

POST-PLAY ACTIVITIES

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Post-Play Activities is an umbrella term that covers all portions of a larp's design that occur after the runtime has ended. Just as designers must pay attention to how participants are onboarded to the experience, post-play activities seek to ensure a clear transition from the fictional frame of the larp back to everyday reality, roles, and relationships. The period just after the runtime is also where participants organise their first-person experiences into coherent narratives, both individually and as a group. Much of what the participants will remember and feel about the experience is decided here.

The type, duration, and facilitation of post-play activities should be an integrated part of the design of your larp as a whole. A four-hour, light-hearted larp about comic book characters requires different post-play design than a four-day experience that interrogates social problems. Regardless of what kind of larp you're making, post-play design should not be forgotten. The processes following the runtime – narrating the experience, leaving the character, sorting through any lingering emotions, reconnecting with the other players out of character – are an inevitable part of the larp experience. As they will occur whether or not you design their framing and facilitation, integrating post-play activities into your design is good practice. It will support participants and your team in processing the experience and achieving a sense of closure.

When considering which post-play activities to incorporate, you need to answer two fundamental questions:

1. What do players of this larp need, due to its content?
2. What do players as human beings need, after their larp experience?

Post-play activities should be selected based on the aesthetics, design goals, and logistics of a game, as well as players' needs. Multiple types of post-play activities may be offered, either in succession, or as alternatives. As larps are different, and players have different needs, it can be a valid choice to offer optional debriefing, or even no structured post-play experience at all – as long as it is a choice, makes sense in your overall design, and meets the players' needs.

THE PURPOSE OF POST-PLAY ACTIVITIES

Post-play activities provide the space for participants to process an experience, to resolve intellectual, emotional, or psychological thoughts and feelings, and to exit the headspace of a character. Unresolved feelings from an intense experience can contribute to *post-larp blues* (sometimes known as post-larp “depression”) or *larp drop* (analogous with *con drop*), a melancholia brought on by the contrast between the mindful, intentional and socially connected play experience and the participant’s everyday life. Reflecting on the transition in and out of character will also help the participants process *bleed*, the phenomenon when the emotions experienced in character affect the player. (For more on the post-larp blues, see Sarah Lynne Bowman and Evan Torner in the Further Reading section below; it also lists many resources for post-play design).

Without the support of a structured post-play process, players may experience some kinds of bleed more strongly and more negatively than they otherwise would – for instance what Eirik Fatland calls a “moral hangover” from playing a villain. Special care should be taken with residual emotions from fictional relationships or social dynamics, which left unresolved can accelerate or even cause interpersonal conflict in the player community. Players might also have conflicts or problems completely unrelated to the play experience or your design, for which you have no responsibility. When these emerge or are intensified through play, they become your problem, and reasonable for you to try to resolve if possible. In the post-runtime phase, emotions are raw, and any negative or overwhelming feelings can end up being blamed on you or your larp design.

There are three main goals to post-play activities: reconnection, reflection, and recuperation, all achievable through designed activities.

- Players *reconnect* with their primary identity, and leave behind the role of their character. They reconnect with others as their primary selves, and not as characters.
- Players *reflect* on their experience, considering what surprised them, what they may have learned or felt, and give name to these feelings. They process their memories and emotions with others who have been through the same experience, establishing a shared sense of understanding.
- Players *recuperate* from the intensity of the experience with self-care and care for others. This helps ground the participants in their bodies and their real lives.

HALLMARKS OF POST-PLAY ACTIVITIES

All post-play activities should be specifically designed (or selected) and facilitated for the event you are running, and you should schedule adequate and unencumbered time for post-play activities to take place.

In addition, it is good practice to design your post-larp process so that everyone is expected to participate, but no one is required to, making post-play activities opt-out rather than opt-in. Ideally, all players participate, but choosing not to attend for whatever reason should be respected without pressure. You should also offer participants who are present the choice to opt out of specific exercises, no questions asked. If the space and social situation allows them to stay in the room, you can invite them to do so quietly; for instance, participants who do not feel like talking in small groups can still reflect individually on the prompts provided by the facilitator.

Participants who do not participate in structured post-play activities should be encouraged to create their own, such as informal debriefing with trusted friends or co-players, resting, socialising, or alone time.

TYPES OF POST-PLAY ACTIVITIES

Post-play activities fall into four general categories: larp wrap or epilogue, de-roling, debriefing, and decompression. These are discussed next.

LARP WRAP OR EPILOGUE

Larp wrap or epilogue is time to close the fictional narrative. At their simplest, these post-play activities give participants time to narrate how a character ended an experience and sometimes also what they do next. Designers and participants can reveal any secrets that were left unexplored, and individuals or the group can create a sense of closure and intensify the shared experience.

If you do not provide a structure for this, players will do it anyway – often the narrating of one's experience starts at the moment the larp ends, as players turn to each other and share what their character was doing or feeling at the very end, or retell some shared moment and what it meant in the context of their character's story. It will also continue as players socialise later, both in person and online.

Providing some time and perhaps a structure for telling these stories – briefly! – in small groups can still be valuable. The character's journey will be top of mind at the end of the larp, and players may feel a need to get some of the narration out of their system before being able to move on to other parts of the post-play process.

As Bowman and Torner have discussed, narrating one's larp experience orders and makes sense out of chaos, including going back and attributing motivation or logic to choices that were made impulsively at the time. Through personal narration and piecing together the stories of others, a player gains a mastery over their experience.

This post-play activity can begin the de-roling process as well, as it encourages participants to consider their characters in the third person and to activate their

analytical and reasoning capacities, which helps create a sense of distance from the character.

In these activities, individual participant stories are validated by their peers and connected to the wider frame of the shared event. The player's experience will feel more real and epic due to the positive responses of others, which increases feelings of community and personal esteem. Participating helps players feel more comfortable with their personal experience and allows them to see other sides of the larp.

Some players will feel a need to write an epilogue for their character in the days after the larp; you can encourage this and provide a place online to share them. You should also be aware that for some players, the character's story ends with the runtime, and they see no reason to speculate about what might have happened later. Be careful as you design post-play activities on site and online to allow both kinds of participants to feel validated.

DE-ROLING

De-roling is the conscious and often ritualised process of setting aside the character and re-affirming one's self or primary identity as distinct from the character.

De-roling post-play activities are helpful for leaving behind the world of the fiction and the headspace of the character, and for making a comfortable transition to reality. They separate the roleplay experience from everyday identity and help players reclaim or reunite with their own identities or ego. De-roling is especially important when playing intense roles or after engaging in transgressive play.

Benefits of de-roling include:

- Helping players control their exit from the larp and create a slow landing after the experience.
- Reinforce the boundary between player and character by distancing one self from any negative traits or emotions that were embodied in character, and claiming any positive traits or emotions that were experienced in character.
- Transferring what is felt viscerally through the embodiment of character to what is known and remembered intellectually (from the body to the mind) through reflection and analysis.
- Definitively signaling that the roleplay experience is over.
- Allowing players to interact as themselves in a facilitated space.

De-roling activities usually fall into one of three types: Establishing *physical (bodily or spatial) distance*, establishing *psychological distance*, and *ritualised demarcation*. Some examples of de-roling activities include:

- Body movements, such as shaking each limb or the entire body to “shake-off” the character or changing one’s posture to the player’s usual posture and gait.
- Change of physical location: Or “gating,” involves moving players from the space where the event or roleplay happened to another space as a signal for shifting out of character. This can also be done by changing the environment, such as turning on the lights, opening curtains, removing decor, or the like.
- Counting out of character. A facilitator asks participants to close their eyes and uses their voice to count backwards, guiding players out of character and back to their primary identities, sometimes accompanied by meditative background music.
- Cool-down exercises such as dance, music, meditation, walking, or talking in third person about the character, or getting snacks or drinks.
- Taking off the name tag is a type of ritualised “disrobing” activity in which a facilitator asks all participants to remove their name tags, and replace with a player name tag, if available, and to state “I was [character name]. I am [player name].”
- Taking off a costume item. An item that particularly embodied a character, such as a hat, brooch, watch, gloves, etc. can be removed and set aside, marking the removal of the role.
- Take with, leave behind. A facilitator asks participants if there is an aspect of their character that they would like to claim, and/or an aspect of their character they wish to reject. This can be especially helpful for those who have played villains or whose character experienced something difficult, or if a player experienced something powerful or liberating as their character.
- Positive Feedback Round or Appreciations. Having participants express gratitude to another player or to the designers for aspects of the experience facilitates third-person speaking, thinking about the experience in the past, intellectualising the experience, and moving the focus to another.

DEBRIEFING

In Elin Dalstål’s definition, larp debriefing refers to “structured conversation held after a larp ends about the larp that just ended” with the purpose of “helping players articulate and deal with difficult emotions, thoughts or relationships that arose in the larp.” In addition, debriefing is a transitional period between the fiction of the larp and everyday reality that, as Brodie Atwater explains in his article ‘We need to talk’, “lets players reinforce the social bonds that allow play and reflect on their own actions.”

Larp debriefs, where participants contextualise a powerful experience, should

not be confused with debriefs after traumatic events, which have therapeutic goals. Emotions experienced during a larp can be surprising or new, but they are not traumatic: If a participant experiences something traumatising at your event, they will need professional help, just as they would in case of a physical injury. Debriefs are not designed to deal with the emotional fallout of real-life mental or physical emergencies, only emotions stemming from play.

The purposes of larp debriefs are:

1. To provide the opportunity for participants' voices to be heard and to have their larp experience validated by their co-players.
2. To begin processing the larp, moving from the immediate experience and emotions into memories, reflections, and learning.
3. To provide a space for others to become aware of anything particularly challenging that a player experienced, and to take steps towards processing it.

The debrief in collaborative larp usually takes the form of structured and facilitated conversation exercises, using guidelines that help create a welcoming environment and ensure everyone has a chance to speak and be heard. It is usually conducted in small groups with participants in a circle. Through a series of open-ended questions that encourage players to reflect on and identify strong moments and emotions, debriefing helps players express and process emotions, thoughts, or social connections that arose in the larp.

Benefits of debriefing:

- Normalises having emotions after a roleplay experience and provides a safe space for them to be expressed.
- Facilitates processing difficult scenes or interactions, regrets for expectations that were not met or choices that were made during play to allow for the release of negative or overwhelming emotions.
- Facilitates separation from in-character feelings of attachment or animosity.
- Reaffirms character alibi by attributing actions and feelings relating to character conflict to the character and not the player.
- Fosters an open, trusting, and supportive culture among players.

The responsibility players have to treat each other with respect and compassion does not end with the runtime. Special care should be taken with participants whose characters participated in socially excluding, snubbing, bullying, harassing, abusing, or depriving another character of any basic needs during the larp. It is

often at least as emotionally taxing to portray an oppressor as it is to portray a victim. But just after the larp, the person who played the oppressed character may not have the bandwidth to reflect on the emotions of the other parties. Likewise, the person who played the oppressor might be feeling unreflected guilt for their fictional actions, blocking them from asking for support they might need.

Encourage players to check in after the runtime with everyone with whom they have played out a conflict. If a player is not able to do this personally for whatever reason, ask them to describe the scene they have in mind to a team member or another player to make sure someone can check in with the other participants.

If your larp engages with conflict or power imbalances – and most do – it is ultimately your responsibility to create a structure where all players and NPCs (as well as any team members who might have portrayed characters during runtime) will be seen and validated as themselves after the runtime and asked about their needs.

DEBRIEFING OPEN-ENDED QUESTION SUGGESTIONS

The following questions are from Learn Larp Studios' debriefing template. It was developed with consultation of Martin Eckhoff Andersen's and Lizzie Stark's articles that you can find under Further Reading, below. These questions are not prescriptive or exhaustive, nor do they all need to be used. They can be selected from or used to serve as inspiration for your own reflective questions to fit your larp.

1. Do you have any burning feelings that you need to get off your chest?
2. What was your most intense moment? Why?
3. What was your most difficult moment or difficult part of the experience? What did you do?
4. What interested you the most during this experience?
5. What was your most positive moment during the larp?
6. What was your most negative moment during the larp?
7. Does this larp have any parallels to real-world reality or situations?
8. What is your strongest impression that you will take away from the larp?
9. What surprised you about the larp, your performance, or the experience?
10. If you could go back in time and change something in the larp, would you? If so, what would it be?
11. If you could give your character a piece of advice, what would it be?
12. If your character could give you a piece of advice, what would it be?

DECOMPRESSION

Decompression is an umbrella term that refers to the process of attending to one's needs and to each other after powerful experiences. Decompression can include being alone or quiet, sharing the experience with another, hydrating and eating, resting or sleeping, getting a change of scenery to reset the brain, taking a smoke or vape break, sitting quietly, getting exercise, showering, hugs, cuddles, huddling under a blanket, or other ways of expressing kindness to oneself and each other.

Often decompression will involve participants caring for their own needs, but you can enable and encourage them to do so by scheduling time for snacks, showers and other basic needs, as well as time when they are not expected to do anything in particular. Most players will then gravitate towards whatever they need the most.

Such breaks are an important part of your post-play design. Even if you prescribe no other formal activities, you can still schedule a break between the end of the runtime and the start of an out-of-character after-party. This further allows for distance from character to player, as they can reappear at the after-party in out-of-character clothes, voice, and mannerisms.

An after-party is a post-play experience designed by the organisers that allows participants to get together to celebrate, mingle, and share their experiences. They are often at the site of the larp, but sometimes are held at a nearby venue. A different place for the after-party reinforces the shift from runtime to post-play.

Benefits of an After-Party:

- Ends an experience on a high note.
- Encourages participants to get to know each other outside of the roles they have played and allows them to transform the trust they innately feel from having shared an experience into real-world social relationships.
- Provide an environment for continued de-roling, informal debriefing, and appreciations.
- Serves as a cleansing of the physical and emotional discomfort of play by renewing and supporting participants.

Design Principles for an After-Party

Ideally, the after-party takes place in a space that comfortably holds all participants with the ability for people to gather in small groups.

- *Inclusive:* Create an open after-party that all participants can attend if they choose. Put some thought into the atmosphere, tone, and potential

activities. If you do not design the party, players will default to familiar patterns. This might reinforce pre-existing out of character social hierarchies and cliques and leave some participants isolated; go in a direction you were not hoping for (for instance, participants dealing with adrenaline from an exciting final battle by drinking heavily); or having participants rehash in-character jokes and social dynamics instead of moving forward with getting to know each other for real.

- *Accessible:* Take care to ensure that there are spaces that are more private or quiet for participants who experience sensory overload, have hearing problems, or just want to talk more intimately. Be certain you have enough seating for participants, and that the event space is accessible to participants with mobility difficulties.

- *Safe:* Remind participants of conduct guidelines and to look out for each other. Have a designated no alcohol space for people who choose not to drink or don't want to be around others who are drinking.