Abstract

This paper aims to identify and briefly describe the central aspects of performance space in live action role-play (larp). It begins by introducing the reader to the phenomenon of larp and relating it to other performance arts. It opens up the concept of the magic circle of play and illustrates the different levels of reality and fiction experienced within larp in order to build a base for understanding larp space. Finally it contains the author’s personal reflections over the performance space in larp and a resulting model.

Fundamental to the ideas proposed in this paper have been subjective experience, representational symbolism, and the improvisational nature of larp. Also, a wide range of different larp forms and larp related games have been considered. This document approaches the issue mainly from the author’s personal experience as a larp player, larp designer, and student of scenography, but also to some degree draw upon academic sources related to larp.

The ideas suggested by the author in this text are that the three central aspects of performance space in larp are a) an interactive environment: the subjective relationship between the participant and the space; b) a stage producing drama: how the space affect the emergent drama and action; c) an illusion: how the fiction relates to, and is represented by, the physical and social reality. These aspects are present in all larp but manifest in different ways depending on the form of larp. Important to note is that this is not a text describing how to design scenography for larp, but a text that suggest a way of understanding it.

Keywords

larp, role-play, magic circle, scenography, set design, performance design, immersive theatre
The Character of Space
Describing aspects of space in live action role-play
Anders Karls
2014
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Introduction

Larp: A noun derived from the acronym LARP which stands for Live Action Role-Play.

Almost exactly ten years ago I participated in my first larp. It was a medieval-fantasy-inspired game where I portrayed the elven prince Lawas, who was one of the guests at a royal celebration. At that time it was one of the most exciting things I had ever done, and though much have changed since then I continue to love this form of art and entertainment. Through the years, the Finno-Swedish larp culture, of which I am a part, has evolved and my motivation for larping has shifted from the search for adventure into the search for strong psychological experiences. I believe that larping plays a huge part in my positive personal development during the last few years and now, when I find myself studying performance design, the natural choice of subject for my bachelor thesis was a given.

Larp is still an unknown and misunderstood form of art and entertainment, and it is surrounded by lots of prejudice and misconceptions. Role-play is often dismissed as something unserious and ridiculous since it features adults playing as if they were children. Larpers themselves usually take their interest seriously, and within the academic spheres there already exists a considerable amount of articles and literature that deal with different aspects of this complex phenomenon. It is my wish that I with this text can contribute in a small way to our understanding of larp and that it will help to raise awareness about larp among my peers.

As a student of scenography, I found it relevant to write about the scenographic aspects of larp, but it is important to understand that this is not a text describing how to design larp sets. Rather I have tried to identify and describe the aspects of larp space in comparison with theatre and other performing arts. The fundamental differences arise from the participatory and improvisational nature of larp and much focus have also been given to the use of representational symbolism. In the process of writing this work I found that larp space is both environment, stage, and illusion.

For the first two chapters, where I introduce the reader to larp and explain it in a general performance art context, my greatest source of material have been the books published by the annual larp convention Knutpunkt. In addition, the dissertation work of Markus Montola On the Edge of the Magic Circle and the book Nordic Larp have been important sources of material and inspiration. A special mention also to Oliver Nøglebæk and Mads Havshoj, and their inspiring lecture Location & Scenography – A toolbox for better larps.

The chapter Spatiality of larp consist mostly of my own personal thoughts and reflections which I have based on my experience as a laper, larp designer, and student of scenography. I end this thesis by suggesting further avenues of research in this field and how this knowledge could be used to enrich spatial design in other performing arts.

I hope that reading this paper will be an experience as informative, inspiring, and thought provoking for you as it has been for me writing it.

Anders Karls

Picture of Anders Karls from his game Inipi – Rökandens återkomst (2012)  
Photo owned by: Anders Karls
What is larp?

A larp is a meeting between people who, through their roles, relate to each other in a fictional world.

— Fatland & Wingård

Many people have tried to give a clear definition of larp but due to the many cultural and regional differences, the many variations of the art form, and the fact that it is constantly evolving makes this an almost impossible task. Especially if you try to explain larp using other more common phenomena you usually create misunderstanding. Personally I have chosen to be very inclusive in my definition of larp and include all larp-like games where participants physically portray fictional roles. Consider also when reading this text that I grew up in the Finno-Swedish larp culture, having little knowledge of the larp cultures outside of the Nordic countries, and that my writing is biased because of this.

Larp have among other things been compared to improvisational theatre, psycho drama, forum theatre, happenings, environmental theatre, parlour games, theme parties and Commedia dell’arte [Morton, 2007; Lampo, 2011: 90], but I will begin by explaining larp by the means most natural to me, namely as child’s play.

Larp as make believe

I dare say that every one of us have at some point in life engaged in a form of make believe or let’s pretend. In this play, the children transform themselves into anything; be it cowboys, princesses, ninjas, space aliens, parents, animals, etc. At the same time the children are transported by means of their imagination to another world where these characters exist. Within this world they play, and out of the children’s creative improvisation a story is formed for their own enjoyment. These same workings are fundamental and almost identical to larp.

The difference between larp and children’s play is perhaps mostly a question of investment, meaning for example the effort that have been put into creating the world, the characters, and their relationships, the emotion and action the participants bring into the game, and the resources in general that have been put into preparing the costumes, props, and game site. Also, there is usually a larp designer, or a group of designers, that have created the rules and the framework of the larp making it more structured than a simple game of make believe.

In order not to trivialize the art form, it is necessary to understand how fundamental play is for humans and many other animals. Play is among other things a way to form and strengthen social bonds, to gain experience, and to learn important skills. Animals who, for example, require to hunt or fend of rivals may develop these skills through play [Montola, 2012: 48-49]. In a similar fashion playing children form and strengthen social bonds and learn skills useful as they mature into adulthood. While there are many different reasons for larping, some argue that larping might also aid the further social and emotional development of the individual. Playing in adulthood is however not endemic to larp; you also find elements of play in, for example, sport games, festivals, and in religious rituals.

Larp as performing arts

On the surface it might seem that larp and theatre are closely related, but it easily becomes problematic when one tries to compare these two. If you talk about larp as a form of theatre it often produces wrong associations and leads you into confusion. Marjukka Lampo describes it well when she claims that larp mainly can be compared to theatre through their differences. [Lampo, 2011: 94].

The most obvious similarity between larp and theatre is that the participants, or actors, in both art forms portray fictional characters in a fictional world, or perhaps, in some cases, fictional versions of themselves in a world much similar to our own. The greatest difference, on the other hand, is that there are no separate spectators and actors in larp; these two roles are rather joined in the same being much in the same way that you could be said to be the actor and the primary spectator of your own life. Whereas you as an audience member go to the theatre in order to experience the play through perception, you attend a larp in order to experience it through action [Lampo, 2011: 91]. This fundamental difference in turn affect the whole structure around larp and theatre, both socially, culturally, physically, and architecturally.
Ur askan i elden
a medieval-fantasy-inspired larp
by Minna Joki and Anders Karlis 2009

Ur askan i elden, abbreviated URAEL and roughly translated to "out of the ashes into the fire", was a classical medieval-fantasy larp aiming for a complete illusion. The situation featured people from a village fleeing from a forest fire and given refuge at a camp set up by foreign missionaries.

The venue of the game was a recreation of a bronze age dwelling deep in the forests of Vöyri. Besides some of the costumes and props brought to the site, the only elements in the environment breaking the illusion of the game world was a few museum signs and trash bins. These could be covered with rustic cloth in order to be less distracting. The venue served the purpose well since the participants could interact with the environment in a natural way. The presence of heavy rain the first night only served to enhance the authenticity of the setting.

As I described earlier, larp as well as children's play are improvised events. Many describe larp by routine as bad improvised theatre without an audience. Whereas it is true that larp in some ways remind us of improvised theatre where one also create stories from little or nothing, the problem arises from the use of the word "theatre". You cannot call larp theatre because it lacks an explicit audience and you cannot call improvised theatre larp since its main aim is to entertain the audience. The word "bad" is added because a larp probably would be extremely unfulfilling to an outside observer. Not only is the larp usually played simultaneously in different locations, making it impossible to get an overview of all events, but most of the experience of larp is created in each larpers own mind for the benefit of the player.

That there always would exist a clear separation between spectators and performers in the theatre, is of course a generalization. The act of breaking the forth wall is already a way of including the theatre audience to some degree in a performance, but there are also many more ambitious works that try to blur the line by including interactive or participatory elements. For example the contemporary British theatre company Punchdrunk creates what they call immersive theatre⁴, where the participants can freely move within a huge fully designed fictional environment, and to some degree interact with the space and the actors [Punchdrunk, 2014]. But despite how interactive and participatory a performance becomes it is important to remember that as long as the actors, or some other authority, remain in power to initiate contact and control the level of interaction and participation, a performance cannot be said to be fully interactive and thus making it dissimilar to larp [Choy, 2004: 56].

Larp has many times been compared to different forms of theatre and performance in an effort to find a common ground. For example psychodrama, in which the psychiatric patient has the opportunity to re-live and process traumas, is credited as the origin of the word role-play [Flood, 2006]. In forum theatre the audience also takes on an active role similar to that of larp [Choy, 2004: 56-58]. Also, larp is by some seen to share many similarities with the happening because of its ephemeral quality and lack of explicit performers [Harviainen, 2008]. Although there are a few curious similarities between larp and some other entertainment and theatre forms it is important to note that it is not descended from any of them. Larp is arguably as old as civilization itself and has developed on its own, perhaps being influenced by other forms of art and culture along the way.

⁴ Whilst immersive theatre describes a performance in which the spectator can be said to be immersed, the word immersion is also used by larpers. Its meaning is controversial but the Nordic Larp Wiki defines it as follows: "Immersion" refers to a state of mind where a player does not need to actively suspend disbelief in the fictional universe, and where role-playing flows as naturally and easily as if you really were the character. (...) [Nordic Larp Wiki. Immersion. 2014]
Variations of form in larp

A common preconception about larp is that it always takes the form of a fantasy- and medieval-inspired event where participants dress up in eccentric clothes, speak in pseudo-archaic language, and fight each other with soft foam weapons and imagined magic, not unlike the larp URael (2009). While these kinds of larp do exist and are extremely popular in many parts of the world, they only occupy a fraction of a much larger and diverse culture. It is safe to say that larp exists in as many forms and genres as in literature, film, fine art, and theatre.

I need not list all the possible genres a larp can be made in. All you need is to think of a genre and you can be sure there has been a larp made in that way, or at least that it is possible to make one; the same goes for themes. Furthermore the superficial differences in larps, like the amount of participants; time span; and size of game area, are quite diverse as well. Larps have been known to include anything from two participants to eight thousand⁵; to last for a few minutes to several months⁶; and take place within the confines of a dark wardrobe or to use the whole universe as venue⁷.

What is more interesting than size, genre, and theme, especially in the context of spatiality, is the form of larp since it tells us more about the structure rather than the contents. In a general sense the word “form” could be said to answer the question how: how something is, how something happens, or how something manifests itself. If I, for example, ask of you to create a sculpture of a human, you have endless possibilities of choosing the looks of the human, its pose, the material to use, and how stylized it should be. I feel that the idea or substance of a larp is captured by the rules and agreements that constitute the game and the fictional universe. Thus the form of larp is the way that the game and the fiction manifest themselves in our physical and social reality, which will be elaborated in later chapters.

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⁵ It is a matter of debate whether you can call it larp if there is only one participant, but the general opinion is that there needs to be at least two in order for it to classify as a larp. ConQuest of Mythodea, in contrast, is an annual larp event which holds the record as the largest larp in the world. In 2014 more than 8000 participated (including staff) [ConQuest of Mythodea. 2014].

⁶ An example of a larp that can last only a few minutes is 1-2-3 Larp, and an example of a larp lasting for months is Pranepeja Bardo 2 "Momentum" (2006).

⁷ Larps that in theory use the whole universe as venue are so called pervasive larps. An example of a larp taking place in a very small space is the elevator larp Uppåt? (2009).
The most common and understandable form of larp is the one that follows the logic of our own world. Take, for example, a classical larp that aspires for realism: where people are people and interact as people do; objects and spaces are as they are perceived; and time is linear. In this form, I would not only include pervasive larp that are set in our real world, such as Blood Money 2 (2010), but also medieval-inspired, low-fantasy games such as URAEL, where the biggest difference to our world is cosmetic. But in contrast to this form, there are larp where time, for example, is not linear: containing flashbacks or time jumps; where the space is symbolically represented or totally irrelevant; where the participants portray animals; objects; or abstract concepts instead of humans etc.; and between these extremes, of course, a vast scale of variations are possible. Trash (2011) and BABEL (2013) are examples of larp with a less realistic form.

In the larp community there have been several attempts to classify larps, games, and scenarios based on their form but, as Anna Westerling describes in her article Naming the middle child, the meaning that people ascribe to these classes differ depending on what country they come from and what gaming culture they have grown up in [Westerling 2013]. Some of the terms that are commonly used are free-form, jeep-form, black box larps, tape-larps, and chamber larps. However using these, or any other categories are not suitable when investigating the spatiality of larp. Instead we need a more general understanding of how larp relates to our everyday existence.

8 To use the term classical larp is dangerous because it lacks a consistent definition. Personally I define a classical larp as one that aspires for realism and keeps symbolic representation and game techniques to a minimum.
9 A pervasive larp uses the existing world as a venue and participants can also interact with people that are not participating in the game.
Layers of reality

*Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away.*
– Philip K. Dick

When discussing larp, and in extension the space of larp, it is necessary to understand the different layers that constitutes it and how these different layers relate to each other. We have the omnipresent physical reality; the social reality which grants the former meaning; and the transformed social reality of the game, in which we find the fictional universe and a metafictional layer. In-between we also find the elusive concept of the magic circle.

The magic circle

The *physical reality* contains time, space, matter, energy, and so on, but also life such as you and me. However it is the *social reality* created by human interaction that gives meaning to objects and actions. A cup is only a cup because we have a social agreement on what a cup is. In its pure physical form it is only a collection of hardened clay minerals in an arbitrary shape. What happens within any game or larp is a transformation of the social reality. We create a pocket in time and space where we redefine the rules of our existence and the objects around us.

A concept much discussed in game studies, and which I believe to be essential for the understanding of larp, is the *magic circle of play*. This term was coined by Johan Huizinga in the ’30s as he wrote about the spatiotemporal separation between play and ordinary life [Montola, 2012]. His own words from his book *Homo Ludens* describe it best:

> All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the ‘consecrated spot’ cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc. are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.

[Huizinga, 1938: 10, as cited in Montola, 2012]

As Huizinga describes, all games, among other similar phenomena, are separated from social reality by a conceptual border known as the magic circle within which the rules of our social reality are different. The magic circle of a chess game transforms the king, a worthless piece of wood, into an object of importance and meaning. In the same way the magic circle surrounding a boxing match makes a punch dealt to the face interpreted much differently than if the same happened on the street [Montola, 2012].

Although it has encountered some criticism, the term is nowadays used by many scholars studying games of various forms, such as computer games, board games, and sport games. In larp the magic circle is the spatial, temporal, and social border that separates the game from our ordinary world. I.e. within a certain time frame and a defined area[11], the participants agree to play by the rules and believe in the fiction of the game. As seen in the example of chess and boxing, the magic circle has the property of transforming objects and actions into something else. For example a water pistol can in some larps represent a real pistol or a neck massage a sexual act. [Montola, 2012].

As seen in the quote from Huizinga the magic circle is found within all places where temporary worlds or situations with temporary rules are created; one such place is of course the theatre. Already as the spectator enters the theatre there can be a certain etiquette and way of being that is apart from the normal way of existing. At the latest when the curtain rises the agreements between actors and spectators, and amongst the spectators and actors themselves, are formed. The audience agrees to sit quiet and watch and the actors agree to perform. When the play starts, the audience willingly accepts to believe in the fiction presented on stage. When the play is over and the curtain falls the magic circle of the theatre is broken and people return to their normal lives.

[10] [Philip K. Dick, as cited in Stenros & Montola, 2010: 14]
[11] In some larps, and especially in so called pervasive larps, the game area is not defined. Here the spatiotemporal border of the game is reduced to just a temporal one.
Fiction and metafiction

Considering once again a game of chess we can see that it does not normally contain a level of fiction since the idea of the game is not to imagine that there are small creatures killing each other. Of course you can decide to imagine this, but that means adding a level of fiction to the game. In the same way we can divide a larp into the fiction, i.e. the world, the characters, the narratives etc., and into what I have chosen to call the metafiction, a word which is loosely adapted from literature. In theatre I am reminded of the distancing effect, as stated by Bertolt Brecht with which he wanted to break the illusion and remind the audience that they were watching a theatre play.

When entering the magic circle of a larp you agree to play by the rules of the game. For example you agree to pretend that a regular Finnish forest is the great forest of Mirkwood in J.R.R. Tolkien's fictional Middle-earth. But playing to support this fiction and being totally inside it are two different things and the border between these are vague. Staying immersed in the fiction often takes great effort and it is normal to drift in and out of immersion during the game. It is this state of mind, when you are inside the larp but outside of the fiction, that I have chosen to call metafiction, or game layer. Others choose to use the words diegesis and non-diegesis for this same separation [Montola, 2012: 55-73]. At this stage it might also be relevant to mention that in some larps there are instances where you consciously exit into the metafiction in order to manipulate the fiction from the outside as a way to enrich the experience.

The same phenomenon of drifting in and out of the fiction can be experienced while watching theatre, or why not also a film or reading a book; you sometimes find yourself immersed in the drama but other times not. As a practitioner of scenography I do the latter quite frequently, looking at the technical solutions of the stage, light, and costume rather than enjoying the play. The decision you make to accept the things you see as real, and disregarding all discrepancies, is sometimes referred to as the willing suspension of disbelief.

On the next page you see a graphical representation of the different layers of reality and fiction. The physical reality exists independently of the other layers, whilst the social reality exists as an emergent property of the physical. The metafiction is in the same way a subset of the social reality, and the fiction an extension of the metafiction.
Games are world-building activities.
— Erwing Goffman 12

If I were to try describing theatre scenography or performance design in general I would say that it is the creation of a performance language by the use of physical means such as material, light, and sound. In a practical sense, the scenographer creates a framework or world through which the rest of the performance is interpreted and understood. In a similar way scenography for larp is about creating an environment or a physical framework which supports the game play and the fiction of the game. In contrast to theatre, however, the design of larp space also requires a design of the social reality, i.e. designing how the surroundings should be interpreted and used in play. A combination of physical and social design to create a fiction- and a game-supporting environment is to me larp scenography in a nutshell.

After much pondering about what the central aspects of larp space are, and how to make sense of them, I finally narrowed them down to this statement: Larp space is an interactive environment, a stage producing drama, and an illusion. In this chapter I will explain what I mean by this suggestion and also elaborate on some related concepts. In the year 2012 I participated in Solmukohta13 and during this event I attended a lecture called Location & Scenography – A toolbox for better larp [Nøglebæk & Havshøj, 2012]. The lecture was mainly about how to practically go about designing environments for larp, in contrast to this more general analysis, but it is safe to say that much of my writing is inspired by the ideas presented by Nøglebæk and Havshøj.

On the opposite page you find a graphical representation of the three main aspects of performance space in larp.

13 The event internationally known as Knutpunkt is an annual conference about larp that ambulates between the Nordic countries Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland, and thus its name alternates between Knutpunkt, Knutepunkt, Knudepunkt and Solmukohta.
**Larp space as environment**

In contrast to most theatre performances, which have an architectural separation between the stage and the auditorium and a defined direction of spectating, the space of larp is better described as an interactive environment to be experienced from within. Still it remains a question of in what way the participants experience their surroundings and how they interact with it, a question best answered by the specific form and demands of the larp itself. Some larps require a perfectly realistic environment; some only require atmosphere; some use representational spaces and props; while some larps are almost completely indifferent to the venue.

**Interactive environment**

Since we humans are a part of the physical reality we cannot avoid to interact with our surroundings. This is still true when larping, but since our social reality is transformed within the larp, the way we interact with the milieu might differ either as a consequence of the fiction or the game. The game rules might for example say that you cannot leave the table while playing *BABEL*, whilst the rules that build the fiction forms your or, more precisely, your character’s, relationship to the hourglass (the most essential prop of the game).

Being able to trust your senses; react to stimuli; and freely interact with the environment, as you can in a realistic larp, allows for more freedom and it requires less energy to uphold the suspended disbelief. However, there is sometimes a limit how much interaction can be allowed before the illusion starts to break down. In *URAEL*, for example museum signs had been covered with rustic fabric in order to be less distractive, but peaking underneath would of course uncover elements not belonging to the game.

In contrast to this there are larps where interaction is done through a filter of representative symbolism. Some larps for example utilize tape markings on the floor to construct rooms through a filter of representative symbolism. Some larps for not belonging to the game.

on it, or be emotionally affected by it, and it does not provide the privacy that an actual wall would give. It might sound as imagining the wall would require a lot of effort, but on the other hand not being distracted by it might also direct the focus of the participants towards more important elements of the larp. The idea and form behind the larp determines what level and mode of interaction is suitable, and the choice needs to be done carefully to produce the best results. Symbolic representation of larp space will be further discussed in a later chapter.

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14 *Tape-larp* is the name for a larp that uses tape to mark walls and areas for gameplay, much in the same way as in the movie *Dogville* (2003).

**Atmospheric environment**

Interaction with the environment is a two sided coin; you affect the environment but are also affected by it. As a physical being with senses, consciousness, and emotions you will always be touched by the atmosphere or feeling of a space whether or not you are in character. For the larp designer manipulating the atmosphere is thus a powerful tool to control what the participants, and subsequently the characters, feel while playing a game. Atmosphere in larp can be controlled in much the same way that atmosphere in theatre is controlled by light, sound, material, texture, acting etc. However, the usual way of creating a suitable atmosphere for a larp is by finding an existing location which already has the desired qualities and perhaps augmenting or modifying them. In the spring of 2013 I attended the larp *Asylum* (2013) which as the name suggests was set in a mental institution. Instead of a real asylum an old primary school was used. The sterile and institutionalized atmosphere together with augmented light and sound design served the purpose well.

As I already mentioned the player is always affected by the atmosphere and one could thus say that all atmospheric elements exist at least on a non-diegetic or metafictional plane. However, all atmospheric elements are not necessarily diegetic. In the same way that music, for example, can be non-diegetic in movies, i.e affecting only the viewer and not being present in the fiction of the film, music in larp, among other things, can be non-diegetic, i.e affecting the player but not being perceptible to the character. In *Asylum*, for example, non-diegetic Gregorian music was played in the gymnasium of the school in order to make it feel like the chapel of the mental institution.

Furthermore the emotions evoked in the player by the atmosphere are not necessarily transported to the character unchanged. I would argue that within the character the meaning of the atmospheric sensations can be transformed. Walking in the sterile corridors of the asylum might evoke fear and discomfort in the player, but assuming the role of the chief doctor the same feelings might be converted into a sense of power and control.

The emphasis and importance of the atmosphere might also vary between larps. In some larps the only thing required from the space is a good supporting atmosphere, as for example in *BABEL*, whilst other larps might be indifferent to the atmosphere or require a neutral room not to distract the players from the issue of the game. Finally there is of course those larps that utilize the naturally occurring atmosphere and not doing much to change it either way, as for example in *URAEL* or *Blood Money 2*. 
So far I have discussed this subject as if a larp always use only one environment with one general atmosphere but that is of course not true. Usually larp environments consist of many spaces with different atmospheres creating opportunities for movement and dramaturgical change.

Larp space as stage

I already talked about the interaction between participant and environment, but the environment also plays an essential part in how players and characters interact with each other. The size and configuration of the physical space, and the meanings and functions ascribed to different places determine how people move, meet, and interact. Also here we can distinguish between the diegetic and non-diegetic, a space can have a function and meaning in the fiction, but also another that is game-mechanical.

Producing action and drama

In theatre, and many other performance types, the movements of the performers and their interactions are usually predetermined through careful planning and rehearsal. In larp where there usually is no predetermination in the story, the participants make their own choices, conscious or unconscious, how to move about in the environment and whom to interact with. In the same way that architects predict and direct human behavior when designing buildings, cityscapes, and landscapes, a larp designer can control the movements of the players, consequently influencing how they meet and interact, and thus affect how the drama of the larp unfolds.

Beginning by looking simply at the size of the game environment one can easily see how smaller and simpler environments produce drastically different games than bigger and more complex environments. In B A B E L the participants have no freedom of movement since the whole game is played around a table, eliminating all possibilities of individual meetings and private conversation. One step higher on the scale is perhaps Trash where a small room is used. All characters are more or less forced to interact with each other but it still opens up some possibilities for parallel narratives to evolve.
A single room or space can be expanded by adding several rooms or spaces with different atmospheres, functions, and meanings providing even better opportunities for parallel stories and events. With growing complexity you will also start to have movement and movement patterns. A larp environment does of course not have to be limited to an interior as suggested by the examples, but can also expand to cover a larger area such as a village, a piece of forest, an urban district, etc.

As the size and complexity increases it allows for new kind of play to emerge. Nøglebæk and Havshøj provide an interesting point when they describe good larp scenography as being “constructively bad planning”. In larp you often search for friction and conflict, as opposed to efficiency in real world. In the spring of 2013 I attended the game Monitor Celestra which is a good example of how to consciously design a non-efficient larp environment in order to create maximum potential for action and conflict. Below I have quoted slide 24 taken from Nøglebæk and Havshøj's presentation; the formatting is my own:

Constructively bad planning:
- Most everyday places are designed for frictionless and efficient occupation.
- In larps we're looking for conflicts and meetings, to provide potentials for play.
- Which means the goal of larp-scenography is bad architecture and engineering.
- Uncritical simulation of real world situations can negatively affect the larp experience.

[Nøglebæk & Havshøj, 2012: 24]

The functions of different spaces in a larp environment can be either diegetic, non-diegetic, or as most often a combination of these two. A diegetic space has a meaning in the fiction and is visited by the player because of the characters motives, such as a holy shrine visited by religious characters. A space with both components could perhaps be the camp fire where both the players and the characters go to eat and stay warm, and an example of a non-diegetic space would be a so called off-room, a space which exists outside of the game where people perhaps can rest, or discuss what has happened, and will happen, during the larp.

This larp was set on a space ship in the universe of the TV-series Battlestar Galactica (2004). As venue was used an old battle cruiser and with great care, and plenty of resources, the interior was partly redecorated to fit the fiction and create an environment of relatively high realism. Symbolism was perhaps mostly present in the pretend play of using the battle cruiser’s own levers and buttons as if they controlled the space ship. Apart from characteristic design of props the larp environment was augmented with atmospheric light and sound. Also, costumes were provided for some participants to create a visual coherence. The same game was run three times and each, session had about 140 participants and lasted for 32 hours excluding breaks and sleeping hours.

This game is also a good example of how you can create potential for conflict and action by designing the space in an inefficient manner. Instead of concentrating all ship functions to the bridge, as would be logical, the different control stations were spread out around the ship.
Constructing illusion

When aiming for realism in a game world that is not exactly like our physical reality, the first method is of course to adapt it by physical means, rebuilding the environment, and creating props that suit the fiction. With good skills and resources, like for instance in the larp Monitor Celestra, one can come close but it is very rare that you are able to construct an environment that does not in some way reveal itself as fake. Quite early on the participant needs to engage a certain suspension of disbelief in order to ignore the details that would otherwise break the illusion. It becomes even more urgent to believe when including, for example, guns, which because of safety reasons must be fake, or when dealing with a magical artifact that obviously is not magical in reality. In both cases we have substituted the objects in the fiction with symbolic representations. Also actions can be symbolically represented in larp, as for example sex or violence.

Sometimes symbolism is a necessity, dictated by the resources available or the laws of physics, and sometimes it is a design choice made by the larp designer. There are different levels of symbolism ranging from replacing a few objects to having the whole environment represent something else, leaving it up to the imagination to fill in the rest. Trash is a good example of a completely symbolic larp where both space, characters, and the way they communicated was symbolically represented. The choice to make Trash a symbolic larp aroused naturally out of necessity since the fiction was strange and impossible to recreate.

Breaking illusion

A symbol - now speaking in general terms - only functions if the people using the symbol are in agreement of its meaning. As an example the symbol 7 (representing the number seven) is known to most people in the world who have learned how to read and count, and its meaning is absolute. Another less clear example could be the pictogram :P which represents a face holding out its tongue. What does this symbol say to you as a reader? Does it represent disgust? Is it an insult? Or a sign of comedy? When using a symbol with unclear meaning you risk creating confusion.

Subjective dramaturgy

Whilst the classical theatre stage has the ability to transform by means of light, sound, and movement of elements and actors to create different environments and dramaturgical change, these methods are extremely rare in larp, where the environment is more likely to be more static. Instead I propose that spatial dramaturgy in larp could be defined as the participant’s subjective experience as they interact with, and move through, the different spaces. When the player, for example, moves from outdoor sunlight into a dark cave they will experience a dramaturgical change. By designing different environments with different atmospheres and functions the larp designer can create a palette with which the participant can paint their own dramaturgy. It also has to be said that in many larps the participant has the possibility to manipulate and change their environment just as they would have in real life. This is also a way for the participants to create their own spatial experience. Perhaps lighting a candle and bringing some warm blankets will transform the dark cave into a cozy refuge?

The same principle of subjective dramaturgy seems to be present in for example immersive theatre, city games, or in other performance types where the spectator moves independently. One more such example is the British group Blast Theory which has produced performances where the participant moves about in the city interacting with the game through their smartphone [Blast Theory. 2014].

Larp space as illusion

As discussed in the chapter Layers of reality larp is always socially separated from reality. No matter how close the fiction resembles our own world it will always be an illusion. A subject often dividing the opinion and taste of larvers – and also what is usually the only thing discussed about larp scenography – is the relationship between realism and representational symbolism. What many larvers hold as a desirable ideal is the so called 360°-illusion, a term used to describe total realism in larp where the world of the fiction is represented exactly by the physical reality. However this is rarely achieved and in some larps direct representation is partially or completely replaced by symbols.
Reflection on larp space

Space is a complicated thing. As a former student of physics and mathematics I could describe it as the three dimensional expanse in which everything else exists. However as humans we experience space in an empirical and emotional way, and through our social existence we define space and give it meaning. In play, games, rituals, and performances the way we relate to space changes because of the special rules and social agreements of the situation. In this chapter I try to sum up the ideas presented in previous chapters and suggest a model for how they could be connected, and also to relate the ideas with theatre.

The elements of larp space

Based on what we have discussed so far, one needs to consider the following when studying larp: a) The physical space; b) how one subjectively relates to space; c) how we socially relate to space; d) how the larp changes our relationship to the space. Furthermore it becomes necessary to acknowledge the difference between the fictional and metafictional elements of the larp since the space exists both to support the fiction and the surrounding game. The general goal when studying larp space would be to see how it affects the emergent game play and fiction.

A general understanding of performance space in larp is made difficult by the big variations in form within this field of art. In my work I tried to consider many different forms of larp, and in an effort to locate the core of the issue, I have among other things contemplated: physical size; physical configuration of spaces; interiors versus exteriors; symbolism contra realism; realism contra minimalism; importance of space; abstractness of space; whether it is artificially constructed or not; atmospheric importance; interaction between players and environment; the effect of spaces on interaction between players; site-specificity of larp space; etc.

In some theatre performances we also struggle with symbols and representations. In order to make symbolical elements in a performance understandable they have to be explicitly or implicitly explained to the audience. If this is desired or necessary it can easily be done in theatre by creating the performance in such a way that the audience understands everything as the performance goes along. In larp, on the other hand, the instructions have to be clear from the beginning because there is nothing within the larp that would explain the symbols for you.

It is impossible for two people to share the exact same illusion, and in some cases disagreement over symbols in a larp can lead to the illusion breaking down. On the other hand, people have different degree of sensitivity for such distractions; what destroys the illusion for one participant can be shrugged off by another. When designing larp you have to be conscious of the level of symbolism and what problems they might create. The following personal anecdote from Monitor Celestra describes such an incident where disagreement over symbols created some puzzlement:

*My character and another member of the clan were about to move some chandeliers in order to set up an altar in the cargo bay of the space ship Celestra. Due to fire regulations in the real world we could not have burning candles onboard which made me assume that the electrical candles in the chandeliers were representations of real candles. Imagine my shock when I see my clan mate take the burning candles with her bare hands and put them into her pocket.*

Another problem, that relate to illusion, is when a larp lacks visual coherence. This is often a result of participants creating and bringing to the game their own costumes and props which can vastly differ in style and quality. Usually this issue can be overlooked but once again it requires us to engage our suspension of disbelief and create the illusion that all costumes and props fit the fiction perfectly, or to think that the clothes and props are representations of the actual objects.

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In the end I found that I could isolate three central aspects of space that are ever-present in all larps but manifests in different ways depending on the form of the larp. My concluding statement is: larp space is an interactive environment, a stage producing drama, and an illusion. In addition to this I also found that creating scenography for larp means working through all the layers as shown in the diagram on page 21; you manipulate the physical and social realities in order to create the game and the fiction.
I feel quite comfortable with the suggested three-way model since I believe that it covers most of the relevant issues. The interactive environment contains everything that has to do with the individual players’, and characters’, subjective relationship to the physical space. I.e. how is the player/character affected by the environment, and how do they affect it? The relationship with the environment, and what level and mode of interaction used, is determined by both the game and the fiction.

The stage producing drama covers all aspects of space that affect the interaction between players or characters, and subsequently how this affects the game play and the emerging story. Among other things, we find that physical size and arrangement of spaces, what purpose and function they have, and what atmosphere they present affect how the players/characters exist in, and move between, them. This in turn produces action and drama.

The illusion part encompasses the relationship between the physical reality and the illusion of the fiction. Is the fiction approached by props; costumes; and set-design; by rules of symbolical representation; or a combination of these? Are we even trying to represent the fiction or are we only displaying the most essential elements?

However, none of these aspects are hermetically separated from each other but rather blend and influence each other. The illusion contains both social and individual aspects, the stage is connected to the environment, and the environment also connects to the illusion. Thus, there is much that could be done to develop and elaborate this model further.

Throughout the process I have felt a desire to collect my thoughts into a graphical model, as you can see from the excerpt sketches on pages 22-23. In a way I think that trying to describe something as complex as performance space with a two dimensional diagram is futile, but I would not be true to my efforts if I did not finish what I set of to do. Therefore I present to you The Elements of Larp Space, a graphic model of the ideas presented in this text.
Theatre and larp are different art forms because you attend with different intent. Still it might be rewarding to explore the boundaries between these two and see what kind of performances that would grow out from combining these two. Some successful experiments have been made, for example the *Walkabout* (2008) project by the Helsinki artists Johanna MacDonald and Aarni Korpela [MacDonald, 2012; Korpela, 2012]. By creating more interactive, participatory, and immersive performances we open up possibilities for new experiences for the participants, and a way to activate an ever more passive generation of art consumers. When creating environments for these performances we can look towards larp to learn from it.

**Relevance to Theatre**

Though theatre and larp are fundamentally different when it comes to the spectator-actor relationship, there are still many similarities to be found when discussing space. The model presented in the previous chapter can easily be adjusted to accommodate the theatre. We have the physical reality, i.e. the stage and the elements put there; the normal social reality; the magic circle enclosing the theatrical performance; and finally the performance itself. Also here we can find a distinction between the performance, or why not metafiction, and the fiction of the play that it contains. In both theatre and larp the scenographer works through all these layers. Perhaps an increased awareness of these layers can be used to develop better theatre performances as well? When you are aware of the borders you also have the possibility of breaking, bending, or playing with them.

Looking at the three-way model we find that the atmosphere and illusion aspects are present also within theatre. The atmosphere is ever-present and affects the audience and the performers directly, and also influence to some degree how they behave in the space. In theatre we also deal with illusion, but instead of trying to create a world in which all participants share an illusion, the theatre performance is presented to the audience and each audience member creates their own interpretation and experience.

The remaining aspects of interaction and stage are bound to the improvisational and participatory nature of larp and are not present in the same way within theatre, which relies on rehearsal. However, these aspects become relevant when considering interactive and participatory performances, and why not also improvisational theatre. When spectators and performers move and interact freely with and within the space, it becomes necessary to establish rules for the interaction, which might also include establishing an understanding of symbolism in the performance. One also has to consider what motivates the participants to move in and interact with the space; whether or not they portray characters; and if this affects their relationship to the space and each other. Earlier I mentioned immersive theatre as a performance form that to some degree reminds us of larp, and here in particular are many constructive parallels to be drawn.
I am glad that I decided to write on this subject. Though it has been a struggle I feel that I have been granted a greater insight into play, larp, performance, space, scenography, and dramaturgy. Still I have a strong feeling that in order to do this subject justice I would have to read more literature about performance space in general, acquire a few more years of experience, and further develop my academic skills. There is however also a comfort in knowing that there is still so much to learn and study.

When I started working on this thesis I quickly found myself lost in a forest of strange terms and concepts without bringing the proper equipment with me in my backpack. I would follow a path in that forest believing it would lead me to great insight but time and time again I came to a dead end, and when I turned around I could not find my way back. In desperation I started cutting down the trees trying to force my arguments through but the trees would fall over me and hurt me. During my odyssey in this forest I stumbled upon some landmarks and little by little I started forming a map. The map is incomplete but I am confident that I sooner or later will find my way out.

Larp and performative games are growing in popularity and so is the academic field surrounding them, but still they seem to be ignored by most of the artistic community. It is not only sad because the artistic community loses opportunity to learn from larp, but also because it runs the risk of reinventing the wheel that larpers have been spinning for a long time, one example being the previously mentioned immersive theatre. Therefore I hope that writing this text will contribute to the awareness and acceptance of larp, at least in my closest circles of peers.

Personally I have a strong feeling that I would like to continue to investigate larp space, or spaces in interactive and immersive performances, and to do actual artistic work inspired by larp. Sooner or later I will need a subject for a master’s thesis, and though I do not yet have any concrete ideas I play with the thought of creating a larp-like performance that will be run several times in different kind of environments. By doing this I could for example study how different degree of symbolism, atmosphere, and complexity of space affect the emergence of drama, and perhaps find more support for my theories. It seems to me that it would be efficient to use larp, in contrast to a theatre production, as a research tool when investigating space since you do not have to recreate the performance all over again through rehearsal. The essential things of a larp design are not dependent on the particular participants in the same way as theatre is dependent on the particular performers.

In addition to the above there are many other things to be studied related to the scenography of larp. How, for example, do the costumes affect the interaction between the players? What are the consequences of participants creating and bringing their own costumes and props into the game? How do discrepancies in the illusion affect the experience? How can the metafiction be the primary performance medium? What is subjective dramaturgy really? What is the relationship between larp and immersive theatre? Is larp site-specific performance? Et cetera.
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LECTURES & PRESENTATIONS

INTERNET REFERENCES


PHOTOGRAPHS

This list only contains those photographs obtained from the internet. Other photographs in this work are obtained directly from the photographers or from the picture archive of Finlands Svenska Rollespelforening Eloria (http://www.eloria.fi/galleri/).


OTHER REFERENCES


LUDOGRAPHY

The ludography – list of games – is made according to the form used by M. Montola in his dissertation “On the Edge of the Magic Circle”. Years are set according to when the first version of the larp was created, not considering that some games have been played and modified several times. Most of these larps can be accessed through: http://www.eloria.fi/lajv/
