

Immerton

A Society of Women

Maury Brown, Sarah Lynne Bowman, Quinn D, Kat Jones, & Orli Nativ

Abstract

Immerton is a 4-day larp written by women for women participants, taking place in a fictional society of women in a polytheistic goddess pantheon. Produced by Learn Larp, the game used a feminist sandbox design that emphasized rituals, relationships, collaborative roleplay, and transformational experiences using a meta room, mask play, and multimedia storytelling as core design principles. The inaugural run took place in October 2017 in Joshua Tree, CA. This post-mortem report looks at the spatial and temporal design and the experience of being in an all-women community.

Introduction

Immerton (Brown, Bowman, D, Jones, and Nativ 2017) is a four-day immersive larp held in Joshua Tree, California. The larp is designed to explore what it means to be a woman in a variety of contexts and intersectionalities, and to focus on woman's ways of knowing, doing, being, and relating. Participation in the event is restricted to those who identify as a woman. A broad definition of woman is used, and organizers and participants welcomed and celebrated all expressions of womanhood. Twenty-three women took part in *Immerton's* inaugural run in 2017.

Immerton is a place and a society entirely of women, existing outside of space and time yet with portals or connections to every world and point in time. Across history, women of all races and ethnicities, social classes, cultures, and

42 Shuffling the Deck

universes experience a breakthrough and find their way to Immerton. There are no men there, and women may stay as long as they like or need. Immerton is intended to be akin to Themyscira from the Wonder Woman franchise, but with a more multi-faceted approach to womanhood than a society of warriors is. The goal of Immerton was to create a sanctuary for women players without the concerns that many women experience in spaces that include all genders. A socially conditioned behavior for most women is to perform for the male gaze (Mulvey 1975); being in the presence of men changes women's behavior, as their concerns about their own safety and relative value move to front of their minds. *Immerton* is an experiment in feminist and woman-centered game design.

We were keenly aware of the issues surrounding the US run of the Nordic larp, *Mad About the Boy* (Edland, Raaum, Lindahl 2010), organized by Lizzie Stark in October 2012. The larp received a great deal of criticism for excluding men, and in particular for categorizing men chromosomally and the design element that annihilated all people with the Y chromosome. *Immerton* was deliberately designed with several key distinctions to *Mad About the Boy*.

First, the larp was not about being without men; it was instead about a complete society of women. This is important, because rather than being a larp about loss, about what is missing, it was a larp about the fullness of the society, of what was included: the multitude of women who chose to attend and whose characters were chosen to find Immerton. Second, we did not make a chromosomal distinction that defines men and women, thus being inclusive to women of any biological body and genetic typing. This separated gender from biological sex, and ensured we did not get into arguments (as had happened with *Mad About the Boy*) about the definition of woman and who could play. It also demonstrated a commitment to trans-inclusion and safe-space for genderqueer women. Giving people the opportunity to search themselves and determine if they fit an identity of woman was more liberating and accepting than an organizer-determined definition of woman. In addition, the all-woman design team included several feminist intersectionalities, which made it easier for women of many identities to feel included. Third, we openly declared that no man would be showing up in the game, which happens in *Mad About the Boy*. Men exist in characters' pasts and futures, but during the larp they were off-stage, appearing only in memories, backstories, or narration.

Design and Playstyle

The concept and initial design of *Immerton* was created by Maury Brown, and expanded and brought to life by an all-woman team of organizers and designers. The team included Sarah Lynne Bowman, Quinn D, and Kat Jones who were writers, designers, and runtime organizers. Orli Nativ acted as Art Director for the game, creating masks and costuming, inspiration art, collages, and scenography for the event, as well as assisting with ritual design and runtime GMing. Tara Clapper and Caille Jensen assisted with character writing and world building, and Jess Comstock designed a set of sigils that were used for the different vocations that defined character groups.

Immerton's design was sandbox-style, allowing participants to make choices about actions and topics to explore. Structuring this open design were scheduled rituals that took place each evening and in the final morning, representing the forces of four goddesses. The site – a remote retreat center in the high desert of southern California – was integral to the other-worldly feel for the game, and was replete with indoor and outdoor spaces for group and private play. Designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and his son, Lloyd, the building was made of natural desert sandstone, and players' rooms were adjacent to one another and surrounded by a central hall, where altars to the goddesses were assembled and players gathered for meals and other activities. The site also had a labyrinth, a warm and cool swimming pool, groves of cacti, joshua trees and other native plants, and several fountainscapes and water features. The event took place during the full moon, and bonfires were lit each night.

A design centerpiece was The Goddess Chamber, a converted bedroom suite adjacent to the large main gathering room. While not a true blackbox¹ chamber as it contained furniture, The Goddess Chamber was a meta room² where participants could spend time with other *Immerton* sisters and meet the goddesses. Players or organizers (who were also player-characters GMing from within the game) portrayed or “aspected”³ a particular goddess by donning her mask, and, at times, her robes. In the Goddess Chamber players could gegine and role-play a memory, dream, alternate choice, or future hope. They could call upon a goddess to guide, to encourage, support, chide, or convict, as needed. The design intentionally drew upon mask theory and altered

1. Black Box. Nordic Larp Wiki. https://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Black_Box

2. Meta Room. Nordic Larp Wiki. https://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Meta_Room

3. Aspecting. <https://moonlightmagick.wordpress.com/2012/01/07/a-is-for-pecting/>

44 Shuffling the Deck

consciousness as introduced by Keith Johnstone (1987) and advanced by Clayton D. Drinko (2013).



Devotees meet with the goddess of destruction, Ellishara, in the Goddess Chamber. Photo by Sarah Bowman.

Play focused on personal journeys, relationships, and exploration of womanhood in a polytheistic goddess pantheon. The game used no numerical rules or combat mechanics, but unfolded through role-play, rituals, art and other media, and meta-techniques. The fictional world and the player community emphasized self-care and a celebration of autonomy in a Culture of Care and Trust (Brown 2016). The intention was to make Immerton a sanctuary for women both in and out of character. The game allowed players to choose their own pace of play and level of engagement, reduce feelings of FOMO⁴ or Fear of Missing Out, and slow the frenzied feeling that many highly plot-driven larps can create. It was very possible to play a mostly internal game and have a transformative experience. That said, the larp had a central premise: Immerton had become tethered in space and time as a result of an anomaly, and players could determine the cause and whether or how it should be resolved. Some players identified with this plot element personally, with the idea of being

4. Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). (2017). Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fear_of_missing_out

“stuck” or unable to move forward resonating strongly with them. Participants’ collaborative solution involved returning a cast-out Trickster goddess to the pantheon and creating rituals to heal Immerton. Those elements, of being trapped and being cast away, combined with a reclamation of play and child-like qualities that are too-often left behind in adult womanhood, led to a lot of bleed and personal processing of emotions by participants (Jones 2017).

Characters and Bleed

The design team encouraged participants to portray characters that shared personality traits or portions of backstory with themselves. We deliberately wanted to make the alibi of character⁵ thin, so that participants could explore shadow or repressed aspects of their lives or selves in the safety of the community and role-play. In this way, the game was designed to deliberately chase bleed (Bowman 2015) that would be empowering and revelatory for participants. The character creation team, led by Quinn and consisting of Sarah, Kat, Tara, and Caille, asked participants to complete a casting questionnaire that sought to inspire careful reflection on one’s own past, fears, blockages, hopes, and desires. Each participant had a primary character writer who discussed the character questionnaire with the participant, and together they created the character for *Immerton*. For example, one player wanted to explore her anger stemming from several recent events in her life. She and her character writer created a lone survivor from a planet that had recently been annihilated, with no home to return to outside of Immerton. The character’s defining trait was rage at this personal and societal destruction, which allowed the player to explore the emotion without reliving details of her own trauma.

Each character was connected to three others, a Pillar to provide support, a Crowbar to push for change, and another character-specific relationship. The Pillar and Crowbar design element was inspired by the Hope and Despair connections in *The Quota* by Simon Brind, Charlotte Ashby, Helly Dabill, Martine Svanevik, and Rob Williams (2018).

Mythology and World-Building

Immerton exists in its own mythos, created by Maury Brown with the goddesses expanded by Sarah Lynne Bowman. This choice was made to avoid cultural and religious appropriation and to ensure the goddesses encompassed a multitude of bodies and identities. We were also seeking to move beyond the

5. Alibi. Nordic Larp Wiki. <https://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Alibi>

46 Shuffling the Deck

tropes of woman as defined by their physical beauty and body, and particularly by their reproductive cycles. Not all women have children, and not all women have wombs or vaginas. We chose to move away from the maiden, mother, crone archetypes and instead were inspired by Lasara Firefox Allen's book, *Jailbreaking the Goddess*. Women in Immerton may be in the Child/Daughter, Siren, Amma, or Sage stages, which are not about reproduction but about states of mind or wisdom. They are also non-linear, as one can channel or return to any stage at any time.



Items depicting or representing Innara, goddess of creation. Photo by Sarah Bowman.

The goddesses were created as a synthesis of many mythologies and share some traits of eastern, western, indigenous, and pagan cosmologies. The four goddesses are of four forces: creation, destruction, reclamation, and fortification, which are Innara, Elishara, Tohtma, and Rahdira respectively. They represent four ways of experiencing the world and forces to invoke when confronted with challenges and opportunities. Each goddess is associated with a season, direction, element, gems, scents, colors, shadow and light aspects, rituals, and tarot suits. Thus, these new goddesses became connected to and evocative of goddesses from other traditions. Elishara, for instance, has elements of Sekhmet, Kali, Durga, or Hel, but is her own entity. Every character has a primary Devotion, a particular goddess they are most drawn to, but they could also invoke or worship another goddess. One's primary Devotion may also change

throughout one's life, and some players used a devotional change as a narrative arc for their character.

Vocations were created in order to break up what is often “woman's work” and combine callings in interesting ways. Players could choose Warrior, Shaman, Seer, Mender, Tender, Keeper, or Vigilant as a primary vocation. These vocations categorized similar skills or impulses. For example, menders included welders, tailors, and healers, while Keepers include librarians, teachers, historians, or builders. Each Vocation was an impulse or a calling to leave a mark in a particular way, a diverse gathering of women who are driven by similar goals and ways of interacting in the world. The design goal was to break down stereotypes and tropes that can pigeonhole women and femininity by instead exploring a multitude of expressions and intersectionalities.

Multimedia Experiential Design

Immerton's design engaged participants in individual and group-based physical and artistic activities. These included art, mask-making, journaling, hiking, meditation, swimming, dancing, kata practice, and cooking. These were used both as parts of everyday life in *Immerton*, but also as ways to explore characters and their relationships through more than verbal role-play. The various activities were opt-in and typically framed as “offerings” that a devotee shared with other acolytes. Participants also tattooed each other with the sigil of their vocation, braided each other's hair, and traded massages as part of group bonding and reciprocal care.

Of course, larp has featured these activities since the beginning, but often they are ancillary or incidental activities rather than a central focus of the experience. For example, a tailor at a medieval larp might sew to heighten immersion. Such behavior isn't typically about making clothes, but about appearing to be a tailor. The story at *Immerton* was told not only through words and actions, but also through artifacts created by participants. Each participant made a mask that they used in at least one ceremony, and participants collectively wrote a scroll that documented their experience. Some participants also wrote poems or journal entries, drew, painted, or created food together. Other artifacts were ephemeral, such as food, ritually made and shared together. Fire and water were used as physical transmutational elements in multiple rituals.

One participant noted that the art and artifact elements of *Immerton*, “emphasized creative and nurturing elements as central to play,” while another

48 Shuffling the Deck

stated that they felt these design aspects “gave places for people to engage in valuable, alternative ways with themselves, each other, and their characters.” The boundary between player and character grew thin during these immersive activities (Bowman 2017), and occasionally off-game conversations between participants crept in. These were valuable to community building and were intense moments for some participants in their own right, but were off-putting for others who wanted stronger immersion into character (Bowman 2017; Lukka 2014). One player stated, “This game was not about simple character immersion – it was about creating spaces to reflect, be introspective, and to examine myself and my issues through the lens of my character. The multimedia aspects gave me different tools and experiences that very much enhanced the experience.”



An acolyte contributes to the scroll, rewriting Immerton history. Photo by Sarah Bowman.

Woman-Only Space

Being in an all-woman space was profound for participants and organizers alike. Although the game was not explicitly about gender identity, many of us live and adjust to a society that treats people whom they label as “men” and “women” differently, with different expectations and burdens. Participants noted that the space of *Immerton*, since it was specifically all woman-identified, relieved participants of those expectations, or at least made them less important

and influential. One participant said: “The space lightened a load I didn’t realize was so heavy; it was freeing, and it was safe. I think it is important to note that I know many wonderful people who are not women in life that I trust, that I feel free around; this isn’t about not-women being unsafe, it’s about the interplay between who is present, and the influence of society’s gender system on all of the participants. It’s about a pervasive system which has so much influence in our lives, and taking a time and a space to try to remove parts of it and see how that feels and develops. And it was powerfully different.”

Another participant said, “I usually play with wonderful men who are good at giving space to others and are sensitive to their privilege. But, there were conversations that I think just wouldn’t have happened in other spaces. Women were openly talking about their experiences with patriarchy, relationships, menopause, childrearing, trans issues, etc. in ways that I think were afforded by the female-only space. We could discuss these issues both in- and out-of-character and it felt like a supportive and understanding atmosphere, even when women had very different views on these things.” A third participant said, “having a community of women made the space feel much safer for some of the personal exploration that I did during the game,” including “the commonalities and differences in women’s experiences, opinions, etc.”

Participants ranged in age from 24 to 55 and showcased various expressions of womanhood and an appreciation for their beauty and diversity. They portrayed characters from across cultures and time periods, some of whom, such as Cleopatra and Emma Goldman, were women from history. One participant reflected, “There was freedom there to exist in whatever state you’re in, and a lot of support all around from fellow ‘sisters’ in a shockingly swift-developing community. It wasn’t an environment I can recall being in before, at least not for an extended duration, and I didn’t entirely recognize going in how powerful this would be.” Some participants discussed how their posture changed, how they stopped worrying as much about their personal appearance and body, how they felt they could go without a bra or other shapewear, how they felt they could sit and take up space in ways where they didn’t have to be conscious of whether they were conforming to “proper” or “ladylike” decorum.

The woman-only community was not without its conflicts. Women disagreed with each other in- and out-of-character, and personalities clashed over sharing space, language, tone, and actions. Since players participants played close-to-home (Piironen and Thurøe 2014), the alibi between player and character was sometimes very thin, and it was difficult to know whether a character or a player

50 Shuffling the Deck

was upset — or both. However, one participant noted, “while power dynamics and differentials were unavoidable, it did not have the same character as when men are involved (for instance I never worried that conflicts would result in violence). I was constantly impressed at how we were able to work through or around these conflicts in a way that helped preserve the community.” Some of this was done in-character, other times through group out-of-character calibrations, and other times through one-one in/off-game consultations with organizers.

Immerton began as, and continues to be, an experiment. We will run a 4-hour exploratory version at several conventions in 2018, using *The Goddess Chamber* as the central portion of the experience and include an initiation and a closing ritual. Since conventions disallow single-gender games, these runs will be open to all gender identities, as long as players are willing to respectfully engage with the material and with the expectation that they will portray a woman. We are committed to keeping the destination experience for women only, believing that the all-woman space over the duration of the longer event creates many benefits for players. *Immerton's* deliberate choice to remove men from the experience allows it to focus on being a woman in a community of women, and by creating a thin boundary between character and player, it provides a chance to explore the self. *Immerton* represents an uncommon or even unique opportunity for a woman-only larp space and community, one that has its heart in feminist design focusing on choice, collaboration, non-hierarchical spaces and relationships, empowerment, and communication. One of the takeaways was the power of the mask and of speaking as a divine force, speaking truth with force and authority. That central core of aspecting a Goddess will be brought into the convention larp version. *Immerton* will be re-run in 2018, and we will continue to tweak the design to allow for even better relationship play and exploration of the intersectionalities of woman.

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52 Shuffling the Deck

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