

HOW TO MAKE ONLINE LARPING GOOD

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Suggestions From

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About This Document

We asked friends with a lot of experience designing and running online larps to give us their insight. We wanted to know what questions to ask, and also what their answers would be in their own words. What follows are lessons learned, both general and specific, summarized just for you. Some of this might be really valuable and some of it might not fit your own design sensibility - take what's useful and leave the rest.

What We Asked

- Knowing that smaller is often better, how many players is your game for? Can it accommodate a range? Why are the characters separated from each other in the fictional world?
- How are you providing extra structure and guidance that might not be necessary face to face? How are you organizing and structuring conversation and decision-making? If you have more than four players, how will you divide them into smaller groups? How will you handle meta- and sub-rosa communication between participants, or between facilitator and players?
- Is your game short enough not to need breaks? If not, can they be taken in a natural way at any time, or are they built in at intervals?
- How will you handle no-shows and sudden player drops, both temporary and permanent? How are you building in an allowance for general awkwardness?
- How are you using the medium beyond emulating face to face play? Is your game accessible? Is your game technology agnostic? Will it degrade gracefully for a low bandwidth participant (for example, can you play audio-only in a game where others use video)? Are you using adjuncts like note-taking applications or dedicated chat channels?
- How will you build interest and engagement in advance of the experience? Does your game create artifacts or memories to share after the experience?

Categories of Answers We Received

- Take advantage of the medium.
- Build the game around a reason that the characters are separated from one another.
- Provide more structure than you think you need.
- Focus on discussion and decision-making.
- Make your game short, or pace it to include frequent breaks, or make it easy to take breaks organically.
- Control the size of groups, either by making the larp very small or by separating 2-4 person groups into cohorts/channels.
- Find built-in, diegetic ways to adapt to player no shows and sudden drops.
- One on One games can be amazing. A large player count isn't always beneficial.
- Be prepared for awkwardness, and consider facilitation.
- Consider channels for meta- and sub rosa communication.
- Be tech agnostic or choose easy to use tools that support format and requirements.
- Consider accessibility, which means new and different things.
- Think about how to build interest and communicate excitement in advance of play.

The Answers We Received, With Specific Comments

Take advantage of the medium. There's no need to recreate physical formats. Push the boundaries.

- My biggest tip is to not make it feel like an in-person game or veering more towards forum RP. Allow yourself to get weird with the medium and the space. This Discord Has Ghosts In It does a great job with this in the rules, f'rex.
- Use a unique feature from the online environment you are in to the fullest extent. Players love exploring the consequences (in communication means for example) of new tools and techniques.
- The beauty of character keepers: Doing character creation in a Google Sheet, being able to watch others fill in their character details (get inspiration, get assurance about your own choices...); in-game then being able to look up details of the background of other characters and their relationships etc.
- Go multisensory / alter sensory input: food, altered lighting, background music / soundtrack, have people do crafts in their spaces, etc.
- Push the medium. Find out things that can be done with the medium that the medium wasn't designed for.

Provide more structure than you think you need.

- Have a lot of structure, especially at the beginning.
- Have strong character ties, way more pointed than they'd need to be at an in-person larp.
- The unintuitiveness of digital conversations also makes it harder to make smalltalk on video calls, and it can lead to awkward silences where players struggle to know what to talk about unless the pre-written characters include detailed motivations and conflicts that will drive play on their own, or play is very tightly directed. Providing new in-fiction stimuli to react to can help direct conversations, so if the larp has plot secrets it might be worth revealing the first ones earlier than you might at an in-person larp, as well as giving suggestions on how the players could react to engage with those secrets further.
- Very clear objectives and relationship goals seem to work very well. But also giving people flexibility to interpret those goals as they need to is just as important.
- Having a speaking order built into the game itself, either in-game or mechanically helps a lot.

Control the size of groups, either by making the larp very small or by separating 2-4 person groups into cohorts/channels.

- Groups of two to a maximum of four can talk without too much hassle.
- Greater numbers require a moderator or facilitator, either in-game, taking a GM role or both - for example, a therapy session, a tutorial, a test of AIs run by a professor, a military hierarchy, a GM who says "now X and Y do a scene."
- In games where this doesn't exist, I found that if someone took the facilitator role it worked a lot better. Cross-conversation and arguments in large groups really don't work online.
- One-on-one conversations are great and intense, and games which mix up one-on-one private sessions and then facilitate group discussions about those sessions work really well. This can be serial (one-on-one with others silent) or paired-up in parallel with a discussion afterwards.
- Similarly, for larger groups: have a built-in mechanism to redistribute players into breakout rooms. Group dynamics are just great when re-shuffled consciously frequently.
- Our format evolved over time into four groups of five characters with reasons to interact with each other, roughly divided into two groups of ten similar characters. This allowed people to very quickly and very instinctively find their bearings and navigate the online environment easily. In this the characters "move" between the rooms. We found this was more popular than the earlier varied group sizes or three groups of seven.
- Our game generally works at its best when it happens to fall into discrete groups of 3-5 moving between the play areas.

Find built-in, diegetic ways to adapt to player no shows and sudden drops.

- Looting! We have a policy that if a character that your character is connected to is not in attendance at the larp, you and everyone connected to that character should open the character sheet and loot it for all of the content and plot you need. This seems to fix the "dropped connections" problem that relationship style larps often face but may not work for all larp formats.

One on One games can be amazing. A large player count isn't always beneficial.

- A notable exception, for me, is that 1:1 interactions, where you can just focus on one person's face, creates for me a sense of immediacy and presence that is significantly more than having more than one other person. I think it has something to do with that split screen on a human brain? Thus, the advice of "control the size of groups", as mentioned before, can take advantage of this. I played a game set in a tight space station, like a 5 or 6 player game and using Discord channels as rooms (which transition smoother than Zoom rooms) that usually it was pairs of people talking.
- Don't write off 1:1 larps/games. The 1:1 online larps I've played account for the majority of intense online larp play I've had. I feel like ... most players tend to assume Bigger is Better.

Focus on discussion and decision-making.

- Play that focuses on discussion is my #1 thing for online larps to provide a satisfying experience.
- Not all larp play focuses on discussion, nor should it. But for online larps, the medium flourishes
- And a largely discussion-based larp experience will be improved by having either of a deadline
- and/or a decision to be made.

Build the game around a reason that the characters are separated from one another.

- Design the game such that your players have an in-game reason to be in separate spaces and communicating through a network has worked really well.
- Have had characters who are physically separated like the players are, and have put genuine design thought and testing into how to use the tools available.

Make your game short, or pace it to include frequent breaks, or make it easy to take breaks organically.

- Have either short play sessions with lots of breaks, or make it easy to elegantly take a break when you need without missing anything.
- Have silly dumb fun with short run times.

Be prepared for awkwardness, and consider facilitation.

- Once play begins, no matter how elegant your design, interactions between players are going to be less natural. This is especially true at the beginning of the larp, so your opening act might benefit from having facilitators play a much more active role than usual in mediating communication between characters. The "just put a bunch of larpers in a room together and tell them to larp" strategy of larp design doesn't work online yet, although maybe it will once the player community has more experience with the format. Having NPCs leading early discussions and inviting people to speak can help a lot in video and voice larps, and giving an idea of what interactions should happen where is great for text larps.

Consider channels for meta- and sub rosa communication.

- Collaboration through shared notes: do scene planning as a side task while others are in a scene together makes online play fast and more collaborative. The Long Time Listener Google Sheet play aid has this nicely built in.
- The ability to PM people is overpowered in digital games versus meat-space games. That doesn't mean it shouldn't be used, but it's much more powerful and needs to be adjusted accordingly
- Use a collaborative online document (like Google Sheets) for character creation, in-session notes (not just a side chat).
- For communication: Have a built-in speaking order, address people directly, start the sentence with the name of the person you want to address "Gerrit, I want to ask you..." (all that helps people to unmute in time, feel more comfortable speaking up etc.
- Be tech agnostic or choose easy to use tools that support format and requirements.
- I think that technically they are both technology agnostic as long as you have the ability to hold video calls in separate locations you can move between. We choose to use Discord for ease of administration but I think that not needing to learn new tricks to play is a contribution to its success.
- Consider your tech setup to match that format carefully. There are many categories where you might find pros and cons, such as available functionality, ease of use, processor or bandwidth requirements, player familiarity, etc. And as widespread homeworking continues, the features each platform offers are changing regularly, so you might want to check back as your design develops.

Consider accessibility, which means new and different things.

- Accessibility should play into platform choice as well, and it's worth keeping in mind that running your larp online isn't a silver bullet for including people who struggle to access in-person larps. It can be great for those who find travel or the energy investment of physical larp challenging, but it has different demands on communication styles, attention spans, and physical access that can absolutely exclude others. Check your technology, make conscious design decisions, and continue asking the people you want to include in your larp how you can accommodate their needs.

Think about how to build interest and communicate excitement in advance of play.

- One aspect that can be easy to overlook amongst the practicalities of setup is thinking about what you can do to help players look forward to your larp as an exciting event. A lot of digital larps this year have been produced on short timelines and it's great to get to play not long after signing up, but limited information until shortly before the larp and an absence of hype and communal anticipation can make the already unfamiliar prospect of an online larp feel alienating to some players and cause anxiety or a high rate of dropouts.