

Notes Taken at the CLAWs LARP-Writing Workshop, 1 October 2011
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Overview of the LARP-writing process

The initial phase involved in the construction of any given LARP is, naturally enough, the “idea” phase. It is generally the longest, but may last for several months, during which time the general themes, character and setting are developed in the writer’s mind. Research may be begun at this point – it is often a good idea to draw inspiration from aspects of reality, particularly when one is writing a historical scenario.

Once the actual writing process has gotten underway, the importance of continuity and conformity cannot be stressed enough. Working in a team is often the best way to ensure that each facet of the LARP is checked for continuity as it is produced, but if one works alone, one *must* make use of a proof-reader (or two, or three) who would be willing not only to read for typos and other such errors, but also to review the logistics of each plotline and the compositions of the character involved therein. Timelines can be of great use here.

In terms of idea generation, it can be useful to attempt to establish relationships first, as this will help to build up characters (naming, which is quite difficult, can often be left until later). If you have forgotten an idea in between writing sessions, it probably wasn’t all that exciting or worthwhile to begin with. Try, in general, not to write too large a LARP, so as to avoid the danger of creating characters without solid plotlines – there is nothing worse, from the perspective of a player, than ending up with too little to do. Bear in mind that from a technical perspective, the LARP differs from the majority of other genres of writing in that there are no supporting characters – while characters may vary in terms of power, influence and plot-involvement, every character should be vital to at least one plot in some way.

Furthermore, when writing characters, try to bear in mind the constraints of casting. If one has a well-established LARPing circle, it can be useful, and indeed quite enjoyable, to write certain characters with specific players in mind. However, be aware that LARPs may still be played quite some time after their initial running, and that similar players cannot always be found – avoid tying one character to any one specific player, and ensure that there is some leeway for interpretation. Do try and supply one or two characters suitable for newer players (i.e., characters that have clear, fairly simplistic goals, and that, by virtue of their specific traits, are either difficult to be misinterpreted or under-utilised, or that won’t have too much influence on too many major plotlines). It is also often expedient in terms of casting to include one or two characters that can be played as male or female.

LARP planning

In terms of structuring power relations, a heavily imbalanced character is not necessarily a problem so long as one trusts the player to which it is assigned not to attempt to abuse it in such a way as to break the LARP entirely. This is one instance where writing casting suggestions into the DM’s notes might be advisable. In order to avoid the game being broken, one might also try to give particularly powerful characters unachievable or near-unachievable goals. Costuming hints on individual character sheets and one or two suggestions as to how the character might be played are also a great help, and can often provide the player with just the right amount of information required to create strong, believable character.

Although the number of players involved in a LARP can range from anything from two to eighty, for our purposes, we would consider eleven or twelve to be a fairly small LARP, and twenty and

upwards to be fairly large. LARPs with too few characters often see implausible connections formed between all of them, while LARPs that are too large are a challenge for the DMs to oversee effectively, and can also lead to difficulties with venues and catering. In general, however, smaller LARPs should be more finely polished, as a single inconsistency can derail them entirely – the larger a LARP, the less fragile it tends to be. Hierarchical structures can also help to stabilise very large LARPs – for example, one might make use of three social tiers, each confined to its own room, with limited mobility between the three.

Selecting a Setting

The employment of a generic or archetypal setting is acceptable, and in fact often preferable, as it allows the players to incorporate well-known elements into their characterisation and build up a clear idea of their character's environment; similarly, the worldbuilding involved is likely less prone to inconsistency. Standard high fantasy or science fiction settings, for example, are therefore very useful. If, however, one's setting is novel, one might include details on money, travel, jobs, and all the general details supplied by worldbuilding.

If one has selected a historical setting, or is making use of a particular story or theme with a well-known or predetermined outcome, one might consider using "fate play", which makes use of certain triggers (either dramatic (i.e., actions performed by another character) or chronological (i.e., an action required to happen at a certain point in time during the LARP) in order to dictate the course of the LARP. This should be used sparingly, however, in order to avoid railroading.

Particularly effective settings include auctions, readings of wills, weddings, funerals, negotiations, dinner parties, and so forth. It may also be interesting, if possible, to experiment with the idea of bilingual LARPs (here again, this automatically creates a split between two groups, thus helping to manage larger LARPs; it also controls the flow of information). Finally, whatever the setting, do try and construct it in such a way as to render the characters incapable of leaving it – an island, ship, cave or prison is useful in this regard, while a banquet, marriage, funeral or other such event with set parameters can be used to a similar respect.

LARP Mechanics

Some suggestions as to mechanisms or gimmicks that might be incorporated into a LARP include NPCs, who may be planted in the LARP from the outset, disguised as player characters, or snuck into the LARP mid-play; either way, they can be utilised as catalysts for certain events, or to supply new information to the characters.

Cards are also useful when cleverly employed, particularly as they can often be used to introduce extra information or regulate encounters between characters without requiring the intervention of a DM. However, they are sometimes seen as a crutch for roleplaying, and as such should be used to represent abilities rather than characteristics; they tend to work well in non-serious LARPs. In general, card-regulated telepathy powers tend to be quite difficult to pull off, and is best avoided. Envelopes containing details about certain artefacts, for example, are also useful, as they provide a means of feeding new plot points into the LARP, and may also be used to regulate access to information.

With regard to DMs, in general, a good ratio to employ is one DM to every five characters, with additional DMs assigned to specific items or objects as necessary. One might consider splitting up the DMs' responsibilities by plotline, item, character or combat.

Anti-Tropes

While not expressly forbidden or frowned upon, tropes involving time-travel, hostage situations, character switches, and telepathy tend to be quite difficult to pull off, and should be used sparingly and with caution, if at all.

Be very careful when writing romance into a LARP – it is often best simply to avoid it, both because it is rather difficult to role-play passionate romance with a stranger, and because one is never aware of the real-life subtleties of any given casting pool. Established relationships such as long-standing marriages work best. Always be aware of what may or may not be offensive to players. One is writing for a general audience that must by necessity become fairly heavily emotionally involved in the storyline, and some players may find certain plotlines or characteristics disturbing, unpleasant, or simply uninteresting.

When employing poison as a plot point, try and find some way to allow the players to eat regardless of whether or not their character is attempting to avoid poison, which, just generally, requires very careful DM regulation. If one is writing in a non-fantasy setting, do try and do some research into the mechanics of poison, and allow them to affect the plot in a realistic way (i.e., don't try to write in a poison that kills instantly and untraceably).

Never allow any real weapons to be used in a LARP.

Gimmicks & Venue Planning

Public announcements, delivered every so often over the course of the LARP, help players to stay informed – they can easily be framed as radio announcements, proclamations delivered by heralds, or even, in a science-fiction or technologically advanced setting, blackboards, projectors or makeshift view-screens.

Don't become too attached to any particular venue, however. While the setting does help with immersion, it is impractical to make it too involved – often a few items of décor, cleverly used, can be highly effective.LARPs can be run from houses, although one ought to make sure to forbid the use of locks, and possibly to cordon off a downstairs or upstairs area in order to facilitate the DMs' jobs. Sound clips often work well – a simple recording of a thunderstorm, the sea, thematically-appropriate music, or ambient noise in general, played in the background, sets the scene nicely, and has the added benefit of reducing the distance from which conversations between two characters can be overheard by other players.

Combat

Combat should be effected as quickly as possible, as simply as possible. Dice may be used, but often rock-paper-scissors is just as effective, provided that the players are not too familiar with each other's habits. Characters should have some impression both of how skilled they are and how skilled others are – and if they don't, it should be a plot point.

It is permissible for DMs to rig combat, either to preserve gameplay or so as not to break the LARP, so long as the characters are not made aware that this is being done (as it detracts from the combat experience and can lead to accusations of favouritism). Avoid freezes if at all possible – they should

really only be necessary if the entire room is involved, and then only to prevent combat intervention. Keep them as short as possible, and be ruthless with their deployment – do not allow them to be broken.

“But how do I make sure my characters work?”

When proof-reading a character for consistency and involvement, check that they have enough to do during the course of the LARP. Each character should be involved in at least three or four plots – major characters with strong influence will require, seeing as they will often be roped into others regardless, while minor characters require more, as their part in each will be smaller. If a character is not vital, they will be ignored, so make sure that each character is vital to at least one plot.

Other ways of making sure that characters have enough to do include kleptomania, greed, the desire to prevent certain plotlines or events, extreme dependence on the actions of other characters, the intention to convert characters to any cause, or a strong personal philosophy that has the potential to set up interesting debate (but be aware, once again, of what may or may not be seen as offensive to the players themselves, and try and avoid touching on any real-life issues).

Check to see how many allies each character has – everyone should have at least one or two. If a character is without allies, the LARP experience will not be enjoyable for the player, who will feel as though the entire LARP is against them; and if any factions are not carefully balanced, the LARP may break.

Onto the Actual Writing Part!

In terms of presentation, try and view the production of your LARP as a professional endeavour – having invested so much time into it, ensuring that the finished product looks good, holds together and is easy-to-read shows respect both for your own writing and for the players. If you invest a good deal of time and effort into the LARP, your players are likely to, as well. Sheets should, generally speaking, make use of 1,5 spacing, and should be free of typos and grammatical errors – this is where a proof-reader must be used. Pictures, diagrams, maps, costume ideas and quotes all help to make each character sheet feel professional, and can be a novel and intriguing way of providing extra information.

A character sheet should contain the character’s name and age, as well as a brief introductory description that may be semi in-character, followed by a character history. Stick to a strict chronology here, and try making use of sub-headings for each paragraphs – so, have an ‘Early History’ paragraph, followed by a section on ‘Later Career’, ‘Involvement with X Faction’, ‘Influence Over Specific Event’, etc. Try not to make them too short – these are the inspiration for the player’s character development – but don’t include too much irrelevant information. Characterisation hints may be applied sparingly.

Background sheets, by contrast, are generally faction specific. Convey how widely-known any information is, and be both consistent and insistent – it is far better to overexplain than to underexplain. Put any very important information into at least two character sheets so as to ensure that even if one player forgets it, or doesn’t quite catch hold of its implications, others will remember it and supply it. Deliberate inconsistencies are often difficult to write, for while experienced LARPer will pick up on the trope, newbies may not. It is for this reason that it is often useful to explain *how* a character has come to know any given information – knowing that one’s character witnessed an event first-hand will likely make one more certain of it than knowing that one’s character heard about it

from a friend, and will lead to less confusions as to which inconsistencies are deliberate, and which are simply authorial errors.

Finally, with regard to naming, try hard not to make them too unpronounceable or difficult to remember. Rely on matching names to stereotypes. Titles - Queen, King, Commander, Doctor, Sir, etc. - are also very useful mnemonic aids.

Writing the Blurb

The blurb may be included on the actual character sheet if one chooses, and should include the LARP specifications out of character - for example, "This is a very silly LARP," or, "This LARP should generate lots of drama." This is also the place to include any content warnings or age restrictions that may apply, if you feel that it is necessary to do so.