

The Vow of Chastity

I hereby submit to the rules of the Vow of Chastity, as developed by Dogma 99,

1. It is forbidden to create action by writing it into the past history of a character or the event.
2. There shall be no “main plot”. (The story of the event must be made for each players character, not the whole).
3. No character shall only be a supporting part.
4. All secrecy is forbidden. (Any participant who so desires shall in advance be shown all documents that pertain to the event).
5. After the event has begun, the playwrights are not allowed to influence it. (Any use of staging and ad hoc organiser roles is forbidden).
6. Superficial action is forbidden. (The playwrights may not in any way plan or encourage the use or threat of violence as part of the event)
7. LARPs inspired by tabletop

role-playing games are not accepted.

8. No object shall be used to represent another object. (all things shall be what they appear to be)
9. Game mechanics are forbidden. (rules to simulate for instance the use of violence or supernatural abilities are not permitted)
10. The playwrights shall be held accountable for the whole of their work.

Furthermore, I swear to regard myself as an artist, and any LARP I write as my »work«. I stand open for criticism and wholesale slaughter of my works, and promise to apologise to my players for all that is imperfect in the LARPs I write. My highest goal is to develop the art and medium of live-action role-playing. This, I promise, will be done through all means available, and at the expense of good taste, all conventions and all popularity amongst the so-called LARPerS. Thus, I take the Vow of Chastity,

Lars Wingård
Eirik Fatland
Erlend Eidsem Hansen
Kristin Hamnerås
Anita Myhre Andersen
Kalle Toivonen

Hanne Grasmo
Atle Steen-Hansen
Morten B. Gunnerud
Margrethe Raaum
Lars Munck
Pasi Huttunen

Tommy Finsen
Jon Ree Holmøy
Erling Rognli
E.Cath Røsseland
Hilde Bryhn

The Dogma 99 Manifesto

The authors' commentary to the Vow of Chastity

Why Dogma 99?

The Dogma 99 Vow of Chastity aims at the development of LARP as a medium and a form of art. We seek to oppose the pitfalls of conventional LARP, the dominance of the mainstream genres, and the refusal of the general public and some LARPer to recognise the potential of LARP as a medium of expression and form of art.

The Conventional LARP methods of today, those methods most often developed when adapting the tabletop role-playing medium directly to live action, are insufficient for the creation of quality LARP. The conventions, pitfalls and clichés of conventional LARP are only a first step, an infant stage which it is now time to abandon. The Conventions are the current ingrown patterns of thought about what and how LARP is, that are hard to see and even harder to avoid. The Clichés are the banal simplicities that work and are therefore repeated ad infinitum instead of inventing something new. The Pitfalls are the obvious mistakes that are repeated, by experienced and inexperienced organisers, usually because things appear differently from the organiser room than from the LARP.

While a few LARP scenes and troupes, especially in the Nordic countries, have managed to progress beyond the pitfalls of conventional LARP, most have not. Hallmarks of conventional LARP are: an emphasis on game mechanics, a high level of secrecy, structures that automatically discern between »important« and »unimportant« characters, and a dependence on gamesmaster control and intervention for the LARP to work.

Conventional LARP is based in the »gamist« style of role-playing. The gamist style creates structures that, intentionally or not, allow for a LARP to be won by some, and hence lost by others. It encourages the use of game mechanics, to create fairness, and the use of secrecy and combat, to create challenge. While we are not opposed to LARP being used for this purpose, we seek to develop the potential of LARP as a medium of expression, not as a glorified game of strategy. We also observe that the methods of conventional LARP are insufficient for fair gamist-style events.

The supreme demonstrations of the weaknesses of conventional LARP are the commercial products of the

Anglo-American gaming industry. By aiming at a lowest common denominator, these publications achieve nothing beyond the infant stage, which has long been surpassed in quality and diversity by LARPer who have innovated independently. Yet, their marketing strength is so vast in comparison, we risk seeing the medium defined in the eyes of the public, not by the independent LARP artist or craftsman, but by the gaming industry and the proponents of conventional LARP.

The current mainstream LARP genres, the LARPs of fantasy and science fiction, combat, horror, mystery and magic – commonly use conventional methods. This, however, need not be so. The mainstream genres are not dependent on conventional methods, and may be enriched by the development of new methods, without the clichés and pitfalls of current convention.

While entertaining and full of potential in their own right, the current mainstream genres are too narrow in their confines and the expectations of their participants to explore the full potential of LARP as a medium. Developments in the crafts, genre adaptations, game mechanics and narration are not enough! We seek to explore and realise the full potential of LARP as a form of art, and for this to be possible the borders the medium so far has developed within must be transcended.

We therefore launch the programme of the Vow of Chastity, which aims at

creating a series of new LARPs that will be unlike any seen before. The Vow of Chastity aims at widening the borders of the medium by excluding the traditional methods of LARP creation and especially the ones used by conventional LARP. To strengthen the Dogma 99 project, the list of signatories will be permanently open. Those who wish, may take the Vow of Chastity and thereby commit themselves to organise or co-organise at least one LARP that follows the rules of the Vow of Chastity.

Dogma 99 is primarily a manifesto for LARP playwrights. Playwrights who take the Vow of Chastity place much of the freedom to form the LARP in the hands of the players. The Vow of Chastity does not say anything about what players should or should not do with this freedom.

While we certainly do not believe that the Vow of Chastity is the only way to develop the medium, we are of the opinion that resorting to such radical means is necessary to accelerate the development and diversification of LARP.

Oslo, 13th of December, 1999

The Dogma 99 manifesto is Copyright © 1999 Lars Wingård and Eirik Fatland. Permission is hereby granted to copy and distribute this manifesto for non-profit purposes, as long as it contains the entire text, without modifications, including this notice of copyright.

The Essence of Larp: A Definition

LARP is often erroneously called a »genre«. LARP is a form and a method of individual and collective expression; LARP is a medium. This medium, as all other media (television, tabletop role-playing, theatre, the Internet..) works according to its own, unique, laws. The lack of development of the LARP medium is easily explained in organisers' lack of ability or interest in using the medium on its own terms. Instead, LARP has too often become lost in the inspiration from other media and sought to become as similar as possible to the movie, the theatre, the book, or (most often) the tabletop role-playing game.

To see the possibilities inherent in LARP, we must find these unique laws; the essence of LARP. What is it that makes LARP different from other media? Let us remove what we may without LARP ceasing to be LARP, and see what is left.

Monsters, historical settings and such associations can be avoided without problems. A LARP may take place in the present, and without occurrences of the supernatural. Individual character descriptions may be removed, the role may be that you are a member of a group who behave in a certain manner. Written material is easy to do without; oral agreements may be made as to how the LARP will function. The organiser may easily disappear; every player can write his own part. We can rid ourselves of game mechanics; everything can be improvised. You can, however, not

remove the fact that the participants play roles in a fictional world. For the event to be a LARP, there must be an agreement that whatever happens is a play, and that this is something else than real life. You cannot remove the physical meeting between roles. If all players are at different locations, and never meet, they are not at a LARP together, although they are still role-playing. For the same reason, you cannot LARP alone. It is not possible to LARP together with someone who does not know that this is a play. That's trickery, not LARP, but probably loads of fun. What we are left with is:

»A LARP is a meeting between people who, through their roles, relate to each other in a fictional world.«

This is hard to see because game mechanics, riddles, background stories, superficial action and other elements divert the focus away from the essence of LARP; the meeting between participants. With a foundation in this minimum definition it is easy to identify the conventions and clichés in LARP.

That LARP is a meeting between people also implies that a LARP is not the sum of all character descriptions and handbooks, but rather the sum of everything that happens from a LARP begins until it ends. LARP is action, not literature.

The Vow of Chastity explained

1. It is forbidden to create action by writing it into the past history of a character or the event.

From the point of view of an organiser, the LARP may appear to be good because every character has an exciting story in the written background. This is a typical pitfall. From the point of view of the player, only what happens in the LARP has reality. LARP is not literature, LARP is action. The use of retrospect in the character description forces the player to relate to incidents that are not real. The Vow of Chastity forbids all action in the written character descriptions past; all action of the story must take place during the play.

Examples as to how this may be solved, is to use fates, to leave it to the players to agree (and role-play) upon conflicts between themselves, or to use static conflicts in the backgrounds. It is not in conflict with this rule for players to invent a more detailed background, if they find this necessary for their immersion into the character.

2. There shall be no »main plot« (the story of the event must be made for each player, not the whole)

With main plots we here mean conflicts that are meant to touch the entire LARP, but does not directly involve all characters. Main plots are another typical pitfall; the conflict is important for the organisers and those players directly involved in it,

but reduces the roles of characters that do not play a part of this plot to the position of an audience. The use of main plots almost universally leads to a division between important and less important characters.

This convention probably comes from organisers seeking to replicate movies, literature and theatre. A story in the non-interactive media necessarily has a limited amount of active characters. In LARP, an interactive form of art, the amount of actors and stories is theoretically unlimited.

Examples of alternative ways to bind a LARP together:

- The LARP may contain many smaller intrigues, where the intrigues are thematically connected.
- The LARP scenario may be a slice of reality. In real life, there are no main plots.

3. No character shall only be a supporting part.

Not only must every character be directly involved in the conflicts that touch it; the character must also in its own way play the lead part of the conflict. It is therefore not permitted to write a character whose most important function in the LARP is to help or support another character.

4. All secrecy is forbidden. (Any participant who so desires shall in advance be shown all documents that pertain to the

event).

In conventional LARP, organisers often attempt to create tension by preventing the player from knowing what the organiser has planned for the character. Actually, things are often kept secret so that players or organisers are to feel important – I know something you don't know – or out of habit.

The reality of the LARP is what is acted out, not what is kept secret and becomes known only after the LARP is over or for a minority during the event. By removing secrecy, we also remove part of the competition aspect of LARP. Some players may wish to know everything before the event starts, whereas others will not. Dogma #4 implies that all plans must be made available for the players who wish to know them, not that these must be published to all players.

5. After the event has begun, the playwrights are not allowed to influence it.

(Any use of staging and ad hoc organiser roles is forbidden).

Organisers of conventional LARP use a number of methods to influence the LARP after it has begun. They do this to entertain players and to steer the event in the »correct« direction.

As organisers take control during a LARP, the players become passive. This leads to players learning to expect organiser control, even demanding it. Only a LARP entirely without organiser influence will place the real initiative in the hands of players,

where it belongs. As we learn how to makeLARPs work independent of organiser control and influence, it will become possible to develop more constructive and activating methods of organiser interaction.

6. Superficial action is forbidden. (the playwrights may not in any way plan or encourage the use or threat of violence as part of the event)

The LARP medium is quite fit to create tension through the simulation of violence. The medium can, however, be used for far more than this - something which is often overseen in favour of combat. At the time of writing, it is for many LARPer difficult to imagine a combat-free LARP. We are of the opinion that it is about time playwrights and players learn to createLARPs without using these simplest methods to achieve thrill and suspense.

7. LARP inspired by tabletop role-playing games are not accepted.

LARP and tabletop role-playing are different media that, despite some similarities, work on different terms. In the tabletop role-playing game, the action is played out as the roles (players) and the fictional world (storyteller) meet. In a LARP the focus is on the roles (players) and what happens between them.

Some of the pitfalls that come from the tabletop heritage:

- The idea of “game balance “ (all players must have the same opportunity to find the treasure)
- Focus on solving the riddle/ completing the adventure.
- Organisers wish to control the game.
- Division between important and unimportant characters (“PC” and “NPC”).

Most conventional LARP is inspired by tabletop role-playing games both in form and content. It is no longer original to make a LARP of a new kind of tabletop RPG. We also register that a majority of the clichés in current LARP, are inherited from tabletop RPG’s.

The most important argument, however, for not being inspired by tabletop role-playing games is that only through these means are we able to find out what LARP as a separate medium may achieve.

8. No object shall be used to represent another object. (all things shall be what they appear to be)

In conventional and mainstream LARP a number of signs and substitutes are used, swords are made from latex-covered styrofoam, cordial is supposed to be wine, the curtains are drawn because windows weren’t invented in the middle ages, a rope is used as a city wall, tents in stead of houses, make-up and masks are used to signify supernatural creatures etc. Signs are most often an ingrown, but

unfit, solution to the problems of transferring settings from other media to LARP. Exaggerated use of signs easily lead to absurdities in the play, as it is difficult for players to remember what the different signs represent. The focus of LARP disappears in the signs. Human beings are, in this context, not to be considered »objects«. A player may still be used to represent a character..

What we wish to end is the absurd certainty that for instance Styrofoam sticks are swords, and the assumption that this is the only way it can be done. The signs are not a part of the essence of LARP. Though they occasionally may come in handy, we wish to learn how to create LARP without their use.

9. Game mechanics are forbidden. (rules for the simulation of for instance the use of violence or supernatural abilities are not permitted)

By »game mechanics« we mean all rules used to simulate situations believed not to be possible to do for real inLARPs: violence, pain, intoxication, magic, poisoning et cetera.

LARP has developed from tabletop role-playing, which again has developed from strategy games. The use of game mechanics merely a fossile remnant from the strategy games, and is unnecessary and generally impractical in both LARP and tabletop role-playing. Game mechanics may be easily replaced with trust in the players’ ability to improvise.

Dogma #9 does not exclude rules for

other purposes than simulation; such as security rules and fates.

10. The playwrights are to be held accountable for the whole of their work.

LARP has often been perceived as a hobby. In pact with this thought, players applaud their organisers no matter the product because the organisers anyway do a good job for their hobby. To the extent criticism has appeared after an event, it has often been for purely practical matters – food, fire security and such. We are not opposed to hobbyists in this way honouring the will to do something, but it helps little when one desires to develop the medium and art form. Which criteria LARP is to be criticised according to is another discussion. Playwrights of a Dogma-event therefore refuse to wear the Emperors New Clothes. We will be held accountable for our production, slaughtered for anything bad or imperfect, and merely receive positive criticism for what was original, well done and progressive.

The Future

We appeal to LARPerS who share our goal of developing LARP as a diverse medium of expression to consider the following broad aims for the future: The abandonment of conventional LARP – the current conventions of LARP are merely an infant stage and should be abandoned. In the future, it should be impossible to speak of »conventional« LARP, as

no conventions should exist. What we in the Dogma 99 manifesto term »conventional« LARP might one day be called »primitive«, »fallen« or »corrupt« LARP.

To this end; training and handbooks must be made available for new scenes and troupes of playwrights, lest they fall into the pitfalls of convention.

Diversity – LARP playwrights and scenes must diversify the genres and methods of LARP events. We seek the death of »mainstream« LARP, in that the diversity of LARP events should be so vast, no single genre or group of genres may be called »mainstream«. We certainly do not want the current mainstream genres to disappear, but they should lose their dominant position.

We therefore appeal to the playwrights of the current mainstream to organise new and different LARPs, experiment with new methods, and explore or create other genres.

Publicity - LARP must become well-known in the eyes of the public as a new medium that takes diverse forms, not as a curiosity. To forward this end, LARPerS should be conscious of the media attention they receive, and steer this away from »feature« coverage towards in-depth journalism.

Fundamentalist and moral-panic critics must not be allowed to choose the battleground. Active and well-planned relations with the media are the best way to achieve a good, steady and objective coverage.

Recruitment – LARP must lose its profile as a young, slightly geeky, white

middle-class activity. Recruitment should aim at all levels of society, and especially at groups from which recruitment has previously been scarce. We must abandon the misconception that conventional LARP is the best way of introduction to the medium; it is not.

Communication – The links between local, regional and national LARP communities must be strengthened. Forums (including magazines, the internet and conventions) must be opened for the exchange of ideas and know-how. LARPers must document their work, experiments and experiences, and make this documentation available to the international LARP community.

An exchange of knowledge with related media (drama, theatre, movie-making, storytelling, tabletop RPG) should take place, although the differences of the media should always be taken into consideration.