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# The Golden Cobra's Online Pivot

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## Abstract

The Golden Cobra Challenge was formed as a contest that met the needs of the international freeform live-action role-play (larp) community. It became known for quirky in-person games between 2014-2018. However, the contest's early pivot in 2019 to live-action online games (LAOGs) before the pandemic meant it was better able to run a remote-only games contest in 2020.

Keywords: Competition, COVID-19, freeform, laog, larp

## 要約

「ゴールデン・コブラ・チャレンジ」は、国際的なフリーフォームのライブ・アクション・ロールプレイ (LARP) コミュニティのニーズを満たすコンテストとして結成した。2014年から2018年にかけて、風変わりな対面式のゲームで知られるようになった。しかし、2019年にパンデミックの前にライブ・オンライン・ゲーム (LAOG) に早期に軸足を移したことで、2020年には遠隔操作のみのゲームコンテストを運営することもできるようになった。

キーワード: コンペティション, COVID-19, フリーフォーム, LAOG, LARP

A murder of crows tries to solve a murder.  
A series of three dates becomes different facets of the couple's personality rapidly judging each other.  
A Korean boy band tears itself apart with drama and infighting.  
A radio program accepts calls right as the world ends.

These game premises belong to the works *A Crow Funeral* by Tim Hutchings (2015), *Group Date* by Sara Williamson (2014), *The Long Drive Back to Busan* by Yeonsoo Julian Kim (2017), and *Long Time Listener, Last Time Caller* by Jeff Dieterle (2017). Among hundreds of others, these were written for the annual Golden Cobra Challenge, an international games competition for the freeform larp format. On the challenge's website,<sup>1</sup> "freeform larp" is described as "tabletop, full live action play and more... games [that] may include elements of other styles of play (tabletop rpg, online, pervasive, etc.), but must have live play in them." Defining "freeform" has never been in the contest's best interests, and that has helped the contest rise to prominence by adapting and fitting itself to the RPG and larp needs of the moment.

In 2014, Jason Morningstar, Whitney "Strix" Beltrán, Emily Care Boss, Katherine Castiello Jones, and myself founded the Golden Cobra Challenge after seeing a gaping void in the design space (Torner

et al. 2015). There were very few short, easy-to-run, emotionally deep larps requiring neither costumes nor fixed player counts that would also fit into indie gamers' busy schedules at Gen Con, the oldest and largest analog gaming convention in the world held annually in Indianapolis, USA. The group we helped organize at the time, Games on Demand, regularly ran larps for any who might show up to a given time slot. We could never be certain of the number of players who would come play with us. J. Tuomas Harviainen, an information systems and game studies scholar, designed a popular social thriller larp *The Tribunal* (2010) for 10-12 players. Games on Demand would have to improvise a 5-person run of the game, or those players who had signed up for it would be cheated out of the experience. We would regularly list larps that, say, would require an even number of players, only to have an odd number show up. We would advertise a 4-person larp, and someone would bring five friends. Our perception of the problem came from hard-won game-running experience.

The initial Golden Cobra contest in 2014 sought newly designed freeform larps with extremely flexible player counts (between 2-12 players), little to no preparation from the game facilitator, a duration under two hours in length, and the possibility to run them in a non-private space (owing to the lack of rooms at peak Gen Con hours). Our framework from

<sup>1</sup> Website: <http://www.goldencobra.org> (accessed 2021/11/18).



then on was simple: The contest addressed problems that the committee saw emerging in the community. They would become the backbone of our award criteria and contest constraints. Little did we know then that our contest framework would prove very adaptable to the restrictive conditions of the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic that would begin over five years later. In fact, the broader indie RPG design community has used the contest every year to innovate at the cutting edge of game design.

Live-action online games (LAOGs) – more an extension of tabletop RPGs (Reininghaus 2019b) than larps or online freeform (Hammer 2018) – have been around in formal publication for almost a decade. Gerrit Reininghaus (2020) defines LAOGs as “live action games to be played online” and say they consist of “full embodiment of the character, play via video call, [and] meta-techniques via technology.” I connect them specifically with tabletop RPGs because the primary practitioners and designers working with the format were from the indie tabletop RPG communities, e.g., those creators who retain the intellectual property rights to their own work and frequently distribute their RPGs outside of mainstream channels. Case in point: Rafael Chandler, an indie tabletop RPG designer, published the first of the LAOG genre with *ViewScream* (2013). This “varp,” or video-augmented role-playing game, took advantage of the newly proliferating Google Hangouts, a video-chat platform with far better group video and third-party app support than its predecessor and competitor, Skype. *ViewScream* lets four players become the last members of a crew in a dying spaceship with a hostile xenomorph killing them all off, one by one. The game came into being after tabletop gamers had discovered the power of remote RPG play, albeit before 2015-16, when popular American podcasts such as *The Adventure Zone* (2014-present -present) and shows such as *Critical Role* (2015-present -present) added mass audiences and streaming into the equation.

Reininghaus undeniably deserves credit for inventing and popularizing the term “LAOG.” Supporting him in this was The Gauntlet tabletop RPG community, an ever-growing collective around the eponymous podcast network started by Jason Cordova, also in 2014.<sup>2</sup> The Gauntlet community specializes in advancing tools and techniques for better collaborative online play, and even normalized the practice of recording and/or livestreaming their play sessions. By 2019, it was quite clear that games in the vein of *ViewScream* were different from other remote tabletop RPG fare, and Reininghaus sought to capture and celebrate that difference. LAOGs were a design space to be reckoned with.

In contrast to Gauntlet online sessions run between different players’ home offices, by 2019 the Golden Cobra Challenge was known for delightfully strange convention games that formed quick bonds between people. Contest submissions such as *A Crow Funeral* (2015) would bring countless players together with their fingers touching in a circle while they all shouted “CAW!” at each other. Kitty Stoholski’s *The Hydra Artist’s Masterpiece* (2017) involved players manifesting as different hydra heads and drawing with crayons. Hakan Seyliaglou and Kathryn Hymes’ *Sign* (2016), now a successful RPG in a box, puts 4 players in a room and has them silently develop their group’s own sign language. Golden Cobra games take their shape not only through the creativity of their authors, but also due to the continuously reinvented contest guidelines. Some guidelines never change: the submissions must always be a new, unpublished freeform larp; games must be immediately playable based on the documents; the creators retain all rights to their creations. All else is fluid and based on what the Golden Cobra committee assesses are the “needs” of the community. Between 2015-2019, for example, we had seen David Schirduan start his own 200-Word RPG Challenge,<sup>3</sup> which meant the community desired shorter, more focused games. We responded by restricting the maximum length of contest entries to 2 or 4 pages. Another example: we saw some familiar topics crop up again and again, so in 2018 a prize was created for “Best Game About Something No One Writes Games About.”

Although typical convention attendees intuited what they thought a “typical” Golden Cobra game looked like, the Golden Cobra committee itself thus insisted on the challenge’s flexibility. By 2019, it was becoming increasingly apparent that the community was embracing LAOG play, but not many LAOGs existed at that time. Reininghaus’ (2019b; 2020) theories laid out a clear schematic for LAOG creation, and we were of course the generation that had already made plenty of life adjustments around the group voice chat. Live streaming had been normalized. Parents with kids preferred quick online engagements to those that required cross-town transportation logistics. Shared Google folders and documents mean easier shared note-taking and permanence between sessions. Beholden to no one but ourselves, we as the contest committee chose to make “Best LAOG” a prize category. To attract more submissions that year, we added a special celebrity judge: John Darnielle, founder and lead musician of The Mountain Goats. Darnielle’s perspective was most welcome, in particular because he came into the challenge without any established idea of what a “Golden Cobra game” looked like.

<sup>2</sup> Website: <https://www.gauntlet-rpg.com> (accessed 2021/11/18).

<sup>3</sup> Website: <https://200wordrpg.github.io> (accessed 2021/11/18).

Thus, it turned out that Darnielle’s favorite game was a LAOG, *Are You There, God? It’s the Quarterly Earnings Report* (AYTG) by Margo Gray (2019). Gray is a Minneapolis-based playable theatre creator and artistic director, but AYTG distinctly departs from any traditional notion of theatre. AYTG is a LAOG specifically designed for video-conferencing systems and takes advantage of the slightly-disembodied nature of the medium. Characters are described as thus:

You are an ethereal being with powers mortals cannot imagine.  
 You’ve been around since before the Almighty created humans,  
 and will be around after they’ve killed each other off. Your work consists of winning souls for the Almighty, which may include duties such as helping mortals avoid temptation, delivering messages, promoting beauty and harmony, comforting the lonely, cataloging and answering prayers, fighting the forces of darkness, and other angelic things. Angels are genderless creatures (Gray 2019).

Actual characters are 3-4 short sentences in length, mostly to define one’s general personality and attitude toward their work. In essence, the characters are both godlike angels, but also just mundane individuals going to work in an online shared workspace. The game also directly uses the affordances of the online video-conferencing system as “special powers,” such as choosing to “drop” the call or “filibuster” a point by talking too much on the call. Normal online behaviors and annoyances suddenly become elements of game dramaturgy. Mundane office politics smash headfirst into the cosmic order. The gameplay length is just over an hour, which takes into account the Zoom fatigue (Ramachandran 2021) before it became an everyday lived reality for millions of people around the world. Gameplay itself revolves around a “quarterly virtual meeting for your division of angels,” but which is to end with the election of a new Head Angel. The surprise ending, of course, is that Armageddon is nigh, and the elected Head Angel will have to take charge right as all of reality fades out of existence. Darnielle (2019) wrote that “the setting is, again, total me-bait, but beyond that: the writing’s first-rate; the roles are clearly defined, yet roomy enough for personalization; the special powers are brilliant; the plot is wonderful. Absolutely terrific game.”

Having a LAOG immediately capture one of the top prizes from 2019 was a wake-up call for us all. No less impressive was Reininghaus’ “Best LAOG”-winning submission *Outscored* (Reininghaus 2019a). The game is about yet another dystopian society. In

this one, friends have to give each other social credit scores as they all apply for university. Reininghaus’ submission clearly comes from a veteran of the format. Whereas Gray’s game plays with the simple affordance of the online video call – the bodilessness, the interruptions, the symbolic gulf between flat video-call affect (monotonous “neutral” chat) and events unfolding (the end of all creation) – Reininghaus’ *Outscored* requires players to use a shared Google spreadsheet, to adjust lighting in the room and in the digital environment, to record of individual video diaries, and even to possess a second computer monitor. This is both some overhead for play, but also it helps establish the dystopia effect: that all the characters are assessed through targets, numbers, judgments, and the screens themselves. As with AYTG, one player plays a role in organizing and orienting the other players in the call, so that the video call doesn’t succumb to the tyranny of structurelessness (Freeman 2012). Players introduce themselves, and then hold five “gatherings” in which they rate each other. The twist is that the very color of the spreadsheet, corresponding with their social media score, is also the color that illuminates a player’s face in the dark. All infrastructural and social concerns aside, Reininghaus’ design shows a familiarity and boldness regarding the possibilities of all these media, as well as the drastic social consequences of a society built around social media algorithms. For this LAOG, the Golden Cobra judges recognized that their old standards of “no-preparation” play could not be held to this new game format. The presumption in 2019 was that some Golden Cobra games would play at in-person conventions, and LAOGs such as those by Gray and Reininghaus would be played remotely by online-savvy communities such as The Gauntlet, and we would not rate a certain format of play over another.

But then came 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic – which began in China in fall of 2019, but then spread to the rest of the world by January and February 2020 – specifically hit all of the so-called “gathering” spots: restaurants, clubs, theaters, wedding venues, schools, and universities, among many others. Hotels and convention centers were naturally on the list too. It spread through droplets from people’s noses and mouths as they breathed, spoke, and sneezed. This meant that the entire 2020 convention schedule was more-or-less wiped out, as people could no longer safely travel or even gather in small groups without endangering their friends and loved ones. For the Golden Cobra Challenge, however, this simply meant an absolute prohibition on games that required in-person gathering of any kind, and an encouragement for participants to really experiment with the LAOG format. Other scenes by summer 2020 were engaged in similar moves: from letter correspondence games simulating 19th Century Russian intellectuals to vast,

weekend-long Discord games and game-running in the Second Life virtual world. Tech-industry-employed creators in New York (Virtual Space Bubble, Judd, Whelsky, and Wiegartner 2020) and New England (ExtraCon, New England Interactive Literature 2021) were particularly keen on making full-blown LAOG conventions work until a viable vaccine made itself available. Thanks to all this ongoing scene-level experimentation, as well as its established open-ness to LAOGs in 2019, the Golden Cobra Challenge in 2020 had no issues in receiving over 50 entries, none of which would endanger their participants with COVID-19 infection.

The 2020 games demonstrate the breadth and vitality of the LAOG form. Gray won yet another prize with *Voyagers: A Larp Duet* (2020), in which 2 players send messages back and forth to an alternate universe version of themselves. As with the highly polished text-messaging-based game *Alice is Missing* (Starke 2020), Gray leans on the intimacy of texting and adds to it the functionality of shared docs and folders. UK-based designer and organizer Karolina Soltys' *The Glimpse* (2020) is played over the Discord chat/video platform, a video-game-centered social media service. The game riffs on the parallel universe theme through having players take on the roles of identical twins. A majority of the games relied on the fact that many potential players would be employed in white-collar jobs working at a distance during the pandemic, and therefore would be suffering from Zoom fatigue. So epistolary/physical-letter writing and texting games were the norm for the 2020 contest. Nevertheless, the widely-run *Exodiplomacy* (2020) entry by Swedish larpwright Susanne Vejdemo and American larpwright Marshall Bradshaw both contains rules for being run as a LAOG or, anticipating less socially distanced times, an in-person larp. Alien civilizations in the game attempt to draft and vote on policy together, all while being separated by culture, biology, and language. Difficulties of communication, period, lie at the center of many LAOG creations: we recognize distanced role-play and online chatting as inherently mediated and flawed. Leaning into those flaws exposes the fragile humanity of our strange pandemic and post-pandemic futures.

While such an essay may seem self-congratulatory, what I wish to highlight here is the remarkable innovation that so many creators from around the world demonstrated as pre-pandemic social restrictions and technological affordances presented themselves, and as pandemic lockdowns made distanced role-play an absolute necessity. The Golden Cobra Challenge simply opened the door for distinct forms of role-play to flourish, using the constraints as spurs for creativity, rather than failure. In a time when everyone was exhausted and few could physically socialize with their communities, role-playing game authors nevertheless found ways

to bring those communities together across great distances. In light of the 2020 protests movements following Derek Chauvin's murder of George Floyd, the Golden Cobra also saw to it that none of the judges that year, save special guest judge Kieron Gillen, were white men. Proceeding into the 2021 and 2022 contests, these principles – of distance-friendly LAOGs and inclusive judging – will likely remain with us. Heraclitus reminded us thousands of years ago that “everything changes and nothing stands still” (1987). We agree and will happily embrace that change as it comes. We will program it into our next contest constraints, in fact.

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