

Developing a Framework of Larp Counseling

Abstract: Within live-action role-playing (larp), there is growing discourse about providing structural caregiving for players through an embedded role known as a larp counselor. We outline the purpose and challenges of the role in order to discuss the need for standardization due to liabilities and expectations of care. Our solution is a training guide, which we propose in three parts: a code of ethics, procedures, and best practices. The code of ethics is presented in the Appendix of this article. The goal of this work is to help organizers, scholars, players, and caregivers better understand the motivations and boundaries of the role while providing an initial entry into an interdisciplinary and emerging practice.

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1. OVERVIEW

Larp counseling is the practice of dedicating a staff member to overseeing participant well-being at a live-action role-play (larp) event. Most practice under the explicit title has taken place during three-day weekend games, whether as single events or ongoing campaigns. Authorities and critics have compared the role to mental health counseling, affecting both best practices and ethical boundaries in how a larp counselor provides role-specific care (Bowman, Brown, Atwater, and Rowland 2017). We defend the title as evocative of a camp counselor: a supervisory role meant to connect the player with the intended fun of an event, rather than suggesting therapeutic intent.

At the time of this writing, authorities suggest that counselors perform this role in pairs who have diegetic involvement through non-player characters (Bowman, Brown, Atwater, and Rowland 2017). Through play, counselors make themselves visible and interactable while remaining accessible to address players' out-of-game distress. In these moments, players seek counselor support for stressful out-of-game circumstances that keep them from feeling engaged with play. A counselor primarily responds with listening skills, aiming to give reflective understanding of the player's situation as a first order of involvement. From there, a counselor must select a resolution vector, i.e., whether to apply larp epistemology or "helping" skills to resolve or mitigate the presenting concerns. They may proceed by talking through options with the intent to help a player reunite with play. If the counselor has the means to solve a small problem, they may offer their resources directly (Living Games Conference, 2018). For example, if a

player reveals that they have had a hard time finding the energy for play because they cannot eat the food provided by the game, a counselor may be able to navigate the structural channels that a player cannot access to find them food. Similarly, if another player is having trouble meeting their expectations for their game to a degree that it is causing them distress, a counselor may choose to provide them with a scene that helps recontextualize or otherwise advance play.

2. PURPOSE

The purpose of this role is to provide structural support to players unable to engage with play due to miscellaneous distress. It is the authors' opinion that, per Benedetto's (2017) framework of experiential risk, ideal game design accounts for the primary risks of a game by designing explicit safety functions for players to manage that risk. Therefore, counselors are best implemented in situations that are extraneous to the designed risks of play but still compromise one's emotional composure, e.g. losing one's medication, panic attacks, etc. This is not to say that a counselor would be a detrimental safety feature at a high-risk game, but that, in theory, such a game would be designed to account for its main axis of risk through workshoping and safety techniques.

3. FUNCTION

The counselor role has the benefit of directing a player's issues of well-being to an enthusiastic and qualified referee rather than leaving players to fend for themselves or seek organizer support. This allows the game's organizers, whether untrained or simply busy running the game, to focus on their primary duties instead, letting players defer to counselors

as the default authority for any wellness issues. A further potential benefit is in the perception of a safer game structure. Providing a counselor may emphasize an atmosphere of safety by designing for reliable help. However, this potential is based upon accurate player expectations and competent staff who will meet those expectations.

3. RAPPORT

These considerations are for the structural role of a counselor who takes care of player well-being, but we believe that the role is amplified by the counselor's diegetic engagement. Engaging with the game gives counselors insight into the happenings of play while building relationships with players through character interactions. We can consider this *rapport*: a friendly and trusting familiarity with both players and the social reality of play itself. Rapport is recognized as the basis of a good helping relationship in many contexts (Joe, Simpson, Dansereau, and Rowan-Szal 2001) and is considered to have the same benefit in larp. Rapport in its traditional sense -- the interpersonal engagement with players -- is helpful for creating a general awareness of the counselors. It is expected that, even if only some players have direct engagement with a counselor, they will be able to extend that trusting engagement and recommend the counselor to others should the need arise.

4. FAMILIARITY WITH IN-GAME EVENTS

Beyond interpersonal rapport is another form: a familiarity with the events unfolding from within the perspective of the fiction. A counselor embedded within play has a vantage on the tone and tempo of play. If a player needs to talk about a scenario, it is likely that information about a scene will have already reached the counselor, as they will have seen its effects on the fiction and characters within it. They may have even been present, as a diegetic engagement allows for non-obtrusive observation. These twin strengths allow for a harmonious awareness of not only potential stressors arising from play, but also the fluency to help repair breaks from engagement.

5. CHALLENGES

If an organization is providing this role and it is intended to meet the above benefits, then challenges fall on how the persons acting as counselors engage with the role. When considered that a counselor is often with people at their most vulnerable and accruing information that is best kept confidential, the anticipated consequences of mistakes in practice become more serious. It is hard to imagine anyone

coming into the role with the express intent of causing harm. It is much easier to encounter what is informally known as "helper syndrome," characterized by a provider's desire to be perceived as helpful motivating them to volunteer for caregiving regardless of competence. Competence is also conditional, as a trained counselor can encounter personal issues -- such as compassion fatigue -- that can compromise their ability to provide care (Thompson, Amatea, and Thompson 2014). Incorrect practice inverts the function of this attempted care from helping to harmful, however, as removing this safety net could potentially cause more distress than if none was offered in the first place due to players' expectations of support.

Due to the diegetic implications of the role, there is also the possibility for a counselor to have undue influence on the fiction of a game in service of their work. Counselors' primary duties are to serve the wellness of a community rather than pursue or affect play, and as such, they are often given both structural and diegetic privileges (Bowman, Brown, Atwater, and Rowland 2017). We believe that there is risk in misusing this power to pursue personal satisfaction at the expense of player agency by unduly influencing players' decisions. Diegetic involvement also risks failing to prioritize availability to players' wellness needs by physically or situationally occupying a counselor, such as being away in the woods for several hours or at the center of a dramatic battle. Furthermore, there is opportunity for negative in-character actions to reflect on the approachability of a counselor, either due to bleed (i.e. a counselor is role-playing that their character is mean or incompetent) or diegetic consistency (i.e. if a counselor character chooses a faction opposed to a player's, so their characters are not enemies).

Given the recent conceptualization of the role, inconsistency in training is a foundational consideration to its practice. Larp counseling's lack of precedent means that counselors can only come to understand it through other experiences in providing caregiving. From that inconsistency, organizers cannot set boundaries, players cannot have standard expectations of care, counselors cannot measure their competencies against a standard, and discourse cannot progress because the terms are not set.

6. THE GUIDE

In response to this lack, the authors of this work have begun composing a guide for larp counseling. Guides are standardized and provide a cornerstone for dialogic interaction with a practice, whether

from those following its writings or those providing concrete objection. A common text cites best practices and provides a disprovable standard, so that progress can be measured as the practice continues to be studied. This guide seeks to introduce the boundaries, terms, liabilities, and ethical values necessary to provide care with predictability and competence.

7. CODE OF ETHICS

We think that foundational beliefs inform the reasoning behind procedures and will prepare counselors for how to behave when using judgement in marginal cases. While larp counseling is not mental health counseling, the privileges and responsibilities bear similar themes. The ethical code of the American Counseling Association (2014) most heavily informed our work of a Code of Ethics (see Appendix A). The values and intentions from this code cover three sections regarding responsibilities of the role, offering guidelines for engaging with a counselor's contextualizing factors. These contexts include players, the academic canon of counseling knowledge, game organizers, cultures of play, regional legality, and a counselor's own competency. Perhaps most importantly, the code of ethics sets boundaries. These include boundaries around confidentiality, relationships with players, and degrees of responsibility in cases when a player seeking help has needs beyond what is reasonable for a larp counselor to provide. This code extends into behavior within play as well. Psychologist Elizabeth Fein's (2015) repurposing of *Star Trek's* Prime Directive in her paper "Making Meaningful Worlds: Role-Playing Subcultures and the Autism Spectrum" provides a useful contextual allegory for this process. She compares the famous creed from *Star Trek*, where interstellar explorers vow "not to interfere with social development of the societies they encounter" to her capacity as a researcher in a larp environment. Likewise, the Code of Ethics purposes that counselors do not engage characters or the diegesis in such a way as to alter its established course or to do so in ways that minimize any rippling effect.

8. RECOMMENDED PROCEDURES

These are methods for uniting ethics with practice that are informed by the typical structure of weekend games. They are heuristics – meant to operationalize behavior in important circumstances based on existing practices. For instance, since a counselor at a game is likely to encounter moments of intense distress, this section includes SAFER-R

Crisis Response Technique. The guide includes this particular framework over others due to its use by mental health paraprofessionals rather than those models used by crisis clinicians. We chose the SAFER-R model because it relies upon knowing one's limits of care and referring a person in crisis to more capable help, a value which reinforces the role of a larp counselor as means of support rather than a mental health practitioner (Yeager 2015).

The recommended procedures section includes entries on larp debrief (Atwater 2016); reporting; composing and executing a referral list (Yeager 2015); and shift-taking. Whereas these procedures are firmly suggested as the best ways to execute counseling, they are not mandatory. Instead, we intended the section for mutable engagement and practices that may change over time with research.

9. EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES

Beyond morals and methods are particular experiences based more heavily on intuition. The contents of this section are considered best practices by the authors because they are experientially effective, rather than evidence-informed. They are ways of preparing future counselors by offering proxy experience and advice if one is starting without a point of reference. These are the areas of greatest subjectivity, meant to exist as part of an ensemble of opinions as more come to the practice. They include frameworks of ethical character creation, such as how to create playfulness for oneself without taking the focus of play, and self-evaluation, in order to bring scrutiny to the qualities that can impair the helpfulness of new and experienced counselors. We have dedicated a large section for example counseling scenarios and outcomes. Should a new counselor want to know what to expect, these examples show common requests for care and how they have been handled by the authors. These cases demonstrate how and when to use diegetic tools, mediate conflict, create a plan of action, and refer once a situation has escalated beyond the responsibility of a counselor.

10. ONGOING DIALOGUE

To achieve the expected benefits of a larp counselor, there must be some common expectations. The proposed framework of a guide aims to help counselors rise to a level of competency, set boundaries that protect themselves and others, and steer judgement in outlying situations --provided it works. Though this guide suggests standardized behavior for counselors, there are not yet any organizers or players who have interacted with

its outcomes. We do not intend for it to end the discussion on this work so much as promote a wave of discourse in reaction to its definitions and claims. Whether aesthetic or foundational, external feedback will continue to affect both public and expert opinion about how the role should develop. Additionally, claims for best practices and ethical engagement currently come from presumptions about the counselor's efficacy based on anecdote, intuition, and generalized research. As practitioners continue to add their contributions to the field, best practices will require more research on effectiveness, which will include developing frameworks for evaluating efficacy in the pursuit of standardization outside of this singular guide.

11. CONCLUSION

Larp as a field is actively gaining language that transforms the implicit and instinctual into something explicit and subject to scrutiny. So, too, are larpers becoming more accountable to their own behaviors. This role of caregiving is not a new one, as issues of distress have certainly existed before a formal role was meant to help with them. Some larps have created similar characters, such as in-game bartenders who are also staff members, but the counselor role has yet to be codified on a wide scale." Continuing to develop this role with rigor, curiosity, and structural enthusiasm will invite more questions but provide stronger solutions through experience and dialogue.

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APPENDIX A

I. LARP COUNSELOR CODE OF ETHICS

Larp counseling is a unique personal / professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals and groups to pursue their own conceptions of mental health, wellness, exploration, and fun through play. Larp counseling is the practice of dedicating a staff member to overseeing participant well-being at a live-action role-play (larp) event. We defend the title as evocative of a camp counselor: a supervisory role meant to connect the player with the intended fun of an event, rather than suggesting therapeutic intent. Ideally, the event should financially support individuals in these roles, who operate outside of the logistical organizational staff.

Larp counselors have a unique definition of and relationship to professionalism. Firstly, play is usually not the intended mode of player interaction and most conceptions of professionalism do not account for it as setting or mode. Conceptions of professionalism shared across various helping professions do not account for scenarios in which, within the lifetime of the player-counselor relationship, multiple personas / realities exist, and diegetic role reversal is expected.

Classic conceptions of professionalism also fail us by assuming the nature of the counselor / player relationship is purely professional and not of a different foundation that is more likely to be fostered in organized play. Due to the privilege and authority inherent to the larp counselor role, there are still strict standards to which to adhere and lines which never should be crossed.

Standardized values are an important way of living out an ethical commitment. The following are core values of larp counseling:

1. enhancing human development;
2. honoring diversity and embracing a multicultural approach in support of the worth, dignity, potential, and uniqueness of people within their social and cultural contexts;
3. promoting social justice;
4. safeguarding the integrity of the counselor–player relationship; and
5. practicing in a competent and ethical manner.

These values provide a conceptual basis for the ethical principles enumerated below. These principles are the foundation for ethical behavior and decision making. The fundamental principles of ethical behavior are:

- *autonomy*, or fostering the right to control the direction of one's life;
- *nonmaleficence*, or avoiding actions that cause harm;
- *beneficence*, or working for the good of the individual and society by promoting mental health and well-being;
- *justice*, or treating individuals equitably and fostering fairness and equality;
- *fidelity*, or honoring commitments and keeping promises, including fulfilling one's responsibilities of trust in our ethical relationships; and

- *veracity*, or dealing truthfully with individuals with whom counselors come into professional contact.

II. LARP COUNSELOR CODE OF ETHICS PURPOSE

- The *Code* sets forth the ethical obligations of larp counselors and provides guidance intended to inform the ethical practice of larp counselors.
- The *Code* identifies ethical considerations relevant to larp counselors and larp counselors-in-training.
- The *Code* enables the community to clarify for current and prospective counselors, and for those served by the community, the nature of the ethical responsibilities held in common by its members.
- The *Code* serves as an ethical guide designed to assist the larp counselors in constructing a course of action that best serves those utilizing counseling services and establishes expectations of conduct with a primary emphasis on the role of the larp counselor.
- The *Code* helps to support the mission of fighting for social justice and fostering safe play.

III. PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

- a. It is always necessary to act in good faith, and without coercion or misrepresentation. Larp counselors must know and stay within the laws of the country in which they are practicing.
- b. It is good, ethical practice for larp counselors to be clear with players about their professional status and training.
- c. Larp counselors must be aware at all times that they are not mental health professionals and should NEVER attempt to perform psychotherapeutic interventions beyond valuable micro-skills.
- d. Larp counselors use their professional work to benefit players and not primarily to satisfy their own needs.
- e. Larp counselors seek ways of increasing

their personal and professional awareness and development.

- f. Larp counselors must maintain standards of practice by monitoring and reviewing their work alone, with peers, and by seeking supervision when necessary.
- g. Larp counselors must openly and clearly explain the possible presence of observers, recorders, and auxiliary-ego co-therapists. They must make any limits of confidentiality aware to the players being helped.
- h. It is not the decision of a larp counselor to decide if players are (i) fit to play and (ii) fit for the specific group in which it is proposed to place them. If they are perceived as not fit, the counselor must indicate that to the player and may suggest alternative courses of action, but they must not prevent someone from engaging in play for this reason.
- i. In order to be fit to practice, larp counselors should maintain an adequate balance of emotional and physical health. This standard should be maintained as a model for other colleagues and trainees. They should not knowingly practice if their mental or physical poor health is liable to have a detrimental effect on their players. This includes the misuse of substances that may be detrimental to professional practice. Notions of health are both personal and cultural, and such connotations should be heavily weighted in this assessment.
- j. Larp counselors should be aware of and respect the cultural expectations of the community in which they work.
- k. Larp counselors should be aware of and respect the cultural mores of their players, trainees, and colleagues.

IV. RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PLAYER

- a. Counselors' guarantees on confidentiality extend as far as themselves. While counselors should always be expected to maintain confidentiality in almost all cases, if other players, organizers, or bystanders are present for counseling, there can be no guarantee of privacy. It is a larp counselor's duty to inform all parties of any limitations to

confidentiality. Diegetic encounters between counselor and player character-selves are assumed to be part of play and thus have no promise of confidentiality or privacy.

- b. Larp counselors shall treat as private all information received from the player whether this is during a session or during other situations when they might be communicating delicate non-diegetic information; unless the player specifically agrees that this information is generally communicable. Comment: For best practices please see the Reporting chapter.
- c. Larp counselors must not use information received in the course of their relationship with players or trainees for personal gain.
- d. Larp counselors undertake to set out clearly and without prejudice a verbal contract with players before play begins and to reiterate relevant facets (i.e., confidentiality or the limits thereof) during play. They must almost remember that consent is an ongoing process.
- e. Larp counselors will give attention to the physical environment in which they work with players in order to provide a safe and secure space for play.
- f. Larp counselors should be aware of the professional boundaries with players and trainees. Larp counselors should be aware of the possibilities of role confusion, which can damage the interpersonal and/or training relationship. It is the duty of the counselor to maintain an understanding of the power dynamic, from their own point of view, as well as the players, both diegetically and out-of-character.
- g. At no time should a larp counselor enter into a sexual and or romantic relationship with a player or organizer during the course of play. Pre-existing relationships of this kind between counselors and players/organizers should be bracketed. If possible, counselors should avoid moderating conflicts or engaging in sessions with these individuals, but not at the expense of anyone's safety. Comment: For best practices, please see the Dual Relationships/Conflicts of Interest Section in our forthcoming guide book.

- h. Larp counselors should inform players of the use of videotape or other recording systems, where it is possible such a factor could upset the nature of the confidential relationship. At all times, the counselor is obliged to obtain clear, informed consent from all participants involved in any recording and to inform them that they have a right to withdraw their consent at any time.

V. RELATIONSHIP WITH SOCIETY

- a. When dealing with sensitive intimate issues that arise in play, larp counselors should treat them with appropriate caution. The use of diegetic techniques should be carefully considered in order to minimize the possibility of compounding the abuse.
- b. When approached by organizers for work or consultation, larp counselors should present a clear unambiguous statement of intention of the services they offer.
- c. Larp counselors have the responsibility to acknowledge research undertaken during an event and, where appropriate, initiate, assist, or participate in the process of informing and seeking the consent of players when they are involved. Players used as research subjects should give informed consent to participating in the nature of the research being undertaken.
- d. Larp counselors have an educative role in the larp community as well as a helping one and should seek to continue their own education. Larp counselors have the responsibility to continue their own development by being an active member of the larp safety community.
- e. Larp counselors subscribe to the principles of anti-discriminatory practice, freedom of speech, and human rights; they should take positive steps to promote them.

VI. RELATIONSHIP WITH PLAY

- f.
- a. Character immersion should never be prioritized over the counselor's vigilance. Counselors acknowledge that their imbedded role is explicitly for the benefit of players and always follow the Prime Directive. Counselors forgo intensive immersion in favor of a perspective that

prioritizes their ability to vigilantly perform their duties. Comment: The Prime Directive refers to the counselor's responsibility to the well-being of players, and the limitations of their involvement within the diegesis: *No intentional interference with the development of plot. No protracted relationship with a player-character.*

- b. A larp counselor's character self should exhibit characteristics and behavior becoming of a counselor. Players should always feel comfortable engaging with counselor characters.
- c. Larp counselors only disrupt another's immersion for the express purpose of resolving issues relevant to their position.
- d. Larp counselors always consider the culture of play in which they exist before acting. However, such considerations should never jeopardize the well-being of players. Counselors are always assessing and reassessing their notions of "well-being" in the context of the players and environment.
- e. Larp counselors should always reserve the ability to stop/ start and relocate play as well as declare in-game areas as temporarily out-of-game to facilitate their duties. Caution should be used when exercising these abilities; counselors should consider the impact upon player experience as well as the urgency of the situation.
- f. If organizers have agreed to allow counselors the authority to use diegetic devices, counselors may do so within the context of the Prime Directive (i.e., directive abilities should never affect the plot beyond a single or small group of characters).
- g. Diegetic devices are to be used only when the counselor believes they will have a positive impact on the player's experience and well-being.
- h. If a larp counselor's character-self is a psychotherapist or an adjacent position, they may role-play psychological interventions. Caution should be taken to ensure these interactions stay within the realm of fiction and fulfill the needs of play.

- i. Counselors should take care to explicitly articulate when play ends and begins.

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