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larp experience design

Experience design is an approach or method to create experiences for humans in all kinds of media (Shedroff 2001). In this case the medium is, of course, larp. Consequently, we need an understanding of how larp works in order to unveil an approach or method for larp experience design.

Larp is actually a variety of different forms and styles. It may consist of only a few players or hundreds of players playing at the same time. It may be situated in a room indoors or in a field or forest outdoors. It may be played with physical or symbolic combat or no combat at all. It may range from realistic genres to a diversity of fantastic genres. And it may last from one afternoon to several days. Therefore one may wonder if it is possible to say anything in general about designing such an experience as larp. What we need to know is what all of these different kinds of larp experiences have in common.

Understanding larp

First of all, larp is about role-playing a character in a fictional frame among other role-played characters by other role-players. Secondly, larp has no external audience. One could say that the role-players involved in the experience are the audience of their own activities, but actually there is no audience, only participants. This is fascinating because Nathan Shedroff says: *Experience designers must regard their audi-*

ence as active participants – not passive viewers. Many real-space experiences (such as parties and other events versus art displays or theatre) require participation in order to be successful. These are the most satisfying experiences for us (Shedroff 2001: 148). Well of course whether or not a party is a more satisfying experience than a stage play comes down to the actual party and the actual stage play. What can be said though is the fact that participation matters.

Thirdly, all larp derives directly or indirectly from pen-and-paper role-playing games, which means larp has a tradition – and that's a good thing. One could argue that if larp ever lost its link to this tradition it would simply turn into improvisational theatre or historical re-enactment, or to put it more bluntly, then larp would indeed lose its hallmark. More than that larp is a new medium. It is hard to recognise larp as a new medium compared to e.g. videogames that use the computer as a medium, because there is nothing in larp that could not have been done hundreds of years ago. They just did not do it. Larp is not a technological innovation based on technological ideas. Larp, on the other hand, is an artistic and aesthetic innovation based on artistic and aesthetic ideas. The larp experience is established on larp as a new medium about the behaviour of role-played characters in a setting. It resembles traditional drama in the fact that there is acting involved.

However, larp has something important in common with many computer games, traditional pen-and-paper role-playing games, and collectible card games: it combines narrative fiction with ludic activities such as playing and gaming.

In that respect larp is part of a new paradigm of how to represent narrative fiction (Konzack 2006). It's not a shifting paradigm in the strongest sense of the word because the shift has already taken place back in 1974 when *Dungeons & Dragons* was introduced (Fannon 1999). Nonetheless, it becomes obvious that there has been a paradigm shift when one encounters people who have not yet become part of this new way of thinking. Especially, older people (not always though) have trouble relating to a phenomenon such as larp not to mention taking it seriously (Ljungberg & Michaelis 1991, Beck & Wade 2004). It is not because they necessarily have anything against it, believe it to be dangerous, or something similar, they just don't know how to connect to it in any thinkable way. They don't 'get it'. It feels like sharing the experience of reading a novel with someone who has never read a book in his entire life and can't see why that should be necessary. Well, strictly speaking it isn't necessary but then again you might have an awesome experience.

Larp criticism

If you want to create an awesome first-rate larp experience design then it's a high-quality approach to have a well functioning criticism. The term criticism originates from the Old Greek word *criteion* that means to distinguish. By larp criticism I mean the ability to distinguish between styles and forms in larp.

First, I want to distinguish between larp and traditional pen-and-paper role-playing games. The obvious would be to say that in traditional pen-and-paper role-playing games the players say what their character is doing while in larp the player acts out what the character is doing. This is true to some extent although some actions in pen-and-paper role-playing games (e.g. gestures) are in fact acted out and some

actions in larp (e.g. killing) are only said to be acted out – not in fact done, which in the case of killing people is of course a good thing.

Anyway, to go beyond this immediate understanding, I would like to argue that indeed larp is closer to *drama* and that pen-and-paper role-playing is closer to *epics*. For that very reason it's easier in a pen-and-paper role-playing game to take the role of any character. The player describes what the character does, and speaks in the voice of that character. Furthermore, it's much easier to make an illusion of an imaginary world, because the gamemaster may in fact just describe what the world looks like. The player's imagination makes it work wonders. This is more difficult to make convincingly in a larp. However, larp has drama and what the world looks like is revealed with all of its props and scenery, like it's the real thing. It is as if they have stepped into the imaginary world. The players, using make-up and costumes resemble the characters they are supposed to be. The setting is right here, right now, creating a space for immersive emotional experiences.

Whether or not one prefers dramas to epics, larp to pen-and-paper role-playing games is obviously a matter of personal taste. What we can say is, that if you want to design an immense larp experience, you'll have to think of it as drama. Likewise, if you want to design a traditional pen-and-paper role-playing game, then think of it as a narrative epic genre. There is more to it of course but at least you'll have the right toolbox and therefore quite possibly the means to create the experience.

Secondly, I want to differentiate between In Character (IC) and Out Of Character (OOC). When In Character, the player is actually playing as if s/he exists in the game world, while if s/he otherwise is playing Out Of Character s/he is outside the game world. To get the full experience of the larp the player has to play IC. OOC play is necessary if the game worlds break down or there has to be some kind of meta-play explanations like the rules of play or non-game socialising (Fine 1983). In Gregory Bateson's terms, as

we shall see later, it's about communicating whether the player is situated inside the frame or outside the frame (Bateson 2000).

Thirdly, I want to address two styles of play: physical contact versus non-contact scenarios. In physical contact scenarios the larp is mainly focused on physical interaction and combat, while non-contact gameplay is mainly focused on intrigue and how the characters interact through diplomacy and social role-play. This question of larp style has immense impact on how the larp is being played, and consequently the sort of players who want to play. In general physical contact larp targets people who want to use fighting and other kinds of physical action as a problem-solving method. Non-contact, on the other hand, targets role-playing players that want to play social drama and find their way out of trouble through negotiation or fast-talk.

Finally, I want to distinguish between two kinds of settings: a realistic setting and a fantastic setting. There are a lot of different realistic genres that make use of realistic settings from historical fictions and detective stories to social realism and psychological dramas. The advantage of this setting is that it offers an easy way into a fiction without many considerations about how the world functions. A lot of people find it difficult to relate to a fantastic setting and can't find the relevance. To assist these people in using their imagination, a realistic setting might help. Furthermore, the realistic setting may be all you need or exactly what you need to set up the experience.

The fantastic settings are likewise used in lots of genres from science fiction and fantasy to horror and weird fiction. What makes the fantastic settings special is the fact that they make use of an imaginary, make-believe world. The advantage of a fantastic setting is that it is possible to give a whole new perspective on how to perceive the world through metaphysical and cosmological considerations. Additionally, it gives the player the freedom of using their imagination.

By combining style and setting of a larp experience we end up with four possibilities:

- 1) Physical contact playing style in realistic setting,
- 2) Physical contact playing style in fantastic setting,
- 3) Non-contact playing style in realistic setting, and
- 4) Non-contact playing style in fantastic setting.

In the following table #1, one can see some typical examples:

	<i>Phys. contact style</i>	<i>Non-contact style</i>
<i>Realistic setting</i>	Airsoft/ Paintball	How to Host a Murder
<i>Fantastic setting</i>	Hack'n'Slash Fantasy	Mind's Eye Theatre

Table #1: LARP settings and Styles

Physical contact style in a realistic setting often turns towards airsoft/paintball combat of some sort with players dressed up as modern soldiers. It is of course possible to play airsoft/paintball combat in a futuristic sci-fi setting in which case it becomes a fantastic setting larp experience. The most well-known kind of larp is the hack 'n' slash fantasy experience with people dressed up as fantasy characters like orcs and elves and armed with latex swords. These kinds of larps are close to child's play like *cops and robbers*. Still, physical contact larp often has more advanced rules and schemes than this old game.

Nonetheless, non-contact styles are often more sophisticated, since it's based much more on intrigue and character-based role-playing. A typical realistic game would be the *How to Host a Murder* series. In this case the larp is a murder mystery that should be solved during the evening. Everyone dresses up for the occasion, and hopefully the murderer will be caught. Realistic games are often used as an educational tool too (Henriksen 2003, Henriksen

2004). The typical non-contact fantastic larp is *Mind's Eye Theatre*. It's a game of intrigue and dark powers set in the *World of Darkness* setting in which vampires, werewolves, and mages are believed to exist. It is of course possible to create non-contact style in any fantastic setting ranging from fantasy and science fiction to horror and weird fiction. It's important to note that the quality of the larp experience isn't defined by setting and style – only by the content of the specific larp experience. This particular larp criticism is not necessarily the only approach to larp criticism. The main point though, is that the analyst must be able to bring about a critical analysis that aids the experience design process.

Framing the experience

Larp is about the social interaction between players. But it is a simulated social interaction. It's not necessarily simulating social interaction of our primary world. A lot of larps are about simulating social interaction of a secondary world. Even so, social interaction as simulation is a central key to comprehending the dynamics of larp. Social interaction is best understood from a socio-cultural or psychological point of view. Yet, larp is an aesthetic experience and consequently, the simulated social interaction must be thought of in terms of aesthetics, which again means that the use of socio-cultural and psychological theory in larp experience design are in fact subordinate to the aesthetic experience. This would of course not be the case if the purpose of the larp were indeed educational or therapeutic. In any case, knowledge from these fields of socio-cultural or psychological theory may add tools to the toolbox when designing the larp experience. Therefore, I propose an experience design theory based on Gregory Bateson's comprehension of socio-cultural, and psychological experiences. Not only because he has some thoughts about socio-culture and psychology, but because he explains these in terms of play and fantasy, which are central key features of the larp as an aesthetic experience.

Gregory Bateson explains that indeed it is possible for mammals to play because they are able to frame a situation in which certain rules exist within this frame, knowing that other rules exist outside the frame (Bateson 2000). By framing an experience, it's possible for humans not only to play but also to imagine creating a make-believe fantasy. Without this ability to frame a situation, fantasy and play would be impossible.

To do so requires the ability to make second order cybernetics. Not only are we relating to the world around us, but we are relating to ourselves as well. Accordingly, we are usually able to distinguish the real from the fantastic – or as J. R. R. Tolkien puts it: *Fantasy is a natural human activity* (Tolkien 1997: 144). Tolkien was, needless to say, discussing how to sub-create a fantasy thereby referring to the ability to create a secondary world within the primary world. This is an interesting concept to have in mind when designing a larp experience, especially if we comprehend the larp experience as a world building activity. *Games*, Erving Goffman says, *are world-building activities* (Goffman 1972: 25), thereby implying that indeed a game is a cosmos of its own.

Larp design method

To design such a frame as a larp experience the world-building activity is much more complicated than the average children's game. That's why the game designer requires more than putting up a frame, and is in need of a design strategy to create successful experiences.

The suggestion is to organize the experience design into three frame levels: 1) The strategic world frame, 2) The tactical group frame, and 3) The operational character frames. It is crucial that there is functional coherence between these three frame levels, because otherwise the experience becomes unmotivated, and it is important that each of the three frame levels is motivated – if not the experience will suffer from this lack of cohesive force. In addition this motivation aids the experience in having a direction. According

to Sid Meier *a game is a series of interesting choices* (Rollings & Morris 2004, p. 68). Following this line of thought, it is evident that a motivated choice is much more interesting than an unmotivated choice, generating superior gameplay.

The strategic world frame is about designing a game world. It could be either a realistic or a fantastic game world. In any case it is an imagined world in which the players can interact. With this strategic world frame it is possible for the game designer (even though many game designers forget this possibility) to create a message with the world design. The cosmology of a larp contains a world-view or different kinds of world-views and the game designer needs to be aware of this in order to produce a meaningful larp experience. This counts for realistic world design as well as fantastic world design.

Making a world-view requires a philosophy or probably some philosophies and almost certainly some metaphysical considerations that are not just plain interesting but exciting and fascinating to examine and explore. One way to do this is to build a world with cultures that compete and inspire one another. Think of each culture as having motivations regarding the ultimate questions concerning life and death based on either religion or ideology. But below this, within each culture there should be subcultures that again compete and inspire each other. The subcultures relate to the same questions concerning life and death, but may have their own explanations rooted in their own ideologies and religious beliefs. Furthermore the game designer should work with these cultures as if they were really thinking about the cultural history of these cultures. This requires a lot of thought and a lot of work to be done. By taking these steps, the game world becomes more believable to the player. Poor game worlds are often based on the notion of *willing suspension of disbelief*. The player is asked to believe in anything because the game world isn't real anyway and as a result anything might as well happen. This way of thinking lacks co-

herence. Another approach subsists in relying on *the power of giving to ideal creations the inner consistency of reality* (Tolkien 1997: 138). By believing in these game worlds as if they were as real as our own, the experience of the world becomes coherent and worth exploring in its own right. It is, on the other hand, much more difficult to create a believable game world based on the inner consistency of reality than a superficial game world based on the willing suspension of disbelief. Be that as it may, the believable game world turns into a deeper motivated world rather than a simple excuse for mindless escapism and dull entertainment. In short it grows to become a fuller experience.

The next step is to get the tactical group frame working, where the most important elements are the possible social narratives that may arise. The game designer has to explore how all of the characters in the larp relate to one another. Each character usually only interacts with a few of the other characters. But at some point all the characters should in some way be linked together within this frame. To do so in a believable fashion, it's important to know how social interaction works.

One way to do this is to create interpretation communities. These interpretation communities of course have to fit in with the overall structure of the strategic game world frame. To do it the easy way, the game designer simply builds each interpretation community around a motivation principle. This motivation principle could be e.g. money, power, ethics, law, trust, truth, love, art, education etc. The character will then have to relate in some way or another to the chosen motivation principles. Each character does not have to participate in just one interpretation community, and may have relations to different communities. In this way the game designer makes it more appealing to experience the larp social relationship, because the player is given an interesting choice between various motivation principles.

To create an even more intriguing experience, the game designer should not only design interpretation communities that are officially known in the game world, but also secret interpretation communities with covert goals and motivations. By doing so the players gain an opportunity for discovering hidden social frames within the game world frame, thereby enhancing the experience of curious exploration, and what's more, it is truly fun and exciting to play a character involved in a secret society or covert operation agency upholding a confidential agenda. The player characters should all have equal opportunities to be a part of the experience, but this is not the same as to say, the characters have to be at the same social level. Experiencing social inequality in a larp is interesting because a lot of social play is based upon social inequality (Goffman 1959). The social inequality may be formal or informal. The formal social inequality is based on the more or less rigid social hierarchy while the informal is based on unwritten rules, situational norms, and personal charisma. In any case, one part sustains the social order due to his motivations like power and prestige or some other motivating factor, and the other part is either submitting to the social structure or trying to undermine it in some way. These social dynamics give rise to a lot of feasible narratives for the game designer to work with. It takes time to design the tactical group frames. But since role-playing is essentially a social experience, it's worth the trouble.

The operational character frames call for work too. This is the point of view from which the player experiences the larp. So even though the game designer has put a lot of thought into the world design and social constructions, the player may feel left behind if his character is not interesting to play. The player needs to frame himself into the character and accordingly the player is in need of actions and tasks for the character to do.

The point is that the character should have some ways to influence the larp. Remember, the player acts in the game world with the tools the character

has at its disposal. So if you give the player a long latex sword then you must expect the player to use it as a problem-solving device. These things are not just mood-creating props, they are game mechanical instruments as well. The game mechanics influence player behaviour (Fullerton, Swain & Hoffman 2004, Costikyan 2006). As a result, the game designer should think of how each character has a chance to influence the larp through their actions, and how these actions influence player behaviour within the larp. This may be anything from a costume showing the character's social position to an appointment book leading the character towards social interaction, or to physical interaction in arranged sword fights. Moreover, each character needs motivations. Not just a single *leitmotif*. The character needs several motivations – especially if it is long-lasting larp. Because what happens if the character accomplishes the goals too easily? Then all of a sudden the player (playing the character) has nothing more to do for the rest of the game. But if there is a list of motivations, there are lots of ways for a player to develop the character, and in addition, the player may choose different motivational factors. Suddenly, there are many interesting choices to be made. These choices become even more interesting if the motivational factors create dilemmas – especially moral dilemmas, because these make for intriguing gameplay (Fullerton, Swain & Hoffman 2004). The more interesting choices the player has to make through the character, the more exciting the larp experience becomes. That is why it should never be easy to fulfil the motivations. The game designer has to think about how the player may struggle towards the goal initiating conflicts and opposition (Costikyan 2006). Conflicting interest and oppositional goals are the building blocks of high quality narratives and exciting gameplay.

To experience a character is not just about getting an array of props, costumes and motivations. It is about character psychology too. Distinguishing between character psychology and player psychology

is essential since it need not be the same. Actually, it should not be the same thing. The character may cry out in pain while the player, enjoys playing the character, and may joyfully love the scene. The character is in this case just a frame for role-playing emotions. Petri Lankoski suggests that a character is described through physical appearance, sociology, and psychology. A part of the psychology is of course the goals and ambitions. But there is a lot more to it than that. He suggests that characters should have moral standards, temperaments and attitudes (Lankoski 2004). Anyhow, the characteristics of the character psychology should fit into the overall purpose of the larp. The psychology of the character is just as much a game mechanical instrument as a latex sword. It points the larp in a certain direction, influencing the social structures in the game world. Additionally, an interesting part of a character psychology is secrets. It is exciting to play a character with secrets, it is exciting to discover the secrets of other player characters, and it is a fantastic tool for the game designer to create interesting narratives. Always give characters some fascinating secrets to work with and remember there are lots of emotions contained in these secrets if someone else finds out about it.

Players will play mostly IC; that means framing the player inside the game world. But every now and then the player may get out of character, playing OOC framed outside the game world. This is perfectly legal and normal. As long as this behaviour does not destroy the experience, it's actually healthy for the players to be able to cope with this behaviour because in any game, each player should be aware that it is only a game frame from one point of view, and yet at the same time, deadly serious from within the game frame. If this paradoxical understanding of the game itself breaks down, the player may have a psychologically unhealthy experience. That is why some really tense larps take precautions like stop words and non-game territories. Necessary to say though, these problems are very rare. Normally

problems like this are solved on the spot without any difficulties

.
When all this framing of world, social structures, and characters are designed properly, the game designer should work from the operational level up to the tactical and strategic level in order to work motivations and game world coherence from below. The characters should fit into the interpretation communities that again fit into subcultures fitting into the overall cultural structures. The cosmology based on philosophies, metaphysics, and cultural history must have consequences right down through the social structures to each particular character. By putting this extra effort into the game design, the larp experience achieves coherence and consistency. First the designer creates the experience design with a top-down approach and secondly the designer makes all the bits and pieces fit by using a bottom-up approach.

Organisers and Non-Player Characters

Organisers should always think of themselves as organisers – never as players in the larp. An organiser may be part of the game as a non-player character (NPC) but never as player. The organisers are the game designers and the game design assistants of the larp experience. They know all of the secrets of the larp and therefore exclude themselves as players. Instead they should focus on make-up, production design, and being the moderators of the game. They should facilitate the larp experience from outside the game frame unless of course they take the role of an NPC.

By NPC I mean a character that is not as interesting as a player character. An NPC has no or little motivation to be part of the intrigues in the game. The worst NPCs are often the powerful NPCs that are allowed to show their powers. Such a character is an exciting character to play and should be turned into a player character immediately. As an alternative I suggest that the NPCs ought to be the non-powerful non-interesting characters that facilitate the larp

experience. As I see it there are three main NPC types: 1) the mood-establishing NPC, 2) the functional NPC, and 3) the story-facilitating NPC.

The mood-establishing NPC is very easy. It's simply an NPC that is there to give the players a sense of place. Often these NPCs have an artistic way to express the mood. It could be dancing, playing music, or quoting poems. The NPC may be a man sitting in the bar playing poker or the fortune-teller as long as the NPC helps to establish the right larp atmosphere. They appear to know nothing of what's really going on.

The functional NPC may of course be mood establishing too and probably will. However, it has a function in the larp scenario. It may be to point player characters in the right direction or to prepare and distribute items that are critical to the larp. These NPCs are normally officials or craftsmen that have some limited authority within the game frame. The story-facilitating NPCs are the most interesting and the hardest to play. It's their job to help the player characters have an exciting experience if by chance the larp fails in some way. They have to guide the larp back on track and help the players to get hooked on the story potentials of the game. Many larp game designers put up a frame in the beginning of the game and wait to see what happens. They may influence a bit through some NPCs and that is about it. But what if the game designer uses NPCs to gradually, dynamically change the larp experience. A player character may get a letter from an NPC in which his goals and ambitions are suddenly all gone, giving the character new clues as to what motivates the character from now on. New story elements may be introduced and so on. By using story-facilitating NPCs the larp becomes an even more dynamic experience. Characters that are useful as story-facilitating NPCs are all sorts of messengers from bards and postmen to journalists and lawyers. Finding the right troupe of NPCs is a challenge to the game designer, and needs to be done carefully and with much consideration. The NPC must of course be understood within each frame with focus on how to

improve the player experience, but also in context of how many and what kind of NPCs are needed to get the job done properly.

In Perspective

A larp is an interesting kind of experience that requires a lot of effort to be done properly. Based on a critical platform and framing the experience, it is possible to create larps that are not only basically entertaining but also have a message. The player characters should always be the central part of the larp experience. Yet, building up several frames from the basic character frame over the social frames to the cultural game world frame must be done to make it work. To support this structure, the organisers may function as moderators of the larp experience and as NPCs trying to strengthen the experience of the larp. Having a method or an approach helps the game designer to make the right choices. This is not to say that this method is the only thinkable method. But the advantage of framing the experience is obvious. The game designers know exactly how to frame the world, the social constructions, and character psychology. Moreover the designers will hopefully create an inspiring world with motivated cultures, subcultures, and communities of interests, and last but not least, motivated characters to play within these frames thereby enhancing the player experience.

I put my faith in the development of even more exciting live action role-playings in the time to come. The game designers ought to work hard to make it the most moving experience mentally as well as emotionally each time. I would like to see role-playing as an art form grow into becoming a whole new way of experiencing drama, changing how we perceive the world.

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