

Evolution of Story III: Having a LARP

Immersion, Liveness, and the Qualities of Experience

17th June 2025 | Online | Southampton Solent University, Southampton, UK

Evolution of Story III: Having a LARP - Abstracts and Programme

Join us at Solent University for the third iteration of the Evolution of Story symposium, where we will critically explore the evolving world of immersive storytelling through the lens of Live Action Role Play (LARP). Bringing together leading scholars, practitioners, and creatives, this one-day event will examine how LARP is reshaping narrative, liveness, and audience engagement. As LARP continues to transition from niche subculture to a dynamic storytelling form, the symposium will delve into its critical and conceptual dimensions, focusing on how real-time interaction influences audience perception and narrative construction. The program features a curated selection of academic papers, keynote presentations from leading voices, and hands-on workshops pushing the boundaries of immersive practice. Selected contributions from the symposium will be published in a special issue of *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, expected in late 2026 or early 2027.

Website: <https://evolutionofstory.info/>

KEYNOTES

Spontaneity is a Lie (But a Beautiful One) On Liveness, Agency, and the Myth of Emergence

Simon Brind, Avalon Larp

This talk examines the relationship between liveness, player agency, and emergent narrative in larp. Rather than viewing emergent narrative as something organically unfolding, it is framed here as an effect of power-knowledge regimes embedded within the structural design of the game. While these regimes are shaped by embodied role-play and immersion, what often appears as narrative spontaneity may instead function as a disciplinary mechanism—normalising particular story forms while marginalising others. The talk questions whether larp produces subjects who internalise the very rules that shape their imaginative freedom, and whether larp designers themselves may internalise dramaturgical conventions. To support this inquiry, a work-in-progress model of these metaleptic structures will be presented, offering an expanded framework for understanding narrative in relation to immersion and liveness.

Simon Brind is a larp designer, academic, and co-founder of Avalon Larp Studio. His work explores the intersections of narrative design, immersive experience, and participatory storytelling. With a background in both theatre and game studies, Simon brings a rich blend of practice and theory to his larps, often drawing on myth, folklore, and political themes. As a researcher, he is particularly interested in how larp can be used as a tool for exploring identity, agency, and social structures.

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PAPERS

In Tents Immersion: examining the emotional and performative labour of ‘Non Player-Character’s’ (NPC) and Encounter Tents

Ada Marlen, PhD Postgraduate, University of South Wales

Within Live-Action-Role-Play (LARP) events, volunteer crew members play a crucial role in maintaining immersion and the liveability of the site, particularly within the LARP-festival system. This paper explores the challenges faced by Non Player-Characters (NPCs) in sustaining the diegetic frame, drawing on fieldwork at Profound Decisions’ Empire LARP and auto-ethnographic PhD research.

Ada Marlen is a PhD researcher and performer with the University of South Wales. Their research interests are aligned along play and commodification in participatory cultures and the exercising of political awareness in these spaces. They are interested in creating LARP projects which challenge the undervaluation of fan time and allow fans to question their position in this hierarchy.

Lessons for larp from the design, development, and play of What We Take With Us

Dr Adam Jerrett, Senior Lecturer, University of Portsmouth.

This research examines the potential lessons from the creation and release of *What We Take With Us* (WWTWU), a semi-autobiographical, values-conscious pervasive game. Combining alternate reality, escape room elements, and game-based workshops, WWTWU offers insights for LARP design, focusing on player wellbeing, immersive experiences, and community building through transformative play.

Dr Adam Jerrett is a Senior Lecturer of Game Design and Games Technology. His research focuses on game design as both process and practice, emphasizing human values to create authentic player experiences. He explores pervasive, analogue, and real-world games, including the educational ARG Nomad and the wellbeing-focused pervasive game *What We Take With Us*.

“Do you have a bishop?”: exploring the Wars of the Roses through educational live action roleplay

Dr Charlotte Barratt, University of Leicester.

This paper explores the innovative use of live action role play (LARP) in teaching history, focusing on a school project called Game of Roses. Pupils take on the roles of key characters from 1483, gaining deeper historical understanding while developing teamwork and communication skills. The paper evaluates the game’s impact and educational potential.

Dr Charlotte Barratt (she/her) is a long-time Larper and expert in widening access and participation in higher education. Her research focuses on inclusion in museums and education, often intersecting with LARP. She specializes in creative methodologies, using drawing and photography to explore participant experiences. Her background spans art history, museum studies, and sociology.

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The Ludic Priority: The Push and Pull of Gameplay and Dramaturgy, a Comparison between Australian Larp and Immersive Theatre

Dr David Harris, Swinburne University of Technology

This paper examines the tension between gameplay and dramaturgy in two Australian immersive works: the LARP *Dance of Ribbons* and the immersive theatre production *Hour of the Wolf*. The study explores how ludic structures mediate narrative flow, player decision-making, and thematic resonance, offering insights into balancing agency and dramaturgical control.

Dr David Harris is a lecturer of interactive narrative and game design at Swinburne University of Technology and a PhD candidate at the Victorian College of the Arts. His research explores the intersection of immersive theatre and game design, focusing on how interactive elements shape audience and player experiences.

The Jump Scare Spiral: Speculation across Layers of Spectatorship in Immersive Impact Design

Dr David Norris, Blackpool & The Fylde College

This paper examines the jump scare as a dynamic sensory invitation across various immersive formats, including LARP, live scare attractions, and games. It explores how spectatorship layers interact within curated fantastical encounters, analysing the balance between individual and group affect. The study highlights the role of predictive speculation in immersive performance design.

Dr David Norris is a postdoctoral researcher who graduated from the University of Birmingham in December 2024. He has over a decade of experience in commercial scare entertainment and is the leader of the BA (Hons) Acting course at Blackpool & The Fylde College. His research focuses on curated fantastical encounters, often within a horror framework.

Immersing, not Drowning: An Autoethnographic Study into Audience Onboarding

Harry Harrold, LarpX

This study explores how larp practices can inform immersive media, focusing on audience onboarding. Drawing from personal experience as a participant, designer, and crew member, it examines how pre-event character understanding and behavioural expectations enhance engagement. The findings offer insights into improving audience preparation in immersive storytelling experiences.

Harry Harrold has been involved in larp since 1984, creating and organizing diverse experiences from small adventures to large-scale events. He is on the board of the Witchards Society and has been instrumental in bringing Nordic larp traditions to the UK. He is passionate about larp as a storytelling medium and blogs at larpX.com.

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Reframing Immersion: Role Playing Communities and Immersion as Practice

Josiah Lulham, University of Melbourne

This study examines immersion as a learned practice within LARP communities, drawing on ethnographic research conducted in Melbourne. It explores how immersion emerges through social interactions, material crafting, and community practices. The research challenges conventional views of immersion as a state, proposing it as a dynamic process shaped by collaborative play.

Josiah Lulham is a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne, researching LARP communities and their immersive practices. His work explores how role players craft immersive experiences and the affective impact beyond the game setting. Josiah is also an actor, theatre maker, and creative collaborator for Dance of Ribbons LARP in Melbourne.

The Dancing of Collaborators: Empowering Role Players in Dance of Ribbons Larp

Josiah Lulham, University of Melbourne & David Harris, Swinburne University of Technology

This study explores the collaborative role of participants in the Dance of Ribbons LARP, highlighting how players are framed as co-creators rather than mere audience members. Through design and practice reflections, it examines how empowering role players as collaborators shapes immersive experiences, balancing interactivity with collective storytelling.

Josiah Lulham is a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne, focusing on immersive practices within LARP communities. His research examines how players craft immersive experiences through material and narrative engagement. Josiah is also an actor, theatre maker, and co-artistic director of the Melbourne Playback Theatre Company.

David Harris is a lecturer of interactive narrative and game design at Swinburne University of Technology and a PhD candidate at the Victorian College of the Arts. His research focuses on the intersection of immersive theatre and interactive play. David is also an artist and theatre maker, specializing in immersive theatre and live game design.

“I Want to Hold You Close”: Power Abuse as an Inherent Problem in Vampire: The Masquerade LARP

Kyria Van Gasse, University of Ghent

This paper examines power abuse within Vampire: The Masquerade LARP, focusing on how the game's structure can inadvertently encourage such dynamics. Through two case studies, it analyzes both bottom-up and top-down power abuse, addressing the impact of bleed and the blending of in-game and out-of-game experiences in LARP communities.

Kyria Van Gasse is a Belgian student in her final bachelor year of Art Sciences at the University of Ghent, majoring in Performance Studies. Her research focuses on LARP and power abuse. She has presented at Romancing The Gothic, BEta Larp, and DraculaCon, addressing themes such as sexual intimidation in LARP and immersive performance practices.

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Kay-Fabled Liveness in LARP

Nafis Ahmed, Leeds-Beckett University, UK

This paper examines the concept of liveness in LARP through the lens of kayfabe, drawing parallels between professional wrestling and immersive role-playing. It explores how emotional immediacy and perceived presence contribute to sustaining fictional realities. The study offers a framework for understanding how participants co-create live narratives through shared commitment and emotional investment.

Nafis Ahmed is a doctoral researcher at Leeds-Beckett University, focusing on liveness and its ontological challenges in mediated live performances. With a background as a live entertainment producer, he has extensive experience in curating multimedia productions and music festivals. His research bridges performance studies and live arts, exploring innovative frameworks for immersive storytelling.

Playing the Part: The Endowment for Make-Believe

Tiz Creel, Independent Researcher

This paper examines the essence of play in LARP, emphasizing the player's ability to create immersive experiences through imagination, care, and trust. It argues that technological advancements may compromise agency and co-creation, while traditional LARP fosters deeper social bonds through face-to-face interaction, where physical presence enhances the authenticity of shared experiences.

Tiz Creel is an independent researcher and practitioner with a background in immersive play and interactive storytelling. Passionate about the dynamics of LARP, Tiz explores how imagination, social interaction, and trust shape meaningful player experiences. They have a keen interest in the balance between agency and immersion in participatory play environments.

Challenge in Mechanics-Light Larp: 'Watcherly' and 'Playerly' Performance

Dr Willoh Osmond, Unaffiliated

This paper explores how mechanics-light LARP can challenge a player's subject-position. Using practice-autoethnography, it examines the Nordic LARP *Just a Little Lovin'* and extends Barthes's framework of readerly and writerly texts to include 'watcherly' and 'playerly' performance. It proposes a balanced approach to dramaturgy to foster transformative LARP experiences.

Dr Willoh Osmond is a LARP designer, playwright, and dramaturg. Their LARP designs include *Welcome to Whisper Bay*, *Zoe's Christmas Taskforce for Personal Betterment*, *Bleak Midwinter*, and *Life of a House*. They completed their PhD in Theatre in 2023, focusing on the politics of playing in LARPs.

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PANEL

Filling the Void(space): Participatory Dramaturgies and Community Building in LARP and Interactive Theatre

Katy Naylor, Voidspace

This panel discussion, facilitated by Katy Naylor from Voidspace, explores how LARP and interactive theatre foster community through participatory dramaturgies. Featuring leading practitioners, the session examines how storytelling practices build both temporary communities-in-the-moment and lasting communities of care, imagination, and play. The panel will discuss integrating community dynamics into live storytelling and creating transformative experiences.

Katy Naylor is a writer, editor, and creative producer specializing in interactive storytelling. As Void in Chief at Voidspace, she curates multidisciplinary events that explore participatory storytelling, including the annual Voidspace Live festival. Katy has interviewed numerous practitioners and is dedicated to building a thriving community around participatory narrative practices.

Panelists:

- **Jack Aldisert:** Theatre and filmmaker, co-founder of Deadweight, known for *The Manikins: a work in progress*.
- **Tom Black:** Co-founder of Jury Games, known for interactive political simulation *Crisis? What Crisis?*
- **Owen Kingston:** Artistic Director of Parabolic Theatre, creator of 'adaptive narrative' in interactive theatre.
- **Chloe Mashiter:** Award-winning game designer and theatre-maker, specializing in blending RPGs and performance.