

Larp Typology

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of our project is to work out a typology of larps and larp games useful not only in the framework of game studies theory, but also for practical applications. Using the phrase “larps and larp games”, we situate larp in the context of activities that do include live-action role-playing but are not necessarily recognised as larps (“larping that is not larp”, Harviainen 2011), e.g. urban pervasive games with superficial role-playing. We hope this approach brings a solid foundation for the discussion of what makes larp a larp, or where larp ends and another form begins.

We have taken into consideration the situation in our local as well as European and U.S. larp communities, concluding that designers, organisers, and players frequently face the problem of categorisation. The already existing terms have evolved organically and fail to constitute a coherent system.

For example, the “blockbuster larp” covers a broad category of games that can be radically different in terms of participants’ experience, such as *The Witcher School* and *The College of Wizardry*. Another example could be “*gra terenowa*” (*field game*), which denotes an outdoor larp game in Poland: depending on a larp community, it means either an action-oriented sport game, or a battle larp played in the countryside/forest. Labels such as “a historical fantasy larp set in medieval Galicia” (Rogueiro 2016) may direct the players’ horizon of expectations and help to establish proper context (Jauss 1982; Rogueiro 2016), yet as related to genre they fail to provide information, for example, about the physical effort required to participate.

Unclear terminology might be a barrier discouraging potential new larpers. Our unified classification has a potential to be both informative and unambiguous, and could expand the player base by encouraging people who might have been familiar with some forms of larp-like activities, such as escape rooms, but not the others (Nicholson 2015) to participate in larps *sensu stricto*.

The method-genre-style-focus system as discussed by Stenros (2004) uses the same notions in different categories (for example, “soap opera” may be both the genre and the style of playing). We suggest a different approach that utilises a classification matrix, understanding larps as formal systems that represent specific attributes.

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The types are based on the necessary presence of the minimal number of those attributes. A given type of larp or larp game may possess more attributes, but the ones distinguished are absolutely necessary for it to be different from other types. We have developed thirteen attributes and fourteen types of larps and larp games (though the typology is open for expansion). Most (but not all) of types can be given commonly used names (eg. “jeep form”, “free form”, “milsim”). The typology can be presented graphically as a matrix:

	T6	T7	T11	T12
I	x		x	x
II		x		
III	x	x	x	
IV				
V	x		x	
VI				
VII		x		
VIII	x		x	x
IX	x	x	x	x
X	x	x	x	
XI	x		x	
XII		x	x	
XIII	x			

fig. 1 - an exemplary fragment of the matrix

To represent a T6 type (“gra terenowa”), a game has to be characterised by the presence of attributes I, III, V, VIII, IX, X, XI, and XIII. The players play social roles, such as, for example, a messenger or a detective (attribute I); the event is narrative (attribute III); the

narrative is divided into specific scenes (V); the players aim at group goals, e.g., a team has to reach a point before the other teams (VIII); all players experience the same time flow (IX) and the same diegesis (X); they witness the actions of other players (XI); and the challenges in the game are physical in nature (XIII).

T7, the chamber larp, is characterised by the presence of attributes II, III, VII, IX, X, and XII. It is similar to T6 type in that it is narrative (III), and there is the unity of time and space (IX and X). It is different in that the players have individual goals (VII) and play the roles of predefined individual characters (II), and one of its necessary conditions is that a player can immediately interact with other players (XII).

Using the same matrix to categorise location-based urban games (T12), their necessary attributes will be I, VIII, and IX. Type T11, the escape room, is characterised by attributes I, III, V, VIII, IX, X, XI, and XII.

Defining larps by their attributes proves that there are no “most complicated larps” - attributes do not accumulate. Some categories have not been recognised as separate in the larp communities before. Some borderline cases appear to be closer to other larp games than it might have been expected. Last but not least, attributes IX, X, and XI show how far larps are detached from traditional theatre.

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