GAME WRAP

Welcome to the second volume of NEIL's *Game Wrap*—a publication dedicated to the art and craft of LARP. It has been a year of adjustment and changes as we've worked to bring you this sophomore effort and continue to think about what *Game Wrap* could be, how to realize that vision, how to carry it through logistically and what role it plays in the New England larp community and beyond. We have expanded our staff and streamlined our process, and look forward to more growth as we put our efforts into supporting authors and encouraging writing about larp as a complementary endeavor to writing and playing in larps.

The landscape of larp has seen much change in the last decade, and there is a sense of acceleration and momentum to that growth. There has been greater public visibility of LARP and its uses from coverage in the *Business Insider,*[1] teaching LARP basics in a Lexington summer camp,[2] to even news of plans for a Disney Star Wars immersive resort where guests costume and roleplay in the stories set in the Star Wars universe.[3]

Larp is education, larp is in tourism, larp is news, larp is activism. At the same time it can be easy to feel disconnected and left out of the loop of the innovative developments in larp, if one maintains larp as a hobby balanced against the rest of one's obligations. I've felt this firsthand as I moved across the country and plunged into a different local larp culture with its own norms and traditions. Larp publications, like all publications, can serve as a way to connect with a particular community and more so for communities largely separated by geography and differing larp cultures. They are a way to connect intellectually and share ideas, and for a reader a way to learn something new.

One goal for *Game Wrap* has been to provide such an opportunity to share the NE larp culture and foster a cultural cross-pollination that helps develop larp as a pastime and an art form. Another goal, in support of the first, is to provide another avenue for the development of larp culture in giving space for more long-form and slower discussion of a topic than in the delightful spur of the moment conversations late into a con evening or even a moderated discussion at NELCO. We believe that creating this space gives us a way to deepen a culture of reflexivity and analysis in the NE larp community, and allows us to learn about the great variety and creativity of thought and design behind our favorite games.

It has been personally exciting to think along with one of the author's included in this volume about the work of creating "truth" within the artifice of playing pretend, to learn from another of the experiences at Peaky Midwest about the challenges of teaching others how to write a game, to get a glimpse into the larp traditions being developed internationally and how they tackle familiar problems of immersion and engagement in familiar and innovative ways, and to notice the wealth of community building expertise represented by all the authors. It has also been illuminating to see how limitations can drive creativity and how good things sometimes really do come in small packages in our selection of some ingenious micro larps.

Take a read through this second volume, enjoy, question, and critique. Talk to your friends. By all means, disagree. And then add your own thoughts and expertise to the discussion, in Vol. 3. We at Game Wrap believe that it will enrich us all and continue to expand the scope of what larp can be.

Viktoriya Fuzaylova

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FROM BAD TO BETTER
Larp Design Lessons from 10 Bad LARPs

by Nat Budin

Introduction

The 10 Bad LARPs series is an anthology of terrible larp ideas which run back-to-back, each for a very short time (usually either ten minutes or one minute). The series, which includes four separate anthology games, contains a wide variety of tasteless and deliberately flawed designs, contributed by a large set of authors.

I co-created the 10 Bad LARPs series in 2005 along with Susan Weiner and Zachariah Hauptman, with the original 10 Bad LARPs in 100 Bad Minutes debuting at Intercon E. Along with a growing set of writers, we followed it up the next year with 10 Bad LARPs: The B-Sides, and then 4 Bad LARPs in 40 Bad Minutes and 10 Bad LARPs: C-Section.

Every larper and larp creator has slightly different ideas about what they consider good larp design. Conversely, in a group of multiple larp authors, each will have their own views on what makes a larp "bad." The 10 Bad LARPs series, by virtue of its relatively large set of writers, represents a diversity of types of "badness."

In the context of a 10 Bad LARPs game, ideas that would obviously never work in a full-length larp (at least in someone's opinion) become playable and even enjoyable. Why is this? How can we apply these phenomena to the design of other larps?

Methodology

I read through each game from the original 10 Bad LARPs, its sequels, and the "apocrypha" (games that were cut in revisions to each of these collections). This was a total of 68 games.

While reading each game, I assigned a set of "tags" to it, attempting to identify common elements. I focused in particular on elements that made the content offensive and elements that I consider generally good and bad in theatre-style larp design, but also assigned tags for things that are commonly found in 10 Bad LARPs games. In addition, I noted the author of the game and its length in minutes.

Through this process, I developed a set of categories of "badness" found in the 10 Bad LARPs series as well as some ways in which these flaws are mitigated.

Categories of badness

For the purposes of this analysis, I looked at elements in 10 Bad LARPs games which, if present in most mainstream theatre-style larps, would generally be considered problems for the game's design. The following categories of design flaw were identified in the tag analysis:

- **Impossible goals**: The game asks players to attempt to achieve certain goals, but these goals cannot be achieved.
- **Insufficient mechanics**: The game asks players to achieve goals in opposition to other players, but this conflict cannot be adequately adjudicated given the game's mechanics.
- **Unsustainable premise**: the conceit of the game is too ridiculous or too unbelievable to be maintained for a full-length game.
- **Undermines own premise**: The conceit of the game would be sustainable if not for other elements present in the design.
- **Incoherent**: The game is self-contradictory, nonsensical, or impossible to understand given the materials contained therein.
- **Misleading**: The game appears to be one thing but turns out to be something else.
- **Too little time to work**: The action of the game cannot fit into the time allotted.
- **Too much time for game**: The action of the game cannot fill the time allotted.
- **Zero interaction**: The design of the game prevents character interactions that would be enjoyable if allowed.
- **Zero characters**: The characters in the game are too thinly written to be possible to roleplay without significant additions on the player's part.
- **Zero goals**: The characters in the game have insufficient motivations provided to occupy them for the duration of the game.

These categories are pervasive throughout the 10 Bad LARPs games: of the 68 games, 48 are bad in at least one of these ways. The average 10 Bad LARPs game contains 1.25 of these design flaws.

To illustrate two of these flaws: Amnesia: The LARP, from 10 Bad LARPs in 100 Bad Minutes, is incoherent because it consists of a set of nonsensical character sheets and a set of equally-nonsensical "memory" cards to be handed out randomly at intervals. Additionally, it is misleading, because the memory cards are deliberately suggestive of larger plots that are not actually present in the game.

12 Players In Search of a LARP, also from 10 Bad LARPs in 100 Bad Minutes, consists simply of a sheet labeled "Setting:" with no other text, and twelve sheets that say "Character:" with no other text. Therefore, it contains zero characters and zero goals.

Offensiveness

Another element in the 10 Bad LARPs design toolkit is offensive premises. Many of the 10 Bad LARPs games incorporate direct references to real-world tragedies, such as the September 11 attacks, the Challenger explosion, and the Holocaust. Other games ask players to portray cartoonishly exaggerated versions of racists, sexual predators, and real-world religious zealots.

On a personal note, I don't feel as comfortable with this content today as I did when I co-created it. This content can be exclusionary for some players, and additionally, the extent to which 10 Bad LARPs leans on relatively easy moral shocks for comedy is perhaps too great.

That said, 10 Bad LARPs largely punches up, and most of its offensive games use the shocking content for some satirical purpose. For example, The All-Jesus LARP irreverently highlights how various cultures have seen Jesus through history, Bid Committee satirizes problematic elements in actual larps, and Naptime 9/11 accentuates the tragedy and horror of the event rather than trivializing it.

Do the offensive elements in these games serve as design flaws, or help the games work despite themselves? According to the tag analysis, offensive games are much less likely than non-offensive games to contain any of the identified categories of badness, so the design intent seems to be for offensiveness itself to be "bad." However, these offensive elements have become so strongly identified with the 10 Bad LARPs brand that it seems clear that many players enjoy the shock humor on its own merits. Therefore, it seems that offensiveness acts both as a category of badness and as a selling point.

Mitigating factors

Despite containing numerous elements which would generally be considered larp design flaws, the games of 10 Bad LARPs use other strategies to make the experience enjoyable, thereby mitigating the problematic elements. The tag analysis also

identified the following categories of mitigating design factor:

- **Built-in structure**: The game provides a sequence in which events are expected to occur.
- **Emergent interactions**: Characters are set up to play off one another in ways that are not obvious to any one player.
- **Improv**: Players are encouraged to make up significant game content on the fly.
- **Meta**: The game references itself, its own genre, or its own form.
- **Opposed goals**: Characters have mutually-exclusive goals their players are expected to attempt to achieve, or the game itself opposes character goals without making them impossible.
- **Physical activity**: Players are expected to run, dance, move objects, or perform other energetic physical activities.
- **Premise is a joke**: The game's title and/or setup are inherently funny.
- **Punchline**: The game's setup, combined with a factor that will appear later in the game, forms a joke.
- **Puzzle**: The game contains a mystery that can be solved by players.
- **Secrets**: The game distributes important knowledge only to some players.

Amnesia: the LARP, through its misleading memory cards, causes players to see patterns (that are not intentionally present in the game's design), and eventually form a theory of what is happening in the game. This is a form of emergent interactions.

12 Players in Search of a LARP is meta in that its title self-referentially describes the adiegetic experience of playing the game. Its premise is also a joke, since the experience of receiving an entirely blank setting and character sheet is (possibly) funny.

Fun factors

The mitigating factors help explain why design flaws do not necessarily render a game unenjoyable; however, they do not fully explain why the games are enjoyable. Indeed, by the traditional standards of secrets and powers larps,

most of the 10 Bad LARPs games would be considered failures.

There must, therefore, be something else making these games enjoyable to play. From my own observations of running 10 Bad LARPs games, there are three major factors that seem to make a difference for players.

The most obvious one is humor. 10 Bad LARPs, to a large extent, lives or dies on its comedy, and employs a variety of comedic techniques. Two of the mitigating factors (premise is a joke and punchline) are directly tied to humor, and another (improv) is a form of comedic acting. Additionally, virtually any of the design flaws can be played for laughs in the inherently self-referential context of 10 Bad LARPs, particularly when exaggerated for satirical effect.

The second is energy. 10 Bad LARPs uses a variety of techniques to keep players energized, including uptempo music between games, quick cuts, and games requiring physical activity placed at strategic intervals throughout each collection. Additionally, the collections place all the one-minute games at the end in order to increase the momentum.

The last important factor is length. Unsustainable premises would clearly be a major design flaw under most circumstances, but

virtually any premise can be sustained for ten minutes, or failing that, at least for one minute.

The shortness of the timeframe also gives players alibi in situations where players are asked to embody characters that are morally abhorrent. Sarah Lynne Bowman defines alibi as "the social contract...in which players accept the premise that any actions in the game are taken by the character, not by the player." A short game gives players alibi to fully engage with a larp concept, or a character, that they would never otherwise for fear of embarrassment. That alibi can prove exciting and produce a surprisingly high level of engagement because of—not in spite of—the shortness of the time in which it occurs.

Broader applications

The design principles of 10 Bad LARPs may seem, at first glance, to be fairly specialized. Most larp writers are not attempting to write collections of over-the-top, satirical, extremely short larps. What lessons, if any, can we take from this series into our work writing other larps?

Perhaps the most evident lesson is that 10 Bad LARPs represents a convenient compendium of mistakes to avoid in full-length games. (This effect can also be seen in other metatextual satirical larps, such as An Evening With Clarence.) These design flaws, while acceptable and even enjoyable in a 10 Bad LARPs game, would be serious issues in most larps.

The fact that a short timeframe turns flaws into features hints at a larger lesson: every larp design element has a lifespan for which it is enjoyable. One temptation in secrets and powers larp design is to keep adding content and pack the game chock full of plots in order to ensure everyone has enough to do, but an equally valid strategy may be to shorten the game to fit the material. Additionally, design ideas that feel not quite right in a full-length secrets and powers larp may work well as a short vignette or as a scene in a tale-telling larp.

Finally, 10 Bad LARPs is a reminder of the power of setting proper expectations for players. It is apparently possible to create a series of games that advertises its own utter disregard for good larp design, and have players enjoy it. A similar phe-

nomenon can be seen in Mike Young's remake of The Cell, a faithful reproduction from memory of the second worst larp Young ever played.

10 Bad LARPs is nobody's idea of high art, and is entirely unconstrained by the bounds of good taste. However, the series does contain non-obvious ideas that can be applied elsewhere in the craft of larp.

The majority of the 10 Bad LARPs series can be downloaded for free under a Creative Commons license from NEIL's Larp Library (http://library.interactiveliterature.org).

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COLLABORATIVELY WRITTEN CHARACTERS AND THEIR ROLE IN CREATING A SUCCESSFUL LARP

by Aliaksandra Franskevich

OBJECTIVES

The surface objective of this article is to **introduce the readers to the collaborative character creation process and encourage using this tool**, as well as to **illustrate the importance of workshops in designing a better, more immersive, and memorable larp**.

This article may be useful to all who are interested in larp design and larp theory. It discusses an alternative larp design to what is traditional in many larp cultures where characters are prewritten, as well as introduces the concept of workshops as a standard part of larp.

I will address the collaborative character creation process as contrasted with the design of pre-written characters, its peculiarities, and the opportunities it opens up for the players and larp organizers. I will outline different aspects of character writing, and showcase how collaboration with the players benefits a larp. I'll consider the most common objections to player-written characters, such as claims to have less control over the larp, no secrecy, problem with casting, et cetera, structuring them from most common to those less frequently mentioned. I'll sum up the existing knowledge about collaborative character writing, show examples based on my experience as a larpwriter and organizer, and elaborate on different types of workshops used for that.

Before I proceed with that, I find it important to mention the larp background I come from, as the ideas stated in this article are highly influenced by the experiences I had as a larpwriter, larp director, and player. I got acquainted with larp at the Larpwriter Summer School (LWSS) in 2012. LWSS is a five-day intensive course in larp design, aimed at enabling the participants to create and run their own larps, is organized by Belarusian-Norwegian team, and is primarily based on Nordic larp—a school of larp design, or larp tradition rather than a geographic term, that is highly grounded on immersion, collaboration, and often offers its players more than just entertainment. Since then, I've been a part of the LWSS organizing team a couple of times, wrote and organized a few larps, seminars on larp, and larp festivals, and played plenty. While I consider myself a representative of Nordic larp tradition, there's an ongoing debate as to what Nordic larp exactly is. It would take a separate article to ponder on that, but there are quite a few articles and books on that that I can recommend: *Nordic Larp* by Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola; *Why 'Nordic Larp' is Confusing* by Lizzie Stark; *Keynote Script: What Does "Nordic Larp" Mean?* by Jaakko Stenros, *The Cutting Edge of Nordic Larp* edited by Jon Back, *There Is No Nordic Larp—And Yet We All Know What It Means* by Stefan Deutsch.

DEFINITIONS

Prewritten characters can sometimes be called organizer-written characters and are those that are created prior to the larp by staff rather than by players. Character description can vary from one line to dozens of pages; it can also be given in a form other than text, such as a song or a picture.

Prewritten characters differ in the amount of information about the world of the larp.

Collaboratively written characters, sometimes called player-written characters, are those created by the players, usually during the workshops immediately prior to the larp. Just like prewritten characters, they can vary a lot—the number and the combination of workshops, as well as the workshops themselves, used for creating characters are unique to every larp.

The difference between these two character-writing techniques can be viewed from two perspectives: who creates the character (organizer versus player) and how can the process of writing them be described (predetermination versus collaboration). I decided to primarily focus on the latter, as the processes that are typical of the larp are more important and interesting for me.

PRE-WRITTEN VERSUS COLLABORATIVE CHARACTER CREATION

The most common argument in favour of prewritten characters that I've heard at larp conferences is that with prewritten characters larp designers **have more control over the larp**. The arguments for this point are as follows: since you are the author of the larp, you know best what will work out and what will not; you can write different types of characters that the players would not create for themselves otherwise; you know which secrets should be revealed and which shouldn't; and you can build expectations of how the actions in your larp will develop. However, many of these objectives, if not all, can be achieved with the collaborative character writing.

Let's first consider the argument of prime importance—how are you going to control your larp if you don't even know which characters you will have? What is your scenario worth if the players can come up with characters that wouldn't fit in the plot? The thing is, none of these concerns prove true if you find and use the proper workshops for your larp. A proper workshop will enable your players to create the characters that fit in with your vision for the plot, and thus give you control over your larp. An extra benefit you'll get is that your players will have ownership of what they

created, which usually results in their willingness to collaborate during the larp, more playable and believable characters, as well as stronger impact of the larp on the players.

How can you choose and design workshops to get the characters you need? Below I will write about the factors I find crucial to designing characters.

A certain order is important, and my example is going to be in reverse order. You cannot start with a workshop on establishing relations between the characters before you at least know who the characters are. For the players to do both, they need to feel safe and comfortable in a group, with people who are sharing this experience, and that's where exercises on establishing trust come in handy. In order to do exercises on establishing trust, you need your players to know each other just a bit off character. I find it important to create a feeling of safety between the larpers before going onto a meta-level of their characters, as this enables the players to feel more secure about their play and boundaries.

A good example of workshop order is given in an article *The Workshop Pyramid*, written by a collaboration of authors Maryia Karachun, Yauheni Karachun, Olga Rudak, and Nastassia Sinitsyna. The article is aimed at creating "a relatively universal structure that will help larp organizers arrange workshops and pre-larp exercises so that they will compliment the run-time in the most efficient way" and tresses chamber and black box larps for participants with little or no experience, but as the authors say, "might also be useful for others." A concept of the workshop pyramid is similar to Maslow's hierarchy of needs and counts three levels:

1. **Building trustworthy atmosphere**: On this level, the larp organizers need to answer the question what are you doing and why and how can they make your players feel safe and trust both each other and you. This level includes basic exercises that establish mutual trust among players and larp designers, as without trust, the authors claim "even well-thought scenarios can be jeopardised, especially when players' personal boundaries are crossed."

2. **Creating characters and inner relationships**. During this phase players are given room to

discuss, speculate, experiment and get used to each others, better understand their characters and relate to them. This is usually the most time-consuming part of the workshop.

3. **Developing a common story**. This part includes exercises needed to create a story that every character will be part of, such as flashbacks, flash-forwards, playing out scenes from the larp and is the result of mutual trust between players and larp directors along with thoroughly developed characters.

The authors warn against meaningless use of exercises used just to fill in a certain level, as every workshop should "have a particular purpose and serve a common goal—making players ready for that specific larp."

The order structure differs from larp to larp. I described a certain structure that works for me and a certain algorithm that I use; however, don't hesitate to alter it to suit the needs of your larp.

Even if you agree with the above arguments, some questions remain. Such as what about secrecy? How is it possible to create it and play it in collaboration?

Secrecy is an important part of larp design for many larpwriters. An argument in favor of pre-written characters states, if you pre-write the characters for your larp, you can write about their secrets in the character sheets. What is not taken into account though, is the question about how big are the chances that these secrets will be revealed. In all of the larps I played and organized (about 30–40 larps in general) the players never revealed all of the characters' secrets if they weren't revealed between at least some of the players during the pre-larp workshops. And even though for some players the fun part was to reveal them after the larp, I adhere to the opinion that secrets in larp exist to be revealed.

A Swedish larp-designer Susanne Vejdemo wrote in her article *Confessing, Gossiping and Confronting* as conscious tools for a better larp that "a hidden secret is boring." The author marks that though "characters might want secrets to stay secret for ever, but you, as players, want secrets revealed." Further in her article, she infers a vital larp principle, which states that "a character's goals and desires are not the same as the player's goals and desires," thus driving us to a conclusion that "when you have or find out a secret, you have to spread it around to at least a few persons."

I cannot help but agree with her—honestly, I believe that secrets ideally should be revealed before the larp, between the players, not characters. There are several reasons why this is necessary. Personally, I think this is more fun to play, knowing as a player what your character should do to "accidentally" come across some other character's secret. Sheer surprise is an emotion that we react suddenly to, without a chance to think about or analyze our reaction, and a character may react differently to the surprise than the player would. Whereas knowing the surprise in advance allows you as a player to make sure the character's reaction alone is expressed, doesn't put you out of your character and doesn't hinder subsequent play. And what I find particularly vital—it's safer. For example, if the secret that my character will come across in larp is that my child will be killed in front of my eyes, as a player I would prefer to know this beforehand. The example shouldn't necessarily be so extreme—anything can, potentially trigger you in a larp. And it's the responsibility of the organizers to avoid psychological trauma and take care of their players.

Considering these reasons, the initial argument about secrecy between both players and characters might not seem so crucial. However, if you still want a **high secrecy larp**, the right techniques of collaborative character creation enable you to have it.

An example of such workshop would be an exercise from the larp *Keep Calm and Carry On*, a four-hour rerunnable blackbox larp designed for 6 players that uses theatre lights and sound. The larp explores the feelings of emotional overflow people face when they are forced to keep up an image of a perfect public life as contrasted with the complications of their everyday private life. During the larp, the participants will find themselves in three dimensions: playing the perfectly "happy" royal family in the first dimension, further unveiling to the desperate "real" characters struggling to hold the family together, finally descending to the third dimension, which is the real emotional experience of the players.

This larp uses workshops to create characters. The only information that the players are given before-

hand is the names of the characters, which include their family relations (for example, Duke Henrik, husband of the Queen). Each character in the larp has some dark secret(s) that they have to create for themselves. During the workshop, the players pair up to discuss their secrets. Thus, two out of six players know that the secret exists, while the four remaining have no clue about it.

If you want your larp to be high on secrets, you can leave it as is. However, if you want to add more openness to the larp, you can use the following workshop. Two characters (a pair from the previous workshop) are sitting on the chairs in two different game spaces, one of which is dark and the other is lit. The characters are sitting on chairs back-to-back, so that they don't see each other's faces. One character, who is sitting in dark, is at home, where they can discuss anything without the need to preserve the social mask. The second character, sitting in a lit space, is in public and cannot talk openly. The two characters are talking on the phone and discussing their common secret, one of them being open about it, and the other—using metaphors and secret words not to reveal themselves.

There are some cons in pre-written character creation that collaborative character creation eliminates. Some **players just won't read the larp sheets before the larp**, and even if they do, they won't do it carefully. So, considering the amount of work you as a larp designer do beforehand, writing and perfecting the characters for your larp, it's sometimes just not worth it. I proceed from the assertion that it's my responsibility that all of my players have great time at the larp. Even if all of the players but one read their character sheets diligently, one person who didn't can affect the larp. Don't trust your players to do their homework, but make it your own responsibility instead. With characters created during the larp, it's easier to make the group of your players focused on the larp while doing workshops together, having group and pair discussions, i.e. walking them through the whole process of character creation. With workshops as part of the larp, everyone will be on the same page, and you as the larp organizer will always have a chance to check with your players, answer their questions, and make sure they understand the idea of your larp.

Understanding the idea is another part of character creation; when you are working on your characters as a group, playtesting some of the relationships, actions, memories, et cetera, you have the chance to calibrate your characters and the world of the larp and make sure everyone **has a shared understanding of what is happening**. Calibration is a term often used in relation to culture (as in Martin Nielsen's article *Culture calibration in pre-larp workshops*[1]), but I find it to be relevant for character creation, too. A character in a larp has so many facets and aspects—personality traits, background, memories, dreams, voice, physical appearance, fears, et cetera—that it is quite challenging for you as a larpwriter to keep all of it in mind and calibrate that without forgetting anything. And the possibility to try your character on before the larp solves much of the problem and you don't have to worry that you might have created something unplayable.

An great example of calibrating the characters is given in an article *Character Co-creation: Surrendering to the group* by Frida Karlsson Lindgren, which can be found online at workshophandbook.wordpress.com.

Another reason for creating characters at the larp is **better availability of the larp for the players**. Not all the players are ready to dedicate a lot of time for larp preparation before the larp itself. This is especially true with first-time, inexperienced, or non-larpers. For example, your friend may have heard you talk about larp and has finally found time to come try it for themselves. Probably, you told them that the larp lasts for a day and even if they don't like it, it only means that they lost one day of their weekend. However, if you load your friend with dozens of pages of character sheets and a few bluesheets they might not be as enthusiastic about it anymore. In other words, it's hard to attract new players to larping if that immediately presupposes such a bulk of preparation.

It's true for long-time larpers as well if larp is not a number-one priority on their list right now, you might lose your players to well thought out (and thus, very long) character sheets. Whereas in case of using workshops, a 6-hour larp actually means 6 hours, without weeks of preparation nobody

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1   http://www.alibier.no/culture-calibration-in-pre-larp-workshops/

warned about. This is also true of larps organized as team-building for companies: when people who are unfamiliar to larp expect to be entertained, they often expect to come to the larp and enjoy without having to do reading beforehand.

However, there is a different perspective on this: we can also argue that in commercial larps players often want the entire experience to be provided for them, so they won't need to create anything themselves during the workshop.

Another problem that collaborative character creation solves is **casting**. Before trying out some larps other than Nordic ones, I didn't even know this problem existed, as casting happened during the workshops in a form of drawing characters with the possibility to exchange them or as an open discussion between the players.

When you do the casting beforehand, it's like putting a blindfold over your eyes. Imagine you have been cast to play a strong bond with some other character. You come to a larp, you see that person for the first or maybe the second time in your life, you act distant and too nervous to notice and develop any chemistry between you. If it's hard to communicate, laugh, and be at ease even as players, how can you play out deep affection in this case? You can, of course, act and pretend, but there's more to that in larping, at least when we talk about Nordic larp.

Of course, you play fictional characters in larp, but you play with real people who might put real emotions in larp, and the level of trust between you as players certainly affects the relations your characters are going to have in larp. However, this is all hard to achieve if you are playing with someone you're meeting for the first time. The solution some larp organizers use is to run larps where all of the players are already friends. But that's a limitation and it makes a larp community closed off to new people. Workshops on establishing trust and working on the relations together with the people you are going to interact with at a larp allow to calibrate the level of intimacy your players are comfortable with.

A simple example of an exercise on building trust between the players would be a hugging exercise which goes as follows: a larp organizer asks the players to walk in the room in a free tempo for some time. As soon as the larp organizer says "stop," the players choose the person who stands closest to them and hug this person until it feels uncomfortable. The players thank each other after they stop hugging each other. The exercise should be repeated several times.

Another example would be a candle exercise, where players stand in a tight circle, while one player enters the center of the circle. Players put their hands forward, the player in the center relaxes and "rolls" inside the circle, supported by the hands of the other players. It is recommended for every player to take part in the exercise.

One more important angle to consider at casting is **gender**. Larpwriters have started designing for neutral characters; playing a gender different from your own in larp is commonly accepted. With more awareness comes more responsibility; and if you absolutely must write a larp where your characters have certain gender, pre-written characters don't give you quite the flexibility that player-written characters do.

One of the larps designed for neutral gender characters is *Inside I'm a Puppy* larp, written by a collaboration of larp-designers—Nadja Trutniova, Yauheniya Siadova, Natasha Smolnikova, and me. In the larp, players play a day from the life of puppies in a dog shelter. Players are not allowed to use human language during the larp, and their "puppy" characters are designed from scratch during the workshops, which include such exercises as walking, barking, yawning as a dog of your breed, your character "memories-building" exercise, developing a sense of smell exercise, and others. To get inspired for creation of a puppy personality, players are offered photos of different dogs, collars of different colors, and quizzes, where they answer such questions, as what is their favorite food, where were they born, what is their favorite pastime.

Workshops are also crucial for establishing the **mood of the larp**. For the players, workshops are a transition phase, where they leave their personality behind and put on the personality of their character. Alongside with it, the overall mood of the larp is established—whether it will be a drama or a comedy, a farce or a romance. Without the transition phase, it's hard to tune the players into the right mood, even if it's specified in the larp materi-

als. For example, you decide to playtest a larp with your friends. You meet, you laugh and make jokes that each of you understands, and then you start playing. If the mood of the larp is light-hearted comedy, you step in the larp easily. However, if you need to play a character in a larp with serious themes that deals with strong emotions (such as death, loneliness, loss, grief, et cetera) it might be hard to switch to the right mood without any preparation. Likewise, if you have never met the players and are supposed to play romance or close relations in a larp, it will most probably be awkward and uneasy without pre-workshopping it.

I've played a larp where all the players (apart from me) knew one another and had a close bond. However, when it came to playing the larp, they didn't put the bond aside, and the larp that explored the theme of death of a close relative came to be an unexpected combination of interrupted scenes and inopportune jokes. Thus, the tone of the larp was changed.

Despite the common belief that pre-written materials that specify the mood of the larp are enough, it is during the pre-larp workshop that the runtime director can turn the larp in the required direction. When players step into the room directly from the outside world, they all have different things on their mind, and often can carry the mood they have into the larp. However, when you have workshop preceding the larp, the organizer has the ability to take hold of players' mood and thoughts, and can adjust them to the larp, or adjust the larp to the mood of the players if it's possible.

An example of such larp would be *Keep Calm and Carry On* that I mentioned earlier when discussing secrecy. This larp is designed so that any style can be applied, from tragedy to comedy. Every time I run it, we end up with a different mood and different style of the larp, which is fully decided by the players. When I playtested the larp with friends, we were relaxed and laughing a lot, so the larp turned out as a comedy; whereas during the second run of the larp at Minsk Larp Festival, the players wanted some strong emotional experience, so they chose to play close-to-home and invest some real emotions in larp. Both of the above-described runs were good and left my players satisfied and I hadn't needed to decide on the mood and the style of the larp for them.

How did I create the larp that you can play with any style? It has a set of scenes and a set of meta-techniques that the players need to use, as well as a repeated sequence of actions in every scene. The style and the mood of every level are to be decided by the players. For example, in a scene devoted to the anniversary of the king and queen's marriage, the characters can either fuss around, exaggerating their emotions and crowing about king's cheating on his wife, or play a serious emotional scene, where the queen is hurt because her husband's cheating on her, where everyone knows everything but carries the burden of silence as the royal family always has to uphold their reputation.

The last argument in favour of collaborative character creation I would list is simple, but essential to larp design: **it always works out better if you try it first**. You can have perfectly written characters with well thought-out aspects of their personality, detailed background and relationships, but it would still be on paper. It is comparable to learning to perform surgery: a professor who teaches a surgical class is surely knowledgeable, but to understand how theory is working in practice students would need to learn from operating surgeons. I believe that the same principle is true for larps, too: in order to understand how your character works, what emotions they have, how they move, what their social status is, et cetera, you have to try it out. And through collaboration during workshop, all this assembles into a real person—your character.

CONCLUSION

In the end, I want to emphasize that I don't claim that **pre-larp workshops are good for every larp and are a universal larp design solution**. Each larp designer has their preferred tools, each larp requires different approaches, and this is only one of them. I believe that collaborative character creation fits in a certain larp philosophy that shares the values of openness and co-creation, values experience over winning, aims for emotions rather than adventures, and considers larp a co-creation process rather than a finished work of a larp designer. And since I appreciate such larps, I find this tool particularly helpful.

CHEKOV'S CREW
The use of adjunct crew in theatre-style larps
by Stephanie Pegg

Abstract

While common in live combat style larp campaigns, the use of crew to play GM-directed characters in theatre-style (parlour) larps is relatively rare in New Zealand. This article covers case studies of Kiwi games written over the past six years which use this powerful technique in different ways, and discusses the pragmatic, social, and artistic reasons why the use of adjunct crew is beneficial to the theatre-style genre.

Introduction

It is a general axiom in New Zealand theatre-style larps that all participants should be roughly equal: King Cophetua may be a king golden and shining on his throne, but the Beggar Maid who's wandering around in rags should be equally rich in nous, quirks, and engaging plot lines—what might be referred to as "everyone's a star" and "there is no 'main' plot... there should be lots of plots, all of roughly equal importance" (Harbrow). 'Colour' characters, which are there to provide atmosphere or in some way be victims of the 'main' characters are generally frowned on, because roleplaying these peripheral characters for the duration of the larp can be dull for the players.[1] Conversely, game crew who play very high-powered non-protagonist characters (NPCs) can consume the 'oxygen' of the larp and make it unfun for the protagonist characters (PCs).[2] Most New Zealand-written theatre-style games default to basic design principles that fit in with this axiom: all players should have characters of roughly similar plot importance and general 'busy-ness,' and the characters and diegetic elements that are fully present in the game space for the two to three hour runtime are the ones that matter to the game.

This article is about Kiwi games that *don't* fit in with this default—our emerging tradition of using NPCs and dedicated crew to make our game worlds richer, more complex—and more compatible with pragmatic game-running considerations. Much as Chekov announced that hanging a gun on the wall in Act One means it should be used in Act Two ("Chekov's Gun"), choosing to incorporate adjunct crew into your game gives you a powerful tool that can and should be used in meaningful ways in the design.

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[1] For instance: "Colour Characters are those who exist (in my head) to be there for the main characters to get something from, or kill, or just to wander around the periphery of the game and look pretty." (user QueenOrTart) and "The reason to avoid them is that they have nothing to do, and that makes for dull larping. Even a player who doesn't want to play a mover-and-shaker should still have things to do that will keep the player entertained and interacting." (user Ryan_Paddy) in the discussion "GMs are bastards."

[2] I prefer to expand out these acronyms as Protagonists and Non-Protagonists (instead of Players and Non-Players) to emphasise the storytelling function of the characters, as opposed to the physical person playing the part. In this article, I will be referring to participants who roleplay as PCs as players or the player group, and people who roleplay as NPCs as crew.

There are some overseas games I've seen that use different PC/NPC models: for instance, horde games such as *Victoria Junction—All change please, all change!* (Barnard et al.) use the structure of a small group of characters who are permanent throughout the game, interacting with a large number of bit characters played by a revolving crew. Another model is to use highly directed non-protagonist characters to help the organisers manage the game, such as in *The Dance and the Dawn*, which uses the competing NPC roles of the Queen of Ice and the Duke of Ash to discourage cooperation between players (Tusk, "Cowardice of your Convictions" 63). To this toolkit, I want to add the use of live combat–style crew rooms which are coordinated in game by the organisers; the deliberate creation of minor NPCs for purely social reasons; and the artistic merits of solving technical design problems with NPC roles which physically embody the setting and game mechanics.

The Social Larp

Despite my comments in the introduction, I actually like 'colour' characters—as long as they're used mindfully; which is to say, they meet social needs first. At, Kapcon, the large annual roleplaying convention in my home town, we run a Saturday night flagship larp for somewhere around 60 players. Kapcon started life as a tabletop roleplaying convention and remains so—larps are welcome, but as a stream of the convention, not its reason for being. What this means is that we have a large pool of people who are friendly to the flagship larp and are perfectly fine with helping dress the set, or bringing their kids over in the evening to see the costume parade as larpers potter around getting into their costume and makeup, and, of course, taking on minor NPC roles to help out the organisers. This means that it's easy to have 'that one guy' who likes to come along and play a door guard or minor helpful person in the game, because he enjoys the energy of big larps but is less keen on pursuing a character arc; it means that *Al Shir-Ma* (Melchior et al), a fantasy inspired by the Arabic story collection *One Thousand and One Nights*, was able to draw on a crowd of non-larpers to be rowdy, noisy crowd for the first half hour of its debut run to help settle the

faction that entered the game through a marketplace (Wellington 2011).

This principle of creating roles for casual larp-friendly people is one that my sister and writing partner Catherine Pegg began using formally for *Tesla's Wedding* (Pegg and Pegg). This is a light-hearted steampunk game that was originally created as a wedding gift for two young larpers in our community. The original design brief, which ambitiously wanted the game to be held on the day of the wedding,[3] was to accommodate a number of friends and relatives of the bride and groom, and my sister created a special Hat Brigade group. In the game, these are assembled in a staging area away from the main game, with a selection of costume items (especially hats!) and nametags with high level character descriptors of various people in the town—each Hat Brigade nametag comes with a colourful name and a high-level descriptor (such as "Angelica Darling: Awkward; Adorable" and "Righteous Fred: Born to hang...") One PC starts the game with a mailbag of letters to deliver at the start of the game which references some of these characters, and they also have a set of cards, the *What's Going On Outside* deck, with random story prompts that they can draw for character ideas then bounce into the main space for a short period, before going back to the crew area to recast. These can be very random ("Beans! Beans!") or more directly linked to the tone of the game ("Er, playing Cagliostro's Concerto on a Glass Harmonica doesn't really drive people insane... right?").[4] This group forms a nascent live combat–

3   In the end, tradition won and the debut larp was its own separate event.
4   Pegg, Catherine and Stephanie Pegg. *Tesla's Wedding*. 2012. "Nametags" and "What's Going On" deck.

style crew to act under the game master's (GM's) direction, broadening out the world and allowing control over game pacing. They are able to introduce random elements, draw out plotlines from the main characters, and fill the functional need of "what to do when a player calls in sick"—the GM for the game has a pool of people who can either be promoted to main characters, or briefly costume as one of the no-shows and introduce game critical information as needed. If a lot of people call in sick (this happened in one run), you may lose your crew to character promotion, but casual NPCs are at least easier for a GM to fudge.

We continued the use of a small crew in the Kapcon flagship *Fragrant Harbour,* set in a marketplace in Hong Kong in 1899, which includes stories inspired by both the historical setting (for instance, colonialism and the opium trade) and traditional Chinese literature and mythology (for instance, ghosts, the search for enlightenment, Asian vampires, and the Bureaucrats of Hell) (Pegg et al.) The game has some prewritten skeleton character sheets set up in the offstage area—for townsfolk NPCs, there is general background and motivation and a lot of "Things You Know" for the NPC to introduce at their own discretion. There are also outlines for NPC members of The Society of Harmonious Righteous Fists (better known in the West as the Boxer Rebellion) to come into the game and be rowdy and recruit fighters to the cause; in the debut run (Wellington 2013) this made them available for the PC with ties to the Boxers to arrange for a small, planned riot that emerged out of the game play. And the game uses crew to create a priming event early in the game (two NPCs fight about a girl in the central marketplace area: one dies and demonstrates to the players that character death is both possible and not the end of the game for them, then moves to the starting area for deceased characters to start making a fuss there and demonstrating the Ghost rules). Near the end of the game, there is a March of the Dead, a ceremony with some pomp and solemnity which draws all current Ghost characters out of the larp area in a grand procession that sends them on their way to Heaven or Hell depending on what in game actions have happened for each character. This gives them a bang to exit the game with, and the existence of the crew lets the players of now permanently dead characters return into the game as NPCs to observe the final flurry of activity prior to game close.

And we have found that "come along and crew for my game" can be attractive to our friends on the more introverted side of the scale, who don't enjoy the intensity of main characters. They get to participate in our enriching hobby at the level they're comfortable—and bring their own richness into our games.

Priming and Game Steering

For the *Fragrant Harbour* debut, we also asked an experienced roleplayer to take on a specific NPC role for the entire game, a senior functionary to run the Anteroom of Hell, bully the player characters who started there or arrived during the game, take bribes, and maintain the area for incoming Ghosts. To help him, the character receives "Karma Files"[5]—a listing of the current characters and various in-character notes about their current and former lives; these can be used for reference or to allow other players to sneak glimpses as a way to seed information into the game. By creating this character with a fully outlined character sheet, but the expectations of "you are an NPC," we can ask that roleplayer to remain static in the location to help meet the needs of the larp. A similar approach has been taken by Jenni Dowsett in *The Silver Kiss of the Magical Twilight of the Full Moon,* a comedy parody of the supernatural teen romance genre. The game is written with four crew slots, three of which are in-character for the duration of the game. These NPC roles have specific purposes—priming the game by sharing information and secrets and being very over the top characters for the PCs to react against, and, in the case of the Principal, acting as an authority figure when needed. One of the NPCs is swapped out near the end and recast to enter the game as a new character ready to have a big dramatic scene and "to spur the various mortal characters in the game to consider what [are] the best life choices they could be making" (Sands). This staged scene isn't the finale, but it sets the tone for what the endgame should feel like for the players—it defines the stakes for them;

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5   Pegg et al. *Fragrant Harbour.* 2013. "Karma Files."

overall, the NPCs act to reinforce the themes and atmosphere of the game.

This 'NPC as Game Manager' model is similar to that in *The Dance and the Dawn* and relatively underused in New Zealand (it's more common here for the GMs to observe the game and referee rules or answer questions without interfering; either out-of-character, unobtrusively in-character, or briefly taking on solo NPC roles themselves to introduce information before returning to the out-of-character referee role.) From my experience as both GM and player, it's an effective technique. Talking about *Silver Kiss*, the author mentioned an occasional downside where "the crew gets a bit too wrapped up in the role or messing with players and start making things about themselves" but added that over multiple runs this had been rare (Sands). And it's something that can be handled by expectation management and selecting crew members whose play style prefers the dramatic to the competitive.

Matt Brunton, an experienced GM of both live-combat and theatre-style games, uses crew to help pace his games, for example, in *The Heat at 3 AM*, an intense Noir game about criminals the night after a big job went badly. In his view, "games that rely solely on the players developing drama or getting plot out there have a greater chance of misfiring" (Brunton). His techniques in *Heat* are similar to those he would use in a weekend-long live combat game—using crew members to appear as cameos to make sure necessary information is in the game (as insurance for player no-shows), and to gauge tension and drama in the room and nudge the game with plot points and named characters relevant to the protagonists, giving them something to react against. Commenting about the game, he has a preference for using external intervention in the mid-game, leaving the first 15 minutes free for players to get into character and form relationships, and the final phase free for final decisions and story resolutions.

Another serious game, *Wilkinson-Baker Hall*, a Great War upstairs-downstairs drama set in a *Downton Abbey*–esque great house, introduced a crew room on its second run (McKenzie-Doornebosch and Melchior). The first run (Wainuiomata 2013) was staged at a larp convention in a large hall with the separate areas of the game divided by partitions, and the two GMs playing all visiting NPCs. This provided some challenges—there were at most two NPCs at a time, costume changes were limited to signifying objects (hats, shawls, aprons) and were played by women regardless of the identified gender of the character, and if a player wanted follow-up contact with an NPC, there were limitations—should the GMs change their plans for the next appearance, or use a 'telegram' or 'phone call' conversation as a proxy? In the second run (Petone 2016), held at a vintage villa, the game was spread out on two floors of the house in multiple rooms. For straight logistical reasons, there needed to be additional people taking on NPC roles—it would take too long for two people to manage costume changes with rushing up and down stairs in the more diffuse game space, and the organiser made the addition of a dedicated crew of five people really count. In the redesign, the crew is run by a Crew Coordinator who has a lot of knowledge of the game, briefs outgoing NPCs, and takes their feedback on what has happened while they were in-game to gauge which NPCs should go in next. The crew has extensive documentation: a detailed crew briefing and another document which has a paragraph of the key points of each PC and pre-written NPC in the game. They also have generic nametags for background NPCs ('soldier,' 'villager,' etc.) and are able to print out new nametags for characters generated on the fly. The primary goal of the NPCs (approximately 20 named characters) is to increase pressure on the players. The investigative characters get support from "people they know," who can appear with information of use to them, and the PCs who have something to hide have to be more aware of people asking leading questions:

> If the journalist PC couldn't be everywhere at once, or was struggling to wade through the lies that various characters were telling, then instead of those other characters getting to [breathe] a sigh of relief that they'd 'gotten away with it' and never have questions asked of them for the rest of the game, we could insert crew characters from the journalist's own newspaper who'd received 'leads' about various stories, and help prompt that journalist to look deeper in a specific direction. (McKenzie-Doornebosch)

The additional people supporting the game are also able to increase the verisimilitude of the game—in the Petone 2016 run, they were able fully costume to go with the vintage location and immersive set dressing—and they play a variety of incoming people: highborn guests, tradespeople bringing supplies to the house, the ill or injured arriving in the Infirmary requiring care (another source of pressure for the medical staff, who have a choice between pursuing personal issues and doing their jobs), and they are able to flit in and out of the game as needed, or take a longer dwell time to suit the mood of the scene and allow a greater rapport to develop between PC and NPC. In some cases, players have 'locked on' to an NPC as a friend and ally, and kept in touch throughout the game. Another design change, two act breaks of time passing, allows players to make offers (perhaps requesting information from the War Office, or sending telegrams requesting an NPC visit, or narrating in between actions) which the crew are able to facilitate.

My sister's and my recent game *Break Room 3: Basilisk Green* (a humorous take on the question 'what do Wandering Monsters do on their tea break?' in a D&D-with-the-serial-numbers-filed-off dungeon) has continued the use of crew rooms, partly for pacing but also to create the outside world breaking into the protected space of the larp (Pegg and Pegg). We took learnings from *Tesla's Wedding* and *Fragrant Harbour* and created crew briefing information to help them be as self-directed as possible. In addition to a verbal briefing, the crew are provided with a summary of all the plotlines in the game and single page outlines of suggested encounters.[6] These have specific hooks to the characters; give some NPC names, abilities and motivations; suggested timeframes; and relevant props. The crew have considerable discretion and the general guideline of 'get in there and make trouble.' The design asks for a proportionately larger group compared to the crews of *Tesla's Wedding* and *Fragrant Harbour* (*Basilisk* calls for a crew of three to five against a PC contingent of 17; its precursor games were setting mini-crews of five against a PC contingent of 30 and 80), so they have more impact on the game play. This suits the Joyful Chaos tone of the game—the PC group are working through

6   Pegg and Pegg. *Break Room 3: Basilisk Green*. 2016. "GM Cheat Sheets" and "Crew Cheat Sheets."

their interpersonal intrigues but have frequent injections of 'what the heck just happened?' that might be specific to them, or available for them to witness. It also allows many emergent plotlines to arise in the game: players can request specific characters they know about to visit the Break Room; and the crew are able to respond to PC actions without needing GM direction. An example of this is from the April 2017 run in Wellington:

> [early in the game, some minions are bothering their Boss on her coffee break]
>
> Minions: Boss, boss, the supply clerk sent us syrup instead of Alchemist's Fire.
>
> Long Suffering Boss: [sighs] Take the syrup, pour it on some adventurers and then, I don't know, lick them or something.
>
> [later in the game, a group of Surface Adventurers storm into the room with unfinished business and complaining about the day they've had]
>
> Adventurers: And then some monsters covered us with syrup and licked us!
>
> [the staff in the Break Room follow this up by trying to recruit the Adventurers to the cause of Evil.]

This is not a plotline that it would have occurred to me to write into this game or any other, but I'm thoroughly glad it happened.

Informing Artistic Considerations
This final section discusses two larps that were written to challenge the boundaries of the form, and had contrasting design issues that the use of NPCs solved. As is usually the case, embracing the Big Flaw in your design usually takes you to interesting and elegant solutions, and these games are no exception.

Into the Woods is a dark fairy tale inspired by Harvey's and Samyn's video game *The Path*: in the larp, Lost Child characters get lost in the wood and continue wandering until they find a resolution with the Wolf they both fear and are fascinated by (Pegg and Pegg). The characters are written as protagonist/antagonist dyads and, because of the premise

of the game, any given pair can be dropped out of the game but an individual player calling in sick at short notice is going to cause serious problems. The solution was to create NPC slots, in this game called Wood Sprites—if we have a no show, we can either promote up a Wood Sprite into the protagonist part, or we can recast the orphaned protagonist into a Wood Sprite.[7] This early design choice influenced the rest of the game—in addition to providing unobtrusive characters for the GMs to play and adding atmosphere (mischievous creatures popping out of the woods to giggle and tease the players), the Wood Sprite crew members are used to control the game movement.

Another design choice is that the players should keep walking throughout the game, partly to stop a big clog of people observing a scene with other people instead of focusing on their own interactions, but mostly because I wanted them to feel *tired*, with all the physical and emotional feedback that brings. The players are given this instruction, but still have had the urge to congregate and stop moving—the Wood Sprites have a game call "Push-Me-Pull-You" to remind the Lost Child characters to follow them. There is also a game rule that the Lost Children have to stay with someone with a black headband. In the first phase of the game, this means the Wood Sprites can lead them on a tour of the game space and make sure they encounter each Wolf at least once. After this, the game stages a tilt event[8] where everyone gathers together for a rest and food break, and the Wolf characters change the tone of their interactions to more conciliatory (as antagonists they are given more GM-direction than the protagonists).[9] At this point, the Wood Sprites become less active guides and let the Lost

7   Ironically, the two runs of this larp have been the extremely rare instances in my GMing career where we had a full turnout with no last minute replacement players.

8   That is, a scheduled event that causes the game to have a major change in tone. This term is adapted from the Tilts used in the *Fiasco* story game by Jason Morningstar.

9   The rest break is another pragmatic choice (the need to let mobile players sit down and get some calories and water) that turned into an artistic device. That sense of relief of "and now I can sit down" gives the Wolves a good opening to renegotiate their relationships, and they are directed to offer food or drink to their Lost Child as a signifier of this.

Children begin splitting up, choosing their own paths, and having more independent and intimate conversations with their partners. It has been a useful feature to have the additional people nudging the flow of an unusual game into the desired story groove.

The Bell, an amnesia game set on a broken spaceship in the 'space travel as spiritual journey' genre, had very much opposite design issues (Pegg and Pegg). I wasn't worried about people dropping out because I'd designed the game to be very flexible on player numbers. What I did need to do is account for character deaths from a very early stage in the game. One of my design criteria was that the game should be high stakes from the moment the characters wake up—there is a lot of information on *how* to fix the ship in the game; the question is "what are you willing to sacrifice to make that happen?" and the setting allows no way for everyone to get home safely. The conflict mechanic is very simple and brutal (if you 'attack' someone, they are automatically injured; if you attack someone enough times, the character dies), with the intent that in the confined space and stressful setting it will encourage the feel of a claustrophobic horror movie where the external threat pushes internal conflict.

Which brings me to: what if the players in this game are very aggressive from the beginning of the game? I didn't want a deceased PC to have to walk out of the room, so I created the role of Revenant—a gruesome setting detail is that the ship can cannibalise dead passengers and wire them into its navigation system as a jury-rigged repair; the Revenants preserve some memories from life while co-opted to the needs of the ship. This got rolled into the writing: things like speculation on what other technologies are enough like the human brain to pass; what happens when the Revenant who is present at the beginning of the game is someone close to a PC; and what does it mean to be human, anyway? To give more complications, the Revenants navigate the ship through hyperspace (popularly called "Heaven") which is inimical to people going outside—the player group can send one trained person outside to fix life support, knowing that they will die, or they can kill the Revenant and drop into normal space, fix things at their leisure and take a century to reach their des-

tination, adding conflict based on how badly each character wants to get home on time.

It has also given rise to a lot of emergent plots in the different runs of the game. In one run (Auckland 2016), the players were happily volunteering themselves to become Revenants in the first act—until they realised they were going to have roleplay murdering each other and had serious second thoughts. In another (Wainuiomata 2012), the player group tried *hard* to preserve the memories of the prewritten Revenant with tears and goodbyes all round; in the debut run (Auckland 2011) this Revenant was killed off very quickly and quite callously and the player group tried *hard* to find a solution with least loss of life—until the final act turned into a bloodbath. The end game phase involved four deceased characters emotionlessly repeating the status changes of the ship, picking up on what each was saying in a continuing loop. To me, the GM of this run, this was *eerie*. In the Christchurch 2014 run, the organiser sent feedback about the extremely complicated, last minute shenanigans involving betrayal and murder to create a new Revenant so that the two final characters could end the game blissed out on the sounds of Heaven (Cohen). What began as a practical choice to solve a design problem deeply informed the themes and planned plotlines of the game—and it has opened up a multiplicity of emergent stories: each run of *The Bell* is utterly unique.[10]

Conclusion

There are very many ways to write a good larp (that is, meeting the participants' needs for entertainment, meaning, and social contact.) A friend has described the act of writing a theatre-style larp with the Chekov's Gun metaphor: put "a lot of big, shiny, sexy guns on that mantelpiece, and make sure there are more than enough to go round. Then throw in a few knives and hand grenades for good measure" (Harbrow). This article has discussed the ways in which the mindful use of NPCs forms an armoury of Chekov's Guns: the colour characters, the game managers, the bursts of the outside world breaking into your larp's magic circle, defining the stakes and setting the tone, physically embodying the game mechanics... That armoury is worth polishing up, carefully priming with black powder, and firing at will.

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10   With regards to spoilerability and the amount of detail I've provided for *The Bell*—I really dig the Dogma 99 principle of open documentation (Fatland and Wingård): this game runs well with people who have played it before or read the game. (Obviously, the Dogma 99 strictures against GM control during the game and 'superficial action' are less relevant to my writing style.)
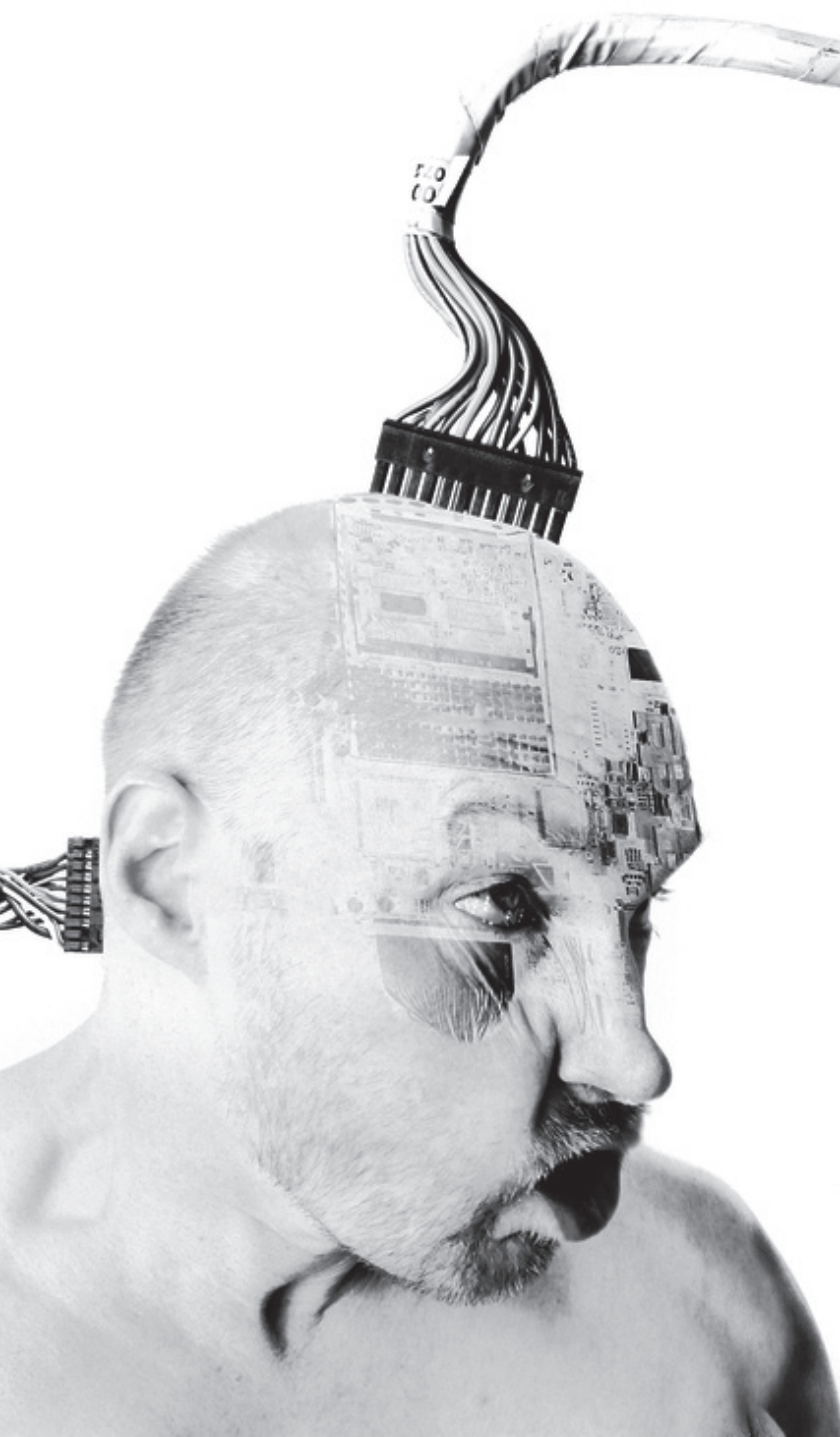
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CONSTRUCTING TRUTH IN LARP WRITING

by Xavid (http://xavid.us/)

In many LARPs, especially secrets-and-powers LARPs, the writers and GMs are seen as the authorities on the game's premise and setting: in many ways, the arbiters of what's true. However, even if a GM is the ultimate authority, their knowledge of the "right answer" doesn't matter if that information doesn't make it into game or gets overlooked. It's what the players collectively believe that matters in practice. Putting a fact into game isn't a simple operation. It can be done in many ways to varying levels, and acting carefully when writing can help make sure that the way you express a fact supports your intention and will properly be interpreted by the player. One framework that can be helpful for this is to assign a game fact three qualities:

- **truth**: how well established a fact is in the game materials
- **mechanical support**: how well game mechanics reflect a fact
- **impact**: how much a fact meaningfully affects things people care about

Truth: How much do game materials support a fact?

Even if a GM positions themself as the ultimate authority, they won't be the first resource players go to in order to form impressions of the game world. First, players will look at the scenario document, their character sheets, and other game materials. But not all of these materials are created equal. Something that's just in one player's packet has much weaker truth than something that's known by multiple characters. Something that's in a scenario document that goes to everyone, that's an even stronger truth. For example, if it says in someone's character sheet that she's the world's greatest swordswoman, but it doesn't say that anywhere else in game, then people are going to react to her very differently than if the scenario establishes that the world-famous swordswoman Yukiko has paid an unexpected visit. She may be able to convince people that she's a famous swordswoman, but this fact will still often feel more questionable or uncertain if it's not well-established. Similarly, something that's discussed in depth on a sheet is established more strongly than something mentioned in passing.

It's worth noting that weak truth isn't necessarily bad. A gamewriter generally shouldn't try to cover every possible detail of culture or history in a setting document, because that can distract from the parts that are most important (effectively weakening their truth). Many characters might not be well-known, for example, and it's fine for other characters to learn who they are in-game. Similarly, a cultural detail that's only relevant for a character's backstory or motivation and not likely to be a big point in game might be fine to be present only in that character's sheet. Conversely, if the detail is relevant to a plot they have in progress, it may be worth establishing it more broadly. When a fact like "only nobles can be generals" is the main obstacle of someone's plot, the plot is much less compelling if no one else is aware of this fact.

In particular, truth can be an issue with player-augmented backstories. Many players will be inclined to fill in details of their past or the world

when something comes up that their character would know that isn't specified in their sheets. This is often a positive addition to a game, embellishing the world and making roleplaying and conversation more natural and fun. The truth of facts made up by players will necessarily be weak, however. While it's impossible to always avoid the risk of players in different parts of game inadvertently contradicting each other with these created facts, it's possible to limit the chances of the worse problem of such player-made facts contradicting game materials. Explain the scenario and setting history clearly enough to all players to give them a reasonably solid basis for improvising details. Relatedly, be sure to make absent facts clear rather than just leaving them out. If you don't, it's easy for a player to assume that it's fine to make something up when someone asks them a setting question, leading to confusion and derailed plots. For example, if how the last king of the land died is a mystery some group in game is working on, make sure the fact that the details of his death aren't generally known is part of the scenario for everyone. This can help avoid creating traps for creative players.

In some cases, giving the players information the characters might not have can be helpful for setting expectations. Being clear about the genre of a LARP is one way of doing this. If someone claims they're a vampire, others might think they're crazy in a realistic fiction LARP. In an urban fantasy LARP a character would be more likely to be open-minded, even if they don't have any awareness of vampires. More specific indications of what to expect can also be useful. For example, "it would be absolutely unthinkable for anyone to disguise themselves as a member of a different caste" both makes the cultural assumption clear and also hints to players that disguises are a part of the game. This helps strengthen the truth of the disguises of various characters in game and helps others get into a mindset to play up their

If Yukiko is the world's greatest swordswoman and there's no combat mechanic, then her player doesn't have the ability to use a major part of her character.

reactions to revelations. It's also generally good to try to avoid creating misleading expectations in the rules and scenario. If there are secretly vampires in game that are immune to bullets, it can be better to make it explicit that some characters may not fall down when shot. If the rules inadvertently create an impression that bullets work the same on everyone, this could mislead players and lead them to make bad choices. This sort of explicit player-level communication isn't necessary for all games, but can be a useful tool to help get people on the same page.

In general, it's worth thinking hard about how you're communicating your understanding of the world and premise of your LARP. Facts that are important to plots, twists, and dramatic revelations should be strongly established across multiple sources. For embellishments that are less crucial, weaker truth can be appropriate, and it can be okay to have fewer references in game materials. Carefully considering your sheets in context with each other and the scenario, especially for key facts, can help your game maintain consistency and proper levels of truth to achieve your objectives.

Mechanical Support: How well do mechanics reflect a fact?

The degree to which mechanics in a game support a particular fact is important in avoiding frustrating players, supporting immersion, and ensuring that players form correct impressions during a game. It's reasonable for players to expect that the skills and abilities their characters have will be reflected by the game's mechanics. For example, if Yukiko is the world's greatest swordswoman, her player is going to feel like she should be able to win swordfights in game. If there's no combat mechanic at all, or one dominated by player skill that the player is not very good at, then Yukiko's player doesn't have the ability to use a major part of her character during game. This

is related to how, in any story, if we're told that a character is exceptional in some way, we expect them to be able to use this to accomplish things in the story.

Mechanical support disconnects can lead to immersion problems, as well. Other players form expectations about what a character should be able to do and when they'll be useful. For example, if someone's attacking people, other characters might look to the great swordswoman to stop them. If her player doesn't think she has the advantage mechanically, that can put her in an awkward position of trying to come up with excuses in-game for an out-of-game issue or trying anyways and failing. Conversely, an unarmed ordinary person should probably not be able to take down a fully-armored knight in normal circumstances. Events that don't seem to make sense can make it hard for characters to figure out how to react appropriately. Players have to figure out if it was just a mechanical weirdness, and thus not plot-relevant, or if it was evidence of a secret in-universe. If there is no secret reason for the confusing event, players may chase a very frustrating red herring for much of the game. Keeping mechanics consistent with in-universe expectations can help avoid these issues and reinforce player's perceptions of the in-game universe.

These concerns aren't limited to combat abilities. Magical abilities sometimes have an issue where either they're very open-ended, and thus have enough mechanical support to overshadow other ways of solving problems in-game, or they're limited to a very specific list of predefined uses, which can seem at odds with backstory or setting. Thinking carefully about the magic system and finding in-universe limits that work with the mechanics you want can help. Alternately, you can provide a reason, such as lack of access to necessary ingredients, why characters are limited in-game. Other skills can be hard to give mechanical support to, such as ones that represent something hard to simulate in game (e.g., the ability to fly). If a character is likely to find a situation where they should be able to benefit from that ability, it might be worth either revisiting the character concept or coming up with a way to give the ability some functionality even if you can't capture its full flexibility. (A character that can fly might mechanically

be able to avoid combat, for example.) Otherwise, abilities characters supposedly have may feel unsubstantial or false.

When thinking about mechanical support, it's important to be aware of what purpose you're trying to achieve and how the various abilities and items you're putting into game assist that purpose. Less is often more: not every character skill needs to be a mechanized ability, and having extraneous abilities that aren't likely to come up can make it harder for players to remember to use their more interesting or relevant abilities. Over-complicated, confusing, or useless mechanical support can be worse than no mechanical support at all. Often you have to put some limits on what characters can do to keep the game manageable and balanced. Having characters with professions of no practical use can still add fun flavor or depth and is one way to make characters feel more distinctive, but giving characters professions that should be useful in-game but inexplicably aren't can impair your game universe's verisimilitude.

Not providing mechanical support to the extent that it interferes with immersion can be unfun.In that situation it's good to think about if you can either find a meaningful way to add mechanical support or change the facts to better work with the mechanical support you can provide. Just because you want a party or diplomatic meeting that's resolved without combat doesn't mean you can't have a character with fighting skill in their backstory. But when writing, try to avoid creating facts with weak mechanical support that seem like they should be able to resolve situations in game. One way to have backstory that doesn't interfere with game is to include a reason why the skills aren't relevant. For example, if you want to put a strong fighter in a game with no combat mechanic, you could talk about how they're not here to fight and why in their character sheet. Measures like these can help avoid frustration and help the facts of your game hold together well.

Mechanics that feature player skill are a particular source of mechanical support issues. Nerf or boffer combat mechanics and player skill-based puzzles can be a lot of fun, and many people enjoy them in LARPs. However, either you only cast players as characters with corresponding skill levels, biasing

your casting, or you end up with inconsistencies where the character's effective skill in game does not match what's on their character sheet. Modifying character abilities to "handicap" based on player skill is an option, but it's hard to measure player skill and the value of tweaks precisely enough to do it rigorously. Striking the right balance here can be tough, but is often important to keeping the practical facts of your game in line with the original intent.

It's important to remember that mechanics are often an important part of shaping the player consensus. A fact that lacks mechanical support is likely to be forgotten or distrusted by the players as a whole. Even if you're convinced that Yukiko is a great swordswoman and you've established this well in the scenario, if she keeps losing fights players are liable to forget this or assume that there's something up. (Maybe she's an impostor, or secretly ill.) Since LARPs often feature secrets and twists, players will often question information in their sheets that seems inaccurate, even if that's not the GM's intention. It's often ineffective to try to correct such things at runtime, so it's best to try to avoid such situations. Mechanics are one of the main tools you have for shaping this consensus over the course of game, so it's important to use it to support your intent so the practical and theoretical realities of the game align.

Impact: How much does a fact affect what people care about?

Another thing to think about when putting something into a game is who's going to care about it, and why. In any story, if a detail isn't relevant to the plot and doesn't seem to have some other significance or meaning, it's liable to be forgotten. In a LARP, unless a fact is connected to characters' goals or the characters have some other reason to care about it during game, it's liable to feel hollow or unimportant in a similar way. A fact that's irrelevant to game is very similar to something that's not true at all. For example, if someone's an elite pick pocket with abilities that let them steal from people, this may not seem so inspiring if no one has any items to steal that are useful in game or will help them achieve their goals.

Concrete consequences that affect the rest of the game are great sources of impact. Combat abilities, for example, often have high impact because the ability to restrain or kill someone can have dramatic effects on the victim and those they are involved with. Information-gathering abilities can vary widely: learning crucial secrets can have high impact, but if the information gained is overly vague or players are unlikely to know to ask the right questions, the ability can end up largely irrelevant. An ability that's never used usefully has little difference from an ability that's not in the game at all.

Having multiple characters with incompatible goals can help increase the impact of the thing in contention. For example, if multiple suitors are seeking the prince's hand in marriage, that gives the prince's search for love much stronger impact than if it was entirely open-ended. Many resource-based plots, while less directly oppositional, work in a similar way, leading different parties to compete over something limited. Insufficient opposition or scarcity can make a plot resolve too quickly, which can make it feel unimportant or uninteresting even if in-universe it should be a big deal. Conversely, having characters compete ensures that at least those directly involved care and often encourages others to take sides as well, heightening the impact of the plot.

It's important to think about the impact of a character achieving their goals, as well. A plot feels higher-impact if winning it affects the rest of game in some way, and low impact if the results of success don't materialize until after game's over. For example, finding a lost pirate treasure is more exciting if the money inside is relevant to other plots. A ritual that has dramatic effects in-game that other characters need to react to is much more exciting than being told that it'll happen tomorrow. Seeing the effects of a success or failure spread into other parts of game increases the number of people that care about said success or failure and thus establish the plot more strongly throughout game.

Secrets are one area where impact issues often arise. It's common for a character to have some "horrible secret" they're worried about getting out. A secret by itself, however, can easily fail to affect game in a meaningful way. For a secret to have

impact on game, you need two things: reasons for others to care and some way for it to get out. Other characters that care will have reactions that drive interesting play and help the character with the secret feel they have impact on the rest of game. A way for the secret to get out could be a mechanical way it can be discovered, someone else who knows the secret who may blackmail or negotiate about it, or there may be a motivation for the character to reveal their own secret when the time is right. In some games, it might even make sense to suggest that the player ensure the secret comes out even if the character is trying to keep it hidden. Having a real chance that the secret will come out and interesting consequences when it does gives a secret real weight. If a secret never gets out, or no one cares when it does, it doesn't feel meaningful and ends up functionally similar to not having secret at all.

It's important to keep in mind that the impact of an ability can depend a lot on other characteristics of the game. Some abilities that seem high-impact on paper can be prohibitively hard to use in practice. For example, the ability to knock someone out from behind seems powerful, but it might not be in practice if gamespace is small enough that it's basically impossible to use without getting caught. The likely negative consequences outweigh any benefit to using the ability, leading to weak impact. In a game with a more spread-out gamespace without line-of-sight between different areas, such an ability would have much stronger impact. In general, impact depends a lot on how something interacts with the rest of game, rather than being evaluated in a vacuum.

Another idea to keep in mind is that low-impact plots aren't necessarily bad. The issues with player skill-based mechanics can be partially avoided if those plots are relatively low-impact. For example, if Nerf guns are only used for a tournament, but not real life-and-death combat, then even if a player is particularly bad at the mechanic, that won't get them killed or keep them from enjoying other parts of the game. Along with this, having plots with different levels of impact can help manage time in game. If plots end up being harder than the GMs anticipated, players can drop their lower-impact plots without feeling like they're failing; conversely, if plots end up being easier,

they still have something to pursue to avoid feeling bored. Evaluating plots and other game elements in terms of impact can help gamewriters act with intention, so that if something is low-impact it's a well-thought-out design decision rather than an unfortunate accident.

What players value in terms of impact can vary widely. Some players care mainly about achieving the goals specified in their character sheet, or the goals that would be important to their interpretation of their character. Some players are happy to be doomed, but likely still prefer that their doomed struggle interacts with the rest of game in some meaningful way. Even a player who just enjoys roleplaying a character and doesn't care about pursuing goals still generally prefers to have people react to their roleplaying and have the interactions progress in an interesting way over the course of the game. Whether players are playing to achieve goals, playing for fun interactions, playing to see what happens, or some combination, they likely want to feel like their choices and actions matter in the context of the game. Thinking about the impact of their characteristics, abilities, and plots when designing and writing your game can help ensure that everyone feels relevant and no one gets sidelined.

Conclusion

When writing a game, it's easy to assume that writing something in your materials is enough to establish it as fact. However, how effective this is depends on many factors. It can be helpful to think about how strongly established various game elements are in terms of truth, mechanical support, and impact, and from there determine whether these qualities support the intentions you had when creating them. Thinking of games from these perspectives can help avoid pitfalls and make games that are more fun and compelling for everyone.

Acknowledgements

NO BATTLE PLAN SURVIVES CONTACT WITH THE ENEMY:
The tension between narrative structure and player autonomy in larp

by Phoebe Roberts

Many larps, particularly one-shot, American theater-style games, center the player experience around the telling of stories. In these games, where you have a self-contained story the starting point of which is already determined, the players' interest and enjoyment comes from the exploration of the narrative, where they take on the roles of protagonists who enter new circumstances, encounter conflict and obstacles, and are compelled to grow and develop in dynamic ways in order to pursue desires. The joy of these comes from a similar place as loving an engrossing book or film for the unfolding of the story, except it allows for the players to be in the thick of it rather than merely observers. In cases like these, the success of the larp rests on the telling of a narrative that is engaging, moving, and interesting.

The intersection of these two things—player participation and compelling story construction—on the surface seems to be working toward the same purpose: telling the best possible tale. But sometimes, even though they have the same goal, the efforts of the person designing the story and the person carrying it out can come into conflict. The very core of larping, the interactivity of the narrative, has the potential to break the experience of the narrative. And the reason behind this can get complicated.

One of the tools storytellers use to shape narrative is **structure**. Structure in this case refers to the design of the order, manner, and pacing of events making up the story and the relationships of those events to each other. Narrative is at its fundamental level about change—starting with a thesis, confronting it with its antithesis, and seeing the new synthesis that results. Structure is an important tool for storytellers to choose and arrange events in order to create, control, and facilitate that change.

In much of literature, structure falls into a traditional form. The circumstances are established in a **setup**, after which a triggering change, the **inciting event**, propels the protagonist into challenging new situations. As the protagonist struggles to achieve their goals in the face of unexpected obstacles, the tension of the situation is increased by the **rising action** and its addition of complications. Ultimately, the action builds to the highest point of confrontation, the **climax**, where the hero faces their greatest challenge, and the changes they have undergone are tested to see if they are sufficient to overcome. This point is usually the most intense action of the story. After this, the tension ratchets down as the consequences of the climax are unpacked, at least to some degree, in the **falling action**. Finally, we are left with the **resolution**, which tells us the new status quo, to contrast with the way things were in the beginning.

This pattern of structure is so prevalent in storytelling because of how well it presents conflict and response to conflict in order to prompt development, growth, and change. It offers a steady buildup of the level of challenge in a manner that increases tension and our investment in the stakes of the conflict—the more struggle a goal entails, the more important achieving it becomes—while eventually providing satisfaction by offering a resolution.

Beyond this simple ordering of events, it offers the storyteller the tools to figure out how and at what speed the events should occur in relation to each other to achieve the best effect. By using this framework as a guide, the storyteller can determine at what point of the emotional journey they would like their audience to have reached at any given moment. The teller can then decide how to shape each event in relation to the other events to achieve the desired effect. If the tension needs to go up, intense actions can occur all in quick succession. If the intensity is increasing too fast, the plot-driving moments can occur on a smaller scale, or be spaced farther apart. So the curation of the occurrence of events in the story allows for the best release of information, timing of events, and measured building of tension.

But the key part of that is that *curation*. To utilize structure to best effect, it requires **design**—intentional choices made in what events occur when, with specific desired effects in mind. For events to have the greatest impact on the course of the story and the development of the characters, they can't just happen in any order or in any relation to one another. Story events don't build properly upon each other or deliver their full effect when they occur in a completely uncontrolled way. For example, if you are unraveling a mystery, part of the appeal is acquiring each clue and encountering each complication in turn, with the opportunity to piece everything together and examine the picture step by step as it develops. If all the clues and secrets come together too immediately, the solution feels anticlimactic. If you are on a quest, the challenge of testing your mettle against obstacles and rising to the occasion to achieve your end is a huge part of the fun. If the ultimate prize is simply handed to you, the experience is short-circuited. Even if a character develops and grows past their difficulties

too easily, without any personal effort or cost, it feels cheap and unrealistic. Indeed, since goals become more important the harder you have to work for them, and easy achievements feel smaller than difficult ones, any resolution that comes too easily or too soon is going to feel less satisfying.

Up to this point, all this applies to storytelling in general. But it's not difficult to imagine how story structure affects the progress and experience of a larp. In larp, players are not living the experience of the story vicariously, but literally placing themselves into the shoes of the protagonist. As they themselves are the actors, their efforts take on an even more personal importance. If their journey doesn't unfold in a compelling manner, or fails to provide emotionally satisfying climaxes, the play experience is massively compromised. However, as important as when and how events progress is to roleplaying, structuring a larp entails difficulties that are unique.

The trouble with larp is that the storyteller never has complete control over the structure of the story. This fact is baked into the collaborative nature of larps as interactive literature. In traditional storytelling forms, there tends to be a single artist behind it, or at least a small team of artists with some kind of united vision coordinating their efforts, who are the only force with control over the shape of the story. The audience takes in what they produce in a more passive way, and does not contribute much to the direction it takes; at the very least, their contribution is limited to suggestions only if they have any awareness of the creative process.

Larp, however, has many contributors affecting the direction of the story in the form of the players. Even when players tend to be given pre-generated characters whose starting points are already set, the direction each PCs (Player Characters) plot line takes is largely determined by player choices. They are the only means by which most of the major points of the structural system, basically everything past the inciting event, can occur. On top of that, these choices are relatively unpredictable. A writer can influence their decisions based on the setup given about who their characters are, where they begin, and what they want, but ultimately what to do in game is up to the player. This means

that, unlike so many other narrative forms, all the actions that are taken by the characters are out of the writer's control. The events they create have the potential to affect any storyline they encounter in the game—and as such, that storyline's structure. And as the players decide on their personal activities without direct storyteller input or control, storylines develop according to not a unified effort, but a collection of independent efforts. The plot is shaped not only by many forces, but ones likely to be working towards many disparate ends.

This unique feature of story building in the larp form can have many interesting and desirable consequences. Players participate in larp to have the chance to live out exciting stories and scenarios, so they can enjoy the ability to make their own choices and test their own mettle to shape their character's destiny. They can find a feeling of accomplishment when they start a great interaction, discover a cool thread, or achieve an interesting result due to their own actions. Because of the unpredictable and individual natures of so many contributors, each run of the game may end up with a different variation of the story. This can lead to new and exciting directions the author may never have thought of otherwise, keeping things fresh, and perhaps even suggesting ideas to incorporate into the game's canon to improve future runs.

Because of all these factors, many game writers and runners conclude that player autonomy to act as they choose is a good in and of itself. Some players, of course, actively desire to be autonomous and feel like their efforts don't matter unless they feel they have both the freedom to choose their activities and the sense that those activities can meaningfully affect the story around them. In theater-style larping, it's generally considered appropriate to warn players ahead of time of games that run "on rails" and do not allow for this freedom, since it tends to be a basic feature larpers expect.

Because of the unpredictable and individual natures of so many contributors, each run of the game may end up with a different variation of the story.

While some Nordic style games expect a high level of GM intervention, and are in fact designed to run with heavy involvement over any approximation of natural narrative flow, in theater style that might be considered excessive. After all, some argue, the form is "interactive literature"—we larp in order to get to participate in the story! If we wanted a story just told to us that we had no control over, we'd read a book.

The big problem, however, with this freedom of players to shape the story is the consequences to structure. As mentioned before, structure requires some level of design, and design requires control. Control over the plot's direction is split up between the writers and however many PCs are in the game. So, in short, the game's structure suffers due to the "too many cooks" syndrome— too many tellers spoil the tale.

While the players exert power over the story events, however much they may desire to tell a good story, they are not in a position to create ideal structure. It's common for larps to require that players come into the game with limited knowledge of the scenario, for a number of reasons. Sometimes it's to ensure some things will be surprising. Sometimes the fun lies in the process of unfolding the mystery or seeing where the story goes. We generally don't like to know the ending of a story before we go through it. But because of this imperfect knowledge, the players may not realize when they are about to take an action that disrupts an element of the narrative arc.

There are dozens of ways players can unwittingly damage the narrative arc. They can be designed to have a bloody final confrontation with their greatest foe at the climax of the game, but an opportunistic player sees a shot early on and they can't help but take it. The targeted player's game is ended and the storyline has no finale. A player can stumble upon pieces of evidence that incriminate

them and destroy them, eliminating any chance for other players to pursue those clue threads which might make up a big part of their intended in-game activity. They might misinterpret some bit of information in their character sheet and spend the whole game pursuing a plot thread that doesn't exist, making them absent in the storylines of other characters who were supposed to interact them with them. They can decide the characterization they were given isn't interesting to them, and make up a completely different motivation that leads to actions that were never expected in the game. When other players around them make choices that conform with a more expected direction, they may find the elements that would normally respond to their actions are absent, giving them nothing to interact with. And a game without interactions, with the plot or with other characters, is almost certainly a failure.

When players decide what actions to take in a game, they are not necessarily making those decisions based on how their activities will impact the narrative arc. Managing this is a skill and priority of writers, and one cannot automatically expect any given player to have the ability or understanding to do it. First and foremost, players tend to be concerned with taking the actions that will give them the most personal enjoyment, or at most account for the enjoyment of other players like themselves, with whom they have interactions. This is, of course, a valid approach, and very important! If a game is not fun for the players, it is not a success! A larp's perfect story structure doesn't mean much if the players don't like playing it. But these self-interested choices geared toward maximizing one's personal play experience are not always best for the health of the overall game. And since the overall game can impact players' enjoyment on a wider scale, that can be a real problem.

The severity of this issue scales proportionally with the size of the game. It's a matter of entropy. More individual actors means more independent actions. The more actions occur independent of each other, the more likely those actions are to contradict or conflict with one another. The more actions conflict, the greater the chance of the plot falling into chaos. So as the player count goes up, the GM's ability to direct the flow of the narrative goes down. Game runners cannot possibly be expected

to manage all the consequences of those disparate actions. GM teams are almost always smaller than player pools, so they simply could not keep up with the developments. Moreover, GMs generally don't want to quash player contribution. Players often desire to have the ability to affect the course of the story, and to not allow this would strangle off all the creativity and spontaneity that results from their explorations of the plot.

At this point the question arises of how a GM is to react to this. It is of course possible for a GM to do nothing; that is, to allow complete player autonomy. The GM in this case provides all information and reactions the players actively request, but takes no unprompted action. All player choices are validated, or at least not countermanded by the GM. The consequences of their choices arise naturalistically, with no attempt to control the impact on other players or the game at large.

This maintains the players' sense of their actions having real effect on the story and world of the game. However, zero management of this activity can also result in a lot of far-reaching damage. All these independent player actions may have unintended impacts on other PCs' story progress. If a PC reaches or uncovers a point of the story before the appointed time, pieces of your carefully-written storyline may be skipped over entirely. That plot will then have an awkward progression that doesn't build naturally, sacrificing tension and the chance to examine each piece in turn. Certain bits of information or interactions may never come out. On a practical level, those absences could mean breaking the logical flow of the story, but moreover that players don't get the chance to fully enjoy it. If the conclusive elements of the story are accessed out of order, it could even trigger the need to end the game early.

Ultimately, as players tend to pursue primarily their own interests as opposed to the game's or anyone else's, some PCs' fun will be made at the expense of others. Those characters whose journeys were interrupted will be robbed of the satisfaction of the proper unfolding of their story. A lot of the work, design, and creativity the writer put into the game will go to waste, and you'll end up with a much lower overall quality of narrative.

Because of these issues, GMs may feel the impulse to intervene to prevent this. In the interest of making sure player actions do not trigger events too early, out of sequence, or in such a way as they negatively impact other PCs, GM may instead use their authority to control their effects. They can decide to fiat that certain results have a greater or less extent, or even countermand player actions entirely.

However, this extreme can cause problems of its own. Excessive GM interference can make player choices irrelevant. If there is no naturalistic impact of their actions, it can cause players to feel like the things they do in-game don't matter. This might lead to feelings of discouragement, leaving players disinclined to make efforts and emotionally uninvolved in the game. While some scripted and/or GM-controlled events aren't unusual game elements in small measure, when everything runs according to a plan that PCs cannot affect in any way, it puts the game on rails. As mentioned before, players should be warned in advance if that will be the case. In a game that isn't specifically designed to run on rails, this level of GM intervention is usually so invasive and clumsy it kills any sense of natural progression of the storyline.

In this case, you end up with a run where players make no original contributions. Players expecting to drive their own adventure feel out of control of their experience and dissatisfied. The story, with no naturalistic consequences arising from its protagonists' efforts, feels contrived and doesn't ring true. When artificiality grows too extreme, it kills any sense of immersion, which can make it harder for some players to enjoy the game. So ultimately, these efforts to preserve the benefits of narrative structure are self-defeating, because a story of such artless construction is not going to be very moving.

So what is a GM to do, if they want to both shape a strong narrative and allow the players to meaningfully contribute to it? There are a number of design features and running styles that will allow LARPs to strike a balance between actively shaping a strong narrative and applying judicious moderating power to maintain narrative flow, and enabling player agency while accepting some degree of unpredictability.

Even in high-autonomy games, it's normal for the run-team to bring about a few events of their own. GMs in boffer-style games, where instances of combat are often built into the expectations of play, often set off events for the players to deal with on a schedule that's already been decided. These GM actions can be planned out beforehand specifically to move the narrative in a particular direction, and their timing can be chosen to keep the flow of events moving at a desirable pace. If the game is unfolding too slowly, the GM can trigger such events earlier to spur things along, or if the plot is happening at a frenetic pace, the GM can decide to delay it. GM-triggered events can be devised on the fly as well, if the need arises. If runtime monitoring shows that necessary progress is not being made when it was supposed to happen organically, a GM can decide to take an action to push things forward in order to compensate, even if it wasn't originally in the plan. This must be used judiciously, however, as too heavy-handed an intervention can feel as if the story development is being wrested away from the players, as GMs have the final word on what actions actually impact the game. In some forms, like boffer-style and campaigns, this may be a more normally expected tactic, but often in theater-style a lighter touch is expected so that players can experience the story more naturalistically. For example, a GM can always fiat that the in-game events happened a certain way, such as you never actually managed to kill that character or you didn't actually meet the requirements to break the curse. And if that's the version they inform other players to act on, that will dictate the reality of the game.

It's possible to make use of NPCs for this purpose. GMs often take on the roles of NPCs for particular moments, frequently so that they can carry out the aforementioned pre-planned events or interactions. But it's also an option to create NPCs who are present and active for the duration of the game. The person in the role of such an NPC can be aware of the entire content and direction of the game, and so be prepared to only take actions that serve the narrative purpose. They can time their actions to best advantage with the pacing, they can release information that hasn't come out in other ways, and they can shape their character arcs to fit what tells the most dramatic story at any given

moment. This is resource-intensive—often it requires a member of the run team who has time to do nothing else—but has the advantage of affecting the narrative in a way that feels more naturalistic to players. Indeed, despite the fact that their actions may be preplanned and they may go in with a complete understanding of the plot, skillful performance of an NPC can feel identical to a PC to the other players, so the repercussions of their actions fit in as seamlessly as any of them. At the very least, it can cloak GM intervention in a way that appears less invasive.

Sometimes, however, players are just going to do things that are not compatible with the direction you're hoping the story to take, or at least ill-timed with current developments. As mentioned before, it is an option to just fiat that the action had no consequences, but generally that kind of heavy-handed GMing feels artless and dissatisfying to players. A more delicate way to mitigate things in this case might be to allow the action's consequences to occur, but say they do not take effect immediately. A lot of the time player actions require GMs to inform other PCs that they happened in order to have consequences to the game world. In those cases the GM can, rather than neutralizing the effects, simply wait a bit to carry them out until a more advantageous point. This can give time for other plot-important events to occur, or other players a chance to take their own actions that might be prevented if others' actions impact them right way. Structure comes from not just which events occur, but when they occur, so even subtle rearranging of event sequences can have a meaningful effect.

The last line of defense can be tipping players off to the needs of the story, allowing them the information necessary to take structure into account. The "bird-in-ear" technique involves GMs whispering suggestions and information to one player at a time to guide them during a moment of play. Many GMs are reluctant to take this step because of the assumption that a player will not enjoy the game as much if the element of surprise is not main-

tained. However, many players simply enjoy the experience of traveling through the narrative, and their fun isn't ruined just because they know what story beats are coming. The right sort of player can be informed ahead of time what certain arcs are supposed to be, so they can choose to take actions that best serve them. They can be informed to hold

> *The right sort of player can be informed ahead of time what certain arcs are supposed to be, so they can choose to take actions that best serve them..*

onto their secret until a certain point in the plot, and then let it out at the time that will create the most drama. They can be encouraged to delay their biggest gambits to late in the game because they stand a chance of taking other players out of play. Many larpers have a sense of dramatic flow and are happy to tailor their game to facilitate it. Players to attempt this with must be chosen carefully, however, as some surely don't want the surprise of discovering the story to be taken away.

It may seem from all this that player autonomy and narrative structuring are inherently at odds with each other, and there could be some truth to that. But the interest of structure lies in the way that it makes the story better, and player contribution means the inclusion of a creativity and freshness that the writer's limited perspective cannot necessarily give. The effort to acknowledge the issue and achieve a balance can combine the best of both worlds, resulting in a play experience where the opportunity to freely explore an adventure in the role of a character is shaped and facilitated by the artistic ability and judgment of the writer.

Phoebe Roberts is an MFA-trained playwright and screenwriter who has been larping since 2007. In that time, she has turned her love of storytelling to the writing of twelve live action games, solo and in teams. She is also on the editorial staff for Game Wrap Magazine. Her writing for larp and for other dramatic forms can be found on her website, phoeberoberts.com.

PEAKY MIDWEST
Running a Weekend LARP Writing Workshop

by Eva Schiffer

This article was written in 2016 and does not reflect some of the difficulties and lessons of the 2017 Peaky Midwest workshop.

The Peaky Midwest LARP writing workshop[1] is a yearly workshop that helps new writers tackle creating LARPs and motivates experienced writers to put together small games for the community to enjoy. We have learned a lot about writing LARPs and about teaching people to write LARPs since the first event in 2012.

I have been the primary organizer of the Peaky Midwest LARP writing workshop since 2014. Here are some of the challenges the workshop has faced and the lessons I've learned.

The Format of the Workshop and the Style of Games

Peaky Midwest is a weekend workshop that is run once a year in the spring or early summer. On Friday evening we gather at the site, have dinner, brainstorm ideas for games, and break into groups of three to five people. Each group works on a different game over the rest of the weekend. The groups have a few hours on Friday night to spend brainstorming the beginning of their game design and characters before everyone retires to sleep. On Saturday we do the bulk of the game writing. Most teams are finished with a playable draft by midnight. On Sunday we playtest our games in two hour slots.

Peaky Midwest grew out of the tradition of the Peaky LARP writing workshop in the UK[2]. The majority of the writers at Peaky Midwest are from the Chicago community centered around Fete Fatale Productions[3] and there is a good deal of cross pollination with the Intercon community around Boston. Because we are teaching through mentorship, most of the games we write are similar to small, secrets-and-powers style LARPs (often light on the "powers" part) from those communities. There is a more detailed attempt to describe our common game style expectations on the Peaky Midwest website[4].

We encourage both new and experienced writers to try new things that they are excited about, regardless of how they push our boundaries and expectations. This has led to some fascinating games that stray away from the traditional secrets-and-powers tropes and into new and experimental (at least for us!) territory.

What Has Worked

For the last few years we have used online pre-registration, starting about six months before the workshop. This helped us to gauge interest and plan spaces, supplies, and menus. It also gave us a way to make sure that our contact information for attendees remains current. Peaky Midwest sends email receipts when people pre-register so that

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1   http://www.peakymidwest.com/

2   http://peakygames.wikidot.com/
3   http://fetefatale.com/
4   http://www.peakymidwest.com/style.html

there is no confusion about whether or not their submission went through.

The workshop charges a small fee to writers in order to provide both physical writing materials and catered meals throughout the weekend.

Writing materials include easel pads and stands, Post-it notes, painter's tape for hanging stuff on walls, washable colored markers, and printer paper. Not every group uses all these supplies, but every group uses at least some of them. As organizers we can buy supplies cheaply in bulk, store extras between workshops, and ensure that there is enough for everyone who pre-registers. We also make sure that writers are using materials like *washable* markers and *painter's tape* that won't inadvertently damage the space our hosts have so kindly let us use.

We collect information about attendees' dietary needs during pre-registration and plan a menu to give everyone tasty options. This can be a challenge, since we have faced feeding people who need vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free, low-carb, and diabetic-friendly food all in the same year, as well as needing to juggle a number of specific food allergies to things like beans or red dye. Despite these complications, it has been worth it to go the extra mile in planning for everyone. Having good things each attendee can enjoy has been a big morale booster and has given writers more time to focus on writing. Getting and eating food takes up less time and you can still have useful breaks from writing to refuel. Serving batches of fresh baked cookies in the evenings was a particular crowd pleaser for relatively minor cost and effort.

Our 2016 cook cut back on the cooking workload at the workshop a good deal by pre-preparing and freezing many foods that freeze well like soup, spaghetti sauce, and cookie dough. We also received donations of homemade, frozen cookie dough from several other attendees. Our cook cut costs by shopping for many bulk ingredients at inexpensive or bulk stores like Aldi's and Costco. He noted that having a dishwasher available was extremely helpful, as serving so many people quickly dirties serving dishes and flatware, even if you are using disposables for people to eat off of.

We have held the workshop in increasingly large private homes as our pool of attending writers has grown. Having enough space to gather everyone in one room for brainstorming on Friday night and giving each writing group relatively sound separated working areas has worked well. We find that we need enough space to have chairs for everyone during the brainstorming session, with a little extra for a facilitator and an easel pad for notes. More space than that is helpful and makes brainstorming feel less cramped, but isn't necessary. While groups are working on their games on Friday and Saturday a lot of discussion goes on inside each group, and having spaces that give some sound separation for writing groups makes it much easier to focus on the game you are creating. For games that have secrets, separate spaces also limit unintentional leaks of secret game information to potential playtesters.

We find it helpful to have enough space to run two separate playtests at a time on Sunday while still giving people who aren't involved in playtesting somewhere to rest. Since 2014, we have had enough writing teams that we need to run some concurrent playtests to make sure that all the groups get a chance to test their games. Most writers are exhausted by Sunday afternoon and those who aren't actively playtesting need time and space to decompress and relax.

Before the Friday night brainstorming session, we talk some about expectations, scheduling, communication, and team structure. All of these are suggestions, but it helps to give writers a place to start when planning how they tackle their games and deal with other team members. More experienced writers usually have a better idea of how they are comfortable deviating from the suggestions.

We have specific policies about how intellectual property developed at Peaky Midwest is handled. These both allow writers to retain their rights to their IP and ensure that writers can individually work on a game after the workshop is over. They also ensure that games won't be published with author names attached unless the authors can review what is going to be published. The exact details of the rules we laid out are less important than the fact that we have rules and we communicate them

to all the attendees before we start brainstorming ideas on Friday so they know what is expected.

During brainstorming, we have great success starting with a few minutes of silent writing so that all writers have a chance to contribute some ideas before we open the floor. This also means that shyer writers do not need to speak up in front of everyone; they just have to hand over some Post-it notes with ideas.

It has also worked well to take several short breaks after we have an initial board of brainstormed game ideas to let everyone mingle and talk about what appeals to them. This allows people to consider the ideas and find out if others are interested in working on similar things. It allows writers to communicate with their potential teammates one-on-one rather than in front of a whole room full of eyes turned towards just them.

We encourage all attendees to bring laptops to work on. Because different teams choose different file sharing strategies, it is helpful to have full featured laptops available for each writer. We further ask attendees to bring laptops to share with others if pre-registration answers suggest they will be needed.

We encourage attendees to bring printers if they can. Having multiple printers that can be easily accessed by a common wired standard like USB makes printing game materials on Saturday evening much easier and faster. The last thing tired writers want to do is sit around waiting in a queue for a single printer late on Saturday night. We also encourage writers to configure and test their printers beforehand, so they will have minimal setup struggles at the workshop.

The teaching aspect of the workshop is handled through active mentorship. We try to make sure that each team has at least half experienced writers and they are expected to help and guide less experienced members of their team. This has generally worked well for us, and our pool of experienced writers has grown over the years.

What Has Not Gone so Well
Our budget has historically covered the food that we are going to feed our attendees, but not any

money to pay a cook to make that food a reality. This means that we've relied on a volunteer cook. Unfortunately, feeding twenty to thirty people for an entire weekend requires a great deal of work. It is basically a full-time job, leaving a cook no time to work on writing a LARP. Because of this, we have had a difficult time finding someone willing to take that (somewhat intense) job. So far we have been able to find people to step in and fill the role, but several of them did it out of necessity or as a favor to the organizers. We would very much prefer to have someone doing the cooking who actively wants to take this role at the workshop.

Because most of the tools available to share files and collaborate on writing require internet access, we find that the workshop needs high quality wifi access which can stand the load of our many participants. Most writers will have at least two connected devices (a laptop and a smartphone) and some may have several more than that. Consumer grade hardware is sufficient for small workshops, but could be overloaded with twenty to thirty people. We used Ubiquiti hardware the last two years, and even with multiple access points, the quality wasn't quite what we wanted. Hopefully we will be able to tune the wireless coverage at the site to improve internet access during future events.

We have learned through hard experience that forming writing groups is difficult. We want everyone to be working on something they are excited about with people they are excited to write with. There are many places where group formation can go poorly and we have found a good number of those unintentionally over the years.

We found that groups of six are too big for the workshop format. Six writers have a much more difficult time communicating well and staying on the same page. Often one or two members of the group will feel neglected and ignored and will lose enthusiasm for working on the project. This happens even when some members of a group are "part-time" writers due to illness or other responsibilities. We now recommend that groups remain in the range of three to five writers, with a preference for four or five.

It is very easy to fail to spread experienced writers around evenly. We have had at least one team

where there was only one experienced writer and three new writers. No one realized the imbalance until after all of the teams were all formed and it was too late to correct it. This put way too much pressure on the one experienced writer to handle all the mentoring in that team alone. We now encourage experienced writers to monitor the experience levels of the groups as we're trying to form the writing teams. This has worked somewhat better than the other strategies we tried in the past, but there is probably an even better solution that we have yet to find.

We have had problems at every single workshop forming the last of the teams. In several cases we let teams leave the brainstorming area as they formed. Since most of the writers were gone by the time we got to the last group, we couldn't shuffle people around to make the last team out of people with shared ideas and desires. On the other hand, keeping teams that have formed in the brainstorming area risks them becoming extremely bored and not paying attention to further groups or beginning to discuss the game they want to make and distracting everyone. There is probably a better way to manage moving people around as we agree on the ideas we want to pursue and it will take some more experimentation to find it.

We didn't previously make strong recommendations about the number of players our writers should try to make their games for, but over the years it has become clear that games with more than ten players are difficult to find enough playtesters to fill. There is also a huge amount of work needed to get so many characters fully written by Sunday, and this can lead to much greater time pressures on the team writing them. In the future we intend to more strongly encourage people to keep their game size to ten or fewer player characters. If they want to have more than ten characters, it would probably be a better idea to plan on writing any characters over ten at some point after the workshop.

We have found that having a dedicated person to schedule the playtests is the only way to fit all the games into the time and people that we have available on Sunday. Invariably some attendees will need to arrive late or leave early on Sunday, so there are limits on when they can be in or be

running playtests. Before 2016 we struggled to make all the playtests happen, and often one of the games simply didn't get tested on Sunday.

In 2016, our cook went around late on Saturday and got information on all the games. He asked about things like when people were arriving and leaving, who was on each writing team, how many GMs their game needed to run, and if there was a specific gender balance of player roles. He took all this information and spent several hours arranging all the pieces to come up with a schedule of playtests for the next day that would allow us to field enough playtesters in each slot.

We still had some difficulty arranging for the needed playtesters at the required times, but we managed to playtest all of the games. We are hopeful that in future years we can attract more playtesters who are not also writers in order to make this task easier. It is clear however that even with more playtesters, we will need someone to spend an hour or two on Saturday night to schedule everything.

We have occasionally had difficulties getting feedback about our failures from our attendees. Many people feel that it would be unkind to be openly critical of the workshop and this can make it difficult to learn where we are doing poorly. In the future we are planning to make a greater effort to offer attendees anonymous surveys after the event so that they will hopefully feel more comfortable telling us what did not work for them.

One of the purposes of the workshop is to create games that other LARPers can run or play. We have been somewhat successful in this, in that many of the games written at Peaky Midwest have been run in Chicago events, in San Jose, or in the Boston area at Intercon. However, most of our games are still not publically available online.

It takes a lot of work to polish a game from the point where an author can easily run it to the point where a stranger can easily run it. In general, we estimate that preparing a game for publication will take about twice as much work as the team did at the workshop, hopefully spread out over a much longer time so it is less stressful. In the future we are hoping to encourage more of our authors to polish their games for publication, so we can add

them to our web store[5] and use any profits to fund future Peaky Midwest workshops. We are also working on publication recommendations to help our authors more easily polish their games to a high standard.

Advice for Writers

The following is advice that we have given to writers attending the workshop. Some of it is specific to the workshop format and some is general advice for LARP writing. It is included here in the hopes that it will be helpful to other organizers and writers.

Be kind to your teammates. We are all friends here, so please treat each other as friends and do your best to listen to each other. Tell your teammates the things you are excited to build, but try to accept that not everyone will be as excited about them as you. You will be able to find common ground that works for all of you. When your teammates say no, even if they say it gently, take it as a no. You can always take the game in different directions after the workshop if you still disagree about what excites you in the design.

Set limits on the content and behavior you plan to include in your game. Talk to your teammates about what you are comfortable with creating and listen to what they say about what they want to create. If you agree on a limit, stick to it.

Have a team leader who helps to keep you on task and organized. It is way easier to manage the workload of writing a game if you have someone watching the big picture and managing time. A good team leader is not a dictator, but rather someone who helps the team members to work together efficiently and communicate clearly with each other. A good leader listens far more than they talk and does their best to make sure all team members are heard.

Have a team caregiver who makes sure everyone is taking care of their physical needs. It's easy to be so focused on getting a game done that you fail to do things like eat or stretch when you need to. A team caregiver helps to keep that from becoming a crisis by watching the other members of the team and reminding them to take better care of themselves.

Plan to take time to rest and to sleep. Agree on when you are going to stop working each evening and then do that, no matter what state your game is in. Most people write much better and much faster when they're rested.

Keep an eye on the big picture schedule (this is a good task for the team leader). We recommend sketching out your game design and characters on Friday and sleeping on those ideas. Often sleeping will bring up new connections and ideas that make your game stronger. On Saturday morning, finish the majority of the large scale planning and design so you can get down to writing the game materials over the rest of Saturday. If you get your game printed out and ready to go on Saturday night, Sunday is much less stressful.

Get the game to a minimal playtestable format first. Especially if you are writing a large game, get your game to the absolute minimum needed for playtesting before you make it nice. It's better to playtest character sheets made up of a list of bullet points than it is to have some of your sheets filled with beautiful prose and others totally empty on Sunday morning.

Playtesters will be understanding and the playtest is short. Playtesters know that you've only had a day and a half to get this game ready and they're going to be understanding of flaws and holes in your game. The playtest slots are only two hours and that includes all the out-of-game discussions like the introduction and game wrap. You really only need to deliver an hour to an hour and a half of in-game time, so don't stress out if your game feels a little thin on content.

Conclusion

Peaky Midwest has faced many challenges and we have done our best to learn from our failures. We will continue to learn, grow, and evolve, building a better workshop as we go. Hopefully this article will help others avoid the same pitfalls we've found and encourage them to organize workshops of their own to help writers realize their ideas and give us all more great LARPs to play.

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5   https://payhip.com/PeakyMidwest

The
LARPS

RULES AS WRITTEN

by Ben Klug

Sit down with some friends. Designate a small object, like a notecard or wallet, the prize. Maybe wear nametags. Have a board game in the room. You should play for the prize. I recommend poker, go fish, monopoly, anything like that.

The most important real rule is: don't touch each other and have fun.

The first real rule is: whoever leaves the room with the prize wins the game. Anyone who's still 'alive' doesn't lose. Anyone 'dead' loses.

The second real rule is: if you make a gun-shape with your hand, it's a gun, and saying 'bang, [NAME]' means you've fired it at NAME. NAME is dead, and should either fall over or leave (their choice). If they have the prize, they must put it down before leaving. Once you fire a gun, you must loudly and slowly count to three before you can fire again.

These are the only rules.

You may want to iterate this. For scoring, give five points for the prize and one point for surviving a round. Then start over.

Variants: Use nerf guns or foam boffers for weapons. Have more than one prize. Have all the monopoly money be prizes weighted by value.

CONSENSUS RPG

by Thorin Tabor

Game Setup

At the beginning of the game, 18 tokens go to the GM and 18 tokens get placed in the player pool. Put these on the table between the players. These tokens represent narrative control over the game world.

Anytime there are more tokens in the player pool than there are players, distribute the tokens in the pool evenly among the players. Any remaining tokens stay in the pool.

Action Resolution

Any time a character takes an action, the player describes the action and its outcome. This outcome happens unless the GM or another player chooses to challenge.

If there is a challenge, the acting player justifies the result based on the character's strengths and weaknesses. All players and the GM then spend tokens to vote Success or Failure.

The vote is simultaneous and blind. Players may not discuss their votes ahead of time.

If there are more tokens voted for success than failure, the outcome happens. Otherwise, the acting player describes the failure.

If the action is a failure, all spent tokens go into the player pool. If the action is a success, all spent tokens go to the GM.

NOW
LISTEN
YOUNG LADY!

by Susanne Vejdemo

"Why are you rolling your eyes at me?"
"Because you're brainwashed like everyone else who is old!"
(Quote from the first playtest)

Requirements: 2 players and this text

Setting & Gameplay

Seven 3–5 minute scenes, set in seven different eras, of a mother and a daughter arguing. It's about how expectations on women have changed (or not changed) during the last two centuries. Expect comedy, drama, seriousness and some heartfelt realizations.

In each scene, the mother is 40 and the daughter is 16 years old. All mothers love their her daughters but is very concerned and exasperated with her for the reason that the mother player picks from list in "Why We Fight".

Each scene begins with the mother saying "now listen young lady…" Both players should try to use the phrase "I love you, but…" at some point in each scene. The daughter player is responsible for ending the scene, and does so by walking out angrily from the room (door slamming optional).

Switching roles: The mother player in the 2010s scene plays the same character in the 1980s scene, but this time when that character is younger and is having a fight with her own mother (new role for the other player). In this fashion, the players steps back in time in this chain of mothers and daughters up until the 19th century.

Why We Fight

This list is written from a Scandinavian white middle class perspective. Feel free to adapt it!

2010s
- You have to take down the naked pictures from online
- You can't have an open relationship and multiple partners - love is about commitment.
- Bodypaint is not clothes!
- You can't neglect your studies to spend time with some boy! Or girl!
- You can't get engaged to someone you've only known for a few months! You need to play the field and get experience.

1980s
- Boys and girls can't be just friends - boys are only interested in sex.
- You can't pursue this engineering dream - you will never find a man.
- You can't get a tattoo; it will forever mark you as a whore and/or criminal
- You have to shave your legs, it's part of becoming a woman.

1960s
- You can't wear a miniskirt!
- You cannot be seen to be cleverer than the boy you're interested in.
- You can't run a marathon - it might dislodge your womb and ruin your chance of children.
- It's no use to pursue an education since you say you want children. Choose.
- You can't wear a bikini! That's the same as being naked!
- You can't shave your legs: it is patriarchal!
- If you are going to spend time around men, I insist that you get on the pill. You never know what might happen.

1940s
- You can't work in a factory, it will take a man's job away and is unpatriotic.
- There aren't enough men - unless you start wearing makeup, they will never look at you.
- You can't wear a skirt above your knees!
- You can't go walking with a boy after dark - it will ruin your reputation

1910s
- You can't ride a bike: it will displace your womb.
- You can't wear makeup, the men will think you are a whore.
- You can't wear a skirt above your ankles!
- You can't wear trousers - they're for men.
- Don't support the Right to Vote movement, it devalues femininity.
- You can't be alone with a boy without a chaperone.

1890s
- You can't wear a bathing suit.
- You can't go out in the sun.
- You can't kiss a man before you're engaged.
- Don't let the boys know that you have opinions about non-house related matters.
- You can't play with boys any longer now that you're a young woman.

Last scene - 2040s
- What will mothers and daughters fight about in the future?

Thanks for playing! If you wish, you can debrief by share arguments you've had with your own mother, or your children. What do you think a male version of this would look like? I would love a short play report emailed to susanne@vejdemo.se!

Credits:

This larp was written by Susanne Vejdemo (susanne@vejdemo.se), who is immensely grateful for all the feedback from the Facebook group Larp Women Unite and the playtesters at the New York City Larp Designers' Meetup Group.

THE ASYLUM GAME

by Susanne Vejdemo

This 2-person 15-minute RPG that was born from my deep frustration over the situation in Europe right now (May 2017). It's a strategic, fast-paced, cynical role-playing game where you play either a refugee or an immigration officer.

You need: around 15–20 D6 (six-sided dice). After you've read the instructions, tear the following paper in two pieces: one has the refugee's conditions; one has the officer's conditions.

Instructions

The setting is an interview room at the department of immigration in the western country and the game is structured in a series of bouts.

Before every bout, each player secretly chooses one or more conditions and gets the corresponding number of D6. Note that once a condition has been used, it can not be used again. It is therefore important to be strategic about which condition to use when.

The bout starts with the refugee stating one or several reasons why they should be allowed to stay, and the officer countering with one or several reasons why they shouldn't. The bare bones of the reasons are given in the character conditions sheet, but players should embroider them at will and make a scene out of it.

Once the arguments have been made, players reveal how many dice they bet and then they roll them. Highest number wins the bout, the loser loses a hit point.

Each player has 3 Hit points. Losing all your hit points means the other person wins.

The players should finish and roleplay the scene to the just-determined conclusion (e.g. the winner says "...so you have to accept this" and the loser says "...alright.")

Note that if a player has no dice left, they have only a single argument left: "Please have mercy!" It is worth 0 dice. They lose the bout. Feel free to play this out.

Have "fun"! Consider switching roles and playing again.

After the game, please have a discussion about the refugee situation in your country.

Then don't go out and have a beer, and instead donate the money you would have spent on that beer to an organization working with refugees.

Refugee

As a refugee, you are fleeing from death and mayhem (from a fictional country) and have entered a western country "illegally" in a last-ditch effort to save your life. Your winning condition is to get asylum.

The refugee player rolls 2D6 six times to get six "advantageous" conditions from the list below. Roll again if you get the same outcome. Interpret the descriptions as you see best. Make a mark for the conditions that apply to you. Cross the condition out once it has been used up.

- ❑ 2) Your country is red-listed (describe why) 3D6
- ❑ 3) You have a job offer (what?) 3D6
- ❑ 4) University degree (describe what) 2D6
- ❑ 5) Already have a lawyer (how did that happen?) 2D6
- ❑ 6) Professional (what did you do for a living?) 1D6
- ❑ 7) Knowledge of your rights 1D6
- ❑ 8) You are rich (what did this mean where you came from?) 1D6
- ❑ 9) Persecuted minority (which? Why are you persecuted?) 2D6
- ❑ 10) Your country is yellow-listed (describe why) 2D6
- ❑ 11) Media is aware of your story (what is it?) 3D6
- ❑ 12) Married to a citizen (how did that happen?) 3D6

Officer

As an officer, you are trying to do your job as best you can. Your winning condition is to deny asylum.

The officer player rolls 2D6 six times to get six conditions to deny the asylum. Roll again if you get the same outcome. Interpret the descriptions as you see best. Make a mark for the conditions that apply to you. Cross the condition out once it has been used up (i.e. used in a scene).

- ❑ 2) You simply don't have the right documentation 4D6
- ❑ 3) You first landed in this other western country, you need to go back to ask for asylum there 4d6
- ❑ 4) You didn't file the proper forms before 3D6
- ❑ 5) Our database has no info on that 2D6
- ❑ 6) You are exaggerating 1D6
- ❑ 7) Look, I'm only doing my job 1D6
- ❑ 8) That's above my pay grade 1D6
- ❑ 9) Legally, that doesn't matter 2D6
- ❑ 10) You didn't file the proper forms before 3D6
- ❑ 11) The person who could help you is on vacation 3D6
- ❑ 12) We don't recognize the documentation that you do have 4D6