

COOLER THAN YOU THINK:

Understanding Live Action Role Playing (LARP)

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INTRODUCTION

When I was eleven years old, a friend and I walked along a strip of land paralleling a creek next to the Southern Pacific railroad tracks. The area was ruled by giant eucalyptus trees lined in rows like temple columns from a fantastical dream world. We spent some time searching for the perfect stick to use as a makeshift sword. Once we each had one to our liking, we squared off and I said, “You’ve been walking through this ancient forest for hours. Suddenly, an orc jumps out from behind a tree and attacks you!” And when I tapped my friend in the shoulder with the stick, my first larp (Live Action Role Playing) was underway.

That was more than a quarter century ago.

Since then, I have run or played in over 100 different larp experiences, which is a small number compared to many other veterans. Most of these larp events were associated with **Enigma**, the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) science-fiction, fantasy, horror and gaming fan club, founded in 1986. Enigma’s early larps were always called “live games,” and they were trial-and-error situations: we knew scant little about other larp groups and rarely recorded our own; a few photos and some random ephemera still remain, but the bulk of the materials are lost, if they even existed in fixed form. Most of Enigma’s larp events tended to fall into what is now called “theater style,” meaning we rarely had physical combat where you actually hit your opponent with something (although we had lots of combat). Our emphasis was on role-playing and character interaction, and the live games were run once only. We usually didn’t play recurring characters, and most events were managed by a handful of individuals who created totally different larp happenings inspired by everything in the broad gamut of fandom. In contrast to many of the larger, popular larp groups in America today, only about 10% of Enigma larp games resembled *Dungeons & Dragons*, *World of Warcraft*, or *Lord of the Rings*. Some examples of Enigma larp settings are: a Roman Emperor’s banquet, a series based on Napoleonic-era British naval adventures, a day at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and a night at the supernatural bathhouse featured in the Academy Award™-winning animated feature *Spirited Away*.

In all these years of Live Action Role Playing, we in Enigma were constantly experimenting: we tried different locations, styles, genres, rules, mechanics, tone, players, etc. It seems like every game was a new invention concocted by one of our larp creators, run with and for a mostly-familiar bunch of gifted players.

A large problem we had (and still have) was that we would rarely sit down to discuss the good and bad in each larp, especially not on an abstract level beyond the “That was so cool when I did this” post-game commentary. Criticism on one scenario would sometimes appear in the next larp as a new creator took a radically different approach than the last one. Or, more commonly, the best elements of one larp would resurface in others, in some strange kind of Darwinian evolution of live action role playing.

In the last few years, I have seen larp appear in both movies (*Role Models*) and documentaries (*Darkon*, *Monster Camp*), while assassin-type games generate national news coverage. Across the pond, in Europe and the Nordic countries, I watch with admiration and envy the great leaps and bounds that have moved larp from a geek hobby into a recognized art form, complete with government grants. I think Live Action Role Playing in the U.S. is approaching a critical mass just before a growth spurt. At least, I hope so. I’m here to nudge it along.

With a large amount of hubris, I am going to try to define larp as an art form. I’m not here to argue if a NERO fantasy game is better than a Mind’s Eye Theater vampire game, or if one type of player, GM, weapon, or improv style is better than another. I am more interested in discussing the underlying principles that each larp is using, and to hint at what they can all do. I want to look at the heart of the Art, the essence of Live Action Role Playing.

In addition to defining larp, I’ll attempt to delineate the boundaries and explore some of the foundations, styles, and structures of the form. I’ll also investigate the possibilities and potential for this very dynamic and creative medium of expression.

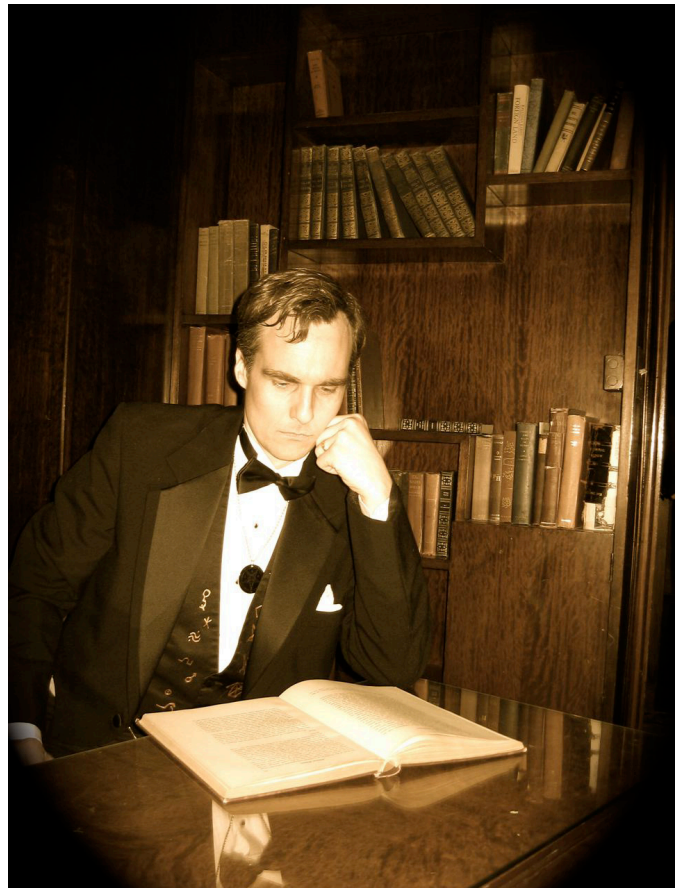
It’s a tall order, as I could be dead wrong—larp might just be the bastard child of performance art, role-playing games, and improvisational theater; it might never be any more popular than it is now, and larp will quietly go the way of the hula-hoop. But I don’t think so.

If you already agree that Live Action Role Playing is an art form, worthy of the respect that other arts have, then you might want to skip ahead to the “Strengths and Weaknesses” section. There may be some things in the first two sections that broaden your understanding of larp-art, but you can come back to them later.

If you have no idea what Live Action Role Playing is, or you think it’s a hobby at best and a waste of time at worst, then please continue reading straight through, and hopefully I can change your mind or at least make a good case for “larp as art.”

Regardless of who you are and what you think about this thing called larp, I encourage you to debate, discuss, and analyze it with others (and me). Ultimately, I hope that beginners to this amazing endeavor will be intrigued enough to try one, and veterans will be inspired to create, improve, and market their own games on a broader stage.

Aaron Vanek
Los Angeles, CA
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DEFINING LARP

Larp stands for Live Action Role Playing, so although it appears as an acronym, it's a noun in Nordic countries. I don't think the full phrase is quite clear or accurate. Does this mean that sitting down at a table and rolling dice while playing *Dungeons & Dragons* is "dead action role playing"?

For most of my life, I referred to larp as "live games" and I still use that term occasionally. But that's worse, as not all larp is a game, and I don't know what a "dead game" is. I think the term larp is too entrenched to change it at this point in time, so that's how I am going to use the word.

If you're already lost, here's my very basic explanation of what happens during Live Action Role Playing, though this isn't the simple definition I am looking for:

Two or more people each pretend to be someone or something else, called a "character," in a pre-determined imaginary setting like ancient Greece, outer space, or Middle Earth, which is represented by and takes place in a real, actual setting, like a park, a hotel ballroom, or someone's backyard. These people interact with each other and the imaginary setting through improvisational acting in the real environment for some amount of time. In most of these experiences, there is some degree of involvement from what is often called a "Game Master" or GM (also Larpwright or Storyteller), who takes on a variable amount of control over the personalities of the pretend characters (who they are, what they want) and most of the imaginary setting (where it is, what's there, etc.). The GM also may or may not be one of the characters. Through the interactions of everyone's imagination and improvisation, some kind of narrative usually, but not always, emerges. These people don't do this for anyone other than themselves: there is no separate audience—everyone is both a performer and a viewer.

I have been slowly combing through the thousand-plus pages of books from *Knutepunkt*, an annual larp conference held in Northern Europe. Each year, hundreds of creators, artists, players and fans gather in one of the Nordic countries to run larp events, hold panel discussions, present theses, and conduct forums on the nature of the medium itself. Many of those essays are collected in lengthy books and have titles like "Role-Playing as Interactive Construction of Subjective Diegeses." Fun, light stuff. Actually, I quite enjoy

them, but each article is like a big glass of dark, heady port—I can only take one a night. I have yet to attend a *Knutepunkt*.

Many of the books' articles attempt to pin down the essence of larp, with each of the many talented authors adding polysyllabic concepts from the deepest bowels of academia to the hallowed Definition of LARP. It seems that everyone has their own understanding of it, but, like Scott McCloud says in his wonderful (and highly inspirational) *Understanding Comics*, "The world of comics is a huge and varied one. Our definition must encompass all these types while not being so broad as to include anything which is clearly not comics." I have taken this direction to heart for larp, and I hope to synthesize the volumes of deep thought into something we can mostly agree on. I must also admit that I want to try and put another horse—an American horse—into the world-wide larp race for legitimacy. Reading through the *Knutepunkt* documents, I realize that here in the United States, we are way behind our European counterparts. Their understanding and use of the larp art is far ahead of ours. We need to catch up.

Finally, all or almost all of the concepts I bring up in this section has been covered elsewhere, probably in one of the *Knutepunkt* books. I am watering down the very dense prose of others to make it palatable to American audiences. If I could figure out how to include high fructose corn syrup in my words, I'd do that too.

History of Larp

I am going to briefly discuss the long and storied history of larp, mentioning only a few of the names and dates that appear in a wonderful History of Live Action Role Playing article that you can read for yourself online at Wikipedia.

The entry traces the roots of larp to the dawn of humanity with children engaging in imaginative play. It was then utilized by ancient civilizations (both Western and Eastern) as organized re-enactment events for entertainment purposes. Many nations and tribes throughout history continued the use of improvisational events with military wargames and mock combats used to train soldiers.

These improvisational events, which were related to but different from formalized stage dramas and comedies, began to spread into other areas of culture, growing in leaps and bounds as it met each new field.

Larp reached the theater through the *Commedia dell'arte* tradition of 16th century Italy and, much

later, through theater games pioneered by Viola Spolin (a founder of Second City in Chicago) and Keith Johnstone in the 1950's.

In the 1930's, the relatively new science of psychology began to use psychodrama as therapy (pushed in the U.S. by Jacob L. Moreno), which is like very personal, very focused larp.

In fiction, a 1905 book by G.K. Chesterton, *The Club of Queer Trades*, describes an organization that puts on larp scenarios for its customers, but the novel with the greatest direct influence on modern larp was *Dream Park* by Larry Niven and Steven Barnes (1981), which inspired the International Fantasy Gaming Society (IFGS).

Larp spread to the classroom through the many mock League of Nations clubs that formed during the 1920's, and resurfaced in colleges and art houses in the 1960's with "Happenings" and experimental theater. In 1966, sociology Professor William A. Gamson, a Guggenheim fellow, developed his ideas for a "simulated society" or SimSoc, at Boston College. It was a "game" to teach sociology, communication, and politics to students. The fifth edition of the rulebook is available for purchase.

The emergence of larp in its recognizable modern form was heralded in the 70's with the release of the *Dungeons & Dragons* table-top role-playing game (more on the difference between a table-top game and a larp game later). As D&D moved into high schools and colleges, some players started to get up from the table, put on costumes, and go outside for a different kind of fantasy role-playing. This era saw the birth of the Society for Creative Anachronism (1966 in Berkeley, California), the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's (MIT) Assassins' Guild, and the Society for Interactive Literature (SIL) at Harvard. Larp organizations and events also started appearing around the world in the late 70's and early 80's, as D&D and other role-playing games grew in popularity. These groups expanded, split, and prompted others to form their own larp groups not just in the mid-Atlantic and southeastern United States, where larp had been going strong for decades, but also across the world. *Treasure Trap* began in the United Kingdom in 1982, considered by some to be the first modern larp group. Although they are no longer active, many of the original players have formed their own larp clubs. The Wikipedia article also discusses similar histories of larp in the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, Germany, Russia, Australia and South Africa.

At the very least, Live Action Role Playing is ancient and worldwide.

(For a more comprehensive view of LARP history, see the essay by Brian Morton in the *Kuntepunkt* book from 2007, entitled "Lifelike," via the links in the appendix.)

So what exactly is Live Action Role-Playing?

I think it is a distinct, unique **Art Form**.

Let that sink in for a second. The online Encyclopedia Britannica defines art as: the use of skill and imagination in the creation of aesthetic objects, environments, or experiences that can be shared with others. I think that's a pretty good definition, so I'm going to use it. Let's focus on the last thing in that list: experiences.

I contend that Live Action Role Playing is the use of skill and imagination to create an aesthetic experience.

Larp is an art form? Like writing, painting, sculpture, motion pictures, music? Yes. Why aren't their larp exhibits in museums, galleries, or concert halls? Can a larp event get a National Endowment for the arts grant? In the Nordic countries, this has already been happening for years. In fact, they have already integrated larp into their schools and artistic culture. Why is America behind? Well, it's not really. We've been doing a lot of larp for along time, but we rarely call it that. More on this later.

I hope that by taking Live Action Role Playing (and calling it "larp") seriously as an art form, we can elevate what many regard as a dorky hobby into a powerful medium of expression that has many virtues that no other art form possesses. There's great strength and power in larp, if we can begin to recognize it.

There are good and bad larp events; larp has trends, movements, revolutions, notable figures, and schools of thought. One problem that I think hinders discussion and critical examination is that larp is not served well in fixed form. Therefore it is difficult to dissect and examine each larp event. It's like trying to analyze an improvisational play performed once only, in five different theaters simultaneously, without an audience, and you were one of the performers. If someone wanted to record all five shows and watch them all at the same time, it still wouldn't approximate the overall experience of Live Action Role Playing. What would happen if this improvisational play was repeated? Would it be the same, even with the same people, the same locations? I doubt it.

Because of this resistance to repetition and

distribution across the globe, I think larp is difficult to see as an art form, at least by the Powers That Be: mainstream media, the general public, and institutions that award grants (in the U.S.), even though Live Action Role Playing is very often an unrecognized part of many “normal” artistic endeavors. I’ll explain the whys and wherefores of all this in a bit. For now, I hope you will agree that larp is an art form. If not, continue reading.

Three Pillars for Larp

These are the three key elements that should appear to some degree in a Live Action Role Playing event. Sometimes these attributes appear in other arts, and of course other art elements appear in larp. When I think of an aesthetic experience and wonder if it’s larp or not, I check it against these points. Some events are “more larp” and others are “barely larp,” so these three ideas will help identify the experience.

Everyone in a larp scenario is both a participant and audience member.

If you are experiencing a larp, you don’t just passively watch, you actively participate. Everyone has a chance to define the narrative, although some people exercise this ability more than others. There must be at least two people for a larp to occur.

A Game Master of the larp usually has the most authority and ability to change the narrative: they set up the world where the players begin, and they can intervene while the larp is running, but they are not the only authority. If the GM controlled everything the characters and setting did, it would be like writing or painting. In addition to moving or shifting the story, everyone in the larp (including, and especially, the GM) is also watching what the others are doing, as an audience.

This pillar separates larp from traditional theater.

Participants in larp do not narrate their actions, they perform that action or a substitute action to represent it.

Obviously, there are exceptions to this if you are role-playing an Artificial Intelligence that has no physical form and must only speak your actions to other players that carry out your orders, but for the most part, the enjoyment of a larp is that you are really doing your deeds or a close semblance to them (more on the difference between actual actions and representational actions later).

In a larp, all five senses are engaged, something that few other art forms can claim: sight and hearing of course, but you can also feel the bite of the weapon on

your skin, smell the scent of a dangerous alien clouding the tunnel you need to crawl through, and taste that martini (shaken, not stirred) in a spy adventure. In a “normal” role-playing game, players use more of their imagination to see, hear, smell, taste and feel what the GM is describing (narrating). Although all art requires imagination, larp aids the mind’s eye with more “real” people, places, and things.

There are many methods that larp uses to engage the five senses, and, to me, the best GMs create larp events that use a minimum of narration. There are exceptions and necessary slips (for safety or practical considerations), but for the most part, larp asks people to do, not say, what they are doing. Do it, don’t tell it.

Many GMs will narrate the rules of the larp event (sometimes in a written form) at first so everyone understands the practical considerations as well as the setting and background, but once this opening is complete, a GM will often limit their talking and instead concentrate on actions: directing or acting as monsters, preparing props or sets, etc.

This part is what separates larp from traditional table-top role-playing games, like *Dungeons & Dragons*. Although they are very closely related, and each endeavor sometimes spills over into the other (larp elements can come into a table-top game and narration sometimes occurs in a larp instead of actual action), there is a very large difference between rolling dice to get through a bar brawl and getting a full body workout in one.

All participants in a larp constantly redefine their make-believe world and everything in it.

This pillar is the most important aspect to live action role playing.

The GM and role-players in a larp explicitly and implicitly need to agree on the shared construct they are in, or **bubble**; that is, the environment—doors, walls, objects and especially the people—they interact with. They may not agree exactly on what’s in the bubble, but they have to give consent that they are IN a bubble, i.e., everyone involved agrees that they are play-pretending inside a shared space.

This environment can be as small as a hotel room or as large as planet Earth. But, everyone participating agrees on the border between the imaginary world and out of bounds (the real world), often for safety’s sake. The participants should regard everything that is in the bubble through a filter: a willing suspension of disbelief, similar to what audience members in theater and film are asked to provide.

Everything inside the bubble—including yourself—is not necessarily what it really is.

What “it” is inside the bubble is dependent on your imagination and improvisational reaction to “it”. This is how squirt guns become pistols, sculpted foam becomes swords, hand-painted wooden dowels become magic wands, how your best friend becomes your arch-enemy, and, most importantly, how **you** become a superhero, pirate, knight, starship captain, or President. As part of this disbelief, however, participants need to know what is in the bubble and what is not.

Environment cannot be ignored in a larp, as it is crucial to an experience which seeks to include as much realism, or symbolic realism, as possible. Again, if you are following the “do, not narrate” requirement from the second pillar, having an actual object or accurate costume goes a long way to improving the experience. Realism means someone doesn’t narrate “Ok, so I use this nuclear napalm gun on you, and you die. Yeah.” Instead, they unleash a garden hose or can of Silly String on someone, and the poor victim already knows that water or Silly String means irradiated liquid fire because he agreed to that part of the bubble, and reacts accordingly: screaming in pain and horror.

The larp bubble can be opaque or transparent to the outside world, i.e., is it physically isolated from outside real world interference so that anything “out there” doesn’t exist in the shared imaginary construct, or does the imaginary bubble “see” real people and things that are not in the larp experience? Both are possible.

This imaginary bubble-world can also bend and flex to include new people and locations, as well as be permeable enough so people can drop in and out of character. In some larp pieces, the whole imaginary world exists inside a hotel room. In others, the whole real world is also the imaginary world (Alternate Reality Games, or ARGs, are known for this). Still, there is a mental boundary, a “willing suspension of disbelief” between the larp world and the real world. Active duty police officers and working emergency medical personnel, for example,

should not ever be considered part of the larp world.

A transparent bubble (where the imaginary larp world is nearly identical in appearance to the real world) also has interesting effects when combined with the “everyone is a participant” rule. In an Assassin-type larp, passersby who are unaware of the game (not agreeing to be in the bubble) can be unwitting participants who affect the game by preventing a “hit” by their presence as a witness.

Time is also flexible in the imaginary world, but bounded by real world time: a larp event may run for six hours, but in the imaginary bubble, hundreds or even thousands of years may have passed.

Crucially, this bubble must be maintained through the improvisational acting of the participants. In the above example of the nuclear napalm gun, good improv and therefore proper maintenance of the bubble means that after being doused with water or Silly String, the participant doesn’t just narrate “Oh, I’m dead now,” and start cleaning themselves up, they instead lie still on the ground in a puddle until the mechanics of the bubble remove them. In other words, *the shared construct that all participants agree to demands their persistent attention and improvisational acting, even if it is poor, to continue to exist.* Of course, certain parts of real world space or certain periods of time may not exist in the bubble, so you can “drop out of character”

while in that place or during that moment.

One example of a space outside the bubble is the restroom. Or, in most fantasy games, when someone calls “Hold!” loudly, everyone stops improv-pretending, the bubble ceases and real-world concerns are addressed (injury, glasses knocked off the face, etc.). A GM will usually count down and say “Lay on!” to reactivate the bubble.

This third pillar is, I believe, unique to Live Action Role Playing and is what separates it from most other art forms. Although film and theater set up their own world-bubbles, they are immutable and defined by one or a small group of people (the director, writer). For table-top role-playing, this bubble is very rigid and



small, existing only through the written rules of the game and the spoken words of the participants. Very few objects in the real world represent anything else, except possibly battle maps and lead miniature figures.

To sum up the three pillars:

Everyone in the larp experience chooses to be in an imaginary bubble, and everyone there has some amount of control over the who, what, where, why and how of the things, ideas, objects, space, pace, and results of and in the bubble. They typically (but not exclusively) enable this control through improvised action as opposed to narration. The bubble can be closely or distantly related to the real world, but the bubble must in some respect not be the real world, and everyone involved is pretty clear on the difference between the two.

Note that the purpose of doing this, the goals, are left undefined. There may be a reason for a particular larp, there may not be. It's an individual experience, so each participant may find deep meaning in larp even when none was intended.

Here's an example of a simple action that shows the differences between live action role playing and some of the other art forms mentioned:

In **larp**, a player-character walks into a hotel room and decides to open an adjoining door and stroll through. In their mind, and the minds of everyone else around them, they just stepped out of the starship's airlock without a spacesuit. Someone else may or may not try to save them. A GM might pour a bucket of ice water over the person to simulate the effect of outer space on unprotected flesh.

In **theater**, the playwright dictates from the page to the character if and when they will open that airlock, and the director tells the actor playing the character how they will open it. For each and every performance, the actor should open that same portal, at about the same time, with roughly the same motivation. This action will never be changed during the normal course of the play. The audience and other actors can do nothing to stop them. If the actor walks offstage, there's no need to simulate outer space on him or her with a bucket of water, for only the audience needs to believe they stepped into the void, and that is based on the performance. A method actor may want the ice water, but it isn't the necessary result of the action.

In a **table-top role-playing game**, a player will tell (narrate to) the GM that their character walks over to the airlock and opens it. Other characters and the GM can affect this action or its consequences, but the results will be spoken. No one has risen out of their seats. The GM can describe in great detail the effects of strolling in a subzero vacuum without protection, but the player won't feel a thing.

In a **video game**, the player-character will instruct (narrate to) the computer, via game controller, mouse or keyboard, to direct their avatar to the airlock and open it. If the outside of the ship has been programmed into the game, the door will open. The user has probably not risen from her chair, and won't feel a thing.

Larp as Art

So what kind of art is larp? Let's look at some examples of art and artistic play and see how Live Action Role Playing mixes or diverges from them.

Please note that this section is where most people like to chime in with exceptions and peculiarities. Don't forget that this is all my opinion, and you are more than welcome to disagree with my conclusions. I'll try to explain my rationale for the comparisons, but in all honesty, I think it's fun to see how these pastimes fit or don't into the puzzle of larp. If you look at them too closely, it might be hard to see where one ends and larp begins, and I think that's part of the power of Live Action Role Playing.

Larp is closest to the art forms of **theater** and **table-top role-playing**.

Theater also includes performance art; it's the idea that an audience member pays an admission fee (or not) to watch and hear someone else do something. For the most part, the audience doesn't have any control over what the performers do besides approving of the proceedings through applause or laughter, thus encouraging the actors to higher highs, or disapprove of the performance (yawns, leaving), thus discouraging them to lower lows. But most theatrical events are assumed to have a Fourth Wall, the name given to an invisible barrier between performers and audience. Some productions willingly and satisfyingly break the Fourth Wall, typically when an actor directly addresses the audience, but it's always there to start. Theater is a very voyeuristic art form, with the audience peeking into the private lives of the characters, who are usually unaware of being watched (though of course the

actors are aware of it). Once the production goes up, ordinarily the actors run the show, absent the director or playwright's interference.

Table-top role-playing is an experience where all the performers (and the Game Master) take on character roles and interact with each other to determine the outcome of a story, usually while sitting at a table and rolling funny-shaped dice. *Dungeons & Dragons*, created by TSR, Inc. and currently owned by Wizards of the Coast™, is by far the most popular version of this art, but there are thousands of other games. In this creative medium, the GM has far more control over the story narrative and interactive experience than in larp, namely because it is rare and difficult for the players to do anything but talk amongst themselves without the GM present. The adventure doesn't progress without a GM to adjudicate what the players see, hear, fight, etc. There are some new, interesting board games by Flight of Fantasy games such as Arkham Horror that are close to a GM-less role-playing game, but here the GM is in the rules, which dictates how monsters move, attack, etc.

In a table-top role-playing game, each player represents a character personality or personalities (usually just one) in an imaginary world. The Game Master represents everything else: the secondary characters and background people, the animals, monsters, populace, gods, and demons. The Fourth Wall from theater is non-existent here; everyone at the table (including the GM) is a performer AND audience member, simultaneously. Each has a certain amount of power to control the narrative at certain points through their actions, reactions, and interactions. We're very close to larp, but not quite there. The biggest difference is that **in table-top role-playing, the performers narrate their actions.** A D&D player says "I attack the orc," they don't stand up and shiv an orc in the gut (at least, I hope not). Also, for table-top role-playing, the players require a Game Master to be with them most of the time, and the physical environment has little bearing on the imaginary world (aside from maps and miniature figures): the chips on the table don't exist in the make-believe world, nor does the table, the chairs, etc.

So somewhere in between theater and table-top role-playing lies Live Action Role Playing. Let's check out what's going on at the borders between these three art forms and some other neat diversions.

How about a theater show where the audience calls out things like location and occupation to the actors on stage who then improv the scene? Is that a larp?

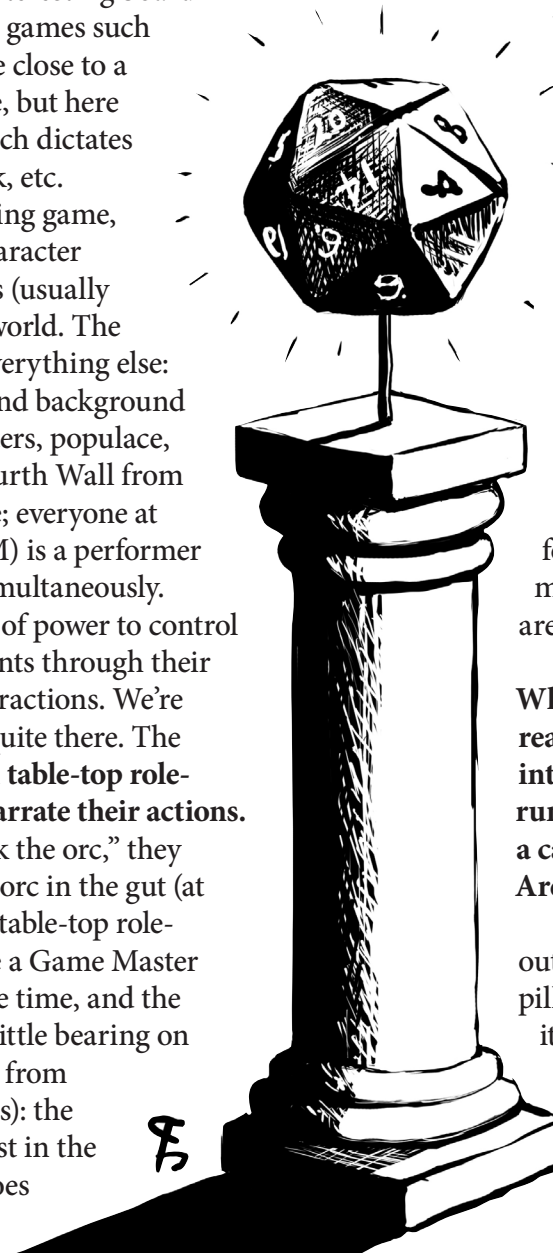
I think it's close. If you think of the audience members as the GMs, defining the world for the actors, it can seem like Live Action RP. However, what about the people who aren't called for their suggestions? They aren't participating, they are simply observing, which is more like theater. The main difference is that actors are performing for an audience, the audience isn't performing for the actors (the first pillar of larp). Plus, the audience is narrating the world, not acting it out themselves.

What about a larp where one character does nothing but sit in a closet the whole time? They just watch what happens. Don't they become an audience member, and therefore that's not a larp?

No, because if they are a character in the game, their absence from the proceedings will still affect the activities. Since that character likely has something to do with the story, not doing anything will still affect the story by their absence, as the other participants will probably adjust their interactions to search for the absent character. The missing person may only have minimal interaction, but they are still part of the overall larp experience.

What about a baseball game where a fan reaches over the wall and hauls a long fly into their glove, giving the batter a home run, or preventing the player from making a catch? What about the cheers and boos? Aren't they affecting the play?

Yes, an audience is affecting the outcome. However, this goes against the third pillar. Everything in the ballpark is just what it is supposed to be: a baseball is a baseball, an overpaid pitcher is an overpaid pitcher, etc. There's no willing suspension of disbelief for anything...maybe an UNwilling disbelief for an impossible catch or a horrible call by the umpire.



My table-top role-playing game uses music and we eat historical food and come dressed like our characters. Everyone there can and does affect the story, and we use highly detailed figures on a battle map plus our GM doesn't use any dice! What about that?

Still not a larp, but close. As long as you are still narrating your character's actions instead of performing them, you're still table-top role-playing. And doing an amazing job at that! However, the more you get away from saying "I do this," and get into actually doing it, the closer you are to a larp. In Europe, they call this "Freeform tabletop."

What about these murder mystery dinners I keep hearing about? Where you have a fine meal on a train or in a restaurant and try to figure out whodunit? Or those Murder Mystery games in a box?

Sometimes these are Live Action Role Playing and other times they are theater. Often, the Fourth Wall is in place, so that the characters are acting for an audience that doesn't really exist while they eat a fine meal. In that case, it's more like theater in a restaurant instead of on a stage. Other mystery dinners involve the audience, who are also playing roles (those of dinner guests). If everyone is agreeing on the bubble, and people do, not say, their actions, and everyone participates, however limited, it's larp.

The "How to Host a Murder" and "Murder Mystery party" series of box games are commercially available Live Action Role Playing scenarios. Each person is a participant in the narrative, acting out a role at a dinner party. The plot is very rigidly controlled however, and often the murderer is already determined, and even the player playing the character may not know it! But, this latter example meets the three criteria: everyone is participating, they are acting, not narrating, and they all agree on the "bubble", the parameters of which are set by the game in the box.

How about the play *Tamara* by John Krizanc? Is that a larp?

In *Tamara* (which I have never seen), the actors move from room to room in a large house. The audience chooses a character to follow. Thus the play takes place simultaneously in ten or so rooms, and although the audience can follow one character or the other, they aren't affecting the script, just their view and perception of it. I have heard that the actors will converse in character with the audience during intermission, so perhaps there's a bit of larp in this play after all!

How about video games? In the Sims or World of Warcraft, I play a character that affects the direction of the game, and the interactions I have with the other players affects the story.

Video games are more like table-top role-playing games, except that instead of a human GM, you have a computer that you narrate your actions to through your mouse and keyboard movements. You aren't running into battle against the Lich King, your highly-detailed avatar is. Plus, you can't do anything without the computer accompanying you (like the GM in table-top). But as more video games include full-body movements, such as with the Wii or Guitar Hero, the line between a video game and a larp begins to blur.

If, for example, someone set up a Wii Boxing night with two fighters, and everyone else present pretend to be coaches, managers, fans, or bookees (their roles can shift after every game), and they all agree that the living room is really an arena, they'd be Live Action Role Playing. (Rock Band the larp, anyone?)

Alternate-Reality Games! (ARGs) What about *I Love Bees*, the ARG for the video game *HALO 2*, or the marketing campaign for the Nine Inch Nails album *Year Zero*?

Almost. Maybe. ARGs, which are becoming very popular as a new way of marketing, are an imaginary world that takes place in the real world—the whole world, specifically. Various clues appear on websites, commercials, in songs and ads and such that lead people (participants) through a story, usually related to a product, like a video game, an album, or a television show, which is developed by extremely creative individuals.

However, many ARGs are more like elaborate puzzles on a global scale. The participants aren't able to control the outcome (pillar one), and the bubble (pillar three) might be very flimsy, or there might be multiple bubbles in the ARG. Some people involved might only be looking at the ARG as a way to get free promo stuff and sneaks of material before the general public. Other people might think the world or narrative is going one way, but the designers or other participants want it to go another way. There isn't a consistent, mutually determined "world" that is built upon by all the participants, from writers and designers to the fans.

But there are exceptions.

In Sweden, a hybrid TV series/ARG called *Sanningen om Marika* ("The Truth About Marika") won an International Interactive Emmy Award in 2007. The series was called a "participation drama" with viewers looking for Marika across Sweden, with

televised debates and clues across the Internet, radio, street art, etc. Was it a true story, was there really a missing woman named Marika? It was more than just a game, it was an alternate reality, very very close to actual reality. Those who were blogging about clues were also intertwined into the story created by the designers, adjusting the outcome (pillar one). In this case, if you participate in the Marika investigation by posting on a web forum, or putting up a clue in a public place (pillar two), you have stepped into the bubble—or perhaps the bubble enveloped you (pillar three).

I believe many people who larp are willing to include ARGs into their camp, as do I, but do those who make or participate in ARGs consider their work to be larp?

I saw some guy chasing another guy down the street with a squirt gun the other day. That's an Assassin game, right? Is that larp?

Yes, it is. In Assassin games, players pretend to be gangsters or secret agents in a round-robin circle of imaginary killings. Player A has to take out player B, who has to exterminate player C. When A takes B out of the game, A then goes after C and so on until there's only one person remaining. They are popular in many urban areas, and, according to the *New Yorker* magazine, an end-of-the-year ritual at several New York high schools.

In these larps, although the players are using their own names and likenesses, they aren't really assassins (hopefully); there is still a play-pretend element to it. The real world is their playground, except in this world, water from a squirt gun is deadly. The GM organizes and sets up the Circle of Death, and often enters the Most Dangerous Game as a hunted hunter as well when only a few or one person is left.

Although it's a very simple larp, sometimes without much character role-playing, the participants are still setting up a bubble, where those involved are assassins (pillar three). Players don't narrate their actions, they perform them (pillar two). There's no audience, because everyone involved can affect the outcome. If a real world news reporter accompanies a player on a mission, they may blow the hit due to a camera light warning the target. Once you enter this imaginary world so similar to ours except in the lethal power of squirted water, you can affect it (pillar one).

Assassin games do three interesting things that many other larps don't: time is real time, space is real space, and every person on the planet is in the game, whether they realize it or not.

These are larps, but they are rarely called or regarded as such.

What about the Society for Creative Anachronism and other historical re-enactment groups? What are they?

Civil War re-enactments, Renaissance Pleasure Faires, and other public events are more in the realm of theater, but they can be almost-larps. Most of the time, the public are observing, not participating in the story. Again, the bubble is flimsy: some people see actors executing a performance (or are actors in a performance); others willingly pretend that they are in that time period, witnessing an event for the first time. However, there is no continuous bubble around the event where everyone inside agrees that everything is something else. A paying customer at the Ren Faire who isn't in costume doesn't usually look at another paying customer in jeans and a T-shirt as a fellow peasant. But if they did, with everyone present contributing (improv acting) to maintain the illusion across the site, we'd get into a large-scale larp. I have heard, however, that something called "Ren Quest" was true larp at a Ren Faire, but that the organizers took it over one year and changed it to more of roving improv theater.

So there might be small, brief instances of larp in these events, even if the function as a whole is more on the theatrical side of the border. Besides, I have heard that a minority of SCA folks get very upset when they are called larpers.

Wargames and paintball, what about them?

Military wargames, which often utilize specialized guns that use air or CO2 to shoot balls of paint that explode upon contact, are Live Action Role Playing events, dependent on the setup. If there isn't a neutral audience (say, the press), and the participants affect the outcome through their actions, we're close to a larp. If everyone in it can agree on the bubble: where they are, that people with blue armbands are the enemy, that gel-covered paint spheres are bullets, etc., then our government is using Live Action Role Playing to train the defenders of the country.

Paintball is regarded by most as a sport. Many fields that host paintball games encourage companies to come down for some "team-building exercises" involving different variations of capture the flag or elimination games. However, if paintballers slid their perception over a bit and set up a bubble (pillar three), they could have some great larp scenarios playing characters: sergeants, medics, veterans, rookies, etc., who go on missions that have role-playing components before and after the actual combat. I would love to run or participate in a paintball larp scenario, as there are

a lot of things that could be done with safe gun combat, and not all the participants need guns or even to be field troops.

How about this thing called “cosplay”? People dressing up like Japanese animation characters or whatever. What is that all about?

Cosplay, or “costume play” is a rising trend that may be a new art form, but I think it is primarily an extension of costume art. People make costumes that resemble a pre-existing character, usually from the *manga* comics of Japan, video games, fantasy or science fiction genres. The wearer of the costume may then re-enact scenes of that character, or likely scenes that character may encounter, but it’s not larp unless and until some of the cosplayers get together and begin to improv between themselves. If they are reciting past lines, or performing in a masquerade show before an audience, they are acting as performance art. I have not been to a cosplay convention, but if there was a place and time where costumed people could come into, say, a bar (real or fake) and role-play their character with the others in a shared imaginary world, without any non-costumed participants, that could be larp. I have been to three events that had this conceit, that is, a conflux of different times and dimensions, where any character from anything could interact with others. The first was called *Dimensional Rip Bar*, the second was called *Xatrian Crux*. Both of these were clearly Live Action Role Play. The third, the *Labyrinth of Jareth*, was more of a masquerade and theater performance, though as more people “get into character” and stay in play-pretend, shades of larp appear. I have heard of some cosplayers meeting in a bar or room and improvising as their characters, which, to me, is Live Action Role Playing.

Two brothers playing cops and robbers in their backyard? Live Action Role Playing?

Yes. If the two of them are playing characters, even as basic as “thief” and “cop”, and making up a narrative in a world they mutually create, they’re engaged in larp. If mom is watching but not participating, this can still be a larp if the boys aren’t performing for mom, and

instead doing it for themselves. If mom is involved (say, as the judge), it’s still a larp.

It doesn’t take much, and, if we accept this simple childhood act of play-pretend as live action role-playing, we can trace this art form back to the earliest days of humanity, possibly even one of the first art forms.

There are strong arguments against labeling childish play-pretend as Live Action Role Playing. Some theorists argue that larp contains much greater complexity and meaning than a kid’s game, and that larp is best when created by adults. Which brings up one area of role-playing that I am purposefully ducking: erotic role-playing. I don’t think that a larp needs to be complex or deeply meaningful to be considered part of the art form. There are simple and complex versions of larp, good and bad instances of it. *Mall Cop* is no *Citizen Kane*, but they’re both movies.

I hope you are beginning to see the boundaries of the larp art form by what’s on the edges and how Live Action Role Play comes into and influences other entertainments. Notice too, that these borders are fluid (a good thing, in my mind) and cross over one another: two larp events I experienced featured a component where the players put on a play. Suddenly, the larp characters became audience members while other larp characters recited memorized lines and performed set actions that may or may not influence the larp story.

I must also mention something that lies right on the border of theater and larp: *Dungeonmaster*, a theatrical play that has been running in North Hollywood for a few years. In it, audience members become characters in a larp that is run by the director of the play. Each week is different, and it features improvisation by the people on stage. However, not all the audience members are characters, nor can all the audience members affect the story. Those who are picked to go on stage, however, can. I think of this as a theatrical play using Live Action Role Playing, but depending on your point of view, you might see it as wholly one, fully the other, or neither. Either way, it’s unique, and I’d like to see more things like it.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

All art forms have their strengths and weaknesses. These are qualities inherent to the medium that can either work for or against it in shaping an aesthetically pleasing experience for those involved. For example, literature is best at getting inside the head of the character, hearing their thoughts. However, literature is slow, and it doesn't have the immediacy of a striking visual image or the reverberations of an electric guitar solo.

This is not to say that specific works in any medium cannot overcome their weaknesses, nor that they are always successful in utilizing their strengths, but this is where the talent of the artist(s) come into play. And this is not to say that one art is superior to another, simply that they are different, and it's wonderful that they are. I think it's a testament to the beauty of humanity that we have so many different ways of expressing ourselves.

Let's look at what the Art of Live Action Role Playing does well and poorly.

Sympathy, Empathy, and Our Senses

Live Action Role Playing engages all five senses. I wish the creators of larp events would use more of this to their advantage, especially the senses of smell and taste. But, in a well-made larp experience, not only are the five senses utilized but also the participant's physical, mental, and emotional aspects. In a game with combat, the physical is certainly used, although there's much more to the physical element than combat. Many games have some kind of puzzle or problem that needs solving, which requires mental faculties. Finally, good games also include the emotions of the participants: fear, love, hate, envy, joy, etc. The emotional aspect of a larp can make for one of the strongest experiences ever for a participant. I am sure that many veteran larp fans have stories of people crying at games, or being truly frightened, or mad with rage. This is because, unlike most other art forms, the participant, you, are experiencing the story directly. You're not watching it on a big screen, or on a stage, or in your imagination while you turn the page. **You** are feeling the sting of a killing blow, watching a loved one walk away from you forever, hiding belly-down in a dark tunnel just outside the lair of a snarling beast.

Art evokes an audience's sympathy and/or their

empathy. Our sympathy is generated when we feel bad for someone else; their plights or rapturous heights pull us along as beings of the same species. But it is quite distinct in that the performer is another person, and we feel for them.

Empathy is evoked when we feel with the performer because we have gone through a similar situation, so we can relate to what they are going through. Empathy means we put ourselves in their shoes, and we feel with them.

Larp might be the most empathetic of the art forms, because you *are* the participant. You are experiencing what you experience, and feel as you feel because, well, you're doing it. Although method actors (and perhaps all actors) often experience the emotions of the characters they play, this isn't required for their art to be good. In other words, the job of an actor is to evoke in the audience certain emotions. If that means the actor needs to feel that emotion internally, so be it. But many fine thespians can bring the house to tears without breaking down themselves. In role-playing, though, your emotions can be activated if you simply allow them to be. The audience-participant has greater control over the ups and downs of their own egos. This is one of larp's greatest strengths: *giving control over the artistic experience to the audience-participant*.

A Democratic Art

Larp is one of the most democratic of arts because of the shared power over narrative storyline. Yes, GMs typically have greater control than players, however, it is not total. Most art forms, with the exception of games, have a degree of passivity attached to them: the audience sits back and lets the artist entertain them. In the case of literature, some work is required: you need to move your eyes, turn the page, and let the words activate your imagination. But for a larp, a player can drastically shift the best-laid plans of GMs into new territory, something the original creators didn't expect. And for the participants, they may never know that that new direction was unintentional. That particular larp story went that way, and the other participants can go with it, push it along, try to stop it or shift the direction. What other art form can so easily handle the creative input of dozens or even hundreds of people simultaneously, while the experience is occurring? What other art form excels and flourishes with the activities of all the audience members, or that can completely surprise even the originators (GMs) on every performance?

Finally, the cooperative nature of larp means that the work continues even if someone is not present. This is most noticeable to a GM. In a larp experience, the original creator of the story cannot be everywhere at once, monitoring every interaction between every player simultaneously. Yet the story continues without them, as players are left to their own devices without GM supervision. Since everyone is an author to the larp narrative, the loss of one or some of the people will certainly affect it, but the action will not grind to a halt when someone steps out of the bubble.

The Soft Underbelly

Larp is not a perfect art form, none are. There are some distinct problems with Live Action Role Playing that can spoil the experience.

First and foremost, the quirks of the participants and the environment heavily impact the overall aesthetic expression. If you are in a larp with a group of immature idiots, or you are playing pretend for a clueless GM, chances are even the best role-players will be hard pressed to enjoy themselves. Furthermore, even a great larp event can fail for a participant who doesn't "get it." Since each larp instance is unique, many factors can make or break the effect. Other art forms are more reliable. It shouldn't matter if you're in a drive-in theater, at home watching a video, or reclining in a leather seat before an IMAX screen, a good movie should fire your spirit. Certainly different viewings can result in a better or worse experience, but you don't see an entirely different movie because the theater is different. With larp, you do. Every participant, GM, and environment is a variable in the larp equation.

In my experience, it is nearly, but not totally, impossible to please all the participants in any given larp. Because each larp is unique, it's difficult (but again, not impossible) to learn from mistakes and successes. What worked last time might not work this time, or, what didn't work last time might work this time. This uniqueness is larp's greatest strength, but also its greatest weakness.

A second weakness is the communal nature of larp. Authors, painters, and composers can and typically do work alone, and enjoy the art they are creating; a

larp cannot exist without at least one other person to interact with. A violinist playing in a forest is still making art, but one person Live Action Role Playing is either talking to themselves or daydreaming (you can be temporarily alone and larping, but someone else, somewhere, needs to help you define the bubble). This social requirement usually means that some planning must occur, for the participants need to agree on what is inside the bubble they are about to inhabit. More often than not, a large amount of staging goes on for larp events, from reserving a location, creating characters and fabricating the rules or mechanics to participant recruitment and training, prop building, and costume making. This pre-production can take months or even years.

Related to this is the difficulty in recruiting other participants. Many people are reluctant to perform in front of others, and are very shy about taking on a personality other than their own. I have had many people ask me if they could come to a larp event and just watch, but since this isn't theater, I always try to create a character for them that is equal to their improvisational abilities. Still, many adults haven't really used their imagination, improvisation, or storytelling ability in many years, and are creaky at first. But I have often found that once they relax and realize that they are equal to everyone else, and can "jump into the spotlight" (and there are many spotlights, one for each participant) when they want to or not, many newcomers quickly acclimate and become very engaging participants. But there will always be that hurdle of a "new thing" to leap over.

A final weakness of Live Action Role Playing is the shackles of time and location. If a participant wishes to run to a store in the bubble to purchase something unexpected by the GM, that prop is often ad libbed or created on the fly, often with less-than-satisfactory results. In illustration, literature, and table-top role-playing, nothing envisioned under the sun can't be immediately created or described. A larp event is heavily bounded by real world space and time.

THE LARP SPECTRUM: VARIANTS TO THE FORM

I'm now going to take a closer look at the elements of the art form itself. This is where most discussions (a.k.a. "arguments") about larp occur between practitioners. Everyone has their preference for certain aspects of larp, myself included. I have read and heard a lot of criticism about different areas and methods of Live Action Role Playing. Many people like to categorize larp events into walled containers, i.e. **theater-style** or **physical combat**. However, I think we would all get along better if we viewed these different styles as a **spectrum**, with two points and a lot of room to slide around between them. Think of these aspects like adjustable settings. What happens if you turn one part all the way to one side, and leave everything else in the middle? If you are an experienced larp creator, try to see where your events normally fit on the different bands or facets of the spectrum, and then imagine what would happen if you radically altered one or more of the other factors.

Finally, this spectrum is content-neutral. These settings can apply to a fantasy, science-fiction, horror, or even experimental and non-genre larp.

Participants: Few or Many?

It may take two to larp, but I don't believe there is a maximum number of participants. I have yet to experience it, but some of the European larp events feature thousands of players, a legion of GMs, and take place over a weekend at a medieval castle. If the creator of an ARG turns over the story to the players (instead of waiting for them to solve puzzles), the potential for participants can jump to millions. I have no idea how to allow a million people the ability to alter a storyline, that's for more creative people to figure out. So this part of the spectrum runs from two participants to, say, six billion.

Time

A Live Action Role Playing scenario can run for a few minutes to a week or longer. This is the continuous duration of the bubble without breaking (or minimal breaking). It's the length of time that the participants remain in character and the imaginary world is active and operating. The majority of Enigma larps last from 5-6 hours, while many fantasy-based larps run for a weekend.

But consider the possibilities of running a larp that's less than one hour long or extended for a month. Europe already has performed the latter, called *Momentum*, and Mike Young of Interactivities Ink has created a few silly five-minute larps. The ends of this band run between five minutes to a year, with the vast majority of larp experiences falling around four to 48 hours. Remember, this is the time that represents continuous creation of the bubble.

Stay Tuned for Next Week's Adventure

A larp can run once, sometimes called a "single-shot," or can be broken up into chapters that are played out every weekend, as long as players keep showing up and GMs continue participating. This is the part of the spectrum that determines if you need to consider one short scenario, or have the luxury of long epic quests to toy with. Is your larp happening only once, three times, twelve times, or will it continue indefinitely for years, as some of the fantasy-based larp games have?

In a continuing larp, participants don't need to represent the same characters, and many changes can occur (new GMs, new locations), but overall, the grand narrative is the same. A continuing larp may also have a long break in between chapters, lasting years. And some larp events spawn sequels, but these might be separate single-shots, not two or three parts to a larger, grand whole.

The two ends for this part of the spectrum are one single instance and hundreds of sessions.

Note that these first three facets of a larp should be determined before commencing. When recruiting participants (or considering participating in a larp), these things are usually revealed or at least known by the GMs: how many participants in it, how long do we play, and do we ask them back at some point in the future?

Who's Driving: Players vs. GMs

This might be the most contentious part of Live Action Role Playing. It certainly is the most fluid, able to shift not only rapidly, but also frequently, both before and during an event.

Who is in control of the experience, and more importantly, when? Most larps have a distinct separation between those who plan and control the environment, and those who interact within it. GMs are usually the first to plan a larp; they reserve the

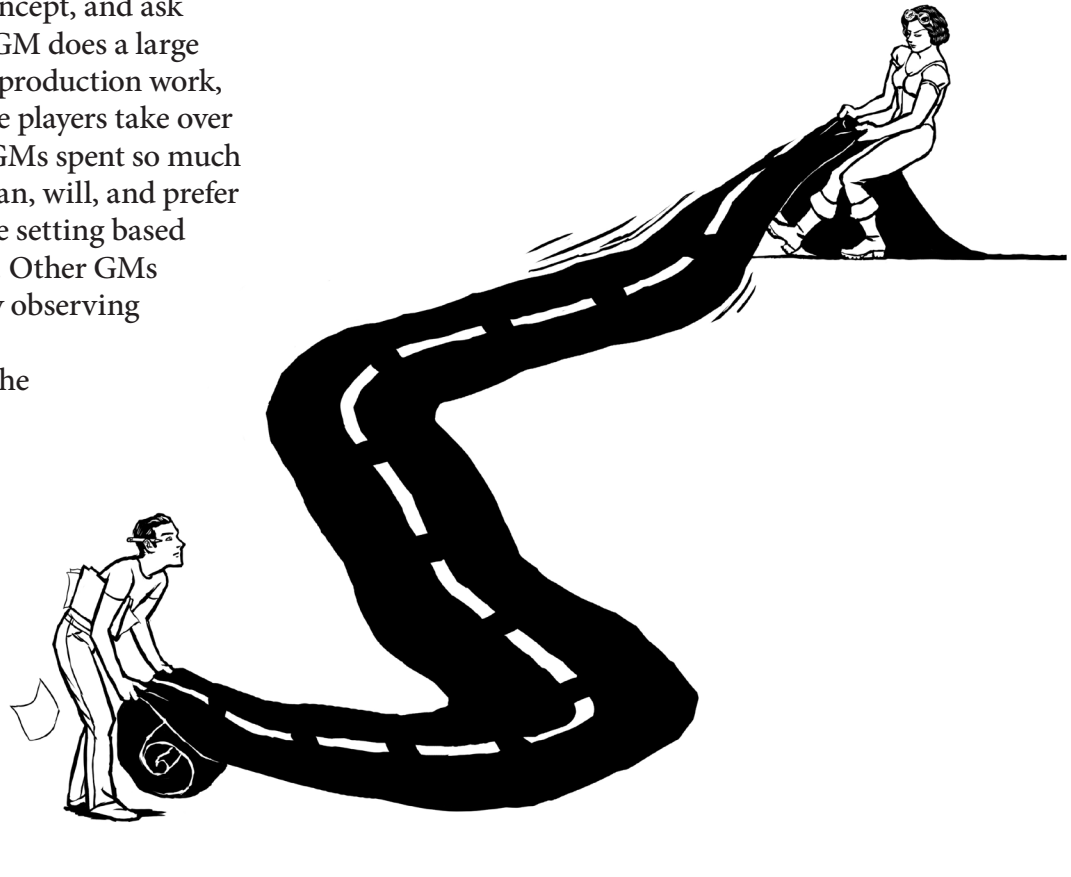
location, dream up the general concept, and ask players to join them. Typically, a GM does a large amount of behind the scenes pre-production work, and when the bubble activates, the players take over and run through the setting the GMs spent so much time and energy on. Some GMs can, will, and prefer to step into the larp and adjust the setting based on the other participants' actions. Other GMs take a hands-off approach, simply observing the results of their scheming.

This control is taken right at the beginning, usually at the point of character creation. Who develops the personalities that the participants will improv, the GMs or the participants themselves? Again, look at it as a spectrum, not an absolute. At one end, a GM can hand over a character they completely manufactured to a role-player to play. At the other end of the spectrum is a player who completely makes up a character on their own, hands it over to a GM, and the GM has to adjust their background and story to accommodate the participant's character. In this way, players can influence the story before they even show up to the event!

Enigma mostly took the latter course: a GM would describe a setting for a larp and ask for characters. Those wishing to participate would write up a persona they would like to represent. From there, the GMs would try to construct a narrative, or potential narrative, around these personas. Connections between characters and plots were derived from the information supplied by the participant-players. Which two characters can be long lost lovers? Current enemies? Who knows whom, and why?

But other GMs use more of a "casting call" approach, auditioning or asking for certain types of people to play characters they (the GMs) have already created. There may be opportunities for the players to add or slightly alter to their character, but the germ of the concept came from the GM. Or, a GM sets up the "rules" that limit the attributes and skills of the characters.

And it is also possible to mix these two approaches: some characters are pre-written by the GMs, others are



written by the players.

As the larp commences, control may also shift: a GM may act like a generator at the center of the location, spewing out quests and monsters for the players to overcome, or, the GM steps back and allows the players to achieve their goals, often at the expense of other players. Another way of looking at this is: are the player participants only interacting amongst themselves, or are they united against the machinations of the GMs?

Example: in a bar, people argue and flirt and fight. This is a player-based conflict system, where a GM should not be required except for disputes or questions, like a referee. Or, at this same bar, some people get together and decide to investigate mysterious noises heard in a nearby cave. Inside is a labyrinth of traps and monsters they need to overcome. This is a GM vs. player scenario, where the impetus for action and story is generated by the GM, and presented to the players, who interact with it.

And of course, there's a lot of wiggle room in between: in the first bar, a GM may declare or set up a situation where the alcohol runs out. In the second, two of the characters in the cave decide they want to ambush and rob their fellow explorers and ignore the noises that brought them there in the first place.

The far point on this band of the larp spectrum represents complete Game Master control, which I think is just outside a true larp, because one person or group of people having absolute control over others is more like storytelling to an audience or directing a play.

The opposite side is complete player control. It is entirely possible to have a larp without any GM interference. This is what happens when two boys play cops and robbers, both have equal say in the narrative, beginning to end.

I think most larp events lie somewhere in the middle, where a GM sets up the initial environment, role-players create their own characters within a framework devised by a GM, and during the larp, the GM is asked to come up with elements based on other participants' requests like "Let us sally forth and cleanse the forest of all evil!" as well as releasing their own plot devices on the others.

What would happen if a few players came up with characters and asked a GM to create an environment for them to interact inside? What if a larp had a "rotating GM authority" during the bubble where any single player could compete for the power to change rules or settings of the game like a GM? But this power is only maintained until another player takes it away, possibly reversing the first GM's plans. There's a tabletop role-playing game by Jonathon Walton entitled *Geiger Counter* that does just this; use rotating GMs for a more consensual game. Could a LARP of this style be far behind?

Again, this part of the larp spectrum is the most contentious. If a player refuses to open the door to reveal the lifelike dragon the GMs spent all month making, do they (the GMs) have a right to force the characters to open the portal? If yes, can they also force them into the lair? What makes for a better larp experience? What is fair to the participants, including the GMs? Again, realize that control shifts between participant to participant (including the GMs), and moment-to-moment, from the first idea to the final resolution.

"You" – You or not you?

This section of the spectrum is heavily based on the third pillar of larp, the bubble. The basic question is: *are you role-playing yourself or not?* In some larps, players are themselves but in an imagined setting. ARGs truck almost exclusively on the "players are the characters" highway. At the other end of the spectrum is someone

who is playing someone decidedly NOT themselves, as far removed as possible. This could mean they are playing many different personalities or a non-human, e.g., a non-sentient giant eggplant.

This spectrum has interesting game effects; if you are playing yourself, certain actions such as mutant powers or divine miracles are typically very limited. Instead, you know whatever you know, you do whatever you do. This can be very attractive to many people, eager to challenge their full faculties. But there's also a camp of larpers who want to escape their normal lives, who want to do cool things not possible in the mundane world. In that case, mechanics are often used to simulate these actions. For example, for a western-themed larp I ran, I couldn't come up with any good mechanics for cheating at cards. Any power or card or metagame note (the skin of the bubble is the metagame) would tip off the other player characters that something fishy was going on in the card game. In the end, we didn't have any characters that played expert card sharks, as I wanted the game to have few mechanics. But that limitation meant a player who barely knew poker in real life couldn't accurately portray a rounder or swindler.

In the larp based on the *Spirited Away* movie by Hayao Miyazaki, we had three characters that were represented by avatars: one was a cat hand puppet, another was a small action figure of *Samurai Jack*, and a third was a Shao-Lin monk represented by a tiger and dragon hand puppets. These are interesting examples of "not you" in that the player wasn't quite seeing, hearing, or feeling as the puppet, but it was still closer to total immersion than an avatar from a video game. Sometimes the "not you" side of the spectrum doesn't just mean different than your own personality or intelligence, it could also mean not your physical being.

Humans are complex creatures, and we often "pretend" to be someone else in our daily lives—larps are open to you being you, or you being any number of other people or things, but of course, it's all YOU. The difference is how others (and yourself) *perceive* you to be while inside the bubble. To be permanently "stuck" thinking you were an orc would lead to trouble, but knowing that there is an orc "in you", or that personality is within your ability to improvise, can be very healthy or at least revealing for your overall psyche—you know when to bring it out, when to squelch it.

As a thought exercise, consider that many celebrities have personas. If their fans believe they are talking to

the persona, an argument could be made that it's almost like larp. For instance, attending a Ziggy Stardust concert (played by David Bowie). Or drinking with Dr. Gonzo (Hunter S. Thompson)? Is comedian Stephen Colbert really a conservative? Some believe him to be. Are they in character when not before an audience?

Finally, this spectrum applies to the GMs as well as the players. A GM can be role-playing a GM of a larp scenario, or they can improvise as things they certainly are not: a demon lord, a child-princess, a rabid wolf or an insane artificial intelligence...sometimes in the same evening.

Plot: Wide or Narrow, None or Many, Fixed or Fluid?

How structured is a larp event? Should there be an overall narrative in the classic sense (beginning, middle, end), or can the participants simply “hang out” and

improvise their characters? This is where **plot** enters.

I define plot as something the characters need or want to do. This desire might come from a GM (in the character's background), another player (“Wanna help me rob them?”) or the player herself (“I am going to get my revenge.”)

Most larp functions have some kind of plot(s) laced through them. Plot gives purpose to the characters, and resides solely in the imaginary bubble. A plot isn't “see my old friends in costume,” or “get back to camp to get my asthma inhaler,” which are real world non-bubble needs and desires.

Plots are part of the characters, not the real people portraying them.

For the GMs, who are also participants in the larp, the environment or setting might also have goals: the undead want to walk, earthquakes want to open up ancient tombs, storm clouds want to release lightning bolts.



This branch of the spectrum has three qualities, each with a range:

Wide or Narrow?

Wide plots affect many characters. In some Enigma larps, we called this an “überplot” as it was the main trunk of the game upon which most (but not all) other plots sprouted. Example: in a larp based on the “Season of Mists” story arc in Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman* comic book, the überplot was to determine who would own the Key to Hell by the end of the event. Note that oftentimes a character can avoid a wide plot or miss it entirely (which usually aggravates the person), but like gravity, it pulls on everyone in the bubble.

Narrow plots affect few characters, possibly only one. These are usually a character’s personal goals, such as “avenge my father’s death” or “obtain inner peace.” Although other characters can affect narrow plots, they are less likely to be aware of them. Sometimes small deeds can have a serious consequence on one character. A narrow plot can conflict with the wider plot, or be completely independent of it.

Both wide and narrow plots can progress or stagnate during the larp depending on the interactions of the participants (both the GMs and the role-players). Sometimes a majority of characters concentrate on their narrow plots, leaving any wider narrative arc to fester. Other times, characters forget their differences (the narrow plots) and concentrate on the larger issue at hand. GMs often intervene when wide plots are ignored, as those are usually the purview of Game Masters, and they likely spent a lot of time and energy on the nuances and props of the wide plots and want those dominoes to fall. Whether this interference is healthy for the larp or not is unique to each participant in each game, so I leave that debate to the participants in their after-larp party.

None or many?

The number of plots in a game can range from zero to thousands, depending on how many participants you have. Of course the more plots, the more overlap is possible, e.g. one character wants to steal a jewel from another character who must keep it at all costs and has hired a guard to protect it. That’s one plot that threads through multiple characters.

Zero plot means that the participant has a character background and personality, but they don’t have known wants or needs. Perhaps they have

amnesia? Or their plot hasn’t been activated (waiting for the old wizard to arrive). Or, a larp can start simply with a bunch of characters in a setting. It won’t take long, however, for other participants (GMs or players) to start creating plots in the absence of one: “Why are we here? Where is the bar?”

It may seem like a larp without any plot will be dull and boring, but Enigma’s *Dimensional Rip Bar* larp scenarios were mostly excuses for participants to enjoyably interact with each other (some characters had plots, however). I found that it is beneficial to have some characters in every larp that have few or no plots to begin with. As the larp progresses, these characters have ample opportunity to select the plots they wish to be a part of or create their own, making them wild cards in the entire experience.

A larp with **multiple plots** offers many things for many people to do. The larp plots can be distributed unevenly, meaning some characters are involved with more than one plot at a time. This number will likely fluctuate as issues are resolved and others arise. A larp that begins with zero plot may end with many story threads (plots) cascading across the bubble.

A larp with only a few plots (say, three or fewer) usually only has wide plots. And a game with many plots, like an amount equal to the total number of participants, usually means that they are mostly narrow plots. But I have heard of larps where one or only a few characters were behind the plots, and the other players were simply support for them.

Note that all participants in a larp, by virtue of being a participant, should have the ability to start, move, shift and end plots. Of course others may resist with unequal force, like the GMs. Who holds the throttle on the plots is closely related to the issue of control (above). If you find your larp events falling into one category, say, heavy GM control over multiple wide plots, consider, as a creative thought exercise, what would happen if you changed one aspect, like more player control over multiple narrow plots.

Some plots never achieve resolution, others end but create many offshoots. Some characters obsess over one plot; others never get involved. Like control, plot in a larp can flow like water.

Programmed or Spontaneous?

Finally, plot can be akin to a theater or movie script. Unlike the general face-to-face interaction of the participants, some plots are usually pre-planned, e.g., a Beast will ravage a village unless the characters stop it. Not only is the character of the

Beast drawn up ahead of time, a costume or prop must also be built. There is therefore a third band to plot: **programmed** or **spontaneous**. The GMs usually have a few locked plot elements—the Beast attacks at the climax, so put the Beast suit on at midnight—but the characters can freely create, alter or ignore plots. The difference usually comes from the production side of the larp (props, costumes, etc.). In some larp creations, the GMs have enough materials available that they can introduce or remove plot elements as easily as they change masks. For other plot parts, it is set in stone, sometimes literally, to occur a certain way in the game. As to the characters, sometimes they have certain dialogue or behaviors pre-planned for the game, and just await the right trigger to unleash it. Other times, they have no idea how they are going to represent the character, and improv it all based on their background and goals. They may start the larp with a few possible plots (“story seeds”), or create these on the fly as other plots progress. The other participants, including the GMs, then react to these new plots, ideally encouraging and helping them along.

Getting Things Done: Actual and Representational, Simple and Complex

In this imaginary bubble where the participants are playing pretend, certain things that are dangerous or unreal can occur. How are these things presented? How can one character assault another without really causing injury to the participant? What happens when a character attempts to cast a magical spell?

The bubble handles these actions through the **mechanics**. Mechanics are the guidelines that dictate what needs to be done for participants to perform an action that they cannot or should not do in reality. These are sometimes called the larp rules, but I think of the rules as larger commandments that dictate the borders of the bubble; in other words, a rule would be that you cannot attack another participant inside a real restroom, or if they are sleeping, or if someone yells “Hold!” A mechanic is how a participant is able to summon a rainstorm, command an army, travel through hyperspace, or even have sex, all without really doing it.

Actual or Representational?

Mechanics have two parts, both of which are variable. The first runs from **actual** to **representational**. Actual means you really do it: you really jump over a pit, you really hit someone with intent to harm, you really read a book and try to memorize the words and actions for a spell. Representational means that action is abstracted through something else. In table-top role-playing, representational means rolling some dice after narrating “I jump over the pit.” In larp, the representational actions can also be dice rolling, or using rock-paper-scissors, or drawing a playing card from a deck. The variety, ingenuity and complexity of representational actions in larp is really amazing.

Again, this is a spectrum. Hitting someone with a boffer (foam sword) is much closer to actual than representational, but it’s still not a real sword. Conversely, drawing a card from a deck and adding a skill bonus to the number and using math to compare it to your opponent’s number to determine the victor in combat is pretty far removed from swinging a haymaker punch at someone, i.e. very representational.

No matter where a mechanic rests on the actual/representational spectrum, the participant is still **doing something** instead of narrating their action, although I concede that speaking is doing something. A pure representational action could be narrating that action, thus putting that mechanic (but perhaps not the whole larp) into the realm of table-top role-playing. Most representational mechanics are still some kind of physical action, e.g., throwing a foam ball at someone. They just aren’t the impossible or dangerous actual actions, like summoning an air elemental or launching a fireball from a catapult.

Simple or Complex?

In addition to being actual or representational, the mechanics can be **simple** (pulling the trigger on a squirt gun) or **complex** (reciting memorized lines, solving puzzles). Some larp groups have rulebooks that are 200 pages or longer, many of them devoted to Byzantine mechanics detailing the workings of magic for a fantasy setting. A complex system of mechanics has different actions for different effects; in other words, casting an invisibility spell involves a different action than casting a binding spell. In a simple mechanics system, one action can work for both; say, using rock-paper-scissors against an opponent. If they lose, the spell works, no matter if it’s Sleep or Lightning Bolt or Shrinking.

Some aspects of the bubble can have simple mechanics, other parts might have complex ones, and some things participants might do is actual, and other things they do might be representational. It is up to the participants, particularly the GMs, to decide ahead of time how the mechanics will work. The more familiar the participants are with this system, the smoother the larp operates.

Here are four examples of mechanics governing the same situation: a character trying to get drunk in the bar:

Simple – Actual = drinking real alcohol, really getting drunk

Simple – Representational = drinking soda pop and pretending to be drunk

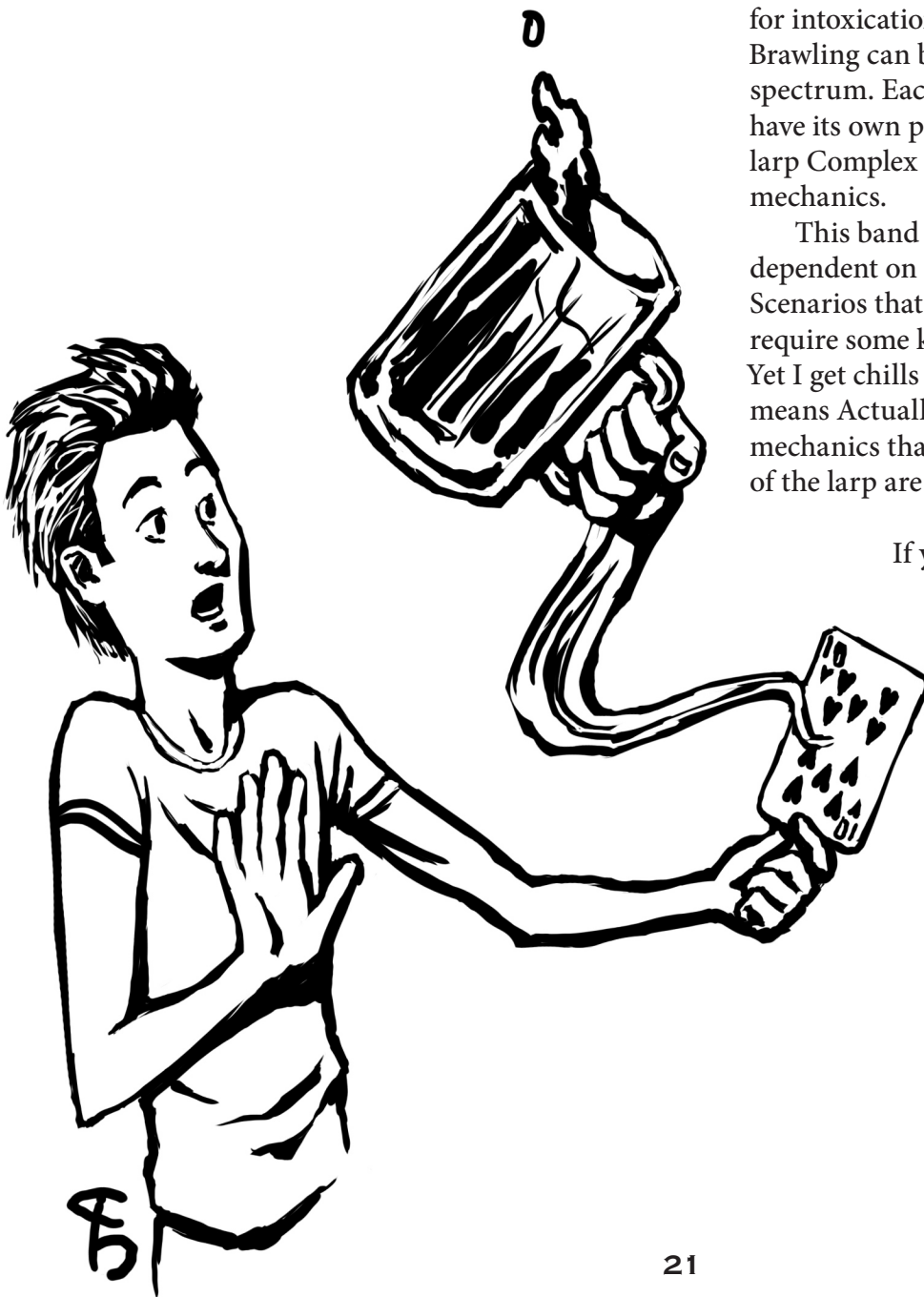
Complex – Actual = Reciting a specific phrase to obtain a specific-colored straw, then placing it behind a curtain and drinking whatever liquid a GM puts the straw into (possibly alcohol, possibly water), and reacting accordingly

Complex – Representational = drawing a card from a pitcher and subtracting it from your character's Tolerance Score, then comparing that result on a chart to represent how sloshed you are, role-playing accordingly

No matter which of these mechanics is used for intoxication in this larp, the mechanic for Bar Brawling can be on the complete opposite on the spectrum. Each mechanic for each action can have its own properties. This can make the overall larp Complex if there are many different Simple mechanics.

This band of the spectrum is heavily dependent on the tone and genre of the larp. Scenarios that feature magic are very likely to require some kind of representational mechanic. Yet I get chills up my spine if using magic in a larp means Actually chanting arcane words. Using mechanics that fit neatly in with the other aspects of the larp are extremely important.

If you make or participate in Live Action Role Playing, by looking at the elements that you are using, you may be better able to match the form to the style, tone, and genre you are interested in creating. This leads us to the next section and the final band of the Spectrum.



THE WIDE WIDE WORLD OF LARP CONTENT

The Spectrum of Form relates to the general qualities of a Live Action Role Playing experience; it creates the bubble. The Spectrum will define who is in the larp, how long it lasts, how it operates, etc. Form separates the bubble from real life.

Content is what it is like inside the bubble, the looks, sounds, smells, and tactile sensations.

The Familiar

Most of the larp events that I have seen outside Enigma, especially in the United States, roughly fall into two major categories. The first is **fantasy-based** larp, which resembles the *Dungeons & Dragons* table-top role-playing game. Participants of these larps, which are usually called “games,” can expect swords and sorcery, trolls and ghouls, clerics and thieves, dark forests and open fields, gold and jewels. *D&D* is easily the most known of all role-playing games, and at the height of its popularity in the late 70’s, it wasn’t much of a leap for players to begin dressing up as their characters and begin to play their games in the flesh. Most of the major established larp groups in America (NERO, IFGS, Shattered Isles, Darkon, Dagorhir, Realms of Conflict, etc.) have a continuous campaign in a fantasy-based bubble.

If not for these groups and others running their larp on a regular basis, constantly bringing in new people to the larp art, it is highly doubtful whether Live Action Role Playing would be as known or practiced as much as it is today. Although I believe that larp would still exist, since it has been around before written language, it wouldn’t be seen as anything more than “childish play-pretending,” and remain perpetually in its infancy. We all owe a great deal of debt to those who have pioneered larp by taking their *D&D* games beyond the table.

On the other hand, fantasy-based larp is so ubiquitous it is often confused for the art form itself. When non-larp people hear someone say “I’m going to a larp this weekend,” they probably think that person is going to put on elf ears and re-enact scenes from J.R.R. Tolkien’s books in a park. Fantasy is to larp like superheroes are to comic books: that’s what “normal” people think of when you mention the term. But the art form is so much greater than one genre or aspect of it. Until Live Action Role-Players and creators can differentiate between **form** and **content**, larp will remain stuck in its adolescence. Rather than making assumptions about elf-ears, our outsider should be wondering what

his friend’s larp is going to be about. It should be the same question as when they are told a friend is going to see a movie, a play, a concert, or dive into a new book. There’s nothing wrong with watching *Lord of the Rings* or playing *Dungeons & Dragons* over and over again, but there’s so much more you can do in larp. The form of larp might appeal to many more people if there was content beyond the mythical medieval.

The second most popular larp type is the dark supernatural-based *Mind’s Eye Theater*, which adapts the *World of Darkness* series of role-playing games published by White Wolf into a larp format. The biggest of these types is based on the RPG *Vampire: The Masquerade*. These games have a heavier emphasis on role-playing, with less physical combat. They are fueled by political machinations, acquiring, holding, and manipulating power and authority through any means necessary, including duplicity, misdirection, seduction and intimidation. The seemingly never-ending popularity of vampires in culture keeps pumping fresh blood into these larp games. Yet sometimes the bubble is too transparent, and some outsiders mistake the role-players for people who think they are vampires in real life (true or untrue, it’s a derogatory stereotype). The passion, devotion and Goth-ness of *Mind’s Eye Theater* certainly attract faithful devotees, but their exuberance may also be a barrier to entry for others. Still, we must thank the undead for blazing another path in the larger larp world.

So what else is there besides vampires and elves? The fecund imagination of master horror author H.P. Lovecraft has engendered some very creative and detailed larp groups (Cthulhu Live and the HP Lovecraft Historical Society), who create an occult mystery experience that can be extremely terrifying yet ultimately satisfying. Straight historical or science fiction larp groups have also cropped up, and events will continue to occur in those genres, but all of these are definitely in the minority compared to fantasy and vampire larp stylings.

Have you noticed something about the examples above? Many are still tied to table-top role-playing; they are enhanced or modified versions of already-existing role-playing games. It is relatively easy to lift the setting and rules from a published game to a larp, and it’s wonderful that people enjoy these. Yet again, there is still untapped potential lurking in larp. The art form is strong and versatile enough to handle any content. This is one reason why I have been using the words “event” and “experience” to describe Live Action Role Playing: it doesn’t have to come from a game, it doesn’t have to be a game.

Which brings us to the final band in the larp Spectrum of Form:

Adaptation or Original?

What is the source material for the content of the bubble? Is it based on an already-existing world or property, or has the larp world been created completely by the participants? Nitpickers will say that there is nothing original under the sun; that it has all been done before. Fine. However, modifying myths and legends, behaviors and plots can still create original material for a larp, just like there are still original movies and novels. Also, as with the other ends of the spectrum, there's nothing right or wrong about either part of this facet. There can be great larp adaptations and horrible original larp.

The inspiration well for larp adaptations is quite deep. Beside the many table-top role playing games, video games, movies, books, comic books, historical events or personages that can be tapped for a larp, why not adapt a larp from a soap opera, a Shakespeare play, a painting, a Gospel, a song, or a system of government?

Here are some examples of breaking the mold of the typical larp setting:

The Europeans one-upped the Americans again, as I have read descriptions of an amazing three-day larp event in Sweden that was based on the play *Hamlet*, but set at a Royalist castle (they used an abandoned two-story fire house) during the Spanish Civil War.

A larp that has been suggested by someone in Enigma, but never enacted, was a "Beltway" game, where each participant would play the role of a real, current United States Senator, and the real world docket of bills our elected representatives would potentially vote on would be the same ones we larpers would debate.

One Enigma larp game that I enjoyed was adapted from the GM's original fantasy world that he created for his *Dungeons & Dragons* game. His table-top campaign culminated in the Apocalypse of the world. The participants in the larp represented avatars of gods and goddesses, who were cut off from their deity by an impenetrable shell, which was the cause of the Apocalypse. The larp climaxed with the avatars marshalling their powers together to recreate the world as they saw fit. In other words, participants of a larp were the ones who would determine when day followed night, if there would even be a night, if magic would exist on the world, what races would exist, etc. Imagine playing a table-top fantasy game in a world created by the actions of a score of larp participants!

Like all art forms, the inspiration for a larp can and should come from anywhere; the news, a conversation you overhear in a bar, a photograph hanging in the library. Depending on how closely the larp event models the

content of another work is how much of an adaptation it is.

Since improvisation is a key element of larp, a Live Action Role Playing adaptation is different from a reenactment or translation of the original work. A larp likely won't and probably shouldn't be a duplicate of the primary concept—if the participants have encountered the original material, they still should not know what's going to happen next in the larp. In other words, if you read the book, you shouldn't know how the larp is going to end (although even if you do, the larp still might be interesting). In the many Enigma adaptations we have run, we typically offset our game a few years before or after the events that transpired in the original source, or use incidents and locations only vaguely referred to in the work that inspired us. But this isn't always necessary. Like everything on this spectrum, there's no right or wrong, there are only points on a line.

Sued?

Something I need to mention related to adaptations for larp: copyright infringement. I have only heard minor anecdotal evidence about larp events that were issued cease-and-desist orders for copyright infringement, and not in the United States. That doesn't mean it hasn't or won't happen. If the larp art gains mainstream media recognition, it is possible that movie studios and publishing houses will get upset that their Intellectual Properties (IPs) are being infringed upon. However, this brings up some interesting legal issues: is it copyright infringement if someone dresses up and acts like a known character in a private residence? Does it become infringement if it's in a public venue? Does this mean that people who dress up in costume and act as known characters for a masquerade, party, cosplay convention, or Halloween are breaking the law? What if the larp organizers are charging money? Working as a for-profit venture? Is the event recurring or a one-time only event? How much would it cost to license the rights to these IPs? Would a studio even consider sponsoring a larp centered around their creative works, possibly to heighten interest in or even market the product?

What fascinates me is that it is possible to portray a copyrighted character in a larp without a fixed recording nor an audience. In that case, is it copyright infringement?

I don't know the answer to these questions. I do know of court cases involving internal fights over larp rules and properties, but not of a non-larp entity suing a larp. If you have heard of a case, I would be interested in knowing the details.

THE FUTURE OF LARP

What will happen to larp in the future, if it really is an art form? Can it be a big thing, or will it always be a small thing wedged between the much more known and profitable media of theater and table-top role-playing games?

The Tug of War

As with many parts of art culture, from rock and roll to comic books to graffiti, there's often a struggle raging between and around the creators and fans of the art. In one corner are those who have known and been with the movement for a long time who wish to hold it close so it remains pure and unspoiled by any outside (read: corporate) influences, such as money, markets, and larger audiences. It's cool to know about something that others don't, and being part of the "in" crowd can make people feel superior. These fans will argue vehemently that a certain work or style of their chosen fanaticism is the only right way. Within this group are fans that argue against *other* fans, saying that so-and-so is "doing it wrong." Mike Young's "Five Stages of LARP Group Development" (below) neatly describes this phenomenon.

In the other corner of the ring are non-fans who also want to participate in the latest hot thing, the companies that want to make money off of it, and often the artists themselves, who would love to break out of the underground. However, doing this might involve some kind of concession or capitulation to inane demands from this larger audience. Or worse, kowtowing to someone who has no idea what you are doing, but thinks there's a gold mine there, if you would just make a few alterations.

I think the immediate future of larp will be determined by the strength of each side in this tug of war between those who want to explore the art form inwardly, delving into the BEST methods of making and participating larp events, and those who want to look outwardly and open the art form to all comers, who are willing to risk infusing their events with inexperienced novices in order to expand the reach of the art.

Neither position is entirely correct, nor are they mutually exclusive. But I expect this conflict will continue forever. All art forms have creators and fans who don't want "the masses" muddying the realm, as

well as gate-smashers who invite the horde inside and offer them drinks and snacks.

My belief is that the pendulum currently needs to swing towards awareness, openness, and recruitment if larp is to reach adulthood. We'll know when larp reaches "the big time" as an art form when there are college degrees for larp, televised awards, regular periodicals and larp-related businesses become publicly traded companies with hundreds of millions of dollars in annual revenue. I'd love to see a larp critic/column in the entertainment section of the local newspaper. And I would love to see a larp guild, which pools resources to establish uniform guidelines for insurance and weapon types, and possibly even share venues, resources, and perhaps even credit for larp groups (something like this is already starting here in the U.S.). We're getting there, but not quick enough for my tastes.

Reaching Out To Those Who Say "Huh?" When You Mention Larp

Inside the immense field of larp there are countless zealots and converts. However, one thing that seems to be lacking in many larp groups is a desire to popularize the art form. Or, although the desire is there, the marketing skills are lacking, so occasionally a larp creator will describe the art to someone who doesn't understand by detailing the content: "Oh, larping is a blast! You camp for a weekend dressed in a medieval costume and go around hitting people with foam weapons!"

Ideally, larp the art form will reach the mainstream. This might mean that some larp events need to be adjusted or the content expanded to attract recruits. Those who are reticent to join might be more inclined if they can bring a friend, so GMs should work out a way for two or more people to be related (either as teammates or enemies) in the larp, perhaps even going so far as to reduce admission fees if they bring a friend with them.

Attracting new members might require some simplification of larp events. It might also mean creating larp situations that don't have physical combat aspects or trying out content that's not fantasy-based, or even genre based. Would your aged grandmother understand a larp? Would she participate in one? If not, why not? If a larp exercises mental, physical, and emotional faculties, it seems like it could be a very effective tool in resisting the effects of aging. What if rest homes for the elderly used larp games, or taught some of their clients how to organize one so they could

make their own? How many grandparents would love to larp with their grandchildren (and vice versa)? How many already are in a larp when they attend their granddaughter's tea party for her stuffed animals but don't realize it? It may help to popularize larp if we create events that both children and adults can enjoy, especially parents and their kids. And leave it to the youths to remind their elders how to role-play.

Again, if we look at larp as an art form and empty it of any content, we can better explain it to those who would like to try it but get hives whenever elves or vampires are mentioned. If we consider larp as **structured play-pretend**, similar to what we used to do as kids, we might convert a few people into at least trying some larp events, which, I believe, can only improve the health of the larp art. For those who think they are "beyond" childish diversions, mention the rigorous improvisational acting requirements and the intricate intellectual challenges inherent in larp. If that doesn't work, tell them they get to hit people.

I think there are many possibilities for larp to be included in other fields, and already have been, but without the name Live Action Role Playing attached to them. Here are the places the mainstream media may first accept Live Action Role Playing.

Larp as Research

A famous psychological experiment (or infamous, rather) from 1971 was the Stanford Prison Experiment, led by psychologist Philip Zimbardo. He wanted to study the effects of becoming a prisoner or a prison guard, so he and his staff of graduate students selected 24 male college students to role-play in a prison for two weeks in the basement of the school's psychology building. The participant's role as a prisoner or guard was determined by a coin toss. The experiment was called off after six days due to abusive behavior perpetrated by the guards. Worse, Zimbardo realized he was allowing the abuses to happen under his watch. Reading the accounts of the experiment and watching the videos associated with it, it seems to me that the experiment was Live Action Role Play, but in a dark, damaging way that continued for too long. Rather than a larp where the students reacted to (and against) obstacles created by the GM, Zimbardo, this was a participant vs. participant larp.

Despite the notoriety associated with the experiment, the medium of larp is not the culprit, any more than any other medium (movies, music, comic books, video games) that is blamed for delinquency.

But the Stanford Prison Experiment demonstrates how effective a larp could be for educational studies. Using larp as therapeutic psychodrama is a viable tool for patients, although I suspect not as effective if it's on the same scale of a 50-person weekend game. Still, how much could we learn about a person's psyche based on their reactions to lifelike simulations?

Larp as Preparation

Early in 2009, Southern California held a large scale, city-wide earthquake drill. Using data generated from geological supercomputers, many people and city agencies tested their responses to an imaginary 7.8 magnitude earthquake. This drill is close to larp, and demonstrated how unprepared most of the region is for a temblor of this size.

Other government and social services are using larp for training and preparation services, such as a possible terrorist attack (with a nuclear or biological agent) and routine police calls. Politicians use the techniques of larp to run mock town hall debates or debate sessions. In late July 2008, the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) staged a "war game" that brought together scientists, national security strategists, former policymakers, military officers, environmentalists and private sector individuals from around the world for a mock summit on global climate change. The idea was to see what the obstacles are likely to arise in an actual meeting of world powers to address the issues of energy, economy, and the environment. It didn't go well, but it was only a simulation. Maybe more larps will unlock the key to a solution.

The advantage of a larp simulation is the ability to demonstrate the unpredictability of human behavior. Government leaders and EMT workers can predict many things based on past experience, but, as most larp GMs can assert, you can never prepare for every eventuality that a group of larp participants can come up with once you give human beings some degree of control over the narrative. Larp is one of the best ways to give those who are charged with protecting our lives experience in situations that are erratic. Moreover, these simulations can include more personal details than hauling weighted mannequins around. What if the police officer in a larp isn't playing themselves, but someone who has been on the force for years and receives an in-bubble text message that their significant other is leaving them just as they are called to handle a simulated domestic dispute? Or a fireman who pretends to be someone who recently lost a relative

in an auto accident, and is called to a situation where they must choose between rescuing one person of that age and gender or a group of people? Many medical schools in America are encouraging social skill training for new doctors, deeming these skills as valuable as deftness with a scalpel. Two recent news articles in the *New York Times* described how medical doctor trainees were using role-playing to give patients (actors) bad news, such as cancer. Another piece described young, healthy medical trainees who lived in a nursing home as if they were an elderly resident with a faux diagnosis, such as a mild stroke. They would be confined to a wheelchair, need assistance every time they needed to use the restroom, sleep through night checks, etc. The goals of the care facility larp were to increase empathy and understanding patient's needs for students going into the woefully understaffed field of gerontology.

Denmark's Østerskov Efterskole school has discovered that larp techniques work for youth education as well: they stage larps for most of their curriculum. Not only can first responders learn from larp, so, too, can students of any age.

Larp as Smart Business

Many businesses go through a rigorous vetting of potential employees. A few use internships to gauge the effectiveness of these workers. What about running a work larp, where the possible hires deal with a typical day at their job, or even a crisis situation? Or a larp event dealing with typical aspects of their job? The Director's Guild of America tests their potential Assistant Director trainees through a series of exercises like these before hiring them out to TV shows and movies, so I am sure other industries could also use larp to examine their hires before the paperwork is finalized. In Finland, this is already being done as consulting firms offer management training using live action role-playing scenarios. It's called Business LARP or BLARP (marketing needs to work on that acronym).

Larp can not only screen potential employees, but also improve the skills of current or aspiring workers in almost any field dealing with other people.

Party and Art-Larp

Big cities love to party, and Los Angeles is no exception. Sure, having a bunch of friends over with some music and an open bar is fun, but what if everyone at the party decided to larp, simply reversing their gender, so all the girls at the party pretended to be boys, and the boys

pretended to be girls (and dressed accordingly)? A larp can add a lot of spice to a social affair. It works as a great icebreaker, helping to know one another, learn about each other, and offers more to do at the party besides figuring out who will take the drunk person home.

The annual Los Angeles Iditarod is a fancy bar crawl, except the revelers pretend to either be a dog pulling a sled (really a shopping cart), or a musher riding inside the cart egging on the dogs as they roll from one watering hole to the next.

San Fermin in Nueva Orleans is a larp of the Spanish "running of the bulls", but the "bulls" are red-shirted women wearing horned hats on roller skates hitting everyone else (mostly men) with boffers.

Many groups are operating right outside the border of larp and inside the realm of performance art: zombie walks, flash mobs, aesthetics (sport-art) and the Improv Everywhere groups are using some of the tricks and tools of larp to create free public entertainment. The spontaneity, creativity, and popularity of these events and groups are signs of a growing interest in Live Action Role Playing, and those events should be fertile recruiting grounds for more standard larp events.

Larp and Religion

There have been studies that suggest that live action role playing techniques are an integral part of human religion going back to the dawn of our species. *Santeria*, for example, regularly features an elaborate dance ritual that culminates in possession, where a dancer embodies the spirit, or *loa*, that is being attracted.

Many ancient and modern ceremonies also involve a person pretending to be someone else (say, Santa Claus) with powers (a flying sleigh), goals (give toys to all the good children), and a personality (jolly). If everyone pretends that Uncle Gordon is Santa, and role-playing their amazement and wonder at his appearance, it's not quite a larp, but it is definitely in that realm (everyone is a participant, acting instead of narrating inside a shared bubble where fat men in red suits fly up chimneys).

In July of 2008 artist Brody Condon set up a large and intense larp/performance art exhibit/public sculpture situation for *Sonsbeek International* in the Netherlands. The exhibit allowed viewers to walk through an outdoor space populated with strange architectural designs while hearing primitive music played by costumed participants. This was designed as a post-Apocalyptic religious pilgrimage, so everyone attending the event space was considered to be a pilgrim, and the participants would react to and with them in a ritualistic fashion.

As larp exercises all facets of a complete individual, the physical, mental, and spiritual, it's not a surprise that the larp art form is well-suited to examining or being a religious experience.

These areas are ripe for live action role playing designers and players to meet the real world. The vast majority of larp scenarios are designed for fun (called "games"), but there are many possibilities for serious usages of the art form. Again, think of larp as a form with many types of content. But sometimes people focus solely on the rules and the content, which can be problematic...

LARP System Wars

Mike Young has been designing games of all types for years. He came up with a scale of larp group development. Although it's refreshing to have the support of active participants, if they remain exclusive to one style of larp (even yours), the overall experience might wither.

The Five Stages of LARP Group Development by Mike Young

1. Ours in the *ONLY* LARP. (This was far more prevalent before the Internet).
2. Ours is the *best* LARP. (The larper has a strong attraction to the game he started playing and just assumes that all others are inherently inferior. MANY LARPerS never get past stage 2. Really.)
3. There are other LARPs out there, but I prefer this one. (The LARPer has recognized that the "bestness" of his LARP is due to personal preference. The rest of the majority of LARPerS hit this stage and stop).
4. I enjoy playing many different LARPs. (This one is rare, but is becoming more common. You may find someone who will play, say Vampire and Cthulhu Live, or two different types of boffer LARPs. You'll still find damn few people who will play Mind's Eye Theatre and NERO).

5. I not only enjoy many different LARPs, I actively seek out and try to find new LARPs to play to expand my experience. (Very rare).

I wholly agree with Mike's explanation, for one aspect of larp that always crops up, especially in America, but also to some degree in the Nordic countries, is the conflict amongst live action role players. It's almost inevitable that a larp group will splinter at some point, sometimes with severe acrimony. Lawsuits over copyright and intellectual properties are not unheard of. These fragmented groups, if they still operate, will recruit new players but discourage them from playing in the "enemy's" larps. Players are hoarded; props, costumes, and weapons are promoted over others, good mechanics are poorly altered to differentiate from past designs, and venues lost due to political infighting.

Although all of this proves a passionate fan base, it's not conducive to recruiting and orientation for those unfamiliar with the art. Many of us (myself included) sometimes stubbornly refuse to see the larger picture and viciously attack other styles or systems and claim "that's not a larp!" instead of honestly competing against them. It's the equivalent of saying that the *Mona Lisa* is the not only the greatest painting of all time, but the greatest visual image ever, the greatest work of art made by human hands, and Andy Warhol's silk screens are not art.

So to the experienced larperS: please, try to avoid damaging the art by attacking other practitioners. Competition is fine; if you think you have a better larp than them, prove it by example. Share your discoveries (mechanics, props, designers, etc.). Spread the word through cheering, not vilification.

We can argue about the best bofferS or how historically accurate a costume needs to be, but what we *shouldn't* do (I don't ever encourage censorship, but have some consideration) is accuse each other of NOT being a larp simply because someone's system isn't the same as yours.

The Dawn of a New Era?

LARP Alliance is a non-profit organization dedicated to creating a nationwide larp community through outreach and education of both fans and non-fans alike (Full disclosure: I sit on the LARP Alliance Board of Directors). Besides setting up guilds where people in any larp can get together and practice fighting, costuming, prop making, improvisation, etc., they are working to establish standards for LARP weapons and armor, much like the movie ratings system. The benefits of an industry standard are twofold: one, it brings larp groups and individuals together to debate and discuss their craft, and two, it provides an agreed template that people can rely on for safety, accuracy, ease of use, cost, etc.

To further the art, we need standards, ratings, and possibly even regulation. This won't kill larp, for there will always be renegades that expand the craft by ingeniously *breaking* the standards. However, without something to react against, chaos reigns, and few groups, or the art as a whole, can progress.

What's Next?

Live Action Role Playing is a powerful art form, capable of creating amazing experiences that can't be obtained through other art media. If you concur, I need you to spread the word. Go forth and multiply. Join a larp group, or form your own. Start or participate in a larp yourself. You may already be doing this. If so, try to examine the form of your larp events. See if there are areas to improve, or perfections that could be shared with others. Most of all, tell people about it. Don't be embarrassed. Tell your local newspaper or art magazine. Get Ira Glass to do a larp piece on *This American Life* or

the *New Yorker* magazine to cover this "new" art. Since larp is not a fixed form, it's difficult to show people the beauty of it. They have to be brought in and participate themselves (perhaps pretending to be a reporter).

Invite others to the larp, even those you wouldn't normally think of: your mother, father or grandmother. Add a little larp to your regular holiday celebrations or family gatherings. Americans used to be noted for our ingenuity and inventiveness, so why don't we practice and celebrate it a little bit more?

And please realize that what you are doing when you are Live Action Role Playing is a creative medium of expression. It's not just a game, a sport, a hobby, a fad or a pastime. It's an art form. And a wonderful one at that.

Revisions

I have already altered this essay greatly in the three or four months I've spent writing it. If I spent more time in research, I will learn new things and make further changes. But then, this will never be finished. I realize that I likely have factual errors in here, or facts that *will* become errors as time goes on and the essay loses its freshness. Therefore, I am willing to revise this, and release later revisions, as I learn more. I welcome your criticism and opinions on anything and everything you've read here. I will attempt to keep this as a "living document" that I continue to update and revise to keep up with the Live Action Role Playing art form.

If you wish to get in touch with me to discuss larp, email me at: AaronLARP2@gmail.com.

CONCLUSION

I hope you are eager to try out your thoughts and ideas. I deliberately avoided talking about how to make or play good characters, how to fabricate or find proper props or costumes, how to utilize seamless mechanics or rules, how to control the story, what makes a good plot, or any other of the many issues relating to larp. These types of debates and many others are covered in the *Knutepunkt* papers, online blogs, literature, and oral history from larp groups and participants. I heartily encourage discussions about these things, but first and foremost I hope the majority of us can agree that larp is an art form, and that it's a pretty cool one, ready to grow enormously.

If you are new to larp, there are probably groups in your area (see the links in the appendix) where you can get started. Or maybe you could generate one yourself? Or perhaps you can bring larp techniques into more traditional media: theater, film, table-top role playing, etc.

Entertainment in the 21st century consists mostly of purchased (or stolen) goods: we rent DVDs, we download music, we buy books. I have heard many arguments that the content of these things are often rehashed, reused, recycled, and occasionally, fake or unreal. Modern audiences quickly learn the tropes and clichés in entertainment, so many can become bored of the content, even when the form of the art is still viable.

Our leisure time is split between many different activities; how many different things can you do for fun on your day off? If you find yourself wanting to hang out with friends, but then looking for something to do, why not larp? Perhaps it is time for a new medium to break into the *zeitgeist*. In larp, you can act out those clichés and tropes. If you know them, you have the ability to change or violate them. If one person in the larp decides against doing the predictable, that can change the whole experience into something new. Live Action Role Playing puts **you**, the audience and the participant, in charge. Viewers jaded through a lifetime of having entertainment thrust into their brains may be thirsting for the novelty and energy of larp, where they can finally have some control of the stories that creators have been telling them for millennia. Maybe the narrative control everyone shares inside a Live Action Role Playing event is enough of a healthy escape from the shackles

of real life. Or at least a very entertaining getaway.

I was inspired to write this essay after I watched a young boy, perhaps eight or nine, run through his first larp. I was the principal organizer of it, but I had a large crew of Enigmans assisting me. We ran it for the WorldCon convention of 2006 held in Anaheim, California. In keeping with the theme of the convention, Space Academy, we ran *Space Cadets: Guardians of the High Frontier*. The general structure was based on a *Hogwarts* larp game that Enigma ran years prior. The idea was that participants would take classes to learn skills like Piloting, Xenobiology, Engineering, Astro-navigation, etc. After classes, the participants had a choice of missions they could undertake to use the skills they learned in class.

The final Mission involved a derelict spacecraft whose orbit was decaying into a planet. The cadets (participants) needed to board the craft, find out what was wrong, rescue any crewmembers and hopefully the ship as well. This involved crawling through a maze to get to the ship's engine room, where a giant alien lurked. A team of five cadets—four adults and the aforementioned young boy—attempted to combat the alien. All four adults were quickly overwhelmed and knocked unconscious, one after the other. I watched as the four “unconscious” cadets pestered the young boy to come over and use his medical skill to revive them so they could finish off the alien, put the engines back on line, and go home.

But as I watched, the kid wouldn't move. He lay on his belly in the tunnel, just around the corner from the stomping and growling alien. This lasted for a few minutes as his teammates became increasingly frustrated (they should have been feigning unconsciousness).

Slowly the boy cautiously crawled into the engine room and used his medical device (a spray bottle filled with water) on the closest cadet, healing them. He then darted back into the tunnel. That revived person helped the others, they defeated the alien and rescued the ship.

As I was reflecting on this afterwards, I projected myself into that boy's head at the moment of decision: he suddenly had to face the big scary monster, alone. It was the Boogeyman that lurked in his closet at home, or under his bed. His team was counting on him to overcome his fear and come rescue them—grown-ups who were vanquished by the alien. How could a little kid save them? Yet he did.

At the end of the larp, we had a graduation ceremony for the new cadets, now full-fledged Guardians. I awarded the boy a medal (a strip of gold fabric lined with black Sharpie) for Bravery that he could pin on the sash we gave all the cadets, now covered with iron-on patches displaying the skills they learned, their rank, etc. After the larp ended, I heard that he ran home to show his dad what a few inches of gold cloth meant.

If that kid saw the same scene in a movie, or read it in a book, what would happen a few hours or days later? He would play-pretend that part with his friends, substituting himself for the character. He'd be Live Action Role Playing. We just skipped the step of making the movie or book.

Did the Space Cadets larp change that kid's life? I have no idea. But I'd like to think so, if only a tiny difference. And that's what I hope larp can do for all of us, if we let it.

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Props to Mike Tice, Nathan Hook, Scott Martin and J. Tuomas Harviainen for their comments and editing prowess.

The great artwork in here is by Jennifer Albright, who is available for hire, see:
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/jalbright/>

Finally, a very special thanks to my wife, Kirsten, for imagining with me.

Links

These are the latest links I could find for many of the larp groups and events I have mentioned. Some may have expired. But with some diligence, you can probably discover anything you want about larp through some keen Internet searching.

History of Live Action Role Playing Games (Wikipedia):

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_live_action_role-playing_games

Knutepunkt: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knutepunkt>

Knutepunkt Publications:

As LARP Grows Up: http://www.laivforum.dk/kp03_book/

Beyond Role and Play: <http://www.darkshire.net/jhkim/rpg/theory/solmukohta/>

Dissecting LARP: <http://knutepunkt.laiv.org/kp05/>

Role, Play, Art: <http://jeepen.org/kpbook/>

Lifelike: <http://www.liveforum.dk/kp07book/>

Larp, the Universe, and Everything: <http://knutepunkt.laiv.org/2009/book/>

Live Action Role Players Association (LARPA) – they have a free game bank of larps: <http://larpaweb.net/>

Tamara by John Krizanc: <http://www.amazon.com/Tamara-Play-John-Krizanc/dp/0773751955>

I Love Bees and NIN “Year Zero” ARGs (42 Entertainment): <http://www.42entertainment.com/default.html>

Mind’s Eye Theater (White Wolf): <http://www.white-wolf.com/met/index.php>

NERO: <http://www.nerolarp.com/>

Live Effects: <http://www.onlineeffects.net/main/>

IFGS: <http://www.ifgs.org/>

Darkon: <http://www.darkon.org/>

Dagorhir: <http://www.dagorhir.com/>

Adrian Empire (Middle Ages re-enactment): <http://www.adrianempire.org/>

MIT Assassin’s Guild: <http://www.mit.edu/~assassin/>

Society for Interactive Literature (west): <http://www.silwest.com/>

New England Interactive Literature: <http://www.interactiveliterature.org/>

Intercon (larp convention): <http://www.interactiveliterature.org/J/index.php?action=87>

Simulated Society (SIMSOC, fifth ed.): <http://www.amazon.com/dp/0684871408/>

Cthulhu Live: <http://www.amazon.com/Cthulhu-Live-Robert-McLaughlin/dp/1568820410>

H.P. Lovecraft Historical Society: <http://www.cthulhulives.org/toc.html>

Society for Creative Anachronism: <http://www.sca.org/>

Renaissance Pleasure Faire: <http://www.renfair.com/>

Civil War re-enactment: <http://www.cwreenactors.com/index.php>

Squirt Gun Assassin larp: <http://www.streetwars.net/>

A Russian LARP based on the video game *Fallout 2*:
<http://www.boingboing.net/2009/07/06/fallout-cosplay-scen.html>

New Yorker article on Killer games by Guy Martin:
http://www.newyorker.com/talk/2009/06/22/090622ta_talk_martin

Geiger Counter: <http://bleedingplay.wordpress.com/geiger/>

Mike Young's Five Minute larps: <http://www.interactivitiesink.com/minigames/index.html>

Paintball: <http://www.paintball.com/>

DungeonMaster Theater LARP: <http://www.the-dungeonmaster.com/>

Stanford Prison Experiment: <http://www.prisonexp.org/>

National Mock Trial Association: <http://nationalmocktrial.org/>

American Mock Trial Association: <http://www.collegemocktrial.org>

Great Southern California Shake Out: <http://www.shakeout.org/>

Clout and Climate Change War Game: <http://www.cnas.org/node/149>

Danish larp school: <http://calimacil.com/blog/2009/03/danish-larp-school/>

Zombie Walk: <http://www.zombiewalk.com/>

The Institute for Aesthetics: <http://www.aesthetics.org/>

Improv Everywhere: <http://improveverywhere.com/>

Labyrinth of Jareth masquerade: <http://www.labyrinthmasquerade.com/>

Los Angeles Urban Iditarod: <http://www.myspace.com/urbaniditarodla>

Running of the Bulls in New Orleans: <http://www.nolabulls.com/>

The Twentyfold Manifestation; <http://www.sonsbeeklive.org/>

Interactive Drama webpage (home of many fine free downloadable scenarios):
<http://www.rpg.net/larp/index.html>

The Truth About Marika (YouTube video): http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iX_ZJkwvKR8

Shade's LARP List: <http://www.larplist.com/>

LARP Alliance: <http://www.larpalliance.com>

LARP Space: <http://www.larpspace.com/>

LARP Source: <http://www.larpsource.com/>

Understanding Comics by Scott McCloud: <http://www.scottmccloud.com/>

UCLA's Enigma: <http://enigmata.org/>