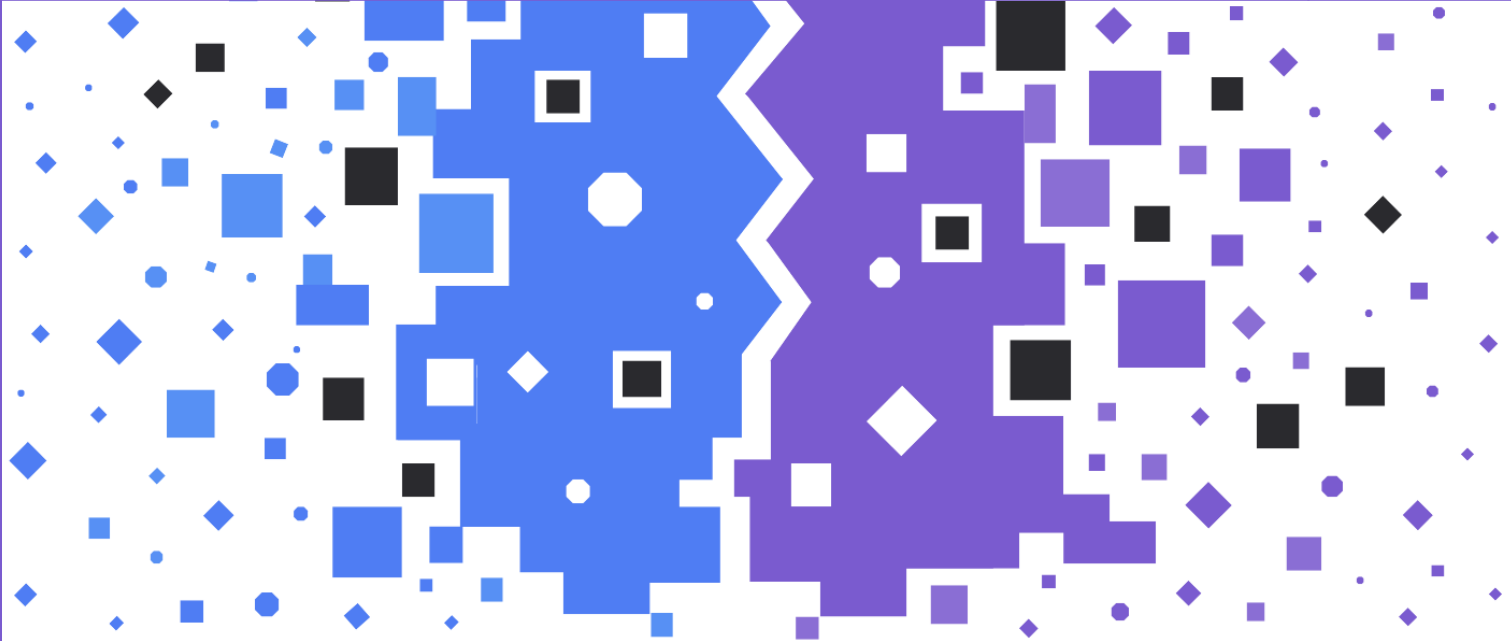




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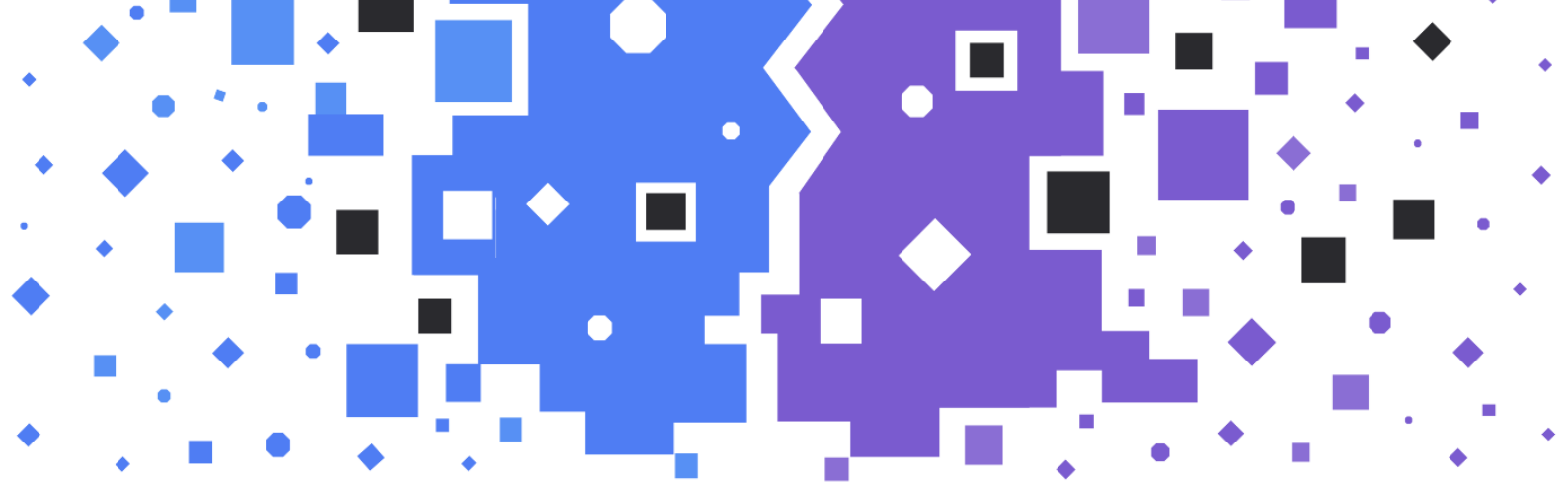
Curriculum for civic education through dystopian larp

LIVEFORM



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Chapter 1 : Introduction to dystopian larp in civic education

Written by Szymon Boruta (Liveform)

Learning objectives

After completing this chapter, you will be able to:

- ◆ Explain why dystopia and dystopian larp can work well as tools for civic, democratic and environmental education.
- ◆ Describe what sets dystopian larp apart from other forms of role-play, simulation and game-based learning.

Recognise how dystopian larp can support ethical decision-making, civic awareness, critical reflection and non-formal youth work practice.

1.1 Why dystopia in civic education?

Dystopia as a mirror

Dystopian stories are not really about imaginary worlds. They are about ours, pushed a little further. Surveillance, propaganda, environmental collapse and extreme inequality are not invented problems. They are problems we already live with, only intensified (Claeys 2017; Rantanen 2016).

This is what makes dystopia useful in civic education. **It takes something familiar and uncomfortable and puts enough fictional distance between the participant and the issue to make it easier to examine.** Instead of discussing a sensitive topic directly, participants can first explore it through a fictional society, fictional rules and fictional roles.



That distance matters in practice. Ask a group directly what they think about state surveillance in their own country, and you may get defensiveness, political point-scoring or silence. Set the same question inside a fictional city where a constantly updated “loyalty score” decides who gets food, healthcare or a job, and people often start talking more openly. They are no longer defending a political position. They are working out what they would do if they were the citizen queuing for services, or the official checking the score.

Fictional distance can help a group discuss sensitive civic topics without immediately assigning blame to real people, political parties, countries, or identities.

For example, a dystopian scenario might depict a city where all communication is monitored by a central authority. Citizens are required to report suspicious behaviour, and access to public services depends on a constantly updated loyalty score. Within such a fictional setting, participants can explore questions about privacy, trust, and state power in ways that connect directly to real debates about digital surveillance and data collection.

Looking at systems, not only individual choices

Dystopia is also useful because it shows systems rather than only individuals (Claeys 2017; Johansson et al. 2026). It is tempting to frame every civic issue as a personal choice: would you have done the right thing? **Dystopian scenarios can ask a more useful question: what kind of system makes that choice possible, or even necessary?**

Many of the problems we care about in civic education – inequality, corruption, environmental degradation – are not caused by one bad decision. They build up through institutions, economic pressure, cultural expectations and power relations working together.

A well-built dystopian scenario can make those forces visible. It can show a rule that limits who gets access to resources, an institution that rewards obedience, or a social norm that quietly pressures people to conform. Participants can then discuss



not only what a person did, but also what the surrounding system encouraged, allowed or punished.

Ethical dilemmas under pressure

That same pressure is what creates real ethical dilemmas (Claeys 2017). When resources run out or institutions stop working, characters often have to choose between things they value: security or freedom, loyalty or resistance, their own survival or everyone's wellbeing.

Some common tensions in dystopian scenarios include:

- ◆ Security vs. freedom
- ◆ Loyalty vs. resistance
- ◆ Survival vs. solidarity
- ◆ Obedience vs. responsibility
- ◆ Individual safety vs. common good

These are not only abstract debate topics. They become choices that participants may have to make during the game, under time pressure and in relation to other players. This is one reason why dystopian scenarios can stay with participants long after the activity ends (Johansson et al. 2026).

1.2 What is dystopian larp?

Larp in simple terms

Live action role-playing (larp) is **a form of role-playing in which participants enact characters within a fictional scenario**. Instead of controlling characters from a distance, players interact with each other directly through dialogue, movement, and social behaviour inside the imagined world of the game. Larp therefore combines elements of play, improvisational theatre, and collaborative storytelling (Stenros 2010; Stenros and Montola 2010).

In larp, participants do not only talk about a situation. They temporarily act inside it.



Here is how it usually works in practice. Participants receive a character and some basic facts about the setting: motivations, relationships and goals. Once play starts, however, the story is not scripted. What happens next comes from how the players interact and what they decide in the moment.

Simple example: A participant might play a local official responsible for distributing limited resources in a struggling community. Another participant might play a citizen attempting to secure food for their family. No one has written exactly what will happen between them. Their conversation, negotiation and choices become a story.

In a dystopian larp, this kind of ordinary interaction can create strong tension between institutional duty and personal relationships. A character may have a role in the system, but also private doubts, loyalties or fears.

What makes it dystopian?

Larps can vary greatly in scale and format. Some are short workshop activities for ten people. Others can involve large groups and last for several days. What makes a larp dystopian is not its size, but the kind of fictional society it creates.

Instead of heroic quests or fantasy adventures, dystopian larp places everyday life inside systems of power, control and scarcity. Participants may deal with institutions that regulate behaviour, rules that restrict freedom, or hierarchies that treat people differently depending on their status.

A dystopian larp is not usually about defeating a villain. It is about experiencing how rules, institutions, scarcity, and hierarchy shape people's choices.

For example, a scenario might present a society where citizens are ranked according to how “useful” they are to the state. High-status characters receive privileges and easy access to resources. Others must compete for limited opportunities. Players do not only discuss this inequality as an idea. They experience it through the social interactions of the game.



One player might enforce a rule they personally disagree with because their character's job requires it. Another might decide whether to comply, resist or find a way around it. Because these choices emerge through interaction, larp can show how power works in practice, not only in theory (Rantanen 2016; Johansson et al. 2026).

The key practical point for practitioners: Dystopian larp is useful when you want participants to explore civic systems by being inside them, not only by having them explained.

1.3 Why dystopian larp for civic education?

From civic knowledge to civic experience

Most civic education explains political systems, institutions and rights. This knowledge is important, but understanding how a society works also means understanding how power, responsibility and collective decision-making feel from the inside.

Dystopian larp helps participants move from knowing about civic systems to experiencing how civic systems affect choices.

This connects with a basic idea from experiential learning: people do not learn only from information, but also from reflecting on what they have lived through (Kolb 1984). In this context, role-play can create opportunities for participants to engage with social and political questions through action, not only through discussion.

Imagine a participant playing a government official in a fictional dystopian society. Their character has to enforce an unpopular regulation. Another participant plays a citizen whose family is harmed by that rule. When these two characters meet, the conversation can reveal the tension between institutional duty and personal values more sharply than a lecture could.



Learning through consequences

A rule can look simple on paper: “Only citizens with a high social score receive extra food.” During play, that same rule may create pressure, fear, negotiation, resistance, favouritism or moral compromise.

Dystopian settings are especially good at this because they exaggerate or isolate specific social mechanisms – surveillance, propaganda, inequality or scarcity – until they become difficult to ignore. At the same time, they remain close enough to real life to feel recognisable (Claeys 2017).

Inside this kind of fiction, participants can try out different civic responses. Characters may comply with authority, resist it, negotiate with it, or look for a way around it. Research on political larp suggests that this kind of role-play can function as a form of civic engagement and reflection, encouraging discussion about governance, responsibility and democratic processes (Rantanen 2016; Johansson et al. 2026).

As a facilitator, you can use this experience to open deeper questions, such as:

- ◆ How do systems shape what individuals actually do?
- ◆ What responsibilities come with holding authority?
- ◆ When do people cooperate with institutions, and when do they push back?
- ◆ How do communities respond to crisis or inequality?

These questions help move the debrief from “What happened in the game?” to “What does this tell us about civic life, responsibility and democratic participation?”

1.4 Dystopian larp in non-formal youth work

Why it fits youth work

Dystopian larp fits naturally into non-formal youth work because this field already values participation, experimentation, collaboration and shared reflection. **Instead of explaining civic topics only through theory, youth workers can let young people test roles, choices and responsibilities inside a structured fictional situation** (Stenros and Montola 2010; Bowman et al. 2024).



This can work especially well with young people aged roughly 15–25. At this age, many participants are still actively developing their views about justice, power, responsibility and society. Experiential formats allow them to explore these questions through action as well as discussion (Kolb 1984).

In a dystopian larp, participants are not only told about civic issues. They enter a fictional society where those issues shape everyday life. They interpret rules, build alliances, negotiate conflicts and make decisions that influence how the story develops (Stenros and Montola 2010).

Practical value for youth workers

For youth workers and organisations, dystopian larp offers several practical advantages. It often generates strong engagement because participants become invested in the fictional world and in the relationships between characters. It also allows participants to contribute in different ways: through negotiation, leadership, quiet observation, collaboration or support (Bowman et al. 2024; Rantanen 2016).

This matters in groups where participants may have different levels of confidence, different communication styles or different preferred ways of taking part.

The format is also flexible. Some scenarios are designed for small workshop groups and can be played within a few hours. Others involve larger groups and longer programmes. **This means youth workers can adapt dystopian larp to different educational contexts**, from a short session in a youth centre to a broader civic education programme.

Safety, simplification and reflection

None of this means dystopian larp is risk-free. Themes such as oppression, inequality, exclusion or social conflict can become emotionally intense. **This intensity can support engagement, but only if the experience remains safe and constructive for everyone involved** (Bowman et al. 2024).

There is also a risk of oversimplifying complex social issues. Dystopian fiction exaggerates certain dynamics on purpose, so that participants can see and discuss



them more clearly (Claeys 2017; Farca 2018). However, without reflection afterwards, participants may take the simplified version too literally.

For this reason, **any simplified dystopian scenario needs a debrief that reconnects the fiction to real-world complexity.**

Abstraction can help, especially when working with sensitive topics such as discrimination, hierarchy or exclusion. **Instead of assigning real-world victim roles to participants, designers can use fictional groups, symbolic status markers or invented social categories.** This allows participants to explore how injustice works without placing real people in the room into harmful or stereotyped positions (Bowman et al. 2024).

The surrounding youth work structure is what makes this possible. Preparation activities, careful facilitation during the game and a proper debrief afterwards help turn the larp from an intense fictional experience into a learning process. They connect what happened in the fiction to broader civic themes and to participants' real lives (Kolb 1984; Kangas 2015).

Summary

Dystopian settings can work well in civic education because they take real and uncomfortable social dynamics – surveillance, scarcity, unequal power, obedience, exclusion – and give participants enough fictional distance to examine them more openly. Dystopian larp takes this further by **placing participants inside these systems rather than discussing them only from the outside.**

Through role-play, **participants can negotiate, comply, resist, make decisions and experience the consequences of social rules in practice.** In non-formal youth work, this combination of immersion, participation and structured reflection can turn an intense fictional experience into meaningful civic learning.

For youth workers, the most important point is that dystopian larp should not end when the game ends. Its **educational value depends on preparation, careful facilitation and debriefing** that connects the fictional experience back to real civic life. The next chapter builds on this foundation by looking more closely at the pedagogical principles behind how this learning happens.

Chapter 2: Pedagogical framework and learning principles

Written by Natalie Jivkova (CVS-Bulgaria)

Learning objectives

After completing this chapter, you will be able to:

- ◆ Understand key pedagogical concepts related to learning in non-formal education.
- ◆ Apply experiential learning principles, including Kolb's cycle, in educational larp settings.
- ◆ Recognise and support different levels of learning (knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviour).
- ◆ Create safer and effective learning environments using the learning zones model.
- ◆ Facilitate learning processes that connect larp experiences to civic and democratic participation.

Larp, and especially edu-larp, is not only a creative and immersive activity; it is fundamentally a structured and **meaningful learning process**. When used in non-formal education, edu-larp becomes a powerful pedagogical tool that allows young people to explore democracy, civic engagement, EU values, and environmental responsibility through lived experience rather than abstract theory.

For youth workers and educators, understanding **how learning happens** is essential in order to design, facilitate, and reflect on larp-based activities responsibly and efficiently. This chapter provides the pedagogical foundations needed to use dystopian edu-larp in an intentional and structured way. It explains what learning is,



how it occurs in non-formal education, and how immersive role-play supports creating meaning, learning, and change.

2.1 What is learning?

Learning can be broadly understood as a **process of cognitive, emotional and behavioural change**. It is not limited to acquiring information, but also involves developing understanding, abilities, values, and ways of acting in the world.

In youth work, learning is often described as a holistic process that includes:

- ◆ **Cognitive** aspects (what we know),
- ◆ **Practical** aspects (what we can do),
- ◆ **Emotional** aspects (how we feel),
- ◆ **Ethical or social** aspects (how we relate to others and to society).

Learning does not happen automatically because an activity is interesting or engaging. **It occurs when clear learning goals are set, safer learning spaces are created and experiences are processed**. Time should be provided to reflect on experiences, connect them to meaning, and apply learning in real-life contexts in young people's lives. This is particularly important in edu-larp, where emotional intensity and immersion can be very high.

While deep immersion increases engagement and emotional investment of the participants, they may become so focused on the fictional world that they find it difficult to step back, critically reflect on their experiences and connect their in-game decisions to the real-life civic issues and learning objectives the activity is designed to explore. Without facilitation and reflection, participants may remember the strong experience but miss the learning outcomes and the key takeaways.

Edu-larp aligns naturally with this understanding of learning, as it invites young people to explore, question and construct meaning together. Understanding these learning foundations helps youth workers intentionally design larp experiences that support civic and democratic learning.

2.2 Formal, non-formal and informal learning

To understand where edu-larp fits pedagogically, it is important to distinguish between formal, non-formal and informal learning. Although the boundaries are increasingly blurred today, we can still recognise some specific characteristics for each of them.

Formal learning

Formal learning **takes place in structured, institutionalised settings** such as schools, universities or vocational training systems. It **follows a strict curriculum**, is **led by professionals** and usually results in **certification or qualifications** after examination.

Formal learning is effective for transmitting structured knowledge, but it can struggle to address complex civic competences such as participation, ethical reasoning or democratic agency.

Non-formal learning

Non-formal learning takes place **outside formal education systems but is intentional, organised and structured**. Youth work, training courses, workshops and projects fall into this category.

Council of Europe's T-Kit on Training Essentials

According to the T-Kit, non-formal education should be: "**voluntary; accessible** to everyone (ideally); an **organised process** with educational objectives; **participatory; learner-centred**; about learning **life skills** and **preparing for active citizenship**; based on involving both individual and group learning with a **collective approach; holistic and process-oriented; based on experience and action**; organised on the basis of the **needs of participants**." (T-Kit 6, Council of Europe).



Non-formal learning truly **values participants' experiences**, adapts to **group needs**, focuses on **personal and social development**, and emphasises **reflection and self-directed learning**. To summarise, non-formal learning is voluntary rather than mandatory, participant-centred rather than teacher-led, and both process-oriented and outcome-driven.

Edu-larp is strongly rooted in the principles of non-formal learning, as it is intentionally designed, facilitated and aligned with educational goals while remaining flexible, participatory and highly experiential. Although it is most commonly used in non-formal education settings, edu-larp can also be successfully adapted and integrated into formal educational contexts.

Informal learning

Informal learning **happens continuously in everyday life**: through conversations, media, social interactions and personal experiences. It is usually **unplanned and unstructured**.

Larp activities can also trigger informal learning, especially after the activity, when participants continue reflecting, discussing or acting differently in their daily lives. However, the strength of dystopian larp lies in its **non-formal structure**, which allows informal learning to emerge from a guided process.

Understanding these different types of learning helps position edu-larp within non-formal education and clarifies its pedagogical value.

2.3 Values and principles of non-formal learning

As discussed above, non-formal learning is not only defined by methods, but also by **values and principles**. These values are particularly important when addressing civic education, democracy and EU values. Listed below are the key principles of non-formal learning:



Voluntary participation

Participants choose if they want to engage. Even though it might be challenging at some moments, following it fosters the motivation, the ownership and the responsibility for learning of the young people.

Learner-centred approach

In the non-formal learning settings, the **participants are active creators and contributors to the learning process.** The role of the facilitators is to support the learning creation and to remember that the experiences, opinions and perspectives of the young people matter.

Participation and co-creation

Learning happens through **dialogue, cooperation and shared responsibility.** The role of the youth workers is to provide the space and opportunity for the young people for the collaborative learning process. Knowledge is constructed collectively rather than transmitted one-way from an expert.

Experience-based learning

Learning by doing often **starts from concrete experiences and with the reflection builds towards understanding.** The Experiential Learning Cycle will be explored further below.

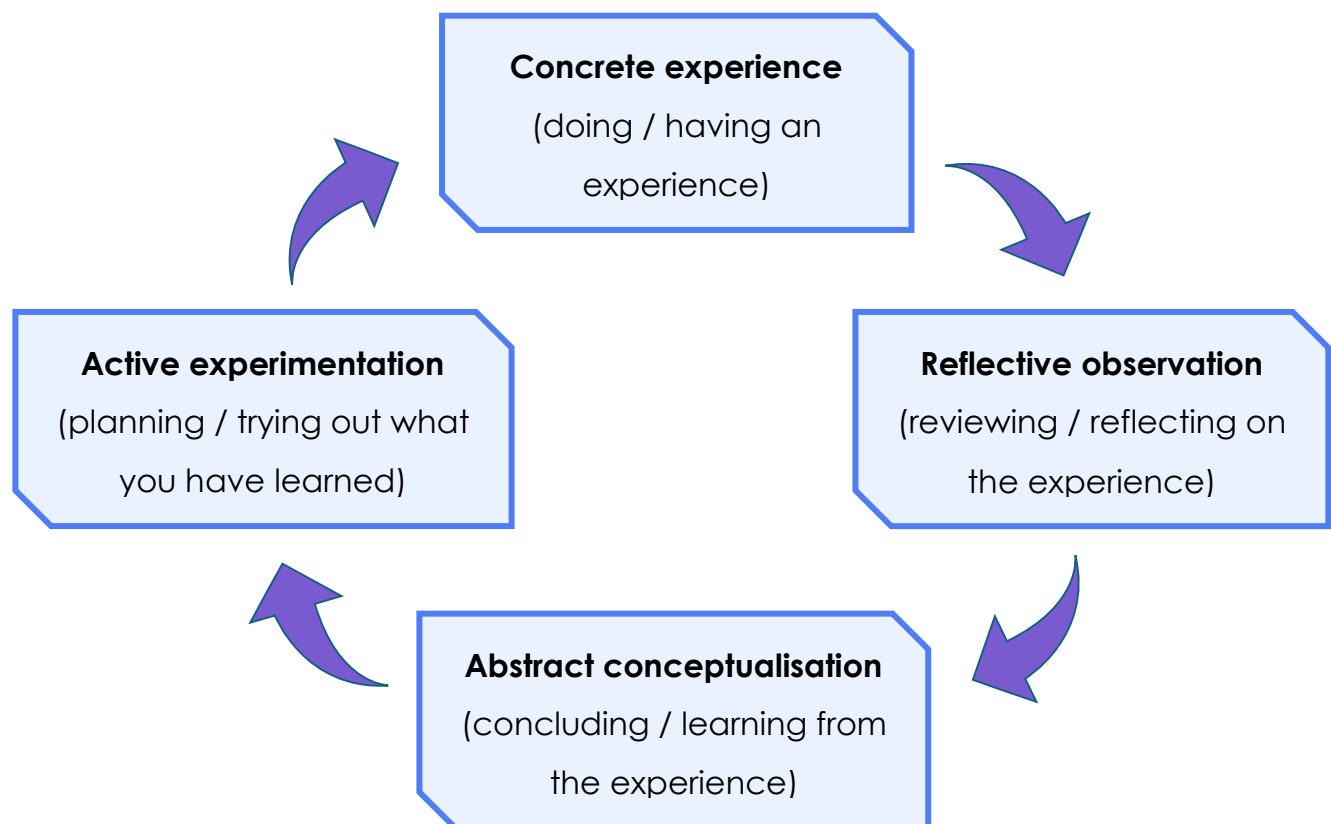
Safer and respectful learning environment

Psychological and emotional safety, trust and respect are prerequisites for meaningful learning, especially in dystopian larp scenarios. Youth workers provide opportunities for the young people to step out of their comfort zones but at the same time they should be aware of how to keep them in a safer environment where the learning process can take place.

2.4 How learning happens: Kolb's experiential learning cycle

Dystopian larp is a great example of **experiential learning**, best explained through David Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle.

Kolb describes learning as a continuous process involving four stages:



1. Concrete experience

Participants engage in a direct experience.

In dystopian edu-larp, this is the immersive role-play itself: interacting with others, making decisions, facing dilemmas and consequences.

2. Reflective observation

Participants reflect on what happened.

They consider their emotions, actions, interactions and outcomes. It is very important to secure time for reflection after the role-play takes place.



3. Abstract conceptualisation

Participants connect experience to concepts and ideas.

During this phase, youth workers help young people to link the larp experience to civic concepts such as democracy, human rights, power structures, sustainability or participation.

4. Active experimentation

Participants apply learning to new situations.

This may include planning civic actions, changing attitudes, or experimenting with new behaviours in real life.

Kolb describes learning as “a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.”

For youth workers, this cycle highlights why reflection and debriefing are essential. Without them, larp will remain just an experience; with them, it becomes learning.

2.5 Levels of learning: Knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviour

Learning in youth work operates on multiple levels and goes beyond simply acquiring knowledge. In non-formal education, learning is understood as a holistic process that includes what participants know, what they are able to do, how they think and feel, and how they act in real-life situations.

The **European Training Strategy Competence Model for Youth Workers** highlights that effective learning involves the development of competences, not only the transmission of information. A competence is not just knowledge or a single skill, but a combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours that enable a person to act effectively and responsibly in different contexts.



In this sense:

- ◆ **Knowledge** provides understanding and information,
- ◆ **Skills** enable action and application,
- ◆ **Attitudes** shape values, perspectives and motivations,
- ◆ **Behaviour** reflects how learning is expressed in real-life situations.

These elements are interconnected and reinforce each other. Learning becomes meaningful when participants are not only informed, but also able to apply what they know, reflect on their values, and act upon their learning in real-life situations.

Dystopian larp is particularly effective in supporting this type of competence-based learning. By combining experience, decision-making, emotional engagement and reflection, it allows young people to develop not only knowledge about civic issues, but also the skills, attitudes and behaviours needed for active participation in democratic and social life.

Knowledge

This is the **understanding of concepts and acquiring information**.

In dystopian larp, this can include knowledge about democratic structures, civic rights and responsibilities, environmental challenges, power relations and governance.

Skills

This level develops the **abilities to do, act and interact effectively**. Larp enhances skills such as communication, negotiation and collective decision-making, which are essential for democratic participation.

Attitudes

This is a deeper level that **challenges values, beliefs and perspectives**. Dystopian larp encourages empathy, openness, critical thinking, responsibility and solidarity.

Behaviour

This is the level that shows **observable actions and choices in real life**. It may include increased civic participation, engagement in community initiatives, ethical decision-making, sustainable eco-living.

The competence model emphasises that learning is most powerful and meaningful when all these four levels are connected.

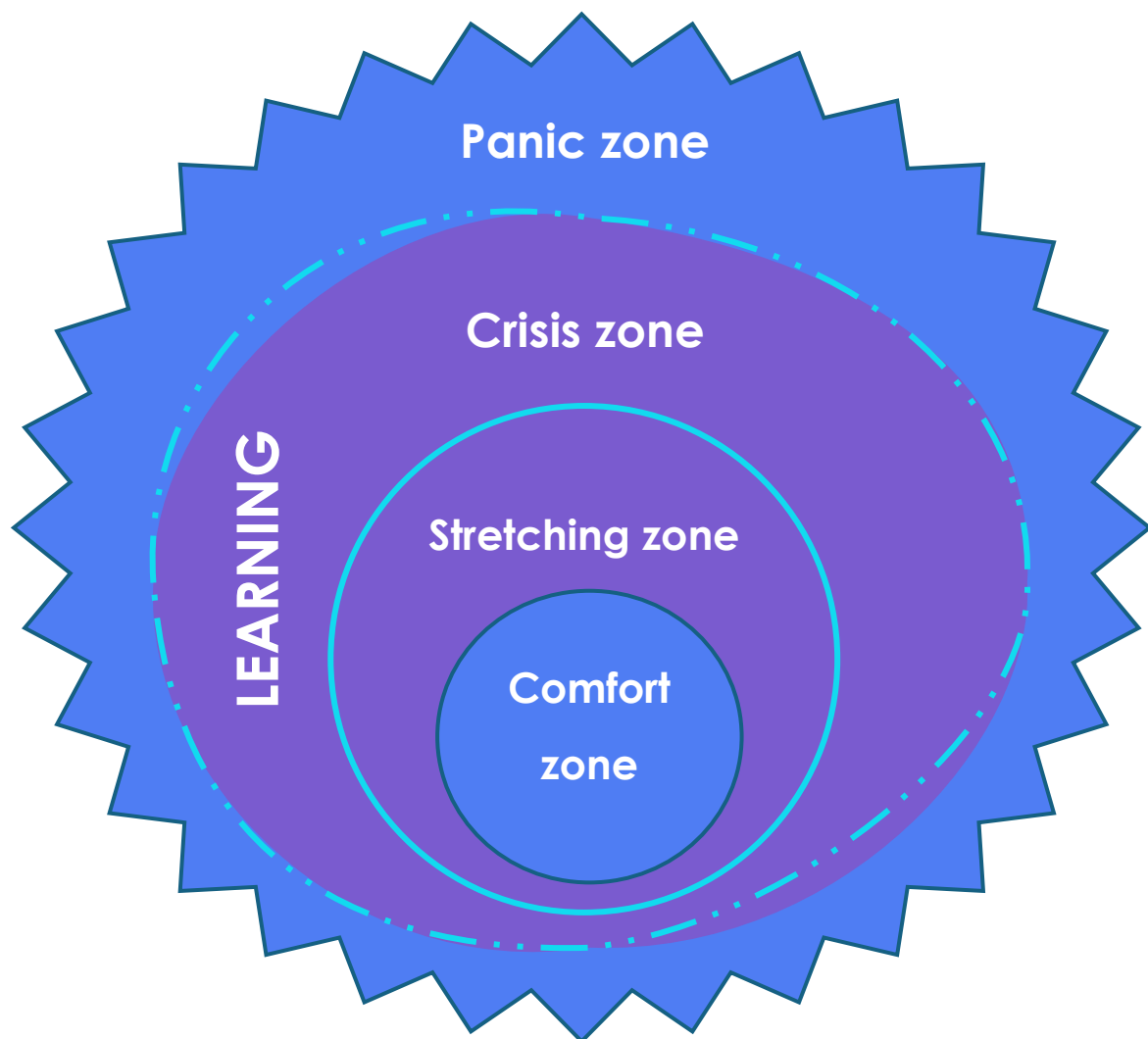
Dystopian larp supports this integration by combining experience, reflection, conceptualisation and action.

2.6 Learning zones: comfort, stretch, crisis and panic

Learning does not happen evenly across all emotional states. The concept of learning zones helps youth workers design activities that challenge participants without overwhelming them.

According to the Council of Europe T-Kit there are four zones:

- ◆ **Comfort zone:** feels safe but offers limited learning, mainly acquiring of information.
- ◆ **Stretch zone:** involves manageable challenge and is ideal for learning and developing the competences.
- ◆ **Crisis zone:** can be stressful but can challenge the values and attitudes thus bringing deep learning, if not facilitated well may block learning.
- ◆ **Panic zone:** fear or overload prevents learning, participant may disengage, withdraw or become overwhelmed.



Dystopian edu-larp can be designed to push participants out of their comfort zone. This is positive when managed carefully, as the **stretch and crisis zones** are where critical reflection, learning, and transformation are most likely to occur.

The youth workers must monitor emotional intensity, offer clear framing and support, provide options to step back or adjust roles, and ensure structured debriefing.

The goal is not to shock participants, but to **challenge them safely** in order to stimulate their learning.

2.7 The role of the youth worker in the learning process

In dystopian edu-larp, the youth worker takes the role of a facilitator of learning processes. The roles of the youth workers include designing learning experiences aligned with clear learning objectives, creating safer and more inclusive



environments, guiding structured reflection and creation of meaning, connecting fiction to real civic contexts. Our role is to balance structure and flexibility, not to control the outcomes, but to shape the conditions in which meaningful learning can occur.

For example, during a dystopian larp scenario in which participants must decide whether to sacrifice individual freedoms to ensure public safety, the youth worker does not evaluate whether the "right" decision was made. Instead, we facilitate a debrief by asking questions such as: **"Why did your group make that choice? How did it feel to have that responsibility? Can you think of real-life situations where societies face similar dilemmas?"** By encouraging participants to analyse their decisions and connect them to democratic values, human rights and civic responsibilities, the facilitator transforms the game experience into meaningful learning.

Summary

This chapter has outlined the **pedagogical foundations that underpin the use of dystopian larp in non-formal learning settings**. It has explored how learning occurs, the values and principles of non-formal learning, the experiential learning cycle, competence development and the importance of creating learning environments that are both challenging and psychologically safe.

Understanding these foundations enables youth workers to move beyond simply organising engaging activities and instead design intentional learning experiences through dystopian larps that foster **reflection, critical thinking, ethical reasoning and active civic participation**. Through immersive role-play experiences, **facilitators can better support young people in connecting dystopian scenarios with real-world democratic, civic and environmental challenges**.

The following chapters build on this pedagogical foundation by exploring how these principles can be translated into practice through the design and implementation of inclusive dystopian larp activities, helping youth workers create meaningful learning experiences that can have a lasting impact on young people's civic engagement, democratic participation and sense of responsibility.

Chapter 3: Civic, democratic and environmental topics explored through dystopia

Written by Sara Rodman & Metka Bahlen Okoli (Zavod Bob)

Learning objectives

By the end of this chapter, learners and facilitators will be able to understand:

- ◆ How dystopian larp can be used to explore civic, democratic, and environmental issues through experiential learning,
- ◆ Examples of how thematic areas such as governance, human rights, sustainability, and ethical decision-making can be framed within dystopian scenarios,
- ◆ How selected examples of larps applied the development of civic competences in educational and youth work contexts.

3.1 Dystopian larp as a tool for civic education

Even though the assortment of the pedagogical approaches within civic education has significantly improved during the past few years, there are still many occasions when participants are being merely passive recipients of the predisposed knowledge. As **the topics of civic education are fundamental for how we shape and imagine our society**, the shift from observation to participation is particularly important – in dystolarp the understanding among the participants depends on their active engagement rather than memorising abstract concepts.



Dystopian larp is being used more and more often for creatively **opening crucial topics of our society** within contemporary civic education. Its main value connects to its **immersive participatory format** and as well in its **capacity to stage societal issues into concrete obstacles and/or tasks that the participating actors need to actively navigate**.

In a larp, participants take on roles within a narrative of a carefully structured world. In the case of dystolarp, we would introduce elements that represent a dystopian reality (e.g. elements of excessive control, elements of totalitarianism, etc.). Within this world the participants immerse in their characters and interact with others through improvisation, negotiation, and collaborative storytelling (Bowman 2010). Through dystolarp in particular, learners act as co-creators of the outcomes of the story within a narrative that depicts real-life or fictional social and political dynamics.

From a theoretical perspective, larp can be understood as a social system in which meaning, authority, and relationships are constructed through the structured world and interaction among the characters. Harviainen argues that role-playing environments function as systems where participants through play continuously negotiate norms and power relations, **develop understanding of another persons' view or even explore the impacts of social structures that don't yet exist** (Harviainen 2016).

This understanding is especially relevant for civic learning, as it reflects the dynamic and relational nature of governance, participation, and collective decision-making. Rather than encountering these concepts as predetermined, participants experience them as evolving processes shaped by interaction. This aligns with **experiential learning approaches**, presented in more detail in Chapter 6, where knowledge is constructed through action and reflection, and where learning outcomes are based on participants' engagement with complex situations rather than from predetermined sets of answers.

One of the most prominent topics explored through dystopian larp is governance and the structure of political systems. Participants are frequently placed within societies where authority is unevenly distributed, contested, or unstable, requiring them to navigate systems of decision-making and excessive institutional control.



Through role-taking, they may take on positions of political leaders, corporate managers, activists, or ordinary citizens, each with specific responsibilities and limitations.

This brings on the concept of **rehearsal for reality** in the dystolarp approach – the learners experience governance as a process shaped by negotiation, compromise, and power relations, rather than as a static set of formal institutions. It allows them to observe how decisions are influenced by factors such as access to information, social status, and competing interests. By understanding these correlations they can **bring the experience into their everyday action as active citizens**.

3.2 Civic, democratic and environmental topics explored through dystopian larp

Dystopian settings oftentimes enhance their experiential educational potential by intensifying and reframing real-world challenges. Scenarios typically represent society crisis, inequality, environmental collapse, or institutional breakdown, allowing participants to critically examine the consequences of political and social decisions.

By exaggerating existing dynamics, dystopian larps make somewhat **invisible societal structures that influence our everyday lives more visible and easier to comprehend**.

Kangas emphasises that larps can simulate those structures, creating temporary societies that reflect and amplify real-world dynamics (Kangas 2016).

Within such environments, participants are by the rule confronted with urgent decisions, conflicting interests, and limited resources, all of which contribute to a heightened awareness of civic and environmental issues.

There are several examples of larps touching civic education topics. In this document we will present three, each of them exposing a different societal issue.



1. PanoptiCorp

Based on the available information from the Nordic Larp book (Stenros and Montola 2010), Nordic Larp Wiki and Petter Karlsson's website documentation, here are the elements of this larp:

Main theme and conflict

The central theme is a satire of the advertising industry and corporate surveillance. The conflict arises from the tension between the employees' task to create intrusive, data-driven advertising campaigns and the ethical questions connected to their work. Players navigate a dystopian environment where privacy is nonexistent, and the corporation monitors everybody – its workers and customers.

Brief description of the setting and mechanics

Setting: The game takes place within the offices of PanoptiCorp, a fictional and powerful advertising agency. The environment is designed to feel sterile, modern, and oppressive, mimicking a high-tech corporate workspace where employees are constantly watched.

Mechanics: The mechanics encourage players to push the logic of **advertising to absurd extremes, highlighting the dehumanising aspects of the industry**. The larp focuses on psychological immersion and interaction. It involves actual monitoring of the players by the game masters (i. e. the system). Players take on roles within the agency hierarchy (executives, creatives, analysts), and the action evolves around meetings, brainstorming sessions, and office politics.

The game is designed to create feelings of paranoia, stress, and claustrophobia connected to constant surveillance and high-pressure corporate expectations.

Players may face scenarios requiring them to betray colleagues, compromise personal ethics, or engage in manipulative behaviour to be promoted within the game's corporate structure. The humour is dark and originates in the uncomfortable reality of privacy invasion and consumer manipulation.



Educational goals

Based on the available documentation, the larp does not have official educational goals. **Its purpose is critical and experiential, aiming to raise awareness and encourage reflection through satire.** However, we can envision the possible 'educational' objectives through the way larp explores themes of capitalism, surveillance, conformity, and enforces the moral compromises individuals make within a hyper-efficient, profit-driven system:

- ◆ **Critique of surveillance capitalism:** By forcing players to act as employees who must invade privacy to succeed, the larp demonstrates how easily ethical boundaries are eroded by profit motives and corporate pressure.
- ◆ **Reflection on complicity:** Players learn by experiencing the moral compromises their characters make to keep their jobs and to be promoted. By being in these positions they can feel and understand the psychological reasons for obedience in bureaucratic structures.
- ◆ **Satire as a tool of understanding manipulation:** By exaggerating the logic of the advertising industry to absurd levels, the larp guides players to recognize and critically analyze real-world manipulative marketing tactics and the normalization of data collection in their own lives.

2. The Chain Gang

Based on the information provided by Francesca R. Cicetti and Alessandro Giovannucci, these are the key elements of this larp:

Main theme and conflict

The central theme is the tension between freedom and slavery, exploring what remains of human identity when individuality is stripped away to enforce collective existence. This conflict operates on two levels. Externally, it manifests as a clash between oppressed prisoners and government-appointed guards, revolving around the construction of a machine that serves either as a tool of the state or a weapon for liberation. Internally, it examines the loss of self, where prisoners function exclusively as a collective group while guards must suppress their humanity to maintain authority.



Brief description of the setting and mechanics

Setting: The game takes place in an environment representing a high-security facility. The space is divided into specific zones: two 'prison' squares where prisoners are constrained, a central construction area, and a raised platform for interrogation (the 'Third Grade').

Mechanics: The game centres on **tension between movement and silence**, with prisoners moving as a single unit (crawling when untied, whispering, and maintaining physical contact) while guards march rigidly at a goose pace, gaze fixed upward, and speak loudly, enforcing authority by stripping 'trait tags' (i. e. 'talkative') from prisoners to enforce behavioural changes.

Together, prisoners secretly choose to either obey government orders by constructing a machine or defy them by building a weapon. They are using bricks to do one or the other, while each brick placement is irreversible. In Chapter 3, guards judged too soft, are degraded to prisoner status, forcing them to endure the very oppression they once upheld.

During 'The Third Grade' interrogation, a prisoner is elevated onto a platform to confess their crime while being subjected to the noise of humiliating group shouts like 'You worm!', followed by public praise for the interrogating guard, deepening the psychological impacts of power and submission.

Educational goals

While the text does not explicitly list 'learning objectives' in an academic sense, the scenario is designed to support experiential learning and critical reflection on the following:

- ◆ **Embodied empathy:** By physically restricting movement and enforcing silence, players intuitively experience the psychological weight of oppression, dehumanisation, and the loss of self-determination.
- ◆ **Understanding complicity and power:** The game illustrates how systems of power function. Guards learn about the pressure of maintaining authority under threat of punishment, while prisoners experience the difficulty of organizing resistance



when individuality is suppressed. The mechanic of degrading the 'weak' guards highlights how systems suppress empathy to maintain efficiency.

- ◆ **Collectivity vs. individuality:** The mechanic where 'the movement of one must be the movement of all' exposes the challenges of consensus, the weight of collective responsibility, and the erasure of the self in totalitarian structures.
- ◆ **Reflection on freedom:** Inspired by Rousseau's quote ('Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains'), the game pushes players to reflect on the questions of freedom, the conditions under which people give it up, and what defines human dignity when being denied the basic civil rights.

3. The Baltic Warriors

Based on the available information from the Baltic Warriors project website and Nordic Larp documentation, here are the elements of this larp:

Main theme and conflict

The core theme of Baltic Warriors is environmental passivity in the face of ecological crisis, specifically the eutrophication of the Baltic Sea and the resulting 'dead zones.' The central conflict is political and systemic: despite consensus among nations that action is needed, there are no real-world cooperation and concrete policies.

The larp dramatises this through the metaphor of 'zombie vikings' – i.e. zombie sailors rising from the sea to attack coastal cities, symbolising the currently invisible, yet catastrophic consequences of pollution and lack of political will for action.

Brief description of the setting and mechanics

Setting: Public, real-world locations in eight cities (Tallinn, Gdansk, St. Petersburg, Kiel, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Sopot, Helsinki), often in accessible urban spaces like pop-up cafes or waterfront areas. The game blends reality with fiction – bystanders are not players, but the larp spreads into their space, creating immersive, spontaneous moments.

Mechanics: Players take on roles of activists, politicians, lobbyists, scientists, or journalists. The game begins as a **political debate about saving the Baltic Sea**. Along the way, zombie vikings attack, forcing players to shift from talk to action. To win,



players must cooperate to carry clean water to a ritual site as a symbolic act representing collective environmental responsibility. After the game, a panel discussion with real experts (scientists, ministers, NGO reps) bridges fiction and reality was held.

Educational goals

Besides being a game Baltic Warriors was a larp intervention in a public space, using play to attract media attention to expose the real-world ecological and political failure and to imagine new ways forward. The educational goals are not specifically defined by the author of the article, yet following the narrative and the topic, we might be able to extract the following ones:

- ◆ **Making the invisible visible:** The abstract ecological concepts (eutrophication, dead zones) were depicted as tangible using the zombie metaphor.
- ◆ **Foster empathy and perspective-taking:** Players step into roles opposite their real-life identities (e.g., activist as lobbyist, politician as assistant) to understand systemic barriers.
- ◆ **Inspire action over awareness:** Moving beyond raising awareness, participants leave with an understanding of urgency and the need for collaboration.
- ◆ **Bridge art and activism:** Turning larp into a tool for civic engagement and systemic change by engaging citizens, policymakers, and media in environmental discourse.

3.3 Key impact of dystopian larp on civic education

Presented thematic explorations are closely connected to broader civic values, particularly those articulated within the European context. The Treaty on European Union identifies core principles such as human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, and the rule of law as foundational to European societies (European Union 2012).

Dystopian larps often highlight the significance of these values by presenting scenarios in which they are challenged or absent. For example, systems characterised by surveillance or authoritarian control illustrate the importance of



individual rights and institutional accountability, while scenarios involving resource scarcity emphasise solidarity, fairness, and shared responsibility.

By engaging with these themes in a fictional context, **participants are encouraged to reflect on the relevance of these values in real-world settings and to consider their own role in upholding them.**

Across these different examples we can see how the dystolarp approach aligns directly with civic education objectives and democratic competence frameworks.

Addressing ethical dilemmas to foster critical reflection

Dystopian larps place participants in morally complex situations with no easy solutions, forcing them to confront conflicting values. These dilemmas foster **critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and personal reflection**, based in experiential learning rather than abstract theory, making them more impactful and memorable. Research on educational larp suggests that such experiences can enhance engagement with complex social issues and support the development of analytical and reflective skills (Bowman and Standiford 2015).

Participation, collaboration and democratic practice

Participants must collaborate under uncertainty, scarcity, or conflict. This requires **dialogue, negotiation, and balancing competing interests**, which illustrates actual democratic processes. On the other hand dystopian settings often embed **structural inequalities** that complicate participation, revealing how **privilege and marginalisation** influence representation. This enables deeper understanding of **barriers to inclusive civic engagement**.

Competences for active citizenship

Beyond thematic knowledge, dystopian larp builds civic competences, vital for constructive democratic participation:

- ◆ **Communication and collaboration**
- ◆ **Problem-solving and adaptability**
- ◆ **Engagement** with diverse perspectives

- 
- ◆ **Empathy** through immersive role-play that encourages understanding of experiences different from one's own.

Overall value in civic education

Dystopian larp offers a **powerful, immersive framework** for exploring civic, democratic, and environmental topics. By simulating real-world challenges, it enables **experiential learning**, translating abstract concepts (governance, rights, sustainability, ethics) into tangible, transformative experiences. Besides **acquiring new knowledge**, it supports the **redefinition of values and competences** essential for responsible societal participation.

Chapter 4: Framing larps for civic education in youth contexts

Written by Sarah Lynne Bowman & Kjell Hedgard Hugaas
(Evocative Games)

Learning objectives

By the end of this chapter, readers should be able to:

- ◆ Describe the basics model of transformative role-playing game design.
- ◆ Identify design choices for dystopian larps based upon basic best practices.
- ◆ Analyse the complex considerations to make when using dystopian scenarios for educational purposes with youth and youth workers.
- ◆ Determine the most important initial considerations to make in relation to your specific target group.
- ◆ Develop basic knowledge of where to find more information on these topics

4.1 Theory and key concepts

This chapter will cover the basics of the model developed for the Erasmus+ EDGE project and published in the textbook "Transformative Role-playing Game Design" (Bowman et al. 2024). The model is intended to as an accessible entry point for new designers who want to use role-playing games in their work with specific target groups. For our purposes, this chapter will cover the basics of how to design larps with dystopian themes for use with youth and youth educators.

4.2 Transformative role-playing game design

Role-playing games are co-creative improvisational experiences in which players immerse into a fictional character together and temporarily inhabit a new shared reality. In role-playing game design, everything about the experience is considered a **designable surface** (Koljonen 2019). While we might assume that plots, characters, and genres are the important parts to emphasise in design practice, when designing for transformation, we also need to consider other aspects, namely: educational setting, transformative goals, framing, and safety practices.

Educational setting

Larps are especially potent because they tend to involve physical embodiment. While a tabletop role-playing game in which players describe having to hide from a horde of zombies in a dystopian apocalyptic setting can be highly engaging, the experience is quite different from actually hiding in the forest in costume while players enacting zombies approach to initiate physical combat. Therefore, one design consideration designers should decide early on involves the degree of embodiment. **Is the larp intended to take place on location in an immersive setting** such as a camp in the woods? **Or will it likely be played in a neutral setting**, such as a classroom or community centre?

From a practical perspective, Dystolarp focuses on designing the latter, with props and costumes optional to the experience, but nonetheless more physical embodiment than a tabletop game offers, in order to more deeply experience the intense emotions of the game in a physical way.

If you have an educational setting that essentially features one room with modular furniture, much of the visual aspects will likely occur in the player's imagination, but you can still find ways to make the experience more visceral. In this chapter, we will take this example and walk you through a hypothetical exercise using the transformative role-playing game design model.



Note that the model has specific recommendations for **transformative leisure**, (informal), **therapeutic**, and **educational** (nonformal, formal) role-playing games, we will focus here on nonformal education with youth and youth educators.

Framing

The most essential component for designing educational larps is the framing that surrounds the game experience. As mentioned in Chapter 6 of the **Dystolarp Booklet**, role-playing games are ritual experiences that require thorough practices before, during, and after play to maximise their educational potential.

Learning outcomes

Essential to educational games is establishing clear learning outcomes for the experience ahead of time. **All design elements should feed into the outcomes** in some way, and elements that do not align or interfere with the outcomes are best removed. In the above example, let's say our learning outcome is to teach youth how to coordinate strategies for success in a teamwork exercise.

The zombies are approaching, and the group has to figure out how best to coordinate their skills to outwit, evade, or defeat the zombies. In such a situation, having some characters who are written as traitors to the group, or who want to challenge the leadership of the team, will likely interfere with these learning outcomes. Such character types might be important for other learning outcomes best saved for another design, such as navigating complex political dynamics in a post-apocalyptic settlement.

Safety design

Central to this model is safety design, which we cover in more detail in Chapter 5 of this curriculum and in part 4 of the **Dystolarp facilitator's guide**. You should carefully consider **how you will help your target group feel physically and psychologically safe as players**, even if their characters are in dire circumstances.

Let's take the zombie scenario described above. We could convert a classroom into two sections: the desks and chairs form a barricade behind which the characters are hiding and discussing plans, whereas the facilitators are approaching slowly as



lumbering zombies. Perhaps the room is completely dark, with only flashlights available to make the experience scarier and more immersive. All they can hear is the shambling of the zombies and eerie moans as they come toward them.

In such a scenario, you would want to try to help players feel physically safe, e.g., making sure the barricades are solidly formed and no sharp edges poke them in the dark, or that the zombies are briefed to engage in combat in a slow, deliberate way, so that players have plenty of time to react.

Similarly, you would want to **establish psychological safety structures** ahead of time, including safe words, for example, to cut the scene if a player feels overwhelmed. The best strategy is to explain these structures in the pre-game materials and ideally try any safety mechanics in the workshop before the game begins.

You could include an exercise in which the participants practice saying “Cut” while a zombie slowly lumbers toward them. Such practices are rarely used in game, but they help establish a perception of safety among participants, and when they are used, it's usually because participants feel they are in a supportive environment in which others will support their needs.

For more information on psychological safety, see Chapter 5 of this curriculum and in Part 4 of the facilitator's guide.

Workshops

During pre-game workshops, you would want to **design activities that are short, build trust among co-players, and directly focus on the activities** in the larp. Common examples include practicing mechanics that will be used during the larp or developing relationships between the characters before play begins. When working with learning outcomes, we recommend having players practice specific skills before the larp and during it.

Perhaps you have a short workshop in which players have to plan strategy for another emergency situation in a dystopian setting, such as escaping a flooded area during a climate event. The players now have embodied practice in the teamwork



skills you want them to continue to perform during the larp, as well as a stronger sense of what actions are most appropriate to take during runtime.

Runtime

During the game itself, you should **consider how you want conflict to unfold**. Is the character experiencing conflict internally, such as trying to build up the courage to fight the zombies? Is their conflict among members of the group, which makes teamwork difficult, e.g., **character vs. character** (CvC) conflict? Or are the players intended to primarily focus on the challenges provided by the physical environment and the zombies, e.g., **character vs. environment** (CvE)?

Do you want the characters to engage in violence or other physical play? Or is the goal to solve the conflict non-violently in some way? All of these choices are especially important when working with youth. Consider what behaviours your scenario is intended to incentivise and how it will benefit your target group, as well as the possible downsides or risks of including certain content. In general, we recommend fostering prosocial skill training whenever possible, even if the scenario makes such encounters challenging.

Post-game framing

While the game might seem like the “point” of the exercise to the participants, remember that the post-game processes are where much of the learning occurs.

Designing effective post-game practices will help cement learning, encourage knowledge transfer, and integrate takeaways into participants' daily life.

The first step is **de-roling**, a **practice in which players ritually transition out of the character**, for example, through a naming practice such as, “I played Maria, I am now Elena.” Players can also ritually remove something representing their character and place it somewhere, such as the centre of a circle, such as a name badge, prop, or piece of costuming.

Another common de-roling exercise is to focus on naming what aspects of the game or character the player would like to take with them and those they prefer to leave behind, such as, “I want to take with me Maria's courage. I want to leave behind her tendency to criticise her teammates when stressed.”



Then, we recommend having a **debrief**, in which **participants can process the experience** in a serious manner. Often players may want to tell funny stories or slip directly into a distanced stance from the game. While this practice can be enjoyable and sometimes even necessary, first we want to make sure we help them process the experience emotionally and intellectually.

Debriefs can be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured. **Structured debriefs** are designed to let everyone have the **same amount of time to answer each question without interruption or conversation**, emphasising their own experience, which helps create space for participants who are more hesitant or shy to engage.

Debriefing questions should focus first on **emotional processing**, e.g., “What emotions did you or your character experience?” or “What was the most profound or intense moment of the scenario for you?” Then, you should ask at least one **educational processing** question that emphasises your learning objective to make sure the players focus on the elements that are most important as takeaways, e.g., “What was most challenging about working within the team during this scenario?” or “What did you learn about teamwork through the scenario?”

Finally, we recommend giving players integration exercises to help them continue to process the experience outside of the larp. You can encourage:

- ◆ **Creative expression**, such as drawing a picture of their character in the dystopian scenario or writing a first-person narrative account of their play experience.
- ◆ **Intellectual processing**, such as writing a reflection journal on how the scenario reflected problems that are emerging in our world as resources become increasingly scarce.
- ◆ **Emotional processing**, including through interpersonal exchange, such as discussing with other participants any feelings or relationship dynamics that have shifted since the game.
- ◆ **Community building** practices, such as applying the skills they learned together to develop action groups who can respond in emergency situations.

Finally, you can give them practices that help them return to daily life, such as self-care activities to tend to their needs.

4.3 Considerations when using dystopian scenarios for educational purposes

Before choosing to use dystopian scenarios in educational settings, there are some considerations one should go through. This chapter will cover the most central ones fairly briefly, but the goal is to provide you with a starting point for a process where you can go into more detail and both deeper and broader considerations for your specific project.

The players

There is a common saying among role-playing game designers: “Players are more important than the game” (Brown 2016; Koljonen 2019). This saying has several layers, but the most important one is that making sure that the players are as safe as we can make them is more important than whether the game gets played the way it was intended or even gets played at all.

Your player base

When choosing a scenario, you should always start by considering who your players are. In general, this means **making sure that the scenario, and its content is appropriate for your players**. There are many considerations you can make.

First, we advise you to at least make sure the topics are **age-appropriate**; themes appropriate for 25-year-olds may not be appropriate for 15-year-olds.

Second, consider the **cultural background** of your players, such as avoiding including stereotypes (Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman 2021) or appropriation (Kessock 2014; Kangas 2017; Mendez Hodes 2020). Encourage players to engage in research and embody such character respectfully (Mendez Hodes 2019).

A third, and possibly the most important thing to always keep in mind when running role-playing games in education settings is the degree to which the experience is **mandatory or optional**. In formal education settings with youth, such as secondary or higher education settings, your participants are students that may have limited opportunities for opting out of the activity. If the game is mandatory or even required



in order to get a grade or pass a course, you have to pay particular attention to how the content of the game might affect different players in certain ways.

One approach is to provide an **alternative activity with the same learning goals** in case a participant needs to opt out. In addition, the safety design and scaffolding you put around the game become even more important than they would have been if the players self-selected to play the game.

Even in non-formal or informal settings that are ostensibly voluntary, power dynamics or social pressure may make players feel less comfortable engaging. Trust-building exercises and methods to onboard the players to the experience in a relaxed manner can help ease such anxieties. For more on this topic, please look at the suggested list of readings below, as well as the other Dystolarp resources.

Players' lived experiences

Your players will all have different lived experiences that can influence how the game affects them. As mentioned above, **methods for opting out and safety design are always important to consider**. Safety becomes even more critical if you have players that are playing close to home, meaning that the players are embodying characters and/or scenarios that are close to their own lived experiences.

There are both potential negative as well as positive things that can follow from playing in this way, but the important thing is to be aware that strong emotional reactions might happen, such as activation or triggering from previous life experiences prompted by game content or events (Brown 2014).

When designing and facilitating larps, you will want **to pay attention to how your players might have lived experiences that are close to the scenarios you want to play**. For instance, if you wish to run a scenario that includes fleeing from war or crisis, as in the zombie apocalypse example, it can be helpful to know if any youth in your group have experienced being a refugee in their real lives or family history.

Similarly, if the scenario involves discrimination based on gender expression, it can be helpful to know if there are students in your class who have likely experienced such discrimination themselves. While directly asking players about their experiences might feel intrusive, you can, for example, list themes in the scenario as content advisories



and allow them to opt out of specific components or request to remove certain content.

We are not saying you should avoid these topics altogether, as sometimes exploring such content can be transformative for people from these backgrounds. Rather, we recommend prioritising these guidelines and making informed decisions accordingly and making sure that you implement safety designs that can support the players sufficiently before, during, and after the game.

Be particularly careful about including edgier content to increase the intensity and assuming players will welcome those topics, for example sexual violence, child endangerment, domestic abuse, and/or torture.

Playing someone else's experience

Even if the scenario does not mirror lived experiences of any of the players, it will likely **mirror aspects of someone else's lives**. No scenario is created in a vacuum, and it will always be **inspired by real-life events**, whether in the past, present, or an imagined future. When we play, we need to be conscious and to treat the material with respect and sufficient empathy for the people whose experiences inspired the scenario. There are ways in which we can design for this conscientiousness, such as making sure to contextualise the content and the experience in workshops either before or after the event.

Avoid discussing traumatic events in "game-like" terms, especially discussing winning or losing. Consider who your design might be designed to accommodate, as well as who might feel excluded, misrepresented, or erased by the content.

It is important to be aware that pop culture has a tendency to simplify and dehumanise real lived experiences, especially of those who do not belong to the majority culture or privileged groups. For example, consider how Hollywood movies tend to portray Middle Eastern cultures, countries, and characters. These countries



are often stereotypically shown as disorganised, “uncivilised,” and “primitive,” and the trope of the “angry Arab man” is often applied to characters from these places, which can foster xenophobia. This tendency is an example of what Edward Said (1978) called **othering**: portraying a person or group as intrinsically different from and alien to oneself. Othering is an important part of how authoritarian and jingoistic leaders maintain power and support for aggressive politics. When exploring topics related to dystopia, we must take care not to unintentionally reinforce harmful messages or reproduce oppressive systems.

This tendency to simplify and dehumanise has paradoxically only gotten stronger with our ever more complex technology, which was originally designed to connect us more closely on a global scale. One of the most powerful effects of role-playing games is they can foster empathy for those whose experiences differ from our own. However, in order to maximise the potential for empathy, we have to make sure that we avoid the pitfalls of simplification and dehumanisation.

The context and the content

Context and content are closely connected, but it is important to be aware of how they differ and how they interact. In short, the content is what you put into the scenario, while the context is how the scenario is situated in relation to our external world. Two suggestions for what you should consider when deciding on either designing a scenario are **culture** and **‘isms**.

Culture

We all belong to at least one recognisable and defined culture, with some of us belonging to several overcultures. We also feel strongly affiliated with our subcultures or even countercultures. These backgrounds affect our worldview. We all tend to see the world through lenses that are at least partly defined by the culture(s) to which we belong. It is important to understand **how culture influences us as designers, facilitators, and players**, because it affects how we design and interact in any given scenario.

In the last few years, the conversation about what is cultural appreciation versus appropriation has reached the mainstream, and we encourage you to familiarise



yourself with basic principles. This is especially important if you are considering designing or facilitating a scenario that centres cultures and/or expressions that you and/or your participants do not represent or do not find familiar. In addition, keep in mind that Europe is home to a vast diversity of cultures, and that cultural imperialism is relative between them.

For example, we might observe that Sweden and Finland are very similar societies, and that they have decades of good relations between them, but that masks the fact that Finland has been occupied by Sweden, and that post-colonial cultural imperialism is still ongoing today.

In addition, when you consider that Swedish speaking minorities live in Finland and vice versa, you start to understand that how the cultures of these two countries stand in relation to each other is not always clearcut. While we cannot always fully understand the diverse cultural histories of Europe, we can endeavour to educate ourselves when working with specific themes, places, and target groups.

-isms

In order to define system, beliefs, behaviours, or ideologies, we name them using the -isms suffix. For instance, our economic system can be capitalism, while the dominant political system could be socialism or conservatism. We also use –isms when defining social behaviours or prejudices, such as racism, sexism, or ageism. Many dystopian scenarios will have strong component of these latter types of –isms in their design, and it is important to understand how –isms affect people.

These –isms affect us differently based on who we are and our backgrounds. Some will be targets, while others might actually be beneficiaries, often without realising it (Resolutions Northwest 2020). It is important to understand that being a beneficiary of, for example, **linguism** simply because you speak the native language, does not mean that you did anything wrong. It only means that you are privileged; the real question is what you decide to do with that information. If you want to work with –isms, contextualising these topics with your players can be crucial in order for them to take away what you intended.



Keep in mind some players will want to avoid –isms, especially if they are accustomed to experiencing oppression in daily life, whereas others may want to explore that content in more detail, for example to experience a feeling of emancipation through play (Kemper 2017). In smaller scenarios, it may be impossible for players to opt out of certain content, especially if it is a primary theme. Always **inform participants ahead of time** if an activity features one or more –isms and their options for engaging or not.

Summary

When designing transformative larp scenario, focus on **aligning the game activities with the learning outcomes and in-game activities**. Provide a **robust framing** that can help players feel safer and encourage learning transfer. Carefully **consider your player base** and make sure the themes and activities are appropriate for them. In particular, be aware of how some populations might find it difficult to opt-out and how you might encourage them to self-advocate. Also **consider how the scenario might connect to the players' own lived experiences** as well as the lived experiences of others. Make sure to always **contextualise the content appropriately** and consider how the scenario interacts with various culture and 'isms.

We encourage you to explore further resources on these topics, either in our list of suggested readings, or in our other Dystolarp resources.

Chapter 5: Accessibility, inclusion and adaptation for diverse youth

Written by Tara Laura Della Selva (EGLE)

Learning objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- ◆ Explain why accessibility and inclusion are essential when designing educational dystopian larp scenarios;
- ◆ Identify common barriers that may prevent young people of diverse backgrounds from fully participating in a larp activity;
- ◆ Adapt scenarios, mechanics and facilitation methods to meet diverse participants' needs;
- ◆ Apply inclusive design principles and accessibility tools before, during and after a dystopian larp session;
- ◆ Facilitate inclusive and psychologically safer larp experiences that support meaningful civic learning.

Dystopian larp often explores difficult themes such as power, exclusion, discrimination and inequality. These topics can create meaningful learning experiences, but only if every participant is able to engage safely and confidently.

In this chapter, you will learn how to identify barriers, adapt activities for diverse groups and create inclusive larp experiences that support meaningful civic learning without excluding or overwhelming participants.

5.1 Definitions

What do accessibility and inclusion mean?

Accessibility refers to removing barriers that prevent participation and ensuring that all participants can engage meaningfully with materials, spaces, mechanics and social dynamics.

Inclusion goes further, as it concerns belonging, representation and power. It asks not only “Can participants access the activity?” but also “Do they feel valued, respected, heard and able to influence the experience?”

Dystopian larp is designed to **explore power, inequality, rights, responsibilities, resistance and collective decision-making**. But without careful design, an educational dystopian scenario may unintentionally reproduce exclusion, marginalisation or emotional harm. To avoid this, drawing on established safety practices, our project adopts a shared baseline:

- ◆ Participation is consensual and adjustable.
- ◆ Accessibility is part of design, not an afterthought.
- ◆ Inclusion includes mechanical, narrative and social dimensions.

Who might need adaptations? Brief overview of diverse youth groups

Neurodivergence refers to natural variations in how people learn, think, process information and interact socially. It includes (but is not limited to):

- ◆ Dyslexia: difficulties with reading accuracy, speed and spelling.
- ◆ Dyscalculia: difficulties with numerical reasoning and resource tracking.
- ◆ Dysgraphia: difficulties with writing, written reflection and note-taking.
- ◆ Autism spectrum: differences in social communication, sensory sensitivity and predictability.

- ◆ ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder): differences in attention regulation, impulse control and energy levels.
- ◆ Tourette syndrome: involuntary movements and vocalisations (tics), which can increase under stress or strong emotion.

Visual impairments range from partial sight to complete blindness. They involve barriers related to text size, colour contrast, visual cues, props and movement in unfamiliar spaces.

Auditory impairments range from partial hearing loss to deafness. They involve barriers related to reliance on spoken instructions, fast-paced debates and background noise.

Physical disabilities may affect mobility, energy, coordination, dexterity or endurance. Some people may use wheelchairs, crutches or other mobility aids, while others may have invisible conditions such as chronic pain, fatigue disorders or joint conditions. Possible barriers include:

- ◆ Movement-heavy mechanics and physical tasks.
- ◆ Inaccessible venues (stairs, narrow spaces, uneven terrain).
- ◆ Long sessions without rest.
- ◆ Props or materials requiring fine motor skills.

Linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity involves young people who are migrants or refugees, who speak a different first language from the language of facilitation or have varying levels of literacy and experiences in democratic and civic matters. They may struggle with:

- ◆ Complex political vocabulary.
- ◆ Assumptions about shared historical or political knowledge.
- ◆ Misrepresentation, stereotypes and prejudice.
- ◆ Fast-paced debate mechanics.
- ◆ Culturally specific references or idioms.

- ◆ Themes that unintentionally mirror sensitive real-world conflicts, prejudices and power dynamics.

Youth with fewer opportunities may face social, economic or geographical disadvantage, including rural or isolated communities, low-income backgrounds and limited access to non-traditional learning. They may face barriers such as:

- ◆ Limited familiarity with abstract or gamified learning methods.
- ◆ Lower confidence in public participation and collaboration.
- ◆ Reduced access to materials or preparation time.

Socially vulnerable or traumatised youth may have experienced discrimination, marginalisation, instability, violence or conflict. They may struggle with and resonate strongly with dystopian themes, such as authoritarianism, loss of rights and persecution.

Youth with mental health challenges may include young people experiencing anxiety, depression, social phobia or emotional regulation difficulties. They may experience stress and discomfort, isolate themselves, get overwhelmed and disengage from group activities.

LGBTQIA+ youth may identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, non-binary or otherwise gender- and sexuality-diverse. They may struggle with:

- ◆ Social exclusion and binary assumptions.
- ◆ Misrepresentation, stereotypes and prejudice.
- ◆ Sensitivity around identity-based roles and non-inclusive language.

Important reminder: Not all needs, disorders, disabilities or backgrounds are visible. Many participants may not disclose their conditions, identities or stories. Inclusive design benefits everyone, not just those who openly identify with a specific minority group. Thus, accessibility is most effective when built into the session design from the beginning, regardless of whether some participants have confirmed belonging to the groups described above.

5.2 Why accessibility and inclusion matter in educational dystopian larp

The goals of dystopian larp for civic education

Dystopian narratives often expose injustice, oppression, scarcity, loss of rights, social hierarchy and exclusion. They allow participants to **experiment with resistance, solidarity, critical thinking, collective responsibility and ethical decision-making**. If not carefully designed and facilitated, these themes may:

- ◆ Trigger distress in participants with lived experience of oppression.
- ◆ Reinforce existing power imbalances in the group.
- ◆ Marginalise quieter or less confident participants.
- ◆ Overwhelm those who struggle with improvisation or ambiguity.

The paradox is clear: a method designed to explore inequality can replicate it if it isn't adequately implemented.

For more details on how to adequately explore sensitive topics in dystopia with marginalised youth, check Chapter 6 of the **Dystolarp booklet**.

Inclusion as a pedagogical responsibility

Accessibility is not “adapting for a few” but **designing for everyone from the start**.

According to EU statistics, youth groups aged 15 to 25 would likely include a significant percentage of neurodivergent youth, multilingual and migrant youth, individuals with learning difficulties and physical disabilities, and up to 29% of youth with fewer opportunities or from traumatised and marginalised backgrounds.

It is thus important to ensure that larp experiences are fully inclusive so that all participants can engage meaningfully. When that happens:

- ◆ Critical thinking deepens.
- ◆ Ethical reflection becomes shared.
- ◆ Power dynamics become visible and discussable.

- ◆ Democratic values are embodied, not only discussed.

Recommended practices and practical tools

Reflective questions: Before running a session, ask yourself:

- ◆ Who might feel excluded by this scenario?
- ◆ Who benefits from complexity, challenge or improvisation?
- ◆ Who might feel overwhelmed by the amount of information, responsibility and emotional intensity?
- ◆ Are certain roles automatically associated with marginalised identities?
- ◆ What barriers exist before the game even begins?

5.3 Understanding and breaking barriers: Inclusive and safety design principles

Typical barriers and key obstacles

Cognitive and emotional barriers

- ◆ Complex rule systems and dense political world-building
- ◆ Emotional intensity (control, violence, oppression, loss of rights)
- ◆ Anxiety linked to performance or improvisation

Example: A participant becomes overwhelmed because the scenario introduces several factions, oppressive systems and hidden objectives all at once, making it difficult to keep track of the story.

Physical and sensory barriers

- ◆ Mobility and spatial constraints (large or restricted spaces)
- ◆ Fatigue from long role-play sessions
- ◆ Standing or moving-intensive play
- ◆ Sensory overload (noise, crowding, lighting)



Example: A participant with sensory sensitivities struggles to concentrate because several groups are shouting negotiations simultaneously in a small, brightly lit room.

Social and cultural barriers

- ◆ Unequal distribution of narrative and impactful roles
- ◆ Dominant players monopolising speaking time
- ◆ Cultural or political references
- ◆ Language complexity

Example: A participant with limited confidence avoids speaking up and taking part because debates move too quickly and other players dominate the discussion.

Structural and organisational barriers

- ◆ Time pressure
- ◆ Large groups
- ◆ Lack of quiet or decompression spaces
- ◆ Inflexible facilitation

Example: Participants receive long written instructions just before the game starts and are expected to begin immediately, leaving little time to understand the scenario or ask questions.

Breaking barriers with accessible and inclusive designs

Neurodiverse youth

- ◆ Predictable and visual timeline of events and transitions.
- ◆ Clear, easy-to-read materials using high-contrast, sans-serif fonts, large text, generous spacing and short sections.
- ◆ Clear role sheets with bullet points.
- ◆ Optional scripted prompts.
- ◆ Advance notice of sensory elements (noise, space, lighting, outfits, props).
- ◆ Self-regulation breaks and an option to opt out of certain scenes or mechanics without stigma.



Youth with learning difficulties

- ◆ Plain language usage and summaries.
- ◆ Icon-supported materials and visual diagrams.
- ◆ Step-by-step instructions and repeated clarifications.
- ◆ Recap and regroup between scenes.

Youth with physical or sensory disabilities

- ◆ Accessible venues and seated options.
- ◆ Station-based play instead of required movement.
- ◆ Regular breaks.
- ◆ Limited use of very small or heavy props.
- ◆ Hybrid physical/digital mechanics and use of digital assistants.
- ◆ High-contrast, large-sized and wide-spaced text in short, readable sections.
- ◆ Clear audio or captioning as needed.
- ◆ Audio description of visual information and written description of audio information.
- ◆ Facing participants when speaking and avoiding background noise.
- ◆ Sensory-friendly alternatives with appropriate textures, light and sound.

Linguistically, culturally and ethnically diverse youth

- ◆ Simplified language.
- ◆ Visual storytelling and common codes.
- ◆ No ambiguous social clues or implicit tasks.
- ◆ No idioms and culturally specific metaphors.
- ◆ Encouraged multilingual expression.
- ◆ Encouraged respectful dialogue about differences.

Socially vulnerable or traumatised youth

- ◆ Sensible theme selection adapted to the target group.
- ◆ Content warnings and full transparency.
- ◆ Option for non-antagonistic, observing and supporting roles.
- ◆ No automatically assigned or forced roles.
- ◆ Pre- and post-game emotional framing.
- ◆ Guidance and structured debriefing.

LGBTQIA+ youth

- ◆ Gender-inclusive language.
- ◆ Characters and roles with diverse genders and orientations.
- ◆ Self-defined character identity.
- ◆ No automatically assigned roles based on real-world assumptions.

Best practices and practical tools

Here are a few strategies and tools that we recommend exploring before implementing dystopian larp.

Barrier-mapping tool

Before running a scenario, analyse it from the participants' perspective.

Element	Possible barrier	Adjustments
Rules explanation	Too abstract	◆ Visual flowchart. ◆ Tutorial scene.
Debate mechanic	Favouring strong speakers	◆ Timed rounds per participant. ◆ Written votes.
Long session	Fatigue	◆ Shorter scenes. ◆ Regular pauses.
Public speaking mechanic	Anxiety	◆ Anonymous messages or social media posts.
Audio cues, sound and light effects	Sensory overload	◆ Quiet corner with low light and simple decor.
Specific language	Linguistic difficulty	◆ Visual icons and simplified language. ◆ Regular debriefings.

Sensitive topics of oppression or violence

Trauma sensitivity

- ◆ Content warnings.
- ◆ Alternative non-oppressive roles.
- ◆ Option to opt out without stigma.

Example of a dystopian role rewritten to be more inclusive

Original role: "Rebel leader who must deliver emotional speeches."

Inclusive rewrite possibilities:

- ◆ Strategic planner who prepares speeches for a confident public speaker.
- ◆ Message coordinator on a rebel social media platform.

The civic objective remains. The participation mode diversifies.

Safety mechanics and safer design

As said in previous chapters, safety is crucial in activities where participants get emotionally engaged with complex or sensitive topics and conflicts. A well-designed larp experience should establish a **safer environment before, during and after the game** through a variety of security techniques and safety mechanics.

Before the game

- ◆ **Safety team:** Designate people responsible for participant wellbeing and for responding to safety concerns during the activity.
- ◆ **Player screening through flagging:** Give participants a way to privately flag topics or situations that may be problematic for them to adjust them in the design.
- ◆ **Code of Conduct:** Establish clear expectations for respectful behaviour, boundaries and interactions between participants.
- ◆ **Calibration tools and protocols:** Use tools that help participants communicate their comfort levels, boundaries and needs before play.
- ◆ **Session 0:** Organise a preparatory session to introduce the game, establish expectations, discuss boundaries and explain the safety tools that will be used.
- ◆ **Trigger warnings and consent advisories:** Inform participants about sensitive themes or content so they can make informed choices about participation.



During the game

- ◆ **The Door Is Always Open:** Allow participants to leave the game or take a break at any time without needing to justify it.
- ◆ **X-Card:** Allow participants to signal that something occurring in the game should stop or change, without needing to explain why.
- ◆ **Luxton Technique:** Allow participants to share what they need when in an uncomfortable situation, to adapt the experience rather than simply stopping it.
- ◆ **Okay Check-in:** Allow participants to communicate whether they are comfortable continuing, particularly after an intense or difficult interaction.

After the game

- ◆ **De-roling:** Establish the process of consciously stepping out of the character and fictional world, helping participants reconnect with themselves after play.
- ◆ **Debriefing:** Facilitate a clear discussion about what happened, how participants experienced it and what they learned from the experience.
- ◆ **Narrativising:** Give participants an opportunity to construct and share their own account of the experience, helping them make sense of what happened.

Learn more about safety measures in Part 4 of the facilitator's guide.

Conclusion

Inclusive dystopian larp is not about reducing challenge, but about removing unnecessary barriers to ensure that all participants can fully and adequately participate in the experience.

When designed with accessibility and inclusion in mind, dystopian larp can not only embody democratic and EU values and encourage reflection, but it can also **model equal rights and responsibilities and create space for diverse and marginalised voices**.

Accessibility and inclusion are not technical adjustments; they are civic commitments that reflect the goals of educational dystopian larp: **empowering all young people** to



hopefully help them **become more responsible, aware and critical citizens and motivate them to act accordingly and improve society.**

As a youth worker, you don't need to remove challenge from a dystopian larp. Your role is to **remove unnecessary barriers so every participant can contribute, learn and reflect**, by integrating **safety tools, inclusive design principles, and adaptive strategies**. When accessibility and inclusion become part of your design process from the beginning, your larp becomes a **transformative, empowering and meaningful method for all individuals who will shape the future of society.**

Chapter 6: Reflection, transfer and long-term civic impact

Written by Benedicta Sannino (Euphoria Net)

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- ◆ Reflect critically on their larp experience and identify the civic competences developed through it.
- ◆ Connect in-game experiences with real-world democratic, environmental, and social challenges.
- ◆ Transfer skills and insights from the larp to real-life civic contexts.
- ◆ Develop concrete action plans for civic or environmental engagement.
- ◆ Assess the impact of larp-based learning using reflection, feedback, and other evaluation methods.
- ◆ Recognise the importance of continued engagement, follow-up, and community involvement for long-term civic learning.
- ◆ Identify ways to embed larp within ongoing civic education programmes in schools and youth organisations.

A powerful experience is not automatically a learning experience. This is perhaps the most important idea behind this chapter. Dystopian larp can produce moments that feel genuinely significant: moments of ethical tension, of unexpected solidarity, of uncomfortable decision-making. But if those moments are not reflected on, discussed, and connected to real life, they remain isolated memories. Vivid, perhaps, but not transformative.



This chapter is about what happens after the game ends. It asks: how do we help participants turn what they experienced during a larp session into real civic learning? How do we measure whether that learning has actually happened and lasted? And how do we make this kind of education sustainable, so that it becomes part of a school or youth organisation's ongoing practice rather than a one-off event?

These three questions, about transfer, measurement, and sustainability, structure the chapter. Throughout, we keep sight of two connected goals: supporting individual participants in developing their civic competences and ethical awareness, and building the broader educational conditions that allow that development to endure.

6.1 Transfer of learning to real-world contexts

"Transfer" is the **educational term for what happens when a skill or insight developed in one context gets applied in a different one**. It is the whole point of experiential learning: we do not practise something just for the sake of the practice, we practise it so that we can use it when it counts.

In the case of dystopian larp, the challenge of transfer is both **its greatest promise and its biggest risk**. When participants negotiate alliances in a simulated authoritarian state, or make difficult resource decisions under pressure, or refuse to comply with an unjust fictional system, they are practising skills that matter in real democratic life. The question is whether they recognise this, and whether they can carry those skills with them when they leave the game world.

Linking larp experience to civic competences

The first step in supporting transfer is **helping participants name what they have actually been practising**. This might sound simple, but it is easy to miss. Skills that are implicit during play (reasoning under pressure, building consensus, recognising manipulation) need to be made explicit in reflection before they can be transferred.

The competences most consistently developed through dystopian larp include:

- ◆ **Negotiation and advocacy:** Arguing for a position, persuading others, building coalitions, all central to democratic political life

- ◆ **Collaboration under pressure:** Working with others when resources are scarce, trust is fragile, and the stakes feel high
- ◆ **Critical thinking:** Evaluating information, recognising bias, spotting who benefits from a given situation, essential for media literacy and informed citizenship
- ◆ **Systems thinking:** Understanding how institutions, rules, and power structures shape what is possible, not just for individuals, but for whole communities

Useful framework: A useful framework for guiding this reflection is Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, as mentioned earlier in Chapter 2, which moves through four stages:

- ◆ What happened? (describing the concrete experience)
- ◆ What did it feel like, and what did it mean? (reflecting on it)
- ◆ What general principles does it illustrate? (connecting it to broader ideas)
- ◆ What would I do differently in a real civic situation? (planning for action)

This movement does not happen automatically. It requires facilitated debriefing, a structured conversation that poses the right questions at each stage. Without this, participants may leave with strong memories but without the conceptual tools to apply what they have experienced.

For more information about this, see Chapter 2 of this curriculum.

A particularly useful exercise is mapping in-game roles to real societal roles. A participant who played a government minister responsible for environmental regulation can be asked: who holds an equivalent role in your real community? What responsibilities does that person have? What pressures do they face? This mapping uses the clarity of fictional exaggeration to illuminate real civic structures that are often invisible because they are taken for granted.

Environmental and democratic applications

Dystopian scenarios are especially powerful for environmental and democratic learning because they make the **consequences of political failure vivid and**



personal. Participants do not just read about ecological collapse or authoritarian control, they live through a version of it, however briefly, and feel its effects on their choices and relationships within the game.

Here are concrete ways, after a larp session, to connect the experience to real environmental and democratic contexts with an educational purpose:

- ◆ **Environmental ethics discussions:** after the larp session ask participants to examine the ecological assumptions built into the scenario. What relationship between society and nature does the dystopian world assume? What political and economic choices produced it?
- ◆ **Policy analysis:** invite participants to research real-world examples that parallel what they experienced in the game. A participant who lived through a failed resource allocation system in the larp might research how real communities have managed shared resources more or less successfully.
- ◆ **Democratic analysis:** connect moments of in-game censorship, surveillance, or manipulation to real historical or contemporary examples and to the democratic safeguards designed to prevent them.

The most ambitious form of transfer is when participants, moved by what they experienced in the game, take concrete action in their own communities - organising a campaign, joining a local consultation, starting a school advocacy group. Facilitators can support this by **building explicit time for initiative planning into the post-larp programme**, and by **providing ongoing mentoring for youth-led civic action** in the weeks that follow.

Facilitating action plans

Reflection alone is not enough. For civic learning to translate into real change, participants need to **move from insight to intention and from intention to action**. Structured action planning helps make this happen.

Rather than leaving participants with a general sense of civic motivation, action planning asks them to be specific:

- ◆ **What will I do?**
- ◆ **By when?**



◆ **With whom?**

◆ **What obstacles might I face, and how will I handle them?**

This concreteness matters. It pushes participants to think about the real conditions of civic action (including its difficulties and its social dimensions) rather than staying at the level of abstract good intentions.

"Civic missions", specific, self-chosen tasks that participants commit to after the session, provide a good structure for this work. These might range from the modest (attending a local council meeting, writing to an elected representative) to the more ambitious (establishing a school environment committee, co-authoring a community charter). What matters is that the mission is personally meaningful and directly connected to what the participant experienced and reflected on during the larp.

Where possible, **service learning or community projects can provide a formal follow-up structure**, giving participants an ongoing context for applying their larp-developed competences to real civic challenges, with institutional support and reflective practice built in.

6.2 Measuring long-term civic and ethical impact

How do we know if a larp session has actually made a difference? This is a genuinely difficult question. The most important outcomes, changes in how people think about politics, in how they approach ethical dilemmas, in whether they get involved in civic life, are slow to develop and not easy to measure.

A good approach to impact measurement combines multiple methods and multiple timepoints. It treats both numbers (surveys, rubrics) and stories (interviews, essays) as valid and complementary forms of evidence.

Assessment frameworks

Competence rubrics

Rubrics provide a **structured way of assessing participant development** in the key areas that dystopian larp is designed to address.



A rubric for critical thinking, for example, might assess whether participants can:

- ◆ Identify assumptions in an argument or situation
- ◆ Evaluate evidence rather than accepting it at face value
- ◆ Recognise different perspectives and whose interests they serve
- ◆ Construct reasoned arguments for a civic position

Similar rubrics can be developed for ethical reasoning (how well participants navigate moral dilemmas and justify their choices) and for civic engagement (whether participants show growing awareness of and commitment to democratic participation).

These rubrics serve multiple purposes at once: they give facilitators a **consistent framework for observation**; they give participants **clear criteria for self-assessment**; and they give schools or funders **transparent evidence of educational value**.

Pre- and post-session surveys

Surveys administered before and after a larp session, and again four to six weeks later, can **capture measurable shifts** in participants' attitudes and self-reported competences. Well-designed survey instruments can track changes in:

- ◆ Civic efficacy ("Do I feel I can make a difference?")
- ◆ Political interest and awareness
- ◆ Environmental concern and sense of responsibility
- ◆ Confidence in navigating ethical complexity

Comparing responses across all three timepoints gives a more honest picture of impact than measuring only immediately after the session, when enthusiasm may temporarily inflate results.

Observational and qualitative measures

Numbers tell part of the story. To understand how and why larp produces civic learning and what gets in the way qualitative methods are essential.



Behavioural tracking

One of the most meaningful indicators of civic impact is **what participants actually do after the session**. Did they join a school committee? Attend a community meeting? Start a petition or an awareness campaign? Tracking these behaviours (through follow-up questionnaires or coordination with school staff) builds a concrete record of the downstream effects of larp-based civic education.

Follow-up interviews

Semi-structured interviews conducted four to eight weeks after the session give participants the chance to **reflect on what has changed since the experience**. Good interview questions might include:

- ◆ Is there a moment from the larp that has stayed with you? Why?
- ◆ Have you thought differently about any civic or political issue since the session?
- ◆ Have you done anything differently in school, in your community, or in your conversations with others?

These interviews often reveal **mechanisms of transfer** that surveys cannot capture - the specific moment, character, or decision that made something click. They also help identify where transfer has not happened, which is equally valuable information for improving future sessions.

Reflective essays

Written reflections, set as a formal task within school contexts, ask participants to articulate in their own words what the larp experience has revealed to them about civic life, democratic values, or environmental responsibility. **Good reflection prompts connect the in-game experience directly to real-world contexts**. The act of writing the essay is itself part of the learning: it consolidates and deepens what the experience has begun.

Case studies and best practices

Research on political simulation games and mock parliamentary exercises, which share important features with larp-based civic education, consistently finds short-term increases in political interest, civic confidence, and democratic knowledge. The



evidence also suggests that these effects are stronger and more durable when simulations are embedded within a broader civic education programme rather than delivered as isolated events (Levy, 2013; Smith, 2010).

Case studies from Nordic edu-larp traditions, where larp has been used in schools and youth organisations for several decades, provide **qualitative evidence of lasting outcomes**, including:

- ◆ A **stronger sense of civic agency**, the feeling that one's actions can make a difference
- ◆ **Greater capacity for empathy and perspective-taking** across social difference
- ◆ **Increased willingness to engage** with morally complex civic questions

These cases also consistently highlight the **importance of skilled facilitation**. Sessions led by experienced facilitators with clear civic learning objectives produce richer, more transferable outcomes than those driven primarily by entertainment. Facilitation quality is not a peripheral concern, it is central to whether the experience becomes learning (Bowman & Standiford, 2015).

Key lessons from these programmes that can inform future sessions:

- ◆ Embed larp within a longer civic learning arc, not as a one-off
- ◆ Invest seriously in facilitator training and ongoing peer reflection
- ◆ Build transfer mechanisms - debriefing, action planning, follow-up - into the design from the start

Develop longitudinal follow-up structures that maintain participant engagement over weeks and months.

6.3 Sustainability and embedding larp in civic education

A single larp session, however excellent, cannot produce deep and lasting civic change on its own. The logic of learning, and the evidence for civic education, both point in the same direction: sustained, recurring engagement over time is what produces durable competence and genuine attitude change.



This raises a practical question: how do we make larp-based civic education a regular, institutionally supported part of a school or youth organisation's work, rather than an occasional special event?

Recurring and thematic larp programmes

A series of connected larp sessions, each building on the previous one, allows participants to develop competences progressively. A well-designed thematic sequence might move through:

- ◆ **Session 1:** Democratic breakdown and authoritarian control
- ◆ **Session 2:** Environmental collapse and governance failure
- ◆ **Session 3:** The ethics of resistance and civil disobedience
- ◆ **Session 4:** Rebuilding democratic institutions and civic trust

Each session deepens the themes and competences introduced in the previous one, and the cumulative effect is far greater than any single session could achieve. This progressive structure also gives participants a sense of civic journey - a developing story of their own civic growth.

Integrating into school and youth organisation curricula

For larp-based civic learning to become genuinely embedded, it needs **institutional backing**. This means:

- ◆ **Demonstrating clear alignment with existing civic education curricula and competence frameworks** (such as the Council of Europe's RFCDC)
- ◆ **Integrating larp sessions into the school timetable** as part of a recognised subject or programme, not as an add-on
- ◆ **Allowing larp-based outputs** (reflections, action plans, civic missions) to count as formal evidence of learning
- ◆ **Building follow-up into the school calendar**, not hoping it will happen spontaneously



Facilitator training and professional development

The quality of facilitation is the single most important factor in whether a larp session produces civic learning. Good facilitation cannot be improvised, it requires:

- ◆ **Training in scenario design:** how to build civic complexity and ethical dilemma into a narrative
- ◆ **Skills in managing emotional and interpersonal dynamics** in immersive settings
- ◆ **Experience in leading effective post-larp debriefs**
- ◆ **Access to peer supervision** and a community of practice for ongoing growth

Investing in facilitator development is not a luxury, it is the foundation on which the effectiveness and sustainability of the whole programme rests.

6.4 Challenges and recommendations

Producing long-term civic impact through dystopian larp is a genuine and achievable goal but it faces real obstacles. Acknowledging these honestly is the starting point for addressing them.

Disengagement after the session

One of the most common patterns in experiential education is the post-event gap: participants leave energised and motivated, but without sustained support, that energy dissipates quickly. Civic missions go unstarted. Action plans gather dust. The larp becomes a powerful memory but nothing more.

The main recommendation here is structural: **build follow-up into the programme design from the outset, not as an afterthought**. Concretely, this means:

- ◆ **Scheduling a follow-up session** (in person or online) four to six weeks after the larp
- ◆ Creating space in that session for participants to **report on their civic missions and share what has changed**
- ◆ **Identifying community partners, local organisations, democratic bodies, environmental groups**, who can offer civic engagement opportunities
- ◆ **Providing mentoring** for participants who want to pursue more ambitious civic initiatives



Misinterpretation of the dystopian narrative

Dystopian fiction can be read in multiple ways not all of them intended by the facilitator. A story designed to critique authoritarian power might be experienced by some participants as an exciting fantasy of dominance. A scenario meant to prompt civic reflection might produce fatalism instead. A character embodying injustice might be played as heroic.

These misinterpretations are not simply individual failures of understanding, they reflect the **genuine ambiguity of narrative and the diversity of backgrounds** participants bring. Strategies for reducing this risk include:

- ◆ **Clear framing before the session:** establish the civic learning objectives explicitly, so participants know what kind of experience this is
- ◆ **Embedded ethical complexity in character design:** give participants roles that require genuine moral reasoning, not just strategic play
- ◆ **Responsive facilitation during play:** when misinterpretations emerge, introduce narrative elements or brief check-ins that redirect engagement without breaking the game unnecessarily
- ◆ **Structured debriefing:** post-larp reflection should systematically revisit the intended civic and ethical dimensions, giving participants the chance to reframe their experience with guidance

Cultural differences and contextual sensitivity

Dystopian scenarios developed in one cultural context may land very differently in another. A scenario drawing on historical authoritarianism may be experienced as distant and abstract by some participants and as painfully close to family history by others. Political norms, civic vocabulary, and relationships to state authority vary enormously across cultures.

Practical recommendations for cross-cultural larp programmes:

- ◆ **Involve facilitators from multiple cultural contexts in scenario design** - do not assume one perspective covers all
- ◆ **Abstract scenarios sufficiently** from specific historical events to avoid trivialising real experiences of injustice or oppression

- 
- ◆ **Build in space during reflection** for participants to articulate how the fictional scenario does, and does not, resonate with their own civic reality
 - ◆ **Treat cultural diversity within the group as a resource**, not a complication: different perspectives enrich the civic discussion

Mentoring and community involvement

Civic learning does not happen in a vacuum. It is shaped by the social environments participants live in - their families, peer groups, communities, and institutions.

Mentoring relationships with trusted adults who have real civic experience are a consistently documented factor in young people's long-term civic development.

Where possible, larp programmes should:

- ◆ **Pair participants with civic mentors** (local politicians, environmental advocates, community organisers) who can support their civic engagement over time
- ◆ **Involve community partners in designing and delivering the programme**, not just as external audiences but as active co-creators
- ◆ **Create clear pathways from the larp experience to real civic participation** – so that post-session enthusiasm has somewhere concrete to go

Conclusion

The long arc of civic education does not end when the game does, it begins there.

What distinguishes powerful experiential learning from mere entertainment is the

quality of the reflection, the intentionality of the follow-through, and the institutional commitment to sustaining the conditions in which civic competences can grow.

Dystopian larp, at its best, is not a simulation of civic failure. It is a rehearsal for civic courage.

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dystolarp

This resource was developed as part of the Dystolarp project, which uses the immersive power of live action role-playing (larp) to foster a deeper understanding of civic engagement, environmental stewardship and democratic values among young people.

Discover more information and project resources: www.dystolarp.eu



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