

The Ars amandi workshop



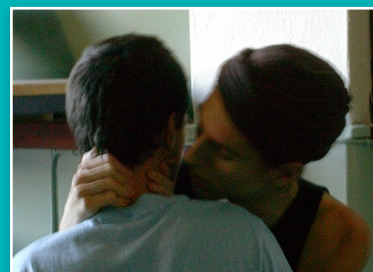
The purpose of this manual is to teach people the Ars amandi method for playing sex and intimacy in larp, live action roleplaying games, either for a specific game or in general to give them a feeling for it so they can incorporate it in their work.

The workshop include several workshop methods and will take $\approx 2,5$ hours including warm up for the group, practicing the technique itself and a talk. Exactly how long it takes depends on number of participants. The estimates in this manual are based on 14 participants. Think of how many people you want to have in a group and then check how many minutes each thing takes. An ideal group to begin with is 10 to 20 participants.

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*”Ars amandi has
been a game changer
in Nordic larp”*



Ars amandi collective
www.ars.amandi.se

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Introduction

This workshop manual is written for larp organizers who already have a basic understanding of the Ars amandi technique and would like to teach it to others. The Ars amandi method is a way for *characters* in larps to be sexual and or physically sensual without the *players* actually having sex. It has been used extensively internationally since 2003 and has had very different applications in different games. In some games Ars amandi makes up part of the fiction - it is literally how these fictional people make love. In other games, it's a representational method, so the players experience Ars amandi but their characters "experience" sex.

To read up on the method, please go to the web page of Ars amandi (where you can find more links) www.ars-amandi.se or read the article Rules of Engagement, in the book The Foundation Stone of Nordic Larp, available on the Nordic larp wiki (http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/The_Foundation_Stone_of_Nordic_Larp)

The core of the Ars amandi method involves limiting the body area that the players touch and use in physical interaction to hands, arms, shoulders (above where the breasts begin and including shoulder blades, but not lower) and the neck (under and not including the earlobes). In some instances the interaction has been restricted to only include hands and arms. Touching the permitted areas, combined with eye contact and breath and moans constitutes the A to Z of Ars amandi.

Why workshop Ars amandi?

The method of Ars amandi has been a game changer in the Nordic larp discourse. We workshop because things that can be performed can be played and actions we have practiced are easier to perform well. Love and sex are scary to many people because it means performing intense actions and feelings. On the other hand, so are death, physical abuse and fear and these themes have been used in larps since the very beginning.

One big difference is that representations of violence are abundant in our western society. Kids watch violent cartoons; they play with plastic guns and swords, while big mainstream films often contain realistic, graphic violence. Graphic representations of sex are generally considered porn, a derogatory term that signals that special caution is advised. This has carried over into the media of larp to a large extent.

People behave differently in different contexts and some might not be used to talking about sex in their larp context. Others might not be used to physical contact at all or at least not in larps. To acknowledge that it might be something new or that players aren't used to might create a more inquisitive and inclusive environment to try it out in earnest. One way of doing this is to say it out loud. To many people it might be clearer if that is then also manifested in the structure of the workshop as well by letting the process take a bit of time and starting at the beginning. You might encounter players that already feel more comfortable, and who might want to start more full on and go straight to the Ars amandi lovemaking. A good argument to encourage them to participate at the pace you set for them is to mention that all new groups also come with new comfort zones. Workshops,

where everyone participates at the same rhythm, create stable bases for interaction (and better sex) – regardless of how well known the content is.

The method was created for a game that experimented with gender roles and the method was instrumental in that as it is very gender neutral. When this workshop is performed with a group that you perceive as less than comfortable with touching people of their own gender, it's good to stress the borders of the shoulders as a gender neutral place.

Preparations

Participants will find it easier if they are barefoot and dressed in comfortable clothes that allow physical exercises. Use a room where there's enough free and open space to allow the participants to walk around without bumping in to each other. Most people become very aware of their hands in this workshop and it is a good idea to ask people to wash their hands before. You can also have nail clippers and disinfectant available. Ask them to bring water bottles or make sure water and maybe some fruit is available.

Read through the whole manual a couple of times before you start. You might want to make changes or rehearse first. Don't be afraid to use notes or this text as a printout but make sure you can find your way around it.

Music

If you are using music, make sure that you have set it up and tested it beforehand, and your playlist allows you to vary tempo and intensity. Instrumental music that isn't too easily recognized and doesn't already have strong connotations for the player seems to work well. The same song might be put on repeat for each exercise to give it the same energy and pace throughout, or the playlist should be timed in a way that allows smooth changes.

When you work with the same group over and over it can help participants to get into the same mood as each other and from time to time if you use the same music each time. It's important to choose music that makes the participants feel comfortable and at ease. To some that means that something too spiritual might be as bad as the latest hits from the radio. The better you know your group and the more specific your purpose is, the easier it can be to find the right soundtrack. The volume should be loud enough to "hide" low whispers, moans, heavy breathing etc. but quiet enough that participants can hear you talk.

For the workshops we've ran we've mostly used soundtrack music from the films Black hawk down (2001) for warmup and Before the rain (1994) for circles. In our workshop spotify list (where music for this and other workshops can be found) we've made some of those tracks available (albeit not in the versions we've used always): <https://embed.spotify.com/?uri=spotify:user:112960964:playlist:5klS03w9NIVJ43Oai2v8zo>.

Starting

Engaging in something as sensitive as techniques for lovemaking requires a fair amount of trust. To establish this you have to deal with sarcasm and enforce positive group dynamics. A clearly stated and useful context is important to frame the exercise in a safe setting. A safe setting is usually easiest achieved by the workshop facilitator being calm and well prepared, and by adapting the flow and pace of the workshop to the participants. In this manual this is done by several preparatory exercises that create an easy flow, playing first with eye contact and then physical contact. The walking also settles some unrest.

Who are we? (25 min)

Do a “round” on who’s there and why. This should take about one min per person plus five minutes to start and another five minutes to round up. Ask the participants to stand up and say their name and something that you think can be helpful for getting to know each other like where they are from (if relevant) and what brings them here (if it’s not obvious because of the context) or ask them say a word about any preconception about the method they might have. Keep the round short. Ask them to keep it to just a few words per person. Give them a minute to think before the round starts. Be prepared to help people keep time and gently keep them from commenting on each other.

”A round”

A round is a method to get everyone in a group to talk and take/get equal time/space for reflection and expression. It works best when someone takes the role of process facilitator and the rules are stuck to. The rules are:

1. Everyone speaks in turn clockwise around the circle.
2. While the person whose turn it is speaks, everyone else is quiet (including laughter and other sympathetic sounds).
3. When you talk, keep it short. A minute per person is enough; preferably it should just be a few sentences.
4. Do not refer to what others have said. Even if others have said it before, say it in your words. As they won’t get a chance to reply or correct any misconceptions it’s easier to just speak from you.
5. If something interesting is said that people want to discuss, make sure you do that after everyone has spoken their turn.

Some ground rules (10 min)

In any event there will be participants that others find awkward or where there’s past experience that influence players perception and trust. If you have not yet had a conversation about consent before playing on sensual themes, now might be a good time to do it. Often both would-be victims and offenders will thank you for being no-nonsense about it. Some ground rules:

- Be honest with yourself and others. Today might not be the best of days. If you doubt that you will be able to take in other people's needs, maybe you should sit part of the exercise out today. There will be other opportunities. If you decide to not participate in everything, please stay anyway so that we can round up together.
- The rules of safewording (cut and brems/red and yellow) and tapping out are absolute. 'Break', 'yellow', 'brems' or tapping your partner twice means, you immediately and as smooth as possible change direction towards safer grounds for interaction. If someone says 'cut', 'red', 'kutt' or taps repeatedly you stop there and then. Stop the situation and assess what's going on. You never ask why a person has safeworded or tapped out.
- A lot of people turn passive rather than violent when they feel violated or pressured. An absence of replies is not a 'yes'. If someone you're interacting with turns more passive than you would had thought was adequate because of instructions, always step it down a notch and ask if it's a green, yellow or red. For red and yellow see above. Green means that it's ok. Said without the question, in some cultures, green can also signify an accelerator. Make sure you agree before you start.
- Ars amandi has a limited area you can touch and touch with: hands, arms, shoulders, the neck below the earlobes; and on the body, imagine a line drawn from armpit to armpit around the torso. Everything else is strictly off limits!

It's a very good idea to practice using safe words before games, because this greatly increases a player's confidence to use them in-game. However, it is not the best idea to push players to purposefully go to a situation that would actually constitute a tap-out for them; it's enough to practice the words. (Or for instance, use elbows as an arbitrary trigger spot; when your partner touches your elbow in practice, use cut, break, or tap-outs to practice de-escalating.)

If participants feel they can trust their co-participants to use clear signals and safe words, it's easier to focus and give each other really good experiences. Another thing is clear instructions from the facilitator. When they don't have to form pairs on their own, you both avoid anyone being the odd one out, and someone getting stuck where they aren't comfortable. That you decide for them can also be the only way for people who fear others' judgement on topics like homoeroticism to actually dare trying this out.

Meet and greet (15 min)

If there's time, ask people to walk around in the room. This step can be cut out but if you think that you need to be careful, or if you need to focus and settle the group this is a good thing to do. Depending on how much time you have and if this workshop is part of a bigger workshop, where they have already warmed up and/or started to form a group, this step can be elaborated or shortened.

Ask the participants to stand in a relaxed position with their eyes closed, with their feet a little apart and with their weight evenly distributed on both feet. Then ask them to breathe

out, breathe in deeply, and with their next exhalation, start walking around slowly, still in the same relaxed fashion.

Tell the participants to focus on themselves, not others; on how their body feels, to taste their own spit, roll it over their tongues and try to taste what it tells them about their current state. Tell them to relax and roll their shoulders back.

After a minute or two of that, ask them to start making eye contact with the others, without meaning or judgement. Just gently taking in the fact of the other person, but not their history or their social meaning. After yet a bit of walking around ask them to shake hands with the ones they meet, to connect with people and greet them.

Water break (5 min)

It might feel strange to pause while trying to achieve focus and intensity. In fact, they are not opposites. On the contrary, many people need a short break. It's desirable that no one takes a cigarette break, as that can be a problem for others when being close. To get a minute, get some water and get a chance to re-focus helps to achieve a higher focus at the end. Most people can stay focused for 45 minutes to an hour.



Getting hands-on (5 min)

To many people one of the most stressful things about playing on sex and sensuality is that they believe that others might have a hidden agenda to feel them up. There might of course be people in your workshop that do not have a clear understanding of consent or personal space, and who see this as an opportunity to fulfill non-consensual fantasies. It is however far more likely that you'll meet participants who don't dare to act out because they are afraid to be perceived like that. The ground rules will help enable the participants to control their own experience. Remember to remind them at this stage. If you have a whiteboard or similar available, write the rules (in short form) there.

Show and tell (5-10 min)

If you feel comfortable with showing the technique, now is a good time. This looks strange in writing but it can be very powerful in real life. Ask someone you trust to get up with you. Talk while you explore the hands of the person. Say something about hands being sensitive and one of our best tools of communication. Mention that people can be self conscious about their hands and that it is good to go slow although it might sound strange. Tell them about the borders of the methods that you have decided on. Show how you can use arms to touch one another and that you can move around (and show this). Say something about using the hands and how you can be rough, gentle, passive, active, teasing and so on while you show what you say, still without looking into the eyes of your partner. Then say, beginning to use emotion in the voice, that lovemaking is not what you actually do, but rather it's an energy that you communicate through other means, like the eyes. Look into the other person's eyes and project lovemaking energy. Add breath and sounds, making subtle lovemaking sounds.

First circle – hands out (15 min)

The next part is all done in circles. It gets easier to organize and keep track as well as help with safety and comfort. Some people might be surprised that they're going to practice this technique over and over and over again, with so many people, and they might feel they should cut it short. Being thorough now, however, can make the difference between an unforgettably good larping experience, and tentatively using a tool that takes more energy than it gives back. Practice is useful!

Ask participants to form two equally large groups. If you have more than 20 participants ask them divide into even numbered groups of 8-12 people in each, then split up in two groups. One group forms a circle around the other facing them. They are now known as the outer circle. The encircled people then form a circle facing out. They are now the inner circle.

The first thing is for the people in the outer circle to hold out their hands in front of them and have the inner circle people investigate them. After about one minute everybody closes their eyes and lets go of each other's hands. Then the inner people stretch out their hands and have them explored for about one minute. Then you switch partners by having the outer circle take one step to the left. I generally try to do this in one full circle if it's possible, as it asserts a sense of security and that everyone has met everyone else in the other circle.

Second circle – getting sensual (30 min)

Everybody takes a second to shake their arms and walk around a bit. After that we get back into circles; depending on how the group feels it can either be really good to have the same circles or to make new ones. First, ask the outer circle group to put their hands out again, while people in the inner circle start touching their partner's hands. Ask them to test it out, tease, be gentle, urging, rhythmical, and remind them we're still only focusing on the hands. Take one-two minutes per interaction.

Now, ask participants to close their eyes. The outer circle all takes one step to the left. Now the inner group just extends their hands, everyone opens their eyes and the outer circle

explores. After one-two minutes, ask them to close their eyes again and for the outer people to take a step to the left again. Now, when they open their eyes the inner people explore, and so on. In this way they alternate being the explorer and the explored. When they are back to the person they started with, the outer person is now the explorer (even if they were active with that person the last time around). This time they start out the same but after about 30 seconds you ask them to make eye contact and start using their eyes too. Take one-two min per interaction and then switch like before.

Water break (5 min)

Here you can stop the workshop and move on to "Closing" if you think it's enough.



One on one – getting it on (15 min)

Split the group into pairs. Do a quick reminder of the rules and talk about limits now that everyone has gotten a feel for the power of this method. By this time in the workshop, you will probably have observed one or two participants who are less conscious of others' borders, and some that are more sensitive. Try to pair up the less observant ones with each other first and then the rest. This is preferably done in a not so obvious way, but it has its uses as it can be a good thing for the energy in the room.

If there's more than a few participants who might have a problem observing others it's good to ask them to step aside or actually make the previous water break somewhat longer to really talk to them. As an organizer, please don't feel shy about this. It will make for a better community and much, much better experience all around. If there's a loud group of participants who are still joking around it might be a good time to talk to everyone about calming down. Walk around some again. Also, in the event that some people haven't yet calmed down, pairing them up might just make them egg each other on, which can be really bad for the workshop atmosphere. In that case it's better to subtly pair the keyed-up person with someone who is not too sensitive but rather well balanced, and then sort the other pairs after that.

Now you tell them to stand in clusters of two-four couple groups (depending on how many they are). Tell them to start with the hands like they did before but now there are no roles of who is the explorer. Ask them to try to explore each other's arms and the neck too, treading gently and stopping to explore things like the edge of a sleeve and things like that. After about two minutes it can be fruitful to ask them to move around each other and not only stand face to face. After about 5 min in total you ask them to switch with someone nearby. Ask the new couple to again start with the hands and then go exploring. Stress that the only part of the bodies that should touch is hands, arms, shoulders and neck. After a minute you can ask them to start breathing in a more sensual way. Ask them to observe how the energy change within them. After three to four minutes ask them to slowly end.

Closing the circle

After this it's time to sit down and talk. Try to postpone having a break as you've had one fairly recently. but some might actually need it. It's now ok to smoke, if they really need to. Everyone must promise to return for the talk though.

Talk (15 min)

Make one big circle. (If there are many people it can be fruitful to ask them to sit down with the closest people forming 8-12 person groups). Ask everyone to think of one sentence that describes how they feel right now or about the method. Do a round where everyone says their word or thing.

Ask them to turn to the person next to them (in pairs or three people) and talk a little about this as a game mechanic enhancer and as a method of playing amorous and/or sexual situations with feeling (compare it with playing fighting and the feelings you have experienced then: excitement, fear, anger). Round up after five - seven minutes. Sit in a big circle and do a new round where everyone says something in less than one minute. Make sure nobody is interrupted.

Smile circle (5-10 min)

Do a smile circle. It's generally a very good way for a group to really see each other and also to go beyond their usual status hierarchies and even some of their issues. We use it to round off and create a feeling of having done something together but also reminds everyone that this is sensitive stuff. With a group that feels like they are up for it, this exercise can be used for starting processes as well. Then the emphasis on preparation can be underlined by more instructions to see that it's them who are here, who have chosen to go here.

"A smile circle"

Ask everyone to stand up and hold hands in a circle, tell them to stand really close, shoulder-to-shoulder. A circle is formed when everyone can see everyone else in the ring.

Ask them to close their eyes and take two deep breaths and to try to find a common breathing rhythm. When they have found that tell them to open their eyes and look at the other people in the circle:

To see that they have knees... shoulders... feet... bellies... hair... mouths... hands... eyes.

To look at each other and see that each and every one is beautiful, in some way, to smile at each other and affirm that beauty.

To see that everyone in here are scared of something, that they have issues about something or something they feel ashamed of.

To see that everyone in here has the capacity to perform magical things, to change the world and themselves, in spite of their fears.

Ask them to smile at each other to affirm each others power, to see that everyone in here is really brave to have been here, to have participated.

Ask them to look around the circle into each others eyes and gently squeeze the hands they are holding.

Then tell them to close their eyes again, find their own rhythm of breathing and then (after a few breaths) to open their eyes and group hug!

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