Access:LARP

Guide to Accessibility for Hearing Impairment

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Introduction

Hearing impairment can be caused by a number of factors and can vary between people. It can include total deafness but also limited hearing in certain ranges, of different volumes and different types of sound. Hearing impairment may also relate to conditions such as tinnitus as well as auditory processing issues related to neurodivergence. This guide will focus mainly on those people who have impairment not related to neurodivergence, though many of the scenarios and related advice may be applicable. This reflects that neurodivergence and associated difficulties have their own considerations which are better dealt with in their own guide.

This guide will look at various aspects of running a LARP and detail considerations for improving accessibility for players with hearing impairments. There will be examples throughout that aim to show how the advice can be implemented.

As always there is no one-size-fits all solution to accessibility and the needs of your players will vary. Some of the advice offered will be suitable for making a part of your game right from the start where as other examples are better suited to specific players and situations. As always, Access:LARP advises having an open and ongoing dialogue with your players and working with players to find suitable accommodations. Hopefully the ideas in this guide will make that process easier.

Rather than following a "stage by stage" format as with previous guides, this guide is making use of looser groupings namely, Logistic, Rules and Mechanics and At The Event. This reflects that many of the issues faced by people with hearing impairments are experienced during the event itself, however work done before the game can make a difference.

Logistics

As with with most forms of accommodations the ground work is laid early on and there is an emphasis on communicating with your players. As mentioned in the introduction, hearing impairment covers a lot of variables which means there are lots of different accommodations you can offer depending on the player.

- Be sure to include a section on your booking form which asks for any access needs or difficulties the player may face.
    - Try to leave the wording as open as possible as some players may either not expect or realise that accommodations may be available for their issue or may not consider their issue to be specifically a disability as the word is commonly used.
- If you include any recorded material as part of your promotional material make sure that it is subtitled or include a transcript.
    - This should include any pertinent sound effects to help with creating atmosphere and creating a setting or theme.
- If your setting documents include and specialist or created language, include names or people or places, then include phonetic pronunciations.
    - It can help to include a video of somebody clearly saying these words to camera.
        - This helps people with partial or impaired hearing or who lip read "train" themselves on the general sound, tone or shape of a word which will make it easier to hear or recognise them during the event.
- Some players may request or benefit from a sign interpreter accompanying them to the game.
    - Different games may accommodate this differently. Consider if the interpreter would need to be a full player or can attend on a half or carers ticket. This may vary depending on the type of game and the needs of the player.
    - Keep in mind that some interpreters may not be "LARP literate" and this may impact how you accommodate them.
    - In all cases, give any special language to the interpreter and player ahead of time so that they can familiarise themselves with it.
        - In some cases they may have to create special signs just for your game. It can be a good idea to share these signs with the general player base.
        - Consider filming some basic signs, especially for your core rules or calls i.e. "Man down", "Time freeze", "Stop the game" etc, which can be shared with the player base to aid communication amongst your players.

It is often the case that a venue is booked before you know exactly who your players are or their needs. However, there are things you can look for that can improve accessibility for people with hearing impairments and it is worth taking note of these things so you have the information when you need it.

- When choosing a venue look out for hearing/induction loop systems.
  - These may be portable systems and you should ask how they work and where they are available from for the event i.e. collecting them from a reception desk or site manager.
  - Make this information available to players early on.
- You may need to consider the general acoustics of the event especially if you wish to make use of music or sound effects.
  - Acoustics can distort or amplify sounds in unusual ways which can make hearing difficult.
  - If you are able to test sound systems early on and consider adjustments that you can make including repositioning speakers or using a different room.
    - There are a number of methods of changing a room's acoustics which can be found online from rearranging furniture to hanging cloths.
  - Consider if hiring your own PA equipment is feasible. In some situations basic amplification can be helpful.
- Make sure to ask about fire alarms and check if there are visual alarms such as a flashing red light.
  - If possible ask to hear what the alarm sounds like so you can describe it to players. Depending on the type of impairment they may or may not have difficulty hearing the alarm- the is especially so for people who have difficulty with high frequency sounds.
  - Consider your fire safety plan carefully and make sure to include visual cues and guidance to players.
  - Explaining the fire alert system to players before the game means that people know what to expect and how to interpret unusual sound or visual alerts.

Rules and Mechanics

Many games rely on vocalised "calls". Calls are often used for spell casting and magic and martial skills in particular as well as for vital OOC calls such as "Man Down!" or "Stop the Game". Clearly these can be an issue for people with hearing impairment: they can already cause difficulty in loud chaotic situations such as a mass melee or battlefield.

- Consider visual cues to accompany vocal calls. It is best to have both visual and auditory cues for the broadest range of accessibility.
  - Options include pointing; holding up a coloured card or flag; specific gestures (though keep in mind physical mobility); throwing a coloured softball or beanbag (this is a popular form of indicating magic in some regions).
- Tokens, tags or cards can be especially useful for OC purposes such as "Stop the Game", "I need assistance"
- It may be helpful to preface the game with a workshop session which demonstrates any non-auditory calls and allows players to practice using them and responding to them.
- As previously, if an interpreter is attending, consider how they will be affected by calls, especially damage calls.
  - An interpreter needs to be able to stay in play and reasonably close to the player they are assisting in order to be useful.

The majority of people who have hearing impairment do not have significant (if any) speech impediments and can communicate verbally as "normal". It's important to keep this in mind in order to avoid prejudice behaviour. However for those who do have difficulty with speech you may need to modify any rules which require vocalisation such as spells, rituals and other more performative skills.

- Recognise that any spoken roleplay is valid even if you do not find the words to be clear.
  - Avoid the need for key phrases or "trigger" words that need to be "clearly stated".
- Write the rules to allow for other types of roleplay that demonstrates the skill
- Consider if a proxy is suitable, e.g. a player can nominate another player to vocalise skills.

If sound effects are supposed to provoke specific roleplay response or have an IC effect for, example using an alarm or siren, make sure that it is something that will be clearly audible to your players.

- You may need to adjust tone, frequency or type – for example some people may struggle to hear a verbal message but be fine with a siren or vis versa.
- As with damage calls or OOC alarms consider providing a visual cue in addition to auditory cues e.g. a coloured light or a message on an LED screen.

You may need to make a rule or guideline that reminds people that costume should not cover their mouth in order to aid clear communication.

- If you have any non-human characters or NPCS, or characters which would ordinarily have their mouth obscured then take time to consider clear communication.
  - In some cases it may mean lifting a mask or similar. A token or card that allows a player with access needs to discretely request the person lift their mask or uncover their mouth may be helpful.
    - Make sure any systems like this are included in the rules briefing so that all players are familiar with it.
  - Can NPCs include a written copy of the information they are sharing to help with comprehension of verbal communication?
  - If there is a hearing loop system in place it may be able to connect to microphones. Though this may be difficult for players, you may be able to equip any NPCs or monsters with obscured faces or who have to deliver lengthy oratory with microphones that work with the induction loop to pass the sound directly to a person's hearing aid (if one is worn).
- Similar tokens may also be useful if a player needs to position themselves so that they can hear or "read" a speaker more clearly.
  - This may mean moving to a position that "doesn't make sense IC" so players should be clear that this is acceptable for OC accessibility.

Some players may use smart phone apps to aid their hearing or auditory processing. Depending on the setting you may have to make a rule that allows for limited mobile phone use.;

- Be clear if this applies to all players or requires pre-approval or an OK from a ref.
- You may want restrictions such as keeping ring tones off or setting to "aeroplane mode" but be cognizant of other access needs (such as the need for alarms for medication).

At the Event

Many of the accommodations for people with hearing impairments will have been put in to place prior to the event. However there are a number of considerations to take into account during the event itself.

Initially you should check that any requested accommodations (both by the players to you and by you to the venue) are in fact, in place.

- This may include hearing loops (fixed or mobile); any rearrangement of sound systems or acoustics; accommodation for a carer, assistant or interpreter.
- Additionally make sure that your crew and players are familiar with rules especially any "non-standard" additions to meet access needs.

NPCs should be briefed that they need to keep their mouth uncovered and be clearly situated so that a player with access needs can hear and read them easily. Additionally NPCs should make sure not to get in between other speakers or between a player and their interpreter should one be present as this obscures view.

Take time to consider lighting. Though low lighting and dark places can be atmospheric it can hinder comprehension.

- Even amongst people with no hearing impairment, a large part of comprehending speech is related to what we can see – some basic lip reading or looking at mouth shapes, facial expression and body language.
- This becomes more important when you have hearing impairment or auditory processing.
- Low light levels reduce the ability of the listener to read these non-verbal cues and limit comprehension further.
- Consider the use of spotlights or torches which can illuminate the speaker while maintaining atmospheric lighting.
- Allow players to move to a more suitable position to be able to see and hear the speaker clearly
  - Prepare NPCs or crew members that they should be adaptable and be prepared to move position to be more visible.
- Have the opportunity for players to ask for clarification or for things to be repeated OOC if needed

Writing things down instead of speaking or signing is generally not a preferred method of communication, however in some circumstances it may be helpful.

- Speak to any players with these access needs before the game to make sure they are ok with this method of communication and find out what method is preferred.
- Be prepared with writing implements and paper or what ever the preferred tools are.
    - Ideally having some freely available in the IC area makes it an option for everybody to use
    - Make sure your NPCs are carrying notepad and pencil or similar.
    - Be aware that some players may also have difficulties such as dyslexia, dyspraxia or similar and this should be taken into consideration.

Modern or sci-fi games are especially adaptable to accessibility for hearing impairment.

- Is it feasible to set up a closed caption system.
    - These can be expensive or difficult to implement smoothly even in professional settings, but this does not mean it's not worth looking in to.
    - If you are using pre-recorded messages or announcements, consider making them videos with closed captions.
    - You can make use of mobile phones and tablets to communicate using accessibility apps, private messaging, emails or text messages.

A note about communication[1]

When communicating with people who are d/Deaf, hearing impaired or with auditory processing difficulties some people can be tempted to speak very slowly, to over-enunciate their words, or to shout.

These habits are usually frowned upon as they can be both counterproductive and fall into discriminatory behaviour. Due to the variations in people's hearing and the many methods people have for coping with their impaired hearing, changing normal patterns of speech can actually make understanding words more difficult.

You can hear this effect yourself: try saying "hello" in a normal voice versus in a very slow exaggerated manner. Think about what you are most used to hearing and what sounds normal to you. Now say just half of the word "'lo" both at a normal speed and exaggerated and slow. Which one sounds most like a "hello"? This mimics the effect of only catching part of a word during in speech similar to some patterns of impaired hearing.

Additionally, talking very slowly and in an exaggerated manner can be perceived as mocking or patronising, even when it is well meaning.

Make sure you are facing the person you are talking to, and your face isn't hidden or in shadow.

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[1]   Adapted from British Deaf Association guidelines https://bda.org.uk/help-resources/#communicating

Glossary

Auditory Processing difficulty – This generally refers to difficulties in interpreting auditory stimulus that do not have a physiological cause. It is often associated with forms of neurodiversity including Autistic Spectrum Disorder, Dyslexia, Attention Deficit Disorder and, cognitive processing issues caused by illness or injury.

D/deaf – This term can cover a wide range of types of hearing loss. Capitalised D deaf usually refers to the Deaf Community. Some people may prefer to use Deaf or deaf in different contexts or prefer one version over the other.

Hard of Hearing – this is a more formal term and is generally used to refer to partial hearing loss.

Hearing Impairment – this is a more formal term which can cover a wide range of different hearing loss. It may or may not cover auditory processing difficulties. For ease of reading hearing impairment has been used throughout this document to include all types of deafness, hearing loss and auditory processing difficulties but please be aware that some people may have different boundaries.

Crew – the team of people working behind the scene to make a game run

Damage Call – a method by which combat can be simulated during LARP. The Call is a vocalisation that describes in some way the action being taken or the simulated damage it causes.

NPC – Non-Player Character: characters with specific roles created by the organisers or refs in order to deliver or develop plot.

OOC/OC – Out Of Character: when you are acting as your real life self and not your character or things that happen outside of the game world.

Ref – short for referee and a term often used for one of the people in charge of running the game