

Ten comparisons between UK LRP and French GN

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SCENE

PLAY

DESIGN

Introduction

In this article I will compare British and French live role-play, and ask the question: are they the same? In the U.K the abbreviation LRP or (live role-play) is used instead of LARP, (live action role-play) which is used in the U.S. In France GN (*Jeu De Role Grandeur Nature*, roughly ‘Actual size role-play’) is the equivalent term, but it only refers to events longer than twelve hours. Smaller events are called ‘*Soirée Enquête*’, roughly translated as ‘murder party’.

The term ‘rubber sword LRP’ is also used in Britain, referring to games, typically fantasy, which use latex weapons for combat. Both the British and French events I attended come under this term.

My experience with LRP comes from three British systems and two different games held by a French *association*, *Les Deux Tours*. By talking to the organisers from this and other *associations*, I noticed similarities that will allow me to talk about GN in France, which has over one hundred and twenty separate organisations. To begin with, I will make two generalisations: British games are usually long running campaigns, while French clubs generally organise smaller games.

1. Organisation, players, copyright

The structure of the organisations in each country mainly explains their respective differences. In Britain many organisations are a limited company, with one founder who designs a system and runs a campaign. While in tabletop RPGs ‘system’ tends to refer to the game mechanics, in British LRP it has become a catch all term for the mechanics and the world background, and by extension the organisers. A game is normally set up so that all the different races and people have a reason to be in the same place, a focus point for the world. Since rules are written to match a background, it would be difficult to use one set of mechanics for a different world background.

To survive, the organisations need to make a small profit, which allows them to reinvest into the game year after year. They rely on a small amount of highly motivated volunteers to assist in running the events. For the main people behind the L.T. (Lorien Trust) and P.D. (Profound Decisions), running their system is a full time job which they rely on to pay their wage.

In France, systems are run by associations, and therefore by a committee and an elected president. These associations are recognised as a hobby under French law, which gives them benefits such as not paying tax. Members are required by law to pay a yearly fee to the organisation. Their main focus is the hobby, not profit. Members are expected to volunteer time to help run the club, though the work is mainly done by a smaller group of active members.

As a result, French organisations rely on collaboration – especially the smaller ones, where the club hierarchy and game organisers are the same people. They need to find people to fill positions for the different games the organisation runs each year. The British model of a single person in charge allows for crew to come and go over its history. L.T. history has shown this model can survive large changes in personnel working for the organisation. Staff positions such as head of plot, security, rules or administration can be held for many years.

French players do attend games run by other *associations*, but identify themselves as belonging to a ‘home’ *association*. This distinction is blurred in the *Île de France* region around Paris, because of good public transport and over thirty *associations* in the area, giving players more choice than in regional areas.

British players have a stricter client/customer relationship like that of a consumer buying a product. Some people do volunteer to become staff and over time are associated with a system.

In France the now defunct *Terres du Sud* (“South Lands”) attempted to create a national game with an ongoing campaign, similar to the L.T. They had connections to C.P. (Curious Pastimes), a breakaway organisation from the L.T. C.P. players attended *Terres du Sud*, as characters from the North land.

France has the *Fédération Française des jeux de rôles grandeur nature*, a.k.a. the FédéGN. This represents the hobby nationally, and has among other things been able to negotiate fixed insurance rates for the *associations*. The U.K. does not have such an association. Organisers have the option of communicating on the Rule7 forum about holding events, but this forum does not represent the hobby to the public.

In the U.K, organisers generally refrain from basing LRP on copyrighted material. The list of LRP systems on Rule7 has two ‘unofficial’ games based on such material. In France the *associations’* not for profit status has meant they are left alone when using copyrighted material. Examples include, Discworld, Dungeons and Dragons, Warhammer, The Matrix, Star Wars, Deadwood and Harry Potter.

2. Rules

British rules systems are used for many years and go through version changes. For example the L.T. and P.D. are now on version 3 of its rules systems. A new system, Eos, has been honing its rules after each event, for its ongoing campaign. Since the organisers have played in different British systems, new ones tend to be a mix and match from other games, with new ideas added. Many organisers begin by working for other events and organising sanctioned observing their effect and influences on the game world. To uphold rules P.D. and Eos have referees and head referees. The L.T. has four positions: Head of Rules, Senior referee, Referee and Marshal. Marshals are the most common and do not have the power to adjudicate over the death of a player's character. Players know most combat situations will not result in character death. To become a marshal and referee requires taking a written test and an evaluation.

Learning the rules can take a few games. Even then, players tend to learn only what is relevant to their character. The L.T. rule book is 63 pages long, Eos is 84 pages, P.D. does not have a unified third edition yet, but would be of a similar length. This does not include pamphlets about your race/culture, skills, magic spells etc. Learning the rules for Eos was simpler for me than it would be for a new player, as it had similar concepts to the L.T. and P.D.

If a French club ran three separate one shot events, it could have rules written for each game. This disposable attitude means there is less of an emphasis on the rules. It is seen as important that they are followed, but there are not always staff whose main job is to adjudicate on rules. In a large battle they will often try to be monsters, guide plot and ensure the rules are being followed – all at the same time. Some French organisations have '*orgas*', the equivalent of a referee. Some *associations* run on-going campaigns and rules. I wasn't able to get any information about them.

The complicated rules written for the *Esterel* setting became a problem. The large amount of things which could be added as a bonus led to rapidly changing character abilities and much confusion. It seemed to

breed a reckless interpretation of the rules. Once, while playing a zombie, I had 'holy' water thrown in my eyes, naked flame passed near me so I would die in flames, and was body checked against a wall by someone with a strength bonus.

In both countries the rules tend to stay in the background. Out of character calls tend to happen in a fight if a weapon does extra damage. Spell effects are explained in the casting. "By my power I knock you down" and the player falls on to their back or squats down for thirty seconds. Play stops occasionally over a failure to understand rules in an important situation. Mostly a player will either reread the rules or ask a member of staff if something happens that is not understood.

3. Quality of equipment

The quality of equipment used is very different, especially the latex weapons. The U.K. has a number of professional and semi-professional manufacturers of weapons that need to conform to the minimum requirements set by the big three systems. Before a player can join a game their weapons and armour are examined by a qualified weapons tester. Any item found to be unsafe cannot be used in-game. This has established an overall standard for the country. In stark contrast, the events I attended in France had no weapons testers. Weapons made by the organisers were crudely constructed and would have been sent to the bin if they had found their way to the U.K. A weapon with the carbon fibre core exposed at the pommel was not considered a problem. They also had arrows whose protective head was barely bigger than the eye socket. People were shooting from a height, in the rain, into the enclosed space of a tunnel, all things that would have been considered dangerous in the U.K.

However, the set dressing in *Les Deux Tours* was of a high standard. Much time, imagination and ingenuity went into bringing plotted events to life, often from basic resources. While British LRPs also put an effort into props and set dressing, their focus is more on creating broad strokes

of a world for the players to move around in, making it harder to build sets for specific things.

Players from both countries accumulate large amounts of equipment, which is brought to enhance the game. In French games there is no time-out period during the night, so the players bring enough to create a living space for their group. This is essential to fill, for example, a large castle. For personal costume, they mix and match for that character and event, resulting in a sometimes generic look. In the U.K., costume and props are made with a system in mind, adding details that enhance the world and add to its evolution. British players earn social 'brownie points' for impressive costumes and props. This can help to keep the suspension of disbelief in a scout camp, which is where many games are held.

4. Health and safety

In the UK safety rules are considered to be very important. The L.T. and P.D. have security personnel that guard camps, put out unattended fires and deal with troublesome people. A section of the rule book is dedicated to the safety rules. They also have out of character calls to alert people when real injuries occur, such as 'man down' and 'medic'. The British have a strong health and safety culture that expects rules to be in place to protect people from unnecessary injury. Grappling is not allowed because of the potential dangers. In some games, people have suggested wearing an armband to indicate they agree to grappling. This has yet to be allowed.

In France, the site at Fort Les Bancs is very dangerous. This is explained in detail in the rulebook. Hazard tape is used to mark dangerous areas and toilets. Players are told to watch out for each other and take action if they see someone in danger. At *Esterel* rain made the stony ground very slippery. This caused a few injuries. The final fight was moved because the terrain was unsuitable for a large pitched battle. *Les Deux Tours* events are known as 'drinking weekends'. This gave the organisers headaches dealing with players who were a danger to themselves.

There were no rules for grappling, but it happened to me twice to bring a dramatic end to a fight. Such moves were usually telegraphed (i.e., moving in a way that shows the other player their next action) and could be fun, such as with the adventuring party group. They played parodies of stereotypical role-playing characters beginning at level one (where the norm was level five). The two surviving characters charged my minotaur NPC. I fell back trashing about wildly while a sword was impaled between my arm and body. When a similar situation happened with a more serious group, I had less warning and their actions were more aggressive.

5. Locations for events

The majority of British games are held in scout camps. This is not always suitable for the larger organisations, so the L.T. rents a private park and P.D. this year is renting land with a view to purchase. Land has also been bought by other companies to be developed and rented to LRP groups. This is happening because scout camps are not the best solution for holding events. Rising prices, unattractive buildings and difficulty in securing locations has resulted in the need for alternatives.

France has an abundance of available castles and other suitable locations. They can also go to Spain to a 'western' film set for a wild west game, or the desert in Tunisia for a Star Wars game.

6. Players and plot arcs

British systems vary from the top down plot of the L.T, to the largely player led plot of P.D., to the even mix of world and player generated plot of Eos. For L.T., the head of a faction will be told that a threat exists to the world. They will tell their faction, who then organises a response. In P.D. characters set their own goals, mainly working against each other. NPCs are invisible to player character's and the small bit of world plot is shared during play. Organisers provide an extensive background for the characters to come from, and check that submitted character backgrounds match the game culture they will play.

Events outside the game location controlled by the plot team have an impact on play to simulate a dynamic world. This could be a tribal invasion in the game in response to new settlements or items from another place becoming available as trade routes open up. Character design is largely in the hands of the player, which the organisers can later incorporate in the world. In P.D. and EOS players can explore, build items, conduct research, learn spells and skills. These downtime activities keep a character alive for players and give them something new to bring to the next event.

In *Les Deux Tours*, background, character and plot are tightly integrated. The organisers write many of the character backgrounds, planting numerous plot hooks that link to the story. Each group has an organiser attached to them to supervise its creation. Behind the appearance of freedom lies a linear path they are expected to follow. In this bubble the rest of the world has little impact in game. In the '*Esterel*' game this caused conflict between players and organisers. One example is a pirate group who had excellent costumes and acted in-character for the whole game, drinking very potent rum. They did, however, not care about their detailed plot arc, ignoring the clues set out by the organisers. They had to be told out of character where to go next for the scripted adventures.

Strong conflicts were also established amongst the various groups in the background. If one group was to kill the characters in another group, the complex web of links between player and world background would break down. So the organisers spent as much time battling to keep the status quo, as they did running the game. It was not understood that if you establish warring factions this would be the result. The strength of the monsters in the final battle was supposed to be decided by a series of small battles. When the players were not organised to win these battles, it was changed so that an event would be a challenge, but they could not lose. The monsters died when it was dramatically appropriate. This resulted in a fantasy theme park that could have worked, if the darker themes had not been mixed with the original Shrek concept.

In *Malatere* this conflict did not happen since it was set in a pseudo-medieval world in which all the characters were officially Christian, so most of the player versus player conflict was covert. For example a bishop was murdered while alone at night, and a nurse maid took away a baby in her care to murder it, as she came from a rival faction.

7. Character death

Esterel had a ritual to bring back dead characters as a way to avoid players needing to change characters if the first one died. In general French organisations can find it difficult to bring in new characters during a game. This is partly because games are a one shot or a trilogy and, there is less scope to play new characters. Players are not used to character death and are not always happy when it happens.

In the U.K., the cycle of character life and death is much more accepted. In this way the campaign evolves with people arriving, dying or leaving, causing the power structures to change over time. There is also a belief that the danger of character death enhances the game.

8. NPCs and monsters

An NPC or ‘non player character’ is a character made by the organisers and directed what to do. Their role is to flesh out the game world by providing local flavour or enemies to fight.

British games have two main approaches to using NPCs. The first is where players put aside their main character and become someone else for a short time. This could be to represent an attacking force, a messenger, a high diplomat from another continent etc. In high combat games such as the L.T., the attacking force becomes the ‘monster’, with no instruction other than to ATTACK! and die on the swords of the players. The second approach is to have a dedicated crew who play a variety of roles, sometimes for the weekend.

In *Eos*, characters that were still relevant to the story were played by the same person at different events for continuity. The *Les Deux Tours*

NPCs had minimal background, monster roles had none. The detailed character backgrounds written for some players would be similar to an NPC in the U.K., especially in how they match players to roles.

P.D. and Eos strive to make no distinction between player characters and NPCs. At *Esterel* my NPC role was taken over by a spell. When our attack was finished an organiser had to explain you can't keep him, he's an NPC. At *Malatere* I played an English soldier and was told we had a strong Christian faith to explain why we didn't kill the wounded. To take the castle, a known Satanist was employed. I became upset in-character because I had developed a pious nature, taking the angry words from the holy orders seriously. To the organisers it was just plot, the contradiction was irrelevant. Further, only the head of the English soldiers had a character background. The rest of us were expected to be generic soldiers for the weekend, while running the camp and going on patrol and interacting with player characters. During the first night I was given the role of a captain since I am a native English speaker. I remained so in the eyes of the other players and NPCs, despite the group having an official captain. This made me unofficially in command when he was absent, which happened frequently as the game progressed. We essentially roleplayed with the players with little feedback from the organisers. I felt a great opportunity was missed to give us character backgrounds to enhance the world. In Eos or P.D. this level of compatibility would be very important in creating a unified world. There would be a background to explain everything and an NPC would be free to respond in character.

9. Creating a make-believe world

As you can see, the approach to creating LRPs are very different in France and the U.K. This is partly because of the values placed on different aspects of the game. *Les Deux Tours* originated from a medieval re-enactment group, so they place a high value on the physical surroundings. Players sleep in character, food is provided by their group or bought in game. Sleeping areas are the exception – they are semi-private and have modern items. The organisers pack as much into the weekend as possible

for the players' enjoyment. They create a detailed world that matches their background, and the player is expected to enjoy the game by following the plot. Conversely this left much less opportunity for character development. Not following the plot for character reasons is viewed negatively by the organisers, because there should be no other logical choice.

British systems create a world with broad strokes, leaving character complexity and development to the player. They also ensure that actions have consequences when the next events plot is written. This allows for long term character development, which is needed to bring players back year after year. To *Les Deux Tours* players U.K events do things that would put them off. Staff wear high-visibility jackets, time out stops play at night, people have an unofficial break when eating. Players have their character details sealed in a card-sized laminated pouch, referred to as a "lammie". A "lammie" can be visibly attached to an item that has something of significance. The "lammie" then needs to be filtered out by the player's mind.

10. Behind the scenes

Office facilities and a website are necessities in both countries. Systems with downtime need databases to keep track of the expanding number of items. P.D. has a row of computers at an event to check player information. Payments and downtime resources and actions are managed on their website. The L.T.'s game operations desk still uses paper, with computers in the back office. *Les Deux Tours* have a simple computer based system, managing player information and the written plot.

Conclusion

As I have shown, LRP and GN are not the same, because of the way they are organised. *Les Deux Tours* has received a tough reception in this article, since they are my only example of French LRP. Going to their events has been a lot of fun both in and out of game. I especially like how key moments are planned for in a game, which can outshine the broad strokes used in British systems. In both countries they are trying to reach the same goal: to provide a fun game for the players.

A combination of country size, culture, laws, and accepted methods of operation has influenced the organisations' respective implementation. However, if you are engrossed in character with others around you, the methodology becomes irrelevant. You have reached your destination of playing a role in a live environment. At the end of games in both countries one thing remains important: Did you have fun? If the answer is yes, then the journey was worthwhile.