

Designing the Volunteer Experience

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Abstract

When producing larps we often rely on the help of volunteers. But we are currently not actively looking at the volunteer experience from a design perspective. This article proposes several ways of looking at volunteer experiences and the way we can specifically design for those to be successful.

Introduction

During Knutepunkt 2017 I followed a debate that was of particular interest to me. Volunteering was presented by some as something evil; a way to make people work for free without any reimbursement. However, as a community which constantly talks about creating experiences I believe we should start treating volunteering as an experience in itself, which we can design and market in itself, not just as a way to get into a larp that is full or too expensive.’

In this article, I would like to propose alternate ways of looking at volunteer work, and how these can help our community, our volunteers, and our businesses to grow.

Volunteering as a learning experience

There are several skills a volunteer may pick up at a larp. From leadership to game running and from costume design to writing, there are many valuable learning experiences available.

If you market your volunteer experience as a learning experience, make sure you can actually make learning happen! Firstly, this means that you will not always have the most effective and experienced people on your crew. Although it is tempting to let the volunteer who is a tailor by trade do all the costume

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fittings, it might benefit the less experienced volunteers if that professional can coach them while they learn how to do it themselves.

Secondly, people do grow more from being told the theory and thought behind the job they are doing. This takes a little more time than it would to just tell them where in the room they need to put every single prop. But it will help fuel their own creativity and understanding of why things are done a certain way.

Thirdly, people learn by making mistakes. When you give responsibility to volunteers who are learning new skills it might mean that it takes a couple of tries to get it right. This costs time but will teach valuable lessons, especially if you take the time to assess the results together with your learners and explain where and how they can improve.

Offering well-tailored learning experiences will benefit the entire larp scene in the long run. You will be contributing to raising a new generation of organizers; be it those coming of age or those bringing larp to new areas of the world. If we invest more in offering our knowledge, skills and experience to others. It might be a little faster to have the job done by someone more experienced, but when learners have completed their learning objective you will have another capable volunteer on your team.

Volunteering as a payment for the player experience

With prices of larps rising, volunteering spots are often given to players who otherwise could not attend the larp. In this case, the volunteering experience must be the same or at least similar to the player experience. There are two ways volunteering like this most often works out in practice:

- A volunteer spends a certain number of hours before or after the game on tasks either from home or on location. When the game starts the volunteer is no longer considered a volunteer but is treated as a player.
- A volunteer does a certain number of shifts during the game (for example npc or tavern work.) Outside of those scheduled tasks, the volunteer is treated as a player.

Of course a combination of these two is also possible.

Volunteering as an alternative to paying can make a volunteer feel included in a community where he or she would otherwise not be able to participate. The emphasis lies on providing a player experience as a reward for the volunteer

work done. This is a classic case of providing extrinsic motivation; behavior that is driven by external rewards such as money, fame, grades, and praise (Ryan, and Deci 2000) and especially the first type is very similar to a paid player experience.

The second type relies on a similar extrinsic motivation but still requires the volunteer to step out of their player experience in order to do some work. It is suggested that labor which is in conflict with the experience a player desires or expects from the larp may make the event less rewarding (Jones, Koulu, and Torner 2016, 125-134) This is especially relevant for larps with a high level of secrecy. In many cases volunteer work before or during the larp might take away some of the games secrets and surprises, in practise this might heavily impact the player experience. It is therefore important to negotiate the volunteers' tasks and time in order to reach a balance between the work done and the reward received. In many cases, it is also reasonable to sign a contract between volunteer and organiser containing the amount of work (in tasks and/or hours) and the reward applicable.

Volunteering as an alternative to the player experience

This case differs drastically from the one above in the fact that the volunteer participates as a full-time crew member, and does not get the same experience as a player at any point during the game. In this case, the volunteer is a part of the design- or production team community but most often serves as an npc or practical helper during the game.

When this is done, it may cause confusion as to the role of volunteers during the game. Are they there to be solely in service of the game and its players, or are their experiences completely their own in the same way as the players?

In this case, clear communication before sign-up is key. It saves a lot of problems on location and before the larp if all parties involved know what is expected of them. When marketing these type of volunteer experiences, it is key to emphasize the differences between the volunteer and player experience. But a lot can be won by emphasizing the similarities as well!

Volunteering as free labor

When volunteers are recruited to commercial production companies, they are sometimes held to the standard of the paid crewmembers. They do however

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hold a different position on the status ladder of a larp organization, and need to be treated differently.

It is completely fair to have expectations of your volunteers, if they know what they signed up for. It is super important to clearly communicate anything they **MUST** or **MUST NOT** do, be it before during or after their volunteer engagement. If there is some kind of reimbursement scheme in place, they should be aware of its requirements. If the reimbursement scheme differs per person or job, this should be known beforehand. It is advisable to have transparency in place, when it comes to reimbursements in order to make sure everyone is reimbursed based on their contribution, and not based on their relationship with the person who decides on the reimbursements.

A well-informed volunteer who consciously signs up to volunteer within a business structure, who is treated well and has all their basic needs met will be more likely to be happy with their experience (Swistak 2017).

This is especially important for specialist volunteers. Volunteers who get brought on board due to a particular set of skills are often put to work on just that one task. It is not uncommon to recruit volunteers foreshadowing an all-round experience, so if you want to bring in a volunteer due to their specialist skills (like sewing or cooking) be communicative about that. Check if your expectations are the same as theirs, and see if you can reach a consensus with them before they get to the location and are taken by surprise.

When working with volunteers and paid employees in one team there might be some friction between these two parties. Where volunteers are usually brought in for a short period of time during a peak period in production they can focus their energy on that serie of tasks. Paid employees are often spending longer periods of time on a project and therefore have less peak moments. Paid employees are often more secure in their skills being up to the desired level needed for the larp and do not necessary need to bring extra time, labor or energy to the table. This difference in approach can lead to friction within a crew and needs to be addressed as soon as noticed by the responsible organizers both with volunteer and paid crew members. After all during the production of the larp they will work as one team.

Part of this friction might be prevented by clearly dividing responsibilities in a way that is visible for both volunteers and paid employees. When dividing tasks both volunteers and paid employees need to be aware of a clear baseline

that is established for the task at hand and be made aware of the fact that everything above that baseline is optional and therefore every individual's own responsibility. This might still mean that some volunteers will put a lot of extra work in specific aspects, but it will also mean that they can be pointed at the desired baseline which was reached by the paid employees as well. However, any work above that baseline should be praised and if possible rewarded making it more tempting to put in extra work for all parties involved.

Volunteering for fun

Beside hard work, volunteering is a fun and social activity and can definitely be marketed as such. Don't be afraid to emphasize social activities, free time and amenities the location might have. Designing for fun is definitely a thing when organizing our volunteers' free time, lunch, dinner or social activities. By becoming more aware of these and using these as a tool to build a dedicated and enthusiastic volunteer team, chances are they will return, and next time they might bring a friend.

I think we can conclude that there are several ways of designing the experiences for our volunteers. I have certainly not covered all of the options and I dare anyone to come up with new creative solutions. Just make sure that you know what you have to offer and be honest and clear about communicating it to those people interested in working with you.

I am aware of the fact that designing volunteer experiences is yet another job for an organizer crew who are chiefly concerned with designing the larp. But I strongly believe it pays off in the long run, both through happy (and thus returning) volunteers, as well as in more experienced and better skilled volunteers.

References

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