

Workshopping the Play Community: Reflections on the role of pre-LARP workshops in *Dance of Ribbons* LARP

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INTRODUCTION

In the tradition of Nordic LARP, live action role playing games are often supported by one or a number of pre-game workshops. Despite Nordic LARP being a well researched and documented tradition (see Stenros and Montola 2010), there is little writing about thoseLARPs whose designers and organisers host workshops prior to their events. Aside from the publishing of workshop plans that seek to develop particular techniques amongst role players participating in specific Nordic LARP events (see Wieslander 2014; Nielsen 2014; Garperian and Vejdemo 2018) most workshop knowledge is, as LARP designer Mo Holkar suggests, an oral tradition (2016). In a blog offering a guide to LARP workshop design, Holkar observes that role players who participate in a workshop before a game might take ideas or activities from that workshop and iterate on them for their own role playing games (2016). Aside from this iterative practice of facilitating workshop activities, however, the role workshops play in broader discussions of live action role play has been little researched or reflected on. In this presentation, we consider the role of pre-game workshops in LARP, and reflect on our own practice as workshop facilitators on how workshops enabled us to ‘rehearse’ play with a LARP community.

In the three months leading up to the Dance of Ribbons LARP, a weekend long festival camping event that we designed and hosted in November 2023, we facilitated three workshops for role players who had purchased tickets to the LARP weekend. As part of our design process for Dance of Ribbons we created a kind of play manifesto that outlined a number of principles aimed at what we called ‘generous play’ that set

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expectations for what we wanted role play to look like for our and with our participants. We also recognised, however, that we were designing a sandbox style LARP. That is, within a set of boundaries set by mechanics, rules of player conduct, some written lore, and the specific materiality of the campsite setting, role players would be invited to creatively improvise a freeform experience involving the embodiment of a character and the enactment of a world. In a sandbox setting, how role players were to play was in some ways unpredictable. Our hope was that pre-game workshops could introduce and give players an embodied sense of what 'generous play' might feel like, and provide us as designers some predictability.

Play, and role play especially, can unfold in unpredictable ways. As game ethnographers observe, people who gather and play together will, over time, iterate on the conventions of their play, and new conventions of play might emerge in ways not always anticipated by the designers of the game (see Pearce 2011; De Koven 2013 [1983]). Furthermore, as LARP designers and game studies scholars Pöllänen and Arjoranta have observed, because role play invites players to embody and improvise the lives of characters, they are spaces that can emotionally affect participating role players in unexpected ways (2021). Cultivating a role play community that recognises the risks of these unpredictable elements of emergent play is a challenge.

In this short presentation, we seek feedback on some of our reflections and observations from these workshops and the role they played in the establishment of a Dance of Ribbons role play community. Dance of Ribbons took place in November of 2023. As creators, facilitators, and observers, we have now had the opportunity to see how a set of abstract play principles become concrete in practice, albeit not necessarily in a linear way. As we imply above, LARP events are reliant on the formation of what Bernie De Koven calls a play community (2013 [1983]). Here, in this work in progress, we ask: how is a play community workshopped?

ENDNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

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BIO

Josiah Lulham is a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne, conducting ethnographic work with live action role play (LARP) communities. His dissertation investigates the play of a Melbourne LARP community, considering the ways in which immersion into LARP experiences is understood and practiced through the craft of material and narrative, and considering the affective consequences of immersion beyond those settings in which role players are immersed. Josiah is also an actor, theatre maker, and the co-artistic director of the Melbourne Playback Theatre Company.

David Harris is a teacher of interactive narrative and game design at Swinburne University of Technology, and a PhD candidate at the Victorian College of the Arts. His research looks at the intersection of interactive or immersive theatres with the principles of interactivity in play and games. His enquiry is one of what a game or work *offers* an audience or player, and how these playful stakeholders *respond* to the situations these games or theatrical works provide. David is also an artist and theatremaker, with a practice of immersive theatre making and live game design.