

Saturnalia - I can finally call it a Chaos Larp

The term of art given to me was “Chaos Larp.”

Saturnalia was an event held in New Orleans November 11th and 12th, 202; a production of Reverie Studios and By Night Studios. The main event involved 180 participants and used 25 venues around the French Quarter of New Orleans LA, and was set in the universe of *Vampire the Masquerade*, licensed from Paradox Interactive. My hope here is to explore and explain the issues and conversations that went into the safety plan for this unique event, and to compare it to the planning of more traditional-presentational events.

Larp (sometimes LARP) is an acronym for Live-Action Role Playing, a style of event where the participants are given a character and setting, and then act freely as that character within that setting. While the form derives from tabletop role playing games, it takes at least as much in its structure from improvisational theater. The events can incorporate basically anything for setting and characters, and can vary with the amount of pre-planned vs participant driven story events.

Reverie designs and produces Larps defined around a minimum of mechanics, and with an aesthetic of “What you see is what you get” (WYSIWYG), which avoids breaks in immersion by eschewing imagined elements. The story of the events are almost entirely participant driven; that is, once the character and setting are defined and the event begins, the participant-characters are given complete freedom within the world-system. All challenges (fights or uses of vampire powers on another participant) are resolved by mutual consent, with the general instruction to play for story, rather than victory. As a custom, the “loser” of any conflict defines how the scene plays out.

Saturnalia’s setting was Paradox’s “*World of Darkness*”, a world where vampires secretly live in the shadow of the modern world. All the characters were vampires of various ages and political stripes (also a few werewolves but I think that’s a bit too into the weeds). They had all come to attend a party, planned by the recently deceased vampire Prince of New Orleans.

Participants designed their character using an online system, then were released into the world of the event with very little direction or oversight, and with only a loose timetable to direct their actions. Some participants used online interactions (facilitated on Discord servers) to create ties and expand backstories involving other characters or their groups, as well as plan meetings and activities for the evening of the event.

Prior to the event all participants took part in a workshop to go over the setting, rules and concerns. Participants were placed into groups of 5-10 with similar outlooks/interests to begin the night. Each group was given a starting location around the French Quarter, and told about a few other locations of interest. Characters were then free to wander around interacting with other groups, until a scheduled Second Line parade to the main location - the Beauregard-Keyes House. The night ended with a “ritual of change,” tying into a theme of the evening- that this was a chance for the characters to redefine themselves.

From a safety planning perspective this event was well outside of my comfort zone. Even having worked with Reverie Studios on past projects, this was a huge increase in terms of number of participants, the scope and number of venues, and the number of uncontrolled variables. As with all Larp events and differing from theatrical events, the participants are both performers and audience, but in this case without any separation between performance space and “real world” spaces. Participants came with a huge variation in expectations and intentionality- the World of

Darkness has existed in some form since 1991¹. Running the event at so many locations spread over this amount of physical space, and involving both a variety of locations and the travel between, made fully securing the event space from the outside world impossible as a matter of the design. This kind of event has been tried in Europe² but may be the first of its kind in America, which brings challenges for liability.

Throughout the planning process it was acknowledged that the design gave the participants the freedom to move around the quarter, even to the extent of simply leaving at any time. This was considered a central design tenet, and many other decisions were based off it. It was also agreed that participants would be in proximity to and interacting with the public, who would be largely unaware of the workings of the event. Within the fiction of the game world the vampires keep their existence secret to avoid being hunted down- the titular *Masquerade*. This gave a diegetic reason for the public being unaware of the in-game vampiric nature of the characters.

Every safety decision was intensified by the fact of the event having limited staff. An ongoing challenge was how staff might even know if there was an issue, especially in the space between venues. Further, the design of the event purposely avoided staff directly interfering with the participant experience. Eventually the decision was made to identify a “group leader” in each starting group that could communicate issues back to the Operations Staff. There was additional discussion around various scenarios that would require intervention by the event staff and how/when to do so in a way that could limit disruption to other participants.

A typical (read “non-Larp”) event can be broken down into several phases which pose their own safety challenges. The correlation is not perfect, but at least gives me some organizational framework: Setup/Construction, Participant Prep, Event Operations, Interactions with the Audience, and Interaction with the Public.

Setup/Construction: This phase was much shorter and less complicated than for an average event. Instead of construction of scenery or infrastructure, almost all of the sites were operational businesses. The WYSIWYG nature and modern setting of the design avoided most changes to venues. Some furniture and equipment was rented and set in some venues, but this was mostly framed on either participant comfort (tables and chairs) or ambiance (additional lighting).

This left venue coordination and site scouting as the major concerns. Since most of the venues operated as bars, they were already set up for crowd control and monitoring. There was a large concern with venue accessibility, but because of the historic quality of some of the venues and the timeframe it was not possible to make large scale changes. The French Quarter, while not geographically large and maintained as a walkable space, has any of the typical hazards of walking in an urban setting (and an historic area). In the end, it was decided to communicate with participants and make clear that the event would involve walking and standing; while nobody would be required to visit any venue, we encouraged participants to consider whether they would be able to enjoy the event based on their ability.

Participant prep: This is perhaps the area most different from a typical performance plan. In a presentational format, the performer’s preparation would take place behind closed doors in rehearsal, supervised by the director, stage manager, fight director or intimacy choreographer. All this would

¹ Vampire: the Masquerade by Mark Rein-Hagen originally released by White Wolf Publishing

² *Enlightenment in Blood* was a Larp using the same setting IP run in Berlin in 2017. It was co-designed by *Saturnalia* writer Johanna Peterson. This is the most analogous event I’m aware of: involving 200 participants and 10 locations in the Friedrichshain district. Obviously the primary difference is taking place in Europe, which has major legal and cultural differences in safety, liability and performance arts.

take place before the performers were put in front of the audience. Because Larp-participants don't get any rehearsal time to coordinate their expectations and desired outcomes beforehand, safety calibration is an important part of Larp experiences. Altogether, this event relied on the participants looking out for each other in the same way a cast might.

Prior to the event participants were provided with a number of resources. A series of videos were produced by a local staff member to familiarize visiting participants with the area, culture, and provide suggestions on walking routes. A code of conduct focused on participant responsibility for their own well being. As a final safeguard, all participants were given a safety card with a QR link to the online document center, and a direct phone number to the operations team.

As mentioned, all participants attended a mandatory workshop in the morning of the event. This was a chance to remind and update everyone on the code of conduct, schedule, and city information, and to practice the mechanisms for play.

Running the event: As with any well planned event, once all the preparations have been made and the event begins, most of the effort comes to watching for problems. This event was made much simpler because of technology- I'm not sure how a similar event could have been run even 5 years ago. One room was dedicated in the main venue as an operations room. This took the form of several members on phone and computer monitoring online channels, including Discord, Facebook, SMS, and phone lines. While many contingencies were discussed, it was eventually realized that every participant would likely have (or at least start) with a smartphone- including GPS directions, and the ability to access event documents, along with communication technology.

Beyond the very limited event staff, we relied on the staff of the multiple satellite venues to manage their own sites, usually simply by their regular business operations, with a private room or drink ticket system. One staff member was chosen as the Venue Lead, who spent the early part of the event in the field responding to issues as they arose. A few others were stationed at satellite venues to decrease response times. Once the action coalesced around the main venue, these people were folded into the operations room.

Interaction with the Audience: As discussed, in a Larp the distinction between performer and audience is blurred, since all participants are performing for one another. This can cause issues in participants feeling pressure to be "always on." It can also cause issues with a participant being unable to get away from another person or situation which makes them uncomfortable. Even with the preparatory workshops, the lack of a "backstage area" can be an issue. If a participant has an issue, whether emotional burnout, a minor medical problem, or getting worn out, there will always be a question of whether that issue is "In" or "Out" of character. This then presents that participant with the option of pushing through, ignoring the issue, or going back to their hotel and forfeiting their enjoyment (assuming they don't want or need to involve staff or emergency services). A care room was set up in the main venue and staffed with a monitor, basic first aid supplies and snacks and water for participants who became overwhelmed, or simply needed an emotional break.

Another major concern, more similar to a typical performance setup, was the concern that participants would be turned loose in the French Quarter and get in trouble- primarily getting drunk. This was recognized early, and decided that it was not possible to avoid without completely changing the nature of the event. A number of steps were taken to avoid issues from participants drinking. Participants were all confirmed to be over 21. The code of conduct specified that intoxication was grounds for ejection from the event. Since many of the venues were bars using their own bartenders and front of house staff, event staff relied on them to help monitor and control intoxication.

Interaction with Public: This section would typically apply to audience-performer interactions, but in this case it reflects interactions between the participants and the uninvolved public. This event was designed and based around being immersed in a functioning city. A foundational design concept was that the city would be an uncontrolled space for the participants to explore. Luckily this was helped by the existing setting-fiction, vampires hiding from human-hunters in “*the Masquerade*” giving a diegetic reason for other people in the area not having any idea about the details of the event and the nature of the characters.

It was also recognized that this would expose participants to the general public, and all the possible issues that entailed. Beyond the multiple venues which would also be active, there was also the concern of the streets and travel between venues. Along with concerns about crime and other civil disruptions, there was the more mundane issue of allowing zero separation from the public. There was some discussion of involving security or police presence, but it was decided that this was unlikely to make a difference, due to the group’s freedom of movement. Even having a security person travel with each starting group would be fruitless if participants decided to split the party. Instead we relied on the participants to report any issues directly to the staff.

Issues: While the experience was an overwhelming success, there were several issues which came up during the event that showed places for improvement:

There were a few venue issues, mostly dealing with on-site staff being unaware of particulars of the event. One specific issue came at a venue which had changed the accessible-egress due to operations in another part of the building. This resulted in one of the participants being functionally trapped in the venue while the issue was resolved.

The weather in New Orleans on the evening of the event was significantly colder than expected or reported even 2 days before. Quick adjustments were made, but this did limit the usability of the garden areas of the Beauregard-Keyes House and required adjustments to some of the entertainers’ schedules. These changes were made successfully and the venue was still able to accommodate all participants.

Only 4 participants used the Care Room for any significant amount of time, and did not need any further treatment.

A handful of participants chose to leave the event early, some due to exhaustion, at least one due to intoxication. Nobody was *asked* to leave due to inappropriate behavior or intoxication.

One participant reported becoming lost in the area after going off on their own, but was able to return to the event with directions from friends.

Several of these issues were compounded by communication issues. Some participants who were more familiar with By Night Studios sent communications to people they knew there instead of communicating to the event staff. This is to some extent unavoidable, in that people will reach out to those they are most comfortable with, but can be further mitigated by clarifying roles and by making sure that those people would be forwarding those communications to event staff, and not trying to take care of issues on their own.

Conclusion: On multiple occasions during the design and lead up to *Saturnalia* we identified areas where we knew there were concerns or places where things might happen. For some of these there was a mindful decision *not* to change anything, because it would greatly undermine the design intent of the event. From the beginning *Saturnalia* was proposed and sold as an event which involved the

French Quarter's culture, history and nightlife. Removing the public from that equation would produce an event which was broadly safer, but certainly not what was advertised.

This did leave us with a very beneficial "fail state" for the event: what participants would be left with if they decided that they weren't enjoying themselves. In this case it would leave the participants with a list of several interesting nightspots in one of the major tourist destinations in the US and that was considered acceptable for most cases.

This event placed an enormous amount of trust in the participants. In some ways this is true of any event; you always expect the performers will act as professionals, and the audience will be largely invested in having a good time. For *Saturnalia* we placed a huge amount of responsibility on participants to actively report any issues and to look out for each other. As typical for an event of this type, the amount of staffing was an issue. Ideally we would not have relied so heavily on the staff of the various venues, or participant-volunteers. Staff on hand at each location could have mitigated some of the communication issues, as well as venue problems. Thankfully the Larp community is greatly invested in each other, and the structure of the workshops allowed for a lot of information and reinforcement prior to getting out into the public.

The amount of communication technology involved was really only recently possible. I don't know how an event like this would have been possible even 10 years ago. It was only because of the ubiquity of smartphones that staff was able monitor all the various communications options from participants. There was a part of the plan which dealt with larger communication outages, but it was decided that this would be outside of our ability to solve internally, and would fall towards large cancellation.