

Two of Wands



LARP, Tarot, and Finding Truth from Fantasy

Introduction

This very self-indulgent essay zine requires a fair amount of context before I dive into it. First of all, I should define “LARP”. LARP is an acronym for “live action roleplay”. In all likelihood, you have either encountered a shallow representation of the vast medium that is LARP, or you have never encountered it at all. If you have heard of it, it probably wasn’t the kind I do most of the time. As of the time of writing this zine, I’m also working on a more general zine about LARP, where I explain more about the different kinds. But for the purposes of this one, I’ll simply say that there is much more to it than running around in the woods with foam swords or pretending to do vampire politics in a rented room (in fact, most of theLARPs I play are nothing like this!) I’m going to talk more about the emotional, psychological, and intellectual impact of playing games where you embody a character and inhabit their mind, particularly those that last multiple days, as well as the liminal process of transitioning from the world of that character back into your mundane life.

And specifically I’m going to relate these things to the process of reading one’s own tarot. I’m relatively new to tarot, and I generally don’t consider my practice to be divination or supernatural in

nature (though I do admit I've had some profound and spooky experiences), but I've already gotten a lot out of it and have a desire to learn more about tarot and learn more about myself from doing tarot.

If you have read some of my older zines, it might surprise you that I got into tarot at all, what with my religious trauma that made it difficult to have anything to do with real-world spirituality or anything where people believe in supernatural forces having control over people's lives. It's true that for a long time it was unthinkable to practice tarot. But it turns out I had a lot of misconceptions about what reading tarot entails, and that each practitioner interprets what they are doing very differently. Not everyone uses tarot for divination or even in a spiritual sense at all. Some use it as a tool for personal exploration, shaking one's mind out of ruts, creative expression, and more! Some people use tarot cards for playing games, or just like the art on the cards. The latter two things are what drew me to the cards, that they were pretty and could be used for randomization in certain tabletop roleplaying games. I started collecting decks, but didn't use them for personal readings for a long time. To get to that point required LARP! And not in the way you'd expect. It wasn't through playing a tarot-

reading character and had nothing to do with using tarot cards in some abstract game mechanic. In fact, it had nothing to do with tarot at all.

No, the thing that made it possible for me to start practicing tarot came from a side of LARP that I wish more people knew about, because it changed my life for the better in ways I couldn't have predicted. To make a long story short, I started exploring themes of religion and spirituality in LARPs by playing characters who engaged with them, and found that adding a layer of the fantastic between those themes and their existence in the real world allowed me to engage with them without a negative emotional reaction or getting triggered. The religions and spiritual practices my characters engaged with weren't real, or at least involved fictionalized versions of real-world practices and desires and motivations people have for engaging with religion and spirituality.

And, with time, I came to be able to approach those things (or things connected to them) in real life without it feeling like I'd mentally touched a hot stove. LARP helped me recover from some aspects of my religious trauma. It didn't convert me to any religion. I'm still an atheist. But I'm much better at being around people when they talk about spiritual beliefs they have, at understanding

the draw of connection with the divine that others have, and at interacting with practices that often have spiritual connotations, such as meditation and tarot.

I will say that while LARP can be therapeutic, it is NOT therapy. There's a difference. You shouldn't go into LARP with the intent to cure yourself of any trauma or mental illness. For LARP to be used towards those ends would require lots of research (which is being done!) and more controlled environments. But, like art or writing or making zines, LARP can be therapeutic without needing to be therapy, like any other creative or social activity can be. I've gotten so much out of LARP and zine culture and other forms of creativity, much more than the reputations of these activities would suggest. I simply wouldn't be the same person without having engaged with them. I wouldn't be as open, brave, social, or have nearly as many friends without them. I wouldn't understand myself as much either. And, as with zine making and LARP, I feel like tarot has the potential to teach me a lot about myself and help me to grow as a person. I've learned with time to not be so dismissive of things with a frivolous reputation. Here's to learning even more.

- Olivia Montoya

Embodiment and Immersion

Two of the most core concepts that define my experience of LARP are embodiment and immersion. For me, they are a big part of what makes something LARP as opposed to some other form of roleplaying. My personal definitions of these words in the context of LARP are as follows:

Embodiment is when you allow the mental and physical space taken up by the character you play to overlap and coexist with your own sense of the physical body and mind. Even if some things your character does are abstracted by game mechanics (for example, using a combat mechanic to represent using a magical attack that isn't physically possible and should only exist in the world of the fiction), the core of how you inhabit that character involves their body mapping to your body, their actions mapping to your actions using that body.

*Immersion refers to the experience of inhabiting your character, of *being* that character in some sense, in the world of the fiction. For me, LARP immersion requires embodiment in body and mind. In some ways I compare my experience of LARP immersion to a flow state, where my character ceases to be a theoretical jumble of*

backstory and abilities and costumes that I'm trying to connect as a player and becomes something holistic that feels more "real" and "alive". I'll expand on what else this state entails for me later in this zine, and how dipping in and out of it can have longer-term psychological impact.

Now, other larpers have different personal definitions of LARP as well as embodiment and immersion, and I find that really cool! People use the same words to talk about very different experiences sometimes, and I find that fascinating from both a psychological and linguistic perspective. And it seems like no two larpers have the same internal experience of roleplay, and some are so vastly different that it shocks me. Different larpers may appear on the surface to be doing the same thing, but under the surface everything varies widely.

Thinking Without Translation

An important facet of LARP immersion for me is what I sometimes call "thinking without translation". To use an analogy: it is a big step in the process of learning a language to think in that language directly as opposed to consciously translating from one's own primary language to the language being learned and vice versa.

That is the difference for me between the steps leading to immersion and the experience of being immersed. I'm no longer thinking along the lines of "What would my character think or do here?" I'm simply thinking those things, as my character, and doing them, rather than translating.

Simulating the Mind

For me, I conceptualize how this works as running a simulation of my character's mind on a "layer" above my own mind, sort of like using an emulator on a computer to simulate the operating system of a video game console to run a game on it. I set aside the layer of my brain to "run" character minds on. Reading/writing character sheets, asking questions about what my character would think and do, and creating costumes can be compared to writing code to run on that layer, and being immersed is what happens when I "run" the code.

While the code is running, I don't lose my sense of my real self or lose touch with reality. I'm fully aware I'm playing a game, and can intervene to steer my character to tell a better story with other players and think on a meta level about my character's goals and arc and how I want to play them, and can stop the simulation at

any time or pause it. A lot of non-larpers assume that larpers must have trouble differentiating between fantasy and reality, what with all this sort of heady embodiment and immersion. The truth is the opposite. Larpers are generally much more acutely aware of what is real and what isn't than the general public, because we have flexed those mental muscles and explored those boundaries in detail. This doesn't always mean that our understanding of this on an intellectual level matches with the emotional side of things, though.

Positive and Negative Bleed

That brings us to another important LARP concept: bleed. Bleed is what happens when emotions experienced by a character bleed into and affect our player selves, or vice versa. Bleed can be positive or negative or some mix of the two. However clever we think our brains are on an intellectual level, there's still a subconscious part of our brain that can't tell the difference between our character going through something emotionally taxing and ourselves going through something emotionally taxing. It's similar to how when we LARP and do something physically taxing as our character, our body is still going to feel those aches when we leave our character behind.

Ritual and Release

This brings us to why it can be emotionally difficult to leave a character behind after a game. You're probably bummed to leave behind a fantastical story and setting to go back to a much more mundane real life existence! And there's also something called "drop", which refers to a sort of post-event depression after a LARP or convention or other socially and emotionally intense event. It can help to take steps to intentionally process one's experience.

Processing LARP and reading one's own tarot both generally involve some form of ritual. Ritual doesn't have to imply religion or spirituality. I think it's part of being human to find solace in familiar patterns, especially when they resonate with other people as well. And to look at these familiar patterns with reverence of any sort allows us to respect their importance and impact on our lives. Including ritual as a part of processing LARP or using tarot for personal growth and introspection acknowledges how things that are often overlooked as silly or shallow can in fact be incredibly impactful.

Every larper has their own rituals for easing themselves out of a character after spending so much time with them. It may be as

simple as removing a name tag and costume and speaking of their character in the third person as opposed to the first person. Other people like to participate in “derole” exercises individually or as a group. One popular exercise involves going around in a circle and sharing something they’d like to take away from their experience as their character, and something they’d like to leave behind.

My personal favorite derole ritual involves standing in a line with other players, all facing the same direction. The facilitator tells them to imagine that their character is standing in the same place they are. Then, they are instructed to step a few steps forward and turn around, while imagining their character stays where they are. Then, facing one’s character, players thank them for the experience and say goodbye. Even if this ritual isn’t run at a game I play, I still like to thank my character. Even though they “don’t exist”, they actually kind of did, at least for a while. Even if it was just a simulation running in a part of my brain I set aside for that purpose. In a sense, I’m thanking a part of myself for the experience, the story, and what it taught me that I couldn’t have taught myself otherwise if I hadn’t spent some time not being me. The character may be gone, but in some ways they live on in my memory and the lessons they taught me that impact my real life.

Illusions of Separation

*The fact that sometimes it takes becoming someone else for a while to learn some important lessons and for them to feel visceral and lasting reveals something profound that I think ties in nicely with my experience of reading my own tarot. Both involve *illusions of separation between parts of oneself*. Sometimes we're just unwilling to accept a lesson unless it comes from someone else. Or our executive dysfunction makes it difficult to change our mental status quo unless the impulse appears to come from outside of self. Other times we just need the excuse of designating some part of ourselves as another mind (consciously or otherwise) to give ourselves permission to think and do things outside of our norm. All of these things can apply both to LARP and tarot.*

In LARP

In LARP, we “become” a character, often with different goals, beliefs, or mannerisms than ourselves. But despite these differences from how we normally present ourselves outside of the games, we are still using our brain and bodies to embody and immerse ourselves in these things. In other words, our characters are actually us in some way. And there is some truth in saying that we

are experiencing what they are experiencing. Not in the sense that we're actually shooting lightning out of our fingers or piloting a spacecraft, but that we are connecting with others and ourselves through play, feeling emotions, and moving our bodies.

Being someone else for a while in a setting where this is acceptable and others have consented to such play, even playing someone very different from oneself or with different morals or beliefs can be cathartic, and one might learn more about oneself in the process than one expects. Even playing an objectively awful character can create a juxtaposition that enhances or highlights one's understanding and commitment to one's own actual beliefs and morals.

Metaphors Upon Metaphors

LARP can be a lot like learning a new language. Once you try it, you often find yourself learning as much about your own first language and how it works as about the new one. And the more ways you see that languages (and selves) can be different (or similar, or anywhere in between), you may find yourself appreciating your own language/self as existing on innumerable spectrums of possibility, and finding the creativity and tools

necessary to pinpoint where, or to explore moving along those spectrums in how you express yourself. Sometimes you need to have a personal encounter with what is possible to appreciate that there are other ways of being for yourself.

In Tarot

*As for tarot, when you read for yourself, you are the one making connections and meanings from the randomness of the cards, but the illusion of separation between self-as-reader and the “other” of bestower-of-meaning-and-message can be exactly what we need to allow ourselves to read things that are outside of the mental ruts we might find ourselves in. If we might otherwise put up a wall before we even allow ourselves to think differently *as ourselves*, seeing the messages in the cards as coming from outside of ourself (whether from a supernatural other or even just the randomness of the draw) can be enough to make us consider things we otherwise wouldn't have thought of on our own or been open to due to discomfort.*

Tarot inherently involves some discomfort, and the possibility of unpleasant topics coming up in the shuffle. While we might avoid thinking about certain unpleasant realities otherwise, flipping a

card and being confronted with discomfort that seems to be coming from a message-bearer outside of ourself can be enough to push us into grappling with it.

Growing Pains

Figuring ourselves out and growing as humans requires us to confront discomfort and other difficult topics. LARP and tarot are kind of like mental loopholes to allow our conscious selves to listen to our subconscious selves or potential selves. Illusions of separation can also serve as the “layer of the fantastic” I described earlier. It can create enough distance between our self and our potential selves for us to not put up a wall against the (potentially painful) process of learning, growing, and experimenting; refining our understanding of self and our place in relation to others.

Making Meaning, Telling Stories

Another major tool in our toolkit for this process of relation is storytelling. At their core, both tarot and LARP are about taking a jumble of seemingly chaotic, disparate things with enough touchstones to ground us in shared experience with others (in tarot, the specifics of the cards and their archetypes and in LARP, the

rules, plot points, and scenes with other players), and bridging the gap between the chaotic and the static. In other words, they are about emergent storytelling.

It is my belief that storytelling is a big part of what makes us human. That humans as a species survived until now was in no small part influenced by our thousands of years of telling each other stories to entertain and instruct. I think most people are to some degree hard-wired to interpret as narrative both their lives and the grand emergence from chaos and touchstones that is the world around us. Our societies. Our communities. Our history. Our current events. We interpret these things as being part of stories. Not just about ourselves or other individuals, but part of grand arcs and sagas about entire groups of people, even generations of people. Of nations and cultures and species.

Teller and Tale

When we read our tarot or process a LARP, it's no wonder we interpret narratively. In my practice of LARP, I consciously process my experience by constructing a narrative about my character, and thinking about the lessons I learned from them and their experiences. Like both an ancient ancestor telling stories around a

campfire and their rapt audience members, I am both story and storyteller. And because I think most humans interpret their lives as being part of a structured story to find clarity, understanding, life direction, and to make sense of an often overwhelming and confusing world, the salient thing about my practice is less about the fact that I end up thinking of my character's journey as a story and more about the fact that I intentionally and ritually do this. I am consciously reaching out for the happy medium between the complexity of the experience as both character and player and the more universal concepts of story and arc and archetype.

Again, storytelling is about relating self and others, both in the telling and in the tale. Even if we never share a story, or if our story is about ourselves, it is in conversation with every pattern and archetype we share with others and learned from others—from our nurture—and also passing through the prism of what makes us unique—from our nature. Shared interpretations bring people together, but even having different reactions and interpretations for a story brings us into dialogue with others.

More Metaphors

By reading tarot and playing LARP, I learn new languages that

allow me to see the possibilities and limitations of my metaphorical “natal tongue”, my status quo self, and create the tools to shape it and guide it and grow it. I create new words for myself and for others, if they find them useful and resonant. Then I/we can use them to disrupt the things that make me/us feel stuck or stagnant. We can write something new.

When I read my own tarot and when I process the experience of a LARP, I also like to write to process what I’ve learned (sort of what I’m doing here, though this is more meta). With LARP, sometimes I write epilogues, while other times I write out what happened in certain scenes during the game. Other times I write about how different events and conversations and actions my character experienced fit into their larger arc. I discuss these things with other players, who are also doing their own rituals to process the game. When I read my tarot, I do similar things. I take notes about the spread and the story I wove from the cards I pulled. I decide what to take and what to leave behind. In both practices I learn things, in conversation with the shared touchstones of the structure of the deck/game and the humanity that made them. And, when I come out on the other side, feeling satisfied with the “ending”, having felt my feelings and learned from them, I feel an immense

sense of gratitude for the experience. At least I do if I did things right.

Later I learn whether the process of processing contributed to more lasting positive changes in my life than just gratitude. Oftentimes it does. And I think the embodiment and immersion involved in LARP as a medium and the reverence and ritual of tarot as a medium give them a little more oomph towards personal growth and change than some other mediums. But most of all I think that the importance of the liminal space of learning from self and other simultaneously in LARP and tarot cannot be dismissed.

Liminal Spaces

Scholars of LARP often talk about the conceptual and physical space in which a LARP occurs as being inside a “magic circle”, the boundary between the real world and the temporary world of the game.LARPs are a sort of liminal space within which one can lay down the burden of societal expectations for a time and exist within the world of the fiction that exists only because those participating say it exists.

Likewise when I read my own tarot, I step into a temporary

mindset, a sort of smaller magic circle, within which I can let my guard down long enough to benefit from the space.

In entering these liminal spaces, I give myself permission to let go of my internal tension, walls, and hang-ups and just live within the fiction for a while. I can take off my masks and try on new ones.

Masking and Unmasking

It's actually kind of funny that as an autistic person I feel like I'm masking less when I play pretend than I do in real life. Within the magic circle I feel safer experimenting with the boundaries between self and other. All participants inside the circle are co-creating the space, and one of the things we agree on is that we are all wearing a mask. There is no need to hide or fear that. There is no shame in it. I learned something from this realization: Masking is a lot like cats sitting in boxes. Forcing a cat to sit in a box will never end well, but a cat will happily spend hours in a box ^{*}if it chooses to do so^{*}. I think the real harm in real world masking is that autistic people feel obligated to do so for our own safety and feel like that is the only way people will like us. We are pressured to keep on the mask longer than we want to. I think LARP has helped me have a healthier relationship with masking. I realized that pretending to be

someone else can be good, actually, when chosen willingly, with the ability to stop without consequence. I look forward to further using LARP and tarot to bridge the gap between pretend and reality.

Truth from Fantasy

If you've made it this far in the zine, you've probably realized that I really like metaphors and finding meaning through seeing connections and congruity between seemingly disparate things. My brain is hardwired for pattern seeking and boiling things down to their essence. That is why I love the archetypes of tarot and the scaffolding of LARP worlds. It is why I like storytelling and game design and programming and writing personal essays. Because I see the resonances between them. From the chaos, emergence. From fantasy, truth. From the disparate, congruity and connection and meaning. There's an aha moment in all of these modalities of creating meaning and finding truth that I can't get enough of.

It's a pity that only some of those modalities are valued by the society I live in. In a way, we're all seeking to find truth from fantasy, reality from imagination, creation from the space of the potential for something to exist. Is this what makes us human? Maybe. It certainly is what makes me the human I am.

Two of Wands

Let me tell you a story to wrap up this zine. It's the story behind the art on the cover of this zine, which bridges the gap between processing LARP and reading tarot.

In March of 2025 I flew to California to play in a LARP called Camp Woebegone. It is a horror LARP set at a summer camp in 1989. Playing the game was an incredible experience, as it nailed the themes and emotions of the genre and made me feel lots of feelings without touching the hot stove of negative bleed. I was able to nail the balance between exploring things that are deeply meaningful to me as a player while maintaining the layer of the fantastic separating me from my character's tragic story and eventual death. The intense emotions I felt afterwards as I processed the experience included sadness, but a good kind of sadness like you get after crying from a good sad movie or book.

*My character "wasn't me", but also kind of was *a* me that I put on in the liminal space that was Camp Woebegone. I can't go into too many details, as that might spoil the game for future players, but suffice to say that I came to interpret my time as Isabella Sanchez as a story about the pain in the transformation of*

growing up, where death became a metaphor. She also impressed upon me that growing up doesn't have to mean that you give up your goals and morals. You might have to accept some degree of not living your dream life or always getting what you want, but you can always still course correct towards the essence of your goals. Isabella wanted to help people. Helping people came at a cost. She learned that cost and made the decision to pursue her goal anyway. In that way, she finally grew up.

After the game, as a part of my derole rituals, I drew a tarot card and chose to interpret it as a message from the part of my brain I used to play Isabella. I pulled the Two of Wands, which is generally interpreted as being about making a choice to either be satisfied with what one already has and knows or deciding to seek out change and new knowledge... even if the path ahead may be dangerous or scary. This struck me so much that I made art of myself as Isabella inhabiting the scene of the Two of Wands, adding in some meaningful imagery from the game. She used her lantern to help and guide herself and others through the dark, choosing change and growth and knowledge. Even if it's scary. Even if there might be negative consequences. And so, as I ever continue to come of age, must I.

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