

The Vademecum of the Karstic Style

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DESIGN

SCENE

STATEMENT

In December 2007 I launched a project for the organisation of at least one experimental or alternative larp every month in the city of Trieste and in nearby locations along the Italian-Slovenian border, especially on the Karst, the limestone plateau which surrounds the city and where I currently live most of the time. In our first sixteen months we have organised 24 larps, ranging in participants from 6 to 23 people and in duration from 2 hours to 3 days.

This project has helped me clarify my ideas about those particular larps which focus on giving the participants an experience (even though larps focusing on storytelling and competition were also included in our programme), and at some point I understood that most of the problems encountered during larps of this kind could be avoided by introducing a

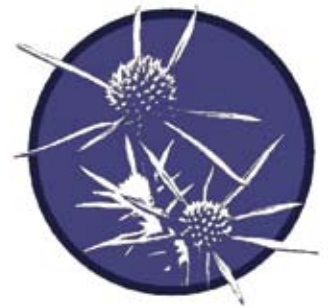
clear set of norms for participants and organisers. For this reason I decided to write this Vademecum of the Karstic Style, which is officially in use for most of our larps as from January 2009, although the fourth run of *La ferrovia scarlatta* in October 2008 had already followed all of the norms later included in the Vademecum. A vademecum (Latin *vade mecum*, “go with me”) is a reference work intended to be carried along at all times: I think the word fits very well with the intended purpose of this paper.

Needless to say, I do not think the Karstic Style should be the only way to do larps; it is just the way I am trying to do this particular kind of larps. Actually, I think the larping world would be horribly poor if everyone agreed that there is only one way to do larps, no matter if it were this way or not.

Chapter 1: Basic principles

1.1. Live-action role-playing (commonly abbreviated to *larp*) is a medium of expression featuring many different styles. This vademecum formalises the Karstic Style: a style aiming to give the participants an intense, deep, realistic, emotionally and intellectually stimulating experience, to be enjoyed together but from a personal point of view provided by a fictional character. Secondary goals may be present, but only when their existence does not hinder attaining this primary goal.

1.2. Character immersion (a traditional but controversial expression which, in the English version of this vademecum, roughly renders the untranslatable Italian expression *immedesimazione nel personaggio*) is the primary tool which the participant should use to play his or her character. For the purpose of this vademecum, character immersion is defined as two interconnected and interdependent phenomena, each giving rise to the other: the situation when a participant feels the same emotions as his or her character, and the situation when a participant assumes his or her character’s personality. Secondary tools may be used only when



■ The Karstic Style logo

they do not hinder using the primary tool (character immersion) and attaining the primary goal (experience).

- 1.3. What a participant sees, hears, smells, touches and tastes is what his or her character perceives; what a participant does not see, hear, smell, touch and taste is what his or her character does not perceive. This applies to the larp proper, not necessarily to pre-larp preparation.
- 1.4. Any kind of person can participate in a Karstic Style larp, not only experienced larpers. Anyway, organisers should not admit those who proved to be unable to handle strong emotions or to follow this vademecum.
- 1.5. Using repeatable scenarios is allowed, as long as it is clear that they are not larps by themselves: they are just useful tools to do larps. A larp is made of people and their interactions, not of words printed on a piece of paper.
- 1.6. The authors of the scenario (if there are any) and the participants (including the organisers) are all to be considered as the larp's creators. This implies that all the participants have responsibilities: larping is a communal undertaking, which cannot be reduced to a customer-seller relationship.

Chapter 2: Norms for all the participants

- 2.1. A good participant is one who considers himself or herself not as a mere customer but as a co-creator of the larp, giving all of himself or herself to the project but respecting the larp's concept as defined by the organisers, even if it is against his or her personal preferences. A good participant does not exaggerate, does not pretend and does not simulate while playing his or her character.
- 2.2. The character sheet must be written, adapted or approved by the organisers, and it should contain only the character's "skeleton": that is,

the minimum necessary information for the larp to be run according to the organisers' concept. All the rest should be created by the character's player through personal deepening of the character (for example by using questionnaires) and through confrontation with the organisers and the other participants (for example in pre-larp workshops).

- 2.3. The participant should try to make his or her character as different from his or her true self as possible, while still taking ideas from real life experiences involving his or her family, friends and acquaintances.
- 2.4. Banal characters should be avoided at all costs. A participant's job is to enrich the character's "skeleton" to make it a real person, not to deconstruct it to make it an empty archetype.
- 2.5. The participant should test his or her character, both in everyday business in the days before the larp and by playing short scenes with other participants during pre-larp preparation.
- 2.6. Clothing and other means of physical identification with the character are very important. Every participant should seriously take care of his or her character's appearance and help other participants take care of theirs.
- 2.7. During pre-larp preparation, every participant must state explicitly which interactions involving sex and violence (both physical and mental) he or she personally deems acceptable for himself or herself in the larp. All the other participants must keep these choices in mind, especially those playing characters likely to have this kind of interactions. As people have various standards about what is acceptable in a larp and what is not, and as their reasons might be extremely personal, nobody has the right to ask a participant why he or she deems a certain interaction unacceptable, neither during the larp nor before or after the larp – let alone the right to criticise his or her choices, directly or discussing with other people.

2.8. The safety words in use are *kutt* and *brems*. *Kutt* (Norwegian for “cut”) must be shouted clearly by any participant when a serious accident requires the larp to be interrupted at once, for example when someone gets seriously hurt or when a situation arises where continuing to play will likely result in a serious damage; when *kutt* is invoked, all the participants must immediately leave their characters and handle the situation. *Brems* (Norwegian for “brake”) should be pronounced clearly by any participant when a situation that might become unacceptable for him or her is about to arise; when *brems* is declared, those responsible for the situation must immediately moderate their behaviour. Again, nobody has the right to ask the participant invoking a safety word why he or she did it, neither during the larp nor after the larp; and using safety words should not be subjected to criticism, either directly or indirectly.



■ Pre-larp workshop for “La ferrovia scarlatta”.

Photo
Valentina Addis

2.9. Once the larp has started it should have no interruptions, except when someone invokes the safety word *kutt*. Sleeping, eating and personal hygiene should always be part of the larp.

2.10. Once the larp has started, a participant can never act or talk as his or her true self instead of as his or her character. Thus, questions to the organisers are allowed only if it is absolutely impossible to continue otherwise.

2.11. Personal relationships between participants should never influence their characters’ behaviour.

2.12. A larp is not a way to fulfill escapist fantasies, to “win” against other participants, to vent frustrations or to be disrespectful to someone else while “protected” by a character.

Chapter 3: Norms for the organisers only

- 3.1. A good organiser is one who cares about the other participants' needs, communicates clearly the larp's concept to the other participants before they sign up, helps the other participants attain character immersion, and does not consider the other participants as mere tools but as co-creators of the larp, willing to give all of themselves to the project. A good organiser's primary goal is to assure that the other participants enjoy an experience; in some cases, enjoying an experience himself or herself might be secondary.
- 3.2. A larp should always be centred on a main theme; of course, this does not mean that secondary themes are not allowed.
- 3.3. Promoting a larp as featuring a certain theme, or stating it explicitly in the participants' material, may be useful for the participants in focusing on that theme, but doing so will not automatically centre the larp on that theme. Organisers should rather make the theme an important topic in all the characters' conflicts, and set the larp in a situation where the characters cannot avoid dealing with it.
- 3.4. The fact that a larp should have a theme does not mean that it should become a way of promoting the organisers' view on the subject. Larps should intellectually stimulate the participants, not indoctrinate them.
- 3.5. Pervasive larps (that is, larps where the border between fiction and reality is intentionally blurred) are appreciated; but organisers should take measures so as to keep interactions with non-participants at a non-bothering level.
- 3.6. A larp may feature high levels of secrecy, as long as unveiling or protecting the secrets does not become the participants' main goal at the expense of their enjoyment of the experience.
- 3.7. Larp adaptations of works from other media are allowed; but if an organiser decides to do an adaptation, then he or she should discard



- Some participants in “La ferrovia scarlatta” pose for the camera after the larp.

Photo
Andrea Castellani

everything relying on the original medium's strengths, and rely on the larp medium's unique strengths instead.

- 3.8. Larps divided in scenes or acts, or connected as campaigns or chronicles, should be avoided.
- 3.9. Larps trying to support measurable competition between participants must be avoided. Avoiding competition between participants does not mean avoiding challenges for the characters.
- 3.10. The larp's time-span should cover some very important (ideally the most important) hours or days in the lives of the characters.
- 3.11. Emotional turning points are very important for the participants' experience, and a larp's concept should always include situations where they are likely to arise.
- 3.12. The presence of a main storyline planned by the organisers is irrelevant or even dangerous. Participants are co-creators, not an audience nor mere spectators.
- 3.13. Mechanics should be implemented only when absolutely necessary, and can be implemented only if they are not perceived by the participants as external to the larp's world. This does not apply to pre-larp preparation, when any kind of mechanics is allowed.
- 3.14. Organisers should never start creating a larp's concept from the setting. This does not mean that the setting is useless: an appropriate setting can improve the participants' experience a lot, but it has to be chosen after the rest of the concept is clearly established, not the other way around.
- 3.15. It is not allowed to use a "fake" object to represent another (for example a toy gun representing a real gun, or a wig representing real hair), unless they are so similar that no participant would be able to tell the difference. Settings which require using such objects should be avoided.

- 3.16. As safety concerns might lead one to represent several interactions involving sex and violence (both physical and mental) by simulation, and as no kind of simulation is allowed, organisers should set larps in situations where sex and violence are extremely unlikely to happen.
- 3.17. As no kind of simulation is allowed, organisers should set larps in situations where the supernatural does not exist or is representable without any simulation.
- 3.18. Using a repeatable scenario usually run at games conventions is not an excuse for organising a larp with no preparation, casual clothing and inadequate location, as it often happens at most games conventions. Every larp should be organised as a unique event of its own.
- 3.19. If an organiser needs to modify a repeatable scenario in order to give a better experience to the participants, then he or she should do so (given the authors' permission).
- 3.20. Choosing and preparing a credible location is very important. Existing locations are preferable to constructed, artificial ones.
- 3.21. Organisers should not distribute characters randomly. They should consider the concept's requirements first, but also the participants' abilities, preferences and physical appearance; moreover, they should take their time to think about the distribution and to modify the character sheets if needed.
- 3.22. Pre-larp preparation and post-larp evaluation are extremely useful phases that may even take more time than the larp itself, yet these phases should not last longer than necessary – be aware that this is very different from “longer than a lazy participant would like”.
- 3.23. If a character's past contains key events that are crucial for the development of that character's personality or emotions, then these events should be played out in short scenes during pre-larp preparation, or brought to life in the participant's mind through a light trance.

- 3.24. Organisers should never be noticeable as something external to the larp. In the cases where, for some very good reason, an organiser cannot play a character, he or she should be hidden from the participants' view.
- 3.25. An organiser's character must never be designed for the purpose of directing the larp's events towards a certain direction. However, some organisers might be allowed to play their characters giving prominence to tools other than character immersion, if this improves the other participants' experience or is necessary for safety reasons.
- 3.26. Organisers should always include at least one piece of music in the larp. The music must be internal to the larp's world; even better if it is to be played or sung by the participants. Poetry may count as music.
- 3.27. Organisers should always see to it that the participants perform at least one ritual in the larp. The larp should preferably be opened and closed by rituals. If a ritual involves music to be played or sung by the participants, even better. Dance may count as a ritual.
- 3.28. Organisers should take care to arrange specific moments for the participants' social needs before and especially after the larp.
- 3.29. Lastly, organisers following this vademecum should always either drop one of the norms in Chapter 3 at their choice, or add to Chapter 3 a new norm which is not stated here. Yes, this is a provocation, but the meaning is as follows: never rely only on fixed norms, and never forget about experimenting. Larp is a young medium, in desperate need of experimentation. It would be terrible if this vademecum should not be clearly perceived as outdated ten years from now.

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Ludography

La ferrovia scarlatta (4th run, 19th October 2008): Andrea Castellani (author and organiser) and other 6 participants; Trieste (preparation), a train from Trieste to Sacile (larp proper), a train from Sacile to Trieste (evaluation), Italy. English *The Scarlet Railway*.

Români: Un'altra vita, da capo (1st run, 7th and 8th March 2009): Andrea Castellani (author and organiser), Anca Burescu (author) and other 8 participants; Gozd Martuljek, Slovenia. English *Români: Another life, from scratch*.