

Scripted Larps and a Neo-Noir Experience

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Abstract

A scripted larp is a larp structured through a pre-defined script with some theatrical appearance. It's a kind of *Play and Enjoy Watching* larp. This article shows how this works, based on my personal experience as creator of *Devil in our sins*, a neo-Noir scripted larp.

Introduction

When designing *Devil in our sins*, I strived to create the experience of telling a profound group story through a key tool: player characters' scripts.

It's common in larps to prioritize players' freedom to take decisions. However, in this larp I wanted to remove that freedom so players could enjoy being part of a film or a theater play as both protagonists and spectators. That way they could live the story's meaning, plot, twists and emotions as imagined by the author. That way, players would become Ani Bezzerides or Rust Cohle, *True Detective* (Pizzolatto, Nic, 2014) TV series' characters from season 1 and 2, and live inside them throughout all their chapters just as in the series. My intention was not only to respect the story as written but also to have players feel like both spectators and characters in a movie.

As this was a larp, I wanted my players to be able to take some decisions that would differ from the series original characters' ones, but still maintaining the story that the script writer (Nic Pizzolatto in our *True Detective* example) created for them to enjoy. The satisfaction of this experience comes from players submerging in a simple yet transcendent emotion: becoming their novels and TV series heroes, as they could have wished when they started playing larps or reading books.



Sergeant Joanne Keller (left) and Detective Tom Reigh (right) wake up after sharing nightmares. 1st run. In-game photo by Enrique Esturillo Cano.

That's what I humbly tried with my neo-Noir scripted chamber larp, and after three runs it seemed to result satisfactory for everyone.

Devil In Our Sins, a Neo-Noir style Scripted Larp

Devil in our sins is a neo-Noir larp about crimes and guilt. It tells the story of a serial killer that has been strangling victims for three years in Duluth, Minnesota, during long winter snow nights. But, more importantly, it tells the story of people that are trying to stop him while suffering the effects of their own pasts.

It's a 3 hour scene-based and scripted chamber larp for 7 players, with preceding workshops about how to dramatically enact an scene and to represent physical violence (pretty much necessary for this larp). It has been run three times in Spain, always with highly emotional and positive feedback from players.

Thematically, its inspiration comes from the TV series *True Detective*, *Broadchurch* (Chibnall, Chris, 2013) and *Hannibal* (Fuller, Bryan, 2013), and from the song and video *Where the wild roses grow* with Kylie Minogue and Nick Cave (1995).

But What Are Scripted Larps?

What I call here a “scripted larp” is a larp that uses a pre-defined script that must be followed by the players. It can have a more or less theatrical, TV series or filmic appearance, depending on the creator’s taste. The level of detail concerning music, staging etc. can vary, as can its length and structure, but the script should focus on a common story that is constructed through the combination of individual character stories.

The scene structure is defined by an overall script used by the organizer, who follows it to guide the scenes’ start and end and prepare the stage (furniture, lights, objects, etc.). To add, each player is provided with a character script that instructs her about the scene’s goal and her character’s own directions to follow, including suggestions on how to play them out. *Devil in our sins* also uses music and light in each scene to help set the mood.

In my scripted larps, only two or three characters are present in each scene. With more people present, the scene could become chaotic, so this helps to maintain focus on one conversation or one flow of events. With more people present, the scene could become chaotic. This also means that the rest of the players become an audience. The result is a theatrical experience in which the acting players are the protagonists.

The Origins: Scene-Based Larps.

But where did this interest for scripting larps come from? First, I am a professional novel writer and I love to tell deep and intense stories. This has been my obsession since I started as a larper and a tabletop RPG game master about 25 years ago. When I came to Nordic style for larping I felt that it offered me a way to express the kind of stories that standard chamber larping didn’t allow me to do. The experimental structures, the emotional approach... all of that was exciting, but there was still something missing. Then I discovered the scene-based larps, which gave me what a narrator like myself was looking for. I was particularly inspired by the following authors.

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Pablo Valcárcel was a finalist in the 2017 Berlin World of Darkness Convention with his *The Other Voice at the Back of Your Head* (Valcárcel, Pablo, 2017) vampire-themed larp. He introduced me to the scene-based larps, but also showed me how to masterfully mix music, colored lights and passion in their design. His larps combine emotional intensity with poetical scenes in fascinating sci-fi/fantasy/horror plots.

Nast Marrero gave me the purest view of how post-modern theater can be transformed into larp. Among other larps, he created really interesting adaptation of the *Requiem for a Dream* film (Aronofsky, Darren, 2000). It was run in Spain and also in 2015 at the Oslo chamber larp festival Grenselandet (Marrero, Nast, 2015). As a theater expert himself, Nast makes skillful use of several meta-technics that one could expect in a contemporary stage play.

Marina de Santiago experiments with personal stories in fantasy settings. Currently, she is heading a gigantic project based on the *Nobilis* tabletop RPG (Moran, Jenna K., 2002) involving dozens of people. In 2015 she ran a half-scripted larp called *Ragnarok* (de Santiago, Marina, 2015) full of Nordic myth, tragic stories, fated Gods and mortal Vikings in a theatrical style, and even made another run in an amphitheater. To me, her larps present a perfect mix of fantasy, tragedy and larping.

Fredrik Åkerlind's beautiful, tough and intense jeepform scene-based larp *The Journey* (Åkerlind, Fredrik, 2010), inspired by Cormac McCarthy's (2006) novel *The Road*, gave me the idea of player's scripts. While this larp encourages playing each scene as chained monologues, the final intention is theatrical, as his author states in the director's guide. The result: I loved the larp as much as I already loved the novel.

Given these influences and merged with my own authorial vision, in the latest years I've been experimenting with my own larps using scenes, music, lights, stage building and, finally, scripts. For example, I've made an *Ars Magica* larp, *Hades* (Espinosa, Daniel P., 2015), I've co-written a gothic horror larp with **Ana López Gómez**, *Our most fearful shadows* (López Gómez, Ana, and Espinosa, Daniel P. 2015), and I've written *Devil in our sins*.

Now, let's delve more deeply into scripted larps.

Spectators of Their Own Story

In scene-based scripted larps, when players are not present in a scene they become spectators and observe what's happening in places where their own characters are not. They acquire information that their characters don't know, something that is necessary for them to enjoy and understand the story as a whole.

But what happens if the killer's identity is revealed but no one should know? Even if players don't use that information in their scenes, knowing it could influence their behavior. Though we cannot completely avoid that influence to alter their acting, it should have a limited effect because their scripts tell them what their characters know or don't know, what happened before, what they can do and can talk about... Thus, due to the script's safeguarding, players can relax and enjoy spoilers.

You may think that just watching other players to act in a scene could be boring, but after three runs, and based on the aforementioned larps, experience said it's not. One reason is that the scenes function as a meta-technique that forces players to think differently from the very instant the larp started. Immediately they found themselves trying to give the best of themselves in their scenes, and resting and enjoying watching during the other players'. Some even said they only missed popcorn.

Caged and Enjoyed

Definitely, in my experience a scripted larp experience is enjoyable in spite of players having their agency restricted. How do they enjoy it? Besides from acting it out and watching it, as stated, they can also find interesting to progressively discover a story written for them, with its carefully plotted webs that maintain coherence no matter what players do, and in becoming aware that they are truly part of it. Besides, though character scripts tell players *what* they have to do, they also give them freedom about *how* to do it. This is critical for the emotional development of characters.

The only thing the organizer must care about is to inform the players beforehand about this particularity—the tight scripting—to make sure they don't feel disappointed for not having “freedom” to act during the larp. The organizer—and the players—must understand that this experience is not for everyone, just as theater is not for everyone. Before each run of *Devil in our sins*, I warned very clearly the interested players, so that those who signed up knew

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what they were in for. They were both curious or anxious to play a larp from a different mindset, one that was a mix of that of a larp player, a theater actor, and a spectator, but finally they loved the experience. It allowed them to focus on emotions and interpretation, without worrying about making wrong decisions or about shouldering the responsibility of the story's final coherence.



Encounter between Rose Whiteday (left) and Professor Leo Deth (right). 1st run. In-game photo by Enrique Esturillo Cano.

Anatomy and Life of a Script

In *Devil in our sins*, each player is given a small booklet with the name and location of every scene in the larp. It is only the ones in which the player participates that are detailed, each describing the current situation and posing several questions about how the character feels. This way, I as scriptwriter can guide the character's mood while leaving the player a margin to decide how she is going to handle the scene emotionally. For example, after a big revelation the script may pose questions if the character would be sad or furious, and how the character would feel if the "enemy" appeared again.

In the "scripted" part of the scene, there is first a synopsis for the scene. For example: "Take revenge revealing what you did in the past". This phrase is

crucial because it enables the player to keep the scene's goal in mind and maintain focus. It was an addition after early playtests, as players reported that it was difficult to remember the scene's objective when on stage. It really helped in the third run.

After that, the script details actions step by step. For example: "Enter the apartment. Think about what you did. Wait for your lover to wake up. Talk with him/her. Reveal your dark past".

An important constraint is that players are allowed to read their scripts only once the larp is started, and that they only read the scenes one by one—at most two by two. This is to avoid spoilers, since the gradual unfolding of the plot is an important part of the experience.

In addition, players are encouraged to act out only that which is scripted, contributing with their own vision of the character but being careful not to do something different to what is written. Since players are unaware of the scripted story, their improvisations could become inconsistent with later scenes.

Finally, if a scene is going out of control the organizer has the option to intervene, as a theater prompter. This allows her to discreetly—without interrupting the scene—tell the players what to do. Harsh as it sounds, this is better than creating a scene that invalidates the rest of the plot.

The Scripted and the Unexpected

There's a lie in all this emphasis on scripting, in that some unscripted events DO exist. They present a point of interest for players, and allow the players to improvise and react like in a non-scripted larp.

When I decided to make closed stories, I also wanted to add a feeling from when we watch a film or read a book: the suspense, the unexpected. Consider the following example scene, where the police sergeant returns home to face her daughter, who is being threatened by a serial killer. The sergeant has a drinking problem, and regrets some immoral things she has done for years. The sergeant's player script says: "Go back home. Take a bottle and decide if you drink or throw it to the trash. Have a discussion with your daughter. Strive for reconciliation. Perhaps forget all about the investigation". And that's what the player expects. However, when she enters stage and while she is struggling with the bottle, she will discover her daughter dying at her room, strangled by the

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killer. So here we have it; we have broken the player's expectations, just as in a novel—or in real life.

Thus we can build an intensely emotional and scripted scene, but still surprise and gratify players with some improvisation that will delve even deeper into their emotions.

Of course, those scenes must be carefully crafted so that improvisation don't break the whole story, using guidelines like "Don't kill anybody in this scene". Just in case.

Action Scenes

A scripted larp allows players to represent action scenes in spectacular ways since these are guided. In *Devil in our sins*, there's a scene when the sergeant and the detective have to chase down someone in a dark place, equipped with flashlights and guns. Every time I've run this scene, the result has been intensely cinematic. With lights off and the song *Somewhat damaged* from Nine Inch Nails (1989) playing loud, the suspect, chased, hides in an unknown room. Seconds later, the sergeant and the detective enter the building, guns in hand and looking for the suspect. The other players, as moving spectators, enter behind them to watch the scene from backstage.

This scene and similar scenes become spectacular through the way they can be choreographed. Just as a movie director, as the author you can tell the players if they must fight, be hurt, run, kill or be killed, etc., and provide details. You can control the scenography, the place, the lights, the music... Besides you can—and must—heighten characters' passions in the script so that the action has a deep meaning for them.

Still, a scene like this can still be unpredictable, to make it enjoyable the players mustn't know what exactly is going to happen. To keep the plot under control you need to use brief and precise instructions. For example: "You can be hurt but you won't die during this scene". Or: "Don't run. Fight". Or: "You will lose but don't give up easily". And, important, be clear about how each character must end their scene.

An Open Final

Despite being scripted, scripted larp leave can allow players to make plot-changing decisions. In *Devil in our sins*, each character has a scene in which she

can decide how to conclude her story. These final scenes are designed in a plot-meaningful way, so that they bring together characters who have unresolved plots between them. The script tells the players it's their final scene and that they have to make decisions to create a shared ending. They know they have nothing to lose and they are encouraged to take wild decisions. This is the time to die, flee, reveal and create a huge emotional climax. It's time to make this their own story.

All *Devil in our sins*' runs have ended differently. One was dramatic and dark. Other was emotive and sad. Another one yet was tough and ruthless. The best was that this was the players' decision.

Breaking Space, Time and Action

In scripted larps—and scene-based larps in general—you can use space and time as narrative tools.

Regarding space, playing out scenes allows to easily change location between them to tell wider stories. Time is easily changed also—not only with flashbacks or flashforwards, but moving action through different days or even years—without breaking the flow of action. Each scene could happen in a different time, for example.

Talking about action, it's important that we involve all characters in our global story, and one easy way to do it is dividing that story into multiple ones. But for me there's one key requirement: there must be only one action at a time during a scene. That way, spectators can focus on one thing and understand the whole story, and we can keep narrative tension and rhythm. After all, this is theater larp.

Writing a Scripted Larp

A scripted larp like this requires careful writing, at least the way I see it. It took me several months to develop both story—with all the twists and crimes—and script for *Devil in our sins*. Much work went into maintaining a balance between all characters, so that everyone could be protagonist of their own story and have the same number of scenes.

After that, I had to write each scene in a concise and clear way. Each one must describe how the character got there, what has happened right before, what is the scene's main aim for the character and when to leave or end it. It may also

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suggest ways to act out the scene and contain questions about emotions. The description still has to be brief, ideally one A5 page maximum.

Apart from that you have to work with the rhythm, interest and suspense within the scenes, and over the entire larp. Scenes must be interesting not only to be played but also to be watched. Finally you are writing an interactive novel. This is not a metaphor, because after the first run of *Devil in our sins* I decided to also write it as a novel that I'm finishing right now. Why not? I had already done all the preceding work: the plot, the mystery, the characters, the structure, etc. That's how with these larps we can tell stories like they were novels or films.

Conclusions

With this article, I wanted to spread the word about scene-based larps and scripted larps, and give some insight into what is happening at the Spanish larping scene.

I have presented my personal vision of what scripts can do when you apply them to a larp to tell a story in a theatrical style. Of course, there are most likely other approaches that are more or less scripted or just scripted in a different way. I'd really love to know about them.

For me, the experience of designing and staging scripted scenarios have demonstrated that scripted larps can make their players enjoy every moment, make story-changing decisions and ask themselves about deep emotional subjects while enjoying a carefully crafted story.

Because we all love stories, and because we all also love to act and to be part of them.

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Detective Tom Reigh (left) and professor Leo Deth (right) meet at the campus to remember past and hard times. 2nd run. In-game photo by Daniel P. Espinosa.