

## Group Improvisation of Larp Rituals

### *A 30 Minute Workshop*

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#### *Abstract*

This article describes a 30-minute workshop which teaches on-the-spot collective improvisation of fake rituals for larp purposes.

#### *Introduction*

The aim of this article is to equip you with all the practical knowledge you need to run good, impactful fake rituals for larps. We present a 30-minute workshop which will teach a group of larpers to on-the-spot improvise cool magicky-feeling rituals.

This article does not aim to discuss larp rituals from a theoretical perspective – for a more theoretical take on larp rituals, see Bowman (2015). The suggested workshop is based on workshops run in connection with several larps, including Coven (Häggström and Falk 2015) and Ekdahl 1995 (Fallsdalen and Holgersson 2017). The authors have run the workshop many times in several countries, and other larpers have run similar workshops for many years in the Nordic countries – see for example Fatland (2015).

Larp rituals can create not only temporary psychological effects but also bleed. The human brain and its emotions are eminently hackable, and one way this can be done is through rituals, both everyday rituals and religious rituals (for more on human rituals, see Bell (2009). Even if we know that something is fake, the act of doing it can have a true impact on your psyche and your body (see Charlesworth et al 2017; Pierre 2017).

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Rituals are experience enhancers: they can take the emotional theme of the larp and dial up the impact factor. Think of them as dramatic loudspeakers, and use them carefully.

### *Overall workshop structure*

The workshop is performed in seven (7) steps:

Step 1: The anatomy of a ritual: explain the common core.

Step 2: The ritual toolkit

Step 3: Practice your first ritual

Step 4: Roles in the ritual: ritual leaders and followers

Step 5: Try another ritual

Step 6: Post-ritual theory

Step 7: (If there's more time) More practice in small groups

### *Step 1: The anatomy of a ritual: explain the common core.*

In order to make it easier to improvise rituals, this workshop works with one specific, set, core structure for all rituals. Explain this structure to the workshop participants. We suggest that you make this structure – diegetic: this is how all the rituals in the larp world in question works.

A ritual consists of three main phases (in boldface below) and two optional phases (in italics).

### **Make a circle**<sup>1</sup>

- E.g. with people holding hands, or salt, or rope, or draw it, or place bones in a circle around the participants. Whatever is most appropriate for the context, as long as it is a circle.
- The ritual leader may state “The circle is now complete” to make certain that all participants are aware of this.

1. *Why circles?* This workshop relies strongly on the effect of circles. Standing in a circle makes us focus on the others in the circle. It creates a small, temporal world with special rules. We feel more connected and are able to easily play off of each other's actions and reactions.

- A circle protects those within from evil outside, and also protects the outside from evil inside.

*Summon forces (optional)*

- This is optional but usually adds a cool feel.
- Summon appropriate forces for the scenario/larp. In one larp it might be the four elements, in another it might be an ancient Egyptian god, in another it might be a fantasy creature. These will aid you and you can play on receiving power from them in the Main Act.

**Main act**

- Before creating a ritual, it is important to know that the ritual is about. This should be clear in the main phase, which should bring the group together and create a cool experience by chanting, movement, light, but also acts and proclamations that make the narrative of the larp move forward. For example, you might be filling a protective amulet with forces or maybe you are summoning the dead to talk to them. Maybe you have a possessed person who you want to exorcise. Use props like incense, fake blood, candles, tarot cards, draw symbols on the floor (make sure you can remove them afterwards).

*Thank the summoned forces (optional)*

- If you summoned forces and forgot to thank them, then that is an excellent source for cool drama. What would the consequences be?

**Break the circle**

- Break the circle by removing a part of the salt, erase the pencil drawing, remove the rope etc. etc.
- Again, this needs to be announced clearly so that all players are aware of this.
- It is potentially very dangerous to leave a ritual before a circle is properly broken – use this as a potential source of drama.
- Another good drama source is if the circle is broken incorrectly or too soon! Forces might be rushing in or out. Anything might happen.



*Fire and dancing in a ritual. <https://pixabay.com/en/bonfire-fire-man-dancing-rituals-1209269/>*

### *Step 2: The Ritual Toolkit*

There is a single basic rule in creating rituals: the more magic it feels, the more magic it is in the larp.

We want to create the illusion that there is magic afoot.

We want to create a joint experience of this magic

We want to create something that looks cool and feels cool.

We want to make all participants feel like they are involved.

In step 2, introduce the tools below to your larpers. Tell them that things will become clearer in STEP 3, where you will practice making a ritual using these tools.

- A foundational soundscape, created by the participants. Everyone in the circle mimics the ritual leader to create the basic soundscape. This soundscape can include:
  - A sustained tone that the group starts and maintains.

- Whispers (maybe the dead are talking?), hushes, vibrating hummings (this can turn into words very easily).
- Song (a simple and repetitive song works best)
- Rhythmic clapping or finger snapping
- A basic movement of the group / position in the room
  - Its simplest form is just people standing in a circle.
  - Or they could be moving in the circle, walking around.
  - They can also be repeating the same gesture (tearing power from the object in the center maybe?) over and over.
- Supplementary sounds that illustrate the magic (and thereby create the magic) achieved by the ritual.
  - A single person sings a higher sustained note than everyone else, or moves up and down a scale.
  - A single person starts snapping their fingers
  - A single person starts talking in tongues
  - A single person blows air (maybe because they are channeling an air elemental?) or hisses (a water elemental?)
  - Supplementary movements that illustrates the magic and thereby creates the magic.
  - A single person claps their hands, stomp their feet, presses life force into someone else.
  - Use props! Stones, incense, bones, papers with words of power, wind chimes, bells etc. Remember – if it feels magical it is magical.

*Step 3: Practice your first ritual*

1. Put an object on the floor – tell the players that you are going to bless it.
2. Tell them that this will feel ridiculous. That's ok! Encourage them to let it be ridiculous. (You will do a more serious thing later)
3. Tell everyone that once you start making sounds, they should mimic you to create the basic soundscape. That soundscape should then be kept going throughout the ritual.
4. Tell them that when you point to a single person, they should add something of their own as a supplementary sound or movement atop the basic soundscape.
5. The others don't need to mimic them, but they MAY do so if it feels right.
6. Tell them that you are doing a small ritual – only the three main stages (make circle, main act, break circle).

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7. Alright – now put them in a circle, make them hold hands. Stay inside the circle. Say “the circle is now complete”.
8. Create the basic soundscape. E.g. a single buzzing tone and then a rhythmical clapping. The others will mimic you.
9. Vary the basic soundscape, make the group feel the power and how fun it is to make noise together.
10. Point to a single person, who starts doing a gesture or sound. Point to some others.
11. Raise the intensity of the basic soundscape.
12. Start pushing power (with gestures) into the object in the middle.
13. Raise the intensity of the basic soundscape to a crescendo. Stop it with an abrupt shout and/or movement.
14. Say “it is done”, and break the circle of hands.
15. Alright – you’ve done your first ritual. It had three parts – repeat them for the participants. Ask them how that felt.

### *Step 4: Roles in the ritual: ritual leaders and followers*

In this step, you make your participants aware of two different roles in a ritual, and how those roles can be used to aid in improvising a ritual or make it more complex.

- Leader of the ritual
  - Has an out of game responsibility to help the ritual feel cool and magicky.
  - This responsibility can be shared among two or more people, but it’s usually easiest to do it alone.
  - Since the leader will be in control of what happens during the ritual, it might be necessary to go out of game to talk to participants out of character before the ritual is run. Depending on the larp tradition you come from, more or less transparency in this will be needed.
  - To determine (via game mechanics or pre-determined choice) if the ritual will succeed or not.
  - To determine if something particular is going to happen.



*Circles are core components of rituals. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ritualcircle.jpg>*

- Is responsible for being clear during the ritual about what is happening so that the players can make their characters react accordingly. For example, the leader is very clear about making and breaking the circle, and informing participants about how to understand the ritual. For instance: “now, if she falls to the floor that means that we fail and the demon wins”.
  - May be a game master.
  - Has to be prepared to change the ritual on the spot if a participant adds something unexpected to the mix (“I sacrifice my life blood to do X...”). Roll with the punches – it’s fun!
  - Has to be able to defend the ritual from TOO MANY changes brought on by improvising participants (by saying “No!”, that usually works).
  - “Repeat after me” is a very good tool to make everyone feel connected and safe.
- Followers

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- Add to the ritual by sounds and movements and cool ideas that they interject
- It's both your right and your obligation to help create the ritual
- Help make the narrative go forward through the ritual
- Respect the decisions of the leader – there might be a grand plan that you're not aware of.
- If you get confused during the ritual, don't hesitate. Ask! Either in character or out of character.

### *Step 5: Try another ritual*

Practice making another ritual in which you are the leader. Tell the participants to look at you and to enhance what you are doing. This will be a ritual with the goal to create some particular magic that you have decided on in advance. The participant's task is to illustrate the magic that you indicate with the way you roleplay. Then do this set exercise:

1. Tell them that you are doing all five parts of the ritual (repeat them) to create a magic portal to another world.
2. Remind them that first the group will create a soundscape, then you (as the leader) will point to individuals. They should add something to the sound or the movement.
3. Make the circle with you inside it. Start the soundscape.
4. Get four people to help you call on the four elements.
5. Say "I call on EARTH", point to one of them – they'll improvise something. Do the other elements.
6. Channel elements into a point in the circle. Let the chanting increase to a crescendo (indicate this with your own voice and with hand movements).
7. Start sounding uncertain (oh no! I'm losing focus! No!) – the group will now, of its own, follow you and illustrate this with frantic sounds. (You should not need to tell them this, at this point, most larpers have the hang of this and will improvise beautifully in concert).
8. Fall out of the circle, breaking it!



9. Go “out of character” and remark that that wasn’t too good for these characters – you broke the circle. What are possible consequences – ask them!
10. If you have some other magic you want to focus on, feel free to replace the portal with something else.



Tarot cards can be good props. <https://pixabay.com/en/tarot-cards-magic-fortune-telling-991041/>

### *Step 6: Post-ritual theory*

Talk to your players about Consequences!

- What are some ways that characters can feel after a ritual? Tired, nauseous, giddy, high?
  - Did the ritual fail? Or succeed? How do I know?
  - The ritual leader can (often should) make this very clear. State it afterwards.
  - Or the ritual leader makes it clear that it is not clear what happened. The players can spend the next few hours worrying, and game masters can plan future events around this.
  - Usually if it FELT like the ritual succeeded, it succeeded. Other things to weigh:
- Was the ritual interrupted? That might be bad.

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- Did you thank the summoned forces?
- Did you make and break the circle correct?
- What would give the most amount of cool play?
- Did it feel magical? Then it was magical.
- Clean up after yourself
  - Blow out any candles
  - Remove salt
  - Remove fake blood quickly
  - Use a plastic sheet if you know it's going to get messy.
- Summary. Remind your participants about what you've been doing the last half hour.
  - Make a circle
  - Summon forces
  - Main act
  - Thank forces
  - Break circle
  - Everyone contributes
  - The role of the leader of the ritual
  - Did you succeed?

There is no absolute right or wrong in creating play pretend rituals. Go with your imagination! Use the dramatic power of consequences.

### *Step 7: (If there's more time) More practice in small groups*

Divide participants into small groups (around 5 in each group)

Give them scenarios to improvise rituals around. Some suggestions:

- Make an amulet that carries a blessing from each of you.
- Let a ghost possess a character to reveal its murderer.

Tell them that it's better to OVERACT than UNDERACT. If they get that out of their system now, they'll feel freer during the actual larp.

If there is time, have them redo the ritual, but this time with less overacting and more serious.

### *Some Final Thoughts*

Many typical rituals seen in larps mirror religious rituals. This might make some participants uncomfortable and might lead to unintentional bleed. Make sure your participants are aware that there will be rituals, and be prepared for the

possibility that some of them will choose to opt out before or during the ritual. As in all other aspects of the larp, make sure that there are safety words and procedures that will let them leave discreetly and feel empowered enough to do so.

Finally, let us reiterate that the goal of this workshop is to create fake rituals for theatre purposes. If you are reading this for any other purpose, this is not the text for you. For the rest of you, we wish to quote Granny Weatherwax from Pratchett's books: "It doesn't stop being magic just because you know how it works."

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