HOW TO DESIGN A WORKSHOP

// Lizzie Stark

There exists no foolproof method or procedure one can follow to generate a flawless workshop because a good workshop is tailored to both its larp and the participant group for that run. Most designers develop a feel for workshop design in the same way they develop a feel for larp design – by trying, failing, iterating, playing, and asking fellow designers for help and advice.

Broadly speaking, the overarching goal of a workshop is to prepare participants for the larp or, to put it another way, to make the participants better participants of your particular larp. In order to achieve this goal, you have to think through (a) what skills and knowledge your larp requires and (b) what skills and knowledge your participants have. Then you design exercises that address the gap between (a) and (b). For example, if your larp prominently features basket weaving and your participants are experienced larpers with poor hand-eye coordination, you will have to spend a large swath of time teaching them how to weave baskets. On the other hand, if you are running your larp for a local basket weaving guild who are new to role-playing, you won't need to teach them to weave baskets. But you might need to teach them how to use weaving baskets as a mode of character expression, and you will definitely need to teach them how to small-talk in character, a skill most new larpers struggle with.

Of course, most groups of larp participants aren't uniform. In this age of international travel, your participants will likely include some new larpers, some experienced larpers, and some larpers who are experienced but steeped in a completely different tradition. This requires you to design your workshop for several different audiences simultaneously. You can't assume that everyone knows how to weave baskets; you equally can't assume everyone knows how to talk in character, so it's best to practice both.

No matter what you're running, it's wise to start by covering the basics of how you want the participants to larp. This helps nervous new larpers while also providing an opportunity to make your desired norms of play explicit for larpers from other traditions, as well as anyone – local or otherwise – who struggles to understand unspoken social norms. These opening pitches to the players often include tips such as the following:

- "Say 'yes and' to build the fiction together".
- "You don't have to be eloquent. When in doubt, be obvious. Your obviousness is different from mine and therefore it is inherently interesting."
- "Sometimes it's your moment in the spotlight; sometimes it's your moment to reflect the light back onto other participants."

Depending on your play tradition, your opening pitch on how to larp might be different.

Identifying the gap between the participants' skills and what skills the larp requires takes practice. It's also easier to identify gaps if you marshall your community resources: ask your community for help as a fresh set of eyes on your workshop content. If you know someone who has run a game with similar design or content, reach out and see whether they are willing to share their experiences.

The aim of a workshop is to equip participants with the skills they need to have a good experience in the larp, but that doesn't mean you will train them equally. Rather, it's okay to rely on herd competence [*See Stenros & Montola! –Eds*]. If most of the group has the required skill, they can carry those who don't or who learn more slowly. You should aim for playability, not perfection – you needn't drill the group in basket weaving until they can produce a professional product – something vaguely basket-shaped is likely serviceable enough for most experiences.

Larp groups handle mixed levels of participant competence differently. For example, some US campaign boffer games simply separate the new participants out from the herd and give them special "new participant" training. The trend in multi-day one-shots is to keep all parties together, since no one has special knowledge of a brand-new experience, and workshopping everyone together can help break up pre-existing social structures.

Upending pre-existing social structures can benefit play for everyone at the larp. If a clique of friends only talks to one another during the larp, then the rest of the participants might feel excluded; by the same token, the clique would miss out on the unique ideas and experiences offered by the rest of the participant base.

WHAT A WORKSHOP DOES

Designers can use workshops to accomplish many useful goals. For instance, a workshop may:

- Get participants comfortable with one another
- Generate alibi for participants to play and create without fear of being judged
- Teach and practice game mechanics or other tools

- Teach and practice safety rules and calibration mechanics
- Generate fiction or reinforce mood/tone
- Create characters, relationships, or factions
- Elaborate on pre-written characters, factions, and relationships
- Teach and practice a skill needed in the larp
- Communicate information about the larp, site, etc. in a straightforward way

That's a list of goals that differs pretty widely. So do the means of accomplishing them. Just getting participants comfortable with one another might involve everything from social icebreakers, to name games, to sharing personal stories or even hugging workshops. The list of specific activities that larp designers have used in workshops would produce a near infinite scroll.

A good workshop does not usually accomplish all of the above goals. Rather, designers have to be tactical about which functions are most vital in preparing participants for this larp. Perhaps, in the perfect world, you'd be able to hone each and every participant skill required for your larp, but in the actual world you will run up against two major constraints: time and the limits of human cognition. The workshop – and thus the design of your larp – must take these into account.

Let's take time first. Larp experiences, from workshop to debrief, have a specific duration. Maybe it's a five-hour slot at a convention, or the timespan of your site rental. Let's say that you've reserved the basket-weaving factory for two and a half days. Teaching your participants complex basket weaving requires two days, leaving only a half day for play. As a designer, you have to decide whether that is the best ratio. Perhaps you adjust the design for the larp to require only simple basket weaving that can be taught in half a day to extend the play time.

Due to time limits, you must also prioritise the information the workshop conveys. Some information is more important. Communicating the themes and play style of the larp is more vital than teaching participants to remember the names of obscure trading posts in Middle Earth, and your informational design should reflect that. Top priority should go to anything that is directly necessary for the participants' interaction with the fiction, for instance what their family members look like.

You can, of course, save time by conveying information in writing to participants before the event begins. Whether this works will depend heavily on your participants' skill at reading and remembering written information. Similarly, there are hard limits on how much participants can learn and retain on the day of your larp just through listening.

When you design your workshop, divide the information you're communicating into "must know," "should know," and "nice to know." Try to figure out the minimum viable information that participants require to enjoy the larp. You should highlight and repeat the most important information. Focus on it first,

when participant minds are fresh, and remind them of it verbally at the end of the workshop or just before play begins.

Remember: you're designing a workshop for humans and humans have cognitive limits. Your workshop is only as successful as the skills and information your participants retain, so prioritising what you want to convey is vital. Likewise, if it's possible to shoehorn meaningful information into the practical exercises, do it! Participants that practice using information in an embodied fashion often retain it better, and doing so can help cater to differing cognitive capacities and learning styles among participants. In any case, if the players are only passively listening, it's not a workshop, but a briefing.

- Groups have an easier time remembering stuff they did, rather than the stuff they heard or read. Plus, it's less work for you!
- All workshops include some amount of talking, but try to break up speeches with activities to keep people awake and the information snackable.
- Include unstructured breaks, not just for obvious reasons of human biology, but also so the participants can speak to each other before the game. As Norwegian designer Trine Lise Lindahl put it, "make sure they feel like that is their time to do what they need to do to be able to play the larp in an hour, half a day, or however long there is left."
- Start with simpler tasks and escalate to more complex ones. Simpler tasks build participant confidence and emotional buy-in. For example, you might like your participants to get comfortable with physical contact. Have them do a low-stakes task like shaking hands before asking them to negotiate a hugging mechanic.
- Always look for opportunities to make one exercise do double or triple duty. If you want participants to practice a particular technique, have them do it as their characters during a scene that builds backstory. The participants get to practice the technique *in situ*, and you're building backstory at the same time.

WORKSHOPS CONSIDERED AS REHEARSAL

Upon learning about larp workshops, a professor of theater once exclaimed, "Ah! You mean a rehearsal. You rehearse before the final performance". In some sense, she's right. A workshop is a rehearsal, where the actors (participants) practice what they will do during the larp.

Consider Nina Rune Essendrop's blackbox larp *Uskyld* (Denmark, 2014, Eng. *Innocence*), a nonverbal experience for 15 participants about naïve creatures called clowns who are waiting for the circus to return. In this larp, the clowns communicate with clown noises, move jerkily, wear red noses, tie string to each other to make relationships, take periodic naps to lullaby music, sell aspects of

their personality to a salesman, and have the opportunity to regain those aspects in turn. Every experience of the larp — even the participants' experience of their own body language — is different from out of game life; participants can't assume any knowledge of the fictional world. The gap between participant knowledge and what the game requires is large.

Essendrop's rehearsal-oriented workshop design is ingenious. During the two hour workshop, the participants practice each element — many of them with lighting and sound cues — roughly in the order they will encounter them in the larp. After the workshop during one run, a participant exclaimed, "I feel like I just played the whole larp". She felt quite prepared and delighted to play it now, for real — the rehearsal had given her a foretaste of the feast to come.

Even if you don't take it as far as Essendrop, considering the workshop through the lens of rehearsal can help focus on which actions and activities require practice, and on methods for delivering that practice that mimic the real-time play conditions.

A WORD ON CO-CREATION

Some larp runners use workshop time to help participants create elements of the fiction, including characters, relationships, cultures, factions, and more. Larp is, by its nature, a co-creative art form. Using workshops to co-create large swaths of fiction has benefits and drawbacks. Participants buy into the larp because they've put creative sweat equity into it. It's also easier to remember the three people a participant has interacted with during the workshop than it is to remember a few pages of pre-written relationships. On the flip side, co-creation requires time, and often in significant amounts. Larp designers cannot control co-creation as tightly as they can, say, written materials, and they have to be comfortable with that. And co-creation doesn't necessarily save designers all that much time. Even if you aren't writing, say, characters or culture, you still have to design the process by which participants will arrive those elements.

Designing the process of co-creation is vital if you want to avoid some common pitfalls. On an out-of-game level, designing co-creation is designing social interactions that foster creativity. That is complicated! You should figure out how to get people into and out of groups quickly, and in such a way that all participants feel included. Otherwise, you risk some nastier forms of social Darwinism, with folks who know each other clumping together and leaving newer folks out. Likewise, if your design requires large groups of participants speaking to one another, you may wish to introduce some conversational mechanics to ensure that the process remains one of co-creation, and not of a single person dominating the conversation. If the participants will design through physicality, put some ground rules for physical contact on the table first.

On the level of game fiction, you must design the blank spaces in which the participants will insert their own vision — let's call those "buckets." The larger a bucket is, the more challenging it is to design — a blank page is harder to fill than a sentence with a few key words missing. Small specific buckets are easier for

players to fill, and you also have more control over them. That control is important, because participants carry their own cultural narratives with them into your game. Inventing things on the spot is hard, and the easiest way to fill a bucket is with low-hanging fruit – stereotypes and common tropes. This might work for some larps, but it can easily go awry, especially when dealing with material related to marginalisation. It's very easy for all the 1950s housewives to end up as passive damsels, or the gay men as light-in-the-loafers stereotypes (or worse!). Giving participants structured choices ("Are you a nuclear physicist, radical feminist, or smart woman trapped in a dumb marriage?") can help them reach beyond and subvert the most common narratives.

Providing structure is also important because these participants have not yet played your larp. It will not be obvious to them what kinds of stories will be meaningfully playable – especially if they have not yet seen the play area – and they may not have the design skills to spontaneously invent, for instance, cultural traditions that resonate meaningfully with the theme of larp. You need to tell them what the metaphorical buckets will be used for so they can know what story elements and social dynamics to carry with them into the larp.

You may also need a mechanism to limit the introduction of certain types of content, or to calibrate story during and after co-creation. You might, for instance, decide that incest or sexual violence cannot be introduced into character backstories. Perhaps it will be dissonant with the larp's themes; perhaps such content is likely to become the emotional focus for the characters' journeys, blocking the players from experiencing other kinds of stories, stories that they do not yet know the larp can offer. In addition, being accidentally confronted with such content in a larp where it was not communicated in advance might be very triggering for other participants. For all of these reasons, carefully design the frame you are asking participants to co-create within.

Remember: if all you want to do is make participants feel like they have some skin in the game, even a small amount of choice or co-creation can go a long way.

A WORD ON REALTIME ADAPTATIONS

Expert workshop designers frequently tweak their workshops on the fly. Many create a detailed bulleted list of activities, along with approximate times for each one, but can adjust to individual groups of participants spontaneously. If this group already knows each other really well, maybe you can cut an introductory game. If participants seem tired, perhaps you move up the break a little bit. If participants figure out how to create inter-family conflict more quickly than you anticipated, perhaps you cut an activity and spend more time on moving as your character. Calibrating as you go is normal, and it helps you tailor your workshop to this particular audience.

FURTHER READING:

Lizzie Stark: "How to Plan a basic Pre-larp Workshop". Leavingmundania.com

The Workshop Handbook https://workshophandbook.wordpress.com/

HOW TO RUN YOUR WORKSHOP

// Markus Montola

In order to promote great play, your workshop has to be *focused* and *safe*. This requires the people facilitating the workshop to be focused, relaxed, in control, and demonstrating good, safe, and egalitarian community leadership.

- Have a solid plan, with backup plans for inevitable scheduling errors. If organisers have to negotiate in front of the workshop audience, they will fail to maintain focus. Workshop time is a very scarce and precious resource for a larp organiser.
- Start by rehearsing the following technique: when the workshop organiser raises their hand up all the way, everyone needs look at them, raise their hand, and stop talking. It is much easier to maintain focus if participants shut up voluntarily, compared to a situation where the organiser needs to raise their voice to proceed with the workshop.
- Running a workshop is a performance, and in all performances you should muster all the charisma you can. Many larp teams invite a person specifically to run their workshops to ensure ideal results. This is particularly useful if core team members are likely to be busy with last minute production tasks as the larp is beginning. (If you are not very experienced, you should probably expect this to be the case.)
- Prioritise the needs of the workshop over the needs of an individual. If you have unhappy or confused individuals in your workshop, make sure they understand that you will attend to their needs after the workshop. If you can, assign a person to be present in the room to attend to their needs as the overall workshop progresses.
- Workshops are often *more uncomfortable* than the larp itself. Make sure you acknowledge this to the participants: "In this workshop we are doing less comfortable things now in order to feel comfortable when we larp." You can literally say "If this feels awkward, you are doing it right."
- Make sure all your participants understand that they can opt out of any exercise without needing to justify the decision. Player comfort is more important to your larp than any individual workshop exercise.