

Introduction

Here is the Place aims to support children to develop the tools to work together to form democratic communities. It invites children to think about difference, acceptance, trust and empathy through play.

In May 2016, Year 6 children from Gateway Academy, artist Adam James and theatre director Jamie Harper created a game about living and working together using strategies from Nordic live action role-play (larp).

Over the course of a week, the young people visited the Cockpit Theatre, formed groups, created community identities, devised maps and built group shelters. Following the sessions the children were encouraged to reflect on their experiences of belonging and not belonging and think about how this relates to the transition to secondary school. *Here is the Place* can be read as a rehearsal for a more democratic form of school and society.

This handbook is an invitation for you and your class to work together to think about this transition through movement, mapping and making. The resource is developed to support teaching staff working with Year 5 and Year 6 students preparing for the transition from primary to secondary school.

Here is the Place is part of *Moving Up* – a series of commissions bringing together artists, teachers and children to reflect on the transition from primary to secondary school. The projects create temporary spaces where children can develop the tools to support one another and think about how schools could be better.

What is Larp?

A larp (live action role-play) is when a group of people who might not know each other get together to tell a story. What’s different, is that in a larp, everyone taking part pretends to be a character in the story, a bit like playing let’s pretend, except the story is always made up.

Larp has origins in early military role-playing exercises, strategic war games, pioneering therapy and avant-garde theatre. The story of a larp is similar to when you go on an adventure in real life. The narrative is made in the moment, which means you don’t know the whole story until you are at the end of it. Though they might sound like games, larps are different because they can’t be won. In many ways, larps are more about group experience than individual pursuit. In fact, it’s far more interesting if they are played to lose, in other words doing what’s best for the story and not what’s best for you.

Like all adventures, a larp needs an organiser, they are called Games Masters. As well as making sure everyone has a fun journey, their job is to get involved, explain the rules and other important things such as where and when the larp is set and what characters are involved.

As an artist, I’m driven to work with larp because it actively challenges existing inequalities. My research at the moment is focussed on the way that larp encourages empathy between players.

Something else I love about larps is that they always end with a conversation. This gives everyone a chance to share their experience, which is nice because there is no right or wrong way to play. It’s a chance to say what did or didn’t work and what was challenging for you or your character. I find it interesting how much you can learn by listening to how other people dealt with similar situations, or simply by trying something new.

For me, larps and larping is about creating a safe space where you can think and talk differently about things you might be experiencing in real life.

How to Play

Who plays?

Here is the Place is designed for groups. The sessions were originally developed for Year 5 and 6 classes, but children in other year groups may enjoy this collaboration too.

When to play?

Try to find a full day to play the game. You could pick a day after the SATs, use a day during transition week or repeat the session each term to build on the conversations throughout the year.

Where to play?

If the weather is good you could play the game outside in a playground or sports field as you’ll need room to move around and create your communities. A dining hall would be a good indoor option or a classroom with the furniture moved to one side.

How to play?

The session is inspired by the spirit of larp and is built on the following core ideas:

- Everyone is equal
- There is no right or wrong way to experience a larp
- Activities cannot be ‘won’, there are no winners or losers
- Everyone is given equal opportunity to reflect and be heard

As the facilitator, try to actively participate in all activities wherever possible, accommodate mistakes and improvise as you move through the session. Larps work best when entered into with a spirit of equality and non-hierarchy. Not knowing how it will end is part of the process.

The final group discussion is an integral part of the game. This creates a space for players to come together to share experiences, reflect on what happened and why, and think about how to apply this to real life.

How to extend?

You could use the handbook as a starting point to plan a full week of transition activities, extending each activity over a full school day.

Explore identities by researching symbols from cultures around the world and asking students to design their own.

Expand ideas around communities by inviting children to create a manifesto, song or anthem for their group.

Develop the mapping element by taking a research trip to the local area to think about what makes a good community.

Devote a whole day to building structures, use the whole school as material and invite groups children to give tours of their communities.

Role-play and The Social Body

Elvia Wilk

Theories of embodied cognition suggest that human thought is driven by the body as much as the brain. The classic example is the smile test: when you enact an artificial smile, you’re more likely to pick up on positive than negative information, because your mind is predisposed to experiencing positivity. The simple muscle contraction conditions the expectation of happy thoughts. Ultimately, action and cognition reciprocally influence each other – happy thoughts increase the smile further – creating a feedback loop.

Embodied cognition has profound implications for how a person learns. This goes beyond the common truism that ‘learning by doing’ is the best way to commit knowledge to memory; if cognition is in the body, one could say that learning is doing, and doing is learning. Many psychological experiments support the idea that practice-based learning, the concrete and the experiential, may be more profound than abstract or rote reasoning.

So if the body learns in conjunction with the mind, how does the social body learn? How can practice-based learning extend beyond the boundaries of the self, bringing the body into proximity or contact with other bodies? Or, what is learned when two or more people affect artificial smiles (or frowns) at each other? Live action role-play offers precisely this experience and experiment: physically instantiated, collaborative storytelling. While it may be theoretically possible to larp alone (experimental larppers have certainly tried), larp is a fundamentally social activity. At best, it extends learning processes beyond the confines of the self, and, ideally, expands the self too.

The social learning processes required by larp are manifold. By assuming new identities, players can test out types of behaviour they’d never want or be able to try ‘in real life’, since they’re always protected by the avatar alibi (‘it wasn’t really me!’). Players can work through past traumas through repetition, engineering various outcomes; they can enact fantasies impossible to fulfil in real life; they can see how a single action goes on to

influence a sequence of events. This requires a complex mediation of felt experience and outward performance – the basis for all social life.

When larps are engineered explicitly for teaching, specific cognitive challenges can be written into game mechanics. In fact, educators often do this without realizing, for instance, by turning a maths problem into a game. And yet what larp offers is not purely technical but relational: it is always grounded in the physical and the social, and therefore demands that its players learn to communicate, empathize, strategize and hold themselves accountable for their decisions. All actions lead to reactions.

Games in general tend to be stigmatized in the educational context. Play is artificially and arbitrarily separated from the ‘work’ of learning. Classroom inside; playground outside. And yet the sorry distinction between un- and fun only cheapens knowledge, implying that acquiring information is inherently unpleasant labour, whereas leisure is unproductive entertainment. In this framework, learning becomes an individualized, non-corporeal, and often competitive pursuit. The goal of larp should not be to turn ‘fun’ into something productive, but rather to change the notion of productivity – into something unquantifiable and communal. This would engender learning driven by curiosity, mutual responsibility, and joy: the joy of being in the mind-body, with others.

Contributors

Adam James is a British artist. His works use larp (live action role-play), performance, film and sculpture to explore empathy. Through the immersive collaborative structure of larp, James invites audiences to embody and explore opposed characters, groups and objects. James uses enforced hindrance, such as non-verbal play, to encourage new forms of dialogue and reconsideration of difference. James is interested in how a shared space is hosted, and how sculptural objects might serve as alibi for new forms of exchange.

Jamie Harper trained as a theatre director at LAMDA and went on to win the JMK Directors’ Award and National Theatre Cohen Bursary. In 2013, he received a Churchill Trust Fellowship to research the merger of drama and games at the University of Miami. He is currently pursuing practice-based PhD research on applications of play in participatory art at Newcastle University.

Elvia Wilk is a writer and editor living in Berlin and New York. She writes about topics such as the ethics of art-making and emerging technology for publications including *Frieze*, *Artforum.com*, *e-flux journal*, *Mousse*, *Flash Art*, *The Architectural Review*, and *die Zeit*. She is currently a contributing editor at Rhizome and from 2015 to 17 was publications editor for the transmediale festival for digital culture. Her first novel is in progress.

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Warm up

Play games to generate different dynamics within the group

☾
40 minutes

Play
Start by introducing the day to the group.

Explain that you're going to play a game together. This game is a little bit different, because it's not about beating anyone else, it's a game that can't be won. Some parts might be tricky, and often there is no right or wrong answer. It's about working together, using imagination and exploring our similarities and differences.

Shaky hands

Find a space large enough for everyone to run around. On your mark, give everyone 30 seconds to shake hands with each person in the space, including adults. Repeat this with a 15 second and then a 5 second timer.

Group sculptures

Explain to the players that you want them to make an individual human sculpture. Call out a letter or a number, and give them 15 seconds to make it as an individual. Repeat with another letter or number.

Now invite the whole group to work together to make a collective human sculpture of a letter or number. Challenge

the players not to talk, and explain that this is so the game isn't dominated by one person telling everyone else what to do.

Encourage the players to trust their instincts and do whatever feels right. It's not about getting it 'right' it's about creating something unique.

Once everyone has a grasp of how this works, and how they can use their body as material, ask them to try and make a chicken, elephant, castle, supermarket, playground etc.

Try out 4 or 5 sculptures to get warmed up.

Human knot

Invite players to form an inward-facing circle with each person standing shoulder to shoulder. Ask everyone to close their eyes and put their hands out in front of them – one hand as a fist and one as an open hand. Challenge players to find a fist with their open hand, making sure to weave their hands and arms amongst each other. Then, ask the group to open their eyes, and slowly untangle themselves without breaking the chain. Repeat.

Explore identities

Use symbols to think about aspects of identity

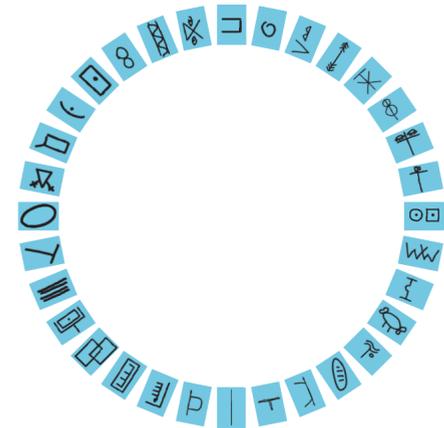
☾
30 minutes

Preparation
Photocopy the enclosed poster in A4 sections and cut out so that you have 64 individual symbols. You will need at least one, ideally two symbols per player. You can also download these from www.serpentinegalleries.org/here_is_the_place

Lay the printed symbols out in a large circle on the grass, playground or floor.

Symbols

The symbols are based on a mixture of real and made-up American signs used by travelling workers. These date back to the 1880s where chalk and coal signs were used to steer fellow travellers away from danger, or to let them know what they might expect in an area, such as 'a place to sleep'. These modern hieroglyphics continued to be used throughout the 20th century before the arrival of mobile phones.



Play
Invite the players to walk around and look at each image.

After a few minutes, ask the players to pick up the symbol that they feel 'is most like you'. These associations might be emotions, relationships or interests. It might help if they try to do this bit without talking.

For example, the image of a wiggly line and a circle makes me think of the way I go through life, a bit all over the place but I get there in the end. Or the symbol of the circle with the cross inside reminds me of how I feel on Sunday night when I know my weekend is coming to an end.

Players should spend some time thinking about why they chose their symbol.

Ask players to present their choice, explaining why they think it's most like them. There is no right or wrong answer.

Form groups

Identify and negotiate differences and commonalities within the group

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30 minutes

Play
Challenge players to form groups based on things the symbols have in common with each other. This activity can be difficult for some people, and that's ok, in fact it's supposed to be tricky. Having to negotiate and make creative compromises often leads to more exciting and unusual outcomes.

To help players form groups, encourage them to talk with each other, to negotiate and be creative in their associations and groupings.

It's important that these groups aren't based entirely on their shape or appearance of the symbols, as that would be too easy and a little boring. Examples of groups might be, 'family', 'things you can use', 'the dreamers', 'things you do on holiday', 'time travellers', etc.

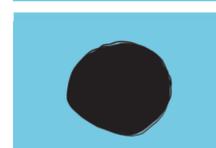
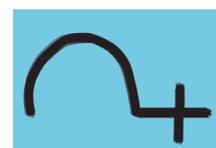
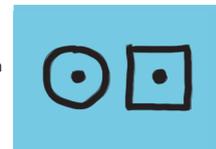
Ask the groups to choose one symbol which they feel best represents them as a whole. This might be really straightforward, or it might come to a vote.

Invite players to discuss what similarities there are within their group. To help, they might like to think about the following:

What is important to your group?

What do you collectively believe in?

How is your group different to others?



Develop communities

Design a flag that represents your community

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40 minutes

Preparation
Select one of the following drawing materials in four colours: coloured masking tape, electrical tape, paint, chunky felt pens or crayons.

Try to find four big white sheets of fabric. These are most like real flags and are great to wave around, as a backup you could use big sheets of paper or card.

Play
Explain to players that their groups are communities. A community is a group of people who have shared attitudes or interests in common.

Ask players to work together to design an image, emblem or symbol for their community on the flag. Try to avoid using words or letters. To make each flag unique choose one colour per flag.

Do different shapes represent different emotions?

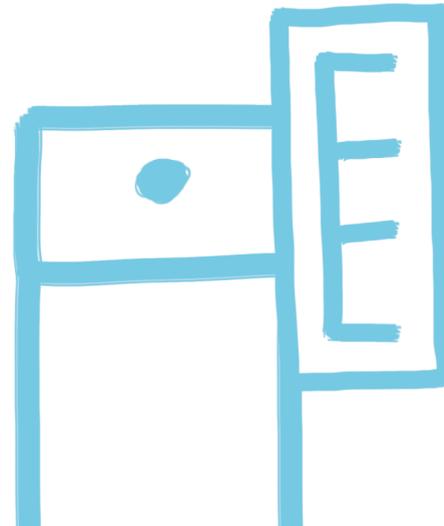
What connections can be made between two different symbols and their meanings?

Which colour best represents the group?

The groups will need to think about how they will work together. Will they all work on the design at the same time? Who will do what? Will they do some test designs first, or think through making? Allow time for players to figure out how to negotiate this task.

Each group should present their flag, discussing how they have arrived at their chosen design.

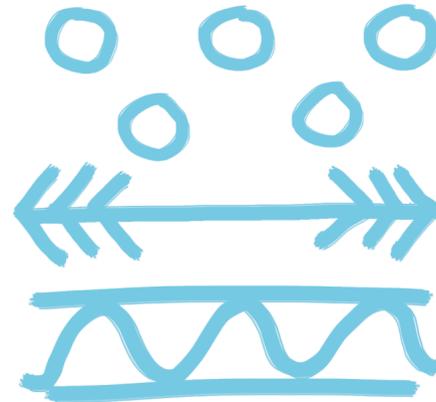
What do the other groups think their symbols mean?



Make maps

Create a giant floor or wall map of your community

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45 minutes



Preparation
Before the session, decide on where to make the map. You will need clear space, so it might work better in a playground, hall, or a classroom with the furniture to one side.

A really great material for this activity is coloured masking tape or electrical tape. If possible the communities should use the same colour they had for their flag.

Display the community flags.

Play
Invite groups to use the tape to draw a giant map of their community on the floor (and on the walls if appropriate). Players will need to negotiate with one another to share tape and decide what form their community map will take.

Ask groups to think about the spaces their community needs:

What facilities or resources would be useful?

Which spaces are public and which are private?

Where does your community begin and end?

After 30 minutes, pause the game and invite groups to reflect on what they've made.

What are they missing?

Does another community have anything they would need or would like?

Now invite the groups to think how to connect the communities to one another in order to share resources and facilities.

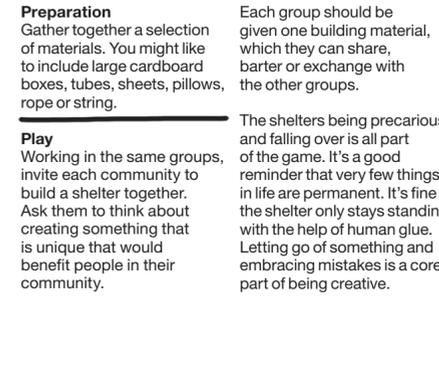
Can they create doorways, gates, passages, pathways, bridges and tunnels?

Ask the groups to spend another 15 minutes making these connections with the tape.

Build shelters

Make a shelter for your community

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45 minutes

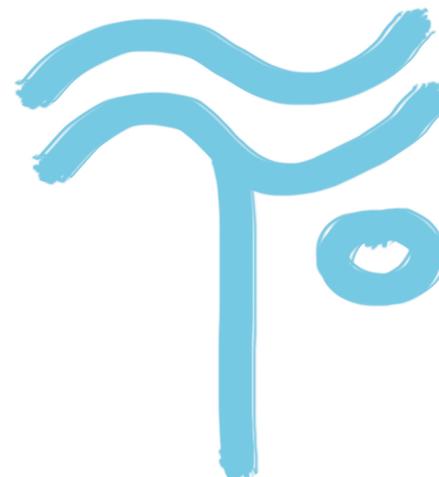


Preparation
Gather together a selection of materials. You might like to include large cardboard boxes, tubes, sheets, pillows, rope or string.

Play
Working in the same groups, invite each community to build a shelter together. Ask them to think about creating something that is unique that would benefit people in their community.

Each group should be given one building material, which they can share, barter or exchange with the other groups.

The shelters being precarious and falling over is all part of the game. It's a good reminder that very few things in life are permanent. It's fine if the shelter only stays standing with the help of human glue. Letting go of something and embracing mistakes is a core part of being creative.



Reflect

Talk about what it means to be part of a community and how it relates to real life

☾
30 minutes



Blindfold paired listening

Ask all but two players to pair up with someone from a different flag group, and then sit down on the floor directly opposite their partner, knees almost touching. Players may be more comfortable if they remove shoes. The two remaining players should remain standing.

Encourage seated players to close their eyes and speak in pairs about the experience of the day. It's important that their eyes are firmly closed throughout.

Invite the standing players to tip-toe around the room, listening in on the conversations. Their job is to find and secretly join an interesting conversation. To do this, they simply tap one of the seated pair on the shoulders, which is the signal for that person to swap with the standing person.

Keep the conversation going until there have been 5–10 swaps.

Group reflection
Ask the whole group to form a circle. This ritual is intended to create a collective and reflective community, where players can share their experiences of the day with others. Invite each player to reflect on the day, allowing people to pass if they wish. Explain that this is a safe space where people can say whatever they want.

Start an open group discussion using the following questions to guide you:

What was most difficult about today?

Why do you think it was challenging?

Did everyone in your group approach the tasks in the same way?

What did your group have in common?

What differences were there in your group?

How did you resolve any problems you had?

What makes a good community?

What advice would you give to a group who are about to play the game?

Notes