

Notes on designing repeatable larps

J. Tuomas Harviainen

8

DESIGN

DOCUMENTATION

RESEARCH

Larp design is a multi-formed beast. The variables are numerous, ranging from scale to local playing culture to player selection. One design issue that has thus far been sadly overlooked is the ephemeral nature of the product itself – most of what has been written about creating larps has been geared towards a designer-supervised single-run project, not repeatable scenarios. This article discusses variance in the latter type of larp, and then gives guidelines for creating them.

In some ways, the concept of repeatable larps has been with us for a long time. Many a rule system contains an introductory scenario that can be used to teach the mechanics and social setting of a setting like *a World of Darkness*. Likewise, there are both scenario books and single-concept larp systems available, in printed form and online, which are designed to support multiple runs.

In my opinion, however, there are several different types of repeatable scenarios available, with some types being far more advanced than others. This is not to say that the advanced ones are better, just that it is possible to design for several styles of play. A simple scenario is easy to comprehend and run, while a more complex concept requires much more effort, but in turn may also offer something much more significant. *Trapped* (2003), a four-player scenario set in an elevator, by Mike Young, is very different from the massive literature adaptation *A Nice Evening with the Family* (Westerling et al., 2007).

The key: narrative

The core question in variances on repeatable larp development is that of plot. Does one want the game to follow the same plotline every time, or one of a few potential ones, or to have something semi-random to arise from just basic seeds planted in the material? Each type has definite strengths – and clear weaknesses. Through a few examples – which I of course cannot really describe, given the ephemeral nature of larps – I will outline the central issues.

The first of these is whether one wants the game to contain one main plotline, or several, or many completely non-collaborative ones. While naturally a question of importance in the design of almost every larp, this becomes even more imperative when designing repeatable works: The choice of plot integrity usually defines every other aspect (with the possible exception of game size). As Aksel Westlund notes, in his “Storyteller’s Manifesto” (2004), this is mostly dealt with through balancing personal character material either in tune, or more or less in dissonance, with the main story arc(s).

For example, my own simulation of a horrible hang-over morning, *Prayers on a Porcelain Altar*, is designed to cater for emergent plots. In other words, the script is created through planting various story seeds – called *fabula* in larp studies, after Eirik Fatland’s definition (2005) – in the setting and the character material, but the goals of each character and



player are left almost completely in the hands of the players. This means that while some plotlines are more likely to emerge than others, the game master has absolutely no control over what is to emerge. The scenario therefore changes significantly from one run to the next. Players may thus attend the same game several times, with the scenario changing a lot more than in a more typical repeated run. The downside is that a game considered great on one run can be a huge disappointment on the next one, and this may be regardless of how “good” the players are.

In contrast, *A Nice Evening* was based on a tightly scripted set of plots, tied around a central one (for a more thorough description, see Hultman, Westerling & Wrigstad, 2008). The plots, in this case, were drawn directly from books and cinema. That sort of structure virtually guarantees, through the use of “plot waypoints”, that the main stories stay intact while players are still granted a significant level of freedom. Some of the most successful repeated-play designs even rely on this to create functional play: The witch-trial game *Salem 1906*, the first version of which was written by Yair Dicky Samban and Osher El-Netanyahu in 2004, is



built on a rigid plotline, but depends completely on players gathering up momentum (accusations and alliances) to feed that rigid plot. It is a game of pointing fingers at others, both creating and requiring lots of interaction. This is an excellent method for making sure things change while they stay the same, but it is heavily dependent on the player's willingness to feed the scenario. It also requires reaching a critical mass of opinion. And, furthermore, there is a chance of sidetracking the whole main plot, which is something that few tight-plotted larps really survive. As El-Netanyahu notes on running *Salem*:

“Players start to inject their own materials to the game and hype it higher (like trying to implant blood on the flour bought from the Nurse store, and painting pentagrams over the houses of the proctor's household). However, it takes the focus a little away from the conflicts I originally intended to confront with, so when it showed, I had to make a decision about how much to let it be in order to let the initiative-takers

- Prayers on a Porcelain Altar at the Utrecht School of Arts, Utrecht, the Netherlands, June 2008.

Photo
Lennart Quispel

come to self expression, and yet, preserve the atmosphere fit for players that do confront with the originally designated materials.” (Personal correspondence, used with permission)

This is a problem that became highly apparent in my run of Nick Huggins’ small séance larp *Communing in Darkness* at Ropecon 2008: with every player trying to control the ouija board at once, nearly all of its channeled spirit messages got scrambled. And as the game is staged around a progression of that information – several sessions at the board, during which more messages appear – the later parts did not make much sense to the players. However, the scenario’s interpersonal parts and general mood were still able to keep things enjoyable for the players. There is an extremely important lesson in this: In designing a scenario that leaves your hands, make doubly sure that the game can be enjoyable even if the main plotline fails to manifest. Even a very experienced game master will consider it problematic to alter the course of someone else’s work, despite witnessing that the game is not unfolding as it should.

Some repeated scenarios have a tight plot even while appearing completely free-formed. A designated start and a designated finish is still a plot, as is obvious in the case of the bomb shelter larp *Ground Zero*, which was run three times in Finland (1999-2001). As Heidi Hopeametsä, who has analyzed its player debriefs, notes (2008), the game was essentially an immersion into a non-plot, non-task-solving situation. Yet this was set in the middle of two scripted events: the entry to the bomb shelter, and the inevitable drop of the bomb. This is essentially the same thing as a game with mandatory waypoints.

The differences in these forms are far more important than one thinks. The emergent type is more precarious, in that there are no guarantees of a repeated similarity in player experiences, but it is also more interesting to repeat in the long run. When you do not know at all how things will turn out, following the game becomes more than just a question of success vs. failure.

On the other hand, a game with waypoints or a major plot is easier for others to run, and more predictable in both the good and the bad. In my experience it does not stay interesting for an organizer as long as an emergent one does, but that is not really the main point, now, is it? The first real question is: “How close to my vision of what is to happen in the game do I need the game to be?” And the second one, “How certainly do I want that to happen over multiple runs, when I am not necessarily in control, but it is still organized with my name on the game?”

There is a difference in designing a repeatable work so that you will run it yourself, and in making a script that anyone can run. The former you can correct as you go along, the latter, when the script is published, you cannot. It is therefore important to have the game as perfected as possible when it goes public.

■ New Voices in Art at Knudepunkt 2007, Denmark.

Photo
Britta Bergersen



Running instructions

This is where the next step of the plan comes in. Not only does the plot require an assessment of future adaptability – so does also the running environment. Any good repeatable scenario comes with proper running instructions. Those instructions, normally, contain at least data on proping, environment, number of characters and game duration, but may have a lot more: I personally include theme, mood and style data in all of my repeatable larp scripts. In my view, these are essential when designing something that leaves your personal control. Even very serious games like *Prayers* or *Salem* have been known to slip into parody on occasion, unless these details are communicated in advance.

My personal suggestion is to draft the running instructions after at least two runs that you have supervised yourself. After that, if it is possible, update them after each two (or so) runs, regardless of whether you or someone else organized them. For example, I toned down the amount of blood on “the sheets upstairs” from three to one liters in the game master instructions of *Prayers*, in response to player feedback on that part dominating the game too much – despite that part not being really significant in the runs before and after that feedback. Try creating a document of *full disclosure* that supports balanced play without (in theory) any supervision. This means that you also need to realize game elements that you have subconsciously added into the practicalities of running the game. Whatever you, for example, clarified in an opening speech or a debriefing session should be automatically included.

Game style is an important factor here: Some repeatable scenarios do not need much of a style guide. For example, *New Voices in Art*, a repeatable larp about a cadre of young artists at the opening of their joint art exhibition, gets along just fine with a simple list of mostly practical things, but also includes some implicit playing style guidelines in the statements given to each artist. This, however, is still open to interpretation: The same emotional pieces can be stated in sarcastic tones, in parody, or very seriously. This makes the game interesting also plot-wise – with next

to no fabula, the scenario can evolve into very different directions simply due to player choices in *style*, not just action.

In contrast, *Prayers* sets the mood to a nasty, offend-the-player-if-you-want feel in the player handouts. The default style, in my view, sets the tone on how fabula develop into plots, even as players are given lots of leeway. The style is further mentioned in the game master information, as in the case of *Prayers* the playing style is an essential ingredient of the scenario:

“You may therefore need to emphasize the fact that in this scenario, people are recommended to be mean to the each others’ characters based on traits that the character shares with its player. This means that it is completely legal to call the character of an overweight player “fat”, make racist and gender-discriminating remarks if it fits one’s own character, and so on.”

These are all also factors that you need to take into account when converting a one-run scenario into a repeatable one. In addition, it is quite likely that you have made some subconscious choices. Pay most attention to what you may have tried – consciously or not – to accomplish via things such as typecasting players. Remember that doing running and playing instructions is very different from documenting a successfully run game of yours.

Catering for audience variation

The point of player selection brings us to the next key part on the line: the selection of players. This is important, because you no longer can do it yourself. It is therefore necessary to create two mechanisms that ensure player enjoyment and game functionality. The first of these is an enhanced character selection process. While you can’t influence who is going to play, you can influence who plays whom. For example, the small ready-to-run

Parlor Larps described by John Kim (2008) use a system of three pairs of traits, so a player can pick the character that is (probably) most suitable for him or her: Dark/Light, Goal-oriented/Emotion-oriented and Simple/Complex, creating eight basic templates. My own games use a system of brief character descriptions, based on which each player picks one character. An example, from my *A Serpent of Ash*, which deals with the remnants of the Liberated, a failed charismatic cult:

A_____ – Timothy’s ”favorite disciple”, despite not being a member of the inner circle. Studied chemistry.

E_____ – The most talkative member of the Liberated. Even more active than the others in everything. Was unemployed at the time.

H _____ – Helpful, like an extra mom/dad who would always give you comfort. Studied mathematics.

Note that the descriptions need not match player expectations completely – the people in this example are described as they were five years ago – but the fact that players choose both increases the likelihood of the match and the probability of the player being at least basically OK with the character, as she/he has personally selected that character.

The second mechanism is more problematic: You have to be quite certain, and open, about to what sort of playing interests does the game mostly cater. A good repeatable scenario either needs to offer several styles of play at once (typical of the emergent plot type) or to state clearly what sort of play will be favored (such as the obvious theatricality of *A Nice Evening*). Otherwise things like local playing habits will play havoc on what you have designed: The stereotypes, from drama-oriented Swedes to just-for-fun-playing Germans and competitive British larpers, are real enough. Say what sort of play is promised and what sort of play is expected, and you may end up offering a random, foreign audience a new experi-

ence. But if you do not, they may accidentally consider your work just a failure and a waste of time.

One further technique to enhance your chance of success is the multi-layering technique I have discussed in an earlier article (2005). It is essentially a system of making sure that the game has more than one level for the players to perceive. For example, a player in *Prayers* may concentrate on in-character insults while – as a player – actually pondering what some bloodstains upstairs mean, or a crowd member may ponder *Salem* as a metaphor for modern society while listening to the accusations. A game can take place on several levels at once. This increases the probability of unknown players enjoying the scenario, as they have something of interest at hand, in case they are not fully immersed in the character or drama-playing itself.

And on a final note on player selection, make a realistic calculation on how many players your larp will actually need to run properly, and which characters should be cut from the game if there is less than an optimal number of players. Then write these instructions down.

On the question of special purposes

There is one more thing to note, and that is the design of repeatable scenarios for purposes other than pure enjoyment. My own most popular works, *Serpent* and *Prayers*, double as research projects, and thus have been written to support the testing of certain theories and phenomena. Done right, a repeatable script takes a life of its own, producing results of varying quality for years to come.

The issue of multiple-use educational larps, however, is trickier. Most of those can be considered repeatable works supervised by the designer, and often, as Finnish educational larp researcher and designer Jori Pitkänen notes (2008), require joint preparation with the players. Yet a few, such as Zentropa Interaction's democracy-teaching political larp set in the 1950s, *I Statens Tjenste* (see Wellejus & Agger, 2006, for a thorough analysis of the game), have been written to stand on their own.

They are curious things to create, as even the idea of knowing what others elsewhere may need to learn is quite arrogant. As they nevertheless are suitable for teaching practical skills and attitudes (as per Lieberoth & Harviainen, forthcoming), they will very likely soon be the most common type of repeatable larp available.

Everything stated above about repeatable scenarios is also accurate on educational and research games, with the following exception: in such larps, plot comes second after purpose. When creating a game that has a goal outside play *and* still leaves your sphere of control, make damn sure all emerging major narrative supports the intended purpose of the scenario.

The guidelines

Anyone who has ever written a successful larp will also be able to design a larp for repeatable play. The key is in writing down enough of the small things one usually handles personally, including most probable variations. Most game masters are so used to off-handedly fixing problems that they rarely notice them. Write every such thing down.

Make sure the plot is interesting. Especially that it is interesting for yourself – there is no point in designing a game for multiple runs, if it's not interesting to organize those runs. All the best repeatable larps have one thing in common: people have said that they would want to attend them again. New players will always bring the most significant changes with them, but only with a suitably designed plot structure will they be able to make full use of that potential.

And while at it, it is necessary to make sure that the scenario will be enjoyable to several types of players. The further your work travels from your own hands, the more likely that it will encounter people who do not share your views on larping. Take that into account early on – you do not want to be considered a lousy designer.

When all this is done, and you have hopefully run the game at least once, write down everything you note as even marginally significant. If

you do it right, the game document itself will be the real “game master” on every subsequent run – players will read the right impressions from it, and the new organizer will know what the game is really supposed to be like. That way it is ultimately still you who controls how much the scenario changes, but you get all the good sides of being surprised by the players. And this is what your vision deserves.

Naught may endure but mutability.

Checklist

- Is there a special purpose to the game?
- What sort of plot structure am I using, and does it support that purpose?
- Is the plot structure supported by enough fabula?
- Have I clearly stated what sort of play is expected?
- Does the larp offer potential players something besides the plot and the primary style of play?
- How many players does this scenario need at minimum, and in which order should characters be removed?
- Would I want to run this game again myself?
- Will I be always involved in running this larp? And if not, have I written down everything mentioned in this checklist?

Ludography

Edland, Tor Kjetil, Falch, Arvid and Rognli, Erling: **New Voices in Art**. <http://chambergames.wordpress.com/2008/01/08/new-voices-in-art/>

Harviainen, J. Tuomas: **A Serpent of Ash**. http://www.larpaweb.org/game-bank-topmenu-32/doc_details/32-a-serpent-of-ash

Harviainen, J. Tuomas: **Prayers on a Porcelain Altar** (Demythologized Version).

Huggins, Nick: **Communing in Darkness**. http://www.irishgaming.com/scenario_storage/nh/CID.zip

Jokinen, Jami & Virtanen, Jori: **Ground Zero**.

Samban, Yair Dicky & El-Netanany, Osher: **Salem 1906**. <http://salem1906.googlepages.com/>

Westerling, Anna, et al. (2007): **A Nice Evening with the Family**.

Young, Mike (2003): **Trapped**. In: Young, M., ed., *Book of Larp*. Interactivities Ink.

Zentropa Interaction ApS: **I Statens Tjenste**. <http://www.demokratispil.dk>

Bibliography

Fatland, Eirik (2005b): Incentives as Tools of Larp Dramaturgy. In Bøckmann, P. & Hutchison, R. (Eds.) *Dissecting Larp*. Knutepunkt, Oslo.

Harviainen, J. Tuomas (2005): Corresponding Expectations. Alternative Approaches to Enhanced Game Presence. In Bøckmann, P. & Hutchison, R. (Eds.) *Dissecting Larp*. Knutepunkt, Oslo.

Hopeametsä, Heidi (2008): 24 Hours in a Bomb Shelter: Player, Character and Immersion in Ground Zero. In Montola, M. & Stenros, J. (Eds.) *Playground Worlds*. Ropecon ry, Helsinki.

Hultman, Anders, Westerling Anna & Wrigstad, Tobias (2008): Behind the Façade of A Nice Evening with the Family. In Montola, M. & Stenros, J. (Eds.) *Playground Worlds*. Ropecon ry, Helsinki.

- Kim, John** (2008): Parlor Larps: A Study in Design. In Montola, M. & Stenros, J. (Eds.) *Playground Worlds*. Ropecon ry, Helsinki.
- Lieberoth, Andreas & Harviainen, J. Tuomas** (forthcoming): *From Rites of Terror to Serious Play*.
- Pitkänen, Jori** (2008): *Pedagoginen live-roolipelaaminen historian opetusmetodina*. Master's thesis, University of Helsinki. Retrieved 25 September, 2008 from <https://oa.doria.fi/handle/10024/38561>
- Wellejus, Asta & Agger, Ask** (2006): Lyst, leg og læring. Det historiske vindue og rollespil som læringsværktøj. In: Sandvik, K. & Waade, A. M. (eds.): *Rollespil – i æstetisk, pædagogisk og kulturel sammenhæng*, pp. 217-236. Aarhus Universitetsforlag, Aarhus.
- Westlund, Aksel** (2004): The Storyteller's Manifesto. In Montola, M. & Stenros, J. (Eds.) *Beyond Role and Play*. Ropecon ry, Helsinki.