ANY TIPS FOR WRITING A LARP?

Compilation Thread

This is a compilation of a series of posts made to the rec.games.frp.live-action newsgroup on methods for writing a live action role playing game - mostly in the vein of the interactive drama or theatre style.

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I posted this originally in alt.games.frp.live-action, and the first piece of advice I got was to repost it here.. . so I have.

Well, I've played in a couple LARPS, and enjoyed them immensely, and now my fiance' and I are toying with the idea of writing one.

What we want is advice from people who've been there.

If we wrote a LARP, it would probably be designed to run at a college campus, from 6 pm Friday to 6 pm Sunday. Most of the ones we've played in were 48 hour LARPs, played at Brandeis University.

How many characters should we write? What's the ideal player/GM ratio? (1/1, I assume. . .:) What's an *acceptible* player/GM ratio? How many sub-plots should

we write? How many replacement characters should we have available? (In case people get killed) How many sub-plots should each starting character be involved in? Replacement character?

How much detail should each character have? A thumbnail sketch? Six pages of documents, passports, life histories?

How do we handle pacing? Give everyone lots of stuff to do at the beginning, and wait for them to work everything out? Have pre-plotted events that happen every so often?

How many interconnections should each character have? Should everyone know six people? Two? Ten?

How do you make sure everyone has enough to do? Are all games, of neccesity, unballanced, with certain people having more central roles? I once wrote up a list of characters for a LARP that, theoretically, were all reasonably closely power-ballanced -- but I never came up with a plot for them.

Which is more important, plot or character?

How many pages of setting, plot, GM-ONLY information, and so forth should we write?

How long does it take to write a LARP? Can they be cranked out in a matter of days? Is the creative process nuturted over a period of years?

That's enough questions for now. . .

- Ian

Author: Brandon Brylawski
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Xiphias Gladius (ian@io.com) wrote:

I posted this originally in alt.games.frp.live-action, and the first piece of advice I got was to repost it here.. . so I have.

Well, I've played in a couple LARPS, and enjoyed them immensely, and now my fiance' and I are toying with the idea of writing one.

What we want is advice from people who've been there.

Well, this is only scratching the surface, but here are a few ideas. I presume this is a theater-style LARP, with few NPCs, a non-linear series of plots, and simulated combat.

If we wrote a LARP, it would probably be designed to run at a college campus, from 6 pm Friday to 6 pm Sunday. Most of the ones we've played in were 48 hour LARPs, played at Brandeis University.

How many characters should we write?

Most of the weekend-length LARPs that I have played have had on the order of 50-60 characters, but really the number of characters is completely dependent on the setting and genre. A larger game allows you to place more of the setting in the hands of the players, which is good for atmosphere; a smaller game is more intimate.

What's the ideal player/GM ratio? (1/1, I assume. . .:) What's an *acceptable* player/GM ratio?

10 players to 1 GM is good. If the mechanics of the game are GM-intensive, have more GMS.

How many sub-plots should we write?

Enough so that every player has a lot to do, even if some of their subplots fall apart due to circumstances.

How many replacement characters should we have available? (In case people get killed)

Depends on how lethal your game is. It's not a good idea to encourage killing early on.

How many sub-plots should each starting character be involved in? Replacement character?

Starting characters should have a little more to do in a game than they can possible accomplish.

How much detail should each character have? A thumbnail sketch? Six pages of documents, passports, life histories?

In a dramatic game, the more three-dimensional the characters, the more the player has to fall back on when the action goes along unforseen lines. Give them enough detail so that they really know who they are, why they are here, and what their relationships are with the people that they know.

How do we handle pacing? Give everyone lots of stuff to do at the beginning, and wait for them to work everything out? Have pre-plotted events that happen every so often?

Give people goals that cannot be accomplished quickly, either because they need to wait for a given event to happen, or because they involve laying a lot of groundwork. Timed events can be worthwhile, if used sparingly.

How many interconnections should each character have? Should everyone know six people? Two? Ten?

The critical element is not how many people you know, but how many reasons you have to interact with others and they with you. Make sure every character has many strong reasons to talk to other people, and make sure other people have many strong reasons to talk to the character. That will dictate how many connections anyone has.

How do you make sure everyone has enough to do?

Give them too much, and assume that certain plots will be resolved way too early, and that others will go nowhere.

Are all games, of neccesity, unballanced, with certain people having more central roles? I once wrote up a list of characters for a LARP that, theoretically, were all reasonably closely power-ballanced -- but I never came up with a plot for them.

Don't confuse power with centrality of roles! You can write a game that contains characters of greatly different power, but still gives everyone the same amount of purview for decision-making and role-playing. You just need to make their goals orthogonal to one another, so that they don't interfere. An example: in the King's

Musketeers, characters ranged from lowly musketeers to Cardinal Richelieu, a huge difference in power. But who were the movies about? While Richelieu could pursue his political goals, the musketeers could go on adventures, fight duels, woo ladies, etc. etc. Moreover, the high and low needed one another to further their desires.

Which is more important, plot or character?

Plot is the armature upon which character decisions are created. I can't separate them.

How many pages of setting, plot, GM-ONLY information, and so forth should we write?

How long does it take to write a LARP? Can they be cranked out in a matter of days? Is the creative process nuturted over a period of years?

A good weekend LARP is a big endeavour; the quality ones take months.

Brandon

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Well, I'm at work on my first LARP. Admittedly, I haven't seen how it's going to turn out yet, so take my ideas with a grain of salt. However, we are well along in the writing process and have addressed a number of questions that you have put, and I'll be glad to share our ideas.

My comments relate to theater-style (i.e., IL-style) LARPs.

Xiphias Gladius (ian@io.com) wrote:

If we wrote a LARP, it would probably be designed to run at a college campus, from 6 pm Friday to 6 pm Sunday. Most of the ones we've played in were 48 hour LARPs, played at Brandeis University.

How many characters should we write?

How many players do you want?

I've played weekend-long LARP's ranging from 40 to over 100 characters. 50-70 seems about average. There's been at least one that had only about a dozen characters, but that was a bit of an anomaly in a number of ways. (For one thing, it was played entirely in an RV, and players were not allowed to drop character, even to sleep.)

Warning, though: having too few players can often make a game much more volatile!

How many sub-plots should we write?

To determine this, we have rated every character's involvement in subplots as high, medium, or peripheral, and given characters 3 points for each high, 2 for each medium, and 1 for each peripheral. We are pledged to ensure that all characters have at least 20 plot points of stuff to do. That has driven our plot numbers way up. (At this point, we have more subplots then characters! And we have 75 characters. You should see the size of my game notebook!)

The number one complaint about games is that there wasn't enough to do. Make sure that no one makes that complaint about your game!

How much detail should each character have? A thumbnail sketch? Six pages of documents, passports, life histories?

I like detailed character sheets. 6-10 pages sounds about right, complete with character background, detailed discussion of what the character wants to accomplish, and summaries of who the character knows and what their goals are. (Such summaries can be extremely useful to players!)

How do we handle pacing? Give everyone lots of stuff to do at the beginning, and wait for them to work everything out? Have pre-plotted events that happen every so often?

I like a mixture of both. Set up some big timed events, but also give players a lot of room to set their own timetables.

I'd also recommend keeping a few surprises up your sleeve that you can spring on players if you need to. Have a couple of subplots driven by surprise events. That

way, if the game is bogging down, you will have something ready to get it going again. And if the game never bogs down, you won't have to use the surprises.

Along those lines, design some of your backup characters to be able to give a jolt to a sagging game. An occasional loose cannon character handed to an active player can revitalize a flagging game. Of course, if your game is going smoothly you may not want to insert such a character, but it never hurts a GM to have a few aces up his sleeve!

Are all games, of neccesity, unballanced, with certain people having more central roles? I once wrote up a list of characters for a LARP that, theoretically, were all reasonably closely power-ballanced -- but I never came up with a plot for them.

I have only one comment on this one: give every character in the game something that no other character has. This can be a unique ability, it can be some important piece of knowledge, or it can be a crucial item.

There is nothing more frustrating for players then to be the second best at everything. If you give each character something that cannot be duplicated by anyone else in the game, then the other players will have a reason to seek out that character.

Which is more important, plot or character?

There are two potential strategies on this. You can develop the plots first, then fit the characters into the roles in the plots. Or you can develop the characters, then generate plots that are appropriate for those characters.

I have seen good games written based on both of these strategies. And, in fact, you will probably use a mix of both strategies.

FWIW, I prefer the second strategy, but am not willing to get into a religious debate over it!

How long does it take to write a LARP? Can they be cranked out in a matter of days? Is the creative process nuturted over a period of years?

When all is said and done, we will have taken over two years writing our game.

Of course, ours is a historical game, complete with all historical characters and many historical plots, so we have had to do a whole lot of research.

FWIW, there are a number of articles in Metagame, the ILF's quarterly publication, that discuss issues on writing and running LARP's. You might want to consider joining, or asking around if you can get some recent issues.