Waiting Before the Beginning

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Abstract

This article looks at the waiting time before a game or a larp. It sees this time as part of the experience, and claims, that if we design this time properly, we will help our players be in a proper state of mind before the game. The article also gives practical examples and tools on how to do this.

Introduction

What is your player's state of mind when they arrive at the location of the game?

What state of mind do you want your players to be in when the game begins?

How do you get them from the first to the second?

My design background is Fastaval, and in recent years the Danish black box scene. Fastaval is a roleplay convention with about 30 new games each year, each for about four to six players. You sign up for games beforehand. At Fastaval you gather in a room with all the other players. When people have arrived, an organizer divides people into groups, and each group is assigned a GM who then takes their group to another room to play the game.

The black box scene works very much the same way. Again, it's mostly centered on festivals with several short larps, the main difference being that the larps often have more players, around 10 to 20, so that everybody plays the same larp rather than being divided into groups. But both types of festival have a span of time before the game starts, where you wait for all players to arrive, perhaps for people from a reserve que to be found, or for the last preparations of the playspace to be done.

You will mostly be waiting together with a mix of strangers and friends. People spend this time in very different ways. As player, I have experienced most of the thing you can do: joking with friends, being half asleep from an exhausting convention, being nervous about the coming game, the "Am I good enough?" feeling, aching to get on with it, giddy, fidgety, bored, impatient and so on. Suffice to say: players will be in many different states of mind while they wait for the game to begin.

Designing the waiting time

For the last three games I have designed, I decided that this waiting time could also be part of the experience. I have tried to design the waiting time just as I design the rest of the game. I do this by asking the three questions that I posed at the start of this article: where are my players? Where do I want them to be? And how do I get them there?

For the first two games, *Creatures* (Pettitt, Simon J., 2015), and *…And that's it* (Pettitt, Simon J., 2017), the solution to those questions were the same, so I will only describe one of them: *…And that's it*.

Playtest of "…And that's it" at Østerskov Efterskole. Photo: Simon J. Pettitt.

…And that's it was my larp for Fastaval 2017. In this game, the characters face their own imminent death and the death of all their friends as a plague wipes out the last of humanity. This is a quiet larp about loss and death, about friendship and community. It's uses drawing as a way of communicating and reflecting. The playstyle is very slow and meditative with the focus of creating together in silence.

Fastaval on the other hand is a very busy place. Lots of things to do, lots of people to see. Very noisy, not much calm. At Fastaval you want to get as much as possible out of your time there, so often your program is packed. So, to answer the first two questions:

The players are some degree of: busy, hectic, tired, full of noise and thoughts about what has happened and what will come.

And I want them to be: calm, slow, meditative and silent.

In an attempt to bring them from one to the other, the players, when they arrived, were given a piece of paper with a short presentation of the larp and this text:

> "Dear player, welcome to *…And that's it*
>
> Please read this, as you wait.
>
> From now on please don't speak unless we ask you to.
>
> This game is about communicating and reflecting through drawings, so if there's some waiting time, spend it drawing. It can be anything, it doesn't have to be good.
>
> At the same time relax, and let all your tensions and worries slip to the back of your mind. This is a slow and dwelling game, so use this time to slowly sink into that mindset."

This is a very simple low tech solution, but the result seemed to achieve my goals. When it came time to divide the players into groups I had a big group of absolutely quiet and attentive players. It was almost unsettling how loyally they had followed the instructions. I asked some of the players how it had been, and their response fit my experience:

"It really help to get into the mood of the game. It was very calming to just sit and be quiet and think, and that gave a good look into how the game would be." *Bo Hjælm*

"As I remember it, we got a piece of paper, where we were asked to pick an object, that appealed to us. We were also asked to not speak any more until told that we could. It was very effective to be silent for so long. It really got me into the mood, to a degree where it even felt all wrong when we were allowed to talk during the workshop." *Anne Vinter Ratzer*

For both games where this preparation was used, the instruction to sit in silence and relax made sense in relation to the intended game experience. But in general, being relaxed and focused before a game starts is a good thing. So, what is yet to be tested is what to do if your game is different? What if it's a comedy or an action piece? It will be interesting to see if this tool is just for this kind of game or if it can enhance the experience of all kinds of games.

Getting into different states of mind

I plan to test this at Fastaval 2018, where I will try to do the same but with a game that offers a slightly different experience. For Fastaval 2018 I'm designing *Uledsaget* (Pettitt, Simon J., 2018)*, a game about children fleeing from a civil war. It will be a dark fairytale rather than social realism. The players will be playing children that are thrown into extreme conditions. So the mood I want them to be in is a childlike state, but a bit apprehensive about the experience to come.

This presents a new answer to the second question: I want them to feel childish but apprehensive. So far in the design process, my idea is to make the room feel like the waiting room of an official institution. Like the doctor or in a hospital. Stale, impersonal, silent, but with some toys and coloring pens for children. The players will be instructed, as they arrive, to wait while playing or drawing by themselves, as if they are children waiting for something, feeling nervous but still being a playful child.

Whether or not this achieves the goal remains to be seen. Designing the waiting time for a larp is still new for me. And I would be very interested in hearing from others, who have tried to work with this waiting time as well. As designers, we need to design the whole experience from start to end, as we are by now designing experiences and not just the larps themselves.

Playtest of "Uledsaget" (Unaccompanied) at Østerskov Efterskole. Photo: Simon J. Pettitt.

An important point to remember is, that this is not meant to be a compulsory activity. The whole point is, that any waiting time often works against the mood and play experience as we get nervous, impatient or just bored. But by designing the waiting time, by making it part of the experience, we alleviate this and even help the players get ready for the game.

Getting into mood vs. getting into character

An important distinction to make here, is that this is not about getting into character. This is about getting into the mood of the game. Many larps have a ritual or transitioning phase where the players move from the real world and into the larp.

The larps *Just a Little Lovin'* (Edland, Tor Kjetil and Hanne Grasmo 2011) and *Brudpris* (Linder, Anna-Karin and Caroliona Dahlberg 2013) both had a theme song that played before game start,[1] during which the players could get into character. The end of the song signal game start. Black box larps have worked

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1. I used these two examples because they are the two longer larps I have so far played.

a lot with transition using the tools of theatre. Both light and sound have been used help the players get into character and start the game.

But this is about the mood of the game and should happen before any such ritualistic transition. Before the workshop for shorter games, and before the transition into role for longer larps. Both tools could be used in the same game.

The waiting time before longer larps

When I posted the original blog post in Larpers BFF[2], Karijn van der Heij made a good comment about how this might work in a longer larp:

"At longer games, in my experience, people will need a certain amount of time to greet friends, catch up, fool around, share the pepp etc."

This is like when I worked for an efterskole in Denmark. We had a yearly open house, where former students came and showed potential students around the school. We had to ask the old students to arrive an hour early, because they needed to spend the first hour reconnecting with old friends.

So, I think what Karijn is saying is true. But it only enhances my point. We need to be aware of where our players are when they arrive, and how we get them to where we need them to be when the larp starts. That might mean creating a meditative atmosphere before a game at a stressful convention or remembering to ad in catch up time before a long larp.

For the longer larps I have tried the start has been like this:

1. Arrival with hang out and catch up.
2. Workshop.
3. Costume and character prep before gamestart.
4. Game start.

But between prep and gamestart there is always a span of time where more and more players are just waiting for the game to start. In my experience this is the point where people are the most nervous and you need them to feel the most ready, relaxed and confident.

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2. See the post and comment here (requires membership of Larpers BFF on Facebook): https://goo.gl/T4i7eo

I think this period is equivalent to the waiting time at conventions, and you can design it too. Perhaps, you could create a space where players can go to when they are ready, where the setting and soundscape matches the feeling you want to set for the larp.

For a larp like *Just a Little Lovin* you could make a disco where people could dance their nerves away, maybe even make it a silent disco so people can listen to whatever music they need to hear to connect to their particular character. For a larp like *Brudpris* a game about a stoic honor based patriarchal society, you could create a meeting area where players could sit in contemplative silence slowly letting the weight of this strangling society build up until everyone are ready.

If you don't do this, the state of mind your players are in when the game starts are out of your hands. Yes, some players will do this on their own anyway. But some will be rife with nerves or joking around perhaps due to being nervous. I believe if you create a space before a game starts that matches the state of mind you want your players to be in when the game starts, you can help alleviate that first difficult hour of play where you are still getting into character and finding your way into the magical circle that is a larp.

References

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