

## Playing Safe?

Martine Svanevik & Simon Brind

### *Abstract*

A number of high profile articles and discussions about safety in Nordic larp seem to imply that safety has become the primary concern for larp design. This paper interrogates that implication by a series of interviews with larp designers, and experts on safety. It concludes that larp can better explore dangerous spaces and themes with considerations for participant safety in place.

### *Introduction*

In the last 12 months, a number of high profile articles and discussions about safety in Nordic larp have been published.<sup>1</sup> We were interested to find out if this represented a turning point for the community. Is safety the primary concern now and has this come at the expense of the ‘edge’ that the form once had? Or are new approaches to safety actually allowing Nordic larp to push the limits further and to explore the extremes of the human condition?

To answer these questions, we conducted a series of email and video interviews with current designers, some who are associated with safety in larp and others who design extreme or challenging larps. This article is a summary of these interviews.

We have tried to give equal space to different opinions, but have discovered a significant overlap in the approach to larp design and safety in larp design between what we assumed were diametrically opposed camps.

1. From high profile articles explaining how to deal with harassment and sexual predators, proposed approaches to safety by committee to the appointment of semi-diegetic counsellors. There were lengthy (and sometimes heated) discussions about the effects of alcohol, threads about physical intimacy, and some disparaging comments about the so-called ‘cult of hardcore’.

Where our respondents have used larp specific jargon or terminology we have given a brief definition or explanation in the footnotes.

*Is larp dangerous?*

**Simon Svensson**

The normal world is more dangerous than nearly any larp. I think that going out on a Friday night is almost in every way more dangerous than going to a larp. So of course, I don't really think that larps are psychologically or socially dangerous in any way that normal life isn't.

**Maury Brown**

Dealing with other people creates dangers, and pretending to play a character is also a radically dangerous activity. We give in to emotions that we may repress in our daily lives, and we allow the character to bleed into our ego.<sup>2</sup> This is fundamentally dangerous and this is not a bad thing. It's a core part of larp. The harm from this danger can come, however, if we are not prepared to experience things like bleed, or cathartic emotions, or the tearing away of communal bonds built through the collaborative storytelling.

**Johanna Koljonen**

In my design practice, we talk very much about the distinction of being safe versus feeling safe. If you are not safe, you are in danger. But *if* you do not *feel* safe, you *certainly might* be in danger, but many other conditions also produce that feeling—for instance, being socially uncomfortable, or not knowing what to do next. And those things are not dangerous at all *per se*, but they do prevent one from engaging with the larp fully. A core challenge when we talk about larp safety is that maybe 80 % of what we refer to is about feeling safe to play rather than being safe from harm.

**Peter Munthe-Kaas**

Dangerous is a heavy word to use. Dangerous for what exactly? And compared to what? It is definitely less dangerous physically than many sports. Psychologically, I guess that you can consider larp to be dangerous, as it potentially can change what you believe to be you and how you see the world around you.

2. **Bleed** refers to something that passes from player to character or vice versa. In larp this is often (but not always) an emotional response or an emotional memory.

**Charles Bo Nielsen**

It is a bit naive to claim that experiencing hardship for a day, on the level with what others survive a lifetime of without dying, should break you as a person. Where you even know that this hardship is temporary of a day or a weekend and is fake or an experiment. To be honest, I believe that the human mind to be stronger than that. As I see it, larp can trigger traumas, not develop them.

*Are there limits to the themes you can explore through larp? Should there be?*

**Maury Brown**

The crux of the issue is not whether the theme should be explored, but whether it is explored with respect and honesty. We have to be very careful that we don't trivialize or reduce complex human beings and complicated situations into playable elements or caricatures, and that we don't reinforce harmful tropes. And we do have to be careful about co-opting identities that are not our own and allowing roleplay to perpetuate stereotypes and opinions that continue to marginalize, oppress, and *other* individuals and groups.

**Johanna Koljonen**

It's very weird to assume that any theme would be unsuitable for any medium. Just like all the others, the larp medium is better at some things and worse at others. Factors such as the skill of the designers, the play culture of the participants, and what kind of larp we're talking about also play a big part—just like they would with film, comics, or anything else.

In larp cultures which have a collaborative baseline and are focused on 'play' rather than 'competition', larp is often conceptualised as closer to theatre and other arts, and both players and the people around them are more willing to accept that it's possible to create appropriate frames for difficult topics.

**Simon Svensson**

I don't think it is a good thing to explore themes like bullying each other for our real life looks or using racist stereotyping without exploring it as an active or discussed part of the larp. But almost any theme can be explored in respectful ways. The limits are context dependent. If you make a larp specifically about the tradition of using blackface as a racist stereotype then absolutely it can be included in that game, but the limit to most games would be, for example, to use blackface as a way of signifying that you were of a different ethnicity. If a game is specifically about our real life bodies and that is what we explore, then maybe a larp can be made with that.

## 200 Shuffling the Deck

*With safety in mind, how do you design larps that let you push your boundaries in interesting ways?*

### **Peter Munthe-Kaas**

I try to make sure that my players feel that they have agency to stop an interaction if they don't want it; work extensively with workshopping<sup>3</sup> to create a co-creative atmosphere where everyone agrees on how the larp should be played, and try to create a safe space to land in after the larp has ended, so there is time for taking in the experience.

### **Johanna Koljonen**

Be super clear about the types of experiences players will encounter. Be very coherent, reliable, professional, respectful and courteous in all your communications with your players to demonstrate that you can be trusted.

Sanity check your larp content with other people, especially if your organiser group is very homogeneous – someone I know just came back from a larp with a lot of dead baby plots and I think that's a topic that looks very different to players of an age where they or people close to them are trying to have kids than to, say, a single 25-year old who has never been in a committed relationship. They can be a great writer and just not realize how personally painful a story like that can be to a couple in their forties.

You need to design the process whereby the players start to trust each other enough to be able to play at all, let alone anything heavy.

If you start by picking safety mechanics<sup>4</sup> off you're doing it ass backwards. The *OK check-in*<sup>5</sup> will not make your larp safe. An off-game room<sup>6</sup> won't make your larp safe. Larps are complex systems and the tools interact with everything else in the system. If the design elements are not aligned in support of the goals of the work, then a consent mechanism<sup>7</sup> can actually create a false sense of security,

3. **Workshopping:** tools for informing players, developing ingame relations, or practicing techniques used in the larp, usually occurring right before play starts. A workshop can help you find your character and show you how to play within the game.

4. **Safety mechanics:** The methods, techniques, and rules that are put into a larp by the designers in order to keep the participants from doing actual long term harm to themselves or one another.

5. **OK Check-in:** A specific technique to check with another player that they are enthusiastically okay with what is going on right now. Any response other than thumbs up means the player needs help. See further Brown, this volume.

6. **Off-game room:** A place to go to rest, recover, or just to centre yourself prior to returning to the larp. Some offer a quiet space for reflection, other support, hot drinks and a hug.

through signalling that you take safety seriously when in fact you don't even understand how it works.

### **Caroline Sjövall**

Make a larp about pushing boundaries. Be clear about it. Don't mix it or cover it up with something else.

### **Simon Svensson**

The most important part is expectation management. Make sure that people know what they are signing up for. Don't try to make it sound cooler or less serious or more serious than it is. Try to find a clear vision to describe what kind of play is available at this larp.

### **Charles Bo Nielsen**

The first and most important part is communication. You need to be honest to your potential players what kind of experience you want to make. Is the larp about pushing the envelope of what is possible in a physical or psychological matter? Then label it with trigger warnings and designed intentions of pushing people's limits.

Do your research if your physical conditions are risky. Your players will play down your content for their own safety—so make sure that the conditions are safe enough to actually be able to push yourself. Making a mortal combat fighting larp on a huge hilltop with limited space to move around without being plunged to certain actual death, will result in players making very fake punches and getting less injured than in a fight club larp in a basement.

*Is it morally acceptable to create a space for players to break themselves?*

### **Maury Brown**

Yes, but. It is only morally acceptable if you have the systems in place to allow them to calibrate<sup>8</sup> the level of breaking, to assist them as they break and begin to repair, and to respect their privacy about their own experiences.

7. **Consent mechanism:** A way of confirming prior to an interaction or scene that the other participants want to run with it. Sometimes an off-game negotiation, sometimes a meta technique.

8. **Calibration:** the process by which larpers discuss the uncertainties between their expectation of a larp and that which is actually happening. That which is calibrated can intersect with safety, for example calibrating the intensity of physical interactions between players, 'I am happy for you to go harder'. We argue that calibration is a metatechnique rather than a safety technique because it is often used in act breaks as a method for calibrating story and character interaction as well as player safety. See

**Johanna Koljonen**

Here's the thing about larps in which people can break themselves: I think all larps have that potential. Let's say I run a concert venue instead of a larp. Some people will come in and drink very heavily and then listen to a band they loved during a particularly difficult breakup. I don't think it's reasonable to ask the venue's designer or manager or the band's promoter to stop people from doing this—but sometimes it will happen, and they will be a wreck, and may require some help.

I will say, however, that I find it morally dubious for players to use larps to break themselves. Or even to explore how far they can go before they break. I think you should aim for a level where you won't break, and then if you overshoot by accident and have a strong reaction, then that is within the normal range of What Larp Does.

**Simon Svensson**

I think it is absolutely fair to design larps that could break people as long as you tell people about them and say exactly what they will entail. Then people going there are saying: 'Okay, I am willing to do this and if it ends badly then that is on me.'

*Should some larps come with a 'strong content' advisory sticker?*

**Charles Bo Nielsen**

I would say 'could' instead of 'should', but if you don't make simple trigger warnings, you should be quite open and frank about the actual content, so that people can decide for themselves if it becomes too strong for them.

**Maury Brown**

People should know what themes and content a larp is designed to explore. They should know how the larp organisers will handle emergent play and content and themes the players bring in. They should know that they are safe at the experience, that organisers have guidelines and procedures in place to ensure that participants handle the content responsibly and respect the rules of the community. They should know what physical and emotional demands will be made of them. In short, they need information to decide if this larp is for them at this time.

**Simon Svensson**

Absolutely. And a very specific one. Not just that this larp could contain

offensive material, no, ‘if you go to this larp you are likely to play out acts of sexual abuse’ for example.

### **Caroline Sjövall**

Better with a clear vision instead. Information: this is what we want to have in our larp. You will be naked at this larp. You will not have coffee.

*Do you think there is still a space for risk in larp design?*

### **Maury Brown**

Absolutely. Larping itself is risky—you’re taking on a persona that is not your own, you’re engaging in new activities with new people, and in some cases, you’re participating in an activity that dominant society may marginalize. It’s important to note that safety is not the absence of risk. Safety (and by that we mean a broad category of physical, psychological and emotional safety) is definitely about considering how to mitigate risk, but no amount of safety procedures and tools will ever fully remove all risks.

Safety and calibration tools are more about being transparent about the risk—letting participants know the dangers that might happen and giving them the choice to take those risks and to consider what level of risk they are ready for. Part of the fun and thrill of many activities, including some larps, is about taking a risk and overcoming it. But you want that sweet spot of knowing the risks, wanting to confront them, and feeling capable of dealing with them, and you want the support system in place to be prepared to help participants for whom the risks are too great, and they require assistance. I would never advocate removing risk from design (nor do I believe it is possible). In fact, I believe that transparent safety and calibration tools allow larp design and larping to tackle even greater risks, because they are critical to creating spaces of trust, agency, and autonomy.

### **Johanna Koljonen**

Yes of course; that is why I do this work. I don’t want games to be bland, I want them to be stronger. This always implies an element of risk, in the sense of social risk, or the risk of learning something about yourself, or the risk of experiencing something painful as part of a learning process. We can’t do that kind of role-playing if we’re not safe as well.

*Where does safety feature in your design process?*

**Charles Bo Nielsen**

I aim to include my players in the safety process as much as possible, since they are the ones who have to go through the experience. Some designers like to test their design extensively until they feel safe, I like to engage in dialogue with my players about what they are okay with and build the larp around that.

**Johanna Koljonen**

Everywhere. Not every second of design time of course, but in each iteration of each element it's there. It's one of the basic questions—just like we ask 'how does this serve the intention of the piece and how does it produce or inspire the player actions we want to see?', we also ask 'how does this affect the interaction system between the players?'

**Simon Svensson**

We usually start off with a 'fuck safety' perspective, just in order to get the wild ideas out there. We want to design interesting larps; we want to make something cool for our own sake but then afterwards we sort of ad-lib safety onto the larp to see what we need to change to realize our vision, to get players in, and to be able to communicate our vision in a sound way.

I think that sometimes, people are too wary or careful with their own experiences and that people too often use safety valves and like going off-game instead of experiencing a larp the way they could have. Their experiences would have been deeper and more meaningful if they had not gone off-game, or if they had not laughed it away or taken breaks.

**Peter Munthe-Kaas**

I think it is usually an add-on that comes after the core experience design has been made. It is more based on 'what could potentially be unsafe/uncomfortable' for the players and then figuring out some ways of dealing with that.

*Where is the sweet spot between responsible design and danger?*

**Johanna Koljonen**

The sweet spot is zero danger but enough social and emotional risk that you have to be a little brave to engage. As a designer, you enable that bravery through taking care of real safety and designing player culture, calibration and consent mechanics right.

**Peter Munthe-Kaas**

I think transparency<sup>9</sup> is a very important part of any ‘extreme’ larp design. The ability to describe the experience that the players are going to have (or at least what you as an organiser are designing for) in an open and honest way, makes it easier for potential players to choose if this is an experience they want.

**Simon Svensson**

I don’t think every larp should be super hardcore nor that everyone should always push themselves to the limit in every larp they play, but if we are making a larp where they are supposed to push themselves then I think the sweet spot is the moment when they can start trusting that other people want them to do these things to each other.

There is a sweet spot when the safety techniques put the responsibility on the one who thinks they cannot handle more, not the person who is doing things and is still comfortable with them. In my personal opinion, I do not want to design or play larps that constantly force you to check in with people to make sure what you are doing is good, because it won’t be good larping.

*Conclusion*

Safety plays a part in every larp design process, even though the focus on safety might differ from designer to designer.

All the designers we interviewed believed that an important part of designing for safety is about expectation management and clear communication. Telling the players what the game is about, which boundaries they were going to push, and how far they would be expected to go, is key. Players need to know what the larp is about to see if it is for them.

One other interesting finding was that vocal proponents of safety in larp design still want to make larps that explore difficult and potentially painful themes. And, as importantly, vocal proponents of larps that do push the limits of the form still care about safety and still consider it a key element in their larp design. As long as the themes and tools are clearly communicated up front, everyone agreed that larp could, and even should, explore themes that are uncomfortable.

9. **Transparency:** Some larps have no secrets. For players who are interested, everything that could happen or will happen in the larp is made available to them in advance. Simply put, there are no surprises and participants are fully aware of what they are getting into.

There is still room to explore the darker and more difficult aspects of the world through larp. We can legitimately explore the extremes of the human condition, as long as we do it with informed consent from all participants, and to do that we must clearly communicate what each larp is about.

# DANGEROUS ADVISORY LARP

*The larp designers interviewed for this article*

**Maury Brown** has navigated the legal labyrinth of bringing large-scale Nordic larp to the famously litigious North America as the author and lead organizer of New World Magischola, Immerton, and Beat Generation. She regularly publishes and speaks about safety in larp and roleplay, and believes that safety systems are a prerequisite for these inherently emotionally risky activities.

**Johanna Koljonen** is behind the most significant work and writing on safety in larp. She coined the term calibration and has contributed safety design to intense larps such as *Inside Hamlet*.

**Peter Munthe-Kaas** is one of the minds behind KAPO, a larp that did not so much as play on the edge as redefine what the edge actually meant.

**Charles Bo Nielsen** has a reputation for designing and playing hardcore larps. The most famous being *What Are You Worth*, which featured on a Discovery Channel documentary about Nordic larp. During the larp participants were told that events would continue to escalate until they called cut; this led to both rectal examinations and mock executions.

**Caroline Sjövall** is a larp designer whose work includes the 2017 game *Gården (The Farm)*, a larp about a religious re-education centre where no meta techniques were used to simulate violence, sex or any other type of interaction.

**Simon Svensson** is behind larps such as *The Solution*, *Do Androids Dream?* and *Echo Chamber*, all of which explore dark themes and have a reputation for pushing the limits of players emotionally and psychologically.

#### *References*

Maury Brown. Safety and Calibration Design Tools & Their Uses: OK Check-In, Lookdown, Pronoun Correction. 2018. In *Shuffling the Deck: The Knutpunkt 2018 Companion Book*. Edited by Annika Waern and Johannes Axner. 57-66. ETC Press.

