

The Death of Hamlet

Deconstructing the Character in Enlightenment in Blood

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Abstract

In the 2017 larp *Enlightenment in Blood*, we created a new form of character creation tool using a software tool called Larpweaver. It's based on the idea that a character can be deconstructed into various parts and instead of offering a complete role, the larp can provide a selection of elements for the player to choose from and compile their own character.

Introduction

Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark, is one of the most famous fictional characters of all time. He's the protagonist of a play by William Shakespeare, conveniently also titled *Hamlet*. The play has been made into a movie over twenty times. There's also a well-regarded larp version called *Inside Hamlet* in which the story is transposed onto the decadent court of a mid-19th century fascist Denmark.

In *Inside Hamlet* (Pedersen et al 2017), one of the characters is Hamlet himself. If you play that character, you're larping a role that has been defined by centuries of artistic practice. Hamlet casts a long shadow, and your interpretation is but one of many takes on the same character.

In short, Hamlet is a role. You can make an interesting Hamlet, a boring Hamlet, a conventional Hamlet or an idiosyncratic Hamlet. Your Hamlet is always in dialogue with every other Hamlet, whether you like it or not.

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Although Hamlet is an iconic example, pre-written larp characters often follow the same idea: the writer of the character has a vision, and the player must fulfil that vision in the larp. The role exists independent of the player.

In the larp *Enlightenment in Blood*, we set out to create a new way of making larp characters. The first step on that road is to murder Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark.

Access to Fiction

What's the purpose of a character? Why do you need a character to play in a larp? When we started designing *Enlightenment in Blood*, our answer to this question was that the character is a tool the player uses to access the fiction of the larp.

The larp presents a fictional environment, and the player needs something to be part of that environment. Without that something, they're just a non-player: someone without agency inside the fiction.

Note that in this conception of character, this something can be extremely slight. For example, I worked on a larp series called *Baltic Warriors*, where the larp events were also public events where anybody could walk in and sit down to listen. In the design of the larp, these people were automatically granted characters: They were to play members of the public who'd dropped by to listen to the debate.

In this example, the character consists of only two things:

1. *A rudimentary identity*: You play yourself, but in a fictional context.
2. *A simple interaction code*: Act like you'd act listening to a real political debate. Sit silently, or maybe ask a question.

A character can consist of many things, and there's no list of mandatory character elements that must be present in all larps. The requirements a larp's design places on character depend entirely on the creative vision of the larp.

This means that when designing characters for a larp, it's necessary to consider what the player needs to properly access the fiction of the larp, and then provide these elements to the participants.



The main theme of the larp was revolution, but we sought to provide opportunities for quiet scenes as well. Photo: Suvi Korhonen, in-game.

Cut Up the Body

In the Finnish larp tradition I come from, the organizers typically write characters for all participants and cast the players as well. In Finnish larps based on *Vampire*, I've seen both purely organizer-created characters and characters developed together with the organizer and the player. The same method is used

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in Nordic-style larps such as *College of Wizardry* and *Inside Hamlet*, although *College of Wizardry* allows the players significant leeway in how to use or discard the written material. When I walk about larps with pre-written characters, I mean it in this context.

In larps with pre-written characters, the role is conceived as a unified whole, a complete concept, but you can break it into the pieces that a player needs to access the fiction. Although no character element is mandatory for a larp to work, many of the components that make up the role of Hamlet are typical of the elements used to construct larp characters. For example, Hamlet has a background, a personality, a motivation, a social role, and connections to other characters.

Hamlet is the Prince of Denmark. He has a clearly defined social position in the milieu of the play: he's the son of the murdered king, a royal scion of a distinguished family. His perhaps most famous trait is indecisiveness. We know that he studied in Wittenberg and he's motivated to find out whether his uncle Claudius killed his father.

If we see Hamlet as a collection of elements instead of a sacred whole, we can start playing around with them. We can change an element or two and see what happens. Perhaps he's not indecisive but cruel, waiting for others to debase themselves before making his move. Maybe his background is not academic but military. Once we give up on the integrity of the role, we start to notice that while some character elements are structurally necessary for the larp (this could be Hamlet's social role), others can be changed with no broad consequences to how the larp works (Hamlet's personality and background). As always, which elements are necessary and which can be arbitrary depends on the larp.

The player usually absorbs the character as a written text with all the character elements laid out. In traditional written characters, the writer sets these out to fulfil their vision: this is what Hamlet is like, expressed in words trait by trait. This is the character's background, personality, and so on.

But what if the larp's writer didn't make the choice of how to combine character elements? What if the player made these choices instead?

An Internet Personality Test

Enlightenment in Blood was a larp based on *Vampire: the Masquerade* about the revolution that brought down the Prince of the city. Because of its size

of approximately 200 participants, it was conceived as a simulation of a supernatural city during the night of an insurrection. Some characters were central to the revolution, while others were more on the periphery, pursuing their own stories. It had multiple locations in the Friedrichshain area of Berlin.

In *Enlightenment in Blood*, our players assembled their own characters using a software tool called Larpweaver. They got an email inviting them into the system, logged on, and started making choices. Our inspiration for this was the endless array of internet personality tests: you answer questions and the test tells you whether you're a Gryffindor or a Ravenclaw, an Autobot or a Decepticon.

We wanted to build that same breeziness, the fun of making little choices about who you want to play, into a part of the experience of character creation.

Key goals of pre-written characters created by the organizers are to allow a cohesive vision of the larp, and to make sure that characters are connected to each other thematically, in groups and through personal connections. This same goal is also behind the motivation to use Larpweaver instead of allowing people to create their own characters from scratch.

The core design element of *Enlightenment in Blood* is the group. All characters belonged to three groups, and you could select which groups you wanted to be part of during character creation. The most important of these groups, and the defining choice of using the character creation system, was the primary group. This represented the principal social context of the character. It determined the character's starting location, allegiance, and who the character hung out with.

Examples of primary groups in *Enlightenment in Blood* are the Stirner Group, comprised of old school anarchist vampires, and the White Eyes, who are junkie werewolves. In both cases, the group also provides the broad outlines of a character concept.

Because the primary groups formed the superstructure of the larp, most of them were limited to ten members. We decided to make the primary groups the main design structure instead of the supernatural Clans and Tribes traditionally used in *World of Darkness* larps for this purpose. This way, you could choose your supernatural type more freely. In the system, many of the possible categories of supernatural creatures didn't have an upper limit. Theoretically, there could have been a 100 vampires from the Toreador Clan in the larp.



A new World of Darkness faction, the Church of Caine, debuted in Enlightenment in Blood. Photo: Tuomas Hakkarainen, in-game.

For those interested, the most popular vampire Clans in the larp were Brujah, Toreador, and Malkavian, although the Tremere and the Ventrue were only available to characters from certain primary groups such as the philosophically-minded Shadow Enlightenment.

The third group in character creation was called the secondary group. The idea was that while the primary group represented the character's main allegiance, the secondary group would be a secret club to which the character belonged.

The idea was to make allegiances more complicated and mix up the larp's social structures. However, based on player comments and feedback, this feature of the larp's design largely failed to play out in practice. My understanding is that this outcome came down to the way we misjudged the pace of the larp, as well as difficulties players had locating and recognizing members of their secondary groups in a geographically scattered game.

In terms of pacing, our chief worry was always that the revolution of the larp would lack energy. Because of this, we encouraged people to play fast and hard. This happened to such a degree that more nuanced elements such as the secondary groups were lost in the general riot.

A Little Piece of You

Enlightenment in Blood was a commercial project, part of the larger World of Darkness Berlin event. The larp was organized on a model where some of the work is done by organizers who get paid for their work, and some by volunteers. One of our key goals when we created the character creation system was to make the writing work less daunting and to increase the scalability of the larp.

The method of larp organizing where each participant is provided with a written character is a lot of work, especially in big larps. It also makes the larp very hard to scale up. If you want to add ten new players, you need to write ten new characters and connect them to other characters through individually created relations.

On the organizer side, the benefit of a Larpweaver-based system such as the one described here is to make the work of writing a larp more efficient and streamlined by exploiting the fact that many characters can share common elements. Once the basic infrastructure of character generation has been built, it also makes it possible to scale up the larp quickly. For example, *Enlightenment in Blood* experienced a surge of sign ups in the months leading up to the larp, ultimately almost doubling its size. It would have been impossible to write new individual characters for these players, but writing new material for Larpweaver to expand its options for new players required much less effort.

However, we felt that the system has to offer something to the player too. While it's useful for the organizer, that fact by itself doesn't improve the player's experience. This is why we focused on player choice. Using the system, the player could customize the character to suit their needs. A similar effect could

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be achieved by asking players to write their characters themselves from scratch, but Larpweaver has the advantage of maintaining thematic coherence in the larp because all the material is written by the organizers even though the combinations of elements are chosen by the players.

This follows from our general idea that each *Vampire:the Masquerade* larp we make uses bespoke game mechanics and a design specific to that larp, instead of a larp design template that would be shared across multiple larps in the style of *The Mind's Eye Theatre*. Following our general philosophy for making a *Vampire* larp, the organizers had minimal presence during the larp itself. Instead, we attempted to load everything into it at character creation and during workshops, and then let it run with only minimal interference.

In *Enlightenment in Blood*, we felt that although all characters were assembled from pieces provided by the system, each also needed a unique element. This was the *character seed*: a short concept based on the primary group. So for example, after you'd chosen the Stirner Group, you could choose a veteran Anarch vampire who was a student of Max Stirner in life or the junior member of the group, a scholar of anarchist philosophy.

As text, the seeds were usually no longer than one paragraph of text, because everything beyond the core idea was provided by other parts of the character creation system. The system was focused on providing the elements necessary for the larp to function in a coherent fashion, but other parts of the character were left with more detail for the player to fill out. The most important of these was personal history. Although the combination of a character seed and group affiliations suggests a lot of history, the player had a lot of space to create more detail in the way players in *Vampire* larps do in many countries.

Unique Personalities

The most complicated part of the Larpweaver system was related to character personality. For this part of the process, we created a questionnaire asking different questions about what kind of a character the participant wanted to play. Based on the answers, the system assigned personality elements to the character.

An example of a question is: "What sort of themes do you wish your conflict to be built around?" Response options included "I'm interested in fate and how to change it" and "I'm interested in questions of control."

In the case of this particular question, our character personalities were built around the idea of conflicting traits, so that the essential dynamic of the character would be formed out of a discrepancy in the character's personality. For example, the character could be cheerfully unhappy, someone who is comforted by the fact that everything sucks. The idea behind this is to force the player to make interpretations instead of playing a character as written. It also creates the necessary space for rewarding internal play when the player can balance different conflicting impulses to determine the way to act.

The questionnaire also provided elements of the character's history that were relevant to the theme of the larp. *Enlightenment in Blood* was about the revolution of the abandoned vampire underclass against their Camarilla masters. The Camarilla is a vampire organization in *Vampire: the Masquerade*, the role-playing game on which *Enlightenment in Blood* was based.

To make the revolution personal, the system gave every character a specific trauma related to the Camarilla, chosen based on the player's answers when they used Larpweaver. For example, the character might have been tortured by the Camarilla, or maybe the Camarilla arranged for the character's friends to be executed.

This is a good example of the way Larpweaver encourages thinking about characters in a systemic fashion. If a theme should be present in all characters, it can be built straight into the mechanism the player will use to build their character.

Other Choices

Apart from these choices, we also included a couple of specific elements in the character creation system to help players access the larp. One familiar to Vampire larpers is the Disciplines or superpowers that are part of the original role-playing game. We simplified them to make them work better in a larp like this, and gave the players the choice of which ones they wanted to have.

This is a good example of a choice that can be totally free, with no limits on how many characters have this or that power. Because in the case of this particular larp the powers characters had didn't affect the overall design structure (although naturally it affected the play of individual players), the choice could be free of the kind of quotas we needed to use for the primary groups. Game balance was less of an issue in general because the game



We assumed that simplistic combat rules would discourage fighting. Instead the opposite happened: Simple combat meant more combat. Photo: Tuomas Hakkarainen, in-game.

mechanics we used for vampire powers made them much less powerful than in most other interpretations of *Vampire*.

In addition to the revolution, another of the themes of the larp was enlightenment, especially from a vampire perspective. We wanted the larp also to have space for reflection and even ideological debate. To support this, we articulated a number of different possible ideologies for the characters, which could then be chosen during character creation. For example, a character could be a materialist who didn't really believe in the great vampire myths of Caine and the Antediluvians.

This element in the character would then allow the player to access this particular subject matter inside the larp, in the form of conversations with other characters or just personal reflection.

Early Adopters

The way we deconstructed characters and arranged the pieces into a set of choices in *Enlightenment in Blood* is just one way of doing it. Every larp has its own demands, and therefore, even if the software tool or the basic principles

of character deconstruction are the same, the implementation of the character creation system can be very different.

In *Enlightenment in Blood*, much of the action was physical. You could dance, move from location to location, play out fight scenes (these were first resolved using our simple mechanic and then mimed out), make out with someone on a sofa, or be part of a roaring crowd of rebels. Because of this, much of the design in Larpweaver was about organizing the players into the various parts of the larp.

The second larp where characters were created in Larpweaver was *Parliament of Shadows*, organized by many of the same people who worked on *Enlightenment in Blood*. In *Parliament of Shadows*, we already chose to do some things differently than in the previous larp because of the different subject matter and priorities of the larp.

Because *Parliament of Shadows* was a much smaller game in which players were expected to be able to generate play out of discussions with the same few people they interacted with, we made the character seeds much more detailed and focused on giving more personality options. The themes of the larp called for the characters to have personal relationships with local Camarilla history as well as recent EU legislative fights, so we included options where you chose a particular historical event you'd been part of and a specific EU law you'd worked on. (The characters were Camarilla ghouls lobbying the EU on behalf of their undead masters).

It is my belief that this way of approaching characters can work very well especially when making bigger larps, but I also suspect that the larp we make now with these tools will seem primitive, even simplistic once we develop our understanding of this approach further. Hamlet has been carved up, but we're still experimenting on how to best arrange the body parts.

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