

# Playing with Leadership: A Multiple Case Study of Leadership Development Larps

**Abstract:** Learning and development solutions often contain some form of role-playing activity. Many live-action role-playing (larp) leisure events openly center their themes or story on leadership topics like conflicting visions, cooperation, or strategic decision-making. Despite this, only a few larps to date have dared label themselves as “leadership development” edu-larps.

This multiple-case study utilizes a synthesized theoretical framework that combines several typologies of both the leadership development research field and the fields of role-playing game studies, edu-larp, applied drama, and simulation. Four individual leadership development larps were identified, categorized by type, compared, and evaluated. The four cases have some striking similarities, as they all make use of the same learning cycle, have observers, and focus on developing versatility as a worthwhile leadership trait. Furthermore, all four larps have relatively few visible game mechanics, the hierarchical difference between characters is low and urgency or uncertainty is used to enhance learning.

The main difference between cases is the setting, where a modern business setting seems to be the default, but more fantastical settings, such as “samurai in feudal Japan” were also used. Character design also differs, from abstract roles to very-detailed personality descriptions. Framing, such as duration, varies from one 2-hour session through five sessions spread over weeks to a continuous 36-hour session. These and other identified differences and similarities highlight patterns to build upon by designers and gaps to fill with later research.

**Keywords:** case studies, leadership management, frame theory, larp, live action role-playing

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Every activity has the potential to develop us in a casual, informal, tacit way (La Belle 1982). This is also true for leadership competencies, especially when considering social activities in which one can practice the management of attention, communication, influence, and decision-making.

This implies that a lot (if not most) leisure live-action role-playing games (larps) have latent leadership aspects embedded in their structure. Larps are a peculiar type of embodied role-playing game that emerged in the late 1980s from various sources and have expanded and evolved since (Harviainen et al. 2024). Larpers are aware of this developmental potential. There are best practice articles in the Nordic larp scene about how to lead during larps (Fischer et al. 2020) and how collaboration toward co-ownership is a form of leadership in itself (Rönnåsen 2022).

In addition, a lot of larps explicitly deal with leadership topics, either foregrounding them or using them as central overarching themes. Examples from the last decade include, but are not limited to: *The Climb* (2013) and *Perfection* (2019) from Bully Pulpit Games, *Witchwood Larp* (Red Feather Roleplaying 2013), *Anything for N.* (Turbolarp 2014), *Legion: Siberian Story* (Rolling 2015), *Cult* (Obscurus 2018), *Suffragette!* (Vejdemo et al. 2018), *Wing and a Prayer* (Allied Games 2018), *Lord of Lies* (Atropos Studios 2021), *A Meeting of Monarchs* (Charmed Plume Productions 2022), *Three Kingdoms* (Cyriax 2022) and *The Seekers* (Langland 2023). While these do not consider themselves formal leadership development (LD) larps, they still provide a fertile ground to experience rich instances of leadership that might easily lead to informal learning. Facilitators can also apply them in a non-formal learning setting to foster leadership development (Westborg 2023). For a summary, see Appendix 1.

Larps can be educational in at least two senses (Westborg 2023). Many leisure larps can be *applied* in an informal or formal educational setting for educational purposes. Meanwhile, some larps were *designed* to be educational in their gameplay, as opposed to being designed for leisure. While more loose interpretations of the term “educational larp” (or edu-larp) include the first sense (Bowman 2014), stricter definitions require that both the gameplay design and the framing design (application) of the larp should be focused on learning (Westborg 2023).

On the other hand, a lot of well-known leadership development interventions (LDIs) contain some form of role-playing. They utilize roles, situations, rules, props, and interaction to foster experiential or action learning (Agboola Sogunro 2004), but they do not originate from larps and do not use the term to denote themselves. Examples include basket-in challenges (Bass 1990), situational role-playing exercises (Guenthner and Moore 2005), improv theater (Gagnon et al. 2006, Visscher 2023), development centers (Hertz 2006), psychodramatic sessions (Lippitt 1943), leadership coaching (Lee 2003), socio- and applied drama (McLennan and Smith 2006), strategic scenario planning (Coates 2000), educational simulation games (Avolio et al. 1988), serious games (Buzády 2017), and gamified activities (Cebulski 2017).

To show that edu-larps can be novel and valuable leadership development interventions, one must present arguments and evidence on how edu-larp differs from other LDIs that involve embodied role-playing. This can be shown through their gameplay design. To position the edu-larp form in relation to other LDIs, in this article, we will look at how edu-larp interventions are designed to reach their goal, namely leadership development. The focus is on design considerations and their effects, not on how these leadership development larps can be applied and facilitated.

To further complicate this situation, it is rather easy to separate the content (the special type of role-playing activity, which we will denote from now as larping) from its game format (e.g., a larp). The former is a particular mindset and behavioral way of doing things that can be experienced and identified in other activities. J. Tuomas Harviainen (2011, 176) attempted to specify and distinguish this role-playing phenomenon with his criteria of *larping*:

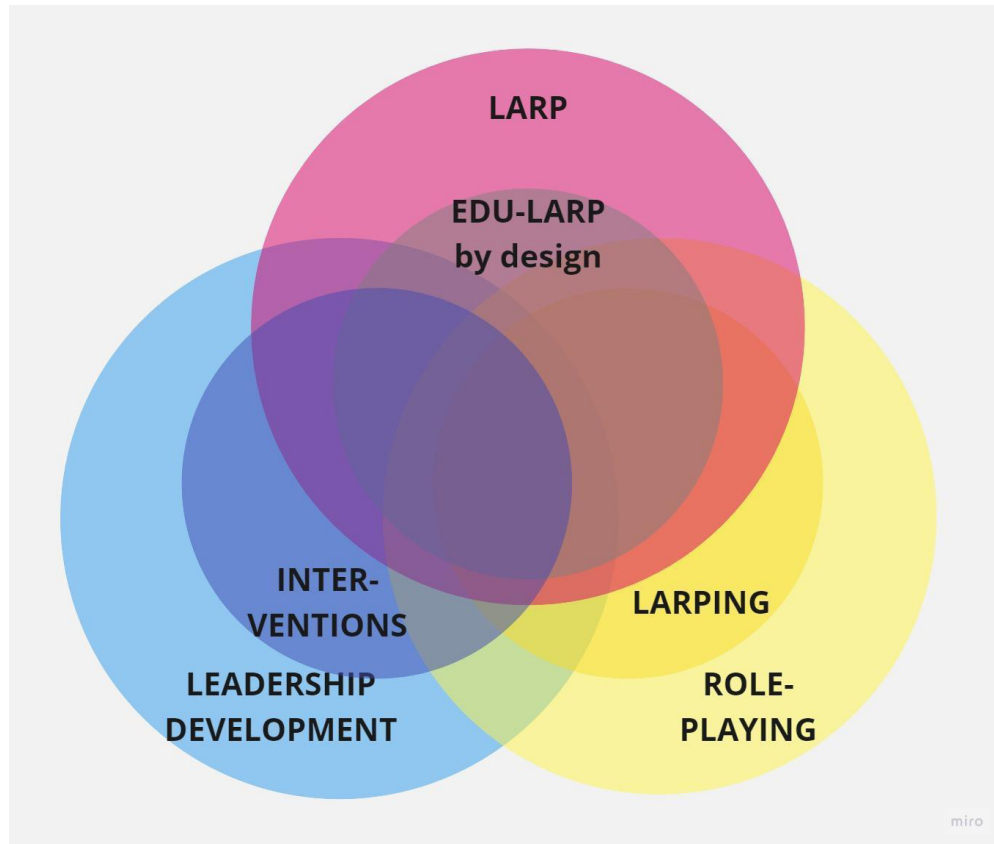
- Role-playing in which a character, not just a social role, is played.
- The activity takes place in a fictional reality shared with others. Breaking that fictional reality is seen as a breach in the play itself.
- The physical presence of at least some of the players as their characters. (Harviainen 176)

In this sense, larping is a special type of role-playing, where participants enact individualized characters in a continuous and embodied manner. Larping happens at most larp events, while it can also exist at non-larp events (Harviainen et al. 2024 cite re-enactment, bibliodrama, and other activities). Without the intention to judge and qualify, we can safely say that on the other side of this space, there are extreme cases, specific larps where no actual larping happens, as players enact only social roles, purposefully break the fiction, or are all not physically present (Reininghaus 2021).

In summary, informal and formal leadership development includes interventions that often involve some form of role-playing. Taking into account interventions, some leisure larps can be applied or “framed” for leadership development. Moreover, there are educational larps that are designed for leadership development in terms of their gameplay. It is also possible to define a specific type of role-playing, an activity that is an embodied, undisturbed enactment of individualized roles, often found in larps, called larping. Considering all of this information, we propose a conceptual map (see Figure 1) that includes three sets:

- » Leadership development situations (with a subset of formal and informal leadership development interventions)
- » Larps (with a subset of edu-larps in a strict sense, Westborg 2023)
- » Role-playing activity (with a subset of larping, as defined by Harviainen 2011)

**Figure 1:** Leadership development, larps, and role-playing



Source: by authors, based on Harviainen (2011) and Westborg (2023)

It is not immediately evident what the different cross-sections on this conceptual map might contain and categorizing individual cases would require thorough understanding of that case. For example, some edu-larps do not meet the criteria of larping (Harviainen 2011, Bowman 2014). Furthermore, there might be leadership interventions that fit the criteria of larping but are not labeled as (edu-)larps. Leadership development (edu-)larp(ing) is a very hazy phenomenon that needs further inquiry to be crystallized (Richardson 2000). A comparative design analysis might facilitate this process.

## 2. BACKGROUND

As the general audience of this journal is knowledgeable about larps, in the background section we mainly focus on giving a broad introduction to leadership and leadership development (LD) studies by summarizing relevant bibliometric and systematic literature reviews.

## 2.1 Leadership

Leadership is arguably the most widely debated and explored issue in management (Antonakis and Day 2017). Because different authors cannot agree on a single definition of the concept, it probably compromises more models than any other sort of behavioral research (Bass 1990). Yukl (2010) provided a comprehensive summary of the various definitions and formulated a definition that has now become the accepted standard of generalized leadership: “The process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives” (Yukl 2010, 26).

Historically, mainstream leadership research evolved in steps, each step hallmarked by a milestone leadership theory (Samul 2020). According to the oldest one, the Great Man theory, leaders are born with specific intrinsic qualities that make them inherently fit to lead (Carlyle 1993). The Trait hypothesis expanded on this premise by claiming that particular characteristics, such as self-confidence, honesty, and empathy, are more significant than others for leadership effectiveness (Stogdill 1948). Behavioral theory, on the other hand, focuses on leaders’ actions rather than their inherent features, suggesting that good leadership can be learned via observation and imitation of successful behaviors (Lewin et al. 1939; Blake and Mouton 1964; Hersey and Blanchard 1977). According to the Contingency Theory, the most effective leadership style depends on the situation, and leaders must be able to modify their style to match the demands of their followers and the context in which they operate (Vroom and Yetton 1973; Fiedler 1974). Later, the Process-based Leadership theory stressed communication and cooperation, arguing that great leaders are those who can involve their followers in a shared vision and encourage them to work toward common goals (Graen and Uhl-Bien 1995).

Recent leadership theories are very diverse. Ethical leadership emphasizes leaders acting as moral role models and prioritizing the rights and dignity of others (Brown, Treviño & Harrison 2005). Servant leadership is centered around leaders serving the needs of followers and promoting their development (Greenleaf 1970). Humble leadership involves leaders acknowledging their limitations and fostering a culture of mutual learning (Owens & Hekman 2012). Transactional leadership focuses on exchanges between leaders and followers, rewarding performance (Burns 1978), while transformational leadership inspires followers to transcend personal interests for the group’s greater good (Bass 1985).

Looking at leadership studies from the contemporary side, a bibliometric analysis of leadership studies identified two dominant themes in the literature: leadership development and leadership effectiveness (Vijayakumar et al. 2018). The content analysis on these two themes revealed six distinct lenses that shape the academic discourse: cultural, cognitive, learning, personality traits, social/relational, and political lenses. Others (Samul 2020) recently argued that the main topical clusters of leadership studies are leadership management, leadership performance, leadership models, leader’s behavior, leader’s personality, and team leadership.

Leadership in organizational contexts is usually contrasted with management and used in a narrow sense. This trend could be highlighted with two concepts. One is a famous statement from Peter Drucker, explaining that while management focuses on doing things right, leadership is about doing the right things (Cohen 2009). The other widespread interpretation is that leadership is one of the four managerial functions besides planning, organizing, and controlling (Koontz and O’Donnell 2004), heavily connected to, and influencing organizational behavior. Another line of thought links leadership with changes in the external environment and the capability of helping others adapt to change (Heifetz et al. 2014).

## 2.2 Leadership development

As David Day (2000) influentially distinguished, while leader development works at the individual level and develops human capital, leadership development (LD) is a broader category that works at the supra-personal (relational, team, group, or organizational) level and in return, develops social capital.

According to Bernd Vogel and his colleagues (2021, 1), “development of leaders and leadership is a formative research area and a considerable industry in practice,” but it is also extremely fragmented. According to their findings, the dominant discourse is defined by journals such as *The Leadership Quarterly*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, and highly influential writers such as Bruce J. Avolio, David D. Day, and Robert G. Lord. Vogel suggests that the origins of the LD field can be found in practice, that it has grown around a single primary narrative, and that organizational behavior and leadership theory underpin the LD discourse.

Day et al. (2014) identified six main topics in leadership development. The *intrapersonal*, individual topics including experience and learning, skills, personality, and self-development, while *interpersonal* leadership topics include social mechanisms and authentic leadership. With an even wider scope (Vogel et al. 2021), we can distinguish three main directions in leadership development research: its learning processes and their elements, leadership styles, and finally intra-person learning mechanisms.

Leadership development is an especially essential task in light of environmental and societal changes (Ey et al. 2021). Our present is often described as a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world (Lawrence 2013). While some researchers suggest stoic calmness and negative capability as a solution to cope with radical uncertainty and turbulent changes (Hirsch et al. 2023), in agreement with Dave Snowden and Alessandro Rancati (2021), we believe that careful experimentation is a better fit to these situations. Moreover, leadership skills, styles, and solutions to slow-burning crises (Hart and Boin 2001) can be developed in the vocal and experiential spaces of larps and role-playing.

Role-playing in some form was probably always part of leadership development processes (Lippitt 1943). Bernard M. Bass (1990) enlists a couple of interactive methods that might develop leadership, including in-basket activities, living case games, simulation, behavior modeling, sensitivity training, and role-playing. According to him, “The purpose of playing a role, rather than reading or talking about a solution to an interpersonal problem without a script, is to improve learning and retention and to promote transference from the learning situation to the leadership performance on the job” (Bass 1990, 821).

## 2.3 Leadership development and larps

The Scopus database showed zero documents when we searched for “leadership” “development” and “live-action role-playing” in the article titles, abstracts, and keywords in the May and December of 2023. One conference proceeding (Hallander 2003) showed up for “larp” but it was about the Lean Aircraft Research Program (L.A.R.P.). When we broadened the search to include synonyms, we got twelve hits, but after manual evaluation, we found that most of the documents were false hits and only three (Bailey et al. 2022; Hjalmarsson 2011, Mercer et al. 2021) were somewhat connected to our research agenda.

Summarizing the Scopus findings, while Sara Hjalmarsson (2011) identified a significant potential in the “larp artform” to enhance scenario-based training in military leadership education in her explorative presentation, Jennifer Bailey and her colleagues (2022) promoted simulation-based

learning for school principals as a way to develop school leadership in their article. Based on the cognitive load theory (Sweller 2020), they argued that “the building of situational memory through role-playing helps leaders to be better prepared to face those situations when they arise in reality” (Bailey et al. 2022, 218) and role-playing simulations as an effective but passive approach compared to digital simulations.

Turning to the most relevant hit, Ian Mercer and his colleagues (2021) used Jason Morningstar’s (2013) larp *The Climb* as a way to teach university students about “leadership, influence tactics, decision-making, conflict resolution, and communication” (Mercer et al. 2021, 71). Their article describes the game and the student reactions, compares it to other mountain climbing-themed management simulations, and makes suggestions about its usage. As a leisure larp that was applied in an educational context, instead of an edu-larp designed for learning, this case could be categorized as a non-serious game-based learning intervention or as an “RPG in education” (Westborg 2023).

A search in Google Scholar was more successful, it showed around 50 documents, where a dozen were found to be relevant, but nothing specifically about leadership development and larps. This list was supplemented by snowballing and editor suggestions. We do not attempt to conduct a comprehensive literature review about every article that briefly mentioned some element of our topic, as our current research is interested in design comparison. However, as a narrative review, we included every relevant source that has come to our attention.

Talking about leisure RPGs such as larps, Sarah Lynne Bowman (2010) mentions that these may require the players to take on leadership roles, and thus, practice the necessary skills such as holding others’ attention, communicating efficiently, managing or mediating conflicts, maintaining cohesion, etc. Larp activities might offer practice opportunities that are unprecedented in real life, and encourage players to develop leadership competencies. Perspective-taking inherent in playing roles might also help in understanding others’ points of view in group dynamics. She also cites simulation and applied improvisational drama as used in business contexts.

A systematic review on edu-larps (Bowman 2014) mentions that many organizations use role-playing activities to teach staff in areas such as teamwork and leadership and lists exercising leadership skills as a behavioral learning dimension of edu-larps. Bowman and Standiford (2016) also conducted a mixed-method study on middle school science students, collecting self-reports on five broad learning dimensions, among them leadership and teamwork. Although 13 students believed larp increased their leadership skills and 6 thought larp somewhat helped, student opinions of their leadership characteristics remained consistent. As the authors summarized their findings, “the data did not reveal significant changes in the areas of team work and leadership between the two time points, although several students offered examples in which these two factors were exercised during the course of the edu-larps” (Bowman and Standiford 2016, 5). To interpret these results correctly we must cite research that suggests that all larp participants gain leadership experience and confidence, even if they are unaware of it (LeClaire 2020). Designers and organizers also intuitively use management techniques to exert control before, during, and after play (Harviainen 2013). Another article briefly mentions managerial functions in the organization of role-playing and larp events and recommends the analysis of organizers’ leadership styles (Túri and Hartyánci 2023).

Another book, *Imagine This* by Blaž Branc (2018), is probably the best expert writing on applying role-playing games in corporate and business contexts. Its analysis focuses strongly on Nordic larps. While the book mentions leadership aspects regularly, there is no specific chapter on leadership or leadership development, thus the topic remains mostly implicit.

The *Routledge Handbook of Role-Playing Game Studies* (Zagal and Deterding eds. 2024) does not list leadership in its index; however, the last chapter discusses the related topics of power,

control, and authority in role-playing games (Hammer et al. 2024). Ryszard Praszkiar in *Empowering Leadership of Tomorrow* (2017) mentions larps in the chapter about exploring the future and briefly introduces the activity and the hobby. In his interpretation, larps can help to experience the “adjacent possible” (Kauffman 2000), thus linking it closer to horizon scanning and scenario planning than actual role-playing.

There are also numerous theses and dissertation texts connected to our topic. In his Ph.D. dissertation, Balzac (2016) did a grounded theory study on the transference of leadership qualities from a gaming setting to a non-game one. His findings suggest that larps may improve one’s understanding of leadership, decision-making, and group functioning. Another good fit for our specific topic is a BA thesis from Maria Kolseth Jensen (2020) who utilized larps for leadership development at the Royal Norwegian Naval Academy. The results indicate that larps might contribute to role flexibility. Moreover, enacting challenging characters and a positive inclination toward larps influences the outcome of leadership development interventions (Kolseth Jensen 2021).

Another significant contribution to the topic of leadership development and applied RPGs comes from Joe Lasley, who researched role-playing games in leadership learning. His dissertation (Lasley 2020) examines the gaming environments in *Dungeons & Dragons* groups employing content analysis, group observations, and interviews for data collection and analysis. His findings suggest that the inherent power in leader-member interactions might serve as the foundation for a psychologically layered emotional container. He mentions that these results can inform the design of tabletop RPGs for leadership development. While his conceptual research (Lasley 2022) nominally focuses on all analog forms of role-playing games and incorporates theories and terms from the (Nordic) larp scene, his analysis is mostly relevant to tabletop role-playing games.

Samantha Funk’s MA thesis (2021) reviewed and summarized what tabletop RPGs can offer for leadership development, highlighting the creative potential of the format. Also very valuable is the dissertation of Christina N. Mackay (2022) which discussed the perceptions of skill transference from *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)* to personal, social, and work life from a leadership theory perspective. The qualitative study of an online *D&D* group revealed new learning capacities that were transferred socially to various life interactions in three main themes: skill identification, social interactions, and leadership skills. Thus, tabletop RPG campaigns can significantly enhance informal learning.

To summarize research concerning leadership development and larps, we can state that it is a relatively new topic. Several studies explored the potential for informal leadership learning in larps, both theoretically (Bowman 2010; Harviainen 2013; Bowman 2014; Hammer et al. 2018; LeClaire 2020; Sweller 2020; Túri and Hartyándi 2023), and empirically (Balzac 2016; Mackay 2022). Another line of research is interested in the application of tabletop RPGs (mostly *D&D*) for leadership development (Lasley 2020; Funk 2021; Lasley 2022).

The topics of edu-larps and leadership were also discussed concerning school principal development through simulations (Bailey et al. 2022), and military leadership education (Hjalmarsson 2011). Empirical research includes using edu-larps to develop middle school science students in general learning dimensions in a mixed-method study (Bowman and Standiford 2016), and leisure larp about mountain climbing to foster thinking about leadership topics in higher education in a case study (Mercer et al. 2021).

It can be concluded that larp designed or applied for leadership development is a topic that has been discussed and touched upon multiple times. However, as an intersection of different topics, it is still a highly under-researched topic, especially in terms of quantitative results.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

We decided to examine leadership development edu-larps using multiple case-study methodologies, because it is capable of revealing the characteristics of its objects (Guest, Namey, Mitchell 2013) by systematically analyzing a practical issue (Yin 1994), namely designing educational larps for leadership development (Westborg 2023), from multiple perspectives (Merseeth 1994), and building or validating a theory (Yin 2003). Theoretical sampling, data collection triangulation, the logic of matching patterns, and analytical generalization can further enhance the validity of case-study methodology (Pauwels and Mattysens 2004).

As the case study methodology is highly flexible, it does not have a widely accepted, fixed set of procedures (Yazan 2015). We followed the research steps recommended by Larry M. Dooley (2002) and Karin Klenke (2008).

1. **Defining the research question;**
2. **Case selection criteria;**
3. **Selection of data collection and analysis techniques:** collection triangulation and comparative framework;
4. **Data collection preparation and researcher reflection:** by paradigm awareness (above);
5. **Data collection;**
6. **Data analysis and interpretation;**
7. **Preparing the research report;** and
8. **Defining quality criteria:** validity and reliability (for data analysis).

Several of these categories are explaining in separate subsections below.

#### 3.1 Research question

Leadership development edu-larps should be properly positioned in relation to other leadership development interventions that involve role-playing. Our research agenda is committed to finding a solution to this challenge using the research lens of design:

- How do leadership development edu-larps attempt to develop leadership through their design?

To break down our research question above, first, we look at the various goals of these leadership development edu-larps, considering what their goal structure is in terms of leadership development, how the gameplay design attempts to reach that, and what are the known results. Conducting a multiple-case study allows us to look at already existing examples and compare them.

While our research sheds some light on how the case studies have been applied, implemented, or deployed by organizations, our research focuses on design considerations. However, the design similarities and differences between the already existing leadership development edu-larps can be used to map out the possible breadth of the topic and highlight gaps.



Moreover, the comparative design analysis might be also used to evaluate if the cases promote or require larping (Harviainen 2011). Answering this question might further clarify or problematize the phenomenon of leadership development (edu-)larp(ing).

### 3.2 Case selection criteria

As we outlined in the introduction, delineating larps from other role-playing activities, and formal or non-formal leadership edu-larps from leadership-themed leisure larps are complex issues.

For this reason, first, we only searched for cases that defined themselves as leadership larps and deliberately omitted the examination of whether a larp contained true larping (Harviainen 2011) or some other form of embodied role-playing. This step excluded leadership development interventions that involve role-playing but do not define themselves as larps.

We attempted to collect all available cases on the internet that labeled themselves as leadership (development) larps. We started with our own two designs, and then searched through the internet, using search prompts and asking for advice and recommendations in related social media groups. We also networked at the Knudepunkt 2023 conference.

To meet our design-oriented research agenda, we utilized purposeful sampling (Creswell 2007) and the matrix developed by Josefin Westborg (2023) and kept only “educational RPGs”; cases that are education-oriented not just in their framing, but also in their gameplay design, as we are interested in cases that were designed for leadership development purposes from their conception, and not just applied afterward. This step excluded applied “RPGs in education” (Westborg 2023), for example, the university application (Mercer et al 2021) of *The Climb* (2013), originally a leisure larp.

By the end of 2023, only four cases fit all of our case selection criteria. We considered whether to exclude cases that existed only on paper but had not been implemented, but as all four cases had been applied at least once, we did not find this as a meaningful filter.

### 3.3 Comparative framework




To answer our research question about the design considerations of leadership development larps, we created a comparative framework that underlines the differences and similarities of the different designs. This framework was combined from various models from different fields.

In the comparative framework, the first dimension is chronological, as it deals with analyzing and phasing the processes that unfold during the larps, from start to finish. From the simulation gaming field, we borrowed the widespread concepts of briefing and debriefing (Der Sahakian et al. 2015), pre- and post-simulation activities that surround the gameplay, and support raw experiences to be digested through the phases of experiential learning, generalized into theory, and finally into a plan of action (Kolb 2015). We used it to summarize from start to finish what happens during larps from a participant’s point of view.

The second dimension separates the parallel existing levels observed during larps. For this, we adopted the three-layered approach to role-playing games created by Fine (1983) and fine-tuned by Barker (2005), Montola (2008), and Cullinan and Genova (2023). The three-layered structural model postulates that every role-playing game process has a primary, social, exogenous, or contextual frame inhabited by acting persons, a secondary, game, or endogenous frame inhabited by players, and a third, diegetic or imagined frame inhabited by characters (Montola 2008, 23). For example, a wooden shaft covered with foam and duct tape in the social layer can be used as a special tool that impacts “3 points of damage” in the magic circle of the game layer, and it is imagined as a runed steel sword in the diegetic layer. For our model of the three-layered structure in role-playing games, see Table 1. This

distinguishing of layers helped us to separate different aspects of the larps and, for example, see if the goals of the various layers are in synchrony or dissonance.

**Table 1:** Our model of the three-layered structure in role-playing games.

	Layer	Space	Presence	Framework
	social	physical & social consensus reality	as a person	personal purpose & social contract
	game	set design & game materials	as a player	game objectives & rules
	diegetic	pretense & imagination	as a character	character goals & diegetic fate/laws

Source: by authors, based on Fine (1983), Barker (2005), Montola (2008), and Cullinan and Genova (2023)

To further distinguish the larps, we also utilized a categorization from the field of Drama in Education (Bolton and Heathcote 1999), or more broadly, process drama (O'Neill 1995). These movements distinguish between three forms of play: protagonist play, meaning that one participant is in the spotlight, intra-group conflict play, and inter-group conflict play. Of course, all three forms can be composed of several types of activities.

In the third dimension, we applied Harviainen's (2011) criteria of larping to see the extent to which the cases meet them, i.e., the extent to which the design of these larps promotes, supports, or requires larping behavior.

Our framework was constantly redefined in interactive cycles, with categories being split and merged as the comparison of cases progressed. For the final comparative framework, see Tables 2, 5, and 6.

### 3.4 Data triangulation

To gain a deeper understanding of the cases, we attempted data triangulation by discussing details about the games with the designers both orally and in writing and collected relevant documentation.

### 3.5 Data analysis

Utilizing abductive reasoning (Lipscomb 2012), we analyzed the cases and refined the comparative framework in parallel. The full analysis consisted of three complete rounds:

1. Case processing according to the preliminary comparative framework;
2. Cross-analysis of the topics emerging from the processing of cases in each case; and
3. Systematic comparison with the final comparative framework.

To minimize bias, the co-authors cross-analyzed each other's games. To ensure reliability, we attempted to report the results in an analytical approach that does not conceal inconsistencies (Gall et al. 1996).

## 4. RESULTS

The result chapter contains the description of the cases and four leadership development (LD) larps. We outline the concepts, design aims, and known results of all cases, and detail the analytic dimensions of the comparative framework, namely the processes, the layers, and the larping (Harviainen 2011) aspects of the four larps. See Table 5 for a summary.

**Table 2:** Our comparative framework

Dimension	Main question	Framework	Author(s)
Process analysis	What is the process of the larp?	Briefing, Debriefing	Der Sahakian et al. (2015)
Layer analysis	How do the goals of the different layers relate to each other?	Three-layered approach	Fine (1983), Barker (2005), Montola (2008), Cullinan and Genova (2023)
		Forms of play	Bolton and Heathcote (1999), O'Neill (1995)
Larping analysis	Does the design of the larps promote, support, or require larping behavior?	Criteria of larping	Harviainen (2011)

Source: by authors

### 4.1 Case 1: *7 Samurai* (7*Samurai*), an Assessment Center larp

#### 4.1.1 Concept

In medieval Japan, a handful of desperate peasants pretend to be samurai to save their village both from rebel bandits and a greedy emperor. Influenced by Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954), in this edu-larp, 5-7 players go through eight diegetic challenges as part of a four-hour-long assessment center (AC), where as a result, the assessors choose one of the candidates for the proposed job.

#### 4.1.2 Aim

The design attempts to gamify AC processes to help participants display their leadership potential fully, as the roles and the overarching narrative that connects the tasks create an *alibi* (Montola 2010) to play outside of one comfort zone. Also, the variety of challenges in the immersive narrative makes it more difficult for the candidates to "look nice" as they have less time to think and behave manipulatively, thus leading to more transparent and accessible behavior.

**Table 5:** Basic information about the cases.

<b>Year</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2023</b>	<b>2023</b>
<b>Main Designer(s)</b>	<i>7Samurai</i> , Ziga Novak, Blaz Branc	SPGR, Maria Kolseth Jensen	<i>Groundhog</i> , Mátyás Hartyándi	<i>MoveOn</i> , Gijs van Bilsen, Vanes Spee
<b>Leadership theory</b>	Team roles theory (Belbin)	Systematizing Person-Group Relations theory (Sjøvold)	Jacob L. Moreno's role theory (Lippitt)	Situational leadership (Hersey & Blanchard) & Core quality quadrants (Offman)
<b>Applied as</b>	Assessment center demo at an HR conference	Part of the curriculum of the Royal Norwegian Naval Academy (RNNA)	Demo for OD consultants, university training for engineer uni students, leadership development intervention for mid-level managers, demo at ISAGA Conference	Open training for leadership development
<b>Target groups</b>	Job candidates / HR	RNNA 1st year cadets	Playset dependent	Individual managers and directors
<b>Duration</b>	4 hours	70 minutes / larp, 5 sessions	2-3 hours	2 hours/participant (intake) 36 hours (training) 2 hours/participant (aftercare) 4 hours (return day)
<b>Roles</b>	1 GM facilitator, 3-7 players	1 GM facilitator, 4 players, 2-4 observers	1 facilitator, 2-3 players + 1-15 observers/scene	2 GM facilitators, 2 executive coaches, 4-6 actors, 8-12 players
<b>Setting</b>	Feudal Japan	Modern-day organizations	Modern-day organization	Modern-day organization
<b>Situation</b>	Defending the village from bandits and the Emperor's army	Group meeting to come to a solution for that problem	Playset-based, dyadic advisor-manager situations	Company retreat of Move On, a fictional travel company
<b>Characters</b>	Peasants pretending to be samurai	Board members of a company, pensioners, and workers	Managers in an organization	The management team of Move On

Source: by authors

### 4.1.3 Results

This larp was run during the “Gamification in HR” conference in Ljubljana, Slovenia, in 2015 for HR professionals. One designer mentioned that during the conference run, against a dominant participant who was gradually losing ground, a quiet player slowly gained influence during the tasks, and for the last task, the other players elected him as a representative without external pressure. Thus, the structure and pace of the larp helped natural leadership to emerge.

Based on anecdotal feedback from the participating HR specialists (Branc 2018), the design reached its goal; job candidates behaved much more relaxed as they forgot that they were assessed. This provided significantly deeper insight into their hidden side and personality than standard AC. However, the facilitation workload proved to be very high and complex. In return, the design was adjusted to decrease the facilitator workload, and fit development center needs as well.

### 4.1.4 Process analysis

After a short AC briefing, the larp starts with what farmers do best, building a defensive wall, but the challenges gradually become more strategic in nature. The facilitator enters the game in non-player-character (NPC) roles (“an errand boy, a delivery servant, a lonesome wanderer, the chieftain of the rebel army,” Branc 2018: 135) to deliver new tasks and instructions in a diegetic way, without breaking the flow of the story. Tasks could be set according to the purpose of the AC. During the larp’s demo run, each of the eight tasks aligned with a particular leadership skill based on Belbin’s (2012) team roles theory. After each task, the lights dim for three minutes during a “good night” phase to allow participants to rest a bit or write a self-reflective journal, and assessors have time to make their evaluations. The final task is a negotiation with one party chosen by the players: the rebels or the emperor’s army. The designers state that there is one correct answer here. They argue that choosing the rebels is the right decision because emperors do not bargain with peasants. Standard AC debriefing closes the event.

### 4.1.5 Layer analysis

On the social layer, individuals might want to participate in this AC larp to get hired or to get familiar with the larpified AC process as an HR recruiter. On the game layer there is an undefined but existing win-state, so players might be competing with each other to be the “winner” in the eye of the assessors, thus getting hired. On the diegetic layer, the characters are Japanese peasants who must cooperate against external threats.

### 4.1.6 Larping analysis

Based on Harvianen’s (2011) criteria of larping, we see that characters are presented to the players as societal roles, distinguished only by simple Japanese names. This is done on purpose, to give each player the same clean sheet to work with. While players might develop a specific character out of these prompts, the goal of these design decisions is to let the personality of the participant shine through the role-play and reveal the “real” character of the job candidate in the AC (Branc 2018).

The shared reality (a village in medieval Japan) is present too. It is slightly but occasionally broken by design, with the “good night” rule, to encourage self-reflection. However, this is presented as a diegetic phase, which makes the break relatively light.

The third criterion is unequivocally present. While there were external observers to the larp, all the players were physically present as their characters.

## **4.2 Case 2: *Apple Pie Factory, Housing Association, and Launch Party* (SPGR), short larps for the Norwegian Navy**

### *4.2.1 Concept*

- An apple pie factory is on the brink of bankruptcy and a crisis team of four or five board members meet to discuss what to do.
- Seven or eight pensioners of a housing association are gathering to settle a huge problem: children are playing loudly and making too much noise!
- An alternative medicine company is launching a new product and four to five employees are planning the launch party.

These three short larps are based on the Spin Theory of teamwork and team leadership (Sjøvold 2007), centered around decision-making and group processes, and were played by the same groups over five sessions.

### *4.2.2 Aim*

These larp sessions served to help cadets of the Royal Norwegian Naval Academy (RNNA) develop role flexibility and were part of the master thesis research of their designer. The plot and setting for all three larps are intentionally simple, with a funny twist, for the characters to be more accessible to the players. It puts the focus on the characters and their interactions.

Observing is used as the main part of the design. Learning to look for certain dynamics and behaviors is also valuable to learning, as is playing. For the apple pie factory and housing association half of the group observed and the other half played.

### *4.2.3 Results*

To test the usefulness of larp as a learning method for leadership development training, the results measure three hypotheses (Kolseth Jensen 2021):

**Hypothesis 1:** “The cadets will become more role flexible after completing five larp sessions” was partially accepted, as the participants had a positive development, which did not differ significantly from the control group.

**Hypothesis 2:** “The cadets who are positively inclined towards the larp sessions and choose to play characters that challenge them will have the greatest development in their spectrum of behaviours” was fully accepted.

**Hypothesis 3:** “The cadets who are positively inclined towards the larp sessions will have the greatest development in their ability to observe situations and select an appropriate behaviour” was fully accepted.

#### 4.2.4 Process analysis

During the sessions, three different larps were played, with two larps being played twice. Each session lasted just over an hour and consisted of an introduction, a workshop (20 minutes), the roleplay itself (30 minutes), and a debrief (20 minutes). The workshops were designed to include a warm-up exercise (such as stretching or improvisational theater exercises to train spontaneity), and character building, where players got to know their own and each other's characters and build relationships between the characters. Finally, meta-techniques and the structure of the larp were explained.

During play, the game master was present at the beginning but then announced they would leave and return in 25 minutes, leaving the participants room to role-play amongst themselves. The debrief made use of both structured and open discussion, with specific attention being paid to the distinction between the player and the character and the learning points of the player. Role flexibility was the main topic of the structured part of the debrief, with questions from the theoretical framework of the larp.

#### 4.2.5 Layer analysis

On the social layer, individuals joined the larp as RNNA cadets for personal and team development, especially role flexibility. On the game layer, players must cooperate in finding a solution to a problem in a short time. On the diegetic layer, characters are from the same community or organization and they are competing and collaborating at the same time to reach some consensus or compromise.

#### 4.2.6 Larping analysis

In the case of SPGR all three criteria of larping (Harviainen 2011) were met. Participants played individual characters, which all held similar societal roles, but differed in their outlook on the problem. The character sheets included names, titles, SPGR categories, typical behaviors, personal goals, relationships, and suggested actions, providing rich instructions and strong affordances (Gibson 1977) to enact complex characters.

During playtime, the fiction was not broken in two of three designs. In the short larp called *The Launch Party* there was a meta-technique where players could say their inner thoughts out loud. In a sense, this can be seen as breaking the fiction, as these monologues could be heard by the players, but not their characters. Not breaking the fiction was relatively easy as the playtime was short (around 30 minutes) and sandwiched between reflective exercises

Finally, although in some sessions half of the participants were observers instead of players, all characters were physically present during play.

### 4.3 Case 3: *Groundhog Leadership Experiment (Groundhog)*

#### 4.3.1 Concept

A difficult and tense conversation has just come to a standstill between a decision-maker and an advisor when suddenly, time jumps back to their original starting sentence. Realizing what just happened, this time, their exchange might be different! The duo must revisit the same situation at least five times to break from the time loop.

The *Groundhog Leadership Experiment* (2022) is a leadership development role-playing game used in training and education contexts. The game design originates from a hybrid role-playing game scenario, *Memento Morrison*, that ran for the Otto award in 2021 at the Fastaval scenario competition in

Hobro, Denmark. It borrows heavily from the movie *Groundhog Day* (1993), and dramatic techniques invented by Jacob L. Moreno (Lippitt 1943). The current, professional version has been used five times up to date.

#### 4.3.2 Aim

Participants are invited to observe and interact with different dyadic leader-follower situations, revisiting intense interpersonal encounters multiple times, and utilizing the process of rapid improv prototyping. Because they replay short scenes at least five times in a row, they can witness how their decisions and word choice impact the outcomes. This creates a brave laboratory space for behavior experimentation, aiming to exploit experiential learning and foster change readiness, mastery learning, and role creation. While the two active role-players negotiate the problem, the observers collect punchy statements and one-liners that might summarize the leadership situation succinctly. The group is collectively responsible for finding a shared lesson learned or motto after each scene.

#### 4.3.3 Results

This larp has positive, but mostly anecdotal results so far. First, it had a successful demo at a well-established Hungarian consulting firm, making it into the organization's L&D portfolio and being utilized during a leadership training intervention for mid-level managers in 2023. It was also invited to be part of the "Project Leadership & Management 2" course at Széchenyi István University, Hungary, where at its first run, students anonymously rated it high, however, the low number (n=4) of participants severely limited the validity of these results (see Appendix 2). These suggest that while participants were engaged, felt safe, and learned both about leadership and themselves, however, they were not warmed up enough for truly transformative experiences, so the intervention could be fine-tuned in this direction. The game was further tested and evaluated by gaming simulation researchers and experts at the ISAGA 2023 conference, who praised its elegant design, the way the simple and easy-to-understand game elements create "a variety of options," unfolding complexity, and how it allows both passive and active learning while the whole experiential learning cycle is utilized.

#### 4.3.4 Process analysis

The briefing consists of a short introduction and warming up sequence by sociometric techniques, and a formal onboarding to the game's concepts, goals, and rules. The participants shift between leader, follower, and observer roles in every scene. When a participant becomes a protagonist, he takes the role of the advisor and chooses an archetypical leadership scene to explore and another participant to play the decision-maker. Others are observers looking for catchy spoken sentences that could well represent the scene. The leader-follower duo replays the scene five times, the opening line from the follower being fixed, each replay consisting of exactly five sentences.

Between replays, the leader can use "lifeline" cards to change the rules of the next replay. This way, a third role can sometimes enter play. After five replays the observers share the best lines and the group collectively chooses one as their motto for the scene. After playing enough scenes, each participant merges the mottos to create a personal moral or lesson about leadership. The debriefing contains two phases: a sharing of personal experiences by sociometric techniques and semi-structured questions, and a short expert evaluation session using the Critical Response Process developed by Liz Lerman and John Borstel (2003).



#### 4.3.5 Layer analysis

On the social layer, individuals join the larp for personal development, but sometimes in a compulsory way. On the game layer, players are cooperating to extract punchy statements from the scenes on the subject of leadership and then work individually to construct their own personal takeaways from these. On the diegetic layer, the protagonist advisor attempts to influence the antagonist decision-maker to make a consensual decision.

#### 4.3.6 Larping analysis

*Groundhog Leadership Experiment* does not meet two out of three criteria of larping (Harviainen 2011). First, roles are not referred to by name, but by position, and participants rotate between them, similarly to sociodrama (Galgóczy et al. 2021). The role descriptions are attitude spectrums with references to well-known advisors and consultants at the extremes of the scale, to foster behavior experimentation. It is debatable to what extent the role rotation and the short role instructions push participants to go beyond social roles.

*Groundhog* is deliberately designed to break the fiction multiple times in short intervals, by changing the rules between each replay of the scene, and to achieve meaningful, substantive dialogues.

While all active players are present physically in their roles, which formally fits the third criterion, two or three players are usually a minority compared to a large number of involved observers.

### 4.4 Case 4: *MoveOn (MoveOn)*, a two-day self-contained Leadership development training

#### 4.4.1 Concept

The management team of *MoveOn*, a struggling contemporary travel organization, goes on a two-day company retreat to solve their problems and become profitable again. However, each member comes with their personal plans and goals. Will they manage to reconcile them? This larp for leadership development is a personalized learning experience for individual managers and directors. Their learning goals were individually collected and roles were written specifically for them, based on those stated goals.

#### 4.4.2 Aim

This larp aims to help the participants broaden their repertoire of leadership skills and work on their individual learning goals. The trainers designed the larp to be an intense experience that uses bleed as a deliberate learning tool. Hugaas (2022) defines bleed as “The RPG concept bleed describes the spillover of physical states, mental states, physicality, values, opinions, and other similar concepts from player to character and vice versa.” Individual learning goals included things like learning to state boundaries, dealing with backhanded, political behavior, or positively using hierarchical power.

#### 4.4.3 Results

While data was collected about the larp at three points after the larp, the authors are awaiting ethical review. Therefore, we reserve sharing these results for future work.

#### 4.4.5 Process analysis

In the months leading up to the training, participants had one intake to determine their leadership goals and one intake to work on these goals with their coaches. They also had two possibilities of reacting to their role as written to propose changes. On arrival, the participants were asked to change into the costumes of their characters. A half-hour in-game session where the actors took the brunt of the interaction on their shoulders showed the participants how the larp would work. After that, there were 5 hours of workshops, focused on learning to roleplay, getting to know each other, and getting familiar with their character.

Time in-game lasted for 17 hours, with 1 hour of group reflection on the morning of the second day. In the meantime, all participants had at least one 1-on-1 session with their coach and could ask their coach for feedback during the larp. At the close of the two-day session, we had 3 hours of debriefing. Later, the participants could reflect with their coach and they had an evaluation session with the trainers. A follow-up session was planned 6 months afterward, to refresh the learning points.

#### 4.4.6 Layer analysis

On the social layer, individuals sign up to the larp for personal development. On the game layer, players cooperate and attempt to lift each other (Vejdemo 2018). On the diegetic layer, characters are organization members who are competing and collaborating in an intra-group conflict.

#### 4.4.7 Larping analysis

*MoveOn* uses fleshed-out, individual characters tailored to participant needs and learning goals.

For most of the playtime, the fiction is not broken. However, during runtime, there are several moments where the fiction is deliberately broken to allow for reflection on the fiction. This is both done collectively and individually. Beforehand, the design was to keep the fiction intact, except for these reflection moments. However, during play, both participants and actors (NPCs) asked for replays of scenes that involved just one or two players, so that these players could get more learning potential from these scenes.

All played characters were physically present during the game. Thus *MoveOn* met two criteria of larping out of three (Harviainen 2011).

## 5. DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Differences and Similarities

This section outlines the design differences and similarities between our cases, four leadership development (LD) larps. While the leadership development theories, goal structures, the framing of gameplay, and the depth of character design show striking discrepancies, recurring patterns among cases are the usage of real-life settings without props, thin game layers, high replayability or variability, and utilizing urgency and/or VUCA aspects. Common aspects in all cases constitute the ideal of the versatile leader, relatively low hierarchy, the structural support of the experiential learning cycle, and observer roles.

### 5.1.1 Leadership development theories

While there are similarities between the aims and underlying concepts of the leadership development theories behind the cases, all larps utilized different models. Case 1 (*7Samurai*) is based on the HR institution of assessment centers and Belbin's team roles theory (2012). Belbin's role theory identifies nine team roles, categorized into action-oriented, people-oriented, and thought-oriented roles, each essential for effective team performance. Case 2 (SPGR) uses Systematizing Person-Group Relations (SPGR) theory. SPGR is a framework that analyzes interpersonal dynamics and role behavior in groups, focusing on systematizing relationships to understand group functioning and development (Sjøvold 2007). Case 3 (*Groundhog*) is based on Ronald Lippitt's concept for dramatic leadership development. Lippitt's dramatic leadership development emphasizes stages of group development and leadership styles, highlighting how leaders can adapt to group needs and dynamics for effective management (Lippitt 1943). This concept, in turn, is based on Jacob L. Moreno's role theory, which explores how individuals assume and perform different roles within various social contexts, using role-playing as a method to study and improve social interactions and personal development (Moreno, 1962). Case 4 (*MoveOn*) utilizes the core quality quadrant model (Ofman 2006) to develop situational leadership (Hersey and Blanchard 1977). Just as there are many different leadership theories, there are many different leadership edu-larps.

### 5.1.2 Goal structure

We found the most significant diversity among the cases in terms of their (latent) goal structures (see Table 6). On the *social layer*, the *personal purpose* of participants in Case 1 (*7Samurai*) might be to get hired as a result, or, for an HR staff, to experience the edu-larp intervention as participants first, to utilize it later as an assessment center. In the other cases, the purpose is personal (and in Case 2 (SPGR), as a navy crew also a real-life team-level) leadership development.

There are more differences in the *game layer*. In Case 1 (*7Samurai*) players compete with each other to win a real-life job, making it a player versus player (PvP) larp. In Case 2 (SPGR), players attempt to create a common goal and become a team. Case 3 (*Groundhog*) aims to foster behavior experimentation through repetition, trying out new approaches, finding new solutions to archetypical problems, and summarizing the experiences into statements about leadership through projective techniques. The *object of the game* (Baker 2013) in Case 4 (*MoveOn*) is learning together and for this, the larp utilizes workshops to help players collaborate in playing to lift (Vejdemo 2018).

On the *diegetic layer*, we discuss *character goals*. Case 1 (*7Samurai*) is exceptional again in the sense that it is an intergroup conflict between the characters versus an unseen threat, making it a Character vs Environment (CvE) situation. They are told that they win or lose as a group. This case is also special because the designers think that there is an optimal final choice and thus, a secret winning condition. In the last task, when the samurai have to negotiate with one of the threats, designers think that it is best to choose the rebels and try to make them an ally, as emperors never negotiate. These are in striking contrast with the other layers and their goal structure. Case 2 (SPGR) and Case 4 (*MoveOn*) are intragroup conflicts plotwise. In Case 2 (SPGR) characters pursue their own goals, however, this does not necessarily lead to competition with others. Instead, usually a mix of cooperation and competition, in other words, co-opetition happens during the negotiation process. This is also true for Case 4 (*MoveOn*) but on a more complex level. Here character goals are designed to fit participants' personal developmental goals, and around 50% of these goals are attainable during the game, the others are process goals. The character goals are aligned in a way that every character can feel that they are gaining something. The two-day game time offers many opportunities to pursue personal agendas

and make meaningful decisions about cooperation or competition. Case 3 (*Groundhog*) is also an outlier. Here, there is only one protagonist in every scene, and the whole situation centers around their interpersonal relationship with the antagonist, sometimes supplemented with a third, supporting character. There seem to be countless possible variations of layers and goals.

**Table 6:** The goal structure of the cases in the three-layer model.

Case	1 ( <i>7Samurai</i> )	2 (SPGR)	3 ( <i>Groundhog</i> )	4 ( <i>MoveOn</i> )
Social layer	get hired/learn the process by experience	personal and team development	personal development	personal development
Game layer	hidden competition to win (PvP)	cooperation in finding a solution	cooperation in exploration & summarization	cooperation in playing to lift
Diegetic layer	cooperation in an inter-group conflict (CvE)	co-opetition in an intra-group conflict	co-opetition in the protagonist plays	co-opetition in intra group conflict

Source: by authors

### 5.1.3 Gameplay framing

There is also much diversity along the dimension of framing the gameplay. Case 1 (*7Samurai*) is a short, continuous larp with several tasks framed softly by the facilitator in a diegetic role. The assessment tasks or scenes are separated by “nights,” the dimming of lights, when assessors can take notes and participants can freely reflect. Case 2 (SPGR) larps are also short and continuous, however, two of them are repeated twice. They lack the inner structure as they are more like uninterrupted long scenes. Case 3 (*Groundhog*) uses hard scene framing techniques, and each scene is replayed with possibly different outcomes at least five times in a row. The gameplay phase of Case 4 (*MoveOn*) is one unstructured continuous play, however, the corporate setting makes it possible to insert scenes diegetically as meetings.

In terms of creative freedom and player agency, as Case 1 (*7Samurai*) is an assessment center (AC), it limits the creative freedom and agency of players on a situational level, meaning that they can influence the action in progress, but not the assessment center process. Case 2 (SPGR) larps were 70 minutes, one scene larps, they allowed much less room for players to go off track. Within the confines (set location and two-day time period) of Case 4 (*MoveOn*), players had a large amount of creative freedom. They were allowed to come up with new relevant facts as long as they did not contradict established ones. They could alter the structure of the larp (for example, they decided to fire the diegetic facilitator and change the proposed timing of several items on the agenda. This led to a high experience of agency for the players. However, game masters still had the final say on what happened on a larger scale, as the players could only affect their characters and not create outside events. While Case 3 (*Groundhog*) was much shorter in time and scope, it allowed a lot of creative freedom within the confines of the short scenes as players had to replay them at least five times, nudging them toward experimentation and trying out different approaches.

#### 5.1.4 Real-life setting without props

Only Case 1 (*7Samurai*) is not set in a present-day, real-life, organization-based situation. It is set in medieval Japan, and players play Japanese peasants who pretend to be samurai to protect their village. This feature distracts the participants from the fact that they are evaluated in an assessment center, connects the various assessment tasks into a diegetic narrative with an arc, and also provides an alibi to deviate from everyday behavior. In terms of stage setting and props, Case 4 (*MoveOn*) is the outstanding one. All the other cases could be played nearly anywhere, as they do not use props and place little thought toward the stage setting. Case 1 (*7Samurai*) uses tools as game material, but they are symbolic. Building a “wall” with stone bricks is not building a wall. By contrast, Case 4 (*MoveOn*) makes use of an environment that is the same diegetically as in the real world (a holiday home where the company retreat is being held) enhancing spatial involvement (Calleja 2011) or environmental immersion (Bowman 2024). *MoveOn* also uses props that are diegetically present, such as the company website, yearly reports, and different clothing for the characters.

#### 5.1.5 High replayability or variability

Case 4 (*MoveOn*) is not easy to replay with different people, as the characters are tailor-made to the participants’ leadership development goals and the game takes two full days plus intake and follow-up. All the other cases are on the opposite side of the replayability spectrum. Case 1 (*7Samurai*) as an assessment center larp is not intended to be replayed by the same participants; however, the possible assessment tasks can be chosen from a pool to correspond with the assessed competencies. Case 2 (SPGR) larps are very short, around 70 minutes each, and easy to play with other groups. It is interesting to note that while two of the three scenarios were repeated twice during the research, participants gave the feedback that they would like to play five different scenarios. Contrary to this, Case 3 (*Groundhog*) is designed around replayability both in the sense that the same participants should enjoy and learn from revisiting scenes multiple times, and also in the scene, that while the default starting sentences of the scenes make it easy for any group to start playing, these scenes can be easily changed to fit the development goal of the participants, as it was shown in the refitting of the consultant protagonist role to engineer in the university setup. Case 1 (*7Samurai*), Case 3 (*Groundhog*), and Case 1 (*7Samurai*) are both around 4-hour-long including briefing and debriefing, thus can be easily fit into a half-day slot.

#### 5.1.6 Urgency & VUCA aspects

The different cases make use of a diegetic crisis or the feeling of urgency to drive the game. Case 1 (*7Samurai*) does this most explicitly, with enemy forces about to attack the player character’s village. In Case 4 (*MoveOn*), the larp starts with a meeting where the boss says it is not going well and she will step back if the character can reach trust within the short period of the two-day company retreat. This urgency is heightened during the larp with a deadline, as a hostile takeover bid is introduced. Case 2 (SPGR) uses three larps, one of which is about a factory in crisis, on the brink of going bankrupt. The second larp is more whimsical, with pensioners facing a crisis of children making too much noise while playing. The final larp is about a launch party for a product, which is not a crisis, but has a high sense of urgency. In Case 3 (*Groundhog*), all standard scenes have complex, moderately high stakes (firing employees, restructuring organizations, etc.), however, the feeling of urgency is reduced due to the constant replaying of scenes.

To enhance the feeling of crisis, most of the cases have elements of the VUCA world (Lawrence 2013). Case 1 (*7Samurai*) is the most *volatile* and chaotic, as it is placed in a warlike situation. Due to its

length, Case 4 (*MoveOn*) has the most *complexity* and *ambiguity*, because of the large creative freedom and player agency. *Uncertainty* is present in all cases, moreover, the goal of Case 3 (*Groundhog*) could be interpreted as offering a remedy to uncertainty by reducing it through replay.

#### 5.1.7 Thin game layer

Larps often do not contain the equivalent of tabletop RPG character mechanics and have only a few game procedures (Harviainen et al. 2018). This is true for all of our cases as they have a very thin, close-to-zero game layer. Except for a simple token voting system in Case 1 (*7Samurai*), an inner monolog meta-technique in Case 2 (SPGR), and the special cards in Case 3 (*Groundhog*) that can be used to influence the replay of the scenes, we found no game mechanics. However, these special cards are used between replays by the protagonist and have no diegetic equivalent (like a latex sword prop would have a diegetic equivalent of a steel sword in a fantasy larp). Thus they do not belong to the character; they are used purely as a game mechanic.

#### 5.1.8 Low hierarchy

In all cases, the main focus is on leadership within a relatively low hierarchy. Case 1 (*7Samurai*) and Case 2 (SPGR) are about groups of equals with minor differences. In Case 3 (*Groundhog*) while the antagonist role (by default, the manager) is always in power, the protagonist role is an advisory one (an external consultant by default). Even in cases where the protagonist plays a subordinate (e.g., as in the engineer's playbook), their trusted advisory role as experts puts them close to the manager in terms of power distance. Case 4 (*MoveOn*) does have scenes with subordinates as well, but the main focus is on a group of senior managers with minor hierarchical differences.

#### 5.1.9 Structural support for the experiential learning cycle

All leadership developmental larps utilize the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 2015). They start with briefing and workshops, thinking about learning goals, and conceptualization of the setting and characters. Within the larp, active experimentation and concrete experimentation are combined. All larps have a debrief or reflective observation (either during or after the larp, or both). Finally, the experience is conceptualized into real life again. This final step was present in all cases explicitly.

#### 5.1.10 Developing a versatile leader

All analyzed larps share the underlying assumptions that successful leaders have to be versatile in their behavior and that this could be achieved by developing (or evaluating) role flexibility and expanding the repertoire of roles the participants can enact. In Case 1 (*7Samurai*), players have to show their different sides in a wide range of challenges to be selected from the candidates for the job in the assessment center. In Case 2 (SPGR), characters are designed to mirror group functions borrowed from the SPGR theory (Sjøvold 2007) which posits that group functions need to circulate or "spin" between the participants to have a developing effect. Case 3 (*Groundhog*) actively pushes players toward behavior experimentation to try out different approaches and leadership styles. This is achieved by two-sided roles with behavior spectrums and through the mandatory replaying of scenes. Case 4 (*MoveOn*) is based on situational leadership theory (Hersey and Blanchard 1977) that posits different employees are better led through different leadership styles (directing, coaching, supporting, or delegating) and a leader benefits from using these different styles, depending on the environment they are in.

### 5.1.11 Observer roles

There is a strong common theme of utilizing observer roles to evaluate or summarize player behavior among the analyzed larps. As Case 1 (*7Samurai*) is an Assessment Center, it has observer roles by default. In Case 2 (SPGR), for every active character role, there is also an observer role with an equally complex observer sheet, containing tasks and goals about observing and evaluating a particular player. In Case 3 (*Groundhog*), the character design for the observer role follows the same structure as for player roles but their goal is quite different. Observers here are tasked with collecting and writing down spoken lines that could summarize the meaning or moral of the situation. Case 4 (*MoveOn*) has two hired executive coaches in the staff who observe the situation in non-diegetic roles, meanwhile, the five organizers do the same but usually in diegetic roles. The lack of an observer role might be a great loss in terms of learning outcomes.

### 5.1.12 Requiring and promoting larping

The cases vary a lot in terms of meeting or supporting to meet the criteria of larping (Harviainen 2011). For example, in character design, Case 1 (*7Samurai*) uses only social roles but states that game duration and immersion support players in developing their characters. Using “tabula rasa” characters that have only names and no psychological depth is crucial here, as it provides an equal chance to each candidate in the assessment center. Case 3 (*Groundhog*) presents roles not as fleshed out, specific characters, but as nameless behavior spectrums with a position and a specific goal. While this character framework is more nuanced and specific than a social role, it is debatable whether Case 3 meets the character criteria for larping, especially because the roles shift between participants in every scene. Case 4 (*MoveOn*) uses premade, fully-fledged characters based on the player’s learning goals, leadership style, and personality matrix, and the character’s names, positions, and associated tasks, goals, personality, background history, and relationships that are based on participants casting choices. Case 2 (SPGR) is similar, as their character sheets have names, titles, SPGR categories, typical behaviors, personal goals, relationships, and suggested actions, however, these are not tailor-made to fit participants’ needs.

The last aspect, the suggested specific actions, are very similar to Powered by the Apocalypse *moves*. “[M]oves give structure and a certain order to the players’ conversations”; they “represent qualities that all the characters share, that we can use to compare them, and the basic moves are how the characters express them” (Baker 2020). These action lists offer perceivable possibilities for action, or in other words, affordances to play (Gibson 1977). This feature distinguishes Case 2 (SPGR) from general role-playing training situations where having names, ages, positions, goals, and relationships is the norm (Rudas 2007).

In all cases, at least some of the characters were physically present, so in this aspect, the researched cases can be called larps and vary from other forms, such as tabletop role-playing games. However, every case had at least a small way of breaking the fiction. In SPGR this was only done in one session with a meta-technique and the other three cases all deliberately included a breaking of the fiction to increase reflection by the participants and therefore enlarge the potential learning effect of the intervention.

Overall, none of the four cases met the larping criteria fully, strengthening Harviainen’s (2011) original observation about this trend in educational larps. The cases might be called edu-larps, but the majority of them do not promote larping in the strict definition we used. This also means that despite the label, brand appeal, and strong identity of larps, when analyzed in design terms, our cases do not look fundamentally different from other leadership development interventions that contain some form of role-playing. This raises the question of whether the term “edu-larp” means anything in terms of specific

design and methodology compared to educational role-playing, other than signaling a designer's background? This points to the need of a more defined differentiation between those concepts.

### *5.1.13 Larping and learning*

The previous topic also brings up another issue, the added value of larping compared to other forms of role-playing, both in LD and in general education. Considering the third criterion, the “physical presence of at least some of the players as their” roles (Harviainen 2011: 176) is strong in all cases. Recent theoretical studies have suggested that the levels of physical embodiment and cognitive engagement might lead to a higher degree of immersion (Kapitany et al. 2022), and possibly transformative experiences (Bowman and Hugaas 2019, 2021). However, physically embodied role-playing is true to nearly all types of mentioned role-playing LDIs; thus this criterion can only delineate tabletop and computer RPGs, not other types.

On the other hand, our cases raise the question of whether the other criteria, the depth of the role and the integrity of the fiction have a significant beneficial effect on learning, or are these just the cornerstones of the autotelic leisure activity of larping? Further empirical research must show evidence on how and in what ways larping supports education and development, otherwise outsiders might jump to the conclusion that larping is relatively ineffective (or even detrimental) to learning compared to other role-playing methods.

## **5.2 Limitations**

The notions of games, simulations, and role-playing are still hazy and often used as synonyms, even among academics (Crookall and Saunders 1989; Feinstein et al. 2002; Hallinger and Wang 2020). The recent appearance of RPG and larp studies in international research further complicates this situation. Limiting our case study to activities that define themselves as educational larps about leadership might seem artificial, as there are many leisure larps about leadership and also, many leadership development interventions that contain some kind of role-playing. To repeat our research question, we wanted to explore how leadership development larps attempt to develop leadership through their design.

Unfortunately, we found no analytic way to delineate larps from other forms of role-playing better than self-titling. One candidate, the notion of larping (Harviainen 2011) can be characterized as a “behavioral-psychological mode of engagement” (Deterding 2016, 104) that can happen in non-larp game framings as well (Harviainen 2011, 185). We found this phenomenon to be challenging to directly observe as the difference between a social role and a fully-fledged personality is highly subjective and in reality, moves on a spectrum. The criterion of (not) breaking the fiction is subjective as well, as sometimes breaking the fiction happens unobtrusively or deliberately, as part of the larp. Including these as criteria is more useful for studies that research player behavior and experience instead of game design.

Also, there are various drawbacks to using multiple case studies. First, the generalizability of the findings may be limited because of the small sample size, making it difficult to make broad inferences. We attempted to minimize case selection bias that may impair the representativeness of the chosen cases with transparent selection criteria, and counterbalance subjective interpretation and potential researcher bias during data analysis with co-author cross-analysis, but blindspots might still undermine the study's objectivity and trustworthiness. Our multiple-case study relied mainly on qualitative data, which can be interpreted and may lack the statistical rigor associated with quantitative research. Moreover, the absence of control over external factors makes establishing causal linkages hypothetical. Overall, we feel that our multiple-case study provided useful insights about designing



and applying larps for leadership development, but the limitations listed should be taken into account when evaluating our conclusions and contributions.

### 5.3 Recommendations and further directions

As our article analyzed its subject from a design perspective, future designers can benefit from its findings, whether they are designing a larp or some other leadership development intervention with role-playing in it. From our analysis, we gathered the following recommendations for the design of larps for leadership development:

**Goals:** Larps can be used for a wide variety of goals: organizational gain (*7Samurai*), personal development (*Groundhog*, *MoveOn*), and team development (SPGR). Based on the analyzed cases, we hypothesize that it could be beneficial to have a contradiction between different layers of the design (e.g., cooperating as players to play competing characters) as it builds creative tension (see Harviainen et al. 2014). Designers and empirical research should explore this space.

- » **Gameplay framing:** The most influential dimensions to the player agency could be: the duration of the larp and framing. To enhance the experience of agency, we recommend mixing longer duration with less rigid framing (*MoveOn*) or utilizing repetition (SPGR, *Groundhog*).
- » **“Larping:”** Character roles were not always needed to reach the aim of the larp (*Groundhog*, *7Samurai*) and usually, breaking the fiction to include more reflection was seen as good design (*MoveOn*, *Groundhog*, *7Samurai*). Suggested specific action lists (SPGR) or behavioral spectrums (*Groundhog*) create affordances to develop for players.
- » **Setting & props:** Real-life settings were generally used to make the larps recognizable and accessible to players. One of the advantages of real-life organizational settings is that they support soft scene framing with diegetic schedules and meetings (*MoveOn*).
- » **Replayability:** Tailoring to participants (*MoveOn*) inhibits replayability and should only be done if enough resources are available for this. Otherwise, high replayability might be beneficial, especially to enhance mastery learning and transference to real-world situations.
- » **Thin game layer:** Larps do not need a heavy game layer with a lot of mechanics. This might be of added value compared to other forms of (serious) games that are used in learning contexts, as it makes the design more accessible to people who are less motivated by game elements (such as points or winning).
- » **Urgency:** Crisis (SPGR, *7Samurai*), turbulent VUCA environments, radical uncertainty (*MoveOn*), or just high stakes (*Groundhog*) create urgency, drive the larp forward, and heighten the tension in larps, drawing the players out of their comfort zone. This makes for more intense learning situations. The explorative and rehearsing aspects of role-playing can also prepare participants to face these challenges more effectively in real life.
- » **Low hierarchy:** Having a low (*Groundhog*) or zero (*7Samurai*) hierarchy between player characters means that players will have a more equal chance to practice leadership skills. This way leadership can emerge through organic play. Developing through a pure follower role in leadership competencies is a complicated issue that needs further research.
- » **Experiential learning cycle:** We recommend going through all stages of the learning circle when using larp for leadership development.
- » **Leadership style:** Based on the cases, the larp medium seems to be particularly suited to teach versatility in behavioral styles. In return, a flexible and versatile leadership behavior repertoire is especially beneficial in turbulent, VUCA environments.

- » **Observer roles:** We recommend observing the larp, either by the game master (*MoveOn*), designated observers (*7Samurai*, SPGR), or participants who (temporarily) fill the observer role (*Groundhog*). This adds to the learning of both the participants being observed and the observers themselves.

Our recommendations for future research are:

- » **Overall:** Further study could also evaluate if new sliders from the current work should be added to the Mixing Desk of Edu-Larp (Bowman 2018). The Mixing Desk of Edu-Larp is a design frame that uses metaphor of a mixing desk to show different design choices that can be made for edu-larp, presented in dichotomies, such as, transparent vs secret for the element “openness.”
- » **Cross-reference:** Systematic comparisons with role-playing interventions that do not label themselves as larp might lead to more crystallized phenomena (Richardson 2000), and a clearer understanding of which role-playing tradition offers what advantages over the others in which aspect
- » **Terminology:** Harviainen’s (2011) definition of larping refers to a complex yet specific type of embodied role-playing behavior that is common both during larps and non-larp events. We suggest that *etic* umbrella terms (Harris 1976) should be as neutral and analytic as possible to minimize linguistic one-sidedness and gain a more widespread acceptance in academia. Thus, we suggest using a different term, especially when investigating this phenomenon in non-larp contexts.
- » **Role vs. character:** We need more empirical data about the mediating effect of role-depth plays in development. In other words, whether playing a fully-fledged character instead of a social role has a significant impact on learning, and in what sense?
- » **Integrity of fiction:** We also need more empirical data on how continuous role-play, unbroken fiction, and immersion might mediate learning and development. In other words, what are the benefits of playing something uninterrupted, without dual cognition as opposed to other methods that purposefully break the fiction for reflection or calibration?

## 6. CONCLUSION

Many leadership development (LD) interventions contain some form of role-playing and a lot of leisure live-action role-playing games or larps deal with leadership topics explicitly or implicitly. However, there are not many leadership development edu-larps, meaning larps that were designed to be educational in their gameplay from the get-go and were utilized as formal or non-formal leadership development interventions.

This study successfully identified four such cases, and in a multiple case study that combined several typologies of both the leadership development research field and the field of edu-larp, applied drama, and simulation to form a comparative framework, examined how these leadership development larps attempt to develop leadership through their design.

Results found that while robust empirical results are still the weakness of role-playing game studies, the cases showed remarkable diversity in terms of conceptual leadership development frameworks, goal structures, the framing of gameplay, and the depth of character design. Common things among the cases were the usage of real-life settings without props, thin game layers, high replayability or variability, utilization of urgency, and failure to meet all criteria of larping (Harviainen 2011). All cases shared the ideal of the versatile leader, relatively low hierarchy, the structural support for experiential learning, and observer roles.

The limitations of this research focused on the small number of cases and a discussion on “what is larp(ing).” Recommendations were made towards future designers making their larps for leadership

development and for future research, to look at terminology, other types of interventions, and more empirical data for the mediating effect of role-depth and fiction integrity.

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#### APPENDIX 1: Leisure larps from the last decade that deal with leadership topics

Year	Title	Organizer / Publisher / (Authors)
2013	<i>The Climb</i>	<i>Bully Pulpit Games</i>
2013	<i>Witchwood Larp</i>	Red Feather Roleplaying
2014	<i>Anything for N</i>	Turbolarp
2015	<i>Legion: Siberian Story</i>	Rolling
2018	<i>Cult</i>	Obscurus
2018	<i>Suffragette!</i>	(Susanne Vejdemo, Siri Sandqvist, and Rosalind Göthberg)
2018	<i>Wing And A Prayer</i>	Allied Games
2019	<i>Perfection</i>	<i>Bully Pulpit Games</i>
2021	<i>Lord of Lies</i>	Atropos Studios
2022	<i>A Meeting of Monarchs</i>	Charmed Plume Productions
2022	<i>Three Kingdoms</i>	(Jake Cyriax)
2023	<i>The Seekers</i>	(Juno Herman Langland)

**Source:** by authors

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