

## The Book of LARP - Chapter Two

### **The Spectrum of LARP**

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## Defining LARP

The old saying goes: *Ask any ten LARPers what LARP is and you'll get eleven different answers.* It seems that there are so many different LARP groups and each of them play LARP differently.

As was mentioned in our first chapter, the difference between live action and tabletop roleplaying is that tabletop roleplaying focuses on the interactions of the players and the GM (or the players and the game system) and live action roleplaying focuses on the players interactions with other players or with their environment.

I've found it helpful to divide LARP along two axes: Mechanics and Interaction. A LARP can fall anywhere on the spectrum of these axes, but there are enough games out there to make some good generalizations.

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### **The Mechanics Axis**

Mechanics are simulations. Most LARPs have simulations for difficult, dangerous, or impossible tasks. These are called game mechanics or the game system.

For example, it is dangerous to actually hit someone with a sword. It is difficult to pick a lock. It is impossible to turn invisible. Most games have some sort of abstract representation for these activities, their mechanics or system.

A mechanic is an abstract representation of a task. For example, a LARP may represent shooting a gun at someone by pointing an index finger at the character and yelling "bang." A system is a group of mechanics. For example, a combat system would explain not only how to shoot a gun, but how to punch, use a sword, dodge, and perform other actions related to fighting.

The Mechanics Axis measures the verisimilitude of the games systems. It consists of Live Combat vs. Simulated Combat. This is not to say that combat is the most important part of a LARP, but it is usually the clearest difference.

Each side of the axis has its strengths and weaknesses. Live combat includes a high degree of verisimilitude and requires the players abilities to perform an action. You want to hit someone with a sword? You have to actually hit the player with a prop representing a sword, usually a padded weapon. NERO™, for example, is a well known live combat organization.

There are many advantages to live combat. Combat, and all mechanics, happens at real time. You don't have to stop the game and wait around to get a GM ruling. And there is a real adrenaline rush when you are carrying a sword and suddenly see a gang of monsters running right for you.

The real problem with live combat, however, is that you cannot play a character who is a better fighter than you actually are in real life. Some groups try to offset this by allowing characters to do more damage, but it doesn't matter how much damage you do if you cannot hit the other person in the first place.

Further, the more real you try to be, the less flexibility you allow. In a live combat system, you cannot create new items for use in the game unless you have the physical props to do so. And there are some things that cannot easily be represented as they require too much abstraction.

## Example

John is playing Marcus the Brave, an adventurer. He is walking down the road alone when he is ambushed by a goblin. Here is how it would play out, first in a live combat then in a simulated combat situation. The actual systems used have been made up for this example.

### Live Combat

Both John and the goblin are carrying padded weapons. Marcus has a sword made with a PVC (pipe tubing) core and covered in closed cell foam and silver duct tape. The goblin has a club, also made with a PVC core and closed cell foam, but with brown duct tape.

The goblin jumps onto the path behind John and hits him lightly in the back with his club, calling “wood-3” to let John know that he has been hit with a wooden club and has taken three points of damage. Marcus can take 5 points of damage before falling unconscious, so he can only take one more hit with the club.

John maneuvers out of range and draws his sword. He advances on the goblin, swings and hits him in the arm, calling “metal-5” to tell the player of the goblin that he was hit with regular metal doing 5 points of damage. That’s all the goblin can take and the player falls.

### Simulated Combat

Both John and the goblin are carrying small note sheets of paper called “stat sheets” to let the players know how well they can fight. They have numbers on them. Also, John has a 3x5” card with the word “sword” written on it, while the player of the goblin has a paper towel tube to represent a club.

The goblin jumps onto the path behind John and yells “combat.” John is surprised, so the goblin has initiative. They both pull out their stat papers and compare numbers. Marcus is better, but the goblin gets a bonus for attacking from behind. They do a round of rock-paper-scissors, and the goblin wins doing 3 points of damage. Marcus can take 5 points of damage before falling unconscious, so he can only take one more hit.

John pulls out his sword card and attacks. Marcus has slightly better numbers and John wins in rock-paper-scissors, so the goblin takes 5 points of damage. That’s all the goblin can take and the player falls.

Simulated Combat is more abstract. It uses an external method that does not rely on player ability. For example, if you want to hit the other person with a sword, you may have to make a rock-paper-scissors challenge. You might not even have a sword prop; it might just be a 3x5 card with the word “sword” written on it. *Rules To Live By*<sup>TM</sup> is a simulated combat system.

The biggest advantage to simulated combat is flexibility. It is easy to run a game that has guns, or swords, or computer hacking. Further, most live combat games require a physical representation for items, but you can run a simulated combat game on a budget using index cards to represent items. This is also useful if your players are supposed to create items in the game.

Finally, you can play simulated combat games in places that would not readily allow live combat, such as bars or museums or swimming pools or china shops. And it is easy to create a character that is more skilled than you, the player.

The biggest disadvantage to simulated combat is that it is intrusive and can often be time consuming. Combat and mechanics take a longer time and can take you out of the game. Often, a GM is needed to adjudicate results.

Simulated combat games can often also lack verisimilitude. Holding a padded “sword” that you can hit another player with just seems more “real” than holding a card or miming it.

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## Live Combat Mechanics

Live Combat games tend to be divided into two camps: Hit Locations and Hit Points. In a Hit Points system, it doesn’t matter where the physical sword touches your opponent, it still does the same damage. The example to the left uses Hit Points.

In the example, Marcus has enough hit points to take 2 hits, while the goblin only has enough for one hit. No matter where Marcus or the Goblin hit each other, they do the same amount of damage.

A Hit Location system divides the body into parts, usually the torso, each arm, and each leg. Many – but not all – Live Combat systems make the head and groin illegal targets. Some also make the hands invalid.

When you are hit in a limb using a Hit Location system, you lose the use of that limb. If you are hit in the torso, you fall unconscious. In the example, the goblin would have won the combat immediately in a hit location system.

This is, of course, an oversimplification. Some systems allow multiple hits or have a combination of the two, giving each hit location a number of hit points. But the more complex the system, the more intrusive it becomes.

The other division in live combat systems is how they handle magic. Live combat systems overwhelmingly are Medieval Fantasy worlds. This is because live combat tends to break down when a certain level of technology is reached. It becomes expensive or difficult to simulate a gun in a live combat system.

Live combat games tend to use one or two methods of resolving spellcasting: beanbags or “point and shoot.”

A beanbag systems means that the spellcaster must have good aim. When the spellcaster wishes to hit a target with a spell, she must throw a beanbag at her target. If she hits, the spell hits. If she misses, the spell does too, possibly striking someone else and affecting them instead. Usually the spell has a verbal component, so you know that if someone yells “fireball” and throws a beanbag at you that you have been hit with a fireball.

The point and shoot system makes mages more powerful, but opens up some room for error in adjudication. In a point and shoot system, the mage says a verbal component, usually a fancy bit of prose, like, “I summon the ten elementals of fire to strike you down forthwith” and then points at her target. The spell automatically hits as long as the mage has completed saying the verbal component.

However, in a game in the dark where people are moving around quickly, it can be difficult to tell who is the target of the spell. The spellcaster must resort to calling out names or descriptions, “you! In the chain mail,” and has to have a loud voice to be heard over the fight. Still, in a point a shoot system, the mage is much more powerful as his spells cannot miss.

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## ***Simulated Combat Mechanics***

**B**ecause Simulated Combat is more abstract than Live Combat, there are nearly as many forms of simulated combat as there are simulated combat games.

The best known mechanic for simulated combat is Rock-Paper-Scissors (RPS). It is used in the wildly popular *Mind's Eye Theater*™ system by White Wolf. When a challenge is made, either through combat, or performing other tasks, the challengers play Rock-Paper-Scissors against each other. Some systems require multiple rounds of RPS (best two out of three, for example) to resolve a challenge.

Other systems use dice or cards to resolve the challenge. The challengers either have to roll dice to compete or they play cards with special abilities on them.

*Rules To Live By*™ uses dice to resolve challenges. The players add an ability level number to a statistic and add a die roll onto that. They compare that to a target number plus a die roll and use that comparison to determine if they have succeeded.

Some games do not have any mechanics at all. This allows for some freedom of roleplaying, but it also means that there is no way to simulate a dangerous or deadly action on the part of a character.

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## ***The Interaction Axis***

**R**oleplaying is all about interaction. You are *playing* a *role*, after all. Live action roleplaying is no different. But it is the focus of the interactions that set live roleplaying apart from traditional “tabletop” roleplaying.

In tabletop roleplaying, the focus of the interactions is player to GM. The player tells the GM what the character does and the GM gives the results. All world of the game that is not the players is handled, managed, and performed by the GM.

The focus of interaction of LARP is different. It can be player to player or player to environment. On the interaction axis, these foci are called “theater style” and “adventure style.”

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## ***Adventure Style***

An adventure style LARP bears the most superficial resemblance to a tabletop game. The focus of interactions of an adventure style LARP is player to environment.

The players' characters tend to be a party of adventuring heroes, and while the characters may have individual differences, they band together and fight alongside each other.

The world, in this case, can be portrayed by non-player characters (portrayed by people who are not players, often called "cast"), GMs, elaborate props, scenery, or signs.

Players in adventure styleLARPs will find their characters trying to solve puzzles, fight monsters, deal with powerful foes and generally live the lives of heroes.

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## ***Theater Style***

The focus of interaction of a theater style LARP is player on player. The player's characters are not a solidified party, but rather a group of factions, or even each player out for him or her self.

Theater styleLARPs usually focus on politics, negotiations, power struggles, and social interactions.

GMs are still needed when the players wish to do something that affects the world outside of the player set (for example, making a phone call to an ally not in the game, or exploring a nearby haunted house). Cast players are fewer and there are usually fewer adventurish plots. The heroes and villains (if any) are all portrayed by players, not by cast or GMs.

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## ***Intersection***

Most live combatLARPs tend to be adventure style and most simulated combatLARPs tend to be theater style.

There is some sense to this. The quick, unobtrusive mechanics of live combat work well in a game where the focus is being a hero and fighting monsters, and the flexibility of simulated combat mechanics allow for a variety of situations for negotiation and politics.

Now, of course, this isn't a general rule. Not every game fits neatly on this grid, and there are a good many gray areas. But the Mechanics vs. Interaction grid is a good start for LARP classification. And it will help you know what you are getting into.

All of theLARPs in this book use *Rules To Live By*, a simulated combat mechanic. However, not all of them fall equally into the interaction axis.