

The Human Encounter as a Designable Surface: Leveraging Insights from Larp Design to Enable Democratic Participation

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Social situations where people come together can be and often are consciously and purposefully designed. This is obvious in social sciences; our reality is socially constructed (Searle 1995). Commonly this is seen as a starting point for critical analysis, to unpacking how phenomena that may seem natural are actually a result of human meaning-making (Hacking 1999). However, it is also a fertile starting-point for design. Experience design is about treating the face to face human encounter (e.g. Goffman 1961) as an event that can be shaped to produce specific social affordances and meaningful outcomes. This happens in amusement parks, flagship stores, escape rooms, and at weddings, but the same kinds of design and curation also apply to healthcare, libraries, and worship experiences.

Contemporary design research centers the human experience, and design itself is now more commonly understood as enabling human experiences with and through objects or systems rather than as perfecting the objects or systems themselves. Any aspect of an experience or situation can be designed – and can thus be considered a *designable surface* (Koljonen 2019). A few examples include sound and acoustics (Is there music? Is conversation possible?), temperature (Might you choose to swim? Will you be wearing bulky gloves?), and interaction patterns (What rules and assumptions around physical contact apply?). Theoretically everything can be consciously curated to create specific affordances in a specific situation, but in practice usually we need to make choices and concentrate on just a few aspects.

A key challenge is that design takes conscious effort. Creating different possibilities and outcomes involves fighting an uphill battle against assumptions about how things are, as well as how they could be. Designable surfaces that are not actively considered in a design process are abandoned to traditional assumptions. These are typically assumed to be shared and obvious, but how to behave in a certain situation, use a specific space, or assume a social role with certain kinds of agency are highly contextual kinds of knowledge. Leaving parts of the experience undesigned –

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unquestioned, unexplored, and unexplained – creates unintentional thresholds to the participation of people with backgrounds, bodies, or experiences that do not match the presumed participant. Different areas of experience design also traditionally concentrate on different designable surfaces.

One area where human encounters are consciously designed is live action role-playing games (larps) (see Koljonen et al., 2019). These experiences often feature immersive environments, specific fictional storyworlds, character constructs to guide the meaning-making and agency of a participant – and bespoke rules for interaction that are used to highlight key thematics, bring focus on certain choices, and enable high levels of co-creative participation. Within the gameplay, these frameworks, like game rules more generally, both limit agency (not all moves are possible) and imbue the remaining agency with additional meaning (see Stenros & Montola 2024). But as larps require a great deal of daring participation – assuming unfamiliar roles, improvising dialogue and story beats, embodying skills and qualities the player might not share (see Deterding 2017) – designing the rules of play itself is not enough if many kinds of people are to participate. The runtime larp design is embedded in wider layers of experience design, and specifically participation design, to nurture and encourage shared cultures of voluntary participation.

Larps increasingly feature rules not just for playing the fictional world into being, but also for the social frame around the fiction. Playing and designing larps has in turn led their designers to think about consciously designing also non-fictional situations with a similar set of experience design tools. For example, role-playing conventions in or inspired by the Nordics do tend to have codes of conduct, but can also feature spatial choices or interaction rules designed to make speaking to strangers easier or to accelerate mutual understanding through shared, meaningful moments. A core insight is that while safety rules and tools are important (e.g. Shaw & Lauren 2021), they will only work within a culture where participants feel empowered to use them (Koljonen 2019). And they will not in themselves be enough to encourage participation; the participant's subjective experience of personal agency is a designable surface too.

Understanding how to design literally any kind of simulated fictional world, and how to make people dare to step into them for strongly impactful co-creation and play, required a conceptual framework that has turned out to be applicable to every kind of designed experience (see also Burickson 2023; Kultima 2018). As a result of their sustained investment in the craft of designing for brave participation in safer spaces, larpers in the Nordic countries, and similar role-playing communities around the world, have in the past 15 years made significant contributions to the theory and practice of experience design. These have application value outside of their original remit, and tools and concepts developed by larp and role-play designers have migrated into fields ranging from museum exhibits, immersive theatre experiences, and escape rooms, to formal education and civic participation processes.

Inspired by this, in our research project, we are looking into those rules and practices that are about designing for people to come together not as characters but as participants, community members, and citizens. We will leverage insights from larp, larp-adjacent events, and larp festivals on how to scaffold exchanging opinion, deliberation – and, ultimately, democracy. Our thinking is that in this age of social media bubbles, political division, and existential climate threats, daring to participate

in discussion and decision-making is an important antidote. We must leverage game design on the designable surfaces of civic participation and ultimately hope.

This full paper will start by introducing the concept of *designable surface* and explore the theoretical grounding of human encounter as a designable surface. This discussion will be rooted in game studies, social constructionism, and design research. The paper will then move to the applied part, where design insights and best practices from larp festivals and communities are leveraged to create situations where it is easier for people to overcome differences of opinion and lack of shared worldview and to come together and practice democratic deliberation. This paper will thus apply knowledge from game studies and game-play communities to support participatory decision-making.

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