

## **The Collective's little red book**

### **A step-by-step guide to arranging larps the collective way**

#### **Abstract**

The collective's little red book is a summary of experiences of collective larp organizing. Collective organizing is a method that effectively removes the organizers. It is an extreme outsourcing of creative efforts to the participants, within a set diegetic framework. As long as the frame is intact, the problems of collective organizing are mainly of practical and social nature, most of which can be dealt with by simple means.

#### **Introduction:**

While the idea of organizing live-action role-playings (larps) with a flat power structure has been conceived and in some cases explored by others (Widding & Hansen, 2002) and while larps have been made without a clearly defined organizer, this text is, as far as I know, the first attempt to formulate a cohesive method for creating larps with a flat power structure, where the traditional role of organizer is removed. The aim of the method is to reap all the benefits of a flat structure in larp organizing. This paper is based on experiences with this method of arranging larps. It will give you an idea of what the collective way is and a guide to one of the several ways of organizing a collective larp. This method will hopefully let you sidestep a few possible mistakes. However, if you have other ideas of how to organize a collective larp, there is no reason why you should stick to this guide. In fact, I would very much like to hear about your experiences if you choose to handle problems differently than I have sketched out.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper I will first explain the vision of collective larping, followed by a short list of the benefits of the collective way. Then I will give a how-to guide to organizing the collective way. This guide can give an insight in how to achieve the best results of collective organizing. Finally, I will list a few of the problems of the collective way and try to give solutions to these problems where possible.

#### **Vision:**

The meagre beginning of this method was a small statement of objectives, included in the making of the first collective larp: "The collective –take the power back", organized in Oslo in the fall of 2004. Experiences from this larp has helped form the opinions of how to organize larps with flat power structures, as will be shown later in the paper. Although the original principles were somewhat altered after their first encounter with reality, I believe that it is paramount to understanding the method that the original principles are stated in full, to illustrate the ideals in their original form.

#### **Collective larps**

Collective larps are basically about cooperation. It is not part of the

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<sup>1</sup> If you are interested in testing the method, wish to share your experiences with it or are plainly want more information, please visit [www.collective-larp.tk](http://www.collective-larp.tk)

traditional way of organizing, where the organizers create a larp for the players to participate in as seen in most larps (Hakkarainen & Stenroos, 2003) It is about one participant taking the initiative to make a larp, and all the participants creating the larp together. All the participants come together to create the best possible larp, and everyone contributes with their special skills and talents. Collective larps demand close cooperation between the participants, thus small larps are the easiest collective larps to organize. There is no theoretical limit to how large a larp can be, nor is there a limit to the number of small larps which can interact in the same fictional reality.

### **The three commandments of organizing the collective way:**

#### **1. Everyone is responsible for the larp**

In a collective larp, all the participants are organizers, and thus all must help create the larp and benefit from the results. Therefore one demand is that every participant puts as much time and effort into the larp as the next. It is everybody's responsibility to make the larp work, and everybody's benefit if it does.

#### **2. There is no organizer**

The initiators job is to set the scene, time and place for the larp, not to organize it. There should however be an administrator of the larp whose job is to make sure that all the agreed happenings take place and that all that needs to be done, actually gets done. This could be the initiator, but it need not be. When the larp takes place, the administrator is a participant like any other.

#### **3. There are no limits**

Collective larps place the responsibility of organizing the larp on all the participants, thus the workload gets evenly shared between the participants. The result is that you are freed to realize your vision, even though it could not easily be realized with a small set of organizers. With this method it is possible to create the larps of your dreams.

### **Why organize the collective way:**

- Organizing a larp the collective way will ensure that all participants are equally inclined to make the larp function. Because all participants are recognized as organizers, they should all feel the responsibility of that appointment. Thus not only will the participants feel inclined to spend more time researching their own character and the setting, they will be a part of creating that setting and they will have the responsibility to make the larp function.
- The flat structure of collective larps makes everyone equal in the creative process, a noble goal in itself. In addition to this, the flat structure enables the initiator to initiate ideas that could not be realized with a small number of organizers, or without wide cooperation between all participants (Hutchison, 2003). This could be a project that requires a large amount of work from each participant, for instance the building of a

village, or that each participant should create her own religion, something one cannot always expect from players.

- The collective way relieves the initiator from the responsibilities of the traditional organizer, and thus equally distributes the workload among all participants.
- This method is an opportunity to use all the participants' abilities in creating a larp, instead of concentrating all the work on a few shoulders. It is an accepted fact that everyone cannot be as adequate in all part of the process of creating a larp, and by making all participants responsible for the creative process, one can take advantage of the abilities of all, and thus reap the best results possible. Everyone is not a born accountant, or an author.
- In addition, whilst this is not something unique to collective larps, having each participant develop her character with almost total freedom, can (and did) yield characters of amazing depth and realism. The fact that no-one sees "the full picture" allows the "plot structure" and social dynamics of the larp to be just as free flowing, illogical and vibrant as it is in real life.

### **How to organize the collective way:**

The initiator sets the time and place for the larp. She has the responsibility of formulating the starting point from which the diegetic framework of the larp can be created. She can also set the price for the game. These are small matters that are of interest to the participant, but are difficult or unnecessary to decide collectively. When participants decide whether or not they can attend the larp, the date of the larp, as well as the core concept, is paramount and thus these elements must be set in stone before any other work begins.

A small number of participants are not necessary to make the larp collectively, but it will make organizing it easier. If you choose a larger number of participants, a possible solution to the organization problem is to split the larp into smaller units; families, clans, workplaces and so forth. Thus the smaller groups can work collectively within the units and meet the others at a few meetings before the larp. There is no reason why individual participants should not collaborate outside of these units, but the units themselves should be responsible for the larger part of the preparations.

During the preparations, everyone has the right to introduce new elements into the game without informing the other participants. Thus the element of surprise in the game need not be lost to anyone. The safety rules of the larp must, however, always be agreed to before the rest of the preparations commence. Likewise, all participants must know the framework they are working within. This framework should specify themes agreed to be unsuitable for the larp, for instance rape, as well as which elements of the fiction are not to be touched. A good rule of thumb is to disallow anything that would seriously disrupt or alter the original intent of the game, as well as anything that could cause the larp to end prematurely. For instance, if the larp's theme is the social dynamics of a workplace, it would be an ill advised decision for one participant to close down the office and fire the rest of the participants. This means in practice that all participants of the game must simultaneously be daring enough to seize the opportunity to shape the larp, and sensible enough to know when not to.

During the first meeting it is a good idea to choose one person responsible for the economic aspects of the larp. Although the creative process of the larp is collective, that is not to say all

aspects of the larp have to be. My experience is that one person, not the collective group, handles the economic aspect of a larp best. The practical responsibility should also either be outsourced or given to one participant. While outsourcing might seem to go against the ideals of the collective way, it is rather self-evident that the main benefits of making larp the collective way are to be found in the creative field. Even though it is nice to do everything together, it is rather counterproductive to make each participant buy her own potato.

Beware that part of the element of surprise will be lost for the person handling economy and the one (or those) handling practical responsibilities, since they will have to be informed of elements in the larp that either require money or practical considerations. For instance, if a participant decides to introduce a new character who is set to arrive on day two of the game, that person's food and lodging needs to be taken care of. Also if someone decides to set off fireworks, it is a good idea to have more than one person knowing exactly when and where the fireworks will go off, and where the fire extinguisher is located. This is why outsourcing these tasks could be a good idea. In addition to these two, one person should be assigned the job of administrator, making sure that all the common assignments get done.

On the first meeting, the participants should set the theme and date for the following meetings. There is no reason why individual players should not have meetings in between these common meetings, however the common meetings should be set so that the creative work is structured and the participants will know when and where they will make the larp. Another important subject to address during the first meeting is how eventual surplus money should be distributed and how additional funds, if necessary, are to be raised.

It is important to remember to utilize each participant's area of expertise, and not to have all participants working on the same project all the time. For instance, if one is to write the background material, having one or two participants, rather than the entire group, do the actual writing is the most effective use of everyone's time. All material produced for the game is of course dependent on the approval of the other participants. On the other hand, if it is a small larp, there is nothing to say that one needs to have written material at all. One solution is to, instead of having a written setting, have a creative night where the entire group meets up and decides together how the setting is supposed to function.

The start and finish of the larp should be agreed to before the larp begins. Having the larp rudely cut off before time because one participant feels that the larp should finish could be quite frustrating. The ending point of the larp should be very clearly defined, such as an alarm clock or a given time, and should not be subject to change.

Last but not least, it is obvious that a person should not be counted among the participants before she has paid the fee set by the initiator. It is a sad fact of human psychology that we are more likely to follow through with projects we have actually paid for.

### **Problems with the collective way:**

There are some problems associated with this method of organizing larp. It is, however, important to remember that the collective method is not necessarily the best method for all larp or larp organizers, though it might be ideal for some. In addition to the practical and

economic problems facing all larps (which have been discussed) there are a number of other problems peculiar to collective organizing.

The most obvious problem concerns cooperation. Personal friction making two or more of the participants unable to work together is most effectively dealt with by the administrator. She could decide to separate the two participants into different groups, and not force them to collaborate unless it is absolutely necessary. Another solution is to address the problem collectively and try to find a solution.

Another problem is free riders. Again one solution is for the administrator to address them and try to make sure that they do their assignments. If this does not work, one could discuss it with the entire larp and decide whether or not the person should be a part of the collective larp. Collective larp-making is not a method that has room for free riders.

If a problem arises during the larp, it can be difficult to know whom to talk to, since there is no organizer. If the problem is of a practical nature, my suggested solution would be to either talk to the administrator, the economically responsible or the practically responsible depending on the situation. If it is of a personal nature, I would suggest talking to someone you know and trust. Stopping the larp should not be an option unless it is necessary for the entire larp to be aware of the problem, and even then, one should consider whether or not this information could be conveyed without stopping the larp. Having for instance a notice-board in an off-game area could be a solution. If the subject matter of the larp is of a serious psychological nature, an idea is to appoint one participant as confidant, giving the players someone to turn to. This of course requires that one of the participants is willing to take that responsibility (Duus Henriksen, this volume).

In my opinion the collective method is best suited for larps dealing with a heavy emphasis on character and character relations rather than stagings, epic storylines or gamism ( Bøckman, 2003). I am not saying that it cannot be done, only that collective organizing is not ideally suited for it. There is however a solution to the problem of plots in collective larps. Since it is every participant's right to introduce new elements into the larp, there is nothing to stop them from introducing new plotlines, as long as it does not harm the agreed upon theme of the larp. Personal plots can be written into the characters either by the participant herself or in collaboration with other participants.

Perhaps the most important problem that can arise when one is to organize a collective larp is the problem of the non-diegetic power structures. It is easy to associate the initiator with the classic organizer since it is the initiators task set the time and place of the larp, and since she often has strong views on how the larp should be organized and what themes should be most prominent. One solution is to make sure that the initiator is not also the administrator, responsible for the economy or the practical situation on the larp. Make sure that each participant is only responsible for one area, and that the initiator is not responsible for any of those areas. Thus the power structure will be evenly shared between some of the participants, and the initiator will not have any more responsibility than any other participant.

## **Conclusion:**

Whilst the elements of collective organizing are not new, the collective way as a coherent method is a new way of looking at larp creation. It is not supposed to be a meat-and-potatoes method for making all sorts of larps, however it does have its benefits. It is a great way of making character-driven larps, it is a good way of creating realistic and surprising stories and by using this method one can become more aware of how power structures actually work in larp organizing. And, last but not least, one of the main benefits, one could even say goals, of the collective way is to shake at the foundations of the power structures of larp. By “taking the power back” and distributing it evenly among all participants, one demystifies the role of the organizer, clearly demonstrating that a great larp can be the product of great participants rather than great organizers.

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### **Sources:**

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A brief description of myself:

Martine Svanevik is a 20-years old bachelor student of History at Oslo University, Norway. She has been role-playing since 1998 and has been a dedicated larper since 1999. In addition to her affection for larping, she has a keen interest in larp theory. Previously she has been co-author of one publication in Imagonem. This paper for the Knutepunktbook 2005 is her first solo publication on larp theory.