now such detentions are triggered by minor factors, such as discovering Gaza-related content on a Palestinian’s phone. Faced with these risks, Bait Byout could not expose their participants to potential harm.

Nassar explains that to mitigate these challenges, "We had to gather all participants in Ramallah, secure lodgings for a few days, and confine them to this safer environment to minimize movement." Participants would visit home briefly and then return for another session. Moving around was dangerous and had to be reduced as much as possible.

At the time of the interview, participants of the Larp Factory had recently completed designing their first larps and were about to present them to the wider group in the coming days. The thematic focus of most larps centered on the social situation in Palestine. Furthermore, participants were about to play their first long larp, *Tribes*, a historical fiction exploring the tribes of Jericho.

Focus on war, occupation and politics

The war in Gaza has not only impacted the logistical aspects but has also influenced the thematic focus of the larps organized by Bait Byout. During the war, all of their larps are centered around the themes of war, occupation, stress relief and political awareness. Nassar believes there wouldn't be a demand for larps played only for entertainment in such a dire situation.

"To have fun while they are dying over there? I don't think people would accept that", she says.

Bait Byout had originally planned to run a fairytale larp titled *Keys to the Kingdom*, designed by Nassar, for 50-100 children aged 6-12. In this larp, participants assume the roles of fairies on a quest to retrieve stolen keys, overcoming trials to restore magic to the kingdom.

However, due to the wartime context, they opted for a different children's larp called *The Evil Lions & The Hungry Animals*. In this scenario, players represent various animals oppressed by evil lions symbolizing the Israeli military. Through unity and setting aside differences, characters learn to rise against oppression and defeat the lions.

The symbolism is evident to adults, but do the children understand that the larp is about the Israeli occupation over Palestinian territories, and the evil lions represent the Israeli military?

Most of them do, Nassar says. She explains that children experience the narrative as an opportunity to enjoy defeating the oppressor without delving too deeply into the political

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nuances. The larp serves as stress relief for kids, diverting their attention from the distressing news about the mass killing in Gaza. Chasing lions with water balloons is simply fun.

The larps run as part of the women’s reproductive health program, too, underwent changes.

After the war began, Nassar redesigned the game she was working on to include scenarios of women giving birth in Gaza during the conflict.

“One cannot talk about sexual and reproductive health without mentioning the dire situation women are facing in Gaza”, Nassar explains. One of the scenes in *A Journey of Discovery* depicts the challenges faced by women having C-sections without anaesthesia in a region where Israel has bombed hospitals and power plants, and air strikes can occur while women are in labour.

According to Nassar, Bait Byout goes against the tide by continuing to run larps. Many other activities such as sports, theatre, and music are currently on hold, and even festive celebrations during Christmas and Ramadan have been largely canceled or altered. The cultural institutions that do continue working have changed their program. It would not feel right to show comedies.

Bait Byout is now developing a series of larps about everyday life in Gaza during the war. They were supposed to reflect the *Nakba* of 1948, in which the Zionist movement and Israel violently displaced and killed Palestinians, damaging Palestinian society, culture, identity, political rights, and national aspirations.

“But another Nakba unfolding within the war on Gaza has changed the game to reflect the current situation”, Nassar says. The larps primarily target foreigners, especially employees of various international NGOs. At the time of writing, the Israeli military has killed over 30.000 Palestinians, overwhelmingly civilians.

Ludography

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Author Bio

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RISKS, DANGERS AND BRAVE SPACES

This final section contains reflection on and criticism of larp safety practices and the wider phenomenon of safety discourse. As Juhana Pettersson points out, larps sometimes employ redundant safety mechanics that hamper play instead of improving player safety. Pettersson's article is followed by *How to Get Safely Through the Woods*, a beautiful parable from last year's book: Little Red Riding Hood is going to a larp but the woods are full of wolves. The moral of the story is that instead of killing the wolves – or excluding people from the community – we should create a better culture and focus on how to get rid of wolfish behavior, not wolves.

Safety practices are, indeed, often based on exclusion. For example, in *flagging*, participants of an event are given a list of everyone planning to attend. They can then flag people who they think should not be at the event. Maury Brown and Nina Teerilahti point out some flaws in this practice. For example, people can be flagged merely because they are socially awkward.

Sergio Losilla's *Rules, Trust and Care: The Nordic Larper's Risk Management Toolkit* marks a discursive shift from safety-based thinking to risk-based thinking. Losilla discusses emotional risks to players. Organizer well-being has been given less attention than player well-being. David Thorhauge moves into this relatively new territory and gives brilliant advice on how risks to organizers – such as that of burnout – can be mitigated. Taro Friman continues on the topic of burnout and gives advice on how to avoid it from the perspective of an occupational therapist.

Safety discourse is connected to the wider context of *ethics*. In recent years, ethical codes for arts and culture have been developed in several countries. Mikael Kinanen discusses applying them to larp. They consider values, transgressive art and accountability in the context of literature on the ethical evaluation of art, taking into consideration the particularities of larp. One of their great insights is that ethical evaluation should always engage with the artwork and strive to properly understand it because apparent immorality might be only skin-deep. In the case of larp, this means playing the larp – or at least delving into participant reflections – and understanding that one player's perspective is just a small slice of the work.

Romantic and erotic play are often seen as potential sources of ethical problems. For example, significant player age gaps are usually viewed as something to be avoided or limited. In the closing article of the book, Ruska Kevätkoski challenges this perspective. They argue that the idea of age gaps as inherently dangerous can lead to several new issues such as discrimination against older players, infantilization of younger players, normalization of neo-puritanical attitudes, and fostering a seemingly safe culture of timid play instead of aiming for a safer and braver space.

danger. Calibration means you use the tools in a wider range of situations, to experience a better larp.

Sometimes safety is a feeling. There's a difference between players feeling unsafe and actual safety issues. A concrete safety issue could be physical danger, sexual harassment or the cops getting called on the larp. Yet when people talk about feeling unsafe, they often mean something more nebulous, a vibe that makes them less confident and more nervous. To combat this, having a relaxed organizer they can talk to at any time in an off-game break room is more valuable than any safety mechanic.

Too many safety tools means players lose respect for them. If a player uses a calibration tool and finds it improves their game, they'll continue using it. If a player feels hampered by safety tools they don't feel they need, they'll forget them or fail to use them. They'll use them out of a sense of obligation, not because they feel the tools improve their larp or help them. (The worst offenders in this category are safety tools based on the idea of scripts, ready-made dialogue the players are supposed to recite to go through the increasingly rushed safety ritual.)

Good communication helps people opt out. When you communicate about your larp, your goal is not to make it attractive to everybody. What you want is to appeal to the people who will have a good time at your larp and enjoy it, while you also repel those who won't. A player who can't handle the larp will not have an unsafe experience if they don't sign up in the first place. A player who creates problems for others won't be able to do so if they stay away.

The bigger the larp, the more milquetoast it has to be. Intense experiences work best in smaller larps. If the larp has 200 players, it should be geared towards a milder experience because it'll be harder to screen the participants and larp chaos leads to increased problems. Super intense Nordic larp craziness is for larps with 5-50 players. Maybe 80 if you're pushing it.

Copying calibration mechanics is good. Nordic larp glorifies bespoke design where every choice has been specifically made to benefit this one event. With calibration mechanics, there are benefits to using the ones everyone else is using too (such as the lockdown and the tapout) because then a portion of the player base already knows how they work.

The culture around calibration tools may degrade unless maintained. The 360 degree illusion where ideally everything you see is part of the larp's fictional aesthetic surface is a very common Nordic larp ideal. This is why in many Nordic larps, the use of a hand sign signifying

that you're off-game (such as placing your fist above your head) is forbidden. Experience has shown that calibration techniques such as the lookdown (where you signify a desire to exit a situation for off-game reasons by shading your eyes with your hand and walking away) may start to be used simply in place of the old off-game sign, leading to casual breaking of the aesthetic illusion with no calibration benefit. Other mechanics may suffer a similar fate unless their correct use is reinforced.

Trust. When it comes to actual safety as well as the feeling of being safe, trust is king. A workshop exercise fostering trust and helping people to listen to the creative ensemble they're embedded in creates real, actual safety. Bolstered by one or two well-chosen calibration tools the players can use in situations big or small without it being a huge thing, trust is what really makes larp sing.

Who are mechanics for

Perhaps the most significant lesson has been that no set of calibration mechanics works for every single hypothetical participant in all larps. Indeed, two larps may use entirely different sets of mechanics and still have well-designed, functional calibration systems.

What makes this difficult is that different players and player communities may require different mechanics and approaches. A choice such as that you always have to ask before touching another player, every time, even just to place your hand on their arm, may be necessary and good in one context, and lead to a collapse of the whole calibration design in another.

The key is whether the participants collectively feel that the design serves their needs. If they do, they'll use it. If they don't, it'll be used only out of politeness to the organizers and a desire to be good larpers.

Author Bio

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There are wolves in the woods but the wolves are people. They're our friends, the ones who'd never do such a thing, they don't count, were too drunk, were in love, make a living now hunting others who are not as good at PR, who are hairier. The wolf is you; the wolf is me.

Does this mean never hunt that which hurts you? Likely not, little bird. Don't peck me.

It means safety cannot just be about whom we exclude. Understand that "good" people do bad things sometimes and it doesn't fundamentally change who they are (nor does it make it okay). Understand that this includes you and that no amount of proper ideology will protect you from it. Even you can cross a boundary you shouldn't have, put your ego before someone else's comfort, translate a reputation to a promise, grow sharp teeth and draw blood. Not on purpose, probably, but who said intention is magic?

Fuck safety; it doesn't exist – not really. Put bright lights in the dark so no one walks alone, build escape routes into your gameplay, think about the cultures you create, not just whom you invite; how to grow responsibility, empathy, insight. Think on what that looks like. Because there cannot just be good people and those who are dangerous, known or unknown – for when that is the truth, those who identify as good find excuses to call their crimes right and they never come out, and the wolf who eats little girls will be treated just the same as the one who takes up too much space in conversations. How then will we navigate?

That there are still wolves among us doesn't mean tighten the net. It means it is time we design to correct not for wolves but for wolfish behaviour.

person's identity is hidden. Additionally, the scope and intention of the flagging system, built to stop sexual assaults, has changed. It has become a system to protect one's comfort zone instead or to shift responsibility for managing one's emotions and interactions to a third party. As a game organizer, Nina for example has seen flagging reasons such as: "They sent me too many messages after a larp and I felt uncomfortable", "They are my ex and it's awkward" and "They always complain after a larp and cry too often." Maury has also seen reasons for flagging including "They have a big ego and dominate play" and "They were abusive to my friend in a past relationship."

When these types of reasons are used – and succeed in removing others from a larp – flagging is no longer about player safety. Flagging is being used to avoid resolving conflict that is an inevitable part of human contact in any community and to create cliques of players who ostracize others. People whose behavior is disliked in any way, especially cis men, get dropped from larps and, in worst case scenarios, ostracized from the larger larp community, because they may have behaved in a way that made someone uncomfortable. Flagged players generally do not get information on how to improve, denying them the opportunity for restoration.

Knowing that you can get someone removed from a larp simply by anonymously clicking a cell in a spreadsheet leads to a misuse of power. 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 practise is also unfortunately common. Nina for example, has been threatened that they will be flagged as an unsafe player from now on unless they stop talking about an issue in the community, online and outside of larp events. Misusing the power inherent in the system for your own gain is all too easy. Being flagged once can also lead to a cycle of continued flagging, using the rationale that if another larp removed them, there must be a valid reason.

Flagging creates problems for organizers too, who need to act as investigators, mitigators, police, judge and jury unless they simply drop all flagged people without question, which leads to the problems already described. Organizers may also be asked to perform hours of emotional labor listening to players in conflict. Adding the responsibility to guarantee safety of participants to this is a huge amount of work that is highly biased, mainly based on rumors, and ultimately thankless. Any larp organizer who does not drop a flagged person, for whatever reason, risks being called unsafe themselves, leading to backlash, ostracization and even abuse from players who disagree with an organizer decision.

No set of safety tools and player support systems will guarantee that every moment of every larp is free of situations that may be problematic or outside of a particular player's comfort zone. We recognize that there is no easy answer to the important issue of protecting player safety, and that this is a difficult conversation. Sadly, bad actors will learn to weaponize any safety system put in place, so the system must evolve in order to stay relevant and continue to do the greatest good possible.

Author bios

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Rules, Trust, and Care: The Nordic Larper's Risk Management Toolkit

Sergio Losilla

In 2018, I brought a friend to *A Nice Evening with the Family* (Sweden 2018). I was concerned, because he had very little experience with role-playing games, let alone with a very emotionally intense game. Despite my efforts to discourage him, he insisted that he wanted to join. The morning after the larp finished, he was a crying mess and it took him quite some effort to convince me that he would be fine and that I should not regret having brought him over. The next time we spoke, he told me that several friends had confronted him about this new hobby that left him shaken for several days.

It was his first larp. Since then, he has chosen to become a crying mess several times. It does not look like he will stop any time soon. What might look reckless from the outside is actually a well planned process: he knows his limits, but when he ventures to cross them, he is aware of the scars he may bring back, and prepares as well as he can to alleviate the consequences. This is the same process he goes through when he goes rock-climbing, an activity arguably more dangerous, which does not raise such concerns.

As larp has evolved, pushing for new limits of intense play, we have developed a wealth of expertise to larp more safely. However, this is not limited to larp: as humankind's ability to cause catastrophes has increased, so has our ability to avoid causing them. Pharmaceutical companies, nuclear power plants, financial institutions, airplane manufacturers all have had to change their ways of working (enforced by legislation, obviously) not to bring about tragedy. The most critical part of it is the object of this article: how to come to terms with the fact that risks cannot be eliminated, and how to manage them instead.

In practice, there is nothing revolutionary about risk management. It is just a systematization of common sense. This article will hardly reveal anything new¹. However, I will hopefully provide a new perspective that will help to view larp safety in a new way, and shine light on how powerful the tools are that we already have at our disposal.

Risk. Attempting to find a definition of “safe” that everyone will agree on is futile. Any communication relying on the word “safe” will be misleadingly dangerous. Any financial adviser, surgeon, engineer, or martial arts or scuba diving instructor worth their salt will never claim that something is safe. Instead, they will try to clearly explain what the negative consequences might be, and let their client make an informed decision. Similarly, a larp organizer that promises that their larp is safe, implying that no harm will happen to any participant, is promising something that they have no control over.

Risk, on the other hand, is a word most people can agree on. There may be disagreement if a certain risk is worth worrying over or not, but if somebody says “This rusty nail is a risk” or “There is a risk that we will run out of money”, everybody understands it the same way: something bad may happen.

Risk means that *harm*, more or less *severe*, has a certain *likelihood* of happening.

Harm. Harm is something that we do not wish to happen. Harm is the ultimate negative consequence of a series of events. Falling off a cliff is not harm, but getting injured as a consequence of a fall is. Being yelled at is not harm, but becoming emotionally distressed is. *Hazards* are the direct sources of harm: fire, physical impact, toxic chemicals, and verbal abuse are examples of hazards.

In larp, there are many things that we do not wish to happen: trauma (physical or mental) and property damage are the first that come to mind, but other things can be also regarded as harm: damage to reputation, loss of friendship, or even boredom. From a risk-management perspective, they are all the same, and you must decide what to focus on.

In Nordic larp, the focus has been centred on psychological harm. Psychological harm is a slippery concept, and to my knowledge there is no conclusive source to refer to. Because of that, most of the examples I will use throughout this article will be about physical harm, which

¹ Many of the key ideas presented in this article can be found in earlier literature, arriving at the same conclusions from a different starting point. See for example Friedner (2019).

is much easier to agree on. Hopefully, it will become clear that the same techniques that can be used to manage one can be applied to manage the other.

Severity. Harm presents itself in varying degrees of severity. We think of a bruise as less serious than a broken rib, which is itself less serious than the loss of a limb. Often though things are not so clear-cut, and determining the severity of harm is context-dependent, subjective, and hence challenging.

Generally speaking, severity should correlate to how longer-term prospects are negatively impacted. For example, in a medical context, severity is assigned depending on the consequences to patients, from a minor nuisance to permanent disability or death; broken bones are usually considered minor injuries, since the prognosis for total recovery is often excellent. Financial risk could be quantified not just in terms of how much money might be lost, but how likely it is to be able to recover from such loss; structural risks could be related to the ease of repairing a building; environmental risk measured by how likely it is that the previous situation can be recovered, etc.

As many have experienced, larp can cause serious emotional harm. However, let us admit that larp is, by definition, a simulation, and hence the severity of emotional harm is going to be always lower than being exposed to the real situation: a larp about prisoners at the Guantánamo Bay detention camp, as harrowing as it may be, will hardly ever be an experience as horrifying as being imprisoned at the actual camp. In a way, larp is an exercise in risk management, eliminating most sources of harm when mimicking extreme real-life situations.

Likelihood. Severity is not the only thing that matters about harm. A meteorite crashing on your larp location would certainly be catastrophic, but it is so unlikely that it is not worth considering. On the other hand, a mosquito is normally considered a minor source of harm, but it becomes a concern if it happens constantly: having a bunch of larpers going back home covered in bites after spending a weekend by an infested swamp is something that everyone would want to avoid.

The likelihood of harm can be understood either in terms of how probable it is or how frequently it will happen. Such probabilities are difficult to estimate accurately. In any case, knowing that the probability of falling off the staircase at your larp is 1.3% is not very useful compared to “I would be surprised if no one trips here over the weekend”. As with severity, organizations normally simply assign terms in a scale, corresponding to qualitative likelihoods. One common example is to have five levels of likelihood: improbable (not expected to ever

happen), remote (it would be very exceptional if it happens, but it is not impossible), occasional (rare, but given enough time, it will happen), probable (nobody will be surprised if it happens), and frequent (it would be surprising if it did not happen).

A quick introduction to risk management

Risk management, as daunting as it may sound, is a fairly straightforward process which consists of three steps: *analysing the risks*, deciding whether to *accept* the risks or not, and *mitigating* the risks.

Analysing risk. The starting point to manage risks is to analyse them: finding as many things as possible that can go wrong and figuring out how severe and likely they are.

Risk analysis requires honesty to be useful. It is hard to admit that we are putting people in danger, but dismissing a risk without careful consideration is a recipe for disaster. Airplanes rarely crash because of saboteurs, and drug dealers are not planning to hurt their customers when they cut their product with rat poison: behind all these cases, there is somebody who believes everything will be fine. Crooks are a piece of cake to catch and stop in time compared to reckless optimists who take everyone down with them.

In any case, identifying risks is never easy. Reality always finds ways to surprise us, no matter how thorough our analysis was. So, how much effort should you spend analysing risks? The unsatisfactory answer is “as much as reasonably possible”. One way to evaluate your analysis is to think about how you would view it in the future if something goes wrong. Was it reasonable not to reach out for an expert? Was it reasonable that you did not check out your larp location in advance? Was it reasonable to conclude that no serious mental distress could be expected? All of this is context dependent. If you have doubts, maybe you can try to run your analysis by somebody else.

Analysing the risks that lie beyond the limits may seem impossible, but it is not: we may not know *how* things may go wrong, but at least we know what wrong means. In other words, we know the severity, but not the likelihood. The safest approach is to assume that the likelihood is higher than you expect.

Accepting risk (or not). After identifying and determining the severity and likelihood of a risk, a natural question arises: can we live with it? Some risks are obviously intolerable, and

some are so trivial that it is even hard to consider them as risks. But quite often this is not clear at all.

Deciding when we can accept a risk is a tricky question. Even after bad things have already happened, people often disagree on whether the risk was worth taking. Even the same person might have doubts about it. So, how to decide about something that may not even happen?

The methods used in risk management (risk matrices being the primary example) help us very little here: they have been designed to leave a paper trail which can be used as evidence. They are too bureaucratic to use in larps, but most importantly they are not much of a moral reference we can adhere to. Sadly, nobody can give you any easy answers here.

Whatever you consider as your criteria, they should fulfil two conditions. First, a criterion has to be systematic: if you find yourself adding exceptions one after the other, it is probably not a very good criterion. Secondly, it must be easy for anybody to understand the criteria and agree that they are reasonable.

One criterion that you could use is the following: *a risk is acceptable if, even when harm happens, we expect nobody to regret having been part of the larp.*

This implies that the organization did everything within reason to analyse and mitigate the risks, all participants understood and accepted those risks, and whatever harm happened was either predicted and handled as well as possible, and nobody can be blamed for having been reckless. In reality, this goal is not achievable: but since it is clear, and the absolute best one can hope for, it is a good target to aim at.

If we decide that a given risk is acceptable, we can move on to the next one. But if we conclude that it is not, then it must be mitigated.

Mitigating risk. Mitigating a risk means reducing its likelihood, its severity, or both. Risk mitigation (also referred to as *risk control*) must be continued until we decide that the risk is acceptable. Let us review several strategies.

If you encounter a risk which you have tried mitigating by all means possible, but it is still unacceptable, there is one way to completely remove the risk: just do not do what you were planning. If it looks like in your larp something horrible might happen which you have no

control over, and you have no idea on how to fix the problem without it becoming a different larp, the best idea is to cancel the larp.

The second approach is to change the design, that is, adding, removing, or modifying elements of your original plan. Moving to a different location, locking doors, removing game content, forcing off-game breaks, adding non-diegetic safety elements (such as mattresses), or changing your player selection process can all be used to mitigate risks. If you are lucky, your larp may be unaffected – possibly even improved! However, it is more likely that the changes will impact your larp, possibly even to the point that you feel it is not worth organizing.

If there is nothing you can change, the next thing you can attempt is to affect how people will behave. You can instruct them not to enter an area under any circumstance, or remind them to stay hydrated under the scorching Tunisian sun. Since this relies on participants' efforts and attention, you may want to go through these procedures during a workshop. Do not hesitate to make participation compulsory, if absence would lead to risks that you cannot accept. Of these behavioural mitigations (called *administrative controls*), the weakest form is what we can call, in general, *labelling*, which is any kind of passive, static visual information, such as signs, warning messages in manuals, pop-up windows, safety brochures, and actual labels found in packages, control panels, etc. If the only thing between a player and disaster is a paragraph somewhere on your website, or a danger sign that looks perfectly diegetic, get ready for disaster. The final option is protective equipment. Unfortunately, as effective as they may be for other purposes, helmets and hazmat suits will do very little to protect your participants from emotional harm.

The Nordic larper's risk management toolkit

By now, you hopefully have a good idea about what risk management is. In this section, we will zone in into the peculiarities of emotionally intense larp.

In emotionally intense larp, like in combat sports, enjoyment is inextricably linked to the potentially harmful things that players do to each other. Somewhat counterintuitively, risk management in both cases revolves around the same key concepts: the restrictions to what participants can do, the measures to ensure that participants will follow such restrictions, and the contingency plans to be used if something goes wrong. In other words, *rules, trust, and care*.

Rules. If you run or design larps, you should appreciate that you have a huge control over players: if you can convince them that they are capable of throwing fireballs by extending both index fingers, you can surely convince them that they cannot touch each other at all, thereby creating a world where the risk of hurting other people is non-existent. This is what rules are for.

By “rules” I refer to all the constraints on the things that can possibly happen during a larp. From a risk management perspective, rules are control measures which either reduce the likelihood of risks – or remove the risks altogether – or replace hazards with different ones. Rules define what may or may not happen in- and off-game. Sometimes larp rules are introduced for other purposes than risk mitigation, and in some cases, rules may control risks at the same time as they contribute to a more interesting game experience.

Perhaps the most representative rules of larp are those used to represent violence: I have never heard of any larp with WYSIWYG violence, that is where violence between characters is not governed by restrictions of some kind. Requiring padded weapons, using rules systems similar to table-top role-playing games, theatrical representation – where the outcomes are either pre-planned or improvised during play using some signalling mechanic, or even removing violence altogether from the game, are all different ways of reducing the severity or likelihood of harm, or even eliminating it altogether.

Sex seems to be the other major perceived source of risk. In this case, the hazards are not so clear-cut as getting a broken nose, but it is generally accepted that sex requires a state of vulnerability which opens the gates for extremely severe psychological harm. Again, the forms in which sex appears in a game are restricted, from total avoidance to “dry-humping”, including more abstract mechanics, such as the Phallus technique used in *Just a Little Lovin'* (Norway 2011), or *Ars Amandi* which, after its introduction in *Mellan himmel och hav* (Sweden 2003, Eng. Between Heaven and Sea), has been used in numerous larps of many different genres.

In the daring type of play of many Nordic larps, characters are often exposed to many other sources of emotional harm, which are often a central part of the game: family abuse, workplace harassment, discrimination, slavery, imprisonment, political repression, torture, manipulation, etc. Harm happens when these emotions exceed the level the player is willing to experience. This may lead to emotional distress, and even trauma. These, in their turn, may be worsened because of triggering past traumatic experiences.

Interestingly, it is rare to find rules to handle emotional risks arising from something other than physical violence or sex in a specific manner: and these other elements are usually supposed to be represented realistically. For example, players playing prison guards are expected to shout at other players' faces, and to represent mental torture scenes as they would think would happen in reality.

Instead, emotional risks are managed generically by check-in, de-escalation, and game interruption mechanics. These mechanics are forms of inter-player communication to avoid harmful situations. Check-in mechanics are used to verify, during or after a risky scene, that players are doing fine. A popular one is using the OK hand sign to silently ask a co-player if they are OK when it is difficult to tell if a negative display of emotions (grief, anger) is a sign of an emotional distress that the player cannot handle. De-escalation and interruption techniques function in the opposite way, providing signals (like safe words or taps) to ask co-players to not escalate further or to lower the intensity of the scene, or to stop the game altogether.

These techniques have become standard. If you decide not to include any of them in your larp, it is a good idea to explain your alternative risk management plan before players sign up.

It is important that safety rules are, in the first place, clear. But it is equally important that you, as an organizer, as well as every other participant, get a clear picture that everyone has understood them.. I strongly recommended practising them explicitly in a workshop before runtime, particularly in case of subtle diegetic mechanics, which may be easily missed. The number of safety mechanics should be kept to a minimum to prevent confusion. Well-meaning players may spontaneously suggest adding their favourite mechanics to your game: it is preferable to firmly – but kindly – not allow this. An overabundance of mechanics may have the same effect as too many warning signs: none of them are meaningful in the end.

Trust. Trust is the degree of the certainty we have in our predictions that no harm will happen to us. Trust is critical in daring larp, because participants will compensate for lack of trust by acting as if risks were worse (either more probable or more harmful) than in reality, refraining from fully engaging with the content.

When we trust someone, we *know* that they will not hurt us, neither by directly causing us harm, nor by neglecting doing their part in keeping us safe. When we do not trust someone, it is because we suspect they may fail at the moment of truth, or because they actively seek to hurt us. Trust has two components: a cognitive one and a primal one. Having enough

information to make predictions is critical, but so is having the “gut feeling” that we are right. These two aspects need to be considered all the time.

The first step is building trust. In other words, convincing every participant that nobody will hurt them. Easier said than done.

For starters, participants must be on the same page about the possible risks. Make sure that you provide enough information during the sign-up process so that everyone has an understanding of risks as similar to yours as possible.

Another important aspect is the player selection process. A player may wish not to play with another player, for a variety of reasons. It is reasonable to publish a list of players and offer a channel for players to give feedback. Flagging, which consists of assigning a colour to other players to indicate the level of trust (from “will not share scenes” to “will not attend same larp”), is a popular approach. It may put you in the difficult position of leaving people out. In such a case, remember that your goal is to ensure a less risky game, and not to act as a moral judge. If you believe that your larp may present such risks that it requires that you completely trust all the players – trust that they can care for themselves and others – then you may need to do something more drastic, such as hand-pick your players or have an invite-only run.

Once your players have arrived at the larp location, the most effective way to create trust is pre-game workshops. On the cognitive side, you should cover all your rules and mechanics thoroughly, and rehearse them as necessary, until players are convinced that everybody can play their part. Safety-critical workshops should be compulsory, not just opt-in. A bit like how beginners are required to show that they can do an 8-figure knot before they are allowed to start top-rope climbing. Finally, do not rush through safety workshops: besides failing to communicate critical information, players may get the impression that you do not care enough about safety, and that you included the safety workshop as a nuisance that must be there.

On the primal side, you need to tickle the brains of participants to convince them that they are of the same tribe. Things like physical contact, or locking eyes and smiling, may help. *Baphomet* (Denmark 2017) used a simple and powerful technique where participants hug each other randomly in silence for a very long time. This had a profound effect in creating a trusting atmosphere. These exercises are *not* a replacement for the safety rehearsals discussed above, and can be counterproductive if they create a sense of false security.

When someone causes us harm, either directly or indirectly, we immediately lose trust, to a larger or smaller degree: our predictions that they would not hurt us failed, which means

that they may hurt us again. Our brain will then activate the alarm and deploy its defences. Suddenly we will dislike, fear, or lose respect for those people. This defence mechanism is quite clever: even if our feelings for those people are unfair (for example, they tried to protect us and failed), our brain will override our reasoning, tricking us into being convinced we are absolutely right, pushing us to avoid that person.

Restoring trust is not easy. At a cognitive level, we need to know that the other person is sensitive to our pain – that's the purpose of a (real) apology – and that we can accept that something bad happened exceptionally, that is, that either the other person didn't know something important or simply made a mistake, or that there was actually a very good reason we did not know about. The primal level also needs to be readjusted to lift the defences after they are not needed. For example, a hug or a smile can have a magical effect after a fight. However, be careful when using this approach: I can tell from my own experience that a forced hug from a perceived aggressor has the opposite effect, and can cause even more harm. In case of doubt, do not push it and simply try to figure out a way for the larp to continue with everyone feeling safe. This, in extreme cases, may require removing players from the game.

Care. Care is a particularly versatile tool, because it can reduce the severity of harm which we had not even predicted could happen. In our quest for pushing the limits of daring larp, it is very valuable to deploy a solid care infrastructure, in the same way that a campaign hospital will help dealing with all kinds of physical harm, without needing to predict its exact nature. Making participants part of a care infrastructure is similar to demanding that everybody must take first-aid training before joining an expedition.

Similar to trust, it is possible to enforce care using rules. Off-game rooms and dedicated staff to support players are very common; although it may not look like such, giving players the

Take home messages:

- Be brave! At least as much as you want to.
- Be honest. Do not fool participants, but most of all do not fool yourself.
- Be open. Your level of risk is not the same as most people's. You do not want to drag anyone into something they will regret.
- Be kind. If other people fail, and they honestly tried their very best to avoid disaster, be thankful that they discovered for all of us where the hard limits are.
- Be creative. Pushing the limits will demand of you to come up with new techniques to go where no larper has gone before, and come back in one piece. Hopefully, you know now that you have more tools at your disposal than you thought before.

option to walk out of the game into guaranteed support is just a larp rule. In many larps, each character has a connection with whom they have a positive relationship. This connection can be used to seek in-game support, which translates into support for the player. This could be further exploited by means of explicit rules, for example adding a hand sign directed at the support connection which forces them to go play a blackbox scene reminiscing of happier times. A larp designed around one-on-one abusive scenes could impose that after every such scene the players must go off-game together to provide mandatory after-care.

Care rules could take many forms: the key is that larp designers should not be afraid to impose such seemingly awkward game elements, because the fact is that this can be much more effective than leaving care to the skill and initiative of the participants.

Conclusion

Nobody – including me – expects that larp organizations will start conducting formal risk review meetings, performing external audits, filling risk matrices, and writing down risk mitigation plans.

Let's be daring! But daring does not mean reckless. Let's learn from the lessons of the past and, for those disasters yet to come, let them be the kind that, despite the pain they cause, leave us with the feeling that it was worth trying.

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Risk Mitigation Techniques for Organisers

David Thorhauge

To me, organiser safety is all about identifying and mitigating risks. I think about mitigating organiser safety risks both in my volunteer event organising work and in my professional work as an economist. In this paper, I will present some risk mitigation techniques I have used at larp events.

Ask for Help!

My best organiser safety advice is simply: Ask for help! Do it! Ask for help! There are only a few risks that cannot be mitigated by asking for help. Most people like to help when asked. So: Ask. For. Help! It sounds banal, but in many situations we are somehow irrationally afraid of asking for help. Afraid of seeming less strong, afraid of seeming stupid. This fear is irrational. So: Just ask.

Throw Money at Problems

Targeted risk: Organiser burnout because of too many tasks

Description: Keep a sizable reserve of the budget reserved for tasks that unexpectedly show up and do not spark joy – or otherwise cause stress. Use this budget liberally to improve your quality of life as an organiser. This will usually not make the event more expensive for the participants since other costs, like location, food or transport, are higher.

How to make this work well: This method works even better if you not only keep a reserve for unexpected tasks but also plan on how to throw money at expected small and big tasks that do not spark joy and that you know are coming up. These could include food for organiser meetings, buying props instead of making them, hiring professionals to clean after the event, catering, etc. If you do this at a scale, be aware that the price of the event may climb up heavily.

Talk About How You Work Best

Targeted risk: Organiser burnout

Description: Early in the organising process have an honest talk with your fellow organisers about how you work best and what kind of tasks make you happy or grumpy. Only after this you should decide who does what and how.

Some people like to work alone at home, while others need social interaction. Some need regular meetings, while some do not want to “waste time” with meetings. Some tasks require working alone and some tasks require constant co-operation. Some tasks are so annoying that they should be done socially – so you can at least suffer together. Find out what shape your larp project is, and then try to solve how to allow most people to work on the things they love – in the way they love.

How to make this work well: If you gather a diverse enough (and big enough) team around you and have this conversation, you may end up with tasks that are all Only Darlings. And keep in mind that many people do not actually know how they work best.

I have had very good experiences with starting with weekly work meetings without deadlines. In these we start with a quick round-table of what we have done since the last meeting, do the minimum necessary coordination, and then start working on our own tasks. At the end we do a quick evaluation. After a few work meetings like this, we usually find a shape that works for all – with people opting in and out as fits them best. This is the softest and most social method, taking advantage of the fact that people usually are better at downscaling than upscaling.

Pitfalls: Compromises are almost always needed. Do not rush it – and do not let the first person to speak get all the best tasks.

Emotional Check-in

Targeted risk: Organiser burnout. Hidden deadline crashes.

Description: Start meetings with a round of how you are all doing. Talk about private problems like relationship issues, work problems, and whatever is taking up space in your minds. Talk about what has been hard. Talk about what you have managed and have not managed to do since the previous meeting. Start the actual meeting only after this discussion.

If you manage to create an atmosphere where people feel they can talk (shortly) about private problems, there is a chance that people will find it ok to be imperfect and talk more openly about problems related to the project. Then you might be able to more easily find organisational problem areas where progress is slow and thus predict deadlines that will not be met. Talking openly also makes it easier for fellow organisers to help each other out and to share workloads.

How to make this work well: This method works well with having weekly work meetings and with finding ways to make meetings more fun and social – like having cake or prosecco at meetings (yes, I do this professionally).

Conflict Escalation Map

Targeted risk: Harassment of participants or organisers, burnout, and social media shit storms.

Description: Map out a clear list of escalation steps and de-escalation steps you as an organiser can use in conflicts involving participants and other relevant stakeholders both before, during, and after runtime. Once you have mapped out and ranked your escalation possibilities it becomes easier to both escalate and de-escalate conflicts. After you have spent some time mapping out conflict scenarios, it will be easier to set clear boundaries.

The escalation map should include offences that will lead to banning from the event, but also offences that might be fixed with dialogue and an honest apology. Or even when you should tell someone to apologise to someone else. The map should include a couple of examples of possible conflict scenarios. For example, it could say: “If participants are drunk and annoying, send them to bed”, “If participants are rude to volunteers or staff, force them (politely) to apologise properly”, or “If anybody harasses anyone, throw them immediately out of the event”.

How to make this work well: Spending a little time roleplaying some conflict examples can build confidence in conflict resolution. Agree beforehand on how to handle a breach of the code of conduct or a failure to own up to bad behaviour. This will make it easier to communicate clearly about how you handle safety issues. This can improve the participants' feeling of safety and minimise the risk of social media shit storms caused by a badly handled conflict.

Use a Code of Conduct

Targeted risk: Harassment of participants or organisers, organiser burnout from social media overflow.

Description: Create a code of conduct. Promise to use it. And then actually use it. Many shit storms, organiser burnouts, and participant experiences of unsafety come from organisers not following up on bad behaviour.

The code of conduct does not have to be particularly detailed, but it should include what kind of social space you want to create/have. It should describe how you plan to ensure good behaviour – how you are planning to police your event.

The actual code of conduct on your website does not create value – the work and communication behind it do.

How to make this work well: When combined with a conflict escalation tree with roleplayed practice of conflict resolution, a code of conduct can really improve your confidence as an organiser when handling conflicts.

Pitfalls: If you just copy a code of conduct from another event and do not put any energy into practising it, you will almost certainly not be able to handle conflicts well or in time.

Say No!

Targeted risk: Organiser burnout

Description: Find out where your boundaries are. And then practise saying no.

Think about your boundaries regarding the tasks you will face as an organiser, the situations you will be in, and the behaviour you will have around you, the problems you are willing to handle, and so on.

A “No” works best when the focus is not on the word itself but rather on the why of it. It is a good idea to express respect for the other person when you decline from a task. You could for example say: “I’m sorry, I’m totally swamped with other tasks right now, can you find someone else to do this?”, or “I totally agree that that is a very important task. I think it would be best handled by Nikolai, as he has a very soft touch and endless patience in those situations.”

How to make this work well: This takes years and years of practice. Both in finding out what your boundaries are in various situations and in learning how to say no in good ways. There are many good ways to say “No” in business speak, and I highly recommend watching business speak tik-toks to learn them.

Pitfalls: There is never a time when it is too late to say “No”. Some boundaries are definitely worth cancelling your larp event at the last minute.

Public Communication Plan

Targeted risk: Organiser burnout from social media overflow.

Description: Make a communication plan and publish it. And most importantly, stick to it. The plan should contain how, when, and what you plan to communicate. It might also include what or how you will not be communicating. Examples could be: “We will only answer emails and not monitor social media”, or “In addition to what is already on the webpage, there will be 3 newsletter-emails: in January, in March, and a week before the larp”.

This helps with setting participant expectations and reduces the amount of time needed to frantically monitor social media.

How to make this work well: The communication plan can often be easily merged with the general project schedule that contains dates for character selection and such. A more extreme version is “white box organising”, where most or even all organiser documents are public. If you do not plan to monitor social media, you could have a friend (not on the organiser team) remind people about this in the relevant social media channels (just a couple of reminders is

sufficient). This way you can indirectly spread the news that the organiser team is not going to follow social media closely.

Larp Organiser Mother

Targeted risk: Organiser burnout

Description: Have an organiser or volunteer whose task is to regularly check in with the other organisers and “mother” them.

In practice, mothering can mean helping out with tasks, helping with communication, helping with delegating tasks, reminding organisers to have breaks and hydrate (while taking over their tasks), bringing food, etc. It could also include baking cakes, providing foot and shoulder massages, sitting down to talk, sharing a beer, and many other small services.

How to make this work well: Many events are too small to have a full time Larp Organiser Mother. In those cases, this role could easily be handled by a volunteer. Experienced organisers can even take this role upon themselves when they are participants at other people’s events (with the right respectful, soft touch).

Organiser Without a Task Portfolio

Targeted risk: Organiser burnout because of too many tasks

Description: An organiser without a task portfolio is an organiser who purposefully has no tasks identified initially. If another organiser becomes swamped with too many tasks or quits, the organiser without a task portfolio can take over some or all of the tasks. This organiser can also pick up all manner of small tasks – and thus reduce organiser stress.

How to make this work well: This is an obvious spot for an old experienced organiser – or a pensioned old fart organiser. An experienced organiser can often take over a wide variety of tasks quickly. The organiser could be present (quietly) at organiser meetings so they will know and understand what the vision for the event is, and so that the less experienced organisers can use them as a library of organiser knowledge. As a variant you could instead choose to

purposefully assign too many people to one central area in the event organisation and then allocate other tasks to them when the need arises.

Variation: You can also have an inexperienced organiser learn from the more experienced crew by starting out having no portfolio of tasks. However, this is not as efficient at mitigating organiser burnout.

Workflow Management

Targeted risk: Organiser burnout

Description: Learn some workflow management techniques. And use them.

There are many, many schools of workflow management out there. Try them out and find a set of techniques that works for you.

As a minimum, try to figure out how to:

- Delete: Some tasks do not have to be done (or are not tasks at all). Delete these.
- Do: Some tasks take less than 2 minutes to do. Do these immediately.
- Delegate: Some tasks are not yours at all, or could be better done by others. Delegate these.
- Defer: The rest of the tasks have to be done at some time. Set aside some time in your calendar for each of these tasks.

It takes time to find out how you work best. But having a structure for how you work can really help you focus on the right things.

Pitfalls: Many organisers forget to prioritise tasks or to delegate tasks to others.

Smaller Methods

Assumption of a victim's truthfulness: If you as an organiser have too little time or energy to handle a conflict, the easiest and least risky method is to just assume that whoever comes to you as a victim in a conflict is fully truthful – and act accordingly. This method is by no means optimal, but it requires less resources and steps of action. Moreover, it is likely to protect the

right participants and lead to fewest shit storms. After the event you can then choose to follow up better on the conflict.

Standard emails: Have a few standard reply emails ready, and do not be afraid of not personalising the text when replying.

Auto-reply: Whenever you need a breather, set an auto-reply on the event email describing that you will not be replying in the next week because you are on a vacation. Detail that you will reply once you return. The auto-reply could contain a short FAQ.

Teach participants how to apologise: All social interactions go so much better when people know how to apologise – so spend a little time teaching your participants. This also works great as part of a conflict resolution.

Check mails once per day: Don't check mails more than twice per day. When you check them, do actually take time to follow up on them. Don't read mails when you don't have time to act on them. (This is a workflow management skill.)

Ask for help: It sounds banal. But do it anyway.

Author bio

David Thorhauge is a professional business administrator and a volunteer event organiser. David has organised more than 30 larp conferences and a small handful of regular larps, plus countless non-larp events, concert tours, parties and professional conferences. In these endeavours David has experienced both heavy harassment and stress. David was born in 1978, and currently lives in Aarhus, Denmark.



Please Stop: An Occupational Therapist's Advice on How to Avoid Burnout

Taro **Friman**

So, you have found yourself on the verge of a burnout, or already in one, without the tools to stop repeating the cycle. In this text I will, as a newly working occupational therapist, larper, larp creator and two-time burnout survivor, give you some real-life tips and tools to fight back.

Many of us think that burnout is something that only happens at work, when we are doing too much in a stressful environment. But burnout can also happen when we do something we love so much that it consumes us. This is called Passion Burnout. While burnout can happen to anyone, people working with things they love are at higher risk. When we do what we love, we risk thinking that we are not really working. We risk thinking that because we love the work so much, we should actually do more, that because we do what we love we don't need to rest. When our passion peaks we become full of energy, and that can make us unable to detach from work enough to focus on the things we need to do in order to avoid exhaustion.

Many larp organizers are in danger of experiencing Passion Burnout, because we love what we do. But if we acknowledge the risk we can work together to prevent it. We can learn to spot the symptoms of burnout, both in ourselves and others: feeling helpless, trapped, defeated or overwhelmed, as well as lack of joy, fatigue, changes in sleep and/or appetite. We can encourage each other by setting an example by taking care of ourselves, setting boundaries, offering help and lowering our expectations. Together we can build a more caring and nurturing community.

Now for the tips and tools.

1. Burnout is not your fault

You, like everyone else, are a victim of this capitalist society that lives from our work. In this system you get rewarded, praised, and judged by the work you do, with larps just as much as with every other pursuit. In the capitalist world you don't get more money or respect by doing less. But if you manage your time better, if you prioritize yourself instead of the work you are doing, if you stop sacrificing your own well-being, your family, your friends, your relationships and your mental and physical health, there is at least one person who will respect you more: you.

2. Know where your time goes

Use a time management circle or a similar tool to find out how you spend your time and how you would ideally spend it. Writing things down will help you notice where the time actually goes, and with this knowledge, you can start making adjustments to your daily routine to better fit your needs. When organizing a larp, it can help you to write down larp organizing time into your day so that it doesn't take over your whole freetime.

Draw two circles and divide them each into 24 slices. The first circle is your everyday life: how you actually spend your time. Think of the last few months or the last time you organized a larp and fill the circle with your everyday occupations such as sleep, work, taking care of yourself, cleaning, cooking, downtime, relaxing, hobbies, etc. You can be as specific or as vague as you like, you can fill it hour by hour, or more approximately. Use color coding if that helps.

Now fill out your second circle. Think of your perfect life and fill your dream circle with what your everyday life would look like if by some magic all your hopes and dreams had come true.

Then look at your two circles side by side. Visualizing the differences can help you find the things you can control. Maybe you need more time for sleep, or more time with your loved ones, maybe less work and more time for self-care. See the differences, but remember that you are not a wizard but a mere mortal. So start small, just one change towards your ideal life. Set yourself a goal that is realistic and achievable. The goal can be as simple as "I want to have an hour a week for myself to go outside" or "I need half an hour more sleep a day". State that goal to yourself and start to find your way towards it by sharing it with a friend – or a stranger at Solmukohta – and asking for help along the way.

3. Write things down

The following tool is useful while working on a larp project. The version pictured is called the Time Management Matrix. It can help you see what needs to be done in order to manage a project and help avoid burnout by giving you a clearer idea on how to spend your time and where you can cut yourself some slack.

	Urgent	Not urgent
Important	crises deadline driven emergencies etc.	preparation prevention planning etc.
Not important	interruptions some emails or social media activity some meetings you don't need to attend etc.	busy work (work that adds a little value, like searching for theme songs for characters) something someone else should be doing etc.

Fill the matrix with the things you need to do for the larp. Fill it with your responsibilities and burdens. After you have things written down, you can see the actual amount of work that needs to be done and spot the things that are less important. Which are the things you don't like to do, and which things give you joy? What could you delegate to others? Are there things you don't have to do at all? To help avoid burnout, I would suggest focusing on the things you like and delegating the ones you don't.

Look at the amount of work ahead and estimate how much time it would take to complete it. Set boundaries: look at your time management circle and be realistic. When are you going to do this work? Make a schedule and add in breaks and off-time. And if the work feels like too much, ask for help.

4. Ask for help

Hard and shameful? For me at least it is. Many of us think we need to be able to do everything ourselves, because we value ourselves mainly through the amount of work we do, be it professional or artistic or passionate work. But try to think of what it feels like when someone

asks you for help. Most of us would feel appreciated, and that it would be an honor to be a part of your project. Asking for help is giving an opportunity for others to feel good by supporting you.

5. Find a way to connect with yourself

This tool is a Green Care exercise. You can do it even in the middle of running a larp, you only need ten minutes. The goal is to find a way to regulate your emotions and ground yourself.

Go outside, to nature if possible. If you can't go outside, find a picture of nature that speaks to you, or try to remember a nice view of a landscape. Start by observing your surroundings. What does it look like, what do you hear, feel or smell? Look at the big picture first, then some smaller details. If it's hard for you to stand still, move. If you find yourself thinking about other stuff, notice that thought and then let it go, shifting your focus back to your surroundings.

After a few minutes, when it feels good to you, start shifting your focus to yourself. With the same attitude of observation, without judgment or evaluation, try to feel yourself. Listen to your breathing. How does your skin feel, where in your body can you feel your heartbeat? If you feel like moving your body, do so. Move in a way your body wants to move. If you feel an emotion, let it in and try to look at it with a sense of wonder.

When you feel ready, slowly wrap your hands around yourself. Hug yourself and thank yourself for this exercise. Do this exercise when you feel disconnected, overwhelmed or when you need a moment for yourself.

6. Calendar some Me Time

When I'm in the middle of organizing a larp I tend to view that time as my freetime, which has led me to overworking myself. It's really easy to cut time away from rest and self-care, but taking care of yourself is necessary to avoid getting burned out. This is difficult, I know, but scheduling some Me Time while working on a larp project really helps. How much you need depends on you. If this is hard you can start small. Mark this time in your calendar and make sure not to book anything else over it. Even if larp organizing is your hobby, don't do that work in this time, make this time your haven, for resting and enjoying yourself.

7. The change needs to happen with you

Lastly, I must give you the bad news: I can help you with tips and tools, but you have both the power and the heavy burden of actually using them. This is the hard part. You must take responsibility for your time management and set up the boundaries to protect your well-being. And please, for your own sake and for the sake of the whole community: ask for help when you need it.

Don't be afraid of the amount of tips and tools presented here, these are not "one size fits all". Pick and choose those that feel doable for you. If something doesn't work, try something else. And don't forget that the community is here: the people who can help you with tools, support and labor. If we reach out and admit that we cannot do everything alone, we can lift each other up. With community, care and support we can achieve magic.

Author bio

Taro Friman has recently started a job as an occupational therapist. Previously they worked twenty years as a youth worker and special needs assistant for people with disabilities or mental health issues and with neurodiverse people. Taro has been larping for twenty years and has been part of several Finnish larp productions. They are actively trying to make the community more gentle.

Will Ethical Demands Limit or Liberate Larp?

Mikael **Kinanen**

Introduction

There may be cause for concern that the recent surge in ethical expectations within the arts and culture sector could threaten artistic freedom. As larp has aligned itself more closely with established art fields, and gained legitimacy as an art form, it is not outside these demands. I aim to show that this threat only applies to a superficial understanding of the ethics in art and their application to artistic expression.

Evolving demands

The #metoo movement was a sudden awakening for much of the cultural sector. It was interesting to see how swiftly the larp community recognized the need for better practices and for addressing the issues brought to light – at least compared to how slow culture profession and institutions were to adapt. However, the cultural sector is catching up.

In recent years, things have moved forward in the broader cultural field and all over Europe. Ethical codes have been developed for art and culture in several countries, including Austria, Finland, and the Netherlands – something that was almost unheard of five years ago. Some of these codes were commissioned by state governments, while others resulted from collaboration between artists and the state. It is likely that more countries will adopt similar codes and

guidelines. While the momentum came from disappointment with how harassment and related issues were handled, the scope of these codes has been broader.

For instance, the Austrian *Fairness Codex* (Focus Group Fairness Codex 2022) outlines a set of shared values and associated responsibilities for creators, organizers, institutions, and decision-makers. These values – respect and appreciation; sustainability; diversity; and transparency – are generally uncontroversial. What is noteworthy is the emphasis on positive values that the cultural field should uphold, rather than on prohibiting certain actions. The *Fair Practice Code* (Breure & al. 2019) in the Netherlands had already developed a similar approach.

In contrast, the Finnish *Ethical Guidelines for the Art and Culture Sector* (Forum Artis 2023) take a more traditional approach to professional ethics by defining the principles and rules governing behaviour, rather than emphasising values to be upheld. For example, the principle of consent is addressed through the rule: “The methods and practices used when collaborating must be acceptable to all participants.” The guidelines are more specific than in the other two codes, but this decision is likely aimed at safeguarding artistic freedom by staying seemingly value-neutral and limiting the scope of the entries. This is also reflected in the guidelines’ content, which includes artistic freedom, and separation of artist and artwork, as distinct entries. Nevertheless, some artists argue that the existence of *any code* infringes on artistic freedom.

These new national codes apply to larp in their respective countries in so far as larp is considered art. However, there are no penalties for violating these codes when the practice is conducted outside public funding or institutional structures. Even with public funding, it remains uncertain whether any sanctions will be enforced.

The larp community has long had codified norms such as safer or braver space policies, codes of conduct, and uncoded practices like negotiating boundaries at the beginning of events. The demands for ethically sound design and play are not new to larp. In fact, resources from the larp scene, such as the *Safer Larping* material package (Niskanen 2017), have been used in promoting equality and inclusion in the broader cultural field. However, the new codes are more far-reaching than has been the case in the larp scene. They encompass expectations for transparent decision-making, ecological sustainability, and respect for rights of cultural participation.

How should we address the growing calls for enhanced ethics in arts and culture, including larp? Should we be concerned that ethical boundaries may restrict artistic freedom? I propose that the issue lies not in ethics themselves but in a superficial understanding of ethical evaluation.

Limited codes

The existing codes have been careful not to encroach upon *artistic expression itself*. For instance, the call for diversity in artistic expression and inclusion of marginalized groups in the Fairness Codex concerns the possibilities of such actions, not the artistic decisions themselves: “Diversity in the forms, content, and various perspectives of artistic and cultural work is a valuable asset and a desired goal” (Focus Group Fairness Codex 2023, 5).

There is no reason to think that non-artistic choices in organizing an event would fall outside the scope of everyday ethics and find protection in the refuge of artistic freedom. Examples of non-artistic choices are often pragmatic, and might include recycling materials for set design, how participants arrive at the location, and catering. Even among these examples there are cases where boundaries between artistic and non-artistic are blurred, for example meals or treats that set the tone of the game.

When it comes to artistic expression itself, there is persistent unease surrounding ethical demands. This unease can range from the strict view that art should only be evaluated based on aesthetic criteria to the more lenient expectation that critiques should engage with the work being assessed. Art, it seems, is unique in this regard.

Values in art

Artistic works encompass a multitude of values: including economic, historical, educational, social, therapeutic, and aesthetical, among others. Some of these values can be intrinsic to the artistic expression in a work of art as art, such as the value of beauty in an abstract painting’s composition. Others may be extrinsic and unrelated to artistic expression, such as the economic impact of well-being brought about by listening to a symphony. Aesthetic value is often considered as essential to all works of art, whereas economic value is rarely if ever seen as intrinsic to the artwork, regardless of the field. With these values intermingling in a work, determining the artistic value can be challenging. One approach is to view artistic value as a collection of all the intrinsic values related to artistic expression (Schellekens 2007, 41).

The emphasis on certain values can vary among different art forms. For instance, social value is traditionally highlighted in theatre, contemporary performance and larp, while this is less common in visual arts. Even within the same genre, specific values can shift between being considered artistic value or unrelated to it. For instance, the social value of an after-party is

probably not part of the artistic value of the larp: but building new social ties or forms of social connection could plausibly be a fundamental artistic intention and one of the primary values of the work.

Why does the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic values matter? Drawing from the literature on the ethical evaluation of art, the primary reason lies in the challenges of interpretation. When values are intertwined with the artistic choices within a work of art, it becomes difficult to point out the correct interpretation. This challenge is particularly pronounced in larp, as interpretation depends on the context and perspective of a particular player, participant, and experiencer.

Consider transgressing

The core conflict between art and ethics comes from the tradition of *art-as-transgression*, where the ability of art to challenge moral conventions and everyday attitudes is seen as its primary value (Gaut 2007, 100–105; also Julius 2002). Even more troublesome is the notion that, at times, a work's apparent immorality is what makes it interesting or enjoyable. How should we approach these cases, where artistic value – and thus artistic freedom – clashes with our moral values?

A crucial initial step is to delve deeper into the work, engage, and strive to understand it. Immorality might be only skin deep. A thorough examination of the transgression might even reveal ethical value in place of immorality. Seemingly immoral works can have ethical merit when subjected to an *all-things-considered* analysis of what is happening within the work. These aims can sometimes be apparent in the way the author describes their work, but claiming such aims is not a *carte blanche* excuse.

A work can hold both ethical and artistic merit, even if it has some ethical flaws. In some cases, the merit may even depend on these flaws (Gaut 2007, 57–66). This means that evaluating a work cannot rely on a single detail, and it provides a way to explain how the apparent immorality of a work can be artistically, and at times ethically, valuable – especially when it enhances our understanding of immorality, such as how easy it is to be drawn to immoral actions (Kieran 2003, *passim*; Gaut 2012, 288–289). A work can encourage us to adopt a critical stance towards what it portrays. Even when it presents something as desirable, the response can be justified by artistic choices and can contribute to the development of our ethical understanding (Gaut 2007, 191–194).

In my experience, something like this often occurs when playing a morally complex character in a well-crafted larp. The artistic value of a larp can hinge on the moral shortcomings of its characters: immoral characters are often crucial for creating tension in larp and for supporting the experiences of other participants. A fulfilling way to play such a character often requires that the reasons for questionable actions and desires be understandable and even compelling to the player. Larps with a lighter tone might not even call for any critical distance towards the attitudes adopted. Does playing such characters lead to moral corruption? This is at least unlikely to be a common outcome: the experience is more likely to be cathartic and cleansing, and to provide abundant material for ethical growth.

However, it is entirely plausible that, in some cases, the effects of immoral characters or entire larps could be, in fact, immoral. The experience may be transformative in a way that seduces participants into adopting immoral norms, or questioning and rejecting what they would otherwise consider fundamental moral values. Determining whether a work brings out moral or immoral attitudes in its participants cannot be based solely on the descriptions of the work; it requires engagement with the experience itself, or at least with the reflections of those who participated.

Evaluating a work as art demands interpretation and comprehension of the work, while non-artistic evaluation can often rely on publicly known facts alone. To critique a larp properly on ethical grounds, one needs to have experienced the work: and even then, it would only be one slice of the complex work that the larp was. Evaluating a work based solely on its subject matter is insufficient (Stecker 2012).

Accountability

In larps, determining who possesses sufficient knowledge to make judgements about the entirety of a work is more problematic than in most other art forms. Nonetheless, if the possibilities to evaluate the work are spread thin, so too is responsibility.

Larps often embrace co-creation of meaning at their core, making it difficult to identify who is responsible for what is expressed, particularly when the work moves beyond the control of its designers and organisers. This introduces the problem of collective responsibility, which suggests a degree of leniency as a practical solution.

It is valuable to distinguish between responsibility as guilt or blame, which is backward-looking, and responsibility to act, which looks forwards. Instead of engaging in blame games, where individuals dispute responsibility so as to avoid guilt and shift it onto others, it is more productive to view collective responsibility as responsibility to take ethical action and make changes, irrespective of blame (Young 2011). This conception of responsibility aligns well with larp as collaborative practice, where the line between participant and organiser is often blurred, and the attitudes expressed in and transmitted through the game arise through co-creation.

Even in thoroughly planned larps, the agency of players can lead to unforeseen outcomes. In the best case, participants create something far more remarkable and compelling than was ever planned. At times, the outcome can be less favourable, and occasionally, even a single player can disrupt the narrative and make it about something completely different. On a smaller scale of what happens with individual characters and in interactions between individual characters, participants often have more agency than the designers ever could. In all these cases, attributing responsibility for the moral content of the work solely to its designers and organisers would be unreasonable. It is challenging to pinpoint who is to blame for ethical shortcomings and who could reasonably have prevented them.

This ambiguity does not depart significantly from traditions of moral responsibility, where the evaluation of actions usually considers unintended consequences in light of what the individual knew or should have known, or what they could have done differently. However, a forward-looking approach to responsibility has one major advantage: it maintains the responsibility to make better choices in the future, even if blame cannot be assigned. This is especially relevant for organisers and designers: and, to a lesser extent, every participant bears some responsibility for the ethical aspects of a larp.

Conclusions

The advancement of ethical practices and codes is not a threat to artistic freedom if we grasp the intricate nature of the ethical evaluation of artistic expressions. Ethical codes and guidelines mentioned deliberately steer clear of delving into the realm of artistic choices, thereby preserving the essence of artistic freedom.

The core issue lies in the distinction between artistic and non-artistic choices, where the existing ethical codes have been careful not to encroach upon artistic expression itself. Just as the tools for artistic expression vary among art forms, the tools for ethical evaluation must be similarly

diverse. In the case of larp, the challenges posed by multiple interpreters and the shared moral responsibility in co-creating meaning offer special challenges to ethical evaluation.

In short, moving beyond ethics as a limit for larp calls for deeper engagement with ethics, not its avoidance. These notes have aimed to show that artistic freedom in larp is not threatened by the development of ethical practices, norms, and resources. A nuanced ethical discussion is apt to help us both protect artistic freedom and allow for the evolution of ethical practices around it.

Given the intricacies of ethically evaluating art, it becomes apparent that the standards for ethical assessment in artistic expression must be more nuanced than when evaluating other facets of larp practice or event organization. A work with ethical flaws can be artistically valuable despite these or even indirectly because of them. However, sometimes there is no such justification for immorality.

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Previous discussion, reasonable reasons?

Surprisingly little, if any, documented discussion exists on this subject. That romantic and erotic themes should be avoided when the players have a large age gap is something that seems to be taken as common sense, a precaution that does not need justification. In private discussions I have had around this topic, older players and organizers usually give a few common reasons for avoiding romantic or erotic play with younger players: it is to prevent grooming and abuse, to avoid problems with poorly managed bleed, or to make sure younger players won't feel pressured into experiences they would rather avoid. Many seem to take it as a given that, at the very least, romantic play over a significant age gap is likely to make players uncomfortable (van der Heij 2021).

Older players seem to fear that younger players will be more susceptible to romantic bleed and less able to handle it safely. There is some anecdotal evidence to support this fear (Juustila 2016) and so it seems reasonable that older players would want to avoid the potential hassle. Avoiding romantic play with younger players for fear of accidentally pressuring them into something they are not ready for also makes sense. Younger players are more likely to be inexperienced with romance and sex, both as larp content and in the context of their own lives. Playing on these themes safely requires the ability to recognize your own limits and to be able to communicate them clearly (Brown 2021), which is something younger players are more likely to struggle with. And while experience and emotional maturity can give older players tools to better deal with potential problems, it can also give them authority which younger players might feel pressured to follow.

On the surface, then, it looks like everyone wins when we limit romantic and erotic play over significant age gaps. But I have a few complicating questions.

Common sense, puritanical attitudes, and other complicating questions

It is reasonable to place a hard limit on erotic play at 18. But what is an acceptable age gap for romantic and erotic play between adults? Above, I used the word *significant* to describe an unacceptably large age gap and mentioned that 30-plus players seem to feel uncomfortable playing on these themes with players under 25. But can a 25-year-old safely play with an 18-year-old? What about someone over 50 with someone around 30? *Younger* and *older* are very imprecise descriptors when the age spectrum of larpers stretches from literal children to people who could be their grandparents.

Surely we can use common sense, I can hear you sigh. But common-sense this: A 60-year-old player wishes to play on romantic and erotic themes, but all their oldest co-players are at most 40 and the organizers have a strict *no significant age gaps* policy. Should they make an exception? And if they make one here, how do they then justify preventing a 22-year-old playing with a 30-year-old – after all, that age gap is much smaller and both players are adults. Common sense, again, would suggest that the mental age gap between a 22-year-old and a 30-year-old is much larger than between 40 and 60. This could well be true – in general. But maturity levels vary wildly between individual players depending on both their individual life experiences as well as cultural differences. Should the organizers make case-by-case judgements based on their personal assessment of the players? Or make new rules – *no exceptions for people under 30*, for example? Because if they make no exceptions at all, the organizers are likely to exclude their oldest players from romantic and erotic play altogether, contributing to the rising problem of ageism in larp communities.

Of course, no-one should be forced to ignore their own discomfort in order to make play happen for someone else. But I think it is worth considering where this discomfort comes from and whether it is in part cultural or learned. Why do we feel that romance and sex between older and younger adults is risky or disturbing?

An increasing number of young people seem to view even small age gaps in relationships as inherently abusive, both in real life and inside fiction. This is one of the ideas put forward by a growing US-centric neo-puritanical movement (Romano 2023), which rejects everything not deemed wholesome enough as “problematic” – that is, disgusting and dangerous. Because of this movement, many young people have come to see all older people, especially older queers, as potential predators. This panic about morally corrupt queer groomers, in turn, has in the hands of conservative politicians become an extremely effective weapon against gender and sexual minorities.

In real life, romantic and sexual relationships with large age gaps are more common among queer people (Payne & Manning 2021). Should we view these relationships as inherently uncomfortable or problematic? Is this the message we want to send when we maintain that younger and older people cannot safely even play pretend at having a relationship together? I feel that there is a real danger of our unquestioned worry about age gaps contributing not only to ageism but also to the spread of neo-puritanical attitudes in general and the vilification of queer culture in particular.

It is also worth asking, why do we feel the strongest need to protect younger players when it comes to romantic and erotic play? Why are these themes assumed to be more difficult to play safely over significant age gaps than other potentially emotionally heavy topics? The explanations I have heard all circle around the idea that romance and sex are both something most of us are intimately familiar with, and that is why playing on them has the potential to hurt us more deeply than things like physical violence, which fewer of us have experienced directly. But following this logic, should we not also worry about age gaps with themes such as bullying or abusive family dynamics? After all, many of us have direct experience with these. Is not an older player, cast as an abusive mother, likely to unknowingly inflict a lot of emotional damage on a younger player, who – as we suspect – is unable to draw and maintain healthy boundaries or protect themselves from severe bleed?

An easy justification for singling out romantic and erotic play as the most dangerous is the assumption that this is the kind of play most likely to be intentionally misused by malicious actors. A common fear is that older men will use romantic play to lure younger women into abusive off-game relationships. But younger players can also do this. And even without bad intentions, isn't potentially damaging heavy romantic bleed even more likely to happen between two young, inexperienced players when neither of them have the experience to recognize it happening or the tools to handle it safely?

Fostering or denying agency and learning?

Who are we really protecting when we decide to enforce age gap limits on romantic and erotic play? When we exclude our oldest players and leave young adults to play among themselves, are we really creating safer spaces for all? Or are we just catering to the sensibilities of those who view age gaps in conjunction with romance and sexuality as icky.

The attempt to shield younger players – especially young women – from bad experiences by limiting their exposure to romantic and erotic play also feels like a return to the kind of patriarchal system where women's sexual agency is restricted with the pretext of protecting them from harm. Even if this is not our intention, by placing automatic limits on romantic and erotic play between older and younger players, are we not denying younger players the agency to decide for themselves what kind of play they are and are not comfortable with? In addition, if we insist on treating young adults as essentially children, are they not likely to then keep behaving accordingly, deferring all responsibility for their own experiences to people they view as actual adults?

If we assume that young players lack the experience and tools to handle bleed and recognize harassment or abuse, where do we think they will gain this experience? Workshops can only take them so far, and real life lessons often come with a significantly higher cost.

It can be uncomfortable to learn about your own limits, because it often means having to bump against them first. But discomfort does not equal harm. Learning to cope with uncomfortable feelings and experiences, learning to recognize when your boundaries have been crossed in actually harmful ways, and learning to trust in your own agency are all skills which larp communities can offer a uniquely safe environment for younger players to practice – if we older players decide to hold that space for them.

Facilitating safer, braver environments

I think that creating meaningful, actually safer spaces for romantic and erotic play, as well as protecting the newer members of our communities, requires more complex solutions than having players tick a box about their age in the sign-up form. It requires fostering a culture of open discussion and care, an environment where we can look past our knee-jerk reactions to uncomfortable topics and instead ask thoughtful questions about how to best manage the real problems behind them.

Letting older and younger players play on romantic and erotic themes together is not in itself a problem. Segregating players by age is not the easy solution we might hope it to be. Not all older players are predators, not all younger players are inexperienced or safe to play with, and not all uncomfortable experiences are bad.

Trying to create safer spaces with a strict *safety from* approach – spaces where nothing difficult should ever happen – will only lead to timid and unsatisfying play. For romantic and erotic play to be meaningful, we need the trust that comes with creating a braver space together. (Friedner 2019)

Romance and sex are themes that can be intensely personal, cause heavy bleed in several directions, and lead to highly uncomfortable feelings or – at worst – pave way to outright abuse. It makes sense to put up some guardrails for younger or more inexperienced players to lean on. But we older players have a lot of hard-earned wisdom about managing bleed, finding

our own limits, and holding onto our own boundaries while engaging in romantic and erotic play. Instead of keeping older and younger players separate and leaving younger players to make all the same mistakes we have made, I think we should try to facilitate the kinds of brave discussions, environments, and play where this wisdom can be safely passed on.

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