Strategies

Letting Go of Gamist Goals – Although gamist goals and competitive play can be an important part of role-playing games, they are not the sole component, nor even the driving force. When a larp is over, all character achievements do not transfer to the non-diegetic reality. Recognizing that the consequences of actions for your character are temporary can help free players to make choices that invite the risk of an unpredictable outcome and may also empower others or benefit the game as a whole. In the Nordic countries, this concept is often referred to as "playing to lose," a collaborative dramatist play style in which one invites or even seeks a negative consequence for one's character.[1]

Dual Consciousness Mindfulness – In addition to becoming a character and immersing in an imagined world, remaining conscious of one's status as a player affords the bisociation required to enact mindful steering. In the dual conscious state, player-characters can consider how a given choice will affect the player, other players, other players' characters, and the overall gameplay experience. Even if those questions are difficult to answer, merely raising them enacts the bisociated state.

Imagine Others Complexly – Snap judgments of others -- both as players and as characters -- are often based on archetypal categories and implicit biases from within or outside the game. These are made quickly and generally without discernment, often during a stressful moment, such as the start of a larp. Pausing for reflection and considering that others have complicated motivations or circumstances helps move our perceptions of others into a less reactive and more mindful state, which is conducive for empathetic play.

Betray Up –Many larps are designed with a significant intrigue component to drive the game's plot, typically coming to a climactic moment of betrayal. In games where power is distributed hierarchically, a PfE strategy is to choose to betray "up" the hierarchy, taking action against a character with plenty of means to retaliate rather than betraying "down" the hierarchy, or taking a betrayal action against a character who is powerless to retaliate. Although betraying up carries in-game risk, it can help reverse the standard action in hierarchical games. See letting go of gamist goals, above.

Lend Your Voice to Support Another – A single supportive voice to someone else's idea can significantly help that person's voice be heard and their idea be given due

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[1] "Playing to Lose - Nordic Larp Wiki," accessed September 26, 2015, http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Playing_to_Lose.

consideration. The encouragement to continue, and the repetition to ensure that an idea is heard both support the other player positively. When this voice comes from a player who possesses in- or out-of-game privilege, that support changes a power dynamic and transfers the privilege to the previously marginalized player, empowering their voice and improving their agency.

Reinforce Non-Traditional Roles – Explicitly supporting someone who is in a leadership role that defies non-diegetic power dynamics can change the balance of power in a larp. Making it clear that your character firmly believes that the person in the authoritative role owns and deserves that authority can help overcome other players' often unexamined tendency to disbelieve a player enacting the role whose embodied appearance doesn't conform to their expectations of what that role would look like (e.g. a physically petite female battle leader). Note: this can be done both in the presence of the character in the non-traditional role, and in the periphery, by taking supportive actions on behalf of the player in the non-traditional role.

Recognize the lived experience of players: Each player comes to a larp with a unique background of skills and life experiences. Since larps are intense emotional experiences, many players -- especially the estimated 90% of the population who have been exposed to a traumatic event and roughly 10% who have PTSD -- need support before, during, and after play. Furthermore, there is the possibility of one or more players in a larp becoming triggered by elements in the diegetic or non-diegetic reality.[2] A triggered player loses the ability to steer, as the trauma intrusion makes difficult or impossible the distance required to make such choices. While trauma triggers cannot be prevented (nor is that a goal of larp), communities should recognize the emotional power of the medium and be aware that characters are played by actual people with varied pasts and perspectives. That awareness of itself is a form of empathy that can then lead to making PfE choices.

Not all play is okay for all players: Safe Words are a larp component that vary by community and allow players to halt or lessen game play that is too emotionally or physically rough. While many larp communities have in place procedures to maintain physical safety and allow for non-diegetic intervention to players experiencing bodily stress (such as heat exhaustion, stomachaches, or a twisted ankle), each larp group also needs to develop procedures and an ethos to support players whose game experience compromises their actual or perceived safety on an emotional level. Merely having

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[2] Maury E. Brown, "Pulling the Trigger on Player Agency: How Psychological Intrusions in Larps Affect Game Play," ed. Sarah Lynne Bowman (Wyrd Con Creative Commons License, 2014), 96–111.

techniques such as safe words available is not enough, however, as there are powerful incentives not to use them. Larp communities need to demonstrate that players have both the permission and agency to use safety techniques that arise from a sense of empathy for others.

Finally, here are some ways that game designers can foster playing for empathy with their designs:

- **Defining the Play Ethos:** Game designers and storytellers can add descriptions of the play ethos to their design docs, player's guides, and other communication materials to make it known the kind of play that they encourage and discourage.
- **Monitor Emergent Play:** During play, organizers can encourage the collective experience and discourage power tactics being used by dominant players using in-game incentives.
- **Casting Decisions:** GMs can cast players in key roles to direct Playing for Empathy toward other players, fostering the emotional contagion of active empathy.
- **Manage the Transitions:** Prior to game-start, short workshops that demonstrate some of the above strategies or delineate a norm of other-directed play can be held. After game-wrap, organizers can host debriefs that allow unresolved tensions that may bleed from the characters to the players to be addressed.
- **Mechanics**: Game rules for conflict resolution can be designed to not specifically favor violence as the solution, but instead reward outcomes achieved through collaboration or compromise. Mechanics can encourage players to consider other characters as allies or team members, rather than enemies to be removed from play or corpses to loot.

Scenarios

A player approaches you with an elaborate story. While entertaining and interesting, and even plausible, you are aware, because of knowledge you possess outside of the game, that the story is a lie, reflects their attempt to deceive your character, and would likely lead to negative consequences for your character once the predicated actions are taken and also when the truth is revealed.

You are aware that you have an intense verbal confrontation coming up with another player in front of others, where each of you will be making a case for a course of action. You are significantly larger than your rival, and have a louder speaking voice. Likewise, the group that you each have to convince to support your particular side of the argument consists of players that you are largely familiar with and even a few of your close friends. Your rival is new player to your group, and has met everyone for the first time.

A player raises their voice to another player in a moment of frustration. The other player backs down and doesn't really participate further in the larp for the rest of the game.

During the game, you notice that one player is using their body to block the doorways, or reaching out with an arm to stop another player from passing. They follow after exiting players, shouting at their backs. You are unsure whether the visible discomfort of the players being blocked is in-character or out-of-character.

During gameplay, a player-character makes a Black Lives Matter joke to a player of color, who visibly bristles. The player of color is not playing a character that would encounter an in-game racist mechanic.

Language in the design document refers to boys and girls and assumes heterosexual relationships in language about relationships and dating.

A trans woman player who plays a female character is repeatedly misgendered by others in the larp, despite correction. When the player approaches organizers with this concern, she is told that she should costume better for more believability and immersion.

A player comes to you, the organizers, with concerns that species, as defined in the larp, are a thinly veiled substitute for races, and that gameplay has embodied elements of racism, bigotry, xenophobia, or ethnic prejudice. Examples include assuming one species has a certain color skin, other physical characteristic or accent, or making references to common racist assumptions from everyday life.

A player of color is repeatedly cast as an exotic other, in roles that have little in-game power, but are admired by other non-exotic characters. According to organizers, this admiration demonstrates that the character is considered esteemed and respected.

In-game power is earned by killing, assaulting, or betraying other players. Player-characters are rewarded for tricking newer players (less-powerful characters), leading to the less powerful character's demise. You are given the opportunity by a very powerful character to advance in power and esteem if you can deliver one or more of these n00bs for a sacrifice. You know that at least one of these player-characters intended for sacrifice is very invested in their character and would be devastated to have them killed.

There's a few hours to go before game ends, and you discover that your character cannot really influence the game's outcome or has much left to offer in terms of gameplay to other players.

A player appears to be unaware of the power / authority that their character holds, and it looks like this is because of a misunderstanding of the rules system. The player's lack of knowledge is of great personal advantage to your character's goals.

You are trying hard to focus and get into character because you know you'll have some challenging scenes in front of you. Another player continues to ask you rules and setting clarification questions when you are trying to focus.

What do you do when a fellow player-character is killed in the game? How do you react? Is the PC's life honored and commemorated? Or are they considered disposable, to be looted, or sloughed off since it's only a game?

You've noticed that the players largely ignore certain rules for the larp as they are written in the design document. When bringing this to the game's organizer, they get frustrated and defensive, stating that they do not have the time or energy to police every player and organize the game.

The larp's game mechanics give female characters power if they sleep with other characters in-game (using sex-simulation mechanics). This same larp's mechanics constrict female character speech by requiring them to ask oblique questions rather than direct ones. Male characters do not have these mechanics.

You have joined a monthly game, and after your third month, you notice that other players begin acting far more aggressively towards your character, and you have a harder time participating and having your voice heard. Another new player joins the game, and you overheard someone remark that they cannot wait for the three months to be up so they don't have to "play nice with the newb."

A player is unhappy over some genuinely problematic things. You overhear the lead organizer advise their staff to "give that player a win" so that they'll end the game happy and don't complain.

A player uses a safe word or exits a scene. The remaining player-characters, including those with in-game authority, ridicule the player-character who called for the cut or left.

A player portrays a very obnoxious character exceptionally well, aggravating most people they interact with. The organizer and the players with the most influence find this very entertaining, so they encourage the aggravating behavior.

A player is triggered by an emergent game event that was not planned by the organizers. You overhear more than a few players complain about the player's inability to separate game from reality.

A player asks for your help with a coup against the game's existing power structure. You are aware that your chances of success are very low, and you have the opportunity to gain a small reward for defecting against the player that approached you.

A player that's smaller in stature and doesn't have a loud voice suggests ideas that are consistently rejected regardless of their merit. Other players suggesting the same ideas are given serious consideration.

After the game during "War Stories" (problematic enough term … perhaps let's use Epic Tales), you hear players talking loudly about other players who can't seem to separate the fantasy from reality, who are always whining and who make absurd demands on them. If they can't handle it, they should go home, these players say, to wide agreement.

A game deals with requests from players to opt-out of certain stressful scenes by referring to those players as "special snowflakes" or having them wear a pink armband or a flower in their hair.

Organizers refuse to cast larger-bodied female players in romantic plots, and smaller-bodied female characters in leadership roles. Immersion is their reason for doing so.

In a very active larp, "team captain" players candidly discuss drafting players by body types as necessary for victory.