

## Playing Nasty Characters

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*Näcken. Photo by Emmelie Nordström, På Gott och Ont photoshoot 2017.*

### *Abstract*

Nasty characters can be important and necessary in larp; and then somebody has to play them. This article looks at the practical issues of taking on such roles; at the social and psychological implications of this kind of play; and at the important things to consider when coming out of play.

*Introduction*

In this article, I will address some things to keep in mind when playing certain types of characters: villains, cruel bastards, heartless manipulators, unsympathetic types, mighty evil overlords or schoolyard bullies. For simplicity's sake, I will just call them nasty characters. You might want to play such characters for various reasons, because the story needs an evil emperor as well as heroic rebels, or because you want to explore the psychology behind cruel actions. Or perhaps just because it's a fun acting challenge.

*Playing Nasty – Easy for Some, Hard for Others*

Before writing this article, I asked around among online and among my friends about their insights into playing nasty characters. Something that came up is that people experience it very differently. For some people playing a nasty role was no different than playing any other type of role, for others it was an emotional struggle or downright impossible.

I can't speak for those who find it a torment to play an evil character, because for me it comes easy. When I was five I jumped at the opportunity to play the evil knight Kato from Astrid Lindgren's "Mio, my son" in the school play. I generally always enjoy playing a nasty character.

But I can say that it is common to be uncomfortable playing nasty characters. In some cases that doesn't change no matter how much practice you get. If you notice that playing a villain isn't for you, then there is no need for you to torment yourself. It is okay to not be comfortable playing nasty characters. But if you want to play a nasty character, here some of my best tips.

*Actions and/or Personality*

What defines a nasty character? Their actions or their personality? On the one hand, it is possible to play a charming and pleasant character that does horrible things. On the other hand, it's just as possible to play a character with a personality as repulsive as a maggot-infested wound that still manages to do good things.

I regard both character types as nasty characters, at least for the purpose of this article, because they face similar challenges in how you as a player are meant to stir up negative emotions in other players without going overboard.

A character that is pleasant but does horrible thing tends to make others feel rage, hate, betrayal, disgust and fear when it becomes clear that the character

does horrible things. Other characters may react with denial if their trust and liking of that character goes too deep. A character that seems nice but isn't will often stir up lots of intense and personal emotions.

While an unsympathetic, mean, or repulsive character that does good things tends to have others first react with negative feelings, that might lessen over time or be mixed up with some sort of grudging respect as it becomes clear that the character, no matter how nasty they appear, does good things.

Yet, most nasty characters fall between these extremes. They seldom have a 100% repulsive personality, nor is every action they take pure evil. What differentiates them from more sympathetic characters is that their unsympathetic sides are more predominant compared to other characters.

### *How Nasty Can You Play?*

So how horrible, unpleasant, cruel, violent or mean can you play during a larp? To get an answer to that question there are three perspectives to take into account: the organizers, other players and your own.

The first thing to figure out is what the different perspectives WANT. Ask them what sort of nastiness they want and would like. Ask yourself that too. That is the sweet spot you are looking for. After you figure out what people want, you can begin asking yourself and others what their limits are, what they would or wouldn't be okay with. Aim for the wants and avoid the limits.

Before the larp read the game materials and get in touch with the organizers. Try to get a feel for what sorts and levels of nastiness they want for the game. Try to have concrete discussions, with concrete examples. For example: "Is systematic bullying something they want for their game? Is violence? How do you want it to be done? What safety techniques will be used?" And so on.

If you have the opportunity you can talk with other players before the game and ask them what sort of interactions they want, and then if there are some things they would want you to avoid.

Try to sort out what you want and what your limits are too. Often it is easy to think that you want to try to take it as far as you can, but that often means that your character will be so extreme that you miss out on nuanced interactions.

No matter what sort of answers you get, keep in mind people might change their minds and have every right to do so. People might realize that they want

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something else, or that they are not okay with something they thought would be fine. This goes for the organizers, other players and yourself.

People might back out of scenes and relationships you planned together with them before the game. You need to be okay with that. Sometimes because the subject is uncomfortable, people will back out of it in weird ways, for example by hiding from you out of character. If you get a sense that someone is trying to avoid something you planned, you can try giving them a way to gracefully back out of it. For example, by out-of-character asking them if they want to take play in another direction than you planned. Or just by giving them the space to keep avoiding you.

Aim for giving yourself and others the level of nastiness they want, but always adjust your level of nastiness so that everyone involved is okay with it. One approach to this is to start low and then work up towards to the desired level.

No matter what people said before the game, you need to be very attentive to other player signals during the game. If you are unsure if someone is uncomfortable in or out of character, ease up and see how they react; or check in if they are okay out of character. If the game uses safety or calibration rules, use them.

### *Things to Avoid*

There are a few things you should try to avoid when playing a nasty character, almost no matter what.

- Never attack out of character traits. For example, someone's body shape, appearance, real-life disabilities etc.
- Don't behave recklessly around children. No scene is so great that it is worth traumatizing a child.
- If your gut tells you something is wrong, don't ignore it. Be on the safe side.

If you often play nasty character you might once in while fuck up. You won't listen to your gut, you will say something that was hurtful out of character, and if you play around children you will realize the kids weren't as far away as you thought during your evil scene. If that happens, go out of character, apologize and tell them it was out of line. You can do this right away, or wait a little while if it's hard to do right away. Even if you make a mistake people will often be okay with it if you take responsibility and apologize.





*Erica Kolppanen as a vampire. Photo by Emmielie Nordström, Lajvlabbet photoshoot 2014.*

*Aspects of the Character to Consider*

When you play, create, or are given a nasty character there are some aspects to keep in mind. These aspects will affect how other players experience your character as well as your own experience. Consider how the behaviors used

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to portray your character may affect other players. Consider whether those behaviors may cause discomfort to players who have experienced similar behaviors before.

### *Close to Home or Not?*

One of those aspects is how close or far from home the character is. By close to home I mean the type of character many of us have personal experiences of. Schoolyard bullies, abusive partners or parents for example. Far from home are characters you don't have, and perhaps no one has, personal experiences of. For example, evil necromancers and murderous aliens.

When you play something far from home, let's say an evil necromancer, it is unlikely that anyone will have personal painful memories and traumas related to necromancy. People expect an evil mage to say vile and nasty things and often take it less personally. As a rule of thumb people are less sensitive to far from home villains and their actions.

But if you play a character closer to home, let's say a bully, it is likely that other players have out-of-character traumas relating to bullying. Because of this, you should be more watchful how your words and actions might be more painful due to real-life traumas.

One thing to watch out for is if you play a character that you didn't consider close to home, but might be close to home for other players. Maybe you don't have any experiences of gang-related violence, but it might be a subject that is close to home for other players. So please consider if anyone might have personal experience of the type of character you portray.

### *Enemy or Team Member?*

Something to consider when you play a nasty character is whether you will be considered an enemy or a member of the group. This greatly affects how people will feel about your actions. If some enemy calls you "a useless piece of shit" it may not bother you, because you expect an enemy to insult you. But when someone on your side says the same thing it stings a lot worse.

When you play a nasty character, it is good to be aware of this dynamic. An unsympathetic friend, team or family member's actions feels differently than those of an enemy. If you play in a game with rival factions you might do both: be a member of one group and the enemy of another.

*The Social Situation*

When playing a nasty character, the social context matters. We larp with others, and for your own gameplay's sake it is important to consider the social situation your character will face. Talk, if possible, with your fellow players before the game about what sort of social dynamic you want. Here are some common examples of social situations that you can use.

**Lonely:** Unsympathetic bastards don't make a lot of friends, so one of the common social situations for nasty characters is to end up in is being pretty lonely. Other characters might want to avoid you and you might end up spending much of the larp alone. Being loathed and lonely can be an awesome experience as well, but it doesn't suit all players. If you don't want to spend much of the larp alone you might consider other options.

**With like-minded companions:** Birds of a feather flock together. If you are a gang, or a few nasty characters, it can be natural for you to hang out together. It also turns you into a powerhouse of nastiness when there is a whole group of you. You can also support each other out of character. This is an option that I would recommend to newbies.

**Part of the team or part of the family:** Every family has their black sheep. If you play a nasty character that is a member of some kind of group that won't kick you out at the first opportunity, you can have a very social larp even if you play a pain in the ass. Especially if you are in a position of power in the group. Group membership also creates a situation where you can play a nasty character in general but having a few genuine positive relationships in the group.

**Well liked and total bastard:** Then there is the final option, which is really hard to pull off. To be well liked and nasty at the same time. For this to work, you really need to be able to do it, because even if you ask other players to play to lift and play up that your character is both charismatic and unsympathetic as hell, it tends to fall flat and just feel like the other characters are just sucking up.

You need to make players and characters alike both love and hate the character. But if you can make it work it is amazing. It takes a bit of daring to try to pull it off, and it won't always work. You might end up being passionately hated instead, or not coming off as vile as you wanted. This means you might end up playing a different character in a different social situation than you hoped for, which might still give you a great experience. But it is worth trying if you are okay with the risk of it failing.

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### *Nasty Towards A few Targets or the Whole Larp?*

Will your character be nasty to a large portion of the characters, or single out just a few? It will make a huge difference emotionally; both for the targets of the nastiness and for yourself.

If you are nasty to just a few characters it means that you can have a lot of positive relationships towards other characters too. On the other hand, people often find it a lot crueler, and feel more vulnerable, when a nasty character singles out a few targets. You also have to make sure it is not experienced as off-game bullying.

While if you are a bastard towards everyone you will have no or very few positive relationships to other characters; and because everyone has negative interactions with you, other characters will take the things your character does less personally.

### *Bleed and Aftercare*

When you play an unsympathetic character bleed and aftercare are important topics to consider.

After the larp, players of characters who spent the whole time fearing, hating and loathing your character might have some lingering negative bleed towards you. That bleed doesn't entitle them to behave badly towards you, but you should respect that it might be there. After the game, be nice, go and talk to players who had negative interactions with your character. Check in with them to see if they are okay, talk to them about the scenes, and give them a chance to get an out-of-character impression of you. Changing your look also helps others get over that bleed. Put on some other clothes, change your hair and makeup, wear a silly hat... The less you look like your character, the better. Tell them that you are actually nice, but that you totally understand if they are still feeling some negative bleed.

Then there is your own bleed and aftercare to deal with. Some people experience guilt after playing a nasty character. Some people who spent the larp being emotionally detached will feel a need to emotionally connect, be part of the group and hear that they did a great job. Some people will feel a need to apologize. Others want to get a distance from the character by fooling around and making fun of their own character.

Often playing a perpetrator is emotionally harder than playing a victim. Do whatever self-care you feel that you need, as long as it doesn't affect others badly.

You might after the larp have to remind other players that even if you played a nasty character, you have the same aftercare needs as everyone else. It might be that you need to feel that you are part of the group out of character, you might feel a need to talk about the larp and be listened to, or need just as many hugs as everyone else. It is easy for other players to forget that, after you have been playing their enemy. It is okay to remind them.

### *Don't Defend the Cruel Things Your Character Did as Right*

There is one more thing that is important after the larp. Don't defend the nasty things your character did toward other characters. Bullying is a horrible thing to do to another person. Torture is even more so. And so on. While you on some level might need to empathize with your character to understand why they took that kind of action, that doesn't change what they did. Out of character you have a responsibility to acknowledge that fact. Own it. Admit it. Don't defend shitty things your character did to other characters. Maybe they did so because they were emotionally fucked up, forced to do it or were socialized into thinking it was right. Maybe your character did some nice things too. That doesn't matter.

In many cases, it will be important for your fellow players to hear you acknowledge what your character did to theirs, without you trying to justify and defend it. Be clear that your character did things that caused harm, and while you might understand why the character did so, that doesn't change anything. By acknowledging that your character caused harm, other players will feel more secure around you when you play unsympathetic characters.

### *In Conclusion*

There are many ways to play a nasty character, and I hope that this article has given you some tips on what to keep in mind when playing them. By now you have probably noted that this article didn't give you any concrete tips on exactly what to do, what to say, how to push people around and so on. That is because there is too much diversity. I can't give advice that would work both for an orc war leader, and a jealous snobby ex-partner. This aim of the article is to give you categories to consider and keep in mind when you are playing a nasty character.

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If you have questions or want to discuss the article please get in touch with me on social media or send me an email.



*The author Elin Dalstål playing the nasty character Agnes. Photo by Emmelie Nordström, På Gott och Ont photoshoot 2016.*