

Writing Freeform Larps

A structured method for creating freeform-
style live-action roleplaying games

Steve Hatherley

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Sample file

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and comments.

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Sample file

1. Introduction

Welcome to *Writing Freeform Larps*, which describes how I write freeform larps.

Larp means “live-action roleplaying,” which grew out of tabletop roleplaying games and originally meant running around in caves or woods with plastic swords. Larp now encompasses a broad spectrum of games, from simple two-player games to blockbuster larps with substantial production values set in spectacular locations.

Freeforms are a sub-set of the larp world and are sometimes known as theatrical-style, interactive literature, chamber larps, secrets and power larps, or parlour larps. I know them as freeforms, and we’ve been using the term freeform in the UK since the early 1990s, so that’s what I’m calling them here. (Other meanings of “freeform larp” are discussed by Lizzie Stark on her blog, here:

<https://leavingmundania.com/2014/12/31/freeform-for-noobs/>.)

1 Introduction

Freeforms differ from other larps in several ways:

- One-shots. Freeforms aren't campaigns. They are self-contained. They may be played many times, but there's no ongoing story or characters.
- Everyone is the star. There are no non-player characters in a freeform. Everyone has a full character (or, occasionally, more than one character). Nobody is running "monsters" or "NPCs." The bad guys are players too.
- Pre-written character backgrounds. Each character has a detailed pre-written background (provided by the game authors) with goals and links to people they already know.
- Plot overload. Freeforms often have lots of plots all crammed together – and when the game starts, there's no telling which way things will go.
- Rules light. Some freeforms don't even have rules. What rules they have will be written specifically for the freeform.
- Low Combat. Most freeforms have no combat. Where there is combat, it is resolved using mechanics (cards or dice) rather than physical simulation (foam weapons or lasertag).
- Freeforms are usually for fun and entertainment (and are often light-hearted) compared to other types of larp (such as Nordic-style larp) which is often more serious in tone.
- Those running the game (GMs) are enablers, not directors. The plot is driven by players, not the GMs. The GMs exist to help the players achieve their goals. GMs may not know what's going on.

These aren't set in stone, and freeforms often break these rules. However, most freeforms follow most of these definitions.

Not normally immersive

Freeform larps aren't usually "immersive". Creators and players in immersive larps take significant effort to create authentic scenery and costuming – playing in an immersive larps is like being present in the game world.

Freeform larps encompass a wide range of settings (modern day, far future, distant past, alien worlds, fantastic realms and more) that cannot easily be recreated on a budget. Instead, everything is done abstractly, with notes and cards representing scenery or props.

How I started writing freeforms

When I started writing freeforms, I didn't know what I was doing. Writing my first freeform was more than a little daunting – all those characters, rules and plots. Where should I start?

I asked people who'd written freeforms that I had played in, and I didn't understand their answers. Partly that was because I was asking the wrong questions, and partly the answers made no sense because I didn't have the experience to understand them. I was asking questions like "How do you write characters?" when I didn't understand that characters aren't normally the first things written.

So I tried my best. My early freeforms weren't awful, but over the years I've streamlined things. I now have a process I follow when writing a freeform – and that process guides me from start to finish.

1 Introduction

Why I'm writing this book

I've written *Writing Freeform Larps* because I love playing freeforms. I want to play in more, and the only way that will happen is if more are written. So I hope *Writing Freeform Larps* will help other writers create freeforms.

I also want to share the knowledge and tips and tricks I've picked up over the years. For those writers already creating larps (freeform or otherwise), maybe this will help them think about their process.

Freeform Games

I started Freeform Games in 2001 with Mo Holkar to bring freeform-style larp fun to murder mystery games. We don't tell our customers they are playing a larp – they think they're playing a murder mystery game. But they're really playing a larp.

The process I outline here is the same as the one we use with our authors for writing Freeform Games murder mystery games.

Example freeforms

I mention several freeform larps in this book. Details of those mentioned are included in Appendix A.

2. The process

I use this process to write most of my freeform larps. It's not the only way of writing freeforms, but it reliably and consistently produces playable freeform larps.

I've used this process many times. Most of my freeforms have been co-written with other people and I find a structured process is extremely helpful when writing with others, as everyone needs to be pulling in the same direction.

Freeform writing process

The freeform writing process evolved as the result of writing several freeforms. It was honed at the annual Peaky Writing Weekends, where teams write a freeform from scratch on Friday night and all day Saturday – and then run it for the other writing teams on Sunday.

To deliver a playable game in time to be run, it helps to have a process; this is the one I use. (There are other ways to write freeforms, but this method consistently works for me.)

Here's the raw process:

1. Concept and constraints
2. Themes

2 The Process

3. Character types
4. Outline characters
5. Character sheet layout
6. Structure
7. Plots
8. Rules and mechanics
9. Background
10. Finishing off

While I've shown this as a ten-step process, I often move backwards and forwards between the steps as new ideas occur to me. So I treat the process as a guide rather than a rule.

#1 Concept and constraints

This is in two steps – the overall concept of your game and its constraints.

First, I decide what sort of game I want to write and summarise it in a simple “elevator pitch”.

A 16-player game set in England with railway building mixed with Jane Austen-style matchmaking.

A small murder mystery set on an ocean liner at the outbreak of World War 1.

A Robin Hood game set in mediaeval Nottingham.

A large weekend game based on Shakespeare's plays.

I make sure the concept is something I am enthusiastic about writing. If I'm not interested in the concept, I'm unlikely to finish writing it.