

Getting Real with Virtual Make Believe

A Manifesto on VR Roleplay for Players and Designers
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LARP is a collaborative art form with decades of rich history and thorough examination into the theory of design and play. Its history has evolved into definitive schools of thought, marked by the publication of manifestos in the 1990's. Many of these manifestos carry a sort of dogmatic idealism, a proud declaration that *“this, and nothing apart from it, is the way to play”*. While most people are not as rigid, and especially not all people conform to a single form of roleplay, this idealism really serves to partition the field, to inform people on which experiences will best suit them.

On the flip side, VR roleplay is young and clueless. With only a few years to inform its burgeoning evolution through the COVID-19 pandemic, the VR project space is staggeringly diverse with not enough written backbone to account for all the conflicting play styles. Players often find out months into a project that their play style is incompatible with the designer or other players, and not enough people understand why.

In case it hasn't been made clear to this point, this document is an impassioned manifesto deconstructing VR roleplay and building it back up piece by piece. It is made to be a bold statement of loosely related beliefs and principles, not a broad analysis or statement of fact. In some ways, it responds to [☰ The Cost of Freedom In Roleplay](#), Sylan's manifesto that explores how freedom affects roleplay. I also highly recommend reading [As Larp Grows Up](#), an early 2000's commentary on late 90's LARP theory that sets a lot of groundwork for this document.

Design Informs Everything

Everything that has ever gone right or wrong with any roleplay ever can be directly tied to, explained by, and resolved by design.

This follows from the principle [“Everything is a designable surface”](#). If everything is a designable surface, then anything upon a surface is informed by the design that created it. Think of everything as a surface, and you’ve essentially abstracted everything to a designable element.

This forces project leads to critically think about their projects and how they might affect the way players engage with it. Far too many VR roleplay designers avoid accountability by asserting that the players are to blame for unwanted behaviors – “everyone shapes their own experience” and so on. Even further, some try to remedy these unwanted patterns with “workshops”, not only failing to address the design at the root cause, but adding bloat to misdirect from the real problem.

A quality roleplay is built on design that informs exactly what it communicates. A responsible experience designer is aware of this, and can analytically separate bad design elements and remove them when necessary.

The Three Way Model

A classical understanding of LARP style is to measure it by three categories: immersionist, dramatist, and gamist. The immersionist plays to experience the world through the lens of the character, the dramatist plays to heighten experience through theater and emotional performance, and the gamist plays to optimize experience by mechanically progressing toward a victory condition. While VR is well-suited to creating experiences much like video games, doing so is often contradictory to storytelling.

If you want a game, then play a game. If you want a roleplay, then join a roleplay.

The gamist masks interesting elements behind random number generators and mechanical systems. They justify unreasonable outcomes with power scaling and skill systems. They crave linear upgrades, quest rewards, and the short-lived gratification offered by a significant dice roll. Gamism is just the scenic route toward “play to win”, a selfish philosophy wherein players maximize their character’s ability to achieve win conditions. Playing to win is inevitably playing to make others lose. This is fine when the objective of the medium *is* to win, such as tabletop roleplaying games and video games, where the story is facilitated by mechanics. The player must defeat a challenge, solve a puzzle, or complete an adventure to progress further in the story. LARP, and by

extension VR roleplay, focuses on the players, what happens between them, how the world affects them, and how they affect the world.

The ideal style lives between immersionist and dramatist. Immersionism brings the player into the character and the character into the world, while dramatism brings the character into the story and the story into the world. Immersionism alone stagnates a roleplay. Dramatism alone is just meaningless bombast.

If your roleplay is intended to be gamist, forgo any pretense that dramatism or immersionism will somehow magically work with it. If your roleplay is not intended to be gamist, do not add game elements to it. Do not roll dice. Do not implement skill systems. Do not use mechanics that do not support immersion. It's about time people learn to create experiences without depending on these simple methods of self-gratification.

Getting Rid of the Tabletop GM

Traditionally, LARP has had difficulties with the Game Master role. An active GM in session is a physical presence that is impossible to ignore, an irreconcilable detriment to roleplays that prioritize immersion. Since VRChat allows the GM to be completely invisible, we may revisit the role's viability, and its current state in VR roleplay.

The usual VR GM floats around invisible, with tools to direct scenes and indicate points of interest. This invisible presence, while able to move around unabated, may also become a disembodied voice to narrate something to a character. All of these tools are made to control pace – a nice way of saying “break immersion”. In reality, the further integrated the GM's presence is to the setting, the more intrusive the actual GM activity becomes.

Every word a GM narrates takes a word away from all players listening. Every second a GM pauses takes a second away from all players in the scene. Every dice a GM rolls takes an opportunity away from all players affected by it.

Is the GM role viable then?

Yes, but not in the same way. The VR GM is still uniquely aware of the direction of the roleplay, and needs to actively follow context to maintain a steady influx of plot movement, so they are clearly necessary. While some believe this warrants separating

the GM role into two parts, those two parts are naturally entwined, so this would make very little sense.

However, the VR GM should completely deprioritize narration and pausing. They should then only use them when the purpose outweighs the cost, and no more. The purpose of the GM in VR roleplay is to facilitate player interaction, not supplant it. Where tabletop GMs would describe a scene, the VR GM should enhance diegesis by allowing players to interpret the scene. Where tabletop GMs would pause to measure action and counteraction, the VR GM should oversee the players determining the truth of the scene.

Playing to Lift

[“Play to lift”](#) is a method of play that focuses on lifting other players, the setting, or the narrative. A well-accepted traditional method of playing to lift is making conscious out-of-character decisions to favor the scenario. Doing so costs a small amount of immersion, but benefits from more fulfilling character drama. This is far more effective than playing to win/lose: playing to win is inherently selfish and competitive, while playing to lose fails to reward the other player for winning since they were destined to win anyways. The goal for any interaction is to experience interesting drama, and the easiest way to guarantee that it happens is to lift the scenario to achieve that interesting drama.

Nordic LARP officially interprets this as “play to let [other players] win”, but that definition is largely reductive and vague – I would revise it to “play for a collective player win”. The secret sauce in playing to lift is situational awareness, recognizing the direction of a scenario and lifting it. The important distinction here, which Nordic LARP doesn’t cover with this interpretation, is *recognizing when your win is beneficial to the situation, and subsequently everyone else*. The even secret sauce hidden in this distinction is that thoughtful character creation makes this far easier. Think of the themes or stories the character will explore, think of core conflicts, think of motivations. The more immersed you are in the day-to-day mindset of a character, the easier it is to take a step back and contextualize scenes.

Interpretations

Playing to lift has been introduced into VR roleplay to some success, but also some flawed interpretations.

“If I am the only person playing to lift, my experience will be worse because no one else is lifting me”

The problem here is that playing to lift is usually framed as strictly playing to lift others. This understanding follows the frustratingly reductive interpretation above – strictly speaking, *we as players should always benefit from playing to lift*. Being the only person lifting a scenario still means the scenario is lifted, so your experience as a player should still benefit regardless of whether anyone else follows suit.

“To play to lift, I must make out-of-character decisions to act like my character normally wouldn’t”

There is an unspoken assumption here that out-of-character decisions inherently lead to out-of-character action. This seems to be either by causality, or another unspoken assumption that a character has only one proper way to act at any point in time. Which makes sense – if you’re Predeterministic. For the rest of us that believe in free will, there is an intersection between a player’s understanding of a character and the character itself. In other words, the player is a person making decisions that reflect reasonable actions in-character. If you believe in roleplaying, then this unspoken assumption is silly.

So we can move on to the real underlying assumption: A player *cannot* play to lift while playing true to their character. Playing to lift requires an out-of-character impetus for the character to act in the interest of the collective players. Without that impetus, players eventually reach an equilibrium where nothing happens. And players, while playing absolutely true to their characters, do not offer this impetus to heighten scenarios, and are thus not playing to lift.

At a glance, this is absolutely true, which is why we’ll choose not to just glance. This is why I mentioned thoughtful character creation earlier. The purpose of a character is to experience interesting drama – not after three seasons, not in twenty episodes, but *consistently*. Some refer to this as a journey, which implies goals, or a destination. If there is a destination (or some kind of target), then a well-thought character

experiences a journey toward that destination. This character *intrinsically* represents a narrative that matters.

There's one thing left. So far this means characters work well on their own, but offers no guarantee for interesting drama. The guarantee comes from the world themes, which comes from design. Well-communicated themes align these well-thought characters to experience *natural* push and pull, attraction and friction, interesting conflict. Restriction fosters creative ways to use the situational space and enhance drama. This *inherently* creates a play to lift environment.

VR roleplay has not yet achieved this, so we have yet to see the full potential of playing to lift.

Escapism and the Modern Perspective

VR is incredible for exploring various settings in alternate time periods, cultures, and landscapes. This would normally lend to extremely interesting stories – if not for the average player's tendency to lean into modern ideologies. A player pursuing a theme overcoming sociopolitical adversity may find that not even a single player would dare issue them an obstacle along the way. Vice versa, a character settled into the norms of a setting conflicting with modern norms may find very few characters agreeing. This almost always contradicts expectations set by the project lead.

Players often violate these expectations for escapism, without seeking to play outside modern notions of comfort – playing, without actually roleplaying. But it is really not as simple as just telling people to leave their comfort zone. Acting out any sort of conflict in an entirely different moral worldview requires trust, and a community of trust is designed. As long as project leads fail to design for trust with appropriate tools and principles, the same ambient distrust will continue to make players hesitate to explore deeper.

This is a solved problem in Nordic LARP. Time for us to catch up.

It's Ok to be Normal

VR roleplay is identifiable by its high degree of character freedom, and hence the ability to actually *be* the things that this high degree of freedom entails. With this in

mind, project leads may offer a myriad of character parameters for players to choose from. Players often use this as a creative crutch – instead of designing characters with an interesting core conflict in mind, they design characters from aesthetics. These players also aim to stand out by fundamentally defying the norms of the world, creating imbalance and conflict that would otherwise make no sense in the setting.

Everyday drama is more interesting than aesthetic (epic) drama, character drama is conflict, and reasonable conflict aligned with shared themes is fulfilling. Aesthetics, on the other hand, are consumed and cast aside in an instant. Players should be confident grounding their stories in the world, thus playing to a core conflict that is far more flexible and interesting.

The Failure of the “Everyman” Roleplay

Roleplays aren’t – and shouldn’t be – for everyone. Far too often has a project strived to accommodate every possible participant, only to meet the needs of very few. GMs need to confirm the type of play and themes that they are able to support, and communicate them properly. Players should confirm whether a project fits their style well enough, and recognize when their own play style would clash.

Reactionary Roleplays

With such a diverse clash of play styles, players often find critical issues with projects that lead them to seek similar experiences elsewhere. Thus marks the creation of “reactionary” roleplays that are purpose-built to resolve issues they experienced in groups they recently left. However, every roleplay is built with a purpose, and these roleplays almost always lack a purpose besides “fixing problems”. Once the problem is fixed, then what? The project loses direction, and the players are left reminiscing about the better days.

Resolving issues is not a valid purpose for designing a roleplay.

The “Extra Credit” Slippery Slope

Picture this: you are a player in a roleplay that holds sessions once a week for 4 hours. You attend a session, feeling good about where you left off with another character, and spend the rest of your week looking forward to picking up from that interaction. You

return the next episode, only to find that the character has also gone through 3 extra hours of roleplay last session, an offscreen mission, a mid-session social lobby, and several days of ongoing text RP where they have experienced far more than you had the opportunity to engage with. The expectation for you now, to match that kind of opportunity at development, is to also spend 3 more hours in session, seek out offscreen missions, attend more sessions, and consistently engage with ongoing text RP activity. This is clearly unhealthy. But why?

It's easy enough to see that players who do more roleplay get more character development. The way that people reconcile this disparity is by distinguishing the type of RP that happens in extra credit. Most commonly, the main session *is* the roleplay, and everything else is either a dedicated mission or "soft RP".

Many claim that missions don't affect the main map – I would argue that they affect it *even more than the main session*. Missions define the stakes of the setting and put them to the test, and they usually offer far more emotional development since characters are *directly experiencing those stakes*. Whatever happens in these missions often echoes back into the main session as world movement, and the characters get to take their development home with them (if they survive). While this format is incredibly useful for pushing major plot movements, it incentivizes players to compete for plot, and often lends more to theater than roleplay. A roleplay designer should always look for how to maximize the potential of the main map first.

"Soft RP" doesn't exist. Implying it does also implies that people roleplay less meaningfully sometimes. Roleplaying inherently values the lived experience of the character, and unless someone is willing to confidently proclaim that one potential second of a character's lived experience is any more important than the next, then this should make sense.

The only real answer here is to limit engagement to well-communicated time slots. Extra credit is inherently unhealthy, and must be removed wherever possible. Sessions should be ended by a call to end scenes (hard end). The maximum potential time investment *is* the expectation of the roleplay, so make it reasonable.

Reality is Subjective

From the point of view of the player, only what happens in the LARP has reality. LARP is not literature, LARP is action.

Something must be perceived to be real. A character's backstory is not real until the player conveys it somehow. A secret is not real until it is somehow communicated in the medium through appropriate means. A conflict between characters is not real until action occurs between them to manifest it. The reality of a LARP is the sum of all things that have been perceived within it, and *nothing more*.

If something isn't real, it is meaningless.

Thus, you should always strive to bring things into reality.

Secrets

Designers and players often believe they use secrecy to create tension: preventing players from knowing what plans they have. In reality, they use it to feel more important: "I know something you don't", "I can't wait until something in my backstory comes up", leverage to keep intrigue, etc. This is a crutch for lack of creativity, or inability to make the secret's subject interesting, and often leads to more secrets – "now that we've uncovered the secret, what's next?"

The interesting outcome we all want is discovering the secret. Rather than expecting people to carve out your secret out-of-character, focus on what you *can* represent in-session to lift the scenario. And certainly do *not* exercise consequences based on circumstances you *haven't even communicated* to the other person.

Who Can Hear Me?

The VRChat platform allows map makers to control how far voice carries. This can be useful, such as reducing sensory overload in tight spaces. However, designers have used this to reduce speaking range through a "whisper" function, incentivizing players to rely on mechanics to prevent other players from hearing plans. This is inherently competitive behavior that pushes players away from each other, which we *don't* want when designing for players to *interact* with each other. Instead, players should properly

convey their intended level of character secrecy without depriving other players the opportunity of experiencing it.

If you cannot trust players to properly address what (and how) you bring information into a setting, then you have a critical trust issue between players that needs to be addressed first.

Muting to perform dialogue is a similar pitfall. If the dialogue is otherwise spoken, muting is clearly nondiegetic. If it is inner (unspoken) dialogue, muting prevents the dialogue from being real. Therefore, muting should be avoided wherever possible.