Access:LARP

Guide to Writing Accessible Plot

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Introduction

Accessibility works best when it is considered from every angle of game and event design. Because there is so much variety in who needs accessibility there are dozens of ways to implement accessibility and many of those can happen at the plot writing stage. Not only that but, plot writing rarely happens within a vacuum: you consider how long the event runs for, what players expect, where you are and what physically can be done. This holistic approach to plot writing comes naturally to most people and it's in doing this that thinking about accessibility at this stage can be an easy task.

It doesn't just make for accessible plot; the need to think outside the box can often lead to better plot. It also makes event planning easier down the line. It is far easier to start with plot that is accessible than to try and tack on an accommodation at the end.

This guide will talk you through the steps of creating an accessibility friendly plot, give guidance on how to spot possible pitfalls and talk through a number of examples of accessibility needs and accommodations within a plot.

This guide won't tell you how to write good plot or run a good game. That's a different skill set altogether.

Examining your idea

All plots start with an initial idea, from whatever inspired the theme of the game in the first place ("wouldn't it be great to play Disney in Space!!") to specific parameters set by the game organisers ("we need a plot that makes use of the MacGuffin"). It is the job of plot writing to expand this idea into something that can be played with, gives the players something to do and advances the game.

At this stage there isn't a lot of "plot" to be working with but it's here that you can first start to identify accessibility issues (and indeed any other issue relating to racism, sexism, homophobia etc which may impact how a person takes part in a game) that may be apparent. Because you don't have much on paper yet it's still easy to change basic elements that are likely to throw up accessibility issues further along in the writing process.

Whenever you are starting with a new idea break it down in to what is essential for this plot to feel like and look like the plot you want. Other things may be nice extras or ideas if they can be implemented but aren't essential if they are going to be an accessibility barrier.

Example

Rodney has come up with the following idea:

"It's a dystopian sci-fi which has a rigid social structure that impacts every aspect of life. As part of this I'm hoping to find a venue with several floors and the lowest classes are made to live at the top and the elite live in relative ease on the ground floor with access to gardens and no stairs!"

Examining your initial idea for accessibility (as well as for other possible prejudice) can help us to fine tune our idea and decide what is really important to the game. In this case Rodney realises that having to make people run up and down stairs for an entire game might be a push even for able bodied people but would exclude a lot of people with physical disabilities. The core of the game is to do with the strict social hierarchy and there may be other ways to show that in game. They can even keep the vertical housing aspect in the background and setting, but it isn't essential to have it in play as long as the social hierarchy is represented in other manners.

Developing plot

Once the initial idea is in place you will begin to flesh out ideas and think of an end goal you want your players to achieve and various things that your players will encounter along the way. At this stage you usually have an idea of what shape or format the game will take: this might be a linear adventure through the woods; a largely PvP game that has plot trickle in through a small number of NPCs; a game of puzzles and information that relies on players to actively find the plot to name a few varieties.

This format informs how you write your plot i.e. whether you are writing a linear series of encounters for your players to encounter or are writing a broader scenario which will then have to have a loose set of methods of introducing it to players. The key thing to focus on here is how your players are accessing your plot.

Remember LARP plot differs from a book or film plot in that it has to be interactive and without opportunities for players to interact with our plot it can't progress.

The fine details of this may come down to "mechanics" and rules (the technical side of how your LARP runs) but a broad idea will happen here. Because we are now thinking about how a player interacts with the plot we start to think about player abilities and any barriers to accessing that plot. If these barriers are to do with disability, chronic illness, mental health issues or neurodivergence (for example ADHD or Autism) then you may need to think of accommodations. It is likely you won't have details of all your players and their specific access needs at this point but you can still think in broad terms and for common pitfalls.

Some things to consider are:

- Am I expecting players to travel to reach plot (for example as in a linear adventure)?
  - Will the plot put those who can't "get there first" at a disadvantage?
- Will players have to find hidden clues, and if so what format are they in?
- Is there a variety of methods to suit different access needs?
- If relevant does your plot fairly and sensitively represent disability including neurodivergence and mental health?
- Does the plot hinge on showing OC prowess in one area e.g. stamina or speed?
  - Is there a balance between physical, intellectual and creative prowess.

You also need to consider the broader plot – short events of only a few hours may have a very narrow focus, but longer events often have a number of subplots or aspects for characters to get involved in.

Are there opportunities for players to do things even if they can not engage in the main plot?

If players can only focus on one aspect of plot will they still be able to get something good out of the game?

Example:

Nic is writing plot for a large game which has a number of small quests. Quests are usually a series of small encounters that take place on a linear adventure through the woods, the "prize" for reaching the end of the quest is some important information or item. Because of this not everybody can do Quests and so some plot might be cut off from them. Nic must think of how plot can sensibly be introduced through other means. Some options are "rescuing" and NPC who can then return and tell plot to a wider audience. Another idea is to have some of the information seeded in the main game area and then additional information brought back from a quest to complete the puzzle ensuring that multiple have the opportunity to be involved.

Example:

Louis is writing plot for a small parlour LARP. A key part of the ongoing plot is having to sing or storytell to engage with magical beings. Louis sees that many people may not be able to take part in this for a variety of reasons from anxiety to speech impediments. However it is possible for other

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people to help in preparing the things to be sung or spoken, in research around the magic and a sub plot that investigates how the magical portal opened. Louis is comfortable that there will be something for everybody to do.

A note on representation

Ideally the game you are writing for has a solid Equality and Diversity statement or similar which includes mention of treatment of people with disabilities. It is important to refer to this when writing your plot to make sure that you are complying with your own rules on diversity. That is not to say that disability or mental health cannot be a part of your plot. It can be good representation to have NPCs or plot elements that include these issues and many players enjoy seeing people like themselves in games. However you should make sure that your representation is accurate and sensitive. Be aware of common stereotypes and negative portrayals that are often found in media and keep in mind that good characters should be presented as real people not merely a description of their disability.

Example

Lola has written an NPC whose role is to teach the players how to achieve superiority in a particular fighting skill. After some research Lola discovers that "The Blind Weaponmaster" is a common trope in media in which a revered warrior or trainer is blind. It is often implied that because they are blind they have developed preternatural senses that enable them to be awe inspiringly good. This is often coupled with a lesson for protagonists to learn about "overcoming difficulties" and may be a source of inspiration. It is poor representation for partially sighted and blind people. Instead of making her weaponmaster NPC blind, she writes a different NPC as blind, for whom their vision impairment is unremarkable.

This is particularly important*[1] if you choose to include aspects of mental health in your plots. "Insanity", psychotic episodes, and the terrors of a horror movie Victorian asylum are common in fiction and can be tempting to play with but contain a lot of harmful negative stereotypes. Avoid negative language such a "psycho" or "schizo" or tropes such as "the mental patient serial killer". Remember that mental health problems are not synonymous with dangerous or evil.

If your scenario will be including mental health effects or issues then consider flagging this up in your E&D policy and explain how they will be handled. Be clear with your players about what is and isn't acceptable roleplay of mind or mood altering effects in game in order to avoid negative stereotypes.

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[1] Though care should be taken with portrayal of all disability and chronic illness, mental health has been highlighted as it is particularly common that it is used as a plot device and the spread of negative stereotypes particularly insidious. However, many of the same lessons can be used when considering other disabilities.

Consider Common Accommodations

While examining and developing your plot you will probably have started to consider common access needs and accommodations. The examples above mention mobility, anxiety and speech difficulties as just three possibilities.

While there are certainly no "one size fits all" solutions to accessibility, there are some common accommodations that can be made that help a broad range of people. Often these are things that also benefit or make life easier for people without access needs too.

- Level access, having things not too far away, varying the amount of time spend walking or standing and having opportunities for rest
- Varying the intensity of the game to give people a chance to rest physically and mentally
- Considering different formats for delivering information, including large print and clear text
- Thinking about how light levels may alter what you can provide either in terms of safety when moving about or seeing crucial information
- Do your players need time to eat and drink – making sure to write natural breaks or opportunities for food is important
- Are you writing anything with common phobias or triggers, are there opportunities to avoid these elements if needed.
- Are you aware of common pitfalls when writing about disability, injury or mental illness? Take time to consider your approach and avoid damaging stereotypes.

This list isn't exhaustive but does demonstrate that there are many ways plot can be made accessible without knowing the specific needs of your players. In many cases this can even make for a better more considered plot that everybody can interact with.

Example:

Justine is a player who has to eat regularly due to her diabetes. During a horror game she was pleased that an "abandoned pantry" with food freely available to players was a part of the game as well as "the old cook" NPC turning up for their regular shift and providing an evening meal. It meant that she and other players could eat without having to break character.

Example:

Dillon is a player whose anxiety is triggered by lots of shouting. They were pleased that the plot seemed to have been written so that attacking NPCs only ever entered through the front door, leaving the back rooms of the venue quieter.

Working with players

Once player bookings are in you can take a look at any accommodation requests and see if there are opportunities in your plot writing to apply them. If you are not also the main admin/organiser you should work with whatever privacy policy the organiser has set out. Remember to keep medical information and accommodation needs confidential.

Directly responding to player's needs can give the best game in terms of accessibility, but you will often find that needs are addressed in the section above or by other aspects of the game design, such as the rules or the venue choice.

Though you obviously don't want to be giving away too much of the plot before the game, do make sure that you are clear and honest when communicating general themes and content. Consider using keywords such as "horror", "murder", "stealth" and so on. This allows players to make informed choices about if and how they play.

Example:

One of your players has disclosed that they have epilepsy that is triggered by flashing lights. Part of your plot involves investigating a torch lit cavern. You are able to contact the player and find out if the flickering flames are likely to be a problem. When they answer that they are not sure you are able to think through the planned scene and make a note to whoever is in charge of props and set dressing that fake flames with a steady flame should be sourced so the plot can continue as planned.

Example:

You realise that the plot you have written may have become more intense than the original pitch implied. You have written several scenes that take place through the night and may break people's sleep. You decide to add a brief statement to the game website indicating that the game will have 24hr plot running but you also let players know that there will be opportunities to rest and that any night-time game will take place away from OOC sleeping areas.

Other Parts of the Game

Though we are focussing on plot writing here, it is clear that writing plot and making it accessible does not occur in a vacuum. When writing plot you are usually considering other aspects of game design such as rules and mechanics and the physical logistics such as what the site is like or how much time you have for certain things.

When considering accommodations and how to make your plot accessible, you may find that difficulties with plot can be overcome with accommodations in other areas of the game. This means you should work closely with other members of the organising team. In the example above the plot writer has noticed that 24hr plot may be an access issue and has communicated that to the players. But they have also worked with the person in charge of accommodation and the venue to make sure that there is sufficient space for a designated OOC sleeping area.

There may also be occasions when other parts of the design team come to the plot writer to ask for their help in meeting accessibility. It is generally advised that a design team should communicate

regularly and work together to create a good game and this is no less true when it comes to accessibility. Take the time to refer issues to other members of the team and consider if your writing could provide the solution to accessibility questions they are facing.

Example:

The person writing rules and mechanics has come up with an idea that allows non-combat players to choose a "champion" to be able to take part in duels on their behalf. They ask you as plot writer to add plot or setting details that make this seem like a natural part of the game. You are also able to consider where and when Duels take place so that people with disabilities who may use the "champion" rule are physically able to be present.

NPCs and your Crew

Players aren't the only people who may have access needs. Your game crew/monsters may need accommodations too. Ideally you will know well in advance who is going to be crewing your game, and even if it is more informal that player details, make an effort to find out their needs.

If you are writing NPC roles for specific crew members keep their access needs in mind. You may wish to reserve non-combat roles for certain crew members or make sure that their NPC doesn't have to go anywhere the crew member cannot access.

This may mean that you have to ask for volunteers with specific characteristics in order to be able to carry out your plot. If this happens, clear communication as to what is required is necessary. At other times you may want to alter an NPC or particular encounter to reflect the abilities and skills of a crew member.

Example:

Leigh is crewing your game – they are particularly suited to a dramatic grand wizard NPC and are very good at remembering and performing rituals. However, they use a wheelchair and cannot engage in the fight you had planned for that NPC. You decide to split the character, so that Leigh takes on the ritual aspects and a second crew member can play an assistant who will take on the fight.

On the Day

Plot writing doesn't always stop when "time in" is called. It is sometimes necessary for plot writers to have to rewrite encounters on the day or write responses to player action. This is all a part of the fun. In terms of accessibility there are two points to keep in mind:

Even something written "on the fly" should consider accessibility. In fact sometimes it is easier when you can see how things are working in play.

People's accessibility needs may change mid game and have to be considered anew. This is especially so for people with variable or intermittent conditions such as ME or migraines.

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When writing things on the day or in response to player action always consider who the plot is for and how it can be carried out. Remember that just because you are reacting to the actions of one or two players there may be many more players who come to interact with this new information.

As for the second point, it may seem frustrating if a player's needs change mid way through but it is a reality of many chronic conditions. It's no different from an otherwise able bodied player who becomes ill or injured during the game. Sometimes you need to write contingency in to your plot before the game but you may need to think of solutions to problems as they happen. Always be on the lookout for opportunities during the game and keep an eye on where things are working and where there are difficulties. As plot writer you are able to introduce or delete elements as necessary to produce a smoother game, though obviously you would do this in line with your co-organisers!

Example:

Liam has had an unexpected IBS flare up and is not comfortable leaving the main building. This means that any plot involving them now has to be moved indoors and so you create a new NPC that can liaise with them and encourage other players to act as a go between.

Example:

Heidi's EDS is relatively mild during your linear style event and they are more mobile than expected. This means you are able to add in a couple of optional encounters as Heidi, and thus the player party, are able to move faster along the trail than expected.

Summary

Writing plot for LARP isn't just about coming up with a good story, it's about coming up with an engaging, interactive story for your players. That is magnified when thinking about accessibility as most of our focus in making sure that people with access needs can access our plots and coming up with plot-integrated methods of helping that to happen. The creative thinking this entails is only a good thing when writing plot as it encourages us to think in different ways about the story we are trying to tell. It is then simply a matter of working with other members of your team to bring your game to life and make sure that that includes and accommodations you have identified. In short the key points to take away from this guide are:

- Think about what the core of your game is; what is essential and what can be altered.
- Work creatively around that core concept. Be prepared to make changes.
- Communicate clearly to you players and listen to what they have to say
- Work closely with other members of your team who can help to implement accommodations.