

# Let's Do It Together! Why Participatory Design and Co-Creation Are Promising Approaches for Designing an Edu-Larp

**Abstract:** After a brief introduction to contemporary participatory design, this article looks at benefits of participatory design approaches when designing edu-larps. Potential advantages include the quality of the edu-larp, the empowerment of students and working towards societal transformation. Two examples for (edu-)larp design processes with participatory elements are illustrated. Entry points for students in a participatory design process within the framework of transformative larp design are suggested, for example, during world-building or character design.

**Keywords:** participatory design, edu-larp, societal transformation, co-creation, diversity

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Designing edu-larps is a challenging task because an edu-larp needs to combine educational aspects with considerations of larp design. There are many examples where this is either done by the combined effort of educational experts or teachers and larp designers, for instance the STARS edu-larp project which developed edu-larps on German language teaching (Geneuss 2019, 2021). Other examples include larp designers who also have a background in education and *vice versa*, for example Mochocki (2013) who designed edu-larps to consolidate curricular knowledge in the subject of history.

If we want to create better edu-larps, we need to get better at aspects of game design and/or at educational and instructional design. However, besides these two options for improvement, there is also another one: participatory design. When it comes to design thinking and human-centered design processes, participatory design is considered a helpful approach used in fields like game design (e.g., Zhang and Wang 2023) or urban studies (e.g., Mees 2018). Participatory design means directly involving the target audience in the design process at various stages: not only bringing in the target audience in the end for a final test and feedback but also having the target audience participate in the design thinking process. Concerning edu-larps this means involving two groups of people: the teachers who will use the edu-larps in their classes, and, of course, the students. The second group will be the focus of this article.

According to participatory design scholars Bratteteig and Wagner (2016), participatory design practices focus on collaborative decision-making, involving negotiation, argumentation, and shared evaluation, while also fostering empowerment of the prospective target group in design processes. When reading Bratteteig and Wagner's description of participatory design from the perspective of a teacher, "empowerment of the prospective target group" immediately strikes the eye. Empowerment in relation to subject matter is an important aspect of education. So, could it be the case that participatory design practices could not only help create better edu-larps, but also that the participatory design process could offer an educational opportunity in itself?

In the following sections, I will give a very brief introduction to participatory design and then look at the advantages of using a participatory design approach when designing edu-larps. I will discuss the quality of the final product, the edu-larp, I will examine how students can benefit from taking part in the design process, and I will briefly consider societal change. I will also present two examples of (edu-)larp design processes with participatory elements carried out in Austria in 2018. I chose these two examples because I was one of the designers of both projects, so I have documentation on both participatory design processes. Despite a thorough literature review, I was not able to find any literature or documentation on other (edu-)larps designed through participatory design approaches. As a last point, I will suggest entry points for students in a participatory design process of an edu-larp.

## 2. CONTEMPORARY PARTICIPATORY DESIGN IN A NUTSHELL

Participatory design has a long history in fields like architecture, urban planning, software development, and various technical fields. Nowadays, few people want to risk developing a product which is unattractive or useless to the intended end users. It therefore makes sense to move away from an approach where all decisions are left in the hands of a designer who might not know about all wishes and needs of the end users, and towards one which includes the end users or target audience in the design process, in order to collaborate on the outcome.

Since its first steps, participatory design has come a long way; attention has been brought to power dynamics, emancipation, a shared vision of the future and much more. Participatory design scholars Smith et al. (2025, 5) identify four agendas of contemporary participatory design:

- *Diversifying* to embrace a multiplicity of contexts, actors, knowledges, and lifeworlds;
- *Politicising* agendas of power, agency, and participation in design and technology;
- *Relationality* for interconnections of researchers, participants, actors, and collectives; and
- *Transforming* through grounding participatory practices for sustainable futures at multiple scales.

Following one or all of these four agendas seems beneficial when it comes to designing edu-larps. We will look into these agendas in relation to edu-larp design in more detail in the following sections.

### 2.1 *Diversifying, or All lifeworlds count!*

Larp designers and larp theorists like Holkar (2016) and Kemper (2018) call for considering real world prejudices, stereotypes, and discrimination when designing larps so as not to perpetuate harmful societal norms. Bowman et al. (2025b) follow Holkar's and Kemper's call to design intersectionally and in an inclusive way, and suggest in their chapter on transformative larp design to include marginalised groups as consultants when working on culture design in a larp.

In this aspect, what is beneficial for larp design is even more beneficial when designing larps for educational purposes. Intersectional considerations cannot be left out when planning educational activities (Carter and Vavrus, 2018). No matter when or where an edu-larp's fiction is set, no matter who the characters are and how their relationships with each other are designed, societal norms will come into play through the fiction itself and also through the players participating in the edu-larp. This is especially true for conflicts, which are a common ingredient of larps and edu-larps. As Bowman et al. (2024b) argue, "conflicts embedded in role-playing games often reflect issues embedded in human cultures." Hence it is crucial to be aware of marginalized perspectives when designing an edu-larp.

Working on diminishing prejudices and discrimination or at least fostering awareness for intersectional discrimination in our societies should always be a common goal in education, no matter which subject is taught, which competence practiced, or which edu-larp played. Edu-larp scholars such as Bowman (2014), Hammer et al. (2018), Westborg (2024), see a huge potential in edu-larp when it comes to the development of social skills and personal development. Working on these properly means including intersectional considerations in an edu-larp design. Even the United Nations see working on harmful societal norms as a necessary goal for a sustainable and peaceful future of mankind. One of their sustainable development goals, SDG 10, is to eradicate inequalities and discrimination; another is to achieve gender equality, SDG 5 (United Nations 2025).

To really work on the UN's sustainable development goals 5 and 10, hence on eradicating harmful societal norms, not only do the perspectives of adults in marginalized and discriminated-against groups need to be included in a design process, but we also need to include first-hand experiences and genuine perspectives of the children or teenagers who are going to play the edu-larp. Game-based learning scholar Masters (2024) suggests in their plea for frugal education that including the target audience in the design process can be a catalyst for creativity when it comes to designing new education practices. Leaving out the voices and ideas of players could lead to missing important points in an edu-larp. Designers need to work together with players and meet them on eye level to be able to tackle the challenges of transforming society. Let me illustrate with an exemplary marginalized group.

Larp theorist Baird (2021) discusses larps that allow trans self-expression, exploration, and embodiment. She concludes that, despite thorough review, she has not found one larp that is intentionally designed for these purposes. Baird asks several questions that should be brought to attention when designing such a larp, giving a good example of the necessity to include marginalized perspectives. These questions might be written down now but to truly work on offering a safe and meaningful space for trans self-expression, exploration, and embodiment within an edu-larp, a participatory design approach involving trans people seems indispensable. Feelings, questions, thoughts, worries, etc., of a specific marginalized group, like trans-people, might vary depending on other demographic aspects, depending on what is currently happening in the world, or depending on different personal experiences. Although there might be common ground as well, all these different perspectives are valid and can be important when designing an edu-larp which aims to offer the chance of a transformational experience.

## **2.2 Politicising, or Empower the players!**

As mentioned before, some first steps into participation have already been made in the field of larp design, where some larp designers and theorists, like Bowman et al. (2025b), have called for having marginalized groups as consultants or even having people of marginalized groups take over the design of some characters who represent their marginalized group in the larp (Saitta and Sveegard 2019).

Also, in the field of education, ideas of participation have been brought to attention. Chemi and Krogh (2017) argue that co-creation in educational processes can foster student engagement and involvement; hence co-creation can have an impact on learning outcomes. Arnt (2020), an advocate for agile didactics, calls for student agency in the design of university courses. Dirndler, Smith, and Iversen (2020) focus on computer science education and argue that participatory design in education might foster young learners' computational empowerment. Weixelbraun et al. (2024) recommend empowering students by applying participatory design processes to educational settings. All of these suggestions have one thing in common – they mean a shift in

power. If we apply this to edu-larps, it means that students should be involved in making decisions about which stories are told. Of course edu-larp designers and learning experts have intended learning outcomes or a didactical design in mind when designing an edu-larp, but we also need to listen to students and learn what stories they want to tell, which experiences they want to make. Furthermore, including students in a participatory design process is likely to have other positive effects besides empowerment. According to a 2024 meta-analysis of 25 peer-reviewed studies, integrating design-thinking processes in education shows a positive effect on students' learning engagement and creative thinking (Yu 2024).

If we follow a participatory design approach for edu-larps, we have two options: 1) we include "exemplary" people with similar demographic characteristics as the intended player group in our design process; or, 2) we design together with the very players who are going to play the edu-larp. According to the previously quoted research in education and participatory design/design-thinking, we might be able to empower students and with that maybe even enhance learning, if we follow option 2.

### 2.3 Relationality, or Examples of participatory (edu-)larp design

Concerning design practices, participatory design scholars Smith et al. (2025) call for ethical and caring engagements, for working across political and cultural domains as well as across human lifeworlds. This can be a somewhat tough step to take for edu-larp and larp designers who often want to convey their own view of the world, or of a theme, and follow their idea of what participants in a larp should experience.

Nevertheless, there have even been some larps where larp design has been taken into the realms of participatory design, for example the Austrian larp *Amazona Megista* (Gleeson, Fischer, Neubauer and Petrovic for 1000 Atmosphären 2018). In the design process of *Amazona Megista*, future players were included at several stages; they were, for example, asked in surveys which stories, characters, and character relationships they would want to play according to an overall theme (feminism), and the rough outline of a setting (a tournament in a low-fantasy Amazon culture). Ideas and perspectives were gathered in closed and open questions in an online survey among all future players of the larp. All the players knew at the time of the survey was that, in the fiction of the larp, three Amazon tribes meet to determine the future leader of all Amazonas, the "Amazona Megista" (meaning "the greatest Amazon" in the style of Ancient Greek) and that it was going to be a fully transparent larp. At a later point in the participatory design process, online design workshops were carried out with the future players of each tribe to design the in-game history and culture of each tribe. Between the participatory phases of the design process, the team of larp designers interweaved the ideas of the different participants and developed them further. At several stages, future participants had the opportunity to give feedback on the larp design in progress.

An example of participatory elements in the design of an edu-larp is *Das Andere Österreich* (*The Other Austria*) by Fischer and Gleeson for 1000 Atmosphären (2018) in cooperation with a class of Akademisches Gymnasium Graz (a high school in Austria) and their German teacher. The goal for *The Other Austria* was to revise a part of the curriculum, the topic of democracy, and also to work on teambuilding with the 14- to 15-year-old students. A rough outline for a story was designed by the design team: the students were going to play teenagers in a fascist regime who had been taken to a re-education facility because they had shown rebellious and anti-fascist behaviour. During the larp, they would have to escape the facility and record and send a message to the public, to encourage an uprising.

After drafting the outline of the story the lead designer worked in a participatory design workshop with all students on the setting and the characters of the larp. Students decided that they

would want to play in an alternate-reality version of today's Austria, led by a fascist. They designed the fascist regime according to their understanding of fascism and anti-democratic principles. This design process of the fascist regime led to the whole class actively discussing aspects of democracy and fascism, including questions to their teacher, thereby deepening understanding and applying learning content. For example, several groups of students made the suggestion that there should be no separation of powers and that the fascist leader would hold the power over legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government. Other ideas included that schools would also teach their own version of history, that there was no freedom of the press, and much more. While designing the fascist regime, the students naturally also revised democratic values and how a democratic government works, key elements of their curriculum concerning political education. At a later point, each student was also able to design their own character in this story, working on the character's back story, traits, and goals. The design team took the documented ideas and tried to connect them, building further details of the plot on them.

In both cases – *Amazona Megista* and *Das Andere Österreich* – it worked well to have future players participating in creating aspects of the fictional world of the larp: setting, parts of the narrative, cultures, characters. However, it has to be noted that the participatory approach led to needing extra time for the whole (edu-)larp design process.

## 2.4 Transformation, or How to create an edu-larp together with future players

An edu-larp might be designed within an approach of bespoke design, as described by larp theorist and designer Koljonen (2019), whereby a (edu-)larp is tailored to specific themes, narratives, or participant groups. Another approach could be following Bowman et al.'s (2024a) step-by-step recommendations for designing larps with transformative goals.

I will suggest some entry points for student participation in the design of an edu-larp within Bowman et al.'s (2024a) framework of transformative nanogame design. I skip aspects of edu-larp design where more time and labour would be needed to follow a participatory approach. For example, aspects like the design of pre-game workshops, mechanics, or safety might require teaching first-time or inexperienced larpers basic larp design and hence seem too much of an effort for a participatory approach to edu-larp design.

The following entry points are aspects of larp-design where future players could participate in the form of short workshops, discussions, or brainstorming, by filling in surveys or by other techniques of participatory design:

**1) Identifying transformative impact:** This is the first step in Bowman et al.'s (2024a) design process and they recommend communicating the desired impact to future players. Within a participatory design approach, this communication could be turned into negotiation of desired impacts with the future players. This negotiation might take place within a very strictly defined thematic space, but it could also be something like an open brainstorming for a very broad theme like feminism, democracy, the use of formal language, or data security.

**2) Narrative design:** Bowman et al. (2024a) define the purpose of narrative design as “to enable a story to emerge that is told collectively and meaningfully by all participants” (156). This might work even better if a design team knows what kind of stories are on the minds of future players. If these stories are not intended by the design team, then knowing them helps to find design strategies to avoid these stories emerging during the runtime of the edu-larp. If these are desirable stories in the eyes of the design team, then they might be the starting point for further narrative development. If future players bring in too many stories,

pulling the game in different directions, the design team might need to guide the future players through a consensus-finding process, or they might mix in methods of collaborative creative practice to reach a common focus. This might take some time and will probably also involve the design team being part of this negotiation and sense-making process, so being prepared to set aside some time for this is recommended.

**3) Worldbuilding:** While Bowman et al. (2024a) describe how to approach worldbuilding in a design team, they also suggest that the process of worldbuilding can be a collective effort where players have their share in creation of the storyworld. I want to emphasize the participatory approach in worldbuilding, as it might help non-larpers step-by-step to familiarize themselves with the storyworld they are going to play in, thereby helping to prevent feeling overwhelmed by information.

**4) “Cool” and “pivotal” scenes:** Future players might have their own idea of what a “cool” or “pivotal” scene means for them. A design team who listens to these ideas and who communicates that the players will be able to play some of these scenes during the edu-larp (if it is possible within the design) might help with motivating hesitant players and might also help empower future players by valuing their perspective.

**5) Character design, relationship design, group design and culture design:** As Bowman et al. (2024a) describe, there are design traditions with no participation when it comes to character design, up to traditions where players do the character design on their own. Even if a design team decides to prewrite all characters for their edu-larp (which will very often make sense), there is still room for participation by listening to future players’ ideas on who they would want to play in a given setting, or when it comes to a given theme. Another option could be making the characters customisable. The same is true for relationship design, group design, and culture design. Participatory design of an edu-larp does not mean that all these — character, relationship, group, and culture design — need to be done together with players. It is still the decision of the design team where it makes sense to bring in players to participate.

All the above are parts of edu-larp design where it seems feasible to bring in future players for participation, even if they have never larped or role-played before. For creating participatory design workshops, it is a good idea to look at methods of design-thinking. Especially for participants who have neither larped nor designed before, it might be helpful to offer a variety of participatory design methods and tools, for example: telling, making, and enacting as described by participatory design scholars Brandt et al. (2013). Participatory design scholars Scheepers et al. (2018) also recommend a balance between pre-defined structures and creative freedom when it comes to participatory design workshops.

Other entry points for participation are bringing in future players for feedback on various design aspects, or having them playtest certain aspects with the option to try out variations that they come up with.

### 3. DISCUSSION

We have looked at several reasons why it is beneficial to follow a participatory design approach for designing edu-larps – from empowerment of students to improving the impact of an edu-larp. Yet sometimes, less participation might be suitable for a specific project. On the other hand, it might

also be helpful to steer away from common patterns of participatory design processes, since lately scholars have called for new concepts and tools for participatory design processes in order to avoid inhibiting the creativity of the participants (Formosa 2024; Hsueh 2024), and to explore new ways to include the target population in the design process on eye level.

For now, before starting a participatory design process, a design team should decide for which aspects they want or need input from future players, and where they are willing to share the power and responsibility of designing. Future research on participatory design or co-design of edu-larps should look into which aspects of the design process need more guidance from designers and which need less when it comes to creating the best possible edu-larp, combined with maximizing the empowerment of the target population. Thinking of the positive effects of using design thinking processes in a learning environment in formal education (Yu 2024), there might be the chance that participatory design / co-design of edu-larps could be used as a means of education itself, which opens up numerous new research questions. What could students learn from taking part in the design process of an edu-larp? How can we design the participatory design process of an edu-larp to maximize learning?

#### 4. CONCLUSION

So far, there is hardly any research on how to approach participatory design / co-design processes of edu-larps, yet the literature and examples presented in this article suggest that a huge potential lies in inviting the target audience / future players into the design process of an edu-larp, empowerment being only one aspect of it. What can be said without a doubt is that whether the future players of an edu-larp might be young people or adults who play an edu-larp as a part of some formal or informal education, it is always worth listening to which stories they want to tell.

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