

Live-Action Roleplaying Props

BY ANDREW LEMAN



THERE ARE MANY USES FOR PROPS, and they are not limited to the worlds of traditional theatre, film and television. There is a large and growing community of people all over the world who play live-action roleplaying games, and many of these people make and use theatre-style props to enhance their various adventures. The levels of detail and sophistication can vary widely, but many game hobbyists devote extensive effort to creating prop objects. With limited resources available, prop use is a major way of creating the game world and telling the game story. Gaming props have to meet different standards than props for stage or screen, because in a game the actors and the audience are the same people. Of all the various genres of live-action gaming, horror games make the most effective use of props.

The hobby of live-action roleplaying (LARP) has been pursued in an organized way for at least three or four decades. In many ways it's the adult equivalent of the kind of Cowboys-and-Indians game that most people play as kids. For some groups, LARPing takes the form of historical re-enactments, like staging Civil War battles or Roman gladiatorial exploits. For others, LARPing is the natural extension of traditional roleplaying games like *Dungeons & Dragons* or *The Call of Cthulhu*. There are thousands of LARP groups in America, and thousands more across the globe, playing in numerous genres under various different rules systems.

Although styles and techniques differ, allLARPs have some basic elements in common. A player in a LARP takes on a character for the duration of the game, and interacts with other characters in an unscripted way to mutually create a story. Games are overseen by referees who try to shape the story as it goes along, resolve rule disputes, and keep everyone safe. Many people describe the experience as like living through a movie, or a spontaneously created play.

Games are always more fun to play if you have good toys, and that's where LARPers get into the world of props. Individual players often go to great lengths to create personal props and costume accessories to make their characters distinctive and respected in the game world. And the referees who run the games often create elaborate prop objects or documents which serve to drive the plot and provide sources of interaction and competition for their players.

The majority ofLARPs are sword-and-sorcery fantasies patterned after the worlds of J.R.R. Tolkien. There are numerous groups across the country who run weekend-long, Renaissance Fair type events in parks and wooded areas. These games usually feature a mix of story-based roleplaying and combat with what are called "boffer" weapons. There are strict rules governing the construction and use of boffer weaponry, and players put in a lot of time making the coolest possible swords, maces, axes and spears that still fall within safety guidelines. Most home-made boffers are built from a core of PVC pipe or bamboo, covered with layers of closed-cell polyethylene foam and duct tape. The tips are given extra padding with open-cell foam rubber. Some rules systems require non-realistic color coding, but weapons are often finished with metallic fabric and made to look as realistic as possible. There are numerous boffer "armories" which offer detailed weaponry, armor, and accessories for sale over the internet. These professional prop weapons are often made of cast foam latex around a carbon fiber or fiberglass core, and are comparable, if not identical, to motion picture props.

Weapons are not the only kind of fantasy LARP props. Fantasy stories often involve treasures and magical items, and the players and referees who run the games take great pride in providing prop items like these. Statuary, wands, chalices, altarware, books & scrolls, staffs, banners & flags, crystals, and candelabra & lanterns are among the more popular items that appear in games. Many are homemade, but many are purchased from online sources or New Age stores.

The world of vampires is probably the second most popular genre for LARP gamers. Many vampire LARP groups are linked in a massively elaborate international organization called the Camarilla, which essentially maintains a fictional parallel vampire universe in which people are playing somewhere in the world all the time. Unlike fantasyLARPs, vampire games tend to be played in urban areas, and players avoid having prop weaponry that might lead to trouble with police. Prop weapons of any kind are usually a rule violation that will get a player ejected from a vampire game. Instead, items are simply named and described on small cards: possession of the card counts as possession of the item in the game world, and using the prop is as simple as showing the card to a fellow player. Vampire LARPers do use some real personal props, however, and many make or purchase elaborate gothic jewelry, scrolls and books, and even custom enamel fangs and exotic contact lenses.

There are many other LARP genres—WWII and other military recreations, science fiction, cyberpunk, murder mystery, and gangbusters to name a few—but one of the favorites is Cthulhu LARPing, inspired by the cosmic horror fiction of writer H. P. Lovecraft. There are two main styles of Cthulhu LARPing: period games set in the 1920s and '30s, when Lovecraft lived and wrote his stories, and modern-day games with an *X-Files* flavor. Both types rely more heavily on prop use than most other LARP genres.

CthulhuLARPs involve human beings investigating mysterious situations with paranormal, occult, and/or alien connections. ("Cthulhu" is the name of a god-like extraterrestrial creature which, according to the mythos of the game world, is imprisoned in a city beneath the Pacific Ocean, and will rise one day to take over the world.) While fantasy and vampireLARPs usually emphasize combat and social interaction, respectively, CthulhuLARPs tend to be driven by well thought-out plots, much like a play or movie. The referees who run these games usually have a story to tell, and props are used to help tell them, much as in theatre and film.

LARP props have to live up to a different standard than stage or film props, however. A typical stage prop will never be seen up close by the audience, and the propmaker can get away with a certain amount of approximation. A film prop may be featured in a close up, but it's usually on screen for just a few seconds, and it's only seen from one or two carefully chosen angles. In a LARP, the audience and the actors are the same people, and LARP props are handled extensively and inspected closely by the players. In a Cthulhu game, the players are usually deeply involved in a frightening mystery and they seek meaning in every tiny detail. Prop documents can't contain greeking, in-jokes, or repeated blocks of text. Prop devices have to be fully functional. Prop artifacts have to live up to nearly evidentiary standards. Many live-action games are played on a WYSIWYG basis: what you see is what you get. Props have to be fully consistent with the game world.

Just as in the theatre, LARP props help to create the world of the story, and to aid in the suspension of disbelief. Games are funded out of the pockets of the players, and few game groups have the resources to go so far as to build sets or play "on location." Creating good props is the best way most groups have to bring physical reality to the imaginary game world. For games set in the 1920s or '30s, having vintage prop products, furniture and equipment can really help set the imagination on fire, and create an intense and highly satisfying roleplaying experience. For modern-day games, good props add a layer of coolness, and can also provide a layer of abstraction that helps to keep the game world distinct from the real one.

Robert McLaughlin and Greg Agostini are two guys who are very active in the world of Cthulhu LARPing and props. McLaughlin, who lives in Tennessee, has written a book of rules called *Cthulhu Live*, which is the system used by many Cthulhu gamers today. McLaughlin is a self-described "tome whore" who enjoys making highly detailed prop books of game magic. Agostini runs a gaming group based in New Jersey called PST Productions, and runs numerous live-action games at sci-fi, fantasy and horror conventions all around the country. Agostini is a special effects and licensed pyrotechnics expert who designs and builds elaborate prop mechanical devices and weaponry, often featuring fully functional lasers, countdown timers, speakers, and other electronic components. McLaughlin and Agostini collaborate on many projects, and run an online discussion forum for Cthulhu LARPers.

Christian Matzke, a gamer and filmmaker who lives in Maine, is also active in the world of CthulhuLARPs. He runs a website called "Propping Up the Mythos" which features how-to guides for building some often-desired prop items, and a gallery of props submitted by various gamers. Although LARP propmaking is just a hobby for most people, there are some who make it a business. There is almost always at least one Cthulhu prop for sale on eBay by a fellow known as Zaron, who specializes in prop books and statuary. The high bid for the leather-bound prop *Necronomicon* he was offering as of this writing was \$113.50.

All propmakers take pride in the detail and accuracy of their work, but nowhere is that effort more fully appreciated than inLARPs. This is precisely because the actors are the audience, and every prop detail, no matter how small, can help further the story. WhileLARPs tend to dispense with the actor/audience dichotomy, they can take advantage of the player/character dichotomy. Sandy Antunes, a published game author and experienced LARPer, says that "in horror gaming, you have to affect the Player moreso than the Character. ...Props are more useful in horrorLARPs because props physically involve the player...and thus provoke more of an emotional impact." He goes on to say that "horrorLARPs are frequently 'Man vs. Environment', ...[which] requires high production values (building 'the Environment'). Man vs. Man, Man vs. Fate, Man vs. Self, and Man vs. Giant Radioactive Penguin (the other main forms of drama and LARP) require less prop work to achieve their goals."

I've been a professional theatre and film prop designer since 1994. I've created props for numerous stage plays in Chicago, and since moving to Los Angeles have designed prop graphics for television and motion pictures, including *Galaxy Quest*, *Ali*, and *What Lies Beneath*. The props I've enjoyed working on the most, however, were all done for LARP games. I have been playing *Cthulhu Lives!*, a unique style of Cthulhu LARP created by the H.P.Lovecraft Historical Society, since 1984, and I'll describe three examples from our games to show specifically how LARP props can be used, and the lengths to which game propmakers can go.

It's not uncommon to provide clues to players in the form of newspaper clippings, but just handing your players a clipping is kind of a dead giveaway that the information it contains is important. In a game called "The Sentence," my fellow referee and I decided it would be far more effective to give them an entire prop newspaper and let them find the most important information for themselves, if they could. We did library research to collect actual news articles from the time period (1920s), and wrote a number of other items ourselves which fit with the game

world. Using Quark Xpress on the trusty Macintosh computer, we laid out four complete full-size newspaper pages, complete with period photos and cartoons. We added a classified advertisements section which was seeded with potentially helpful contacts they could call upon, in addition to the relevant game articles. The layouts were printed in sections on an ordinary laser printer, then pasted together and copied on a large-format photocopying machine at the local Kinko's to make a complete four-page, full-size period newspaper. The players in the game had the challenge, and the reward, of doing actual detective work by following up the various leads in the paper, and the various articles (even the real 1920s news items) opened up gaming opportunities that would have been lost if we'd simply handed them a clipping that told them what they needed to know. In addition to serving its game purpose extremely well, the finished prop became a treasured souvenir when the adventure was over.

Another important game prop was a mummified body used in an adventure called "Mose Ain't Dead." In the opening scenario of the game, the players found a mummified corpse in the middle of a dry lake bed in the Mojave desert, about 100 miles outside of Los Angeles (*Cthulhu Lives!* games often involve travelling to real settings like this.). One of the characters was a forensic pathologist, and I knew he would want to examine the mummy for clues. I needed to build a mummy prop which would be able to withstand an in-game "autopsy." Starting with a life-size rubber model skeleton, I stiffened the long bones by injecting them with household insulation foam. I replaced one of the soft rubber skeleton hands and the skull with hard plastic models, expecting that the head and the hand would both be examined closely. I covered the skeleton with foam-rubber flesh, and "skin" which was made from coarse brown art paper saturated with acrylic polymer gel thinned with water. When the gel dried, the paper acquired a semi-translucent, leathery texture which was quite convincing. An actual antique glass eye was inserted into one of the eye sockets of the skull, and acrylic/paper eyelids were added. Crepe wool hair was glued in layers onto the scalp using unthinned acrylic gel. The mummy was going to be found with the mouth open and filled with dirt, so I needed to create a tongue and throat that could actually be examined. They were done with a combination of foam and acrylic-soaked paper. The teeth were a set of acrylic dentures carefully painted. An Egyptian tattoo was painted on the mummy's chest, and an ancient statue (a whole separate prop) was placed in his hand. During the game "autopsy," the coroner had to cut the statue free from the mummy's death grip. He also cut open the eyelid to remove the glass eye inside. The anatomical correctness of the prop made the autopsy procedure extremely unsettling for the players, which was the goal. It also made it possible for them simply to interact with the prop and draw their own conclusions, without being fed information by the referee. A player's own ideas and opinions are always far more persuasive than anything provided by an outside source.



MUMMIFIED HEAD. Photo by Gregg Roth.

The most elaborate game prop I ever constructed, however, has yet to be actually used in a game: the adventure for which it was originally intended never really got off the ground. It was a vintage-era story, and the plot called for a fully-functional personal computer as it might have existed in 1929. Inspired by the retro-futuristic props from the Terry Gilliam film *Brazil*, and armed with research about what office machinery was like in the late 1920s, I set out to convert my old Macintosh (the very one that was used to make the prop newspaper) into an appropriate machine, which I called the ElectriClerk. The computer components were removed from their original beige casing and supported on a base made out of various kinds of industrial surplus parts. A yoke was cast out of epoxy resin to hold up the CRT. I purchased two antique Underwood typewriters from a thrift shop: one to use as the keyboard for the machine and the other to scavenge for spare parts. I stripped the circuit board out of an actual Macintosh keyboard and mounted it to a wooden base. I then installed one of the old typewriters above the circuit board and physically connected the typewriter keys to the corresponding buttons hidden beneath (for a couple of the keys this required elaborate cam and push rod contraptions). I removed the circuitry from a trackball and mounted it on a base next to the typewriter, and built an extension of the typewriter housing out of corrugated cardboard and modeling paste to cover it. The prop was dressed with vacuum tubes and relays salvaged from old telephone equipment. The 1988 Macintosh SE20 at the heart of the machine continues to be fully functional, and maybe one of these days the game itself will get played.



THE ELECTRICLERK. Photo by Gregg Roth.

Such detail may seem insane, but the unique demands and opportunities of live-action roleplaying make it worthwhile. An entire adventure can revolve around one well-made prop. Game props are used and appreciated on two different levels: both by the characters in the story of the game, and by the players as real people. The effort that goes into LARP propmaking is always abundantly rewarded. LARPing is a fascinating hobby, growing in popularity worldwide. It's an activity which encompasses the various meanings of the word "play," being all at once a theatrical event, a dramatic form of storytelling, a game and a recreation. As long as people continue to explore this rich medium for creating and telling stories, they will continue to make and acquire and use all kinds of wonderful props.



WEB LINKS

www.cthulhulives.org

The official site of the H.P. Lovecraft Historical Society, featuring numerous photos and PDF re-creations of props used in *Cthulhu Lives!* games.

www.ahleman.com/ElectriClerk.html

Features more photos and descriptions of the ElectriClerk prop.

www.matalics.org/lrp/larp.htm

Features a FAQ about live-action roleplaying which answers many basic questions about the hobby.

www.larplist.com

An excellent list with links to hundreds of currently active LARP groups all over the world.

www.miskatonic.net/pickman/mythos/

Christian Matzke's "Propping Up the Mythos" site.

www.cthulhulive.com

The official website for *Cthulhu Live*, Robert McLaughlin's popular system of rules for Cthulhu LARPing.

<http://members.tripod.com/~terrorpants/welcome.htm>

The site for PST Productions, the Cthulhu LARP group run by Greg Agostini.

