

A Little Guide to LARP

Noob



Your First Few Games

1. Act, Don't React

Live Action Role Playing (LARP) is a form of community based entertainment where a group of players takes on roles in a shared world. This entertainment comes from engaging in stories, fulfilling goals, performing quests, and interacting with other people (whether talking, fighting or otherwise).

Overseeing these players are GMs (specific games might call them narrators or some other title), it's their responsibility to make sure the game runs smoothly. GMs might also provide quests or reveal prompts and clues that lead to new twists in the story, but there are typically only a few GMs and there are many players. As a player, if you spend your time waiting for a GM to tell you what to do, you'll probably waste your time waiting around before the GM gets to you, then waste other player's time while the GM is dealing with you.

Use common sense where you can, do things for yourself, make your own stories while events unfold around you...when things start happening, get involved.

2. Play Fair

Remember at all times that everyone in the LARP is present to have a good time. They may have paid money to be involved in the event, and they may have paid even more for any costuming or other accessories they have. Everyone has an expectation that things could go well in the game's unfolding story, or could go badly for them. But regardless of how things go, they expect everyone to play by the rules.

Once the game is over, everyone should walk away as friends knowing that the events of play unfolded due to story circumstances or character choices (that way they can return to the next game and plot revenge). No one should ever walk away from a game feeling that other players cheated during the course of play. This can lead to players leaving the game altogether, and can even lead to entire games collapsing when arguments break out between multiple players.

3. Remember That It's Only a Game

Sometimes things go wrong, sometimes you need to take a deep breath and a step away from any bad situations to gain a moment of perspective.

If you feel that someone has cheated in some way, let one of the GMs know when you get the chance (don't interrupt them if they're in the middle of something, but make sure the event is still fresh in your mind when you do let them know).

In LARP events where politics and alliances play a role you may end a session feeling betrayed by someone. In LARP events with combat, your character might even be killed. If this happens, remember to keep the story events and the real world separated. After the session, have a talk to the player of the character who "did you wrong" during play, especially if the scene was particularly tense or dramatic. Discuss the scene from a bigger perspective... Was it a good story? Did it entertain people? What was enjoyable about it? What didn't you like? You don't need to congratulate someone for causing you issues in game, or even walk away as good friends, but at least walk away from it without bad intentions toward one another.

4. Learn the Rules

Every LARP system has its own rules. The GMs should know these rules, and in most cases they should be relatively close at hand when things get too tense, but they shouldn't have to handle every single issue that might arise during the session.

A new player attending their first session isn't expected to know all of the game's rules before they start playing, but after a session or two they should have grasped the basics, and any specific rules that might commonly come into play with their character (someone playing a fighting character should generally understand the combat rules, someone using spells should generally know rules for their magic, etc.).

Given that point 2 is "Play Fair", you can generally assume that other players will know the rules for their characters and will use them correctly, but after a few more games you might want to learn the common rules that other players use to their advantage.

Don't try to learn everything about the game rules, especially if it's a complicated rule set. But try to learn enough to keep things running smoothly in most situations.

5. Learn the World

Just like the different rule systems, most LARP campaigns and events have their own settings. They may have unusual races, new interpretations of traditional fantasy races like elves and dwarves, they may have well known places, famous historical events, religions, customs, or any number of other details. Sometimes these setting elements are written down, sometimes they are known to the GMs and key players to be revealed during a game event, sometimes they are developed on the fly by players and characters as the story develops.

Consider how much you know about the real world. Most people don't have a comprehensive knowledge of cultures or events beyond their immediate lives. When getting into a game, don't expect to learn everything about the world before you play, or even before the end of the first session. But if the game has races (or factions), get to know who is in charge of your group, who else is important in your group, and what places or events are significant to them. Then learn a bit about the other groups you commonly associate with (as enemies or allies).

6. Set Yourself Goals

In most LARP systems, you won't start with the heroic character you first envision. This gives players something to work towards, and a motivation to keep coming back to events. Hopefully it shouldn't take too many games before you settle into a role that's close to what you had in mind. Don't worry if your original ideas change into something else by the time a couple of game sessions have elapsed, such is life. LARP is about telling stories...stories are journeys, and journeys have steps...each step is a goal and a goal you set for yourself is often more satisfying when it's achieved.

Or you could look at it another way, think about what you want your character to be known for, then start doing those things.

In a LARP event, there will always be things happening, but it isn't the responsibility of other players to keep you entertained, and there's only so much that GMs can do. Many of the players around you will have set their own goals for their characters, and they may sweep you up in them, but if you want to develop a reputation for yourself, you'll need to start setting goals of your own. Discuss these goals with the GMs and organisers, they might be able to work them into larger stories.

7. Engage in the Stories Around You

Some might describe LARP events as somewhere between tabletop play and a MMORPG. There are typically dozens of players, some with conflicting agendas, some needing allies, most with enemies.

As soon as a character chooses a side, they will make friends and enemies, they'll instantly become a part of the wider narrative. But a character who doesn't choose sides, has a harder time because they have to work alone and have to make more entertainment for themselves.

LARP is an inherently social event. If you aren't going to socialise and engage with other players and their characters, you aren't getting the most out of the event.

Stories have typically been devised by other players, the GMs, and the Organisers. They'll typically appreciate it when you help them out (or engage their story by adding a bit of conflict to it). If you engage in the stories and goals offered by others, there's a better chance that they'll engage in yours when you need the help.

A Little Guide to SARP

Veteran



Taking the Next Step

1. Develop a Character

The first time you attend a LARP event, you typically aren't expected to wear a costume, have your own props, or even know what's going on. After a couple of visits though, it's good etiquette to get into the spirit of things.

Costumes for medieval/fantasy larps can be easy to make, often a sheet cut to size and a belt can be worn in a variety of ways (as a toga, a tabard, a cloak). Or you can always visit a local party supplies store or discount shop. If your LARP uses weapons, these might be a bit trickier or more costly.

Just as important as costume are the mannerisms you adopt for your character, any accents you may use, or common phrases used by the character.

Develop a background for the character, use your existing knowledge of the game setting and anchor certain elements of your characters background into them. You don't need your character to have been everywhere, or been a part of every historical event (in fact it's better if you don't do this). Choose a few key times and places, think about them, work them into conversation during the game. Don't just watch the world, be a part of it.

2. Short Term and Long Term

The Noob Guide said that it is good to develop goals for yourself, by the time you've played a couple of games you have probably accomplished one or two of these and your character should be more comfortable for you. So now it's time to start thinking about new goals and long term agendas. Have a good balance of things to aspire toward (no more than 3 or four in total, because otherwise you'll inevitably forget some).

Short term goals are things you can accomplish in a game session or two. Perhaps aim to organise trading agreements with someone, avenge your honour against a roughly equal foe, recruit a key person to your faction, build something, it all depends what your game is about, and what you see as your character's role in it.

Long term agendas are things that might take half a dozen sessions or longer. Aim to take control of a faction, create and recruit an entirely new faction, lay the seeds of destruction for another character (so you don't get implicated in it)...these are the plans that will typically require the support of other players, they will lead to climaxes that other players talk about (when they get revealed), and they may shift the landscape of play for a long time to come. Just remember that they don't always succeed.

3. Help Bring the World to Life

Do you have a special skill in real life that might be translatable into the game? How can you use this skill to make things more fun for the other participants?

If you're an artist, you might draw maps or character portraits for people. If you can sew, you might be able to help people with their costuming. If you can fight well, you might be able to share your combat skills with new (or less capable) players. If you're a writer, you might be able to chronicle the history of the setting. Even if you're just energetic and enthusiastic, you can help set things up or carry equipment to let the organisers and GMs focus on their part of getting the event ready. If you're charismatic but don't have ideas of your own, be the first follower of any good ideas proposed by others, use those ideas to promote the idea's originator and inspire the rest of the community.

Everyone involved in this hobby comes to it from their own backgrounds, with their own resources and their own expectations. It's a shared community of imagination and everyone deserves the chance to contribute to it.

4. Assist the GMs

In most LARPs, there are few GMs and many players. After a couple of games, you might know the rules as well as the GMs, you might have a group of friends within the setting or even factional followers. You don't need to take a position of leadership within the game (not everyone can be the head of their own faction), do something that you are comfortable with. Become the scribe for your faction (chronicling their deeds), the keeper of rituals (whether mystic or religious), the banker (monitoring money or even favours traded), flagbearer (who inspires morale), or come up with some other role where the other players can come to you for assistance without needing to bother the GMs.

At the end of a session, write a report of the activities you oversaw, make a note of who did what and the ramifications of those actions (or expected ramifications if they haven't happened yet).

GMs and organisers can't be everywhere, they can't see everything, but players often expect them to know these things.

5. Engage New Players

After a few events, remember back to what it was like when you attended your first session. Were the players friendly? Did their actions make sense? Did you feel included in their activities?

Consider what you liked about the greeting you received, and the good advice you were given. Emulate those actions with new players and give the same good advice. If someone is having trouble creating a character, or can't decide the best path to take for the concept they've got in mind, give them examples of what you've seen so far in the game, or introduce them to someone who might be able to clarify matter for them.

Consider also what you didn't like about your introduction to the LARP events, then think about what it was that kept you coming back. Try to make sure you don't repeat any negative patterns with new players, and if you think they are feeling the same way you felt in the first few sessions, encourage them, and use stories about the game to tell them about how much better it gets.

6. Working Together

In a tabletop roleplaying game, a small group of players often works together to accomplish something, but they may also engage in infighting and betrayal. The majority of activity comes from the players and their characters, everyone else met along the way (known as NPCs) are potential allies, enemies, or exist in a grey area with their own agendas; they are often simply bit characters and occasionally recurring roles.

In a LARP, there are far more players, and typically far fewer NPCs. Most the characters met during a LARP will be played as the protagonists in their own stories, the recurring roles in some stories, and the bit parts in other stories. Some LARP events might be so large that certain characters never significantly come into contact with one another.

To make an impact on the overall storyline of a LARP, it helps to join up with a team or faction. This helps GMs organise stories around manageable chunks of the player base, and it helps players achieve goals by spreading the load among multiple characters (each with their own specialised skills).

7. The Power of NPCs

While NPCs aren't as common in LARP as they are in tabletop roleplaying, they can still make an appearance or play a significant role in a story.

GMs and organisers may take on the role of NPCs to help guide an event's storyline in a specific direction, or maybe provide skills and knowledge necessary to open up certain quests to the players. In some cases, they may offer the opportunity to play NPCs to those players who have shown they are good at a certain style of play, or who possess real world skills that match the NPC's persona. A warrior NPC might be offered to one of the better fighters among the group, a sneaky ninja to someone who is naturally acrobatic, a diplomat to someone with a good speaking voice, a flamboyant wizard to someone with the flair for the dramatic.

Often the organisers will offer some kind of reward to the player who is willing to take on their roles for a session (maybe reduced event fees, or bonus XP/Gold that may be applied to any of the player's regular characters). If the chance to play an NPC is offered, there will usually be some kind of significant story event for the character during the session. Use the opportunity to play something different, take risks without jeopardising your regular character(s).

A Little Guide to LARP

Avatar



Transitioning from Player to GM

1. Be Confident

I'll be straight up here, if you have decided to take the next step, and have offered your services as a GM, be ready to face the darker side of some players.

Some players unable to resolve issues for themselves will expect you to have the answers for them, other players will expect that they have paid their money for an event and now it is your duty to entertain them. Some players will deviate from your carefully planned storylines and will introduce their own elements of chaos into the LARP session.

Accept these events, take them with a grain of salt, don't let them get to you. Without GMs, a LARP event has a nasty tendency to degenerate into a bunch of like-minded people engaging in anecdotes about previous events, pop-culture references, or other hobbies.

As a GM it's not your job to entertain people, it's your job to facilitate the shared imaginary realm, the entertainment comes from players interacting with one another through their characters. A good GM focuses the group, keeps them "in the zone", offers new ideas when the activity starts to stagnate, and doesn't take shit from players who are trying to bully their way through a situation that's meant to be fun for everyone.

2. Be Consistent

All LARPs have written and unwritten rules (we'll get to the written rules later). The unwritten rules are referred to in some circles as a "social contract", these are the expectations of play and the things a typical player can justifiably expect from participating in a session. Such things might include:

- The chance to improve your character.
- The opportunity to tell a communal story with your character in the setting.
- Coherent and logical rules.
- The chance to state your case when things go wrong.
- Fair judgements from impartial GMs.

It may seem common sense stuff, but many LARPs have crumbled when one or more of these expectations is not handled in a balanced and consistent manner.

If players see that GMs aren't handling things fairly and consistently, they often see no reason to continue playing fairly themselves. As long as people are playing within the spirit of the rules, don't punish the actions of their characters (unless in-game means justify such a punishment). As soon as players breach the rules of the game, pull them into line quickly.

3. Understand Ramifications

Ramifications can be bad.

Sometimes as a GM, you will need to punish someone. This may occur within the game as a punishment for a character acting against the laws of the setting, or it may occur out of game as a punishment for a player caught cheating. Make sure you know the difference between these, and make sure the player concerned is aware of why they are being punished.

They can also be good.

As a GM it's also your responsibility to make sure rewards are offered fairly when people complete goals, fulfil quests, or perform necessary tasks for NPCs. If your game uses experience points, make sure these are handed out appropriately, and any expenditures are correctly applied to improve the characters concerned.

On a wider level, learn the dominant quests and goals that are unfolding in the game. Try to keep track of how close these goals are to completion and what obstacles continue to stand in the way of the characters concerned. Finally, be aware of how the game might shift (for the better or worse) once these objectives have been reached.

4. Know the Rules

A new player is expected to learn the basic rules. On top of these, an experienced player is expected to learn a variety of rules concerning their regular activities. The players typically expect a GM to know all of the rules, without needing to resort to fumbling through a rule book.

Sometimes this just isn't possible. There are rule sets that are intricate and rely on the interaction of various sub-rules in such arcane ways that very few people could understand the full complexity of them. In this case, it's probably recommended that each GM tries to get a good grasp of the common rules, then have specialist GMs dedicated to specific categories of rule knowledge.

If you don't do something like this, it is almost guaranteed that the game will automatically streamline itself. Some rules will be forgotten, others will be removed because they don't make sense without the forgotten rules, and eventually the game being played will not match the rule set as written. This in turn will frustrate players who've written characters to take advantage of certain rules (refer to sections 1, 2, and 3 to see how to deal with what happens next).

5. Know the World

Most players come into a LARP to explore a fantastic world of escapism. They don't know everything about the world but they expect to find people who do know enough about the setting to immerse themselves.

Like the rules, sometimes a game setting will be simple and it is easy for players to understand it (it might even be based on a variant of the real world, and thus players/GMs can use their general knowledge to fill in the blanks). Sometimes the settings will be so baroque and complicated that a dozen trained scholars could spend their lives analysing the complexity and still will not be able to piece together the full picture.

Discuss this with the other GMs (since this is a LARP, we assume there are multiple GMs), assign an area of lore to each of them. One might specialise in the history, while another handles the magical lore, another for religion, and another for the current heraldry and court rankings. Otherwise, the community of GMs might divide up the setting knowledge by races, or geographical regions of the setting.

Keep the knowledge consistent, have it written down somewhere for players to access if they have appropriately knowledgeable characters.

6. On NPCs and Playing while GMing

If you're going to play, play.

If you're going to GM, GM.

Keep these separate.

If a GM is playing their character in game, and they get into a conflict with another character, there may come a time when a GM's advice/adjudication is necessary. Since the GM present is involved in the conflict, their words might not be considered impartial and a second GM may need to be called in. This pulls resources from the rest of the game, and can be very annoying for the players. It's not being consistent, it's safer to not play a character at all (especially not one of your PCs).

Occasionally, the need might arise to introduce an NPC into the game to keep things moving. Where possible try to get one of the players to take on this role, even if they only do so for a short period of time. In a worst-case scenario, take on the role of the NPC, but make sure you costume appropriately so that people realise you are not in "GM-mode". Also, when you do take on an NPC, avoid deus-ex-machina...don't do things for the players, offer clues and facilitate their ability to do it for themselves. The players have come to be heroes of their own stories, not to watch NPCs get the glory.

7. The Big Picture, The Little Picture

The big battles, the dramatic stand-offs, the grand rituals...these are the things that people look forward to, and the events that people discuss well after the event. Big events like this involving a sizeable chunk of the players should be rare, no more than once every game or two. Making events like this more common diminishes their impact on the game.

Instead, pay attention to the small things. Personal vendettas, lost children, gathering resources, making allies...a variety of tasks. These are the mundane events that keep the game going between the dramatic moments of climax. These are the tasks that help define characters in the long run, and put those big events into context.

As a GM spend a bit of time with small groups of players, and if you've got the resources available make sure that GMs spend time with individual players to discuss their motivations, their goals and their agendas. This also means that you don't need to come up with all the ideas for the game by yourselves, and the players get more input into the direction of the impending storylines.

A Little Guide to LARP

Deity



Coordinating the Whole Show

1. Respect the Players

Once you've gotten to this level of things as an Organiser, there can be a tendency to focus on big picture elements of the game, and real world aspects such as group finances, venue hire, liability insurance, organizing as a non-profit (or profit driven) company, and other legal requirements. These are definitely important to the ongoing welfare of a legitimate LARP organization, but don't forget that without the players none of this would be possible.

If you're going down the professional route, the players will be paying for the events you run. You need them to keep coming back in order to keep your game alive, and the finances in the black. Try not to let the players leave a session unsatisfied, and if they do leave unsatisfied try to make sure it's not because of something that has been done by the GMs or the Organisers. If there has been an issue of conflict between the players, you can either call a discussion between those involved at the end of play, or wait 24 hours until the tension has passed and emotions have cooled. In an age of social media, it shouldn't be hard to keep in touch with everyone involved in a conflict situation, but try to discuss the resolution in person. Keep things civil, and try to get back to the fun as soon as possible.

2. Be Prepared to be Firm

The first step in resolving a conflict issue should be a calm discussion between the players involved. The next step should be the impartial adjudication by a GM. If a conflict issues reaches the Organiser, it should be because these two steps have failed to reach an agreement.

If you are running things professionally with a group constitution and bylaws, there are probably a series of protocols to go through when players have disputes and punishments for offences. These typically include suspensions from games, but could result in expulsion from the group. Hopefully things don't get that far, but always be prepared in case it does. If membership fees apply to players in the LARP, make sure everyone has access to the relevant constitution and bylaws.

Even if you aren't running things in a professional manner, make sure everyone knows what could happen if they breach the rules of the game, or get into heated arguments with other players (outside the context of the story and game). Once you've laid out these rules, make sure you stick to them in every case where they apply, or be very specific and open with everyone as to why a change of policy has occurred in a particular case.

3. Keep it Fun

As the Organiser, it isn't just your job to simply apply rules and punishments, nor to take care of all the dirty work behind the scenes. You're here to have fun as much as everybody else. Take on the role of a prominent NPC in the game (perhaps the king, a local bandit lord, a prominent CEO). Make it known that this role is reserved to the Organiser, and that if someone wants to take down the character in play, they are effectively volunteering for the role of Organiser (and all that entails) out of game.

Otherwise act as a coordinating GM, the fill-in person who keeps track of the wide scope activities in the game, and the person to back up any rule disputes where another GM might be unable to take care of the problem.

If you see someone looking bored, offer your assistance. Find out what is bothering them, and how you can help the situation. There might not always be an answer, sometimes people just need some alone time, or get overwhelmed by the action and drama unfolding around them. But it's better to be sure that this is the case, rather than allowing something darker to fester.

4. Don't Worry if Things go Awry

Some GMs carefully plot story structures months (if not years) in advance. They limit the choices of players so that their destined plot elements come into play regardless of the decisions of the players involved in the LARP. Think of computer games with specific cut scenes that are always present regardless of the actions you might take between them.

Occasionally, this might be interesting. More often, it's better to not plan too many things in advance; allow the decisions of the players to prompt new elements of the story. You might take this slowly, carefully working with one or more of the players over the course of many sessions to build up a dramatic story arc that will envelop the game.

But if a character dies during the build-up, or if a player is unable to make it to a session (or moves away and can no longer attend games), be prepared to follow another path to reach your goal, morph it into something new, or abandon it altogether for another plotline that involves a sizeable portion of your players.

Life rarely moves in straight lines, and neither should your LARP.

5. Get Ready to Ad-Sib

Things may change slowly, you may get notification that a player is unable to show up to an event; but more often, they change quickly. A player just doesn't show because of a scheduling conflict they forgot to mention, maybe there's a car accident, or an illness. It could be halfway through a game when a pivotal character in the storyline is killed by some freak conflict, or suffers from some curse that was prevents them from fulfilling their destiny.

This sort of stuff happens all the time. The easy way to avoid it is to not have a coherent and consistent storyline planned, let the players work out everything for themselves. But when this occurs, you find that most players just end up aimlessly drifting through the session.

Provide impetus and drive, point the characters in a certain direction and let them go. They might shoot straight toward your intended goal, they might curve around toward it, or they might take your drive and end up somewhere completely different. Don't stress out about the events occurring in game, as long as the players are having fun along the way.

6. Don't Micromanage

Give the players and GMs scope to do their thing. LARP is about immersion in the world, letting go of the mundane everyday, and using a set of game rules to tell stories. A style of LARP known as Australian Freeform doesn't even use rules as an intermediary between the imagined world of the story and the physical world outside it. In Australian Freeform, the GM simply helps adjudicate when players can't decide who would come out on top in a conflict or dispute, many players in this style of game consider it a failure if they have to get GMs involved at all during a session. GMs and rules just get in the way of their escapism.

Not all LARP can be that open though, and that style of play can be intimidating to players who like a bit more structure.

Get to know your players, get a feel for how they are reacting to the rules and storytelling techniques in effect. Guide the whole show with a light touch; a prompt here, a rule explanation there. The more you get involved, the more stressed you'll get, and the quicker you'll burn yourself out as a GM and Organiser.

7. Many Hands Make Light Work

Delegate.

Spread the knowledge load and the responsibilities of running the game among the GMs and the experienced players. Use these two groups as your most valuable resource in the game. Many of these individuals will be passionate about the game, but won't have the inclination to do the back-of-house paperwork and take care of the business side of things.

Organising a good LARP might be possible for a single person if there are only a half dozen players, but the common rule of thumb in Australian Freeform indicates a GM for every five players plus a coordinating GM/Organiser. You can probably drop the number of dedicated GMs if you've got experienced players who are willing to take on more of the load, but for over twenty-five years this has generally held up as a good ratio.

If you're having trouble getting players to help out, offer incentives to them; perhaps bonuses to their characters in game, access to exclusive character types (as mentioned in section 3), or reduced cost for attendance at special events.