

So You Want to Write a LARP: LARP Theory 101

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Introduction

- ❖ Introduction
- ❖ Twelve LARP writing rules to live by
- ❖ How to get started
- ❖ Size, Shape and Duration
- ❖ Writing Characters
- ❖ Mechanics

Who Am I To Talk About LARP?

- * Author or co-author of sixteen LARPs
- * Author of *Across the Sea of Stars*, a LARP which contains more than thirty microLARPs within it
- * Facilitator/Participant in seven Build Your Own Game efforts, including *Collision Imminent!* (12 runs by 2013), *The Barbecue* (NELCO 2012), *The Night Queen Princess Fluffykins Passed* (NELCO 2013)
- * Con-chair for Intercon the Thirteenth, staff on every Boston Intercon since then, including years on the Bid Committee
- * Player in much more than 100 LARPs since 1986, of all kinds of LARPs

Who Am I To Talk About LARP?

- ❖ These are the rules and guidelines that work for me and other LARP authors I respect.
- ❖ They are general rules, applicable toLARPs of all styles and genres.
- ❖ Any rule can be bent, or even broken, if you're careful. Usually, breaking a rule just leads to avoidable problems.
- ❖ Learn from the successes and failures of others. Play other games, other systems, other genres, and other styles.

What is LARP?

- ❖ Period drawing-room murder mystery?
- ❖ Live-combat medieval fantasy battles in a field?
- ❖ Gothic vampires in a political struggle amidst unknowing humans?
- ❖ An emergency evacuation of a dying starship?
- ❖ Characters breaking out into Broadway songs and dance?

- ❖ All of the above. LARP isn't defined by a particular style or genre.

What is LARP?

- ❖ 4 characters stuck in a simulated elevator for 15 minutes?
- ❖ 9 characters in a room for an hour without a GM?
- ❖ 30 characters in a bed and breakfast hotel for a weekend?
- ❖ 60 characters in a nine month campaign all meeting once a month, with smaller groups meeting more frequently?

- ❖ All of the above. LARP isn't defined by a particular size or duration.

So, what is LARP?

- ❖ A LARP is live action. It has people interacting with each other, acting out their intentions. The players don't describe actions to a moderating GM.
- ❖ A LARP tells a story. It may be small or it may be epic.
- ❖ A LARP has players playing characters with character-specific goals.
- ❖ A LARP is improvised. Players make choices and drive the action, outside of Game Master control.
- ❖ A LARP has no audience. The players are the audience.
- ❖ This definition is squishy and open-ended. There's a lot that LARP can be. Don't be afraid to experiment.

Twelve Rules to Live By

- ❖ There are a dozen useful rules to keep in mind as you're designing and writing a LARP.
- ❖ These are guidelines that shouldn't be broken.
- ❖ They're nothing new - I wrote these rules for a Usenet discussion in 1997; they worked for me before then, and I use them to this day.

Rule 1: Interesting Characters

- ❖ Role-playing is about getting inside the head of another person and letting them live for a while.
- ❖ Characters should be rich, full characters with shades of gray.
- ❖ “Actors love mental disorders, dialects, and corsets. Give them one of the three and they’re happy.” Robin Tunney from *The Mentalist*
- ❖ There has to be more than just shtic, though. An accent or a limp is not enough.

Rule 2: Interesting Stories

- ❖ Not plots - stories. They are NOT the same.
- ❖ Life is a tale, with a complex set of events and people that have gotten you to this point.
- ❖ Characters should be similarly detailed, with information that helps the player know and understand them.
- ❖ Give the players things they can talk about in game, ways that they can connect to other characters.

Rule 3: Human Stories

- ❖ The most memorable stories are the ones that deal with the things that make us who and what we are.
- ❖ Life, love, loss, birth, death, failure, success...
- ❖ They can be very simple at their heart, but very, very powerful to play.
- ❖ You don't even have to be human to tell human stories. *Dustpan: The LARP* has a cat's hairball as a character, and it's wrestling with issues of identity and loss.
- ❖ Saving the world stories are highly overrated and cliché.

There's not a single human character in *Dustpan*, but they all have human drama.

Rule 4: Tough Decisions

- ❖ Put the character on the spot. Make them choose between difficult options.
- ❖ Black and white decisions can be too easy. The more shades of gray, the better.
 - ❖ Do I keep a sacred oath that I've been entrusted with, and, by doing so, allow a war to break out, one that will kill millions? Do I break the oath, challenge my religious tenets, risk my own imminent death, all to save nameless strangers? How do I decide this as I am scrambling to recover something that could bring death and destruction on my own people, some of whom have interpreted my attempts to help them as heresy?
(*Tabula Rasa v2.0*)
- ❖ Give the player a good reason for each of the options.

Rule 5: Repercussions

- ❖ There have to be repercussions.
- ❖ Pulling a gun in real life is not a trivial act, yet look how often it happens in LARPs.
- ❖ I should not be able to get away with murder.
- ❖ Make the players live with the consequences of their actions, and give those consequences teeth.

Rule 6: Things to Do In Game

- ❖ You can never have too many plots.
- ❖ Too many games are seriously underplotted, where things drag for some (or all) of the characters, especially in longer games.
- ❖ The real fun happens when a player realizes that she's been running non-stop for the entire game, without a moment to catch her breath.
- ❖ A bored player is a dangerous player. They can wreck a game.

A bored player, with a gun, in a game where there are no consequences on opening fire, can ruin the experience for everyone, especially you. The story of that will live on in the LARP community.

Rule 7: A Chance to be Noticed

- ❖ All players aren't created equal. Some are better at playing than others.
- ❖ All characters should be more equal.
- ❖ Everyone should have a chance for a great part, for a dramatic moment, or a time when everyone turns to them for an answer.
- ❖ Why would I want to play Third Spear Carrier from the Left? Why is my character's story less important than someone else's?
- ❖ You never know when someone is really going to surprise you.

When people came out of Conjunction, everyone was arguing, because everyone believed that the 20+ character game had been centered around them. That's ideal.

Rule 8: Try Something Different

- * Players get typecast. Roles get typecast. LARPs get typecast. Plots get typecast. Cliche is boring. How many times have you seen:
 - * The king/Vampire Prince/boss/head of the family is dead
 - * Pregnant teenage angst
 - * Trapped in a house during a storm with a psycho killer
- * Just as players need to stretch their role-playing muscles, writers need to stretch their plotting and character-writing muscles.
- * Switch it up. Find a new twist. Learn from other writers and games.

These stories can work, if you bring something new to them.

This also applies to casting... Sure – I might be exactly what you see as the person to play General Hiram Cork, the blood and guts boss of the San Inguon military base and defender of America against the Commie threat. However, I might also like the chance to play Tony "Scooter" Turrelli, the unappreciated teenager who was always 2nd in everything at the local school. One is a commanding role, in the middle of a lot of the action, driving the game at every turn. The other is far more of a character role, dealing with the far more mundane crises of adolescence. I might not be what you had in mind for the part – and I might not be the best person to play the part – but give me the chance. (In my case, I actually played both characters in different runs of "I Was a Teenage Mutant From Outer Space!" Both were great fun!)

Rule 9: A Character Involved

- ❖ Outsiders who have little connection to a game aren't much fun.
- ❖ Characters that are ostracized by everyone can quickly lose their luster.
- ❖ Why should I play a character who is only there to be abused?
- ❖ Make sure every character has connections to several others in game, in some way. Give them reasons to talk to each other.

It doesn't have to be some sequence of cosmic coincidences in the backstory. The stranger who turns out to be a medic can be very valuable.

An uninvolved/ostracized character can get bored very quickly. In Return to Bora Gora, I was ostracized. I was also the only one with the combination to the safe with the nuke. There was panic when I went missing.

Rule 10: A Chance at Success

- ❖ You can stack the odds against me - but as long as I think there's a chance, I'll be engaged and I'll have fun.
- ❖ If a character's only purpose is to go down for the big fall, then it's probably not going to be fun. If I don't stand a chance, and all there is to do is to flail at impossible goals, I won't be happy.
- ❖ Unless you tell me about it *beforehand*, so the player can plan accordingly. They can play it for all it's worth. This rewrites the goals - the meaning of "success" becomes very different. The doomed character can give their opponents a real challenge, and that makes a better game for everyone.

You've worked very hard to set up contradicting goals in characters. Why risk it by having a player rewrite their own goals?

Don't change the rules of the game halfway through.

Rule 11: Making the Best of Good Players

- * Nothing makes a game greater for a player than the chance to interact with someone who's really good at it. It usually makes their own play better. Give them the chance to do so whenever you can.
- * Good players can make a weak game stronger, and can pull other people along in the process.
- * Chemistry happens with the right elements.
- * You never know where those combinations are going to come from, so you have to mix people up.
- * This means you want a LOT of interactions, among a lot of characters.

I call them the "Phone Book Players" – you can throw anything at them and the game will be great.

Rule 12: Play without Interruption

- ❖ When my character gets rolling, don't stop me. Nothing breaks a game faster for me than having to step out and do something to facilitate the game.
- ❖ I *never* want to roll a die, throw Rock/Paper/Scissors, add a modifier, reread a special ability card, search through index cards for an item, or remember some mechanic, if I don't have to. It breaks the role-playing. It breaks the mood.
- ❖ Consider the great moments you've had when LARPing. The really great moments probably came when you were pouring your heart and soul into the character, without a mechanic in sight.

Confessing my sins and my heresy to the Pope, one on one. Competing socially with Lancelot to try to keep Guenevere with me, even as I knew I was losing. Painting a canvas as a Toreador vampire, keeping the easel between me and the Hunters who were there in an uneasy truce.

So, You Have This Brilliant Idea...

- * You have an inspiration for a game - it can be anything. A clever title, a cool prop, a great setting, a genre that speaks to you... But that's not enough.
- * A clever mechanic is rarely a good place to start. It's an easy place for many, and an easy place to get wrapped up and lost.
- * You need a story. This is where you have to start.

Keep It Simple

- * Your global story concept should be simple to describe. If it takes more than a sentence or two, you haven't simplified it enough.
- * *Collision Imminent!* - A horde of passengers trying to escape from a dying starship, and the crew trying to help them. Starship *Titanic*.
- * *The Idol Hands of Death* - An archaeological expedition in Egypt in 1921 invites interesting people to see what they've found, and there's a murder.
- * Given this, you have a focus. Now you can work on the story concepts that will tell the global story. Each character will have their own story concept inside of and related to the global story.

But I have Great Character Ideas!

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- * Characters are important, and definitely jot down your notes, but consider the following character ideas:
 - * Virgil Thorne, a Toreador vampire, a painter struggling with his Sire and his vampiric brother over what his birthright should be.
 - * Arthur, King of the Britons, a mashup from *Camelot* and *Spamalot*!
 - * Z, the paranoid and catnip-loving black cat who sees Creatures from the Ninth Dimension.
 - * All great characters to play, but what would they *do* together? You have to start with the global story and the story concepts that tell that global story. That will define the characters. It will also tell you how many characters.

So, How Do I Build The Story?

- ❖ Consider a simple basic story concept: “You love your father. You hate your father.” Each character should have their own story concept that helps to build the global story.
- ❖ This is a coming-of-age story, a finding oneself story, a classic. Classics are that way for a reason. Don’t be afraid to use and adapt a classic. How many flavors have we seen of *Romeo and Juliet* or the Hero Cycle?
- ❖ There’s conflict right there, which means drama. There’s a choice to be made. Having to make choices is key.
- ❖ It’s the foundation for a child character, but what’s the character going to *do in the game*? Standing around in some kind of mental anguish is not going to be much fun, or last for very long before most players get bored.

Be wary of cliché.

I didn't see that coming...

- ❖ You need a "To Do" list for each character.
- ❖ Character ideas can help in building the To Do list, but they aren't necessary. The To Do list *will* suggest things about the character.
- ❖ Clearly, this is a story about conflict with a father, so the To Do list might include taking an action attempting to gain approval. Alternatively, the character might do something knowing it risks disapproval.
- ❖ So, one item on the To Do list might be "Host an event, so you can demonstrate your organizational and leadership skills for your father." This involves at least two characters - the father and the child.

Isn't that just plot?

- ❖ An action on the To Do list isn't the same thing as a plot. A plot is driven by actions on the To Do lists of all of the characters involved in the plot.
- ❖ "Hosting an event" is not a plot. What happens at the event, however, is driven by plot - and hopefully by a lot of them interacting with each other.
- ❖ Thinking about potential plots will define To Do items that can be distributed to characters in the game.
- ❖ "Hosting an event" is part of a goal or a set of them. The child character will want the event to look good. The father character may have goals based on the event, and has his own decision to make - whether to approve or disapprove.

Being pregnant is not a plot. Give messy birth to the demon child mid-game is a bit cliché, but it's a To Do.

But is it enough?

- * Child character, hosting an event, wants father to approve.
- * Father character, concerned about child, is waiting for the event to happen.
- * No one else shows up.

- * This could be a very interesting but short LARP between the two characters. You could write dramatic character backgrounds to shape and color the interaction. Then you could turn two players loose and watch what happens.

The Golden Triangle

- ❖ Conflicts and decisions add drama to characters, and gets them to interact. Consider the Golden Triangle.
- ❖ Each vertex represents a character. One character is advocating for X. Another character is advocating for not-X. The third character is the one who has to decide between X and not-X.



Add a story with a Triangle

- * Consider a second child for the father, with a similar, but subtly different story concept: "You hate your father. You love your father." This suggests an entirely different dynamic between the father and this child.
- * There's also a story between the two children: "Father always loved the first one more." Sibling rivalry - another classic!
- * This adds a To Do to the second child - make #1 look bad. There's a To Do for the first child - figure out what #2 is up to and stop it.
- * One triangle is clear: the first child wants to succeed, the second child wants the first to fail, and the father must decide the result, reacting accordingly.

Note that I've described this without any details about the children. These details can drive the story in different directions. Consider how the story can differ depending on the ages and genders of the children. Consider how the story can differ if each child was from a different mother. What's the global story you're trying to tell? Are there some consistent themes spanning groups of characters?

More triangles, please!

- * Consider a romantic interest for the first child, with a “star-crossed lovers” story concept. The To Do item is “introduce the lover to the father.”
- * This new character has all sorts of potential triangles. Consider a triangle between the father, the lover, and the second child. The father wants to know the details of the lover’s history. (A To Do!) The lover doesn’t want to have that history come out. The second child has to determine what to say to the father.
- * If the second child doesn’t know the history, this adds another To Do - “find out the lover’s history.” Depending on the story you’re trying to tell will drive what the second child is looking for, what they find, and what they might do with that knowledge.

Time period, genre, gender of the lover – all these and more add important flavor to the story.

A Common Fatal Mistake

- ❖ “Find out the lover’s history.” “Find the McGuffin Widget.” These are common To Dos, intended to drive a lot of plot. Many times these fail, driving a player nuts in the process, and potentially wrecking a game.
- ❖ If I ask the lover “do you have a sleazy past?” - they’re going to lie. If I ask a second character about the lover, they may have skimmed over that part of their character and don’t remember. I have to keep looking.
- ❖ If there are 20 other players in the game, and it takes me 3 minutes to ask each one that one question, then that’s *an hour* I’ve spent trying to solve one problem. That’s a lot of time and effort, and I have other things to do!
- ❖ *Information has to exist in more than one place, and there has to be a way to get at it in those places.*

This is also why dropping a character can kill entire sections of a game.

Compounding the Mistake

- ❖ “Find the McGuffin widget” is commonly the result of following a clue chain - a sequence of steps to get to where you have to go.
- ❖ In one game, I was looking for a map. The characters that had the information I needed had it in the form of pieces of a cryptic poem that led to the map.
- ❖ They had a scrap of paper with words that said nothing about a map. They had nothing in their character background that said what the scraps of paper were about. (Players know they’re important, which might be a reason not to reveal them.) They were the only ones in game who knew.
- ❖ I asked all of them about a map. They didn’t know about a map. I never found it - and I spent much of a weekend looking for it.

More information was available – in characters that weren’t cast, because there weren’t enough players to fill those roles.

Marin County New Age Society failed for me because I was the last one in a chain of events. One of the players decided that they weren’t going to do their step. I was hosed, with no chance of recovery.

The Cardinal Rule

- * As you're thinking about stories, characters, To Dos, triangles, plots, and goals, constantly ask yourself this question:
 - * *Would This Be Fun To Play?*
- * If it's not fun to play, then why would someone want to do it? This is a game. It's entertainment.
- * If you wouldn't want to play the part, why would someone else want to?
- * If the answer is "no", then strongly consider replacing the game/character/plot/goal with one that will be fun to play. This doesn't exclude dark and twisted stories, just boring or distasteful ones.

To Do is to Do

- * As you're building the character, review the To Do list. Ask yourself this:
 - * *Could this character be replaced by a mannequin or an item card?*
- * A brilliantly written character means little if all the player has to do is admire your writing.
- * A character should have To Dos to keep them busy. Other characters should have To Dos that bring even more action to the first one. There should be a dense web of interactions, going in all directions.
- * I'm a believer in the "you can **never** have too much plot" school of LARP writing.

To Do is to Do II

- ❖ Some writers use puzzles to simulate engineering tasks, or working your way through a bureaucracy, or something complicated. Thus, the player has a To Do, which looks reasonable.
- ❖ LARP is about acting and interacting. A puzzle does not fit this paradigm.
- ❖ Some players hate puzzles. Some players are not good at puzzles. Why is it fun for someone to sit and solve Sudoku puzzles while everyone else is having intense interactions?
- ❖ Of course, it all depends on the puzzle. In the fabulous *Curse of Whately's Moonbase*, getting the air system working required reassembling a number of PVC pipes into slots to get fan-driven air flowing out the output pipe. Landing the ship was a ship landing video game while riding in an RV.

The ship was an RV being driven to the destination, in the dark, on back streets, out of radio contact with the base. Characters had to work together to make things work.

To Do is to Do Too

- ❖ Consider a To Do that is “Break into a safe and steal the secret plans.”
- ❖ I was the GM. The player, playing a safecracker character, came up to me and said “I go to the office and break into the safe. What do I find?” In many games, this is exactly the right approach. He expected me to invoke a mechanic, do a quick description, and hand him some item cards.
- ❖ “I don’t know,” I replied. “You’ll have to find it and tell me.” It really threw the player. In this game, there was a real safe in a real office space, with things inside it. He wasn’t expecting that, and it made his game more of a challenge.
- ❖ Consider the experience of actually having to do this, while risking being caught.

Another player, playing the same part in another run, told me that someone nearly walked in on him as he was going to the safe. He’d had to hide in the room and hope he wasn’t detected. He talked about how his heart had been racing at nearly being caught. Once in the safe, there was more than he expected, and he had to take more precious time to find exactly what he was looking for. Then, when it was in his hands, he had to figure out how to hide the bulky object for the rest of the game.

To Do is to Do Until It Is Done

- * Never write a To Do that is “find a way to leave the game.” It’s a big mistake, and easy to make.
- * You won’t write it consciously, or in that form, but you have to keep the position of the character in mind. For many characters, there are points in games where the best and most logical solution is simply to leave.
- * What will you do if they decide To Do this three minutes into the game? All of your plotting, all of your interactions, all of your triangles, plots and goals involving this character would vanish.
- * Forcing the player to stay just annoys them, rightly so. You need to give them a stronger reason to stay.

This only works if everyone has the goal of leaving, and the game ends when they all succeed.

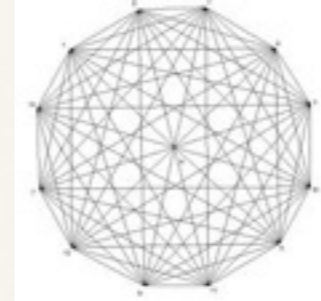
Size, Shape, and Duration

- * You've been writing story concepts, To Dos, character bits, plots, and goals. How many are enough?
- * That all depends on the story and sub-stories you're trying to tell. You can tell a simple, elegant, and powerful story with two or three characters, in a handful of triangles. You can tell a lot more stories with more triangles and characters.
- * You can decide up front about how many characters you want in the game, and that will help drive your process - but don't be limited by a strict number up front. Consider it an estimate, and work from there.
- * If you're doing it right, the characters will tell you when there is a complete set.

Idol Hands of Death started with 20 characters. After the first run, I realized that there were a couple of dangling threads and loose ends. We also had 22 signups for the second run. Tim Lasko and I sat down and talked about our experiences in the game – and soon had two new characters that filled in some of the holes. They helped to fill out the stories. Players in the second and third run never realized that we'd added characters. For the fourth run, we realized that we still had some holes, and we knew how we could fill them. Three new characters, tied in with the others, worked brilliantly. They fit in so well that one of the new characters has gotten several votes as the potential killer, in both of the runs where they were present.

Interconnection Math

- ❖ The number of interactions possible in a game increases proportionately to the square of the number of players in the game.
- ❖ In a large or crowded space, it takes time for people just to *find* each other.
- ❖ It takes time for people to talk to each other.
- ❖ Characters have to be subtle to get what they're after, and that takes even longer.



In my run of The Morning After, game space was the entire WPI campus. It took a long time to go from place to place.

Even 30 or 40 people are swallowed up by all the nooks and crannies in four floors of Sage Hall at RPI.

There are Limits

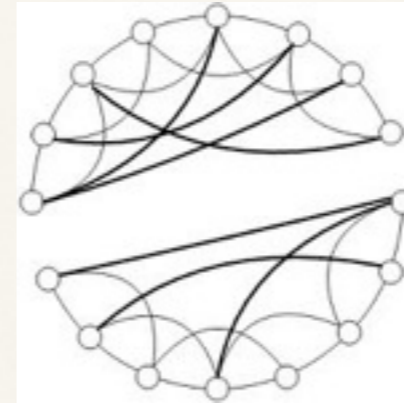
- ❖ You can only expect a limited number of connections and conversations in a given amount of time.
- ❖ Theoretically, this limits the number of characters you should have for a given game length: 20-30 = 4 hours, 30-40 = 8 hours, and 50-60 = weekend.
- ❖ This also depends on your players and their style. Some players can take a three player LARP and go for hours. Others are just the opposite.
- ❖ Realistically, most characters aren't going to interact with everyone. Characters work with smaller groups, going outside the group as necessary, especially in bigger games, where characters can't be as densely tied together.

Keep this in mind when writing "Find the McGuffin" plots. Characters won't talk with everyone.

In Lullaby of Broadway 3, As Arthur, I spent most of the weekend with Guenevere and Lancelot. I talked to quite a few of the others, but really was focused on our story. I couldn't tell you what happened with the rest of the game.

The Primogen Council Problem

- * The Primogen are the leaders of the various Vampire clans, who get together, in private, with the Prince, to figure out how to solve the problems created by each other and their clans.
- * The number of possible interactions drops dramatically, because key people are locked in a separate room, incommunicado.
- * Some players can't do anything. The game breaks for them.



All of their connections are gone.

It's not just the Primogen Council...

- ❖ The Away Team, going off on a mission.
- ❖ A clique or faction having to work on deciphering an arcane text.
- ❖ Loner characters, trying to have interactions with those who are tightly bound to a larger group, can't make connections.
- ❖ Über-plots, where many of the players, but not all, are chasing something.
- ❖ The Big Combat Bubble, where a large group of players are using slow mechanics to resolve things.
- ❖ Try to avoid this whenever possible, because you don't want Bored Players.

Secrets of the Necronomicon kept people in tight groups for large chunks of the game.

Variable Sized Games

- ❖ Sometimes, you can't get 20 players for a game.
- ❖ When you drop a character, you're tearing a hole in the dense web of interactions you've carefully constructed. Some To Dos will be impossible to complete. Some information will not be as accessible. (If this is the only source of that information, go back and fix that.)
- ❖ This is hard to plan for. It can be done.
- ❖ Never write an "extra" character, that is somehow less. The players will know. All the characters should be equal and integrated with each other.
- ❖ Letting characters get killed off mid-game has similar issues. Writing a good replacement character is very tough to do well.

I personally don't do this. Even with Idol Hands growing from 20 to 22 to 25 characters, those new parts are fully integrated. Remove one and the game wouldn't work as well.

12 Characters Walk Into A Bar...

- * Your characters have spoken, and you have a good idea for the size of the game. You've considered the web of interactions. How long should the game run?
- * That depends on a couple of factors:
- * Are you going to put everything into the characters at game start?
- * Are you going to introduce external events and *significant* new information during the game? (e.g. pages of restored memories)
- * Are you using mechanics that will take a long time to resolve if things end in a massive conflict?

Inserting information takes time, and information takes time to propagate through the game.

Variable numbers of characters are hard, because the number of interactions changes dramatically. Plots can break. Start simple, and use a fixed number – unless you're doing something like a horde game.

So How Long Should It Run?

- ❖ Your estimates are TOO LONG.
- ❖ Be merciless. I've rarely met a game that couldn't be compressed in time. Doing so puts pressure on the players to act. Time pressure also helps to prevent slow periods.
- ❖ Give your players a lot to do and not enough time to accomplish everything. Force them to choose their priorities. Yes, this means that many of your possible To Dos won't get finished, but you still have to write them.
- ❖ Leave the players wanting more. That's so much better than having everyone just standing around waiting for the last two people to finish up their last plot.

This is also what playtesting is for.

Don't Skimp On the Other Bits

- ❖ It takes time to set up the space.
- ❖ You're going to start the role-playing later than you want. Players are scum; they will be late.
- ❖ You probably need a game briefing, to explain the space and anything tricky about your game, such as mechanics. Be brief; people are here to LARP, not listen to you talk.
- ❖ You may want to have a game wrap when you're done.
- ❖ It takes time to clean up.
- ❖ Plan on this, especially if you have a fixed time and place to run.

Tony Mitton has a great rant on why Players Are Scum. Of course, Sue Lee has an equivalent rant about how GMs are Bastards.

Writing Characters

- * A game is a collection of characters with things they have to do, individually and/or collectively. The details and directions that a LARP will take depend on how those characters will see their tasks and goals, and how the player interprets them.
- * A To Do will be approached very differently depending on whether the character is a tarnished saint, a depraved sociopath, a sinner seeking absolution, a selfish manipulator looking only to their own ends, or something entirely different.
- * Your job is to weave a character into the given set of goals. You probably already have some good ideas about them, but listen as they tell you about themselves. They may surprise you.

How Long Should a Character Be?

- ❖ That depends on the number of To Dos, the length of the game, and the depth you want to give your characters.
- ❖ “You don’t remember.” is the shortest legitimate character sheet I know. That doesn’t go very far. Either the character will get their memory back, requiring a longer description, or other characters will have to know what happened, which means their sheets are longer.
- ❖ Three sentences can totally work, for a game like *FOCUS: the Generic LARP*. There was a surprisingly rich environment, and everyone had a clear archetype to play.
- ❖ Three sentences (or less) can fail totally, like in *Slave Girls of the Terror Dome*, where nothing was connected or made sense.

Where Is the Character Information?

- * Character information is often spread into several pieces. Consider a game with d'Artagnan, of *The Three Musketeers*. From most specific to most generic, details about his character could be:
 - * In his character biography (*e.g.* d'Artagnan's personal history)
 - * Introduced in the game, via contingency envelopes or arrival information.
 - * In small-group or description bluesheets (*e.g.* A Musketeer's bluesheet, French court politics, etc.)
 - * In public materials (*e.g.* common knowledge of events at the court, history of duels, etc.)

Which of those Places Do I Choose?

- ❖ It's clearly easier and more private to put more useful and specific information about how a character thinks in the most specific materials - the character biography.
- ❖ To say that d'Artagnan was passionately in love with the Queen and how he feels is not something publicly known.
- ❖ If it's relevant, it belongs in the biography.

How will the Choice Affect Game Play?

- ❖ Consider Armand, who is given a contingency envelope that says “Open when you meet Esmerelda.”
- ❖ Armand meets several characters, and then is introduced to Esmerelda. Armand introduces himself as he has to all of the other characters he doesn't know.
- ❖ There's that contingency envelope. Roleplaying stops, which is troubling. Armand opens the envelope and reads “you were lovers long ago.”
- ❖ That would entirely change how Armand would greet Esmerelda. The player probably did it wrong because they didn't know what the character would. This is relevant. Furthermore, how the relationship ended would make a big difference in this new greeting.

Other characters will react based on what they see. It might be relevant politically that Armand and Esmerelda have a history. If all a third character saw was the botched introduction, they might come away with the wrong information.

Relevant is Key

- ❖ If it's relevant, it belongs in the character sheet. At a minimum, the character sheet must contain all of the relevant information needed to play the part.
- ❖ This does not mean all of the details are correct; the information is there as the character sees it or knows it.
- ❖ If d'Artagnan had a relevant argument with Louis over the meaning of honor, it *has* to be in both characters. That d'Artagnan sees it as the last chance to persuade Louis to be a decent King, and that Louis sees it as yet another nagging annoyance, is perfectly reasonable.

Consistency is So Important

- * Even though Louis thought the argument unimportant, it *has* to be in his character sheet.
- * Consider a dramatic moment in game, where d'Artagnan is facing down the King. d'Artagnan refers to the conversation: "I told you that honor was key, that it would make you a better King, yet here we are." If Louis replies "You never told me that," it destroys the moment, and can kill a game.
- * Worse yet, they metagame for a moment and say "the GMs screwed it up."
- * Always, always, always, make a consistency pass after you've written the game. If X and Y were both together at Z, it has to be in both sheets, so they can both play with it. This is where a new set of eyes really helps.

You have to start consistent and keep checking as you write. Then you still have to have someone else read it. My son Jordan reads everything I write, and he sees things I thought I fixed.

Details Enhance the Picture

- ❖ Once you have all of the relevant pieces in place, embellish and add.
- ❖ Details give characters something to talk about when they're first getting together. "I grew up in Paris, and loved to walk through the Latin quarter, smelling the aromas from the bistros, watching the tourists as the maitre'd's competed for customers."
- ❖ Details give characters something to share in quiet intimate moments. It can be a way to connect. "I knew your son well, he talked of you and your farm often, in the lulls between battles."
- ❖ Details give characters a sense of how to play them. Write the part as compassionate or cold, optimistic or pessimistic, and so on. Use details to paint the broad strokes for the player to refine into their interpretation.

Bluesheets are Your Friend

- ❖ Sometimes, you can push common information into bluesheets.
- ❖ Bluesheets are pages that contain additional information, not written in a character-specific way. They are typically printed on blue (or green) paper.
- ❖ If you find yourself writing the same text over and over again, consider pushing it into a shared bluesheet. It's quite reasonable to share a bluesheet between a small number of characters.
- ❖ If the interpretation of the common event differs significantly, you may not be able to use a bluesheet. Or, you can cheat. You can say "See the X bluesheet, but this is what you really think."

You Need to Let Go

- ❖ You can't control your players. Plots will not go the way you want them to.
- ❖ Players are perverse and brilliant. They will see solutions that you never expected. They will find cracks and loopholes. They will compromise when you least expect it.
- ❖ I have an archaeologist character in *The Idol Hands of Death* who has finally gotten the chance to go on the dig he's dreamed of. I thought I'd made it absolutely clear that the dig was his focus, to the exclusion of nearly everything else. In one run, a player announced that he was giving it all up. When I pulled the player aside, he explained his reasons, which made sense - but it was a very different interpretation than I expected.
- ❖ You lose all character control once the game starts. Learn to deal with it.

Players will solve your unsolvable problems. My solution for Tabula Rasa v2.0 was brilliant, unorthodox, and completely within the abilities they'd given to me. I was given two choices and found a third option.

You Really Need to Let Go

- ❖ If you try to control the plots or the action, the players will know it and will resent it.
- ❖ *Deus Ex Machina* plots, where “a seemingly unsolvable problem is suddenly and abruptly solved with the contrived and unexpected intervention of some new event, character, ability, or object,” will make the players angry.
- ❖ Don't plan for a specific outcome, because you're guaranteed never to get there.
- ❖ Trust in what you've written for the characters, stand back, and watch them come to life.

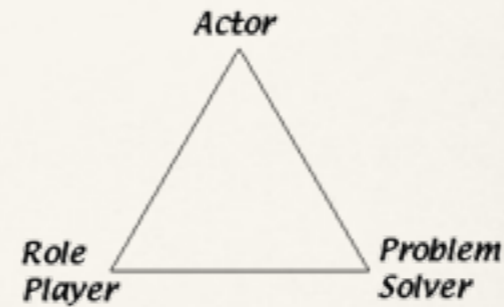
Don't Forget the Cardinal Rule...

- ❖ Will this character be fun to play?
- ❖ If you have doubts, ask someone.
- ❖ If you have serious doubts, rewrite the character.

- ❖ Don't wait until you've written the part to ask the question. This has to be in your head as you write.

Archetypes aren't just for Characters

- ❖ As you write the character, you need to consider what kind of player will play the part. It makes a big difference in how the character will be interpreted and played.
- ❖ This is the player archetype triangle, defined in the 90s by Gail and Doug Freedman.
- ❖ It's similar to RPG's Gamist/Narrativist/Simulationist trio.



Consider how these archetypes might approach a murder mystery.

The Actor

- * The Actor wants to make things happen with his character, play to the audience (of others), act out the dramatic scenes, have loud arguments, gesticulate wildly, and fondly reminisce about old times.
- * An Actor could talk for hours about some minor incident in their background, making up all sorts of details about who he was with, and what happened.
- * An Actor goes for the dramatic, and so might not be best for those roles where they have to get away with something.
- * An Actor might actually dramatically confess to committing murder, even though it wouldn't be in the character's best interest.

The Role-Player

- ❖ The Role-Player wants to identify with the character, internalizing the character's goals.
- ❖ The Role-Player wants to act and react as the character would, regardless of what's going on.
- ❖ A Role-Player would remember the details of their past as their character would.
- ❖ If a murder mystery is really irrelevant to the Role-Player's goals, they might not bother to reveal the details that they know, even if it means a guilty player walks away.

The Problem Solver

- ❖ The Problem Solver wants to figure out what's going on.
- ❖ The Problem Solver likes to solve puzzles, investigate clues, follow up on all the To Dos they can, and check off as many goals as possible. It doesn't matter how they get to the solution; characterization is less important.
- ❖ A Problem Solver is more likely to want to know what happened to the victim of a crime than to go on about their own character's history.

Matching Players to Characters

- * The triangle is a good shorthand to describe players. It's also a good way to describe characters.
- * Players fall somewhere in the triangle. So do characters.
- * I tend to write murderer characters who need to get away with it for most of the game as a Problem Solver. A Problem Solver player in the role keeps them focused, dancing as the noose tightens.
- * A Role Player might stay too much in character to get away with it.
- * An Actor might decide it would be dramatic to confess in midgame, which would abruptly end the To Dos for the detectives.

I'm probably halfway between Role Player and Problem Solver, closer to the Actor corner.

The Third Dimension

- * I've realized there's a fourth archetype: the Gunslinger.
- * Players fall somewhere in this three dimensional volume.



The Gunslinger

- ❖ The Gunslinger is someone who enjoys using mechanics to extend their role-playing with special abilities and combat.
- ❖ This may be as simple as using a boffer weapon or Nerf gun in live-combat. It may be as involved as using dice, cards, a war game, or something else to simulate something not physically possible or reasonable.
- ❖ The Gunslinger prefers these elements in their play. They may step out of the role-playing moment to invoke these mechanics - and it is not limited to combat.
- ❖ The Gunslinger would rather pull out a "Fast Talk" ability card than try to actually convince someone to do their bidding.

I stink at mechanics. I forget that I have Special Ability cards. I have the personal Special Ability of making mechanics fail in unusual and unexpected ways. I can't count, add, or subtract when I'm in a LARP. I fall in the plane at the bottom of the pyramid.

Mechanics

- ❖ You may have gathered I'm not a big fan of mechanics.
- ❖ Mechanics interrupt the flow of role-playing and characterization.
- ❖ Mechanics break the mood.
- ❖ Mechanics create time bubbles, where players can't be reached, and connections are broken.
- ❖ Mechanics take time to explain on paper and during game briefing, take time to run, and, with a player like me, need a GM to get "right."
- ❖ Mechanics suck up GM time, which can mean players waiting in line to get to a GM. No one wants to wait in line while other action is going on.

There are war stories of horrible games where nearly every action required waiting in line for a GM.

If I really wanted to play a tabletop game or a war game, I wouldn't be at a LARP.

So How Do You Do Odd Things?

- ❖ Why are you doing this? What are you trying to accomplish in game? Do you really need this to tell the story you're trying to tell?
- ❖ The first option is not to do them. You can write great games without them.
- ❖ The second option is to run with "GM Sanctioned Mayhem Only," which means if a player wants to do something, they go to a GM who figures out what happens. There's no need for statistics or detailed special ability cards, because the GM keeps this in their head.
- ❖ If you must have player-driven mechanics, then Keep It As Simple As Possible. Remember that the player is going to be fumbling through ability cards, looking up numbers on the character sheet, and struggling to make something happen.

But I have this Really Cool System!

- * That's what everyone thinks, until the players get their hands on it.
- * If you must have a system, write it all down first, well before the game.
- * Find a handful of playtesters who have never heard of your system, who have not been in the design meetings, who are not practiced at such things.
- * Brief them as you would for the game and then playtest the system. Watch how people struggle with it. Fix the problems and repeat the playtesting. Continue until it works or you give up.
- * Make sure that you have extra GMs at runtime to help handle this. Make sure that they are practiced with the mechanics. It's a bad sign if the player has to explain the system to the GM.

Item Cards are a Mechanic, Too

- * How many games have you been in where you are given a stack of index cards representing items you have in game?
- * How many times have you struggled to find a specific item by searching through all of the things in your packets?
- * Compare the play experience of handing a “Holy Hand Grenade of St. Antioch” item card to a GM versus carrying the Hand Grenade and then trying to lob it, on the count of five, at someone playing the Vorpal Bunny.
- * Use real props or close facsimiles whenever possible - unless the game may be exposed to nonplayers. Then fake guns, other weapons, bombs, drugs, and other potentially sensitive objects should not be used.

Or digging in soft soil looking for body parts, or disassembling a nuclear generator to make a bomb, or just trying to conceal a bulging folder of secret information. It adds greatly to the play experience.

Just remember: Thou Shalt Not Freak the Mundanes.

Don't Confuse a Prop With A Plot

- * A cool prop is not a plot or a To Do.
- * Cool scenery and set dressings don't help players who are standing around bored.
- * Consider the stories, the To Dos, the plots, and the characters. If they can't stand on their own, running powerfully in a bare room, then all the props and set dressings in the world aren't going to help.

There's a LARP group out there that I won't name. They pride themselves on their prop creation skills, and go around teaching them. They've built some imaginative materials, better than in most games. Their props are great, but their games have a reputation for stinking. They've confused creating a cool setting with creating a good game.

Conclusions

- * We've talked about the core of what it takes to do a good LARP, which is applicable to many different flavors of games. There are additional ideas which factor in if you're running a live-combat game, or a horde game, or a serious murder mystery, or any of the other many styles.
- * Keep the Twelve Rules in mind as you design your game, and as you write.
- * Start with the stories and what the characters are going to do.
- * Build with triangles, creating a web of interactions, decisions, and To Dos.
- * Always ask the question: "Would this be fun to play?"

We've just skimmed the surface.

More Conclusions

- * Keep the structure of the game in mind, and how it might flow. Be careful not to break the game into smaller pieces, breaking the interconnections.
- * Make sure the characters are consistent with each other. If an event happened to two characters, it has to be in both of their backgrounds.
- * You can't control the action. Let it go.
- * Know your players and match them to the appropriate characters.
- * Keep it simple, especially when it comes to mechanics. Less is Better. None is Great.

Even More Conclusions

- ❖ Writing a good LARP will always take longer than you expect. Give yourself plenty of time. Don't wait for the last minute.
- ❖ With time, you can bounce ideas off of other writers. They can provide a much needed sanity check. You will write goofy things.
- ❖ With time, you can review, revise, and check for consistency. You can give the finished materials to someone else to read, so they can look at it with fresh eyes.
- ❖ With time, you can do a better production job, with cool props.

Some Final Advice

- * As you write, play in other people's LARPs. There is no better way to learn what works and what doesn't. It's also fun, stimulating new ideas.
- * "The most dangerous thought that you can have as a creative person is to think that you know what you're doing, because once you think you know what you're doing you stop looking around for other ways of doing things and you stop being able to see other ways of doing things. You become blind." - Bret Victor

Room in the BYOG effort.