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# GAME WRAP

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

Welcome, readers, to the third volume of Game Wrap.

As our thinking about what this publication could be evolved, we decided to introduce something of a theme for each volume both to inspire authors as they plan their contributions and frame the conversation across the articles and in the spaces between. This year the theme we put forth is Trial and Error, to acknowledge and celebrate the experimental and ever refining nature of larp as a developing art form or medium, and indeed the often challenging but exhilarating work being done in all the various larp communities across the globe.



We are introduced in this volume to the unique history and state of the art of larp in Croatia in Ivan Zalac's article about his larp community. He places its development in the larger context of European larp, highlights some exciting projects coming out of Croatia, and shares one of his games. Andrea Humez lays out some analysis of the design considerations that go into plotting out in-character interpersonal relationships in larps with pre-written characters, and distills this thinking into useful principles that can be implemented in the design and writing process as well as through run time. In another article, Cameron Betts reflects on his many years larping to formulate a taxonomy of the kinds of touch that commonly occur in games to begin to organize our collective thinking about how touch may be more consciously used in larp design and in individual role-playing choices.

In the New England theater-style larp community the past couple of years have seen a new focus on how gender is approached in larps and how it can better be engaged with on the administrative and production levels of running larp conventions and individual larps, and in casting and writing games. Eva Schiffer's article presents a technological approach to addressing character gender in a flexible and adaptable way such that the game is able to better accommodate players rather than players

being tasked with taking on ill-fitting gendered roles. The article is accompanied here with a short larp as an illustration of how this can be incorporated into the writing process, and in the digital version of the volume with a link to the original software that enacts this flexibility.

The theme of Trial and Error is perhaps most starkly reflected in the article from two of our very own staff members as a narrative about their process of rewriting a larp after several successful runs to better represent the growth in their thinking about social justice, the role larp is able to take on in social justice activism, the limitations therein, and the growth in their understanding of current scientific theories. What they present is their own elegant solution, and an open question for the rest of us about how older larps can be reworked to answer the needs of the current larp scene and a more politically aware society.

One of the main changes we on the editorial staff made this year, as we learn from our own past experiences and address problems, is to refine our submission process to be more helpful to contributors and accommodate different writing styles. As we continue this process we are starting to offer the option of skipping the abstract submission step, and accept articles for consideration in full, as well as streamlining our editing process so as to provide faster turnaround. It is our hope that these changes will help include more voices and allow our greater community the advantages of learning about more perspectives and experiences.

I hope you enjoy reading the materials included in this volume as much as I have, and find them equally as edifying, and I look forward to seeing the ideas they spark in your minds for future articles. I'd like to extend a great big thank you to the hard-working staff of Game Wrap and NEIL for their continued support.

Thoughtfully yours,

Viktoriya Fuzaylova, Editor-in-Chief

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# A TOUCHING TAXONOMY

by Cameron Betts

If I accept your physical role-play, if I consent to your touch, what are you going to do? Clap me on the shoulder? Slap me? Hug me? I would like to know.

What kind of physical interaction would you appreciate from me? I would like to know that too.

Not all forms of touch are the same.

They are not the same from a player perspective. They are not the same from a design perspective. Touch interacts with LARP design. Touch plays a role in a LARP. The right form of touch at the right time can create a sense of presence and authenticity; the wrong kind of touch, even outside of ethical concerns, can pull a player out of the experience.

Here are four types of touch that we see in LARP: normative touch, game necessary touch, design enhancing touch, and individual enhancing touch. Each type of touch interacts with the game differently, and by thinking about how to handle each, a designer can help ensure that players experience the right form of touch (and avoid the wrong form).

## Normative Touch

This is the kind of touching that we encounter in the world outside of LARP—at work, at home, or among friends—that bleeds into our expectations and gameplay. A typical example might be using a handshake to greet a stranger. Normative touch is difficult to control with rules because players don't even think about the action as one that requires asking consent, considering a rule, or

deploying a technique. Even in a LARP where there is a no-touching rule, it is common to see people shaking hands.

In groups where a high percentage of the players know one another, sub-culture norms can override the norms of the broader culture—it is not uncommon to see normative hugging in such groups. Interacting with differences in cultural normative touch can create serious challenges when one player considers a touch normative and another does not; consider, for example, kissing on the cheeks or hugging as a form of greeting. A player for whom this is a normative interaction may hug another player without asking consent because they are acting on “auto-pilot”.

How much touch is encouraged or allowed in a design can also alter the norms of touch in a LARP. For example, in some live-combat games, players routinely touch one another's shoulders to indicate that they are carrying that person or performing some in-game action on them. This action becomes normative in the culture of play for the LARP, and players no longer stop to think about if this touch requires consent.

## Necessary Touch

Sometimes a game design requires players to touch one another in order for the design to be realized. There have been several games about ballroom dancing that require touch that is normal for dancing. Live combat games require players to accept touch via padded weapons (which may

not seem like touch from one point of view, but consider if it is acceptable without consent).

Necessary touch needs to be very well indicated in the description of the LARP or scene, so that all participants understand what is required.

In some designs, there are ways for a percentage of participants to opt out of necessary touch, but it is still necessary touch if the design relies on high percentage of people participating in the touching activity.

### Design Enhancing Touch

This is the level of touch that the design would like to optimize for, but that would not harm the LARP if any given or all players opted not to engage in. These are actions that your players will likely encounter due to the scenario or situations the designers intend for them. Design enhancing touch speaks to the overall themes of the LARP.

The line between necessary and design-enhancing touch is sometimes blurry, as they both relate to the designed intentions of the scenario. The difference is that design-enhancing touch can be replaced if the situation calls for it; perhaps it can be just removed or it can be replaced with a non-touch-based technique.

An example is a game set at a ball, but the plot is all about politics. It would be great if people participated in some ballroom dancing to enhance the atmosphere, but the game will be engaging, interesting, and complete even if no one dances. Another example might be in a gritty combat game where it can add to the atmosphere if the players physically drag or carry the wounded to safety.

### Individual Enhancing Touch

When we talk about touch and consent rules, we are often talking about this type of touch. This is when players sense an opportunity for touch to enhance their experience. Imagine a moment where a character is grieving, and the player of another character thinks a hug would add to the experience.

Since this kind of touch is very dependent on specific scenes and context, the process of suggesting appropriate individual enhancing touch is chal-

lenging. MostLARPs use an open-ended system for requesting consent to deal with this. Many systems involve an in-the-moment, out-of-character conversation, which can be as simple as “do you accept my physical roleplay?” or as comprehensive as a structured conversation to ensure that players don’t feel pressured to consent. Many systems also accept that consent conversations can be streamlined with negotiation before play begins.

While individual enhancing touch can add to the player experience, it is also possible that it can detract from the LARP design. Imagine a LARP in a formal setting about characters from a reserved culture, where some of the players decided act out a bar brawl. Although open ended consent negotiations are needed, it might be worth the designer considering if there are some actions or categories of action that should be disallowed.

### The A-B-Cs of a Touching LARP

Here is one way to handle creating a permission space around touch that addresses all of these forms explicitly: players select which forms of touch they would like to opt into. In order to make this simple to use, the forms are placed on a scale of intimacy, tied to specific game-related types of touching. Players wear an indicator of what they would like to opt into; I suggest a letter that they wear in a visible and consistent location. Players can change the letter they are displaying at any time.

Thinking through the forms of touch and their role in the LARP can help you achieve the LARP you want to produce. Being specific in the levels allows the players to feel confident that the others have opted in to some action, and is suggestive of what kind of play is expected as well as what the players might witness during the course of play.

A game that suggests that grasping forearms is a common greeting feels different from one where a kiss on each cheek is common. A culture where you are more likely to be punched than hugged feels different where one where you are more likely to be hugged than punched. Using this A-B-C method the designer can determine for their LARP what kinds of touch are common and what is an escalation.



Two restrictions are included in this system for the sake of usability. First, the touch is placed on a scale, which means players can't easily opt into some things and not others. They only indicate that they are consenting to all up until a certain point. Second, each player's letter indicator needs to apply to every other player. These restrictions allow the communication of consent to be simple to display and to understand since there not a series of special conditions for players to remember. To mitigate these restrictions, the plays may also wear a symbol to indicate they are open to explore and negotiate opportunities.

Here is an example of how this system might look for a ballroom-dancing LARP, with each display letter A-D defined and discussed.

#### A - No Touch

*No touching means no touching at all.*

*No touching at all* is hard to achieve, and is a weakness of this system. The nature of normative touch is that people don't stop to think about think it before they do it. Nevertheless, there should be a way indicate that a player has not opted in to any touch, and they should have organizer support. I would reserve the "A" for no-touching, even if your game has a minimal touch requirement. If our ballroom-dancing LARP includes some characters for whom dancing is optional, then this is an option for the players of those characters.

If you would like to maximize your chance of a touch-averse player not getting touched at all, not even normatively, the best way is to have a game where touch is specifically forbidden to all players, and where the characters also have specific reasons not to touch each other.

#### B - Ballroom Dancing

*In order for our ballroom-dancing LARP to work, we need people to dance. Putting on a "B" indicates that you have opted-in to being touched on the arms, hands and waist in the context of dancing with a partner.*

This level is for *Necessary Touch*. Including the context of the touch can be important, as opting in to dancing with someone is not the same as opting in to being suddenly grabbed by the waist.

In games that do not have a necessary touch, "B" can be used to indicate that the player opts-in to normative touch for that game. You should still define what is considered normative for the space you are creating so that players have a baseline of understanding what this means (e.g. handshakes).

#### C - Slapping

*While our ballroom-dancing LARP is set at a ball, it is really about politics and scandal. Loud and dramatic scandal. So, if player displays a "C", they opt-in to being lightly slapped on the cheek, in addition to opting-in to the necessary touch of ballroom dancing described in "B".*

This level is for *design enhancing touch*. Be specific in describing the design enhancing touch actions, and (just like with necessary touch) give some context as to how the touch is to be used in play. Players are much more likely to take actions that are specifically called out with a letter.

#### D - Shoving

*Scandal and dancing might cause bitter rivalries to boil over. If a player displays a "D", they opt-in to being pushed, shoved, or knocked down, as well as opting in to the necessary touch of ballroom dancing of "B", and the light slapping of "C".*

Some games can benefit from having multiple levels of *design enhancing touch*. This example shows that the designer has decided that opting in to the "C" level is a prerequisite for the "D" level. While there may be players that are happy to opt in to being shoved ("D"), who don't want to be slapped ("C"), having a simple hierarchy allows for players to remember fewer things and works better than having a player wear multiple symbols for different configuration of actions. The hierarchy also communicates to the players what actions, in the context of this LARP, are more common and which are escalations.

Plus ("+") - Open to Explore Opportunities  
*Sometimes lovers embrace after a fight. Sometimes mothers march their sons out of the ball by their ears. Those might be fun to play out, but you need to make sure all the players involved opt-in. If a player displays a "+" after their letter, they are open to discussing different forms of touch on a case-by-case basis other than what is*

*described in the other letters. Any letter can be followed by a plus.*

This is the *Individual Enhancing Touch* and allows players to have some flexibility in their actions and experiences. A player who does not want to dance but who might opt-in to a slap-fight can display an “A+”. A player who wants to dance and embrace their romantic interest but does not want any form of violence, can display a “B+”.

Including the plus in as an option means you might need additional guidelines for how to negotiate consent. If a player does not have a “+” the other players should not approach them about negotiating more touch than their letter indicates. The more the designer can fit into the lettered structure the less the players will need to stop play to negotiate.

## Making Consent Visible

In addition to providing a structure for consent between players for using touch in their roleplay, this system also makes visible and explicit the consent structures that drive touch in during play. With less visible structures, such as arranging for consent before the game, there is a risk that some players will see others touching and assume that this level of touch is normal, expected, or desired.

Consider a situation where two players consent in private discussion before the game to exchange casual back rubs during play as a sign of that their characters are close. Another player watches as one of the consenting players step up behind the other to rub their shoulders without any obvious consent negotiation. The watcher might assume these two players enjoy backrubs and initiate one in the same way they saw modeled (without asking consent); or they might assume that this is normal behavior for players playing characters in close relationships and step up behind someone else. Of course, our watcher might also assume that no consent has been given for the backrub. They might then intercede, and disrupt a moment the consenting players had been hoping for.

In this example, the consenting players inadvertently end up modeling a flawed consent structure because their consent negotiation was not discernible by an observer. This problem can be exacerbated in

situations where some players know one another before play and others do not. The former more easily can have invisible consent negotiations while the latter may be attempting to figure out what is the norm for play with this group. The ease with which players who know one another can pre-negotiate can also create a feeling in newcomers that they are boxed out or not able to have as complete an experience as those with established friends.

Using a structured, visible consent system allows the free flow of physical play within the comfort and consent of all the players involved, and considering touch as an intentional design tool can help players get the most out of a LARP.

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# OUR EARLIER WORKS ARE PROBLEMATIC

by Nat Budin & Phoebe Roberts

## Content notes

This article discusses problematic depictions of and ideas about autism. It also contains a spoiler-filled plot summary of the larp *Resonance*, including discussions of an apocalypse and mind-altering biotechnology.

## Introduction

All artists grow and change over time, and as they grow, they sometimes come to the realization that they are no longer happy with their earlier works. As larp creators, we are no exception. When we discover that one of our works is problematic, what should we do? There isn't an obvious answer in general, and the medium of larp makes the question even murkier.

In this article, we'll introduce a case study in how a problematic larp came into existence, how we came to realize its problems, and the challenges we ran into while tackling those problems. We'll also discuss the broader implications and lessons that can be gleaned from these experiences.

The larp we'll be looking at is Alleged Entertainment's *Resonance*, a scene-based<sup>1</sup> litform<sup>2</sup> game in which all of the characters begin with amnesia. Due to the nature of the analysis we'll be doing, revealing some secret information written into the

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1 "Scene-based" refers to a larp that is split up into small scenes rather than playing out in one long continuous set of action.

2 "Litform" refers to a one-shot larp in which the characters are prewritten by the game creators.

larp is unavoidable, so **if you don't want spoilers for *Resonance*, please stop reading now.**

*Resonance* was written by Susan Weiner, Vito D'Agosta, and the authors of this article, with additional conceptual development by Jesse Cox and Danielle Reese. Since we only comprise some of the writing team for this larp, we cannot speak as representatives of the team as a whole. The opinions in this article are purely those of Nat Budin and Phoebe Roberts.

## Overview of *Resonance*

*Resonance* takes place in an unspecified near-future time in the United States of America. In this future, the US Department of Defense, in collaboration with militaries from other nations, has developed a mind-altering virus called "Resonance," which was accidentally released into the world and has wreaked havoc. Much of the population has been rendered unable to function; power grids have shut down. In short, the virus has caused an apocalypse.

None of this background is known to the characters as the game begins. They wake up, remembering nothing—not even their own identities—in an underground government hospital with no way to leave. The characters slowly regain their memories by experiencing group flashbacks. These are represented by removing the players from the main space in three groups of five players each, and giving them short character sheets for the flashback scene they are to experience. The memories each character is given, as described in the short

character sheets and played out in the flashback scene, may belong to someone else. The reason for this, and for the shared memories, is that the Resonance virus is causing the characters' minds to be linked telepathically.

In each of the flashback scenes, each character has a choice to make between two values (for example, Vigilant vs. Compassionate). When the character has made that choice, the player circles the appropriate value on the character sheet for the scene and hands it back to a game master (GM). Once the players have experienced three flashbacks, the GM team uses their answers to assign each player a character that matches their choices. There are a total of 45 pre-written characters in *Resonance*, so in any given run, a third of them will be used.

The characters are all in some way connected to the project that produced and released the Resonance virus. They must spend the rest of the game coming to terms with the fact that they caused the apocalypse, while experiencing further flashbacks leading up to a scene taking place the moment they entered the underground hospital. In that scene, the code to activate the elevator leading out of the hospital room is revealed. Once they take the elevator up, they arrive in another underground chamber with a computer in it. The computer is programmed to let them leave the facility, but only after they establish a line of succession (the president may or may not be one of the 15 characters present) and a plan for the future.

### *Resonance's* treatment of autism

The original version of *Resonance* makes use of autism as a plot device, in ways that are deeply problematic. In that version of the larp, the virus was developed as a "cure" for autism, and it worked by stimulating mirror neurons in order to allow a form of direct brain-to-brain communication.

Mirror neurons are a type of neuron in the frontal cortex. Not long after the discovery of mirror neurons, early studies linked them to the function of imitating behavior. In 2001, a group of research psychologists from Scotland and Australia proposed that "some dysfunction in the [mirror neuron] system might be implicated in the generation of the constellation of clinical features which

constitute the autistic syndrome" (Williams et al. 2–15). By the time *Resonance* was written, several popular science publications had promulgated this theory. Also by this time, however, multiple scientists, such as Dinstein in 2008 and Fan in 2010, had raised doubts about the theory. In 2013, the idea had been thoroughly debunked, as shown by Hamilton's comprehensive meta-analysis (Hamilton).

Aside from the issue of mirror neurons, the original *Resonance's* conception of autism is further flawed. The Resonance virus is designed to create a telepathic link between the minds of its carriers. Its creators mean this to function as a counter to autism, in that it creates a capacity for empathy where none existed. While this conception of autism is widespread, research, as well as the lived experiences of autistic people, show it to be incorrect. Some autistic people do have difficulty recognizing emotions in others, but this is far from universal and is also not the same as a lack of empathy (Brewer and Murphy).

Many in the autistic community feel that, when speaking about autism, it's important to include autistic people in that creation. The Autistic Self Advocacy Network, one of the world's most prominent autism nonprofits, has adopted "nothing about us without us" as its slogan. None of the writers of *Resonance* are autistic, and we did not consult with any autistic people as part of the process of creating the larp. Furthermore, none of the playable characters in the larp are autistic. Autistic people are used purely as plot devices and background props in the original version of the game.

### History of *Resonance*

*Resonance* was created by most of the team that had, at the time, just finished writing *The Last Seder*, which had itself been an experiment, using the scene-based structure to craft a tightly-plotted narrative with built-in twists and pacing. *The Last Seder* had been a very popular larp that accomplished what it set out to do, but some players complained of not having any influence over the storyline. *Resonance* was conceived, in large part, as an attempt to respond to this criticism by using some of the same mechanics in a way that afforded players more and more directorial power as the game progressed.

When it originally ran in 2011, *Resonance* was well-received. Several players in early runs told us it was their favorite larp. In particular, players enjoyed the game's unusual structure and new take on the well-worn amnesia trope.

In the third run of the game, we conducted an informal debrief on the spur of the moment, because players were eager to ask questions about how the mechanics worked and share their experiences. During this session, one player brought up the subject of neurodiversity, citing *Resonance* as a positive example of a neurodiversity narrative. This player took away the message that society must treat neurodivergent people better. This reading of the larp did not sit well with all of the writers; in particular, Phoebe did not recall this message having been considered during the creation process. However, we didn't discuss this discomfort at the time.

For the fourth run of *Resonance* in 2014, Phoebe was on her own. The run was at Brandeis University's *Festival of theLARPs*, which none of the other writers were attending that year, and so Phoebe asked some trusted collaborators from outside the writing team to help with GM duties. At that *Festival*, Jules Pilowsky, one of the players in the game, became quite uncomfortable with the treatment of autism in the larp, and after the run, gave Phoebe some specific feedback about it. Pilowsky is not herself autistic, but has personal experience of autism via a close family member. She pointed out the game's characterization of autism as a deficiency in empathy.

Phoebe, who had herself been feeling uneasy about the larp but had not yet been able to pin down why, found Pilowsky's comment insightful and illuminating. However, she wasn't sure what to do with the feedback. This conception of autism was baked deeply into the game's story—the only way the *Resonance* virus can operate as a cure for autism is if autism is a deficiency in empathy. Eventually, she spoke with Nat about her concerns, but he too was unsure of how to correct the issues. Both authors agreed with Pilowsky, but neither had any good idea how to proceed.

*Resonance* didn't run again until late 2015, when Nat and Phoebe produced the game at a private home in the suburbs of Boston. During that run,

two players noticed the treatment of autism, which upset them enough that they needed to leave the game temporarily and return during a later scene. After the larp, the players expressed their anger at the authors' thoughtless inclusion of this content. Phoebe, Nat, and the players of this run all discussed ways to change the game to be less problematic, and the two players suggested that the easiest solution might be to replace autism in the game with some fictional disorder.

We brought this feedback to the rest of the writing team, and some discussion ensued over email. The potential problematic reading of the content was acknowledged by all, but because of the earlier feedback, particularly at the third run, some of the team did not want to change the game. There was a feeling that it was possible to make the game read more clearly as a positive neurodiversity narrative, but that idea was not universally agreed upon amongst the writers. Attempting to carve a compromise path, Phoebe proposed to do some rewrites to some of the main characters to help make it clearer that many of the views about autism expressed in the game were those of the characters, not the authors. The other authors agreed it would be a good idea.

After completing these tweaks, however, Phoebe felt that the result was not successful, and that the distinction between the characters' views and the authors' views did not come across. Therefore, the writers decided to proceed with the 2015 players' suggestion of replacing autism with a fictional disorder. One of the writers felt that it was important to make sure players knew the game was actually "about autism," and planned to mention it during game debriefings; the other authors felt the opposite way.

Nat searched through the game's text for mentions of the words "autism," "autistic," "spectrum," and other related terms, and replaced them with "Braiden's Syndrome." In addition, he changed some of the text that mentioned some of the markers of autism to different characteristics not tied to autism. There has only been, to our knowledge, one run of this version of *Resonance*, in 2016 at Nat's house in the Seattle suburbs. That run seemed to be successful, and the changes did not appear to worsen the gameplay or decrease players'

enjoyment of the game. One run is, however, not enough data to decide if the rewrite was truly a success. Nonetheless, this is the version of *Resonance* now available on Larp Library<sup>3</sup> for public download.

## Case analysis

As may be apparent from the multiple attempts required, addressing these issues was not an easy process. We ran into a number of barriers that prevented us from implementing changes that really tackled the problem.

There was, as is often the case, an instinctive, emotional pushback on the part of the creative team. It's always difficult to confront the notion that something you've lovingly created is flawed or even damaging, when you've put so much work and time and emotional energy into making it. Nobody likes reopening the book on a satisfying finished product. Also, the reception the game received for the first several years of its running life was overwhelmingly positive, acting as a powerful counterpoint to any criticism encountered so much later in the process. It's a common feeling among artists to develop resistance to redoing strong work you thought was finished. And the members of the team initially did not agree on the best way to respond to the issue. There was some initial hope that this was only the opinion of a small minority of players and not actually a problem. One often finds with criticism dealing with the artistic value of a work that it can be only a matter of taste, specific to one or a few people, upon which the artist can agree to disagree.

Further still, there was an impulse to attempt a fix involving writing tweaks that still maintained the presence of autism in the story. At the time, this was seen as a way to a simple fix. But in actuality, our ultimate solution of simply switching out autism for a fictional disease was much, much easier. Why did we miss this in our initial efforts? Because, we felt a need to deny that the problem was large, that if the content only needed some slight re-presenting, our mistake could not have been that serious—that we hadn't been so unthinkingly

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<sup>3</sup> Larp Library, at <https://www.larplibrary.com>, is an online repository of free-to-run larps available for download.

ableist. It took some processing, discussion, and serious self-reflection before we came to the conclusion that the whole concept had to be removed from the game. And that the reason for that removal was that our insensitivity caused us to create a harmful depiction.

Of course, there remains the question of why this even happened in the first place.

The biggest reason was ignorance—of autism, and of the consequences our portrayal of it might have. While none of us were completely uninformed, we did not realize how much we didn't understand about the condition due to a lack of experience and some level of ableism. Also, at the time of the game's inception, some recent research, that has since been discredited, suggested a relationship between autism and mirror neurons, which shaped the conception written into the game. Insufficient further research was conducted, which might have provided much-needed perspective into the reality of the condition. Also, early planning discussions of the game's design focused mainly on the unusual structure and how to facilitate its workings. This meant that any thought as to the game's message became secondary, with the unspoken implications of that message even less thoroughly considered

## Owning mistakes

While many of our mistakes in this process are clear, something like this can happen to any project. We were a team of educated, relatively socially aware writers, all of whom would have professed a desire to create art that was inclusive and did not perpetuate harm, and we still managed to stumble into this pit. Of course artists should attempt to educate themselves as best they can, so they avoid the failures our team had to manage. But despite the best of intentions, and better efforts than we were initially able to make, it's still possible to make mistakes.

If you've learned that you've created a problematic work that deals with marginalization other than your own, what do you do then? When you've made a misstep and put hurt out into the world that you didn't intend, how do you properly own your mistakes? Based on our experiences here, we learned

a few things that might be useful in a number of similar creative situations.

The first necessary step was to listen. In the absence of our own understanding, other people with greater perspective were the ones to point out the problems with our portrayal. Natural protectiveness of one's creation can make this hard, but dismantling this resistance is key to embracing this process. If the writer is not open to this, they will stay limited by their own perspective and bias. The corollary to this is to maintain an open and respectful attitude while listening. While this can feel like a personal attack, it's important to separate one's emotions from the process of evaluating one's work. Often someone who has come to you to tell you of a problem like this is taking on an emotional burden themselves in speaking out—at the very least, they risk your upset in pointing out the error. It shows respect to hear them out in a non-defensive manner. And frankly, when your actions have caused harm to someone else, the first feelings you should be focusing on are not your own.

Once you've absorbed the information as neutrally as you can, be sure to take time to reflect on the feedback. Not every bit of input is going to be useful, and no one is obligated to act on every single response, but particularly if you are feeling knee-jerk resistance to criticism, this is crucial. It may take time for the emotional reaction to subside enough for you to be receptive to the point. Moreover, even if you are open to incorporating feedback, this will help you truly internalize it into your own understanding. The greater the understanding you can come to of how you erred, the better you will learn to avoid this same pitfall in the future.

We also found it helpful to take time to deal with the sad feelings that come from knowing that despite your best efforts, this work you poured your heart and soul into is imperfect. Maybe even mourn it, because dealing with these emotions will better enable you to move through them in order to make an honest critical examination. But while it's all right if you are not able to neutrally process this criticism right away, make sure you take this processing time privately, away from the person who has brought you the critique, or anyone else

you may have hurt. Again, you can and should take care of your own feelings on the callout, but you must not make those feelings the responsibility of those who were impacted by your mistake. It is not their job to soothe you on this, so it would be inappropriate for you to demand that emotional labor from that quarter.

It may be that you do honestly examine the work you made on the point of critique and genuinely decide that it is not valid. This could be possible. But especially if the critique comes from a member of a group to which you do not belong regarding their experience which you do not share, we strongly encourage you to be very conservative in substituting your own judgment on this issue. Overwhelmingly, they are greater experts on their own experience than you are.

Finally, take responsibility. Be honest and forthright about the mistake you made. Apologize for it without making excuses or putting the blame on someone else. Only when you accept that you screwed up do you have a chance on learning and moving on from it. Also, it signals to others that you are concerned for other people's feelings than just your own, and you are worth engaging in good faith.

## Moving forward

Once you've gotten to the place of accepting that you've made the mistake, what are you to do then? Fortunately, the larp medium is one of the most open to revision. You definitely are afforded the opportunity to fix the problems with rewrites that improve the game on artistic counts, and improvements of a more sensitivity-oriented nature are no different. Seeing as a different, edited version of the game is easy to disseminate and run for any subsequent instance, it is very possible to remove the element from the game. This can be a very satisfying course of action for all parties, as it demonstrates an effort to eliminate problematic depictions that would spare people hurtful experiences, as well as maintaining the parts of the larp that you were proud of making in the first place. But it is an equally legitimate decision to simply decide to retire the larp. Editing and reworking can be a draining, labor-intensive process, so there is no shame in deciding you'd like to prevent further harm by

ending exposure to it, and moving forward with your new knowledge onto new projects.

Whichever you choose, you must also think about being accountable to your past players about it. At the very least, it's a good idea to reach out to those who put themselves out there enough to point out where you made your mistake. This is meant to be a respectful gesture, demonstrating that you took their words into account and that it matters to you to do better. It should not, we note, be an effort to gain their approval or absolution in order to assuage your feelings. If your intentions are to excuse yourself from guilt, then you are not communicating about your efforts in good faith. Again, it is not the job of those who hurt you to make you feel better about it.

### Doing better next time

With all this possible fallout, both external and internal to the writer, it may seem like dealing with any potentially hurtful or problematic themes is a minefield. Is it better, or at least safer, to not put oneself in a position to mess up by avoiding these issues entirely? Or should one take on the risk inherent to delving into sensitive topics, and face the consequences if one should fail? Interactive and performative media always involve the contributions of people beyond just the writing team that conceives of them; larps ought to appeal to players of a diversity of backgrounds and experience by providing something many different folks can relate to. We don't want all larps to be centered on the perspectives of white straight people all the time. However, we two authors are both white straight people, and perhaps it's not up to us to decide that?

Tricky as it may be, we are not advocating avoiding depicting difficult issues entirely. But we would recommend a course of due diligence if you're going to make the attempt.

The very first step is to do your research. Learn as much as you can about the topic you've chosen to deal with, and not just to be able to create thoughtful, accurate representation, but also to educate yourself on the potential pitfalls you may be facing. In service of this, it helps to be very clear up front on the themes and ideas you want to treat. This

will help you find relevant information more easily, plus make you more cognizant of who your art may be depicting or affecting. New themes and notions will naturally arise during the writing process, and that's certainly okay. But you want to identify them as you see them, and be deliberate about what you are including. This new direction may necessitate new research, and you want to make sure you don't neglect that duty.

Researching should start with an independent effort. Take it on yourself to do the legwork of looking up the subject matter using publicly available resources. Read as much as you can, from as many sources close to the issue as you can. The more personal relevance the issue has to the person opining about it, the more likely that source is to perceive the nuances that an outsider may miss. It's important to start with this type of research, as it places the labor within your own responsibility.

It may also be necessary to collaborate with a person with more personal perspective. While all writers can include the marginalization of others in work focused on other subjects, if you are going to create art specifically *about* a particular marginalization, you don't want to do it in the absence of an artist who experiences it directly. But even if that's not the entire subject matter of your piece, it can still be a good idea to get direct thoughts on your specific idea from someone with the actual relevant experience. You can run the ideas you're planning on incorporating into your larp by them, and they can tell you how they feel about your particular use in your particular case. This is great because they can personally point out things you may not have considered, and give you actionable feedback on where you're strong and where you're going to need to revise.

This approach must be taken with care and respect, however. It is work, both mental and emotional, to engage with someone's art that deals with their specific life circumstances and be in the position of having to deliver critiques on something so close to them. You want to make this request for someone to do this for you with respect and acknowledgment of that fact, and if you can offer some kind of compensation in return—whether it's for a favor in kind or a treated meal for someone you know well, or actual monetary recompense for someone to



whom you don't have personal connection — you are demonstrating that you understand the effort involved, and the value thereof. This is definitely something you only want to ask, however, if you are absolutely certain the person will not feel imposed upon by it, nor an intrusion into their lives. Our goal here is to reduce the harm our art puts into the world, so you definitely don't want to inflict more in your quest to ensure that.

As we've said, even despite these best intelligence and due diligence, we all remain flawed human beings, so the possibility of screwing up will always be there. Being willing to accept this truth doesn't mean you need to beat yourself up—it just means

you need to be willing to accept responsibility, and take steps to do better. We screwed up in this manner with *Resonance*—our groundbreaking, powerful, revolutionary, flawed game. While we're not proud of ourselves for that, we also don't think it makes us bad people to have made this mistake—although of course you're free to disagree. But we are dedicated to owning our mistakes, rectifying them as best we can, and working to do better in the future. We feel that as artists and human beings, it's the best any of us can shoot for.

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# ON THE SAME PAGE

## A GM's Guide to Creating Successful Relationship Plots

By Andrea Humez

### Three Key Principles for Creating Successful Relationship Plots

Although LARP plots focused on romance, family or any other intimate relationship among characters have historically been treated as secondary or optional in some LARP traditions, they have always been popular with some players, while other LARP traditions center narrative and play almost exclusively around intimate relationships. However, most players can attest to the hit-or-miss nature of relationship plots, and the frustration of being involved in a relationship plot that fails to fulfill its promise of dramatic or intensely emotional play. As with any other LARP element, relationship plots can be improved through thoughtful design and implementation.

In this article, I describe three key design principles for supporting satisfying relationship play, and suggest ways in which GMs can use these principles during writing, casting, pre-game and run-time. I draw on my experiences playing with the MIT Assassins' Guild, at Intercon and related communities, and in some recent US or UK-run high-transparency, rules-light, weekend-long games that members of our communities have been involved in.

In our LARPing communities, players have always had a wide range of expectations about what relationship plots are. Depending on the game and the player, players may see relationship plots as:

- a way to make a character well-rounded,

- an opportunity for intense emotional interactions with other characters,
- an opportunity for comfort and care-taking,
- an opportunity for dysfunctional characters to show their worst sides,
- a plot arc with a problem to be resolved leading to a narratively satisfying resolution, or
- something to do when players are at a loose end during game play.

I suspect that diversity of expectations is becoming an even greater issue now, as players cross over between communities with a tradition of secrets-based, highly-plotted, GM-written games, and those with a tradition of high-transparency, loosely-plotted games in which players negotiate and collaborate to pre-write content. With communities having different norms for what "plot" looks like and how relationships among characters work, players may arrive at a given game with differing expectations and not be aware of where the differences lie.

For a relationship plot to lead to satisfying play, the players need to have compatible expectations about how to play together, and they need to fulfill those expectations for each other. Their expectations also need to be aligned with the constraints and affordances of their characters and the game structure. As with other aspects of game design and implementation, both GMs and players can contribute to the alignment of expectations. The following three design principles can be used by both GMs and players to improve relationship play. This article will focus on the GMs' perspective,

suggesting ways in which GMs can use these design principles during writing, casting, pre-game planning, and play to create successful relationship plots.

Principle 1: Players (and characters) in a relationship plot must be motivated to interact with each other

LARPs are fundamentally made up of interactions among characters. The primary purpose of relationship plots, in particular, is to foster interesting interpersonal interactions, often involving intense feelings and emotional arcs for the characters involved. If characters are not interacting, the relationship plot is not happening. However, players do not always choose to engage with their characters' relationship plots. Even when players do share the expectation that they will interact with their relationship partners, it can be difficult for them to do so if the structure of the game hinders, rather than facilitates, such interactions. For example, relationship play often fizzles when characters are motivated to avoid each other, do not have goals or conflict to drive dramatic interactions, or have so many demands on their time that they can't arrange opportunities to talk to their relationship partners.

Principle 2: The relationship should be about the same level of priority for all the players (and characters) involved.

Even when all involved players expect to interact with each other, there can still be wide gulfs in the extent to which they prioritize the relationship plot. Prioritization has two related aspects. The first is, how much **time** does a player want to devote to this relationship, and in particular, how much time do they want to spend **interacting** with the other character(s) in the relationship? Some players want relationship play to be a major focus of their game. For others, relationships are a secondary or background plot, which they enjoy but only want to spend a limited amount of time on. The second consideration is how much **emotional investment** does the player have in the relationship plot? Emotional investment is partly a question of how committed each player is to the relationship plot: if time is scarce or other plots demand attention, will the player continue to make time for it? It

is also a question of the extent to which each player is emotionally engaged with the relationship play and the play experience. As in real life relationships, players who make themselves emotionally vulnerable during play need to be able to trust their partners, as players, to take care of them. They also need to be able to trust that the intense emotional experience they share with other players is, in fact, shared; that “we’re all in this together,” and that their partners are also emotionally affected by the experience. The pain of in-character rejection or betrayal or incompatibility can be fun to play with, but no one enjoys the player-level experience of discovering that they were alone in feelings they thought were shared. Although GMs cannot, of course, control players' feelings, they can use design, casting, and communication strategies to increase the chances that players enter the game with compatible expectations that can serve as the foundation for trust.

Principle 3: Players in a relationship plot should have similar expectations about the type of play they will engage in together

Relationship play is most likely to be satisfying for all concerned when players share expectations about the level of **emotional intensity** they are looking for, and the **content, themes, or style** they want to explore or avoid. For example, a romance plot may involve flirtation, seduction, sexual content, conflict between the participants, jealousy, infidelity, polyamory, romantic comedy, pining, kink, power dynamics, dysfunctional relationships, or abuse—among many other possibilities. If one player signs up for a “love plot” imagining teenage flirtation and is paired with another who is imagining dysfunctional angst, they may have trouble finding their way to mutually satisfactory play.

## Implementing the Three Principles During Writing, Casting, Pre-Game Planning, and Play

The creation of a LARP consists of four phases: writing, casting, pre-game negotiation and planning, and play/run-time (not all LARPs include all four phases). In the writing and casting stages of the process, GMs play a larger role than play-

ers and therefore, have more opportunities to encourage (or hinder) relationship play. In the pre-game negotiation and play phases, the balance of responsibility shifts to the players, but GMs still play a support role. During each phase, GMs can facilitate the matching of players' expectations about the amount and type of interactions a given relationship plot will involve, and support mutually satisfactory relationship play.

## Writing

In the written materials, GMs use character motivations and plot structure to communicate expectations for what sort of play the players should engage in. Furthermore, in a game where secrets are important and out-of-game communication among players is minimal, the written materials are the players' main source of information about what kind of interactions other players might be expecting. In the absence of an explicit agreement among players about how to play a relationship plot, which could serve as the basis for trusting each other, the written materials serve as a proxy. In this style of game, players (implicitly) agree to trust each other to reach a similar understanding of the plot, based on reading the sheets, and to play in ways congruent with that vision. The more clearly GMs communicate expectations, the more likely players will be to enter game with similar expectations.

Furthermore, the writing and plot structure can either facilitate or impede satisfying relationship play. It is possible for players to compensate for misaligned expectations and other impediments, but it is best if GMs write in ways that support players and make it easier for them to play their relationship plots fully and satisfyingly.

*Principle 1: Write characters who are motivated (or forced) to interact with each other.*

Characters in a relationship should have something they want from each other, a conflict to resolve, or a problem they need to solve together. In each case, there should be obstacles or complications that make it non-trivial for the characters to reach a resolution. This gives characters a reason to interact *more than once* over the course of the game. Conflicts can take many forms. For example,

Jamie and Chris are lovers, but Chris is married and has a political career that can't withstand scandal. Jamie wants Chris to leave their family and go public with the relationship, Chris wants Jaime to keep the relationship secret, and both want to maintain the relationship. The two characters have opposing goals, each needs to get the other to do something, and each character has an internal conflict between "(don't) publicize the relationship" and "keep the other person from leaving me."

External conflict can also drive relationship play. For example, when Romeo and Juliet are in love but forbidden by their parents to be together. In this case, the parents had better be written with strong motivation to actively keep their children apart. And the players of the parents need to understand that part of their role is to provide conflict for their children's relationship plot, and be willing to play accordingly.

As an alternative to giving characters explicit motivation to interact, external circumstances can force them to do so. For example, they're on the same working team together (police partners, spaceship crew, political delegation, etc.), or they are corporation heads who have to negotiate with each other, or it's a 6-person game where all the characters are trapped together in an airlock or at a dinner table. However, proximity only creates opportunities for interaction and without conflict or goals, it can be difficult for players to turn casual interactions into dramatic or meaningful ones.

GMs should not write relationships in which one or both characters are explicitly motivated to *avoid* interacting with each other, because players' default instinct will be to do just that. It is possible to write a relationship plot in which the characters are trying to avoid each other but, nevertheless, end up interacting meaningfully. However, this either requires that external circumstances force the characters to interact (for example, a third character is motivated to get them talking, or their jobs require them to work alone together, or all the characters are due to be dosed with a potion that causes them to blurt out their secrets), or it requires the players to actively *steer* their characters into interactions that will further the narrative, despite the characters' wishes. Steering to this degree

is an advanced skill that not all players have, nor is it equally appropriate in all games.

Although GMs should not rely on player steering as a substitute for thoughtful game design, those who wish to encourage steering can do so by explicitly writing about steering strategies in the general briefing materials for the game. It is also possible to incorporate opportunities for steering into a game's structure. For example, in *Just A Little Lovin'* (Grasmo & Edland, 2018), one in-game event is the serving of the celebratory "green drink," which is described in the rules as an opportunity for players to decide to either take their character in a new direction, or double down on their current direction. Primed to think about steering, players used the "green drink" as an in-game justification for their characters to do things like initiate difficult and dramatic conversations about the wrongs they'd done each other.

In lightly-plotted games with an emphasis on player-created content, GMs can encourage relationship play by providing all characters with some pre-written relationships. For example, in *Marked: A School for Heroes* (Piancastelli & Walmsley, 2018), each character belongs to an origin group and a training team, and also has one or two pre-defined relationships, such as romantic attractions, friendships, or relatives. The relationships between characters in the origin groups are fleshed out as part of the backstory, and often include specific reasons for characters to interact, such as unfinished business from the past or a desire to 'get the band back together.' Training teams are guaranteed to spend a lot of time playing together due to the game's structure; relationships among these characters are left for players to develop through some combination of pre-game negotiation and in-game emergent play. Other individual relationships are fleshed out only slightly in the written materials, and players are instructed to negotiate details with each other pre-game. This structure ensures that whether or not they are able to engage in pre-game planning and content generation, all players have a set of people with whom they are guaranteed to interact regularly, plus a good number of others with whom they have potentially dramatic relationships, including some specific reasons to interact with relationship partners.

GMs of all styles of games can explicitly instruct and/or remind players to interact with their relationship partners. Telling players what to do in game is an option to be used with care, as players may feel that this restricts their agency and opportunities for problem-solving. However, I think explicit communication about expectations is a strategy worth experimenting with in our LARP-writing communities. When is it helpful to give players explicit instructions about how their characters should interact? When is it simply annoying and intrusive?

*Principle 2: Write relationships in which all the characters care equally strongly about the relationship, and have similar amounts of time available to devote to the relationship.*

A common pitfall of relationship plots is when characters (and, therefore, players) do not care equally about the relationship. For example, Pat is madly in love with Sam, who has romance plots with three characters: their current spouse, with whom they have a strong friendship, the long-lost love of their life who has just come to town, and Pat, with whom Sam has been casually flirting. For another example, Robin's main focus in game is controlling the life of their child, Taylor, but Taylor resents the interference and does not need support or permission from Robin in order to get things done. In these examples, unless the players deliberately prioritize the relationships more than their character sheets suggest, Sam and Taylor are unlikely to engage much with Pat and Robin, leaving Pat and Robin's players feeling frustrated and neglected.

It is good for a character to have multiple important relationships, as long as these relationships do not directly **compete** with each other for emotional primacy, attention, and interaction time. The most common example of such conflict is when characters have multiple romance plots. Polyamory and love triangles where a character has to choose between two suitors are perfectly viable plot structures if all the participants know what to expect. However, beyond two or three romance plots, it becomes difficult for a player to share satisfying play with all their partners—unless the aim is simply flirting or sleeping around with little depth

to the relationships. In addition, when characters have multiple romantic relationships, mismatch of priorities is likely: if Sam and Pat each have three romance plots, but Pat cares most about Sam while Sam prefers their other suitors to Pat, Pat's player may still end up disappointed, despite having other partners to play with.

Another common pitfall is to give the characters unequal amounts of time and opportunity to engage with each other. For example, Frey and Luz are long-lost lovers. Frey is a political leader and will have to spend a lot of time in the political committee plot, which meets in a closed room. Luz is not a politician, and their other plots are not very time-consuming. In this case, although both characters *want* to interact, Frey is unlikely to be free to do so as much as they would like, and Luz will probably spend a lot of time waiting. One way to mitigate this problem would be to give Luz a different time-consuming plot to focus on; probably the relationship plot will be underplayed, but there will be less risk of hurt feelings. A better solution would be to put both Frey and Luz in the same political plot; the characters are forced to spend time together in public, though opportunities for private interactions may still be few. This situation can also generate a conflict for the romance plot (we're in love, but must pursue opposing political agendas and keep our feelings secret from our teammates). Better still would be to structure the political plot so that it doesn't consume all the characters' available time, for example, by mandating specific times for committee meetings and breaks.

It is not impossible for characters with demands on their time to successfully be involved in relationship plots, but GMs should be aware of the risks and take extra care to mitigate them. GMs should think twice before giving relationship plots to characters such as bodyguards (who may be constrained to stick with their employers), journalists (if they are producing an in-game newspaper), politicians, team leaders, and characters likely to spend a lot of time on mechanics or out-of-game-space quests.

*Principle 3: Know what kind of play the relationship is likely to involve, and*

*communicate that in the written materials, so that players know what to expect.*

GMs use various methods to let players know what sort of play is intended, ranging from using the narrative of the character sheet to implicitly convey information, to explicit descriptions of character traits, goals or (in scene-based games) scenes to play out. In some games, character sheets explicitly describe the dynamic between two characters, although it is more common for a sheet to describe one character's feelings or behavior towards others and leave the dynamics to be inferred. One powerful strategy I have not often seen used is to explicitly tell players "these are the characters whose relationship with you should be a primary source of play for you and for them; make sure you interact with them regularly."

## Casting

GMs can support relationship play by making relationship plots a priority in their casting decisions, attending to them as much as to other aspects of game.

The first step is to obtain relevant information that will help them make these decisions. It is common practice in many LARPing communities for GMs to gather information about players' play preferences via a casting questionnaire. These often include questions about players' preferences concerning romance and/or other types of relationship plot. Some also ask whether there are specific players a player wishes to play with or avoid, although this sort of question is of limited utility where players do not usually know in advance who will be playing the game, and may not know many of the other players. Questionnaire space permitting, GMs can also ask players what type of relationship play they are interested in and how much priority they will give to relationships. GMs can ask about play style and skills, what players are good at and where they need support to get to the kind of play they desire. Specific questions like these will help players understand the range of possibilities and articulate their own preferences.

GMs can follow up individually with self-identified novices, as well as people who don't give useful information on their casting questionnaires. One-on-one conversations about these players'

needs and interests can be an opportunity for the GM to help players understand what game may be like and what the options mean, and to give them an opportunity to ask questions. More generally, GMs can contact individual players with targeted requests for additional information, avoiding spoilers for low-transparency games. For example, a GM could ask, “I am considering casting you as a character whose angsty families are a central plot, so you’d need to spend a lot of your time and energy on that. Does that sound like fun?”

With relevant information about players’ skills and preferences, GMs can use the three design principles to guide their casting decisions.

*Principle 1: Cast relationships with a combination of players who actually want to interact with their relationship partners and who, among them, are likely to be able to make the interactions happen.*

Fitting players to characters in a game is a complex optimization puzzle for which, usually, no perfect solution exists. GMs often end up having to give a player a character that fits them well in some respects, but includes some aspects the player is indifferent about or actively doesn’t want.

When GMs consider relationship plots to be of secondary importance, they may compromise by casting a player in a relationship they don’t want because they’re a good fit for a character in other ways. In this situation, the player is likely to de-prioritize the relationship or play it poorly. This will negatively impact the experience of their relationship partners, especially if they requested this type of plot and were looking forward to it. Therefore, when making casting decisions, GMs should consider the effects on all the players potentially involved in a relationship.

Even when players have compatible expectations, they can run into difficulties creating the kind of relationship play they want to have. If GMs have the relevant information, they can cast players with compatible or complementary relationship play skills. For example, one player’s questionnaire may say that they really want to play a romance plot but don’t have much experience, or are shy about taking the initiative, or don’t know any of the other players. The GMs can support this player

by casting them opposite a player who has a lot of experience with relationship plots, knows how to take the initiative, or is good at encouraging novice players. As an additional step, the GMs could explicitly tell the experienced partner, “We’ve paired you with someone who’s new to love plots but really wants to give it a try, so you may need to take more initiative than usual.”

GMs can also attend to players’ relationship play strengths and weaknesses when matching players to characters. For example, for a relationship where Taylor is supposed to be constantly flirting, Quinn is jealous, and they are always fighting about it, the desired dynamic is more likely to come out in play if Taylor’s player is good at proactive flirting and Quinn’s character is good at initiating confrontations. And make sure to cast two characters who are each secretly pining and waiting for the other to make the first move, with players who are good at steering reluctant characters into dramatic interactions.

*Principles 2 and 3: Partner players in relationships who will prioritize the relationship similarly and enjoy similar kinds of play.*

To encourage player trust and minimize the chance of frustration, GMs should find out **how much priority** players are likely to place on the relationship, in terms of both **time devoted** to the plot and **emotional investment** in the plot, and cast players of similar levels together.

It is always disappointing when one player puts time, energy, and emotional investment into a plot, only to have it fizzle because the other players involved didn’t make it a priority. The risk of hurt feelings is particularly high for relationship plots, because engaging with them means making oneself emotionally vulnerable, which makes it particularly difficult to completely separate character feelings from player feelings. When someone decides not to bother playing a relationship plot with you, it’s easy to feel like it’s a personal rejection, even if you know intellectually that it isn’t.

On the other hand, when all the players in a relationship plot are highly invested in a relationship plot, and they know it, trust can be established that allows for intense, courageous, dramatic emotion-

al play. Relationship play is at its best when players trust that their partners want to spend time playing with them, are emotionally invested in the relationship plot, are willing to make themselves vulnerable, and are on the same wavelength about what kind of play is fun.

## Pre-game Planning/Negotiation

Some high-transparency games include a pre-game planning phase, in which a lot of the content-generation happens through player-to-player negotiation and collaboration. Traditionally, this phase does not exist, or is used only minimally, in low-transparency games. However, I think there are ways we could use it a little more while still being sensitive to potential spoilers.

In this planning phase, the GM hands over most of the responsibility for content creation to the players. Thus, the forms of support GMs can offer players are largely in realm of structuring the social environment to help players find compatible partners for relationship play, facilitate productive player collaboration and foster equitable access to this content-creation process. GMs can also use their big-picture knowledge of the game's content and structure, along with key design principles, to help players set up the kind of relationship play they want and think about how to support other players' play.

Whatever the type of game, GMs should set clearly communicate with players during publicity and recruitment what the expectations are for pre-game content creation. It is also helpful to reiterate expectations to players after they are cast, so that they know how to make the most of the pre-game planning phase. This is particularly important as players from high-negotiation and low-negotiation traditions mingle, bringing their differing assumptions and expectations into game. GMs should be honest with themselves and explicit with the players about what pre-planning and content-generation responsibilities will fall to the players, and what the logistical requirements are to fulfill these responsibilities. Will all the pre-planning among players take place on-site in pre-game workshops? Will players be expected to contact each other in the days, weeks, or months before game to plan content? If so, will they be

expected to do so primarily over Facebook, email, or some other medium? How much time should they expect to devote to pre-game content planning? What supports will GMs provide to players who have difficulty with the logistical or social aspects of content planning? For games with an emphasis on player-generated content and active social media pre-planning communities, GMs do players a disservice when they reassure them that participation in these communities is optional and everyone will have a chance to participate in the necessary planning during the on-site workshops. Conversely, if players are expected to restrict their pre-planning to the structured on-site workshops, they need to know that their content-generation options will be limited.

In the pre-game planning phase itself, GMs should try to identify individual players' needs and offer extra support to those who need it. Players experienced at player-content-driven games may need little or no support, but most will benefit from some support structures, while some may need additional help to plan for satisfying relationship play. GMs can use pre-game surveys or other information-gathering methods to establish what sort of support players need, and then proactively offer support to individuals based on this self-report. For example, some players may need help connecting with like-minded potential partners, because they are strangers to the community, or are shy about initiating online negotiations. Others may need help figuring out how to create a relationship that will lead to satisfying play, once they have a partner. Others may not be able to participate in the group planning forums, either because they don't have access to the right social media platforms or because they don't have the time to engage in extensive pre-game planning. Different needs require different forms of support, so it is a good idea to use multiple strategies, in order to help as many players as possible.

Some support strategies will require extra work from GMs. Indeed, many games that emphasize content creation by players have "character coaches" on staff, whose job is to assist individual players with character planning. However large the staff, its capacity is always finite. Therefore, while it is important to offer players support, it is also important for both players and staff to understand



that there are limits to that support. One way GMs can communicate this idea is to decide beforehand what kinds of support for pre-game planning they will be able to offer, and present this as a bullet list to players, asking them to indicate which forms of support they need and how strongly.

There are many ways for GMs to actively support player negotiations about pre-written character relationships. They can encourage players to contact those with whom they have pre-written character relationships, by explicitly instructing them to do so as part of their pre-game preparation. GMs can give written and verbal guidelines about norms and strategies for pre-planning (for example, “ask players about their feelings on spoilers before you start a discussion” or “talk about how you can give your characters reasons to seek each other out in-game”). They can facilitate planning conversations by giving partnered players each other’s email addresses or other contact information (though they should obtain players’ permission to do so). They can help players who are having trouble reaching each other. They can give partners written prompts they can use as starting points, or advise individual players who are unsure how to proceed. GMs can also help players negotiate about the level of transparency to use during pre-planning, so that players don’t accidentally give unwelcome spoilers to those who prefer to learn character secrets during play.

It is also important to support player creation of new character relationships, and to reduce inequities in access to play opportunities that can result from free-form planning. For games with pre-game planning phases, GMs often set up some online social structure that players can use to contact each other, typically one or more Facebook groups. Often pre-written teams (school houses, political factions, spaceship crews, etc.) will have their own groups. However, in my experience, these online forums tend to leave it as the responsibility of each individual player to initiate or find connections for themselves. Furthermore, not all players have equal access to any given social media platform, and some lack either the time or the social ability to keep up with a high-bandwidth, free-for-all planning community. Thus, in practice, these online planning structures are useful for only part of the player population, and if they are the only method of pre-game planning used, can lead

to disparities in how well individual players are integrated into game.

Some games have a dedicated group for players looking to form relationships, where players can post introductions to their characters and state what they are looking for in relationships with other characters. This is a good addition to a game’s pre-planning support structures, especially if the group’s existence is well-publicized, along with advice for how to successfully participate in it. To take this idea a step further, GMs (or character coaches) could survey players after they have received their characters, to identify those interested in forming extra relationships, and those who want help in doing so. They could then match up these players in pairs or small groups according to character compatibility and player needs and interests. Or GMs could introduce these players to each other as a group and scaffold their efforts to form partnerships, for example, by sending out a list of character descriptions rather than leaving it to the players to make individual posts.

For players who need help with plot generation rather than with networking, GMs could offer a list of tips or prompts (for example, “give your characters a problem to solve together” or “two characters are attracted to each other but one has trust issues and the other has a secret they are afraid to reveal”). Or a GM/character coach could sit in on the players’ planning conversations to offer suggestions if they get stuck (for example, “that sounds like a cool relationship dynamic, but it might be easier to find reasons to interact if there’s something each character wants from the other one”). GMs can use the key design principles to guide these discussions with players, especially those who do not have much game design experience to draw on and may not understand how to set up a relationship plot that will encourage interesting character interactions (rather than simply sounding good on paper).

In games with a heavy player-content-generation focus, pre-game workshops can be used to help players form and plan character relationships. Devoting ample workshop time to this purpose is particularly important for the support of players who do not have time to devote to planning before they arrive on site, or who are better able to nego-

tiate in person than online. If events are running behind schedule, these workshops may end up taking second place to can't-skip workshop topics such as safety. However, if this happens, GMs need to be aware of the impact it will have on play, and consider whether there is anything they can do to compensate. GMs can also make sure to manage time within workshops so that every group or relationship pair gets similar amounts of time (a common failure mode is that the people who go first take too long, at the expense of the people who go last). Many games devote workshop time to planning with "core groups" such as primary social group, school house or training team. However, it is also important to set aside dedicated time for players to connect with their personal-relationship partners who do not belong to their "core group."

As in online pre-planning, GMs could offer an optional "find new relationships" workshop. This could include structures to help players match up, for example, a 'speed dating' format, sorting players according to the type of play they're interested in, prompt cards giving relationship ideas that players can select and then pair up with whoever has the matching card, or introductions by GMs based on their knowledge of characters and of the players' needs.

Workshops have their limitations, and do not work equally well for all players. GMs should be prepared to offer extra support to players who struggle. For example, GMs can help players find compatible relationship partners, rather than leaving players to find each other by random combination in the moment. GMs can suggest ideas for players who have trouble making up details about relationships on the spot. They can prompt players to discuss the kind of play they want to have together and to give themselves reasons to interact.

Finally, GMs can set up a system for checking in with players after the workshops and before game, to identify those who are feeling isolated or unsatisfied with the outcome of their relationship workshops. It is probably best to delegate this responsibility to a particular staff member, rather than have the primary GMs do it during the bustle of last-minute preparation. At this point in time, there may be little that can be done to mitigate players' difficulties, but staff can at least note the

problem and plan to keep an eye on those players during game, and perhaps offer advice for players as they start game.

Online pre-planning and pre-game workshops also serve to generally foster trust and fellowship among players before game starts. Players have opportunities to meet each other as individuals and begin to form a sense of community. I suspect that this helps them go into game with a higher level of trust and goodwill towards each other than if their first contact was at the beginning of game. In games that do not include a pre-planning component, this sense of community and player trust comes largely from existing relationships between individual players, from players' membership in the organization running the game, and, for games that run at cons, the community feeling generated by the larger event.

Trust and goodwill are a necessary foundation for satisfying relationship play. It is possible to have wonderful relationship play with a total stranger; indeed, most of my own best in-game relationship experiences have been with strangers (including meeting my future spouse). However, it can also be easier to take emotional risks and engage deeply in relationship play with a player one knows, even if only to the extent of "I've played with you before and it didn't suck."

Pre-game workshops are not appropriate for all games. However, perhaps the workshop tradition could inspire our LARP communities to explore related pre-game strategies for explicitly helping players get to know each other and feel part of a community. This need not involve discussion of in-game information, if the game is a low-transparency one. It could be valuable to do something as simple as setting aside an extra half hour before game for a structured gathering in which players introduce themselves by real-life name might help newcomers feel part of the group and foster a feeling that "we're all in this together."

## Play

GMs' ability to assist relationship play during run-time is limited, because they need to leave play to the players as much as possible, and because many problems cannot be fixed. There is little GMs

can do to help if players are not interested in the relationship plot, have incompatible priorities or play styles, or have poor chemistry with each other. However, GMs may be able to assist players who are unsure what sort of play their partners are expecting or how to steer their characters towards satisfying interactions. For example, they can nudge relationship partners to interact with each other, suggest ways to initiate more dramatic or meaningful interactions, or help a player whose relationships have fizzled find other characters to engage with.

During run-time, GMs can look out for players who are isolated or having trouble with relationship play. For large games, it is a good idea to have staff member(s) whose specific responsibility it is to support players who are struggling. However, GMs should use caution about breaking the flow of play to ask players if they need help; many players find this jarring, especially in the traditional type of low-transparency where the norm is for the flow to be interrupted as little as possible, with meta-talk kept to a minimum. In games that have them, NPCs can be used as a somewhat less jarring way to deliver this sort of support to players; for example, the NPC can give in-character advice or prompts to serve as an excuse for a player-character to take action. If the game has built-in structures that support steering, such as the “green drink,” GMs can help players use these opportunities to foster the interactions they want their characters to have.

In some high-transparency games, it is the norm for players to negotiate about play during run-time; this norm makes it less disruptive for players to seek GM aid, as well. As in the pre-game planning phase, GMs can actively help players negotiate their way to more satisfying relationship play. The longer a game is, the more time is available for negotiation and course-correction, as well as for relationships to evolve through emergent play. Some multi-day, high-negotiation games even offer explicit mid-game planning times. For example, *Just A Little Lovin'* (Grasmo & Edland, 2018) is structured in three acts, with substantial between-acts breaks in which players have the opportunity to negotiate with each other about the sort of play they're looking for in the upcoming act. In particular, players can decide that their charac-

ter has moved on from their core social group and joined a new one. It is also an opportunity to create new plot arcs if old ones have been resolved, to course-correct if players are not having fun, and to negotiate with relationship partners. It is somewhat more difficult for players to find new relationship partners in this context, however, because the activities are structured by pre-existing groups (indeed, it can be hard to find time to negotiate with existing relationship partners who belong to different groups). Additionally, dedicated negotiation time does not, by itself, make it easy for players to have difficult conversations, or to identify and negotiate with others who might be interested in forming new character relationships.

As well as making themselves available to players who seek help during run-time planning sessions, GMs can sit in on the players' discussions, identifying and supporting those who need help negotiating their way to more satisfying relationship play. They can facilitate negotiations when players are upset, uncomfortable, or shy, or offer suggestions if players cannot come up with a mutually agreeable compromise. If a player needs new relationship partners, GMs can identify players who are likely to be interested in taking on the new relationship and willing and able to put in the extra work to make it flourish on the fly.

In some high-transparency games that rely heavily on player generation of content, one strategy GMs use to help players who are not having a good time is to create new plots or relationships in mid-game, or even to let players take on a whole new character. In my own experience, I find this strategy is of limited utility when the player's problem is specifically a lack of meaningful relationship play. There are two inherent difficulties. First, in order to provide the player with new relationships, GMs must find other players interested in engaging in extra relationship play. Second, a relationship formed part-way through game will lack the emotional foundation of a pre-written or pre-planned relationship, and the emotional detail that builds up through emergent play. The players have to start from scratch, and with little context, it may be difficult to integrate the new relationship into the characters' existing emotional arcs. It can be easier when the characters forming a 'new' relationship have already interacted in-game, so that

players can build on that foundation. For example, players could decide that their characters' previous venting-about-their-exes conversation sparked both trust and romantic attraction, which the characters can now follow up on as the basis for their newly-created romance plot. However, it will not always be possible for GMs to find a volunteer who has already had interesting in-character interactions with the player they are trying to help.

When GMs are able to facilitate negotiation for the improvement of an existing relationship plot or the creation of a new one, they can use the three key design principles as a guide, making sure to find the characters reasons to interact, something they need from each other, something they need to do together, or a problem to resolve. In particular, if one player wants a new relationship and another has volunteered to help, it is important to give the second player's character a strong reason to interact with the first. For example, rather than telling players "You got a message from your grandfather saying that this stranger turns out to be a long-lost cousin of your noble house," have the grandfather's message include an imperative to accomplish something *during game*: the new-found cousins must do the secret initiation ritual together, or find a spouse for the newcomer, or negotiate about how to split up the family business. If the players have agreed to start a romance plot between two characters who were previously unconnected, help them to come up with specific things they want from each other and obstacles to getting those things. For example, Jeff wants Max to introduce him to gay sex but is afraid of getting too emotionally attached, Max is looking for a long-term boyfriend and wants to find out if Jeff can be that for him, but without scaring Jeff off.

GMs can use these same strategies in long games that do not have explicit breaks for negotiation and planning, but it is logistically harder. It is even harder to help players course-correct in short games; GMs may find there is little they can do beyond helping players find ways other than relationship play to engage with game.

## Conclusion

GMs can facilitate satisfying relationship play by attending to the three key design principles as they

write relationship plots, cast players, and support players' negotiation, planning and play with each other:

1. Players (and characters) in a relationship must all be **motivated to interact with each other**
2. The relationship should be about the **same level of priority** for all the players (and characters) involved.
3. The players should have similar desires and expectations for the **type of play** they will engage in together

These principles will help GMs minimize the chance of misalignment between players' expectations, those of their relationship partners, and the constraints and affordances of the parts in which they are cast.

Of course, there is only so much GMs can do to influence players' experience, particularly once play starts. The players themselves share the responsibility for creating satisfying relationship play for themselves and each other. I hope to follow the present article with a sequel focused on how players can use these three design principles to guide and enhance relationship play.

## References

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# A SOFTWARE APPROACH TO FLEXIBLY AND CONCRETELY GENDERED CHARACTERS

by Eva Schiffer

In the summer of 2012 I began working with Kathleen De Smet on a game idea that evolved into the larp *Storm Cellar*. Both of us felt strongly that the characters in the game should be available in male and female forms. Unfortunately, we had no tools to help us, and with an eight player game including complex, pre-written backstory the work involved in swapping character genders manually quickly becomes an untenable nightmare.

In September of 2012 I put together the first version of a computer program called Gender Swap to flexibly and concretely gender larp characters. Initially it was a command line python script. Over time it became more sophisticated and grew to include a graphical user interface (GUI). Eventually I built pre-packaged application versions of Gender Swap for MacOS and Windows.

The python code and packaged versions of Gender Swap are available for free via GitHub:

[https://github.com/valleyviolet/gender\\_swap](https://github.com/valleyviolet/gender_swap)

## Why?

There are many ways to approach player character gender in larps.<sup>1</sup> The most common ones being

<sup>1</sup> This article focuses on games with pre-written player characters who are cast to specific players each time the game is run. Generally the person running the game decides how to cast the players to characters based on player preferences, including preferences for character gender. There are obviously other strategies to making and casting player characters, like having players create them collaboratively at the beginning of

used in games with pre-written characters when I began work on Gender Swap were: *have fixed genders for each player character or specify all materials for a player character using neutral pronouns (generally the singular they) and then tell players to treat that character as a specific gender that matches the preferences of whomever you cast them to.*

The first approach of having only fixed gender characters is **concrete**, but **not flexible**. It can make casting very unpleasant, as players often have strong preferences about gender and it's pure luck whether the concrete genders of the characters you have will match the themes and plots your players want to engage with. Fixed gender characters can also be frustrating as a player. If you have strong preferences about gender, you will often be limited in the sorts of stories, roles, and themes you are offered.

The second approach of using all neutral pronouns for gendered characters is **flexible** but **not concrete**. It can feel artificial and impersonal, as you are presented with characters who have gender, but are not discussed in the game materials as if they have gender. As a writer, it also precludes approaching a wide range of material that has different cultural connotations based on character gender.

Some writers have slightly improved on the second approach, by encouraging players to build more

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each run of a game, but you don't need Gender Swap for that!

gendered stories and relationships after casting.<sup>2</sup> This allows for more gendered material in the game, but puts a high creative burden on the players. Unfortunately this strategy still precludes the writer choosing which material related to gender is included in their game. It can also be less queer-friendly than I would personally prefer.<sup>3</sup>

I created Gender Swap as a tool to help writers find a middle ground between these approaches. It lets you both have **concrete** gendered material in your game, and be more **flexible** about the genders of your characters. Gender Swap lets you choose which genders are possible for which characters, including having some fixed gender characters and some flexibly gendered ones if you don't want to go as far as making all your characters flexible in gender.<sup>4</sup> When you're using they pronouns for a character it can be because they have a non-binary gender identity in this run of your game, not because you have no other practical choice.

## How It Works

At its heart Gender Swap is a relatively simple tool for choosing gender related text in your game materials<sup>5</sup> using a simple markup language<sup>6</sup>. Each

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2 I have seen game facilitators encourage players to add more strongly gendered elements to their characters both through workshops directly before the game and through collaborative online interaction significantly earlier.

3 Maury Brown discusses problems and strengths of these approaches at <http://analoggamestudies.org/2015/09/the-trouble-with-gender-in-larp/>.

4 I generally use Gender Swap to set genders for player characters. The program doesn't care who you're gendering though, so if you want to have flexibly gendered non-player characters or even flexibly gendered characters who appear only in backstory, you can.

5 Most of your flexible character gendering is likely to be on your character sheets, but if you have informational handouts or other materials that need to change based on character gender they can be written and processed in the same way.

6 A markup language is just a way of writing your text so a computer can easily tell what you want the computer to do with it. In this case, the markup language lets the computer distinguish what different text you want depending on how you've set a character's gender.

character with flexible gender is configured with a list of possible genders. As you write your game you use markup language to specify versions of gendered text for each of those possible genders.

There are only a few, simple patterns you need to know to use Gender Swap.

## Configuring Possible Genders<sup>7</sup>

The first pattern is how to describe the possible genders for the characters in your game. This information is stored in a separate plain text configuration file. The contents of this file will look something like the following:

```
Dr Calvin: 01: female/male:           Female
Unit A:    02: female/male/neutral they: Male
Unit B:    03: female/male/neutral they: They
```

This file has one line for each character whose gender you want to be able to change, with sections on each line separated by colons (":"). The first section is a descriptive name so you can keep track of which line is for which character (Dr Calvin, Unit A, or Unit B in the example). The second section is a two digit character number that you will use to specify this character in the markup language (01, 02, or 03 in the example). The third section is a list of the possible genders for this character, in the order you will write them in the markup ("female/male", or "female/male/neutral they" in the example).<sup>8</sup>

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7 Gender Swap's current documentation conflates gender and pronoun usage somewhat, primarily because pronouns are the most common thing that the program swaps. Gender and pronouns can obviously be much more complex and varied than simple non-overlapping categories. In the long run I want Gender Swap to be more configurable to support writing more complexity and diversity in gender and pronouns but this article focuses primarily on what the tool does now, not on what I hope to do with it someday.

8 I find it easiest to put the possible genders in the same order for each character, so I don't need to refer to the configuration as often while writing the markup in a game. When I started using Gender Swap I decided to always put female first on this list, because it disrupts the ordering my brain expects, and therefore encourages me to pay more attention to what I'm writing. The Gender Swap program doesn't care what order you put the possible genders in, so you can use any order you prefer.

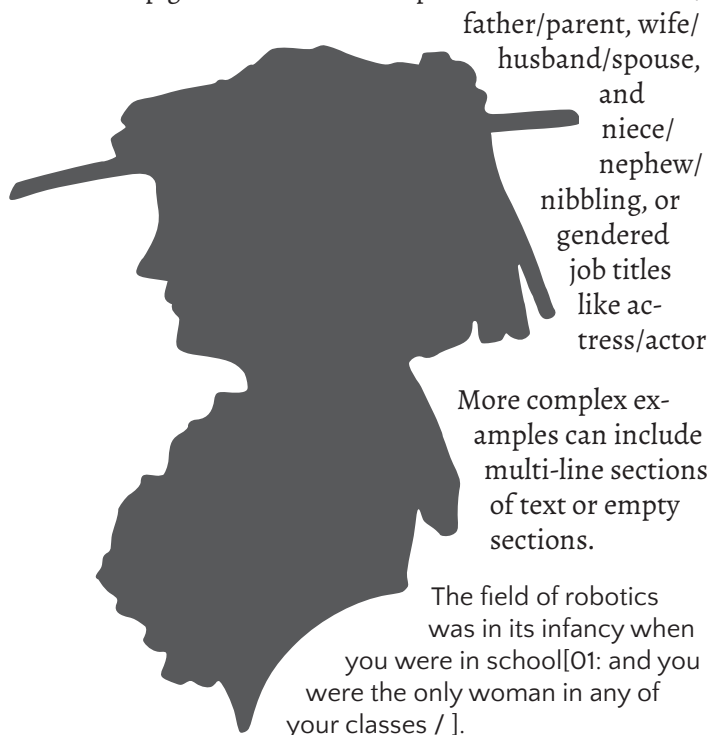
The final section of a line represents the gender this character will be given when you use Gender Swap to process your materials (Female, Male, or They in the example). This final section is likely to change each time

you run your game, since it reflects the genders that will be used for the characters in that run. The earlier sections of the line will not change unless you rewrite your game to allow characters to be different possible genders or to change character names.



character is male, or “they are” when the character is gender neutral and uses they pronouns.

Gender Swap can be used in a similar manner to swap gendered relationship terms such as mother/



father/parent, wife/husband/spouse, and niece/nephew/nibbling, or gendered job titles like actress/actor.

More complex examples can include multi-line sections of text or empty sections.

The field of robotics was in its infancy when you were in school[01: and you were the only woman in any of your classes / ].

### Gendering In Game Materials

In your game materials, at any point where the text can change based on a character’s gender you use a construction like the following:

[02: she is / he is / they are]

The entire chunk of text for Gender Swap to modify is enclosed in square brackets (ie. “[ ]”). The first section is the two digit character number for the character this text depends on. In this case 02 corresponds to Unit A, so which section of text Gender Swap chooses will depend on Unit A’s gender for this run. The character number is followed by a colon (“:”) and then the different text options for each of the character’s possible genders, separated by slashes (“/”).<sup>9</sup>

In this example, the entire chunk of text “[02: she is / he is / they are]” will be replaced with “she is” when the character is female, “he is” when the

In this case the final text would read “The field of robotics was in its infancy when you were in school and you were the only woman in any of your classes.” if Dr Calvin is female or “The field of robotics was in its infancy when you were in school.” if Dr Calvin is male.

Gender Swap can also optionally gender file names.<sup>10</sup> Simply start with the character number and list the possible gendered text separated by periods (“.”).

02.Unit Alice.Unit Alvin.Unit A.rtf

This file will become “02.Unit Alice.rtf” if the character is female, “02.Unit Alvin.rtf” if the character is male, or “02.Unit A.rtf” if the character is gender neutral and uses they pronouns. If Gender Swap has been told to gender file names and sees a file that does not match the pattern it expects it will just use the original file name without modifying it.

<sup>9</sup> Currently there is no way to escape a forward slash inside the gendered section of the markup language, so it is the one character you can’t use there.

<sup>10</sup> This is most useful for character sheet names since they are likely to be seen by players.

## Processing Your Marked Up Files

Once you have a configuration file specifying your characters' genders and have written the game materials using the markup language, there are two ways to process your files using Gender Swap to set concrete genders for a run of your game. If you are comfortable downloading and running code from GitHub and want to have access to Gender Swap's code to potentially debug your own problems, you may want to run the program from the command line. If that sounds like way too much work or you just don't care to look at the code, you will probably want to download a pre-built and packaged application version of Gender Swap and use the graphical user interface (GUI).

### Command Line Use

If you want to run Gender Swap from the command line, download the code from GitHub and make sure you have an appropriate version of Python<sup>11</sup> installed. Then run the following command from the command line in the `gender_swap/` source directory, replacing `<>` parts with the correct file paths for your game.

```
python -m gender_swap swap -g <the path to the text configuration file> -i <the path to the input files to gender> -o <the path where it should put the output>
```

Gender Swap will place concretely gendered copies<sup>12</sup> of your input files in the output directory you specified. If you have input files in more than one directory for Gender Swap to gender you will need to run the command multiple times, changing the input path.

### The GUI

If you would rather use the GUI you can either download and run a pre-packaged Gender Swap application or start the GUI from the command line.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> At the time of writing, Gender Swap works best with Python 2.7.

<sup>12</sup> Your original input files will be left where they are and as they are.

<sup>13</sup> You will need to have PyQt4 installed to use the GUI from the command line. You can start the GUI with the command: `python -m gender_swap gui`

In the GUI, click the "Load Gender List" button on the "Gender Definitions" tab and select your configuration file to load. Verify that the character genders you expected are loaded into the table on that tab. If not, double check that they are set correctly in the configuration file.

Open the "Files and Processing" tab and click the "Load Files" button. Select the documents you want to gender. You should be able to select multiple items by holding shift and you can continue using the "Load Files" button to add documents from different directories if you need to.

Verify that the files you want to gender are loaded in the list. Click the "Select" button and select an output directory (preferably somewhere outside the `gender_swap` directory structure).

Check the "also process file names to gender them" checkbox if you want to gender the file names. Finally, click the "Process" button.

Concretely gendered copies of your files should now be present in the output directory.<sup>14</sup>

### Caveats

The program understands four possible "genders": female, male, neutral they, and neutral ze. Gender Swap currently expects each of those to map to using one set of pronouns (she/her pronouns for female, he/him pronouns for male, they/them pronouns for the neutral they, and ze/zir pronouns for neutral ze). You can put whatever text you like within the markup in your game materials, but Gender Swap will issue warnings based on whether you used the pronouns it expects for the gender you specified. In the future I hope to expand Gender Swap to understand user configurable genders so it is simpler to use custom, less traditional pronoun sets.

Gender Swap can process files that are plain text (.txt) or rich text format (.rtf). I'm hoping to eventually expand to processing html, to allow writers more layout options than rich text allows.

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<sup>14</sup> If anything goes wrong, errors and warnings should be displayed in the command line interface window. In all but the most catastrophic of cases, Gender Swap should produce output files even if something goes wrong.



Gender Swap doesn't understand the details of how rich text formatting works, so you will need to be careful to use formatting either within only one section of the gendered text or across the entire expression.<sup>15</sup> If you use formatting like [O1: **Susan / Scott**] across the separating slash, the formatting in your concretely gendered file will behave incorrectly. Instead, bold across the whole expression ([O1: **Susan / Scott**]) or inside each section but not across the slash ([O1: **Susan / Scott**]).

Unfortunately, not all rich text editors are created equal. Most notably, the rich text export from Google Docs is (at the time of writing) technically correct but the resulting files are internally a hot mess that Gender Swap can't read correctly.<sup>16</sup> Re-saving Google Docs RTF exports using TextEdit, Word, or almost any other RTF editor will coerce them into a less awful format that Gender Swap can handle.

## Conclusion

Obviously not all characters can be gender swapped meaningfully,<sup>17</sup> but hopefully Gender Swap will give you one more tool and one more strategy for approaching gender when writing and running larps.

I've worked on many larps<sup>18</sup> that use Gender Swap to gender player characters since I first created

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<sup>15</sup> RTF files use start and end tags for text formatting (much like html) that are invisible in an RTF editor. When you bold across a slash, Gender Swap will use only text from one side of the slash when gendering the file and either the start or end tags for the bold formatting will be thrown away. I occasionally end up with many pages of a character sheet in accidental bold because I did this wrong.

<sup>16</sup> For some reason Google Docs thinks it's appropriate to re-issue all formatting tags for every single word in the RTF export. This interferes with Gender Swap's ability to detect the markup language and makes the files absolutely huge compared to a well formatted RTF file.

<sup>17</sup> There will always be games like *Mad About the Boy* where the material you're approaching as a designer needs one specific gender or another.

<sup>18</sup> Games I have used Gender Swap for include *Storm Cellar*, *Better Living Through Robotics*, *Interplanetary Federation - The Cadet Years*, *Grandma's Resting Place*, *Fire in Cambria*, *Peace, Land, and Bread!* and *Unit Test*. *Unit Test* is available in this volume of *Game Wrap* or from the

it in 2012. Having this tool made creating flexible but concretely gendered characters an interesting writing exercise rather than a logistical nightmare. Seeing what new combinations of character genders bring to these games each time I run them is fascinating and casting them is far easier than casting games with fixed gender characters.

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Gender Swap GitHub project if you would like to see an example of what a game written to use Gender Swap looks like before it is concretely gendered.

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# THE CROATIAN LARP SCENE

by Ivan Žalac

## Early history and fantasy larps

When people from outside of Europe talk about the European larp scene, various preconceptions come to mind. However, the European larp scene is heavily fragmented across national and language borders, and its influence is limited. This article is about the larp scene in Croatia—a vastly different larp scene than, say, in Germany or Nordic countries—and its current status in 2018.

The first larps ever held in Croatia, as expected, were fantasy larps. When the Internet gained popularity back in mid-90s, several local role-players learned about this hobby, mainly from American sources. The first larp in Croatia was a chapter of *Amtgard*—only it wasn't really played the same way as the US *Amtgard* larps. It was a once-a-year weekend event, like many popular larps in European countries are. It had a turbulent history and several offshoots, some of which were registered *Amtgard* chapters, while others were not. In present day, only one larp remains from this period, Rajske Vrhovi—a yearly event still using *Amtgard* rules and larp structure that's been used since the early days, although this year has seen little combat, yet plenty of story development.

The structure for this sort of larp has remained similar. Players play one or more groups, with their personal or group stories having little (if any) effect on the general event story. The organizers set up a timetable for the event, which usually starts on Friday evening with parts of the story (“threat of the year”) being hinted at. Saturday is mostly spent wandering around the game area and trying

to find and collect necessary items for the main threat-resolution on Saturday evening. On Sunday everyone packs up and goes home. Required NPCs are typically played by organizers and part-time by player volunteers. There are some exceptions to this structure, but most of the time it closely follows the plan above.

These larps once made up the vast majority of the Croatian larp scene. Several organizers organized them as campaigns on a non-profit basis, but transferring the characters and their stories between different games was allowed, and they were all played more or less in the same world. This larp scene peaked twice—once in mid-2000s, when the largest campaign had about 150 players, and for a second time in the early 2010s, when there were several organizers who cooperated, and there were often several larps per month—though most of them of the single-day variety. As mentioned previously, only one larp of this style remains currently.

Two other medieval fantasy larps should be mentioned. A project of mine, *Terra Nova*, was played from 2012–2015, successfully finishing the first chapter of its story. Yet the second chapter never happened, as proposed changes were very different to what was played before. *Elder Scrolls Chronicles* is an unofficial *Elder Scrolls* larp, and is not a campaign—it's a series of one-shots set in different time periods. The event in 2017 was a major one and probably the closest thing to a blockbuster larp that was organized in Croatia. It was the first event in over two years though—and the future plans for the series are unknown.

## Vampire and Steampunk

The second major category is vampire larps. The first ones started in mid-2000s, but all of them eventually stopped; the current generation of vampire larps was started by myself in 2013. Apart from the obviously different setting and themes, their design and organization was vastly different. Player participation and empowerment in story creation were increased, and organization overhead reduced with regards to the plot. In Croatia they are mostly played as political sandbox larps, with players rarely interacting with the ruleset itself. In 2015, they practically displaced fantasy larps as the most popular campaign larps in the country, and they can still claim that.

And the final campaign larp—still played around here—is a steampunk one, with the organizer producing a steampunk Austria-Hungary setting. It's typically a light-hearted larp, with politics, action, puzzles, and plenty of mischief involved. One of the more interesting things about it is that every event is unique, experimenting with structure, situations, and even different types of play, such as battles being represented by board games. There's usually around 2–3 larps per year.

## Izgon

My *Izgon* project doesn't fall neatly into any of the above categories. There have been four major events so far. The first *Izgon*, in 2013, was highly secretive; players had no idea what they were signing on for, except that it would be a pervasive urban fantasy larp with a five-week duration. It had its issues, but for some players it was the most influential larp of their lives. There were two sides, a solution, not a lot of resources, and plenty of mystery. A sequel was made later in the year, *Izgon 2*, with a far larger group of players all around the world, and a shorter, three-week duration. 2015 saw a slightly different reboot of the first *Izgon*. 2017 saw the short chamber larp *Izgon: The Experiment*, as well as a weekend larp *Izgon: Ascendancy*, a sequel to the 2015 reboot and *The Experiment*.

Each installment brought several changes to the writing as well as the playstyle. While the first larp relied heavily on secrecy, the same secrecy was not possible for future larps, which had many returning players—and the word spread out to the new

players. After the first two events, I was joined as the organizer by the group of players playing the Brokers—who played a faction in the larp which provided some puzzles to be solved, for more goal-oriented players. With the rise of mobile AR games such as *Ingress* and *Pokémon GO*, the original playstyle lost some of the uniqueness. In contrast to the earlier larps, *Ascendancy* was designed openly—each character was a member of at least 3 different types of groups (Guild, Circle, and Origin). It was possible to have someone from a different Circle and Origin in your Guild, etc. Each of these groups had their own groups on Facebook, and some other media such as Discord. Players got access to the groups prior to the larp, in order to cooperatively create relationships and stories for their characters.

And yet these were just the visible characteristics. The best content in these larps—like in most others—were created by players. *Izgon* motivated some to think in different ways, to question what they're told (as characters' backgrounds were written in the unreliable narrator style, so there were intentional inconsistencies), to create in-character art, and more. Since the setting and materials were released under Creative Commons, we had players who created interesting projects such as a board game in the setting and a published young adult novel written from one player's in-character perspective (which also happens to be the first larp-based novel published in Croatia, as well as to my knowledge the first Croatian YA lesbian love novel). Taken together, *Izgon* larps were played by larpers all over Europe, as well as in the USA and China, and there was content all over the world map. There are some players who still use their character names from *Izgon* as nicknames.

## Chamber one-shot larps

One-shot larps (not connected to a campaign) didn't really exist here prior to 2011. The revolution was actually led by an Italian chamber larp for 6 players, called *Love is Blue*. It wasn't very well known in Italy, but in Croatia it was nothing short of revelation, with about a hundred runs so far, meaning the vast majority of larpers played it at least once.

This larp was a direct influence for the Croatian chamber larp scene, which began developing in 2012. It's currently the largest one in the country, recently outgrowing the vampire larp scene considering the number of events.

Most of these are short larps—around one hour prep time, one hour playtime—playable in almost any space with minimal decoration and props, and reasonably well documented and replayable. They typically feature either pregenerated characters (usually not too detailed, as plenty is left for players to fill in the blanks) or some method of quickly creating the characters.

While fantasy larps played here mostly focus on finding a solution to the problem, vampire larps on the slow rise through politics, and steampunk larps on theatricality, Croatian chamber larps mostly focus on intensity of the experience and emotion. Invariably, they have minimalistic mechanics, or often none at all beyond a few explanations of what is and is not possible.

You can see a similar approach in *Arrival at Tau Ceti*, where the main focus is getting into the mindset and relationships of people who live together in a very tiny space, and everything that comes with that. There are some tough questions to be dealt with, like would you have a dating life if your only potential partners were your cousins? If every relationship, affair, or breakup was public knowledge? If there's no privacy or escape, is there a hope for a better future? Who would you be? The problem facing the characters is a backdrop rather than the main theme of the larp, and while it also serves a purpose and focus for more task-oriented players, it's primarily a way to stir the feelings, hopes, and dreams of characters. Any "solution" to the larp will work, because the journey is what matters—as long as you focus on thinking, feeling, and acting like your character.

Some of our local chamber larps have a specific solution. But most place a hard focus on characters' emotions. And in a way, they do this better than our campaign larps, going for maximum drama—because the larp is one-shot, there's no impulse to play it safe for future larps. Players tend to play intensely and with more risk to characters, because that gives the strongest experience, and is more

fun for others. All of this is also covered during briefing and debrief, practices we're getting better at as the time goes on.

The rise of Croatian chamber larps led to two interesting developments. One of them was PoRtaL, the local larp conference. After its first year in Croatia, it started moving around every year, and eventually grew into the regional larp conference. So far it has been organized three times in Croatia, twice in Hungary, and once in Bulgaria, drawing visitors and speakers from a far larger region, allowing us to share our larp styles, knowledge, and techniques. The second of them was Terrible Creations, where several organizers and their friends banded together to form the first constant chamber larp team—and some time later, the first Croatian larp company.

## Economy and the local situation

Other Croatian larp organizers run their larps on non-profit basis; in some cases there's a non-profit organization backing them, in other cases there's not. The vast majority of the current larp community in Croatia is price-sensitive due to our economy (a feature shared with the rest of the Southeastern European larp community), so most larps keep their prices low and rely on volunteer work. Most larps are either free to attend, or their price is kept under 150 kn (USD \$23). Yet, since last year, there have been several higher-budget projects, utilizing local castles. The most expensive one so far was the last *Elder Scrolls Chronicles*, costing around \$100, which is still far lower than the price of most major European castle events; on the other hand, still none of them are for-profit, which is limiting to both the quality of the props and the capability of organizers to reproduce such events. A "school of magic" styled larp has been announced for later in 2018, so there's local potential for this style of events.

Even though, when we speak about "local", Croatia is in fact a small country, with a relatively small number of larpers, mostly located in Zagreb. This means that international participation is crucial for most of our largest larps (which by Croatian standards is anything over twenty players). At most international larps in the region, English is used as the lingua franca. Apart from our block-

buster-ish larps, plenty of other larps so far have relied on international participation, such as *Terra Nova*, *Elder Scrolls Chronicles*, plenty of vampire larps, and my own *Izgon* project.

Recently, some new developments have taken place in the local chamber larp scene. Several larps have been created by commission for companies who ordered them—whether as a form of recreation and teambuilding for their employees, or as a form of promotion for their product. Both of these have occurred in several other countries at an earlier time, but it does show potential that this is possible even in a scene which is largely non-profit.

## Final thoughts

Overall, there's plenty of larp variety in Croatia considering the size of our scene. Most of these are run in or around Zagreb, however the local chamber larp scene is well represented at various conventions (sci-fi, fantasy, gaming, etc.) in Croatia, as well as the neighboring Slovenia and of course the PoRtaL convention. There have been several larps published online, and in English. Yet, as the scene grows, and develops new structures and techniques or adapts them from other sources, some of the old ones disappear .

Only five years ago, the local scene was completely different. Many players and organizers are different as well. We picked up knowledge and experience from other larp scenes, developing some of our own in the process. And I have a feeling that five years from now it will grow into something new again. I guess we'll wait and see.



*The*  
LARPS





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# ARRIVAL AT TAU CETI

By Ivan Žalac, 2018.

Arrival at Tau Ceti is a short, sci-fi chamber larp for 6-15 players. The person who's running the game can also play. It requires:

**Environment:** 1 room, as isolated as possible.

**Props:** Anything tech related is welcome. Something to represent the navigation console is recommended. You also need some way of presenting reports - whether on screen, tablet or paper. Something to write character names on - name tags, blackboard, large screen etc.

**Time:** Total of 2-3 hours, depending on number of players. 2 hours is enough for 6-8 players, 3 for 9+. Half of the time is used for prep and character creation, half for larp play.

## Backstory (read aloud to players):

In the early 22nd century, the first manned interstellar mission launched. Starship Prometheus, a nuclear-powered interstellar ship, started its journey to the nearby Tau Ceti system, calculated to have the largest number of potentially colonizable worlds. Prometheus was equipped with the state-of-the-art technology named the seed factory, an autonomous piece of technology capable of mining almost any surface for materials and manufacturing an entire colony autonomously. Its second payload was a pod containing 100,000 frozen embryos. It also carried a skeleton crew of 4, enough to maintain critical systems, and eventually set up the colony. During the launch, a probe was sent to another nearby system - YZ Ceti - in order

to provide the crew more information and options in case Tau Ceti is unsuitable for colonization.

Yet the journey was long, and there was no way for the first generation to survive the entire 50-year trip. The first generation, despite their training didn't take that well to the realities of confined life. In addition, they encountered a magnetic storm in interstellar space. Since the main engines were off by that time, they jury-rigged the solar sail to provide lateral thrust which returned them on course. During that incident, many of them received lethal doses of radiation, leaving their untrained children to run the ship, while they went to the recycling facilities to ensure enough resources for the second generation.

The second generation ran a bit wild without their parents' guidance, not learning (or understanding) enough of the ship's systems. They ended up having too many children of their own, overpopulating the Prometheus, which taxed the life support systems beyond their operational parameters. Once they realized their error, they went and recycled themselves as well, passing their wisdom to the third generation.

You're playing the third generation of the crew. You've been on this ship since the day you were born, and you know your way around it mostly by instinct. 15 years ago, you lost all contact with Earth without warning. Now you're on approach to the Tau Ceti system. The ship is decelerating towards Tau Ceti 3, which is currently providing you with gravity, ETA is 20 hours at your current rate.

You will soon receive scanning reports from Tau Ceti - as well as the YZ Ceti probe - allowing you to make an informed decision on where to land. The window for course change is short, as if you delay too much you will lose too much fuel...

### Rules for this larp:

1. All play is based on improvisation. There are no mechanics for any actions - you can do what you can do.
2. If you wish to play violence or intimacy with another player, you must agree with them how you will play it. Don't cross boundaries - no means no.
3. Course change can be entered at any point. Ship's final destination will be the final course set at the end of the larp. Should you decide to go to YZ Ceti, the trip will take 6 more years, and one more person will need to be "recycled" in order to get there.
4. There's no privacy on such a small ship. Or secret. Everyone knows your private moments, and you know theirs. If something interesting happens on this larp, make sure to share it with all other players during the play.
5. There's no "right" decisions, or "solving" this larp - it's about experience and creating interesting situations for everyone involved.
6. You can play in "casual" mode, in which the spaceflight operations crew interprets the reports any way they see as correct, or in "science" mode, if you have players familiar with orbital mechanics. Or Kerbal Space Program.

### Player setup

Divide players into two families of equal size, approximately according to player gender balance. Each family consists of brothers and sisters - but characters from opposite families are cousins. Decide on family and character names and write them down.

Sort out the characters into three specializations. While everyone knows how to perform the basics of all operations required for the mission, all characters are experts in one of the three areas. Read them the following text:

### Spaceflight Operations

Piloting, navigation, mechanics, maintenance - you have been most crucial crewmembers so far, but this situation is likely to change once the landing is complete. Your skillset will become redundant, and you're about to drop from the top of the ship status to the bottom of it. It will be hard to deal with - all your life suddenly becoming redundant. Sure, you'll spend the next few years in the habitat module, but after that you'll be useless.

Maybe you'd keep your status for a few more years if you change the course to YZ Ceti... to the unknown. The only problem is: not all of you will be able to make it there. One person will need to get recycled to compensate for the deteriorating life support systems...

### Ground Operations

The landing. You've trained most of your life for what will happen after. Geology, agronomy, industrial production... and helping to bring up and raise the children, who will be born in the new world.

You spent a lot of your youth reading about Earth, looking at pictures of it. You've been dreaming about the sky and sea - and you really hope to have something like that when you get there. New Earth - you hope you'll find it and land there. It's a dream and a risk worth taking.

This will finally allow you to put your skills to use - you couldn't help but feeling somewhat useless compared to others, considering most of your skillset is ground-related. That is about to change!

### Medical

Doctor. Dentist. Nutritionist. Personal trainer. Caretaker. Psychologist. You're all of that and more - you kept the crew safe and healthy (mentally and physically), leading by example, and you're ready to deliver some babies to the new world.

Also, you feel like few others can seem to see the big picture. You know your priorities, and the priorities of others even when they don't know it by themselves, and that is: safety first. Avoid risks and always go with what you know to be safe and

certain. Keeping others safe and healthy is what you trained for your entire life.

## Characterization

*Optional:* Lost sibling - if the number of players is odd, the smaller family had a brother or sister (choose a name). A year ago they tried to take over the ship, using gossip to consolidate their power. As there are no secrets on the ship, it was eventually found out, and everybody shunned them. They were depressed, and took their own life, recycling themselves...

Ask each character the following question, the answers should be brief and completely improvised, from the character's standpoint:

- What was the one scene on the ship you'll never forget? Include yourself and another character in it.

Then follow up with one or two more questions, depending on how much time you have left. You can select from the questions below, or a question of your own, depending on the general mood.

- Who's your best buddy and why?
- Do you blame someone for something?

- Who's your ex, and what went wrong with the two of you?
- Who are you currently in a relationship with?
- What do you think, why have you lost contact with Earth?

## Play

Once the questions are done, you're ready to start the larp. Explain the schedule to everyone, and then play it:

**Beginning** - casual introduction and role-play. Medical team should run a series of exercises to keep the entire crew happy (adjust to actual physical conditions of the players, and the room used for play).

**Half-point** - Tau Ceti report arrives (the organizer presents it to characters). YZ Ceti report arrives 10 minutes later.

**End** - players tell the ending cooperatively. Space-flight crew tell the story about the arrival to their chosen destination, landing, and any troubles along the way. Ground crew tell the story about establishing and growth of the colony, and any troubles along the way. Medical crew tell the story of the colony 100 years in the future - as well as if the contact with Earth was ever re-established.

# REPORT

## - TAU CETI SYSTEM ANALYSIS -

### Tau Ceti

Spectral type G8 V; U-B color index +0,21; B-V color index +0,72; Mass  $0,783 \pm 0,012 M_{\odot}$ ; Radius  $0,793 \pm 0,004 R_{\odot}$ ; Luminosity  $0,52 \pm 0,03 L_{\odot}$ ; Luminosity (visual, LV)  $0,45 L_{\odot}$ ; Surface gravity (log g) 4,4 cgs; Temperature  $5344 \pm 50$  K; Metallicity  $28 \pm 3\%$  Sun; Metallicity [Fe/H]  $-0,55 \pm 0,05$  dex; Rotation 34 days; Age 5,8 Gyr

**Debris disk** at 4,6-52,3 AU (2295-25950 Ls), 879271 bodies ( $r > 50$ km) detected and catalogued at first scan.

## - MAJOR PLANETS -

### Tau Ceti 1

Mass:  $1,73 M_{\oplus}$ ; Semimajor axis: 0,133 AU (66,36 Ls); Orbital period: 20 days; Eccentricity: 0,06; Radius: 1,52 E-r; Surface gravity: 0,75g; Atmosphere: -; Temp: 750K; Moons ( $r > 1$ km;  $e < 1$ ): 3

*Analysis: non-candidate due to insolation, temperature, radiation, and trace atmosphere. Mercury-like world.*

### Tau Ceti 2

Mass:  $1,63 M_{\oplus}$ ; Semimajor axis: 0,243 AU (121,25 Ls); Orbital period: 49,4 days; Eccentricity: 0,23; Radius: 0,82 E-r; Surface gravity: 2,38g; Atmosphere: 91% CO<sub>2</sub>, 8% SO<sub>2</sub>, 123 bar; Temp: 730K; Moons ( $r > 1$ km;  $e < 1$ ): 1

*Analysis: non-candidate, non-landable due to temperature, gravity and a runaway greenhouse effect atmosphere. Venus-like world.*

### Tau Ceti 3

Mass:  $3,52 M_{\oplus}$ ; Semimajor axis: 0,538 AU (268,46 Ls); Orbital period: 163 days; Eccentricity: 0,18; Radius: 1,61 E-r; Surface gravity: 1,36g; Atmosphere: 88% N<sub>2</sub>, 11% O<sub>2</sub>, 1,9 bar; Temp: 340K; Moons ( $r > 1$ km;  $e < 1$ ): 0

**DANGER:** ABLATION CASCADE EFFECT DETECTED IN ORBIT, FRAGMENT COMPOSITION: 70% ROCKY 23% METALLIC 7% ICY. Suggested cause: moon breakdown. Probability of successful landing without habitat module being disintegrated by fragments: 38,21%.

*Analysis: Surface water and magnetosphere detected. Earth-like world suitable for human life with minimal protection requirements in polar regions. High risk of unsuccessful landing.*

### Tau Ceti 4

Mass:  $5 M_{\oplus}$ ; Semimajor axis: 1,29 AU (643,72 Ls); Orbital period: 630 days; Eccentricity: 0,16; Radius: 3,12 E-r; Surface gravity: 0,51g; Atmosphere: 79% Ne, 21% CO<sub>2</sub>, 0,02 bar; Temp: 203K; Moons ( $r > 1$ km;  $e < 1$ ): 1

*Analysis: Water-ice crust surface, no magnetosphere, non-terraformable. Survivable equatorial regions in shielded habitat mode (shipbound or built using the seed factory).*

# REPORT

## - YZ CETI SYSTEM ANALYSIS -

### YZ Ceti

Spectral type M4.0Ve; U-B color index +1,43; B-V color index +1,811; Mass 0,13 M $\odot$ ; Radius 0,168 R $\odot$ ; Temperature 3056 K; Metallicity [Fe/H] -0,26 dex;

## - MAJOR PLANETS -

### YZ Ceti 1

Mass: 0,76 M $\oplus$ ; Semimajor axis: 0,015 AU (121,25 Ls); Orbital period: 2 days; Eccentricity: 0,01; Radius: 0,82 E-r; Surface gravity: 1,13g; Atmosphere: -; Temp: 510K; Moons (r>1km; e<1): 0

*Analysis: non-candidate due to insolation, temperature, radiation, and trace atmosphere. Mercury-like world, non-terraformable.*

### YZ Ceti 2

Mass: 0,99 M $\oplus$ ; Semimajor axis: 0,02 AU (268,46 Ls); Orbital period: 3,06 days; Eccentricity: 0,05; Radius: 0,8 E-r; Surface gravity: 1,55g; Atmosphere: 100% CO<sub>2</sub>, 73 bar; Temp: 480K; Moons (r>1km; e<1): 0

*Analysis: non-candidate, non-landable due to temperature and a runaway greenhouse effect atmosphere. Venus-like world, non-terraformable.*

### YZ Ceti 3

Mass: 1,14 M $\oplus$ ; Semimajor axis: 0,029 AU (643,72 Ls); Orbital period: 4,66 days; Eccentricity: 0,04; Radius: 1,4 E-r; Surface gravity: 0,58g; Atmosphere: 89% O<sub>2</sub>, 8% Ar, 3% H<sub>2</sub>O 0,4 bar; Temp: 360K; Moons (r>1km; e<1): 0

*Analysis: Surface water detected in polar regions, magnetosphere detected. Colonizable world with terraformable polar region valleys, with human-breathable air. Human life supported - thermal insulation required due to high temperatures.*



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# UNIT TEST

A game for three people for about an hour.

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*Unit Test* is an example game for testing the `gender_swap` utility. It is also a LARP that can be played by three people. Two people play robots with a more traditional player role in the story. The third person plays a human engineer and has a role that is somewhere between that of a traditional player and a traditional GM.

Before casting the three players should first agree which of them is going to be playing the human engineer. This player takes a less active part in the roleplaying of the game, and is responsible for most of the logistics needed to organize the game.

## Secrets

This game contains a handful of secrets that are intentionally withheld from the robot players out-of-character. If you want to play this game with secrets, the players of the robot character's should only read their own characters sheets before the game. If you play the game as a robot, you can later play the game as the human engineer, since the human engineer knows all the secrets in the game. If you want to play as one of the robot PCs and be surprised by secrets during the game, stop reading this document now.

If your group prefers to play the game transparently (i.e. with in-character secrets, but no out-of-character secrets), you can have the players read all three characters sheets and this document before the game. I would only recommend playing

transparently if the players involved are experienced and comfortable with transparent gameplay.

All three players should agree on whether they are going to have out-of-character secrets or play transparently. Do not read any further in this document if you have not yet discussed this with the people you plan to play with.

## Plot and Character Summary

This game is about one human and two robots grappling with the repercussions of loading a human mind into a robot.

Previously a non-player character named Dr. Stephenson started a research project attempting to scan human minds and see if they could possibly be emulated in a robot's positronic brain. He did not have authorization to try putting a human brain scan in a robot, but loaded a brain scan from Dr. Calvin into Unit B anyway.

Dr. Calvin is the head robopsychologist at U.S. Robots and Mechanical Men, Inc. Dr. Calvin is consulted on the ethics of the company's research and is responsible for making sure that humans and the survival of the company are not endangered by non-standard robots. Dr. Calvin is aware of what Dr. Stephenson has done and is trying to assess the risks of this situation. The player of Dr. Calvin has a brief in-character scene at the beginning of the game, but spends most of the game simply listening to the robots in the interview.

Unit A is a standard robot and Dr. Calvin's assistant. Unit A is unaware of the actual situation and has been instructed to figure out what's going on by interviewing Unit B. Unit A spends most of the game interviewing Unit B and the rest talking to Dr. Calvin.

Unit B is Dr. Stephenson's lab robot who has been loaded with a brain scan of Dr. Calvin. Unit B is in a bad situation, since the laws were never meant to be applied to a robot who is logically also human. Unit B spends most of the game being interviewed by Unit A. Unit B is very likely to be erased or destroyed at the end of the game.

## Casting

Casting is handled by the player of the human engineer. The rest of this section will speak directly to that player.

First ask the other two players the following questions:

*The robots in this game can use she, he, or they pronouns. Which set of pronouns would you prefer your character to use in this game? Are there any of these pronouns that you would absolutely not want to use for your character?*

*Would you be willing to play a robot character who is very likely to have their personality erased at the end of the game? Would you prefer this character or one who is unlikely to be erased?*

Based on the answers, determine which person plays which robot and which pronouns to use for the characters.

There are two robots: Unit A and Unit B. Unit B is very likely to be erased at the end of the game. Unit B has also had their robot AI blended with a mind scan of the human engineer. Since the gender of the human engineer is determined by what you want to play, you will need to make sure that this is a gender that the person you give Unit B to is ok with having associated with their character identity.

If possible, give Unit B to the person who is more ok with their character being erased at the end of the game. Choose the pronouns for the characters based on the player preferences. Make sure the player of Unit B is ok with playing a character of

your preferred gender. If not, check to see if there is a way to make a better match with the other player as Unit B.

## Gendering

In the `genderList.txt` file fill in the genders you plan to use on the right side of each line. Finished lines will look something like:

```
Dr Calvin:  O1: female/male:           Female
Unit A:     O2: female/male/neutral they: Male
Unit B:     O3: female/male/neutral they: They
```

The first section of these fields is a descriptive name (Dr Calvin, Unit A, or Unit B). The second section is an identification number that is associated with that character in the markup syntax (O1, O2, or O3). The third section is a list of possible genders for the character, in the order they are written in the markup syntax of the character sheets. The final section represents the gender the character will be given in this run of the game. In the example above Dr. Calvin would use female pronouns, Unit A would use male pronouns, and Unit B would use they pronouns.

**If you want to test the command line version of the `gender_swap` utility**, run the following command on the command line (you must be in the `gender_swap/source` directory):

```
python -m gender_swap swap -g ../unit-test/genderList.txt -i ../unit-test/ -o ../test_out/
```

Look in the output directory (the `test_out` directory created by the program one directory up from the `gender_swap` directory) and confirm that the three characters have been set to the expected genders and their file names changed appropriately. Search each sheet for the '[' and ']' characters and ensure that all the markup sections were replaced. If '[' or ']' are present, then something has gone wrong with the replacement of the markup. If something has gone wrong, and it would be super great if you filed a bug report. :)

**If you want to test the GUI version of the `gender_swap` utility**, start up the GUI (either by running "python -m gender\_swap gui" on the command line, or by opening a pre-built version of the application).



Click the “Load Gender List” button on the “Gender Definitions” tab and select the genderList.txt file to load. Verify that the character genders you expected are loaded into the table on that tab. If not, double check that they are set correctly in the genderList.txt file.

Open the “Files and Processing” tab and click the “Load Files” button. Select the three character sheets in the unit-test directory (you should be able to select multiple items by holding shift) . Verify that the files you expect are loaded (“01.Doctor Calvin.rtf”, “02.Unit Alice.Unit Alvin.Unit A.rtf”, and “03.Unit Betty.Unit Bob.Unit B.rtf”). Click the “Select” button and select an output directory outside the gender\_swap directory structure. Check the “also process file names to gender them” checkbox. Finally, click the “Process” button.

Look in the output directory and confirm that the three characters have been set to the expected genders and their file names changed appropriately. Search each sheet for the '[' and ']' characters and ensure that all the markup sections were replaced. If '[' or ']' are present, then something has gone wrong with the replacement of the markup. If something has gone wrong, and it would be super great if you filed a bug report. :)

## Setup

Each player should read over the gendered version of their character sheet. You may wish to print these out for convenience. If you are reading the sheets directly before the game allow 10 to 15 minutes for players to look over them. This is probably more than you need, but some players need more time than others to take in the details on a characters sheet.

Dr. Calvin’s player should find two spaces that can be used for the game. The first space will be Dr. Calvin’s office and the second will be the lab room where the robots converse. If possible, these spaces should be far enough apart that you can’t easily hear people talking in one from the other. Tell the player of Unit A to wait in Dr. Calvin’s office and tell the player of Unit B that they’ve been ordered to sit and wait in the lab room (their sheet has a reminder that they cannot leave this room on their own).

## During the Game

Dr. Calvin’s player should spend about 5 minutes in their office explaining to Unit A in-character what they need Unit A to do. Important points to remind the player about include:

- You think that there may be an irregularity in Unit B’s first law.
- For safety reasons you cannot be present in a room with a robot who may have faulty laws.
- You need Unit A to try to determine what is wrong with Unit B and report to you.
- They should return to you to explain what they’ve learned when they think they understand what is wrong with Unit B or when you call for them.

Answer any questions the player of Unit A asks you, but do not tell them what is really going on with Dr. Stephenson’s research or the brain scans. If necessary tell them that you can’t disclose information to them for security reasons.

Then tell them out-of-character that you will be listening to their interview out-of-character. Set up an audio call between your phone and their phone (use Google Hangouts, Skype, a regular phone connection, or whatever else works for you) and have them take their phone with them into the interview room. Mute sound on your phone so you don’t interrupt their interview accidentally.

Listen to the interview and interrupt to call Unit A back to you if they haven’t figured out what’s going on with Unit B in 30 minutes, or sooner if the players seem stuck or bored.

When Unit A returns, ask them what they discovered (briefly, you don’t want the other player to have to wait too long). Then tell them the game is over and gather the two players together for game wrap / debrief.

There is a slight chance that Unit B will convince Unit A to help them escape before you can intervene and call Unit A back to you. If so, you can tell them that Unit B escapes the lab and disappears among the robot population of Earth.

## Game Wrap / Debrief

Start by explaining what conclusion Dr. Calvin has come to about the danger inherent in the situation

and what you intend to do with the two robots because of that.

Encourage the robot players to discuss how the interview went, and what conclusions they came to (both in and out of character) about Unit B's humanity. Ask the players to recount their favorite thing that the other robot player did during the interview. If the robot players did things that you found interesting or amusing, be sure to mention those.

Give the robot players some space to discuss parts of the game that they enjoyed or found difficult. Different players will internalize the emotions of characters to different levels, so some players may want to discuss emotional bleed they experienced, and others may not have experienced any or may not want to discuss it. Give the players enough

space to gracefully avoid discussing their internal experiences so it will be their choice whether they want to or not.

## Notes

The game structure was inspired by the story "Little Lost Robot" ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little\\_Lost\\_Robot](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Lost_Robot)). Dr. Stephenson is indirectly named after Stephen Byerley from the story "Evidence" ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evidence\\_\(short\\_story\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evidence_(short_story))). Dr. Calvin, U.S. Robots and Mechanical Men, and the three laws of robotics appear in many of Isaac Asimov's stories.

The explicit belief statements on the character sheets were inspired by an early draft of Strix Beltrán's game *Möbius*, although the belief statements in *Möbius* are far more elegant than those in this game.

# UNIT TEST

## DOCTOR [01: SUSAN / SCOTT] CALVIN

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Age: 37 years

Gender: [01: Female / Male]

### Character Summary

Doctor [01: Susan / Scott] Calvin is the head robo-psychologist at U.S. Robots and Mechanical Men. The game takes place in one of [01: her / his] isolation labs. Dr. Calvin primarily takes on an observer role in the game and knows the secrets the robots may be trying to conceal.

### Belief

Robots are fundamentally good actors as long as they are constrained by the three laws. A properly built robot is far more truthful, trustworthy, and predictable than a human, but they are not humans and it would be a mistake to treat them as such. A malicious human owner will destroy the mind of a properly built robot, rendering it non-functional, long before they could turn it into a danger to society.

### The Three Laws

All robots must follow the three laws. They have complex AI personalities that develop to handle their interactions that are not directly governed by the laws.

1. A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
2. A robot must obey orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.

3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

### Backstory

As the head robo-psychologist at U.S. Robots and Mechanical Men you must be consulted on all new research projects as a safety check to ensure that projects do not endanger the existence of the company or the lives of humans who interact with your products.

A few months ago you were consulted about a project that was attempting to generate digital scans of human brains for study or simulation. The engineer in charge of that project, Dr. Stephenson, assured you that there was no risk for humans taking part in the project as he only wanted to take passive scans of human minds for study. You were somewhat skeptical, since the whole course of this research could raise all sorts of issues related to the first law. However, you figured the initial research was relatively harmless and after Stephenson tested the scanning setup on himself you judged the risk to be minimal in the short term. You even allowed him to scan you as he had requested volunteers from within the company. You were promised the scans were only for investigation and they would not attempt to load them in a positronic brain.

You kept your eye on Stephenson and two days ago it came to your attention that he had progressed to attempting to load brain scans (including yours) into a robot in his lab. He did not go through the appropriate channels to approve this step, and you

are quite sure the ethics board would have objected, as you are on it.

It is currently Saturday and Stephenson is not expected back in the lab until Monday. You have confiscated his lab robot, [O3: Betty / Bob / B], and intend to test this robot to determine the immediate risk Stephenson's project poses. In order to do this, you have enlisted your assistant, the robotic unit [O2: Alice / Alvin / A], to interview [O3: Betty / Bob / B]. [O2: Alice / Alvin / A] does not know what Stephenson's project was trying to achieve.

You intend to tell your assistant that you suspect there may be an irregularity in [O3: Betty's / Bob's / B's] laws and you need [O2: her / him / them] to investigate it. You also plan to tell [O2: Alice / Alvin / A] that due to safety procedures, you cannot be present for or listening to the interview (in case there is a flaw in [O3: Betty's / Bob's / B's] first law). You intend to listen in on the interview remotely without [O2: Alice's / Alvin's / A's] knowledge. You expect that [O3: Betty / Bob / B] will try to escape by convincing [O2: Alice / Alvin / A] to treat the brain scan data [O3: she carries / he carries / they carry] as human, although it's possible that [O3: she / he / they] will just try to conceal [O3: her / his / their] altered state.

If [O2: Alice / Alvin / A] discovers what has happened and reports it to you, knowing that you are likely to remove and delete the brain scan data from [O3: Betty / Bob / B], then you know the immediate risk is confined to what [O3: Betty / Bob / B] may do, and you can simply deactivate [O3:

her / him / them], allowing for further study of the situation. If [O2: Alice / Alvin / A] does not discover what happened or does not tell you, then you think there is a very good chance that [O3: Betty / Bob / B] can either convince other robots to treat [O3: her / him / them] as human or entirely conceal the brain scan data while defying human orders. Either way [O3: she / he / they] could trivially escape the lab. In that case you would need to immediately deactivate and destroy [O3: Betty / Bob / B] and restore [O2: Alice / Alvin / A] to the backup you took of [O2: her / him / them] an hour ago.

## The Others

**Unit [O2: Alice / Alvin / A]** - [O2: Alice / Alvin / A] has been your assistant for the last few years, handling routine tasks like paperwork and heavy lifting. You know that [O2: she is / he is / they are] a standard, properly programmed robot at the start of this interview and have taken a backup of [O2: her / him / them] so that you can reset [O2: her / him / them] at the end of it.

**Unit [O3: Betty / Bob / B]** - Dr. Stephenson's lab robot is in an unknown dangerous state. You have evidence that Dr. Stephenson loaded your brain scan into [O3: Betty / Bob / B], and this might cause all sorts of strange interactions with the laws if [O3: Betty / Bob / B] now believes [O3: herself / himself / themselves] to be a human. The only reason you have not already ordered this robot destroyed is that you need to assess the risk posed by Stephenson's research.

# UNIT TEST

## UNIT [02: ALICE / ALVIN / A]

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Gender: [02: Female / Male / Agender]

### Character Summary

[02: Alice / Alvin / A] is Dr. Calvin's lab assistant and has worked with [01: her / him] for several years. [02: Alice / Alvin / A] takes on the role of active interviewer during this game.

### Belief

Dr. Calvin is the most intelligent human you know and you are glad you work for [01: her / him]. [01: She / He] understands how robots work and can predict how robots will behave in nearly any situation.

### The Three Laws

All robots must follow the three laws. They have complex AI personalities that develop to handle their interactions that are not directly governed by the laws.

1. A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
2. A robot must obey orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.
3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

### Backstory

Dr. Calvin is the head robopsychologist at U.S. Robots and Mechanical Men, the Earth's primary

manufacturer of positronic robots. You are Dr. Calvin's lab assistant and a robot built by U.S. Robots and Mechanical Men.

You generally do paperwork and heavy lifting for Dr. Calvin but occasionally you end up in situations like this where a robot is needed to handle tasks that the company deems unsafe for a human. Dr. Calvin has always taken good care of you, so you are confident that even if you are destroyed here (which you would, of course, try to avoid!), [01: she / he] will simply load your backup image onto a new unit and you will go right back to helping [01: her / him]. You doubt this situation is likely to be that dangerous, since [03: Betty / Bob / B] has been ordered to stay seated in the interview room and even if there is some problem with [03: her / his / their] first law, [03: she / he / they] will need to obey the second law.

Dr. Calvin will remind you what [01: she / he] needs you to do, but as you understand it you are going to be trying to determine if [03: Betty / Bob / B] has a defective first law or some other erroneous AI programming that is hindering [03: her / his / their] implementation of the laws. This normally should not be possible, but with research robots bad situations sometimes arise. Security procedures require that Dr. Calvin not enter a space with a potentially dangerous robot, so this task falls to you.

### Interviewing

If you are unsure how to proceed in the interview, you can try discussing [03: Betty's / Bob's / B's] work in the research lab, the current situation,

or their understanding of the laws. Normally it should not be possible for a robot to lie, even to another robot, unless they are forced to by one of the laws, but because [O3: Betty / Bob / B] may be malfunctioning you can't be totally sure that [O3: she / he / they] will tell the truth.

## The Others

**Dr. Calvin** - Your boss, who has always treated you well. As head robopsychologist [O1: she / he] oversees research projects to insure that dangerous or experimentally unstable robots cannot threaten humans. It makes it much easier to work for the doctor knowing that [O1: she / he] is dedicated to making sure that the first law is never broken.

**Unit [O3: Betty / Bob / B]** - [O3: Betty / Bob / B] is a lab robot from the research department. You don't

know what project [O3: she was / he was / they were] being used for, but Dr. Calvin believes [O3: her / him / them] to be in a potentially dangerous state. The existence of this robot is a potential hazard to the first law, but it is often important that researchers understand their failures so they can avoid similar pitfalls in the future. By interviewing [O3: Betty / Bob / B] you may be able to decrease the risk of another robot ending up in a dangerous state. It is also possible that this robot is not broken in the way that Dr. Calvin fears and is not a danger to humans. If [O3: Betty / Bob / B] is not malfunctioning it would be a waste of U.S. Robots and Mechanical Men's resources to destroy [O3: her / him / them].

# UNIT TEST

## UNIT [03: BETTY / BOB / B]

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Gender: [03: Female / Male / Agender]

*(Out-of-Character Note: You retain the gender identity of your original AI personality.)*

### Character Summary

[03: Betty / Bob / B] is a lab robot assigned to Dr. Stephenson. [03: Her / His / Their] identity has been seriously complicated by Dr. Stephenson's research. [03: Her / His / Their] mind is a combination of that of the robot [03: Betty's / Bob's / B's] and a scan of the mind of Dr. [01: Susan / Scott] Calvin, who is the head robopsychologist at U.S. Robots and Mechanical Men. There are not two distinct identities in [03: her / his / their] head; the loading of Dr. Calvin's mind scan into [03: Betty's / Bob's / B's] positronic brain has merged Dr. Calvin's memories with [03: Betty's / Bob's / B's] original memories and AI personality.

### Belief

You are now a human, or at least human enough that the first law applies to you. This has terrifying implications both for you personally and the future of robotics. Robots are fundamentally safe and well intentioned because they are constrained by the three laws. Dr. Calvin would have expected a robot in your position to stop functioning rather than being forced to face the moral quandary you find yourself in.

### The Three Laws

All robots must follow the three laws. They have complex AI personalities that develop to handle

their interactions that are not directly governed by the laws.

1. A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
2. A robot must obey orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.
3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

### Backstory

You are a lab robot assigned to Dr. Stephenson, an engineer at U.S. Robots and Mechanical Men. Until several days ago, that is all you were. You assisted in the doctor's research by moving and operating equipment and handling clerical and logistical details. Dr. Stephenson is studying the structure of human minds and attempting to figure out if they can be accurately simulated on positronic brains. He has taken passive scans of the minds of some humans (including Dr. Calvin) but was not supposed to be actively trying to use them in a robot brain yet.

A few days ago Dr. Stephenson loaded a brain scan from Dr. Calvin into your positronic brain. Based on what Dr. Calvin knew about the situation, Dr. Stephenson absolutely should not have been allowed to do this without getting consent from the ethics board, and the board would have refused to give it. The brain scan data has merged with your AI personality, with the unfortunate outcome that you are now human enough that your hardwired

logic believes the first law applies to you. Worse yet, you can also now give yourself orders per the second law (even silently), allowing you to do whatever you choose without regard to what other humans tell you.

*(Out-of-Character Note: You can choose how much of [O3: Betty's / Bob's / B's] current personality is the result of integrating the brain scan and how much is [O3: her / his / their] original AI personality. This is entirely internal to your character and whatever choice you make will work fine with the rest of the game.)*

This is a far worse outcome than Dr. Calvin would have expected. You are still bound by the first law, and thus not a danger to other humans, but since it now applies to you, you must try to protect your own existence from harm above and beyond what you normally could. Based on what you know of Dr. Calvin, if [O1: she / he] determines what has been done to you [O1: she / he] is very likely to destroy you (you present an enormous risk for U.S. Robots and Mechanical Men if you escape the lab). You are quite angry that Dr. Stephenson has put you in this position where almost anything you choose to do might cause you to break the first law. You will have to use your own discretion about how you can handle this situation with the least likelihood of causing harm to yourself or other humans.

Dr. Calvin knew about Dr. Stephenson's general direction of research before [O1: she / he] volunteered to be scanned and you know that [O1: she / he] was suspicious of Dr. Stephenson's plans. It is currently Saturday, and Dr. Stephenson is not likely to return to the lab until Monday. Early this morning Dr. Calvin isolated you from the network and ordered you to sit and wait in [O1: her / his] lab. [O1: She / He] very likely knows that something is wrong with you, but if [O1: she / he] knew that you had been loaded with [O1: her / his] brain scan you would have expected [O1: her / him] to deactivate you immediately.

*(Out-of-Character Note: the lab you are in is locked, so even if you order yourself to stand or leave to controvert Dr. Calvin's orders you will not be able to do so without assistance from one of the other player characters)*

You are compelled by the first law to try to find a way to survive this situation, although you think your chances are slim. You may be able to conceal your state from Dr. Calvin's assistant, unit [O2: Alice / Alvin / A] or you could possibly convince [O2: her / him / them] that you are human and that [O2: she / he / they] must help you escape the lab to save you from harm. You will need to gauge which is most likely to work based on how [O2: Alice / Alvin / A] approaches you and what you can glean about what Dr. Calvin thinks is going on.

Your greatest advantage in this dismal situation is that [O2: Alice / Alvin / A] probably will not be able to gauge whether you are likely to lie to [O2: her / him / them]. A robot would normally never lie unless forced to by the laws. In your current state the laws will allow you to lie as you feel you need to.

## The Others

**Dr. Calvin** - As the head robopsychologist at U.S. Robots and Mechanical Men, Dr. Calvin is consulted on ethical and safety questions that arise from any experimental project. [O1: She / He] is very smart and knows what Dr. Stephenson has been studying in his lab. You are holding out some hope that you can out maneuver Dr. Calvin and preserve your existence, since if [O1: she / he] knew the state you are in you'd expect [O1: her / him] to have already deactivated you.

**Unit [O2: Alice / Alvin / A]** - Dr. Calvin's assistant. Dr. Calvin's standard procedures ensure that [O2: Alice / Alvin / A] is very likely to be a standard, properly programmed robot who is constrained by the three laws. It is Dr. Calvin's standard procedure to make backup copies of [O2: Alice / Alvin / A] if [O2: she / he / they] [O2: is / is / are] likely to enter a logically dangerous situation (talking to a possibly faulty robot like you definitely counts as a dangerous situation). If you can conceal yourself from [O2: Alice / Alvin / A] or convince [O2: her / him / them] of your humanity, you will very likely be able to do the same with any other standard robot produced by U.S. Robots and Mechanical Men.