

# Designing Educational Larps

## how to entertain players while saying something important

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### 0. All you really need:

- Idea
- Setting
- Characters
- Reasons for interaction

(all the rest is just decoration – but some of it may be very useful)

### 1. Purpose? Do you want to:

Prove a point? - *such as a game saying “drugs are bad”*

Teach new facts? - *like “the historical situation was much more complex than the school books tell you”*

Provide incentives for self-learning? - *This can be either during play, or as part of researching something, such as period costumes, for a larp*

Raise questions? - *i.e. making the players leave the game so that they ponder new perspectives*

### 2. Plot. Options:

Railroad – *a plot that mostly follows a set course with its story, either through game master manipulation or by pre-told fates (like “the game will end with the spaceship crashing, the idea is to play the events leading to it”)*

Hidden railroad – *as above, but done by having NPCs or hidden game masters among players steer the course*

Emergent – *no special plot, just story seeds in characters and settings. The players take those where they will, with next to no GM interference (e.g. The Tribunal)*

Fractured – *scenes which do not necessary continue from anything before. Broken-down time and space (e.g. The Road Not Taken)*

Miniplots – *writing strong plots for groups of characters, but leaving any central plot out.*

Choose the one that best fits your goal: freedom of play invokes thoughts, but railroads teach single things better. *-The more you want to emphasize a single thing, the more plot control you usually need.*

*Plot structures can be combined, so it is for example possible to make a game that has both a railroad and emergent smaller plots.*

### **3. Be interesting**

Make the larp worth playing – *the game has to be worth the players' time, if it is to educate in any way. The lessons of a bad larp get easily forgotten.*

Make the larp seem worth playing – *Marketing. Advertise the game as something people will want to play. Do remember to be honest also, though.*

Using familiar things is fine – *Borrow ideas and techniques from elsewhere, such as psychodrama and improvisational theater, if they work. Giving credit to the sources is fine, too.*

Provide starting points for easy play – *Educational larps often include first-timers and players who do not know each other. Give them something easy to use for getting into the game (e.g. the animal character likenesses in *The Tribunal*).*

Integrate learning point and material to the game concept – *Saying after the game that “this was the lesson” is not good. Showing with the larp the point, then expanding upon it (“the reality was ten times worse”), however, is often extremely useful.*

### **4. Turn thorns into emeralds**

Find out your larp's problem points in advance – *If the game is boring, if the lack of some character nearly ruins it, and so on*

Turn them to your advantage, if you can – *For example, prepare the game so that if a key person is missing, it stays interesting, just in a different way (“if the king's player does not show up, I can still turn this into a great larp about power vacuums.”)*

Add them to the game information – *Say “this game requires some boring moments because of...”, etc, and the players will play accordingly. Then they know it's not due to bad design, but for intent.*

### **5. Seek balance**

Too educational, and it is no longer enjoyable

Too entertaining, and it is no longer educational

Keep the larp challenging – *Challenges make the players want to keep playing.*

Cater for many styles of play – *Think about your own regular playing group, how their interests differ from each other. Try to make sure that your game would offer as many of them something interesting as possible, even if you are writing for other people, not them. Some will want competition, some stories, some character-immersion, and so on.*

## **6. Evolve**

Design the larp, run it once, then write down organizer guidelines – *Everything of significance you did while running it. Especially if you are doing a mini-larp. You never know when someone wants to run it again, and that someone may be you.*

Never consider the game “finished” as a design – *There is always room for improving a game, at least on the level of making it fit each audience better.*

Always debrief, or ask for debriefs if someone else ran the larp – *Debriefing tells you what the players felt and learned, and it will allow you to repeat the main points of the learning content to the players.*

Learn from player feedback – *If the players tell you that something works, or does not work, believe them. Even if it's not the same for everyone, and the game requires no changes, take heed of the fact that some players have reacted to it in a certain fashion.*

Avoid idealism – *You do not know everything. When you start defending your ideas strongly against those who played the game, you are already on shaky ground. Remember that even your whole teaching point may sometimes be wrong. Always examine your ideas.*

## **Further free reading :**

### **On design:**

Harviainen, J. Tuomas (2005): Corresponding expectations.

<http://knutepunkt.laiv.org/kp05/correspondingexpectations.pdf>

Harviainen, J. Tuomas (2009): Notes on Designing Repeatable Larps

<http://knutepunkt.laiv.org/2009/book/NotesOnDesigningRepeatableLarps/>

Koljonen, Johanna (2007): Eye-Witness to the Illusion.

[http://www.liveforum.dk/kp07book/lifelike\\_koljonen.pdf](http://www.liveforum.dk/kp07book/lifelike_koljonen.pdf)

Lankoski, Petri (2004): Character Design Fundamentals for Role-Playing Games.

<http://www.ropecon.fi/brap/ch12.pdf>

Svanevik, Martine (2005): The Collective's Little Red Book.

<http://knutepunkt.laiv.org/kp05/The%20Collective%27s%20little%20red%20book.pdf>

Fredelius, Ada. Happily Ever After. Techniques for Ending a Larp.

<http://jeepen.org/kpbook/>

### **On plot structure:**

Fatland, Eirik (2005): Incentives as Tools of Larp Dramaturgy.

<http://knutepunkt.laiv.org/kp05/Incentives%20as%20tools%20of%20larp%20dramaturgy..pdf>

Fatland, Eirik (2006):

<http://jeepen.org/kpbook/>

Kim, John (2004): Immersive Story.

<http://www.ropecon.fi/brap/ch3.pdf>

Westlund, Aksel (2004). The Storyteller's Manifesto

<http://www.ropecon.fi/brap/ch25.pdf>

### **Theory (useful for applying for permits, grants and such):**

Bruun, Jesper (2011): Pre-Larp Workshops as Learning Situations.

[http://rollespilsakademiet.dk/kpbooks/think\\_larp\\_web.pdf](http://rollespilsakademiet.dk/kpbooks/think_larp_web.pdf)

Harder, Sanne (2007). Confessions of a Schoolteacher.: Experiences with Role-playing in Education [http://www.liveforum.dk/kp07book/lifelike\\_harder.pdf](http://www.liveforum.dk/kp07book/lifelike_harder.pdf)

Harviainen, J. Tuomas (2010): A Brief Introduction to Larp as an Art Form.

[http://www.larpsymposium.org/?page\\_id=368](http://www.larpsymposium.org/?page_id=368)

Henriksen, Thomas Duus (2004): On the Transmutation of Educational Role-Play.  
<http://www.ropecon.fi/brap/ch10.pdf>

Henriksen, Thomas Duus (2010): Moving Educational Role-Play Beyond Entertainment.  
[http://campus.usal.es/~revistas\\_trabajo/index.php/revistatesi/article/viewArticle/7462](http://campus.usal.es/~revistas_trabajo/index.php/revistatesi/article/viewArticle/7462)

Hyltoft, Malik (2008): The Role-Players' School: Østerskov Efterskole  
<http://www.ropecon.fi/pw>

Nurmi, Bo (2010): Participatory Education.  
[http://interactingarts.org/pdf/Playing%20Reality%20\(2010\).pdf](http://interactingarts.org/pdf/Playing%20Reality%20(2010).pdf)

Printed books and journals that need subscription (such as *Simulation & Gaming*) contain more, on both theory and educational game design.

And remember that there are still loads more, written in Russian. See <http://www.rpg.ru> for a start.

### **Links to free mini-larps and similar games:**

[http://wiki.rpg.net/index.php/LARP\\_Scenarios](http://wiki.rpg.net/index.php/LARP_Scenarios)

<http://jeepen.org/games/>