

# CATCHING ONTO CLUES

*Pondering the Essence of LARP design from the spectrum  
of curious players and aspiring LARP designers.*

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# HOW CAN WE DEFINE LARP DESIGNING?

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From an obscure geeky hobby, frowned upon by onlookers, to a worldwide sensation, with entire castles and thematic villages to support it, LARPing has bloomed into a well-respected hobby in modern society. Fitting the gap of alternative and in touch with nature as well as covering favorite tropes such as questing and adventuring, there is little wonder as to why LARPing has been catching on, at least as far as its most popular counterparts are concerned, such as fighting LARPs.

However, it is interesting to look further into the design aspect of LARPs. What are the relevant skills a designer should have, and how do they come into play? Analyzing LARP design seems to be more and more convoluted, but we shall track down all the clues and different aspects, and see what LARP design stems from.

Because in my experience, the road to designing a well implemented LARP game takes dedication and personal growth in a vast variety of subjects. In that sense - LARP is not only educational as a participatory act, but also as an act of delving into its production.

## SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

LARP design is very obscure and sly at what it does - it is not performed by artists, or at least not always, it is used by educators, and it is called a game - though traditional game design theory is way off what you do when designing a LARP game; So what is it?

The most apparent subject that comes to mind is improv theatre. Truly; coming up with lines on the spot, acting, having a crowd around you, workshops and methodologies as well as intention to have fun rather than create a cohesive storyline, together with the "yes, and" motto of following along on content and not being a party pooper. As a profile, we could say the two match a lot, with LARPing usually having a larger focus on physical activity and non-confined space. The two are similar, and almost indistinguishable as art forms - but designing an improv session and a LARP game are two different worlds. LARP designing takes planning, mechanics to dictate the outcome of interactions, as well as a feeling of safety and justice. In fact, it is simply the sheer size of LARPing that dictates these arbitrary needs for rules - where in improv you have people who know each other, in LARP you have strangers - and strangers should have solid societal rules to avoid crashing with each other.

So social sciences then? True, they give a very detailed basis on how to approach an issue, and how to let people bond. How to create boundaries and feelings of belonging, how to tackle severe issues and let people reflect upon the experience that they are taking part in. It is in fact essential to any game that consists of regurgitating the experience or having some educational value - both to shelter the participants as well as to ensure a clear understanding of the aspect to design towards as an educational goal. But what about the game itself? The mechanics and the actions taken? All the necessary tidbits to organize thoughts and theorems into a cohesive experience,

So, Event Management? Project management? Quintessential to manage a hefty sum of people, create windows for the "content" and well-timed excitement to pop up and entertain or rather "bother" the players so that the ultimate goal may be achieved: Challenge! People join LARPing events to be challenged in one way or another, either by exiting their comfort zone, by having to manage a personal crisis of their character or merely finding the space and time to reflect on their own personal beliefs. LARPing brings us in front of adversity and through it, we learn, as humans do. When properly planned, a LARP game remains challenging, and good planning and understanding of the flow of the game/event should be there, but does that really make it a game?

Let's delve into game theory - both in the form of mathematics and modern role-playing games. Game theory revolves around people making decisions - which is largely what a game is; the framework in which a person considers different choices and picks the one that most fits their plan/strategy/way of having fun or however you may call it. Interestingly enough, factoring in the maths for 40 different players of different backgrounds and cultures within the sandbox environment of LARPing is a daunting task - no matter the level of abstraction or how much the frame of the game is narrowed. There is just too much chaos involved - and although it is controllable chaos, there is no easy prevailing strategy or Nash equilibrium that can make the game itself clear - there is always unseen complication and ways to abuse the system.

When roleplaying games are involved, there are other problems. In tabletop roleplaying games, parties rarely consist of more than 5 players. And although it is easy to design and theorize about the experience of 5 people, what happens when you have 10 or more? They are rarely agreeable, and it is not easy to find content for each palette. But even if content for every palette is designed, overlaps, lack of supporting staff, lack of enough players to make the content worth it, etc. are still problems that will plague the designer. Video games on the other hand have content that is stale - there are predetermined outcomes and updates whenever it is necessary to keep the content fresh - nothing is dynamic, and people know beforehand what they can expect - the level of challenge is only measured by their

motor abilities with the virtual skillset.

Play by post seems to come the closest - where the game takes place in responsive messages. Personalized experience, interactive content and ability to host an abundance of players - but there is no time constraint - you respond whenever you are ready. In such an environment, impulse, which is a great educational tool when used with reflection, is vanquished.

Lastly, we can see similarities with movie directors. Having a vision and a feeling to the game, people adjusting as if actors, their personality to fit a role, the director molding it into a scene and letting a camera roll while you stare from a distance and let everything unfold seems very close. However - there is always the possibility for a second take. Analyzing the frames, the setting and the feelings closely resemble the art of the director - but there is no second chance for content that was missed.

## **SEAMS OF THE CULTURAL TAPESTRY**

There are many common tropes in LARP design, and they usually stem from folklore. Tales of daring-do from mythologies irrelevant to the geographical space where one was born - tales that inspire and motivate people to spring into action, and to have specific goals for their characters. It is indeed peculiar; different cultures are bonded through traditions and mythologies of other countries they have never been to and may never visit. Storytelling has been engraved in our DNA for longer than we can remember, and their educational value may many times precede us - but LARP designers use that precise value in their scenarios, aiming precisely at the heart of the issue. Through narrative and established feelings and public opinion, they tackle the subject at hand quickly, and let the players empathize with the culture and reach the meaning themselves.

As such, LARP designers tend to look to obscure lore to get inspiration from: lost occult texts, folklore and word of mouth as well as narratives from different cultures. As if bards of old, keeping tradition and culture alive, they pour this narrative into a game - making it widely available for people.

These people, the audience as well as the powerhouse of the activity, find the personal meaning of what is being discussed. There are different feelings involved for a Greek person delving into the Greek Mythos, and a person from Germany. Different approaches to both people, one having a Balkan temperament while the other approaching a more Nordic point of view. Being moved by different styles of art, having blackbox be preferred for one folk and action-packed battlefields for the other. In essence - it is the understanding of different cultures and the transformation of the medium of gaming into an experience that is specifically designed to strike at the heart of what is the cultural heritage of a person. Where online games tend to produce en masse, with no great concern for personalized

detail and specifically tailored experience, LARP design drives people to educate themselves onto the very essence of each folk, their educational system and their needs as a society. It enforces an understanding of culture for the sake of something as simple as a game - and it makes learning about the foreign culture fun. It is a method to touch and connect, a way to trouble your own mind into taking yourself out of your personal bias and trying to empathize with an entirely different culture.

## **FACING YOUR INNER DEMONS**

LARP game design needs personal growth. In comparison to other games, you are there, responsible for the direction that other people will feel towards. You are there, understanding that people may be hurt, or bothered by what you created. You know they may even be physically challenged. The path of designing such games takes empathy and understanding - people need to be able to trust you with what you are putting them through.

It is not a deal of "they chose to play it". There isn't a screen and a replay game to separate the person from the game. There is a very real approach to having someone before your very eyes, and your rules being responsible for their safety and well-being. One word, written on paper in the wrong way, could result in a player breaking down, crying. One mechanic, delivered to emphasize on your personal worldviews, could scar a player forever. One line of narrative, aimed towards a specific issue, could inspire a person to pursue volunteering.

LARPing is tied to emotions. When designing a game of LARP, you need to both understand these emotions and be responsible for them - not in the sense of being a parent, but in the sense of being a caretaker. You take care of these people - your players. They need to have the perfect space to feel what you designed, to learn from it, to be challenged by it, but not to be broken by it. Not to agree with your content, but to feel free to interpret it in their way.

Directors make movies that people hold dear for the rest of their lives. Actors perform in ways that stay in a person's mind forever. But in LARP, you feel the very thing you are tasked to do on your own skin. And in that sense, the experience challenges you to pit against yourself.

Why did I insert that into my game?

Why is this important to my players?

What will they gain from it?

And the more you ask the more you learn. But this time, it is not about your players...

Your players also seek to have Agency. They seek to be responsible for the outcomes of what happens to them. They seek to know that what they do will somehow be rewarded or punished, and that they aren't mere pawns in the God Complex of the designer. Which is another grand trial - because the designer seems to find manageable ways to make order out of a completely chaotic event; to create some form of logical sequence where things follow some kind of sense. Yet in the players' eyes, it seems like a way to dictate their actions, a way to manipulate and control them. How each designer handles Player Agency, is a personal case, but the very question of how, pits you once more against yourself, asking how you want to manage your stress. Hopefully, with enough thought, you will rise above it.

## TRADEMARKS OF THE CRAFT

When approaching a LARP, people are always focused and keen on the mechanics - one would even call that a trademark skill of a LARP designer. Understanding and building game mechanics, is in my mind, one of the least important - alas necessary skills for LARP design. It is very easy to just copy paste mechanics from a game you have seen, played and from any LARP tradition that you have been used to. Safety mechanics can always be resolved with a red, yellow, green to set boundaries. Mechanics are the essence of what defines a good player (as in someone who makes good decisions that lead to success in the game), the aspect of fun within the game and lastly the flow of a game. It happens often, that people get too acquainted with a mechanic and apply it senselessly everywhere, believing that something that is inherently fun as a mechanic and they are familiar with, will make their game better. This is where your critical thinking comes in: What exactly is it that my game aims towards, and how can I best achieve it? What does this specific mechanic yield, and how does this help me?

Sadly, as with almost every part of human nature, good design comes with compromise. We can't reasonably expect everything to work just the way we want and to have the unlimited resources to make everything perfect. Perfectionism slowly burns you out and ruins your relationships with the people around. Try instead to aim for professionalism. Some player traditions will absolutely need a specific set of mechanics that is really unreasonable for your game. Some of your co-workers may insist that a mechanic must be applied, when in your opinion, it doesn't offer anything. Sometimes you need to have a new LARP game ready in 45 minutes and you have to rush the mechanic part quickly in order to focus on the characters. Knowing which hill to die upon, and where to compromise is an essential skill in any kind of design - and in my experience, it helps give a better outlook on life as a whole.

# THE WAITING GAME

I was once young and with knees that didn't hurt a lot, when I first happened upon LARP. I rushed into designing without giving much thought. At the start, you always try to be involved, give as much of yourself, play the NPCs so "everything is done right" and try to control the flow too much. Then you eventually sit the game out. Stand in a corner and look at your players. That's when it first hit you.

Just watching the players, and how they handle your rules and mechanics, your characters and narrative, gives you an insight on their motivations, their needs, what it is they capitalize on. After spending enough time, you start to develop game sense - understanding what players will flock towards, what the most involving game strats are, which player needs to get the prompt to create a cool scene, and what the players goals are. You learn to hear one sentence from each player and understand which part of the character arc they are on at the moment. And it feels great. It gives you this sense of control of a very, very chaotic process.

Many times, people try to railroad the experience of a LARP game. This essence of exerting control, of being able to monitor the kind of fun people have and knowing exactly how it is going to turn out. I find peace in understanding that, LARP is chaotic. You can in no way be ahead of your players or spoon feed them the experience. It is more of a sandbox to me and allows people to "breathe" as a character and put on something new on their bodies. This is something personal that you shouldn't rob off of them - let them be free in this experience, limited only by your rules and mechanics. As mentioned before, LARP is chaos - but that doesn't mean you don't have absolute control!

LARP games usually have a clear purpose and goal. You know and understand both the crowd you are attracting, through the marketing and branding of your game, the reason you are playing this game, and the level of fun people will have. How the game runs, in a setting where everything is chaotic and each player may make countless split-second decisions that will just ruin your game, lies in setting up good "traps" and mine fields. Buzzwords and archetypes that always have certain effects on people - such as "injustice" or "parents". Narratives that are very dear to your intended crowd such as "vampirism" or "fairies". Conflict that stems from personal understanding or interest such as "freedom" or "politics". Knowing when and where these come into play makes your run of the game smooth sailing - and you need only fine tune these traps at the moment of design!

The only issue is - knowing which "traps" and where to apply them takes lots of hands-on experience, and also a lot of personal understanding of humans. This works for me - but then again, it may not be a skill you would like to develop!

## CRAFTING A TANGIBLE VISION

Making a LARP game looks and sounds a bit like crafting your own favorite fairytale. You have the ability to bring what moves you to the table, to craft it in a way that moves others and to show them why it's great! You get to make people approach feelings that you are familiar with and delve into storylines that make your day!

Truth is, you don't need to try much. Humans are very drawn to narrative, and corporate film making has made it very easy to create and design a complete story, in a way that people will be drawn to it (Hero's Journey, the Hero with a Thousand Faces etc.). LARPing is no different, you can in fact apply all the standards of storytelling and make your life easy - only to realize that the system is flawed and works around having a protagonist. When you try to make a diverse environment, however, where people are each their own person, each seeking to have the spotlight and each wanting to delve into their own story, the archetypal narrative doesn't get you far. The outdated archetype of the "damsel in distress" or the "goofy but loyal friend" or even the "child of destiny" may be very attractive to players conceptually, because it reminds them of their favorite characters, but it leaves little player initiative and space for action. Realistically, every character in a game should have three things to do; One that is ongoing and will probably never be done throughout the game, one thing that guides them as a personality, and attaches them to a specific thing, that (surprise, surprise), happens within the game and one tangible goal that will make them successful.

For example, a child of Destiny, may want to (tangibly) defeat the monster and be done with the quest, be kind to people being oppressed and constantly strive to be their shield (as a personality guide), and aspire to be done with the prophecy and open a bakery shop (as an ongoing and impossible task), constantly giving them both things to associate with the story and to dissociate and make their own narrative.

Just one character goal that serves the game is never enough, as with real life, cause people have vast interests and motivations, and the idea of incorporating just one concept and having to fit into it, is the most certain way to either have your game end in 5 minutes, or it going on with people completely ignoring their task.

To be honest - the more you create characters for your games, the more you understand that the characters that are the most fun, are not the classic broody movie types, but those that have this little bit of drama, these small human aspirations, these burdens that they really want to share with other people. And you slowly learn to identify these in yourself too and understand their importance.

These little things will keep popping up, as you observe them in little things, a single word in a song you like that conveys meaning, a page on Wikipedia, or an add on social media, these little tidbits will pop up in the corner of your eye in whatever you do, providing you with inspiration on your next project, your next game, and characters. This small little “instinct” will be your guide away from burnouts and a quick filter on what draws your attention.

## WRAPPING UP

LARPing is a pastime activity, a hobby and a community that gives people loads of chances to learn and improve. Much like theatre, it is a place of exposure, where you as a participant bring out your genuine bodily and psychological reactions to the game. However, hosting a game gives you much to learn too. From the logistics of managing budgets, human resources and managing the project from design to run, to tying up the narrative and bring light to your vision, as well as in creating rules and mechanics, or “traps” to guide the process of your game, LARPing gives you opportunities for growth in every step along the way. The process itself pits you against your personal biases, your ego and your very understanding of people and their motivations. It calls upon you to explore the vast landscape of art and the way people have delivered it through the centuries, and to constantly search for inspiration within your everyday life. It stirs the pot of curiosity, of what could work and how it can be utilized. It urges you to make choices - much like most games do - and leaves you to grade your degree of success on your own. But most important of all, it puts you in a position of power to a number of other people - and begs you the question:

“How are you going to be treating them?”

I believe we personally aren't asking ourselves this question often enough.

And even worse, we neglect to reflect on the answer afterwards.

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