

The Nordic larp yearbook 2014



Edited by Charles Bo Nielsen & Claus Raasted

Rollespils Akademi

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Foreword



“It all started with the *Nordic Larp* book from 2011.”

Actually, it started long before that. But if it hadn't been for the editors of *Nordic Larp*, Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola, their producers Anna Westerling and Anders Hultman, and their layouter Tommi Kovala, this book wouldn't have been.

In early 2009 Rollespilsakademiet published a photo book documenting the volunteer larps that I had been involved in in 2008. It was a 200-page A4 book with great photos, short texts describing the larps they were taken at, and it weighed almost a kilo. It was called *Larp photos 2008*.

I thought it would be a game changer. It wasn't. At the book launch at Knutpunkt 2009 in Norway, four people besides me were present. It turned out that they weren't there for the the book release though, but because they had wanted to get away from all the serious programme, so they could play their not-so-secret drinking game in peace.

We brought around twenty books with us to that Knutpunkt, and we just barely managed to sell them all - mostly for rounds of beer, which in Norway (almost) cost more than gold. And the interest from the Danish larp scene was even smaller.

We now owned books with a (supposed) market value of €40,000, but though we sold quite a few to Danish libraries, no-one else really wanted to buy them in the numbers we'd hoped. Anders Berner, my co-author and partner in the company teased me mercilessly about all the money we'd sunken into useless books.

Then we did something radical. We started giving them away as business cards when we had meetings with potential customers. People would skim through the book, taking in the high production value, the excellent pictures and the short, explanatory texts. And then we'd casually say: “Take it. It's our business card.”

No-one in the larp community had cared much and we'd been useless at creating interest ourselves, but outsiders were ridiculously impressed. Here was a book that managed to eloquently convey the fact that larp was more than just orcs and elves (not to mention kids, which most people in Denmark associate with larping).

Fast-forward almost two years. *Nordic Larp* came out. It was everything our book had aspired to be, except they did it right. It had awesome pictures that were nicer than ours. It had texts that were longer and better than ours. And it featured larps that were a shitload more interesting than ours. It even weighed almost double!

Due to excellent fundraising work, the price was an absurdly cheap €50, and interest was massive. The book had been underway for quite some time, and when it came out, the Nordic larp community celebrated it like it was the new bible. And we weren't wrong to do so. It was the bible.

In it, anyone could read about 30 larps from the Nordic larp tradition, stretching all the way back to Trenne Byar in 1994 - way back before there even WAS a Nordic larp tradition. And read, people did. It's been read to death, quoted to oblivion and is still viewed by anyone who has even the slightest interest in Nordic larp as THE definite book on the (sold out) market.

Because where *Larp photos 2008* had managed to convey to non-larpers that larp was more than just kids' fantasy larp, *Nordic Larp* conveys to anyone who even picks it up that Nordic larp is mind-blowing. Power-hungry vampires, nasty gunslingers, decadent nobles and futuristic spacers. They're all in there, their stories expertly told. All in that one, magnificent volume.

But what if there was a Nordic larp book every year? A place where anyone could read short, interesting texts and view gorgeous pictures of Nordic larps that had happened in the previous year. What if we didn't just have that one book documenting thirty of our shiniest creations, but had many?

This book is not in any way at the same level that *Nordic Larp* is. It doesn't even pretend to aspire to that greatness. But if we're ever to have a Nordic larp yearbook tradition, it has to start somewhere. And that somewhere is here.

For this first Nordic larp yearbook, Charles Bo Nielsen and I have received contributions from 18 larps from nine countries. We hope you'll be as impressed as we were by the diversity and passion, and that you'll be inspired and entertained.

Welcome to the Nordic larp yearbook 2014.

- Claus Raasted, January 2015

What's the plan?

We actually want to do something that's very easily described. We want to create a book like *Nordic Larp* - except that it will only contain larps from 2014, instead of larps from a long span of years.

And after we've done this for KP15, we want to do it again for KP16 - this time with larps from 2015. Within a few short years, we should have established a yearbook tradition for Nordic larp, and that will provide us with some excellent documentation for the future. We want to call the first one *Nordic Larp in 2014* and release it at KP15.

(From the Call For Papers)



Baltic Warriors Helsinki

Saving the environment with zombies

Juhana Pettersson

□ Participants discuss the game while a member of our film crew records sound. (Pre-game, Juhana Pettersson)



Tourists are standing in the queue for the Ferris wheel. Some are eating ice cream. Suddenly two viking zombies, covered in seaweed, shamble from behind the ticket booth. They stumble and crawl to reach the higher platform of the popup cafe. The zombies ignore the tourists and other bystanders, because they're not players.

There's a public discussion of the state of the Baltic Sea going on in the cafe. There are politicians, activists and lobbyists arguing what should be done to save the Baltic Sea from an imminent ecological catastrophe, and who should do it. This is the larp.

At first, the characters look at the zombies in confusion, but after the first couple are infected, panic ensues. As one of the organizers, I scramble around picking up purses, shoes and other items the players drop during their impressive zombification scenes. The zombie victims are rushed into makeup so they too can join the undead horde, and I take personal items to the back room of the cafe for safekeeping.

Baltic Warriors: Helsinki was the first in a hopefully longer series of political larps about environmental issues related to the Baltic Sea, and especially to the way oxygen depletion in the water can lead to "dead zones" in which nothing lives. These are caused by many different things, but one culprit is industrial agriculture.

This and future larps are part of the wider *Baltic Warriors* transmedia project. The creative outline of the project is by Mike Pohjola. He was also the principal designer for this larp, with some help from me. The *Baltic Warriors* project is a complicated international co-production, steered by the German film company Kinomaton.

Baltic Warriors: Helsinki was played at the Allas popup cafe on the Helsinki waterfront on the 30th of August, 2014.

Zombies

In 2011, I published an article called *The Necessary Zombie* in one of that year's Knudpunkt books, *Talk Larp*. I argued that even an experimental larp must have some elements that are familiar to the participants, and that they are comfortable with. It's hard to be creative if all the elements of the game feel foreign and opaque. I called this familiar element the *Necessary Zombie* because zombies are one example of an element familiar to most. We all know what to do in a zombie game.

I never really expected to end up actually making a game with zombies, necessary or otherwise, but in the spring of 2014, I was asked to join the organizing team of *Baltic Warriors*. My job was to act as a larp producer in the context of the wider transmedia work.

The Necessary Zombie has more to do with *Baltic Warriors* than just the zombies. *Baltic Warriors* is a political creative project, and that means it's supposed to reach people. As transmedia projects tend to do, it consists of many different kinds of media operating on different levels. Some are national or international, and others, such as larp, are local.

In Pohjola's larp design, the zombie is meant to liven up an otherwise dry subject, and to make the game easier to approach for the participants. It also acts as a blunt metaphor. In our fiction, the Dead Zones forming and growing in the Baltic Sea would make long-dead viking warriors rise from their watery graves as terrifying undead monsters seeking to attack the living. In the game, the political debate was cut short by the attack of the viking zombies.

This went into the heart of the political analysis underlying our game: Everyone agrees that something should be done to help the Baltic Sea.

Yet very little is happening. If this continues, soon it will be too late. Too much talk, too little action, and the viking zombies will get you. Or the damage to the sea will be so severe, it can't be fixed.

Risks

In its first game, the *Baltic Warriors* project was following ideas about rapid prototyping and iterative game design championed by Eirik Fatland and Bjarke Pedersen, as well as following my own experiences in the use of a test game to help with the design of the larp *Halat bisar*. The basic idea is pretty simple: Since larp is relatively cheap and easy to produce, why not try out ideas in smaller games before committing resources and time?

This attitude also encourages taking creative risks. Will it work? We'll see! It's a test game. We also had a reason to run a test game that went beyond the demands of the game itself. The transmedia nature of the wider *Baltic Warriors* project demands that we document the larps thoroughly. In the test game, our documentary crew would get valuable experience with how to shoot larp.

The location was provided by one of the partners, the Korjaamo cultural center. As a larp space, the open-air cafe was pretty much the opposite of private: In addition to our documentation team and reporters and photographers from various media, there were tourists and random passersby. Indeed, this was part of the design. You could jump into the game after a brief talk with an organizer.

It was supposed to work so that you'd get a short instant-character, a couple of pointers about what you could do, and you'd be ready to start playing. You were a citizen, a version of yourself, who had come to the meeting to air some of your own concerns about the state of the Baltic Sea.

Unfortunately, this was one of the parts of the game that didn't really work. We only had two people who did this. One of them managed to become part of the game, the other didn't until the zombie attack, which had a democratizing effect.

Baltic Warriors is the second political larp project I've been involved in, after *Halat bisar*. In both cases, using the game to get media attention for the issues has been a part of the overall strategy of the project. Getting media interest for a game is really about how good a story it makes. *Halat bisar* was easy to publicize: Palestinian larp in Finland is a good story. *Baltic Warriors* was not especially difficult, but definitely harder than *Halat bisar* had been. It didn't have an exceptional hook, which meant it had to compete with all other newsworthy events and cultural happenings going on at the same time.

We got a few mentions on radio and local news, and one really nice article and video in *Helsingin Sanomat*, the biggest newspaper in Helsinki. I only later found out how this had come to be: through relentless badgering of the paper, by many different people in our organizing group.

The Participants

During the production we joked that we had more partner organizations than we had players. The punchline was that this was literally true. Of course, this was because our small game was the pilot for a big project. It had the support structure of a much more ambitious production.

Our system for who played in the game was somewhat chaotic. We had a public sign up, we invited players, we had people just show up, and at the very last minute, many of the people from the organizations we worked with decided to play. This proved to be a very good thing: Larp is hard to grasp if you don't try, but when you do try, its power becomes manifest. In complicated transmedia projects, it's good that the people who are involved understand and appreciate the form.

As a result, we had a strange player base: Some were larpers who knew how to make game but didn't have a lot of personal experience with environmental politics. Others were professional activists who were new to larp but knew the subject of the game very well.

At least in my estimation, this combination worked well, with larpers helping to make the game work and the newcomers giving it some authenticity.

In practice, we tried to cast characters so that there would be mixed groups. For example, a larper could play a politician and an activist could play her assistant. We planned the characters so that the politician in this scenario would be more of a "face" character, and the assistant more of an "action" character.

Some of the participants were given characters who were the opposite of who they were in real life. For example, one activist player had a business lobbyist character. A participant who was a real business lobbyist got a character who was an environmental activist.

I believe that most people can larp pretty well on their first try, especially in a game with experienced players. That's how it went this time too. It was fun especially because some of the players from the partner organizations were of an older generation. It gave the game verisimilitude.

After the game, we held a public discussion about the issues raised in the game. The idea was that it would be good to show how things were in the real world: What was fiction, and what was true. In the panel discussion, one of the participants was the Finnish Minister of the Environment at that time, Ville Niinistö.

Unfortunately, we couldn't get him to play in the larp itself.

The Attack

The political debates of the game ended in a pre-designed non sequitur: The zombie attack. We had briefed players about this beforehand. Practicing the rules had doubled as a warm-up exercise before the game started. What had until that point been a very social, discussion-oriented game suddenly turned into everyone running around the place trying to complete the ritual to banish the zombies.

If the players managed to carry enough clean water in their hands to the ritual location, they would win. If not, the zombies would win.



□ Organizer Mike Pohjola being interviewed by Helsingin Sanomat during the larp. (Play, Juhana Petterson)

Trying to care for clean water was a game mechanic, and according to player feedback, it worked on a conceptual level.

The zombies were a structural choice I had been a little worried about, because on a story level, it was kind of random. It proved to work in practice, though, probably because it gave the game an action-oriented, fun ending. The characters could only survive by working together to achieve a common goal. That was a good thing to finish with.



Baltic Warriors: Helsinki

CREDITS: Mike Pohjola (Design), Juhana Petterson (Additional design and production), Sarita Sharma (Production), Harmke Heezen & Miia Laine (Production Assistance), Julius Sepponen & Make Up For Ever Academy Finland (Zombie Effects), (Film documentation), Kinomaton Berlin & Made Partners: Goethe Institute, Baltic Sea Action Group, Korjaamo, Helsingin kaupunki, Finnland-stitut in Deutschland, AVEK, Medienboard, Berlin-Brandenburg, Media, Filmförderung Hamburg Schleswig-Holstein, Nipkow Programm, EsoDoc (Production)

DATE: August 30, 2014

LOCATION: Helsinki, Finland

LENGTH: 3 hours

PLAYERS: 20

BUDGET: €1.000

PARTICIPATION FEE: none

GAME MECHANICS: First minimal, then light zombie mechanics

Web site

balticwarriors.net





Brudpris

Honor. Love. Patriarchy

Anna-Karin Linder Krauklis & Carolina Dahlberg



Jan and Eskil in a conversation (Play, Simon Svensson)

The game

Brudpris (Bridal Price) is set in Berge, a rural village in the fictional Mo culture. The culture of Mo is inspired by Nordic rural 19th century aesthetics. They live isolated from the outside world according to their strict patriarchal honour culture.

The culture of Mo requires every adult person to show control and restriction. Mo believe women carry a potentially dangerous force inside them - the Force of Life. If harnessed, this power will grant them children and allow the Mo people to live on. However, if women are not controlled by the men of Mo, the Mo people believe this power will destroy their land in a blaze of fire and chaos. The chaos within every woman can be stronger or weaker, but it is always there. Therefore, every woman must be the responsibility of an adult man, who will make sure her behaviour doesn't endanger Mo.

The story in *Brudpris* revolves around the young boys and girls who are ready to leave the relative freedom of childhood behind and step into their respective roles as adults. Their fathers will find suitable partners for them, and every young woman will be married to a man who, from then onwards will be responsible for her. For the girls, this means an end to freedom; for the boys, the beginning of a crushing responsibility.

Design note

The original idea for *Brudpris* was to 'turn up the volume' on real world gender roles to make visible social norms and cultural practices we rarely notice in our real lives or would attribute to our own culture.

We chose the Nordic historical inspired setting to avoid creating an 'otherfication' effect. Had we, for example, chosen to set the larp in a setting close to what we as westerners consider to be 'typical honour culture' countries, we would not only have had severe problems navigating some cultural appropriation dilemmas, but also risked making it look like "these people are not like us" - which was the opposite of what we wanted.

"Katrin is shaking after the forgiving-ritual. Hilda leads her beloved little sister into their tent where Katrin breaks down and starts crying. Hilda holds her and feels her own tears burning behind her eyelids, but she does not cry, just comforts her sister and dries her tears.

'You did so well' says Hilda, 'You did not cry out there where others could have seen!' She corrects her sister's head scarf and gives her a smile before they exit the tent again. Hilda walks with a straight back. She is a woman of Mo."

(Siri Sandqvist, player)

"The meal is finished. The wife, Runa, says: 'Tonight is the last night we dine together as a family:'

The sky, the moon and the heavens fall on Lars. But instead of showing this, he asks: 'Does anybody want some more water?' Each member of his family replies with a nod.

No words. No tears. It simply isn't done in public in this family. They seek each other's eyes, giving hints of their true feelings behind the facade. Still, the time they have left together isn't enough. Not even close.

Lars remembers he must get more water: Empty glasses look bad. He rises and imagines how his heart is left on the floor when he walks away.

To feel and not allow yourself to show it. To love and not be allowed to say it."

(Anders Ohlson, player)

For the people of Mo, living a respectable and good life is about control and order. The patriarchs of the families are the carriers of both their own and their family's honour. Everything their family members do will reflect on them. Most families have a little more leeway in private, away from the eyes of others. Internal struggles are common, but no family would willingly expose these problems to others.

Design note

Another design challenge was explaining and using honour as a design feature. Although most are familiar with the term *honour culture*, we knew that the full meaning of honour, and the impact it has, would be hard to communicate to the players. For this reason we chose to create a religious explanation as to why women had to be controlled and why men had to take responsibility for them. This was the Force of Life. It gave a reason *why it was important* to control women's behaviour. As a natural consequence, women in this culture had the sexual initiative, since men were expected to control both their own and their wife's sexual drive.

We also wanted to make clear that the honour culture of Mo was not a matter of personal choice or preference for the characters. It was integrated in every aspect of life, and going against the cultural norm would have severe social consequences. *Brudpris* is chamber drama where the family unit is the focus of everyone's play. Every family has secrets that can cause a public scandal if they are revealed. The feeling of constant pressure is kept by making public outbursts costly for everyone involved. Public scandals always have severe consequences. And if it is a woman who shames her husband, father or brother, she might be beaten publicly. Or in the worst case even killed.

All the women beg forgiveness for their behavior the night before. (Ritual) (Play, Simon Svensson)





The men, eating breakfast, separate from the women (Play, Simon Svensson)



"The men watched each other, or they believed the other men watched them. At no point could a man show his true feelings or show any sign of weakness without losing face in front of his peers. For me, this was one of the hardest parts: To be forced to do terrible things, while not being allowed to share it with anyone in Mo. In the game setting, this was normal and part of the responsibility of being a man."

(Mads Dehlholm Holst, player)

The Keips are the third gender of the Mo culture, recruited from boys who either fails the manhood test, or who don't want to become men. The Keips are the only ones who can talk freely to anyone they wish; they play a key part in making the Mo culture function as a whole, crossing the social and cultural firewalls between men and women.

This culture makes for a slow and quiet gameplay. Players rarely show 'big' emotions; the drama is played out with discreet gestures instead of obvious ones. Things are said with gazes, a discreet touch, a mumbled word of comfort, a quiet tear that is quickly wiped away.



"It was a terrible experience on many levels, this was really the quintessential nordic larp self-traumatizing emotional masochism that we all love and celebrate. But not a gratuitous one, like many strong games it had a basis in reality, that crept up on you afterwards and made you realize new things about people in the world."

(Oliver Nøglebæk, player:
excerpt from Play report)

"Forgive us. You had no way of changing your life. For your sake – and mine – I will make my own life different.

You are just 34 years old and have many more years to live. I'm also 34, but my life is vastly different from yours and I will not let it go to waste.

The only thing I want to keep with me from your life, is how your lust was so simple and powerful. It was probably the only positive thing about Mo. I will not be ashamed or let the culture – my culture, in the real world – turn me into a sexual object."

(Sofia Stenler, player:
excerpt from "Letter to Dina")

"Some larp experiences you carry with you as not just a memory, but physically in your body. For me that is what happened after Brudpris. My character Hilda was a young woman. She was mature for her age and perfectly adapted to the violent honour culture she had grown up in.

It was easy, comfortable even, to slip into her subdued body language and thought patterns. It was like an amplified version of my own teenage insecurities. And after the larp I felt that it was hard to move quickly and act out; my mind had also been partly absorbed by her. I still can't feel hatred towards the men who mistreated her, I just feel love.

Love because the violence was proof that she was loved and cared for. A Stockholm Syndrome so strong, it still lingers long after the larp is over."

(Siri Sandqvist, player)

"And yet, that alluring lack of responsibility for my choices, that wish to be carried, that fear of talking and laughing too much, all resurfaced in you and moved you to give up everything.

I wish it all had come from you (Beatrice) - because I certainly didn't want to find that in me. I'm sorry."

(Annika Waern, player:
excerpt from "Letter to Beatrice")

Design note

We can't be sure if this is the first game designed with honour as its main design feature, but we can tell that we sure didn't have many examples to look at. We wondered at several instances if this larp was playable at all, or if the extreme imbalance in player agency would make it entirely dysfunctional. Regardless, we knew the game would put pressure on both the male and female cast.

We wanted the (players who played) men to be powerful, and the (players who played) women to be close to powerless. Still, one must not believe we designed this game only for misery. We wanted to balance the horror and injustice by adding love, desire, affection, music and dancing. We wanted characters and families to feel relatable, like real people.

"Brudpris is a game that will stay with us a long time. Seen from our eyes as organizers, it was both gut-wrenchingly sorrowful and soberly beautiful, horribly cruel and heart-warmingly human. And although we put as much dedication as we could into the game design and preparations, it is the players who made the vision come to life. Their dedication to this game, their characters and each other have been complete. It is by far the best reward a larp organizer can get."

(Anna-Karin Linder Krauklis and Carolina Dahlberg, organizers and writers)



Brudpris

CREDITS: Anna-Karin, Carolina Dahlberg, Tor Kjetil Edland (producer) and Trine Lise Lindahl (producer)

DATE: September 17 - 21, 2014

LOCATION: Vestmarka, Norway

LENGTH: 3 days

PLAYERS: 50

BUDGET: €6,000

PARTICIPATION FEE: €110 (normal)
€75 (youth)

GAME MECHANICS: Minimal.
Ingame cultural rules.

Web site

brudpris.wordpress.com



College of Wizardry

The first larp to go truly viral

Claus Raasted



The fairytale castle of Zamek Czocha, which served as the location for the larp
(Play, Christina Molbech)

College of Wizardry (CoW) was a Harry Potter inspired larp about a fictional magical college in Poland, where students could go to learn advanced magic. It wasn't Hogwarts, but a place to go after Hogwarts, Durmstrang or any of the other magical schools that exist in the HP universe. Players played students, teachers and staff members at this wizarding college, and supporting non-player-characters played ghosts, monsters in the forest, visitors from the Ministry of Magic, etc. The larp gathered 138 players from 11 different countries, and was run by a Polish/Danish team of volunteers from the organisations Liveform and Rollespilsfabrikken.

But none of that is really important.

What made *CoW* a larp that mattered wasn't so much the larp itself. Sure, many participants considered it an excellent experience and said so in the afterlarp survey. But many larps are excellent experiences. Three things made *CoW* stand out from a sea of excellent experiences.

- Larp tourism
- Massive press interest
- Engaging with IP holders

#1 Larp tourism

First and foremost, *CoW* was larp tourism. Though it took place in Poland, it was clearly a Nordic larp aimed at a Nordic audience. Most of the game design and communication was done by the Danish team, with the Polish team being responsible for fiction, scenography, logistics, etc. Of the 138 players, 122 were from the Nordic countries, and only one was Polish.

It also sold out in less than 48 hours, with a solid waiting list being established quickly afterwards. The reason for this was simple. The chance of playing a student in the Harry Potter universe at a real fairytale castle was something with broad appeal. And the price was absurdly low, due to the fact that it was held in Poland.

Larp tourism has been going on for some years, but very few larps have been designed with larp tourism in mind. A good example is the German megalarp *ConQuest (of Myrbodea)*, which draws more than 300 Danes every year, making it one of the biggest Danish larp events of the year.

ConQuest has participants from all over the world, but is still primarily a German larp made by Germans for Germans. Foreigners are welcome, but do not in any way make up the majority of the participants.

CoW was different. It was created as tourism from the start. None of us expected many Polish players, both due to the price tag and the Nordic style of play. We got one, a Polish history professor with several years of Knudepunkt experience. Some Poles thought it looked interesting, but out of their price range. Some thought it looked boring. Some were even mad at us for doing a larp in Poland that Poles couldn't afford.

Because we wanted to get as many Poles in on the project as possible, we had a lot of free spots for organisers, who could play NPC roles during some of the larp, and we gave Polish NPCs priority. We also took some money from the project and put it into our Polish organisation, Liveform, and let Rollespilsfabrikken soak up the loss on the project.

Sadly, even with fundraiser larps, we lost €4.000 on *CoW*, but the two *CoW* larps we have planned for April 2015 balance out that loss, and we'll put even more money into Liveform after doing those.

The idea is that while we feel larp tourism is a good idea, we also want it to strengthen the local community and involve it as much as possible, and by putting money in the Polish organisation, we hope to make it possible for them to make other interesting projects for local players.



□ Professors enjoying a moment of peace from the students (Play, Christina Molbech)



□ The crest of Czocho College of Witchcraft and Wizardry (Pre-game, Tia Carolina Ihalainen)
□ A House Elf lighting candles in the dark (Play, Christina Molbech)



#2 Massive press interest

On the previous page are some - but not all - of the media that have written about *CoW*. The list is from the round-up on Nordiclarp.org and if it seems over-the-top, it's because it is. It sure as hell blew our minds to get this kind of attention.

While some of us have gotten good press on larps before, this massive media storm is unprecedented, and as organisers, we hadn't seen it coming. Suddenly, journalists from Brazilian luxury travel magazines were calling. A Ukrainian company thought *CoW* was a four-day guided tour of some sort, and a pair of poor American students wrote to ask if there were scholarships available "at our college". Others ask if it's for 3 or 4 years.

On some levels, the amount of interest has been wonderful, while on others it has been a bit bizarre. While larp has grown in popularity in recent years, and Nordic larp in particular has gained more recognition, there's still a long way to go. Many people still have no clue as to what we do, and if we don't do our best to educate them, they'll just keep misunderstanding. However, what we do matters. I've talked with journalists from all over the globe, and it's become extremely clear that Danish journalists know very well what larp is. They didn't 10-15 years ago, but they do today. My guess is that some of the same goes for journalists in Sweden, Norway and Finland, but I've only talked about *CoW* with a few of them.

One lesson I've learned from this has been clear. If we want serious press attention, we need to do spectacular projects that are easy to understand. It doesn't get much better than "Harry Potter in a real castle", or "Battlestar Galactica in an old warship" (words used to describe the Swedish larp *Monitor Celestra* from 2013, which also got quite a bit of media attention). We also need to do solid documentation that can be picked up and used. *CoW* had the British film

makers from Cosmic Joke present, and their 1:41 min teaser film has gotten more than a million views on youtube. We also had no less than four brilliant photographers present, and especially Christina Molbeck' and John-Paul Bichard's images have been spread all over the globe. Good documentation makes media mention more likely.

This is not to say that we have any illusions about larp quality and media attention having anything to do with each other. *CoW* was - according to most of our players - a great larp, and we're proud of what we've helped create, but we're also completely aware of the fact that even if it had been a deeply unsatisfactory affair, the video and pictures from it would still have looked almost as stunning. Or in other words: we could probably have gotten more or less the same amount of media attention even if our participants had hated the larp.

We have also learned that if we want to move outside our (relatively) small circles, media coverage is something we need to take into account. Not only have we been contacted by larpers from all over the globe who were unaware of our existence, we have also been contacted by large numbers of people who want to try out *CoW* as their first larp experience. If we're serious about increasing our numbers, then this is one way to do it.

Finally, it has also become very clear how much of a difference it makes to have some words written on your larp's web page with journalists in mind. Honourable mention must here go to Swedish larper, journalist and TV host Johanna Koljonen, who as one of the first said "You need to make a page for journalists, because if you don't, they'll just write the story anyway". After we updated the web page with info written with them in mind, stories about *CoW* in the media suddenly jumped in quality. Having a "For the press" page won't get you media attention, but it'll make the attention you get that much more qualified.

Logos showing some of the media that wrote about the larp (Internet)

#3 Engaging with IP holders

Last, but not least, *CoW* was interesting because not only did we use somebody else's story world, but we also got in contact with the Intellectual Property rights holders. Larpers all over the world have been doing larps in "known" worlds for a long time, without anyone either noticing or caring.

A twenty-person *Star Wars* larp at a camp site in Denmark isn't going to matter any more for the *Star Wars* brand than a kid in Texas holding a *Star Wars* themed birthday.

Some larps have gone past that stage, and have been noticed by IP holders. *Monitor Celestra*, set in the *BSG* world, was one of these, and the Czech larp *Hell on Wheels*, based on the TV series of the same name, is another. Reactions have been positive, but to my knowledge formal cooperation has been at a minimum. Some larps have been made in collaboration with big-name authors, but not only have these been few and far between, none of the larps in question have gotten publicity on the same scale as *CoW*.

For that reason alone, it's a game changer. We contacted J.K. Rowling's publishers, who sent us on to her lawyers. They sent us on to Warner Bros' legal department. WB Legal talked it over internally and decided that while they were fine with what we had done (and maybe even happy with the extra exposure it had given the HP brand), they needed to control their own brand.

This is something we understand completely, and have a lot of respect for. The deal struck was that we were given permission to hold two more *CoW* larps in April 2015 (which were already sold out), but from then on we should move *CoW* to its own original universe; a challenge we're looking forward to.

But while this neither ended up with us working for WB doing HP larps for a living or being engaged in legal battles, it definitely changed the game for me. No longer can we expect to go under the radar unless we try, and maybe we don't want to.

A few days ago, I wrote to the film company behind the movie *The Grand Budapest Hotel* and asked them if they were interested in a joint venture. Maybe they'll say no, thanks, and maybe they'll just ignore the question. But there's also a chance they'll say "That sounds interesting".

Some months ago, I know that I would never even have dreamed of asking. In the end, I believe that's how we evolve as a scene and as individual larpwrights. By opening up new possibilities. *CoW* certainly did that. Now let's just see how deep the rabbit hole is.

College of Wizardry

CREDITS: Agata Swistak, Agnieszka Linka Hawryluk-Boruta, Aleksandra Hedere Ososinska, Charles Bo Nielsen, Claus Raasted, Dracan Dembienski, Dorota Kalina Trojanowska, Freja Gyldenstrøm, Ida Pawlowicz, Mikolaj Wicher, Szymon Boruta, with more than 20 helpers

DATE: November 13-16, 2014

LOCATION: Zamek Czocha, Poland

LENGTH: 4 days

PLAYERS: 138 players, 33 NPCs

BUDGET: €35.000

PARTICIPATION FEE: €180 for players, €70 for NPCs

GAME MECHANICS: *CoW* spellcasting, gossip mechanic, Liveform alchemy system

Web site

cowlarp.com





□ The gazebo was used for outdoor classes (Play, Christina Molbeck)



□ The potions cellar (Play, Christina Molbeck)



□ Students concentrating on their studies (Play, Christina Molbeck)



□ Professor Bombastus Bane teaching D.A.D.A. 2 (Play, Christina Molbeck)



De la Bête
An expensive beast

David František Wagner

"The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority."

Revelations, 13:2

De la Bete (About the Beast) was a larp for 95 players, running over 48 hours, with 12 hours workshops before and some extra three hours post-larp workshops.

It was probably the most expensive game in the history of Czech larps. We will go more into detail about size and realizations about using gender specific characters in the end. But first: What was the larp all about?

Background and theme

For a Czech person, old France, the 'Ancien Régime', is always a place of great books and great stories. Dumas's brave *Three musketeers*, de La Fontaine's social critique and wisdom transformed into fables, and Balzac's fervent drive to describe all aspects of life in his novels, intrigue and romance of de Laclos's *Dangerous liaisons*. And of course Molière's drama and the great works of Rousseau and Voltaire.

Our imagination is maybe even more fired up by real-life events: the legend of Joan of Arc, countless stories of endless rivalry between France and Britain and the horrifying difference between the splendor of Versailles and the poverty of the common man.

We feel that all those stories describe the human condition from really interesting angles - and we found the one story that enabled us to pull all that together in one story.

The story of the Beast.

Setting

The game is not set in a specific year, but rather it attempts to depict the height of the French Ancien Régime in the second half of the 18th century as a historical phenomenon.

That means that the absolutist and infallible King of France is Louis, without a given number. Technical innovations progress only very slowly, the Church plays a very important role in matters of the world, and volunteers are returning from the war in America.

The key theme of the game is a conflict between different ways of thought. We see the collision between rationality and sensitivity, scientific and superstitious views, Catholics and Huguenots.

These and other lines reflect one of the game's features - it has several layers of interpretation, which are, from a strictly positivist point of view, mutually exclusive.

Most events in the game can therefore be viewed from several different angles - and all of them can be right. After adding the element of character themes to the game, this feature proved to be very valuable, and the varying interpretations stimulated the game, rather than killing it.

The setting also clearly showed how the advantage of having weapons which the characters could use in conflicts that turned bloody; these being blank firing pistols and steel weapons - mostly different kinds of knives, swords and rapiers, provided by us.

Story

The game does not have one story that unifies all the players. It takes place in a region suffering under the attacks of the Beast, and although many plots are linked to the hunt for the Beast, many others, based on religious conflicts, witchcraft or schemes at the court, are just as important to the game.

The game begins and ends with symbolic moments (return of the veterans from the war, a speech by the baron de Morsange, followed by individual epilogues, which we will discuss later in more detail). It is divided into acts which outline the game's framework, both from the point of view of rules (increasing use of violence) and the story. The game works not only with natural escalation of the stories and their setting by us, but also with explicit meta-game information - some of the conflicts, decisions etc. are limited by "You have to solve this before XY".

This timing allows for quite sophisticated work with the game's dramaturgy, and very accurate use of plot twists, fakes, double climaxes, etc. In the third run, we also solved the dramaturgic problem of many dramatic games: too many plots reaching their peak in the same time almost leads to comedy, where a tragic love story reaches its climax right next to a young scientist turning mad, while only a few meters away, an unjustly sentenced convict decides to take his revenge.

To players who do not know their plots this naturally seems like random groups of people who are suddenly making dramatic gestures and dying in various ways, without any reason. Our solution used more significant stratification of the content, which caused some plots to reach their climax sooner than others.



The fact that one character always had a role in more than one plot meant that even after the end of one plot the players still had enough content to keep their game going, because they could engage in another plot. We have also changed our approach to scenography and attempted to use the space as effectively as possible, offering various spaces for various uses to the players.

We actively promoted suitable locations for different types of scenes, and from the beginning the players were informed of that: "This romantic pond can be used for a rendezvous, this courtyard for a duel and this table for an argument." We also tried to support the story's progress using musical intermezzos between acts, which moved from period tunes (introductory cheerful military march, deliberately used to create contrast with the destitute unit) to unsettling modern ambient.

The lack of a central story served to untie our hands in many aspects, and we were able to work with three levels of plots (according to the number of characters involved):

1. Mass plots, concerning tens of characters, based on a specific feature - for example a problem concerning all local Huguenots. These plots provided more of a framework and points of reference: in reality, the players did not spend that much time with them, and the emphasis was on the other two categories.
2. Group plots, which were meant for groups of 4 to 8 players, from obvious and official (families, hunting groups), to unofficial ones (gambling societies, collectives of veterans) and secret ones (conspiratorial organizations). The goal was to have every character involved in at least 3 - 5 such plots (depending on their intensity - being a member of the Freemasons generated a lot of content in itself). Various private groups were meant to provide sufficient interconnection between character groups and create a believable, and above all interesting network of relationships, which allowed the player to see different parts of the game and play out scenes in different contexts.
3. Personal plots, which included a small number of characters. This category included personal goals and motivations of the characters, which correspond to the characters' themes if possible, and support them. The theme of a character was the most significant game design element of *De la Bête*.

The character as a novel

Each character has its theme, problem, and main question that is usually phrased in a rather general way: "What boundaries does scientific knowledge have?", "What does it mean to become an adult?". These are reflected in concrete situations in the game: "Is it morally tolerable to carry out an autopsy, though the relatives are against it?", "Can I steal to provide for my siblings?".

The theme also provides the main interpretative angle of the game: everything the players encounter in the game can be integrated in their theme, or overlooked because it does not support their story.

An important creative shift for us was to explicitly acknowledge the theme on a meta-level, right in the character text. The text of the role, which the player received, contained a brief summary of the character's life story, clearly stated goals, relationships, and values, and an explicitly described theme of the character.

Apart from that we also added a song to each character, which served as an inspiration and which we thought depicted some aspect of the role (we used a great variety of songs and tunes, from classical music, to *Stairway to Heaven*, to Polish and French mutations of *Still Alive* from *Portal*).

This approach to the characters also significantly influenced the ways the game was played. Inclusion of individual scenes into one's own story led to a situation when emotional scenes are not perceived as the pinnacle of the game, but rather the scene submits to the general storyline, which conforms to a general message and meaning.





The game style, which presented individual scenes as means to piece together the story and let the whole game be interpreted through the prism of a character theme, was completely new in the Czech Republic. We will later present a more detailed explanation of how it was created in a specialized article, *The cure for the stuffed Beast*. But for now, the key factor for the game was that this style of gameplay did not require any kind of sophisticated training - only an outline of the general direction for the players during the workshops.

During the game itself, there was a specially designated room in the pub in which the players had the possibility to consult with organizers. The organizers were trained for this purpose, had a complex overview of the game, and also performed basic evaluations of the players' mental state and problems (we assign great importance to mental hygiene).

The players were openly instructed to visit them at least once every act, to talk about their plans and options, or at least to reflect on how they had progressed in the game using the available information, additional texts and such. The idea was to get detached from the role for a short time, in order to come back to the game with a better idea how to advance and perhaps even a new perspective.

The epilogues, which concluded the game, have the form of one clearly phrased question which the player answers not from the point of view of their character, but rather the author of a novel. These questions were not necessarily the same as in the original text of the theme in the character sheet, but they could address the theme from an unexpected angle.

It is answering these questions that really ends the game. A secondary goal of this system of game conclusion is to support an important design plan: we tried to write the characters without using classical archetypes or dramatically functional division to good and bad, or one-dimensional. We used the system of varying groups and plots to show different sides of the characters' personalities, and avoid one-sided archetypes, such as "mother", "mistress", "murderer", etc.

Realization

We spent quite a long time deciding whether it would be reasonable to write a game from a period, where costumes would create a challenge for most players. In the end we decided to avoid the problem by providing all costumes, weapons and other props for the game.

Despite the non-simulationist nature of the game, we decided to invest as much effort as possible into the setting, props and scenery. The logical result was to create three organizer teams, connected by two main organizers and other links.

The PR team was involved in communicating with the players, promotion, photographers, managing payments and so on.

The realization team had four permanent members, who worked together with the creative team throughout the whole year. Their responsibilities included creating props, coordinating volunteers, logistics and production. At times, there were over fifty volunteers participating on the production of the event.

For maximal optimization, we had ten people dedicated to scene setting, cooking and packing up the game throughout the whole weekend, and a number of others, who were involved only for some time (players, working before and after the game for a discount on the fee, stagehands, who went off to play a short-term role for a while, and vice versa).

From the point of view of total costs, it was probably the most expensive game in the history of Czech larps, with the total costs slightly exceeding one million crowns. The only game with higher costs is the forthcoming larp *The Legion: A Siberian Story*. But it was well received, though costly, and we plan to run the game again in 2015.

We are considering translating it into English, and if there are enough players interested in participating, we would start working on it in March.

The game uses a vast amount of texts, and requires high-quality literary translation.

Size

The time for the game itself is 48 hours, adding approximately 12 hours for pre-game workshops and half an hour for the compulsory after-game workshops, and potentially also 2 hours for facultative after-game workshops.

The game is for 95 players, with 57 male characters and 38 female ones. Our choice to use strictly set gender of roles was quite instinctive: it is completely traditional in the Czech Republic, and during the first phases of creating the game, the thought of the possibility of using gender unspecified or cross-gender roles didn't even occur to us.

Reasons for gender specification of roles:

We still believe that dividing the characters into clearly male and female ones and lack of cross-gender playing is important for the game and for us, for reasons concerning not only the historical setting and costumes that we provide for the game.

There are many multigenerational family plots in the game, and we aim to present stories of people who go beyond the place traditionally assigned to them by society.

These themes are especially strong with women, who for instance take a strong stance against their family and the demands that it places on them (e.g. an illegitimate daughter de Portefaix, hardly tolerated at the court), become significant moral authorities (e.g. Claire Gravois, a saint), or disturb the order of the society in general (e.g. the galley prisoners - it should be mentioned here, that the inner social order of the galleys includes two male prisoners, who are, however, at the bottom of the prison hierarchy).



□ Nothing says "intrigue" like soldiers holding a lantern. (Play, Ondra Pěnička)

We see these kinds of stories as substantially more interesting and natural in the game when the roles are clearly identified as male or female. We have dismissed the option of casting female players for roles of men and vice versa for the above mentioned reasons, and in order to maintain the visual illusion of a historical world.

Conclusion

De la Bête is a game, which tries to connect classic larp elements (including action, shooting, fencing and running around) with novels (including romance, mystery stories and huge family sagas) and philosophy (attempting to depict a great number of contemporary schools of thought, which we see as interesting and topical even in the present).

And we think that when the Beast howls in the forest, even we, the authors, will shiver for a long time to come...

De la Bête

CREDITS: Adam Pešta (chief of production); David František Wagner (chief of game design and writing); Kamil Buchtík, Ondřej Hartvich, Lucie Chlumská, Mikuláš Pešta, Petr Turoň (game design and writing); Alice Ďurčatová, Slaven Elčič, Iva Vávrová (PR); Tomáš Bazala, Eva Mlejnková (costumes); Vít Filipovský (website); Alena Kučerová (accounting); Michal Olbert (pre-game photos); Rosenthal o.s., Rolling and another 30 people.

LOCATION: Valeč castle, Czech republic

LENGTH: 2 days + 1 day of pre-larp

PLAYERS: 95 per game

BUDGET: €12.000 pr run

PARTICIPATION FEE: €65 - €95

GAME MECHANICS: Prescribed characters, pre game workshops, rules for combat, act structure

Web site

delabete.cz



□ Uncovering of a conspiracy results in public trial. (Play, Ondra Pěnička)



Exit 3: The Bunker
Claustro-drama

Karijn van der Heij



Sometimes a room needs little more dressing than a flag and player costumes will do the rest
(Play, Ork de Rooij)

Intro

In July 2014, 30 players in the Netherlands split into two groups of 15 and allowed themselves to be all but locked up during two of the hottest days of the week. They were playing a larp game called *Exit*, the third installment in a series exploring interpersonal tension in enclosed spaces. This game was situated in the early sixties, in a cold war bomb shelter.

Like in the previous installments there were no game masters present at all during the run time: all communications to influence the game direction and pacing were given per phone, speaker and a period-like machine made out of a receipt printer. The organizers kept track of the game through cameras and microphones. This way the illusion of being disconnected from the outside world was preserved.

We were lucky to have two large, separate rooms with facilities. The first *Exit* was only playable for about 15 participants, with many more regretting not being there. In the second game we tried to fix this by doing two runs back-to-back in one weekend, but that significantly reduced the playtime of each run. This time we decided to do a parallel run of two games, which was challenging, but worked out really well.



Characters

The story started when the players awoke on Saturday morning and lasted until late in the afternoon on Sunday, after which there was some time for debriefing. Friday evening was spent socializing and doing some workshops, both for fleshing out character quirks and relationships and for communicating out of game fears and limits, since we know from experience these games can get pretty heated.

In the previous games we had players send in three one-line concepts, and we would pick the ones that we thought best contributed to the overall drama and let them flesh those out.

This time the characters would not meet for the first time when the game started; they were already part of a close-knit community. That called for a somewhat different approach.

We did again not have pre-written characters, but we did have pre-written roles in the cast: there was an upper class family, a working class family, a childless couple, an outsider couple (players could choose why those two did not fit in), a lone weirdo in the house on the corner and three coincidental passers-by, who were the most unrestricted in making their concept.

We cast everybody in one of these roles while allowing for their preferences, and then had them make online connections with the players of their families and neighbors on their own. To make sure that people had intersecting secrets we gave all the players two *Dread*-style questions, like „what are you hiding in the attic?“, thus establishing the existence of secrets without deciding on the nature of those secrets.

Setting

The comparison with the Nordic larp *Ground Zero* is pretty easy to make, but apart from the setting the games are probably pretty different in intention and feel.

In *Exit*, it was pretty clear from the beginning that there was no massive nuclear attack going on outside. Instead of that we opted for an apparent virus outbreak: the players could just wait for it to be over. The reason is that we did not want to explore the narrative of coming to terms with one's imminent death and the loss of civilization. Instead, the *Exit* series has so far always been pretty Sartrean: the overarching theme is how the dynamics of a group of people are affected by a stressful situation. The answer, it turns out, is that those groups become pretty dysfunctional after a while.



Mind you, we would of course never dare claim that the *Exit* series provides actual insights in that regard. There are not many full-weekend one-shot events in the Netherlands, so most people take their chance to try the concepts they always wanted to try but think unworkable for an ongoing series.

That means the cast usually consists of an over-average amount of characters in extreme situations or with extreme opinions in terms of status, religion, sexuality etc. This is in no way discouraged by us, and it does contribute to a more volatile situation and thus, more drama. On top of that people of course aim to escalate instead of subdue their conflicts. They know that a secret that is still a secret at the end of the game is a missed chance.

This time the players really went all out in including typical Sixties themes like the communist scare, emerging feminism and the American Dream. But there was also a lot of emphasis on more personal stories of addiction, betrayal, missed chances and shattered dreams. Some people had secrets as a family, others had deliberately kept things from their loved ones, like the mother in an upper class family who dabbled in witchcraft, or the young woman who had an affair with the man next door.

Sometimes small props and gestures add a lot to the atmosphere: propaganda posters, flags, and food that added to the feeling of being in a shelter: boxes of canned food (including the rather dreaded canned bread) that the players of course had to prepare themselves. We played the Star Spangled Banner multiple times over the radio, and put the text on the wall of the bunker so everyone could sing along. The players couldn't get it out of their heads for days afterwards.

Player input

The few points for improvement that were mentioned by player reviews were mainly about the fact that we had no planned moments for escalation, no specific moments for the players to take the spotlight. Some of them would have liked something to encourage them to find the right moment.

We deliberately chose not to do that. The reason is that we like to keep *Exit* easy to organize so we can create an episode every year alongside our other organizational duties, and writing a plot instead of just inciting incidents would increase this workload. But also because of the fact, that for every one of the three *Exits* we have decreased the amount of organizer input and have exchanged it with encouraging players to create conflict and play through their characters. We are curious to see what happens as we do that.

The first *Exit* actually had a plot of sorts, the second one had challenges for the players, and both worked with a system where they had to collect, or fight over, tokens that seemed essential to their characters' success. This *Exit* had none of that, there were only some radio fragments and a protocol for the bunker with things like physical exercises and other drills that the characters could perform.

The content that we provided was very well received, especially the radio speeches by the president (some nice amalgams of actual Kennedy quotes), but there was not much of it and most of the time the players were left to their own devices. We were happy to notice that it still worked.

We are still looking for the perfect way to challenge players towards making great secrets and connections, and to make sure they do not leave this step until the last few days.

Maybe more and better workshops are the answer, or those workshops might even provide an alternative character creation process.

We did workshoping for the first time for this *Exit*. This is another possible point of improvement. The organizers were not very familiar with workshops outside of the usual improv exercises to get warmed up for playing. Something that didn't help is that one of the organizers who dug into the workshoping aspect has the most unfortunate habit of not writing stuff down, and got sick so she could not be there for the game.

Overall the players were positive about workshops on Friday, but the nature of the workshops could use some improvements.

Reflections

The previous two installments of *Exit* took place in a medical research centre and a Big Brother style camera house, respectively. In each one we tweaked different aspects of the game. We plan to keep doing this for a long time to come, after all there are many more interesting closed settings, from prisons to space stations.

Exit 3 was the first (but possibly not the last) installment exploring an actual historical period. The fact that *Exit* attracts mature players who expect drama makes it an easy try-out space for new ideas.

Another thing that was different this time, as mentioned before, is the fact that most characters already knew each other. This worked really well to immediately create tension. On the other hand there is something to say for being in a tough situation with strangers as well. We may have to alternate in the future.

A few weeks after the game I was discussing it with a player. I expressed my surprise at the fact that there are not more people in the Netherlands who run concepts like *Exit*, since it can create good, original games without too much organizing hassle. He said he could imagine that other people wouldn't want to do all the hard work of matching and tweaking all those characters together so that the drama would maximize. He found it hard to imagine we didn't.

And it made me proud to have inspired such a talented cast of players to create such an intense experience amongst themselves. We told them to create their own backgrounds, their own secrets to be exposed and just go nuts. And nuts they went.

Exit 3: The Bunker

CREDITS: Evolution Events, René van den Berg, Karijn van der Heij, Brenda Hellenthal, Matthijs Kooijman, Cora Korsman (shared responsibility for game design, character creation assistance and game logistics)

DATES: July 25 - 27, 2014

LOCATION: Hunsel, The Netherlands

LENGTH: 3 days

PLAYERS: 30 in total (two groups of 15 playing simultaneously)

BUDGET: €1.800

PARTICIPATION FEE: €55

GAME MECHANICS: Freeform larp with almost no game mechanics

Web site

evolution-events.nl/algemeen





KoiKoi

Drums! Rituals! Inaction!

Eirik Fatland & Tor Kjetil Edland

□ Forkwath (ancestral spirits) gathered around one of the sacred boulders. Each clay mask weighed 5kg.
(Play, Li Xin)

In July of 2014 we invited 75 players from around the Nordic countries to a wilderness camp in Finnskogen, Norway, in order to give life to a fictive hunter-gatherer society. For four days and three nights they sang, slept, woke, wept, ate, drank, drummed, flirted, chanted, and performed the ceremonies as men, women and nuk of the Ankoï. They each have their own stories to tell - some contradictory, but all true. This is a designer's story - a story about the why and the how of the larp "KoiKoi".

The Ankoï

The Ankoï are a band society. Each band, (called a "Fam") consists of 10-20 people, who move from camp to camp through a vast northern forest. Their life is nothing like ours. Their "fathers" are the brothers of their "mothers", who in turn are the women who nursed them as children. They are surrounded by gods/spirits/presences called kwath, living in the stones and the forest and the winds. Their children have no gender, while their adults have three: women, men and nuknuk. A woman always gives birth alone in the wild, and a man cannot light fires, lest they draw the ire of angry kwath. They have no laws, no judges, and no prisons, regularly fighting each other over perceived insults. They kill strangers on sight.

Every two years, the whole people gather in the valley of Koi, center of their cultural life, to celebrate the feast of KoiKoi. The central rituals of the culture are performed here: rites of passage where children are accepted into a gender and adulthood, FamRit, where a person becomes a member of a different band, the rite of passing into old age, the rites that keep the sun shining and the winds blowing.

The Human Condition

This was not a fantasy larp. Neither was it historical. It was an attempt, for our part, to deal with the central events of human life: Cradle and grave. Relationship and separation. Growing old. Growing young. Being and belonging.

To provide a vantage point on these themes we constructed the Ankoï as a mashup of traditions and ideas as alien from our own culture as possible, but still "authentic": documented in history and anthropology. The result was a society far more complex than can be described here, but not one representative of any real hunter-gatherer society. These are quite diverse - the Inuit of the Arctic have less in common with the Umanikaina of New Guinea than Denmark has with North Korea.

A hunter-gatherer society opened aesthetic possibilities - facial painting, masks, rituals, storytelling, drums - that had been prominent in some Norwegian larps in the 90s, and that we wanted to bring back for a new generation of players to enjoy. When asked what *KoiKoi* would be about, our one-word answer was "Rituals!".

Low conflict, slow play

Our modern culture is steeped in a sense of urgency that infests even historical and fantasy larps with a relentless focus on Action! Conflict! Now! With *KoiKoi* our aim was different: Serenity. Reflection. Rhythm. The joy of being alive.

Player feedback - generally ranging from the moderately positive to the euphoric - was not without critical points. But despite the lack of major conflicts and goals to drive the larp, none of the players seem to have been bored. As one player commented on the forum:

"As no-one wore watches, and we were encouraged to play slowly, our experience of time changed. It felt like we had an ocean of time available. When was the last time I felt that way? Time was no longer fragmented into small chunks, but became a steady flow of change."

Another concluded: "The calm I found at KoiKoi will be with me for a long time."

A systemic design

KoiKoi was a *systemic* larp design: we neither wrote individual characters and plots, nor did we spend time negotiating with players. A character was defined by two standard types, e.g. "The Best Lover" and "Afraid of the Dark". In the sign-up form, players were asked which of the 40 types they were interested in playing. No two characters had the same combination of types.

We encouraged players to sign up together, as fams. These groups, and the enthusiasts who initiated them, did a lot of work to coordinate practical and creative preparations, filling in the gaps between our types and real humans.

The culture served as the dramaturgical engine, designed to offer up meaningful play opportunities - transitions, relationships and choices - for every character. For young adults to find one or more lovers, and be accepted as members of the same fam. For older adults: to consider whether it was time to settle down at Koi as an Ald, an elder. For the elders: to consider whether your path was near its end. And for the children: to seek adulthood as a woman, a man, or a nuk.

Teaching through language

We communicated all this by defining how the Ankoï talked about their world, hoping that players would internalize the culture that spoke this language and told these stories. We, obviously, could not make up and teach an entirely new language. Instead, we modified Norwegian (and Swedish and Danish) to create Språk, the Ankoï Language.

In Norwegian a woman is called a "Kvinne". In Språk she is called "Kvinn". In Norwegian, the plural - women - is "Kvinner". In Språk, it is "KvinnKvinn". Common words were reduced to their first syllable, and repeated to make a plural or an emphasis.

We thereby provided an easy-to-learn illusion of speaking a different language. It also meant that non-larpers overhearing statements like "meeting the nuknuk for some foodfood" thought the players had lost their marbles.

Here is a sample chapter of the main text - the Kulturkompendium - titled "Murder":



*Humans do not kill humans.
Only beasts, and strangers.*

*I have heard that long ago,
a man killed a man in his own fam.
Then all understood that he was not a man.
The man was dead.
And he who killed
was a wroth and jealous kwath.
This was difficult.
For the kwath continued to live with the fam
as if it was a man.
And fam asked an aldruk for advice.
And the advice they were given, they followed.
They shared no food with kwath
and told no stories to kwath.
And when kwath-that-pretended-to-be-a-man
wanted to tell stories
no-one listened.
And so it walked away
over the river to the land of the strangers
and since then, no-one has heard of it.*

These texts were also distributed an audiobook, earning us accolades from busy, text-weary and reading-impaired larpers. Every larp should have an audiobook.

No *KoiKoi* text has a single author - we wrote collaboratively, online, constantly revising and adding to each others work. We also wrote some 30 myths and stories, and gave each player one, encouraging them to tell it at the larp. That wish was granted: not only did the players tell stories, they also invented new ones. By the end of *KoiKoi*, the Ankoï Literary Canon contained some 100-150 stories.

Our language-based approach worked very well for most things: The characters spoke Språk. They believed, intuitively, in signs and portents and taboos and kwath. Their social structure followed the intended “primal anarchism”, though with perhaps a bit too much attention given to the symbolic roles of Great Man and Great Woman in each fam, and the future-telling rites of the nuknuk.

Gender was tougher. Players easily picked up the notion of gender as (mostly) divorced from biological sex. One female-bodied character went from being a child to being a man at the larp, and was unambiguously accepted as such. But pairings tended towards monogamy and jokes were told based on the premise of “man who always hunts for the beautiful woman”, in direct contradiction of the cultur compendium. While the nuk’s social role (caretakers and shamans) was clear, their gender identity - their sense of self - was not. If you want to tinker with gender, we conclude, you’ll need plenty of workshop time.

A ritual dramaturgy

But this was a larp about rituals, right? Yes. Yes, it was. We had pre-scripted it to contain 1-2 major rituals (“Rit”) each day, as well as innumerable smaller ones. Each rit was described through a minimalistic ritual “recipe”. Had the Christian Mass been described the same way, it would have been: “The priest distributes bread and wine, saying ‘this is the body of Christ, this is the blood of Christ’”. All the singing, prayers and cermons would have been left to improvisation.

We used the workshops to practice such improvisation. The main element of ritual improv - a set of practices that have evolved over the years in the Oslo larp scene - is to cultivate an awareness of the people around you: to listen, sense, feel, and then to act in harmony. Rhythm, movement and chanting all contribute to synchronising people. On top of this, we introduced a system of hand-signs that would allow people to take, use and distribute leadership in the rituals.

The ritual improv approach was also used when improvising music, of which there was plenty, and in our sex simulation technique.



Ankoi storytelling was both ritual-like and larp-like: the “audience” would chant along with the storyteller, and the storyteller could use hand-signs to call others to act as the characters of the story. This, we feel, was one of the most successful aspects of the larp design: storytelling became a constant activity, the thing you did when you had nothing else to do, and something some players wanted to continue doing after the larp had ended. Some of the pivotal moments of the larp occurred in the midst of improvised storytelling, as the stories told resonated with the lives of multiple characters and players.

Practical production

One does not simply walk into Finnskogen. It is a vast wilderness - cold and wet, populated by swarms of meat-eating insects, far removed from the nearest hospital. Our pre-larp planning included contingency plans for bear attacks and the purchase of a defibrillator. Neither bear nor heart attacks occurred, but we waged constant war against the meat-eating insects. The location did not have enough buildings for all the fams, so a gang of heroic larpers volunteered to build additional buildings before the larp.

The main hall, Koi, was transformed into a tribal gathering space by 20 meters of rough tapestry. The three ritual places posed a bigger challenge. We were helped by the large boulders giant kwath had thrown around the area. By decorating them in a mixture of clay and paint, and clearing the bush around, random forest locations were turned into sacred spaces. Each fam was responsible for outfitting their own camp and for most of the food they would need during the game. Observing players in their great costumes, their scenic campsites, preparing elaborate meals, singing, drumming and chanting, being Ankoi - this was our reward as organizers.

Altogether, *KoiKoi* was - by the standards of Norwegian larp - a major production, nearly perfectly executed. Had it not been, these other stories could not have been told.

A night of death and laughter

We close this organizers’ story by sharing a moment from another, a player’s story. Latter was an aldnuk, an elder nuk and shaman. In the ceremony of Dødrif, Latter was responsible for killing those deemed useless to society and ready to become forkwath, ancestor spirits:

“Dødrif had finally come to an end. As always it had been a night filled with one feeling after another. Ebbe and Dugg had stopped being. Latter had strangled them. They were now forkwath. Walking with the other aldnuk towards Koi, Latter was still holding on to the two white ribbons. They heard singing from Koi. When they arrived Bris threw open the doors and they entered. As others danced around the bonfire in the centre of Koi, Latter sat down on the knees.

Sometimes bursting into sorrowful moans. The song in the room continued, but changed character. After a while the circle (on its own?) began chanting the names of the deceased: Ebbe, Dugg, Ebbe, Dugg, Ebbe, Dugg... The names of the two aldmen became a melody. Latter, the only ankoi who takes human lives, crept towards the fire on all fours. Screamed, and left.

Later that night, they sat by the fire at Boarfam. Told lighter stories. Were comforted by their old friend and lover, Wave. Joked. Laughed. Their face still painted with the death mask..”

The three previous days had seen meditation, song, dance, love and birth. By this ritual murder, this final act of loss and cruelty, our tableau of the human condition was complete.

KoiKoi

CREDITS: Margrete Raaum (main organizer + producer), Eirik Fatland and Tor Kjetil Edland (main organizers). Trine Lise Lindahl (writing/concept), Martin Knutsen (production/scenography), Elin Nilsen and Jørn Slemdal (writers). Extended team: Fabe Dalen (costume), Ståle Johansen and Anders Ohlsson (practical), Gaffa Express, (building and derigging), Frode Pettersen and Ørnefam (building), Li Xin (props & photography).
 DATE: July 1-5, 2014
 LOCATION: Finnskogen, Norway
 LENGTH: 5 days (4 in-character)
 PLAYERS: 75
 BUDGET: €10.000
 PARTICIPATION FEE: €90 (€70 under 26)
 GAME MECHANICS: Minimalist.

Web site

koikoilav.org



- Participants invented and told an estimated 50-100 new myths and legends of the Ankoi people. (Play, Li Xin)
- The Ankoi believes that the mask is wearing the human during a rit. (Play, Li Xin)



Last Will

Make us your slaves, but feed us

Annica Strand, Frida Gamero & Sofia Stenler

□ A lifer collar with the Jericho id-code.
(Post-game, Ylva Bergman)

In the end they will lay their freedom at our feet, and say to us, "Make us your slaves, but feed us."

Last Will is a larp on the subject of a fading human dignity in a world run by money and consumption in which people can be bought and sold as commodities. The larp is set in a future where debt and poverty breeds slavery and slavery perpetuates poverty.

The larp was run by the organization Ursula, and the story was set in the gladiator-stable Jericho, with six fighter-teams as well as an administrative staff running it all. The larp depicts some twenty hours in Jericho. The trainers and the coach prepare the fighters for gladiator fights, the doctor and psychiatrist evaluate the fighters and other team members, the pleasers perform their duties towards the fighters, as do the physiotherapists while the guards make sure everyone does what they should do and only the right people slips in the showers.

All the while lives and relationships go on. Some of the people in Jericho are free workers, having contracts that allow them a salary and a little more freedom but also the risk of being let off with no further notice.

Others have signed a life contract, which gives them the security of food and a roof over their heads, but no say on almost everything else. It is the day before the national election to parliament, but only the free workers needs to decide if they should take the risk to sign up to vote or not. The lifers need not worry; they no longer have the right to vote.

Last Will revolves around hope in a hopeless situation, where the desire to create a future battle with constant fighting against fear and hunger. In a time when freedom is weighed against security and survival every day the question echoes – What is my value?

Inspiration: "I owe my soul to the company store"

Slavery - the word makes us think about chains and whips, blood and colonialism. But the system of humans as commodities is even more widespread today, wrapped in inhuman working contracts and debt that is passed down from generation to generation. We wanted to show what losing self-determination does to a person and that it can be done with a piece of paper just as much as with chains of iron.

"India: The forced labour of women and girls has become known as the "Sumangali system". It affects unmarried girls and women aged between 13 and 18 years old who work on three-year contracts, often in mills that operate 24 hours a day, using three shifts. The workers are not only required to work any shift but also to carry out unpaid overtime. The girls are confined to the mills, sleeping in hostels, during their contract period and are rarely, if ever, allowed out during that time."

(Antislavery.org, article from 2012)

We wanted to create this larp to look at modern slavery through the lens of a fictional future. We can not claim to give a true portrait of a sweatshop in China or a mine in Africa, but by taking bits and pieces from different places and putting them together in Jericho, we can give our participants a feel for what life is like when agency has been taken from you, and what it does to you when you feel that you have no value. And what it makes you do to other people. We hope that experiencing something with your whole body will make you take something home from it.

The setting of a gladiator-stable was a design choice we made to incorporate play on the loss of bodily integrity. We wanted people to sell their bodies to be used by others, for pleasure, entertainment or profit, but we didn't want to portray a brothel.

Reactions: "Now I know what it is worth."

As you read this, *Last Will* will have been run two times, and as we write this, we are preparing for the second run. We decided on doing a second run after the preliminary sign-up for the then only run had over a hundred people sign up in less than a week. The larp was massively hyped, and the first run sold out in only eight (8) minutes.

For the second run we used a different sign-up system than first-come-first-serve, and a hundred people signed up to let us draw lots for the 44 spots on the game. It is strange to arrange a larp with such a hype. Thrilling, but scary.

Will we be able to deliver what all these people fervently wants us to?

What exactly was it that they thought they would experience? Had they really all read the participation contract? And if so, why were they surprised when we told them that they would not get eight solid hours of sleep? The sleeping schedule was a big issue, and something we will re-design for the second run. Having two runs and an extensive questionnaire after the first run gives us this chance of re-evaluating our design choices.

Based on the questionnaire and our own evaluation, we have decided to change some things in the pre-larp workshops and post-game debrief and the above mentioned sleeping schedule, as well as little things as the amount of in-game drugs already present on the game floor at the start of the larp.

In all, we wanted people to get a feeling of how poverty deprives you of your agency. Participants telling us things like this makes us believe we came quite close to our goal:



"You felt like an animal, in your head. Everything but the here and now disappeared. You were stripped of your agency and told to shut up when you had opinions. Zero discretion, zero authority. All actions were reactions. Your initiatives were very few and usually caused by something that happened in the past and had the purpose of keeping up appearances."

(Player)

"It was overwhelming, overpowering and scary; my first reaction was that I never wanted to expose myself to anything like that again, but when the experience settled with me a bit, I realized that it had developed me - I realized that I was actually grateful that I am free and I have a healthy and loving family. This is how Ursula really succeeded: rarely have I been so submerged in dystopia. Every little thing played its part, from the crowded gym that served as venue for the event to a clogged drain, the violence, the horrible vacuum-packed food. I felt hopelessness, like a serf and completely lost."

(Player)

Perspective: "You used larp to tell an important story."

We have been asked why we think this larp got so hyped, and while we can think of several possible explanations for it; we had a very nice presentation package, the setting and roles intrigued many people, and we offered an intense experience without an overwhelming amount of preparations or money needed - we also got another explanation from a friend:

"It was the Hardcore larp of the year, and there was a demand to fill."

To be honest we hadn't really thought about it as hardcore ourselves when we designed it. We focused on the story we wanted to tell. We wanted our players to live and feel the horror, frustration and degradation of their roles. We did not see this as a game for everyone, nor an experience that anyone would want to have.

We did have some players that were fairly new to larping. That was not a problem, though. Like in most games of this type we put a lot of effort into introducing the players to the world, making them feel safe with each other and providing a safe space in which they could indulge in some horrible play.

What we worked for, and hope we succeed with - at least for some - was to leave an impression on our players that would help them see and think about slavery and poverty from a new perspective.

Stories: "The cruelty and the pressure hit me hard and my eyes start to water."

These are some snapshot images from *Last Will*, told by participants of the first run:

The player of Jericho's Coach gives us a snapshot from the darktime:

"I open my eyes and stare out into the darkness with eyes hurting with the lack of sleep. At the same time thoughts grind and grate. They are always the same thoughts. I am thinking about how it would be if I wasn't in this sour sweat-musk of Jericho. I am thinking about what I would have done if I had not signed that lifetime-contract."

As always I cannot form a picture in my mind of a different kind of life and I come to the conclusion that I can't because I have been here for so long that I have forgotten what it is like out there, in freedom. At least I am not hungry. /.../ When the lights come on and the morning buzzer sounds I am nauseous from having gotten too little sleep. The Lifer-collar has made an indent into my neck and I casually scratch it as I pack away my sleeping-gear."

The player of the fighter Eli tells us this story from not long after she and her teammate have been in the pit fights:

"The doctors came by the Team 2 sleeping area and injected Eli and Milo with pain relieving drugs to make them able to impress during the owners' visit, despite them having been badly beaten up and injured in the arena just hours before. The words with which this was done made it perfectly clear that Eli and Milo were regarded as no more than animals: "There's going to be hell to pay for this later, but they'll be fine during the visit."

Another fighter gives us a snapshot from her game:

"The time before my fight was quite extraordinary, and coming back from the fight, too. You really felt like a broken star." /.../ "The second time the lights went out, when Mitsuki'd been walking back and forth outside the toilets to wait for the painkillers to set in, and finally went to sleep, and just lay there and stared into the ceiling, and felt that this was her entire world, her entire life. It was breathtakingly horrifying."



The player of one of the psychiatrists tells us about a memorable moment:

"The rape of Ataru was incredibly strong. As I imagine a real rape in war or a concentration camp. It was so deliberate, so well planned. Not in any way about sex, just power. Ataru sat there, extremely passive, eyes staring straight down at the floor. Never said "no" or "stop" but just sat there. Silent. Motionless."

The player of Team 6's pleaser tells us about an impression from the game:

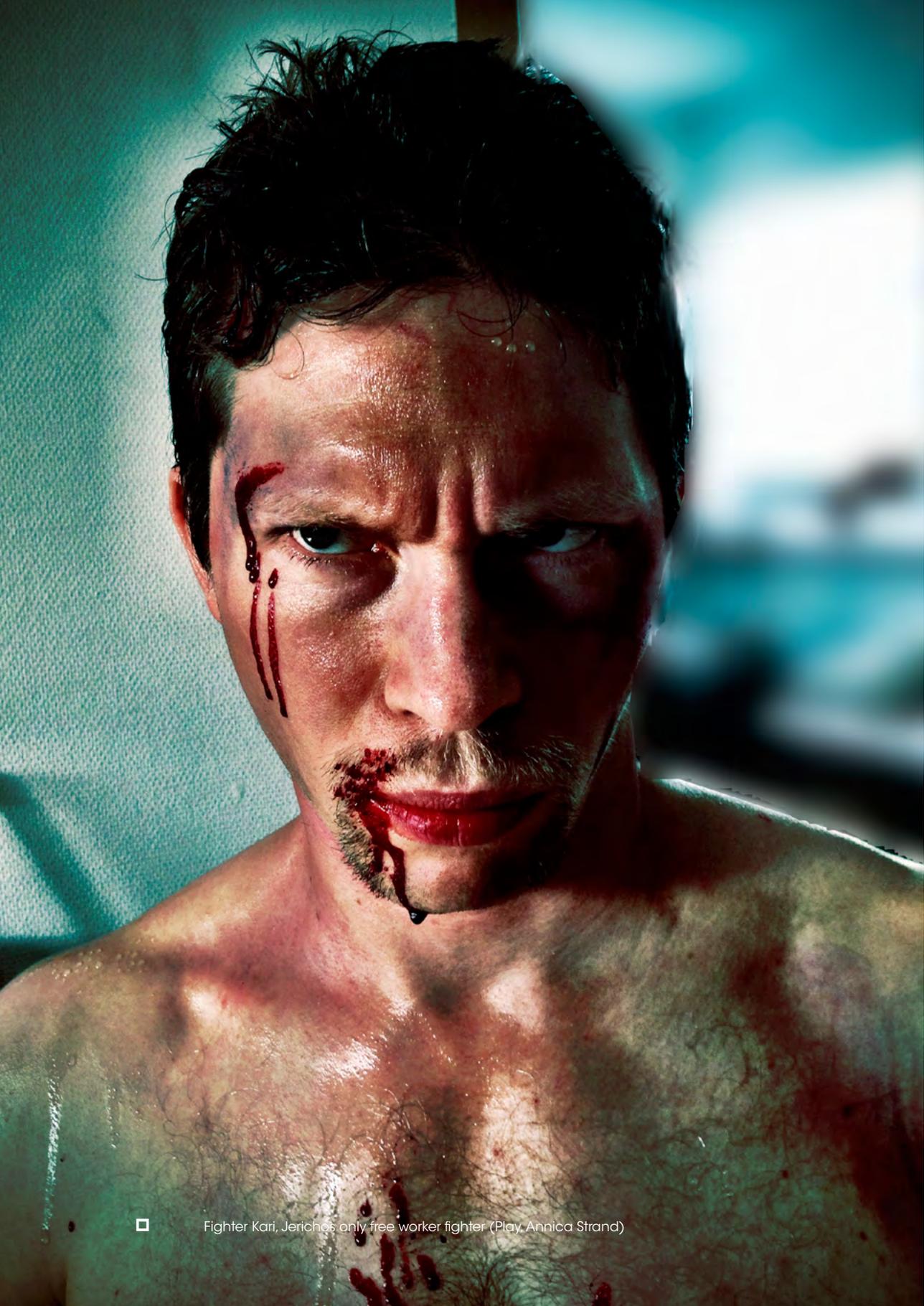
"Cleaning the shower room from blood after love interest JT6FIL's suicide. It was horrible but also became a very private way of saying goodbye."

Last Will

CREDITS: Frida Gamero, Annica Strand and Sofia Stenler
DATE: August 15 - 17, 2014 and January 2 - 4, 2015
LOCATION: Stockholm
LENGTH: 23 hours game time, 3 days total
PLAYERS: 44
BUDGET: -€3,000 per run
PARTICIPATION FEE: €73 regular price, €37 subsidized price
GAME MECHANICS: Not described

Web site

lastwilllarp.com



□ Fighter Kari, Jericho's only free worker fighter (Play, Annica Strand)

- A team consists of five: physiotherapist, trainer, fighter, fixer and pleaser. (Post-game, Ylva Bergman)
- Fighter Sol with her trainer Zion. The collars distinguish them as lifers. (Post-game, Ylva Bergman)
- Lovers in hell; physiotherapist Ryan and trainer Hayden. (Post-game, Ylva Bergman)



Livsgäld
Fantasy with gender elements

Simon Svensson

Setting the stage

Livsgäld, translated roughly as “the price you pay for your life”, was a low-fantasy larp held in November, 2014, in Halmstad, Sweden. The larp was played in Swedish, had 40 participants, three non-player characters and four organizers. The spots for the players were given out through a lottery process, where participants first signed up over the span of a week after which a draw was made to see whom among the players would receive spots. The larp used two criteria to divide the various players into different pools - we first divided the player group into self-identified men, women and non-binary individuals, with a goal of as many self-identified men as women in the player group. After this division was made, we went on to divide by age. Ten spots were reserved for the 25% who were youngest of the player group, twenty spots were reserved for the 50% in the middle and ten spots for the oldest 25% of players.

Despite our efforts to achieve this balance, when dropouts were taken into account, we did not have enough reserve players among men in the latter stages of the process and the actual game ended up with a skewed ratio, with more women than men attending.

Setting

The setting for the larp was a world known as *Xaos*, constructed by organized Simon Svensson.

The larp itself was centered around an isolated culture that had been existing on its own for hundreds of years in a single village. The culture entirely lacked a social sex-based gender, the focus was instead on four elements that were seen as part of your biological entity in the same way as gender is for us today. The concepts ‘man’ or ‘woman’ did not exist, even if the members of the culture were physically identical to us.

Story

The story played with themes of survival, both literal in avoiding starvation, but also cultural survival when the old ways did not work as they used to. The food stores were low and for many years, the fields had gotten more barren, the hunting had diminished and tensions were on the rise. During the larp, the People, as they were called, had to confront whether they would rely on the extremely conservative foundations of their entire people, the cultural values they held sacred, or brave the dangers of the unknown.

The unknown also held the mythological threat from a civilization that once held the people as slaves and were said to roam the wilderness in search for them.

The culture was one of shame and guilt, where the personality traits that are often seen as good today were considered destructive and bad (bravery, creativity, being outspoken, self-confidence), while atypical leader abilities – intuition, empathy, carefulness and cowardice – were seen as positive and constructive traits. Conflicts were solved by smoothing over and handling the fallout rather than the cause.

If the main storyline was the food crisis, the actual focus of play was the social pressure that was a natural part of such an isolated society; a society where the equilibrium rests on shame and the silencing of dissenting voices. When the crisis became more outspoken, all the tension that was stored in the various dynamics between the collectives (the family units of the game), individuals and between element-genders rose up to the surface. Love was lost, forbidden love was uncovered and the young members of the village were initiated into their collectives, to live with them for the rest of their lives.

During the larp, three unknown spirits also appeared, brought into the village by some of the fire-gendered, the most oppressed of the four elements. These spirits turned out to have different agendas that they tried to pursue through affecting the people and their ways.

In the end, a choice was made. Their existence doomed, they refused to go quiet into the night and fade away. The village abandoned their ancestral home to face the unknown on a great exodus, knowing well that most of them would not make it.

Designing Livsgäld

“Calm gazes with the power to silence loud voices. Tears that are swallowed, hidden away to uphold the illusion of well-being. A collective where everyone is included. Yet, some are still left outside, isolated. Love filled with demands exists side by side with the search for acceptance. To be loved, not for the person who I am but despite of it. *Livsgäld*. One larp, many emotions followed by important insights. I was not poor when I went there but I left richer than I was before. My new found riches are thoughts and a new way to view the world.”

(Player, Air-gendered)

These thoughts by one of the players include some of our core design elements. When we created *Livsgäld*, we had three major design goals. They were:

- A gender-equal larp
- Reversing fantasy stereotypes
- Narrow focus

The first point was one of the first that we decided on and our philosophy towards gender was based around the thought that, in order to achieve gender equality in a larp, you could not simply remove gender inequalities and otherwise keep the same traditional fantasy or modern setting. We would still have hidden patterns and behavior that were modelled on inequality. Instead, you have to remove them and replace them with something else that could take their place. This philosophy guided us as we created the *Livsgäld* world.

The second idea was based on the observation that fantasy worlds are often inherently conservative. They are worlds where uprisings are bad, where feudalism works, where power is rightfully inherited and where loyalty to authority is something noble.



They are worlds where individual bravery and vigilantism is held as the norm of heroic behavior. We wanted to challenge these concepts and show a world that worked differently from how we expected a fantasy world to work. We knew this would be a challenge for our players since we had already removed so many other familiar points from the players' horizon of expectations and recognition, but we did not want to create a gender-equal world only to reproduce the normative, traditionally masculine traits as superior.

The third point, narrow focus, was something we'd learned from the countless fantasy games that exist out there in the more mainstream fantasy genre. Many of them present a whole fictional world for the prospective larper with nations, maps, cultures and religions all presented in short written format, easily overwhelming their players. We wanted *Livsgäld* to exclusively present relevant information for the players, where every piece of information was something that had an impact for the People and the experience at the larp.

Inspirations from the Nordic larp tradition were games such as *Mellan himmel och hav*, for a different way to construct gender and personality traits, *Hemligheten*, for the way it portrayed a low-key fantasy setting, and *Brudpris* for handling a culture of shame and invisible barriers.

Reactions

There were many things that did not happen as planned or expected and there were many story elements that were identified as flawed or working in an unintended way. Even as the game came to a close, we had already learnt a lot.

After the game, the players were asked to give the organizers a week of stories, a week where feedback and criticism could wait.

When this week had passed, a document was published with our the organizers' design thoughts, containing thoughts on what had gone wrong and what could be improved, along with a feedback form for the players. We felt that this approach helped players focus on areas that we had not already reflected over.

The feedback form received answers from roughly half of the participants. The most widespread reaction which was echoed by nearly every feedback form, was that the participants had experienced a sense of leaving their own social gender behind. No longer did they feel the internal or external pressure to act their gender.

Despite of this, several individuals noted that actual behavioral patterns still conformed to those they had been taught all their lives. It is not surprising that players did not adapt entirely new patterns of behavior simply from two days gametime and a day of workshop.

However, it is noteworthy that the expectations to behave in the same ways were perceived as lacking. It was more out of comfort and habit that the players acted out their off-game gender identity, rather than a feeling of pressure or expectation.

Another common point of feedback was that the elements had felt like castes, rather than gender. There had been a lack of sexualization or the tension that exists between genders attracted to each other and they had felt like 'roles' in society, rather than something natural you were born to.

Many felt that a workshop for translating typically gendered behavior, like flirting, sex and attractive stereotypes, into the *Livsgäld* world, would have been a boon to the larp. That was, according to the players, the most difficult part of the setting.

The biggest lesson we learned was to trust in the setting and the characters to provide the content. An element was introduced early on that was meant to be kept low-key: the three foreign spirits. However, their occult nature and mystery quickly spiraled it up to the top and it became a major plot. Many players reacted as if they had to solve it, rather than use it as background material. Had we informed everyone about the element beforehand and kept its function transparent, we feel that it would have filled its function more properly.

We are glad that we created *Livsgäld* and in many ways, it felt like a success. However, it also felt like a game that explored relatively unknown territories and in doing that, left a lot of room for improvement.

Closing thoughts

Everything points to the fact that *Livsgäld* changed the way people thought about gender, if only for a little while. In this, we hope that *Livsgäld* can be an inspiration to others and that we will see more games exploring similar themes.

As a closing statement, here are some thoughts from one of the participants, taken from their blog post about the larp:

"It was scary, in a way, to see how effectively we changed our way of thinking and behaving over a mere weekend. It showed me how easy it is to create oppression on completely arbitrary grounds, and how real those feelings provoked can be even though you know it's just play-pretend. But most of all it gave me hope. If we could change our way of thinking and behaving so easily over such a short period of time I have no doubts about that it can be done on a much larger scale. All it takes is that most of us play along."

(Player)



Livsgäld

CREDITS: Kajsa Seinegård (main organizer), Simon Lindman Svensson (co-organizer), Carl Nordblom (co-organizer) and Jennie Nyberg (co-organizer)

DATE: 30th of October to November 2nd, 2014

LOCATION: Primus Vicus medieval village, outside Halmstad, Sweden

LENGTH: 60 hours in-game, 16 hours pre-game workshop

PLAYERS: 40

BUDGET: -€5.000

PARTICIPATION FEE: €70 standard fee, €50 for low income participants and €90 for high income participants

Web site

projekt-xaos.zaramis.se/



Mare Incognitum

Trapped in the ice

Olle Nyman & Sebastian Utbult



The organizers have an ingame radio conversation with the stranded travellers. (Play, Jonas Aronsson)



The fate of the M/S Lyckan

Our story took place aboard the M/S Lyckan, a former German navy freighter with a horrific history of atrocities. A research expedition to Kirkenes in Norway had unearthed a strange statuette, which was brought onboard during M/S Lyckan's last journey out of Kirkenes for the winter. Aboard were the expedition, the crew and captain, a group of workers, a doctor and nurse, a group of dilettantes and adventurers and a few others.

Mare Incognitum was a larp set in Lovecraft's *Cthulhu Mythos*, aboard the decommissioned destroyer HMS Småland. We wanted to create a claustrophobic horror larp that relied more on atmosphere and "slow pressure" than shock and jump scares; more on subtle, personal horror than on monsters and gore. We chose, unconventionally, to do a 1950's Lovecraft larp rather than the classic 1920's setting, both because it fit the actual ship better, but also to be able to use the Second World War as a tapestry for much of the background, something we think worked out very well.

We realized early on that we were going to have to do multiple runs of the larp in order to be able to finance it properly, and we decided on doing three runs of the larp for 26 players each game. Wise from the experiences of our last *Mythos* larp *Terra Incognita* we tried our best to have a fifty-fifty ratio of women to men, and to let chance dictate who got the spots for the larp (with a few exceptions).

This strategy proved to be successful, both in terms of equal representation and in terms of players we didn't personally know - you can get comfortable as an organizer and mostly cast people already known to you. Most of the final participants were from Sweden, but we also had participants from Denmark, Norway, Finland, Estonia, Great Britain, the US and Spain.

We also tried to have at least 20 percent beginners at the larp. However, quite a few of the beginners dropped out before the larp, so the 20 percent was not fully realized.

Creating a horror story

The location, the ship, made many decisions about the story for us, which is how we like to work - do something within a set of limitations. It was going to be claustrophobic and dark, and the players were going to be cut off from the outside world; all great components for creating horror. We first decided on the basic outline of the story: first some normality onboard the ship, followed by the ship getting stuck in the ice, then taking away comforts like lights and food, a slow escalation of weirdness, clues, handouts and events leading up to a crescendo in which the players are confronted with their doom.

It was quite a challenge writing twenty-seven interesting, multifaceted characters and fitting them all together in the story, making sure to give all the players both agency and internal logic. It was important to us that we created characters that would be fun to play even if we completely removed the horror and supernatural elements. We had utilized *skjebner* (fateplay) before, and for *Mare Incognitum* we gave all the characters several fates and *triggers* ("if x happens, do this/react in this way") in order to create hooks for the players nudging towards insanity or to create potential for scenes or conflict. Once we had assigned players to the characters we tweaked those characters who were not Swedes (different background texts).

Characters were divided into groups; an expedition of scientists, a group of workers, a group of dilettantes and adventurers and their servants, etc. A big help here was a drawing board, where you could connect the different characters and how they related to each other in order to visualize possible plots, twists and subgroups.

As we said earlier, we used the Second World War as a background for many of the characters, and the war itself was used as an underlying subplot; the ship had previously been the stage of some atrocities during the war, and many documents, letters and signs produced for the larp and spread around the ship contained info on this backstory which we think added another layer of horror underneath the *Mythos* horror.

This also offered us the opportunity to treat the ship itself as a character in the drama and the ship's history was lent physical form as shadows from the past via odd messages on the radio but also as actual Shadows (NPCs giving suggestions or insights to the players, but being invisible to the characters).

Producing horror

Early on, we decided to aim for a creeping, slow horror rather than “in-your-face” jump-scares. As is the key to most *Mythos* horror, the horror is ancient, does not care at all about humanity, and is more or less impossible to understand - and there can be no defeating the horror, only a short respite.

The key things that made this larp were, we think, the ship itself (i.e. “the stage”), the handouts (handwritten diaries, letters, photos, documents, etc) that gave background and increased the sense of horror onboard, the characters (pre-written and designed for drama, conflict and a slow descent into madness) and a combination of creative NPCs and on-the-spot gamemastering.

The sound system used onboard greatly helped in creating mood and atmosphere. Having great players also helped a lot.

Creating horror, we believe, is a very delicate and sensitive thing.

Pace it too slow or too fast and you burn out the players or destroy the narrative, show too much of the horror and you risk it losing its power. Give the players too much to do - like reading handouts and completing tasks - and they can become too focused on *doing* and not *feeling*.

But on the other hand, if you give the players too little to do the sense of “developing” story or of getting anywhere might be lost and the players may become tired or bored.

Our larp had its fair share of pacing issues (which we tried correcting during subsequent runs), and as an organizer you have a hard time gauging what the players are feeling or currently doing, and you might panic, thinking the players are bored, and start *doing* things that screws up what might be an excellent atmosphere for the players.

We had a radio room, where the players diegetically could speak to other ships in the area as well as the coast guard, and we think it worked out better than we had imagined.

At first it functioned as a source of information and safety for the players (there was always an “external party” they could talk to), but as the game progressed the voices on the radio increased the feeling of isolation and the problematic situation the passengers were now in - coastal stations reporting that the storm was gaining in intensity; ships reporting that they could not reach them to help, etc.

Players in the radio room could also experience semi-meta gameplay; strange voices from the past, weird monster sounds, voices speaking to them from beyond the grave etc, which worked really well - especially so since the room was rigged with a night vision camera so we could identify players and simultaneously read up on their backstories as we spoke to them.

Lessons learned

Gender roles and equality

We put some effort into making sure all the characters for the larp were as gender neutral as possible. Any character should be playable by anyone without any (or very little) modification. We were also very strict in keeping the ratio 50/50 between (self-identified) males and females. We realize that we need to actively work more to create a game with actual equality in regards to gender, and this is something we'll have to keep discussing and working on.

Tech

Tech never works flawlessly. It will break, or you'll have great problems getting it to work right. Always plan for that if you intend to have a tech-enhanced larp. Keep an “analog” option for your players. Also make sure tech is dead simple to understand, then dumb it down even further. Test the tech in extreme conditions. Try everything beforehand, multiple times, to find the glitches. Our sound system gave us extreme headaches until we managed to get it working *right*.

Railroading

We railroaded the end too much, which felt weird and out of place. This is bad design. Try to avoid that unless you have a kickass ending that you feel works no matter what state the players are in.

New blood

Bring in new players, and people you've never worked with before. Don't be afraid. You might just be amazed (like when the new blood don the wellingtons, and take on the monumental task of cleaning out the poop floating all over the kitchen). Make sure you have a great team of NPCs and functionaries to back you up when you get tired or busy.

Don't be afraid to break the diegesis

We are somewhat stuck in the 360 design model, and we were sometimes hesitant to break the diegesis in order to spook players or use meta techniques to further the game, but once we did it was universally well received and really worked out well. We need to stop being afraid of breaking the 360 illusion.

Information

Keeping players up to date is very hard, even if you just choose one single channel for that information (email for instance). *Do NOT* rely on facebook at all, but also keep in mind that players will miss emails and will not read all your text. Be very, very clear in writing, and repeat everything that is important several times.

The verdict

In the end we're happy to have created the larp together with the kick ass participants and our excellent crew, to have run three fairly different runs. The participants humble us with relevant feedback, making us wanting to continue, and also letting others learn from our mistakes (and successes). It was a great larp for most, but it could have been better, and we'll work on that 'til next time!



□ One of the last pictures of the ethnologist Rehn before his disappearance. (Play, Nino Hynninen)

Mare Incognitum

CREDITS: Olle Nyman, Sara Pertmann, Sebastian Utbult, Andreas Sjöberg and Simon Svensson. Crewed by 15 additional NPCs and deckhands.

DATE: November 28-30, 2014

LOCATION: HMS Småland, Göteborg

LENGTH: 10 hours

PLAYERS: 78 (26 pr run)

BUDGET: ~€6.500

PARTICIPATION FEE: €65 - €110
(depending on income)

GAME MECHANICS: Diegetic Game Mastering, Honour System, Slow take-off, Slow Landing, Soundtrack, Pre-written characters, Shadows, Narrative Voice-Over, Playing to lose, Brems, Kutt, Pre-larp Workshop

Web site

xn--ii-viab.se





Moon

A Firefly larp not exactly about Firefly

Jindřich Mašek & Martin Buchčík



Despair and frustration. That's the impact of those situations. (Play, Martin Buchčík)

How we created a Firefly larp, not exactly about Firefly

One day the world became too small for all of us. Then we started to settle other planets. Terraformation begun. Things changed. Lot of us became adventures, seeking freedom and independence. But with great power comes great responsibility... None of us had an idea of what the "Alliance" would be capable of... "Take my home, take my land, take me where I cannot stand. I don't care, I'm still free, you can't take the sky from me..."

(Words from the *Firefly* theme)

What is Moon?

Moon is a chamber larp (3 hours + 1 hour debrief) for 10 players, situated in the *Firefly* universe. But the essence of the game lies in something else than in a cool sci-fi/western setting, and knowledge of *Firefly* is not necessary for playing the game.

After nearly four years of running *Moon*, we have decided that it's time to capture moments from the life of this game. From the first idea that came to mind, to the last weekend when we put our grown-up child in the hands of other teams. This will not be a complete walkthrough of the game, but an outline of useful tools for other game designers. We'll try to describe features in enough detail that anyone can copy them.

Game design & tricks

First of all, we wanted to write a game not only to entertain people but also to make them think about a certain topic. That is why the whole *Firefly* setting is just scenery for our metaphor. Beyond a cool surface there is a very-much-discussed topic; the decision made by the Czechoslovakian president Edvard Beneš after the Munich Conference in 1938 (where he decided not to fight against Hitler and to let the country be occupied).

We wanted to show this difficult decision-making process as it applies to everyday life ("Would I risk the life of my spouse?") at macro-level political circumstances. Players were not aware of the parallel before playing the game.

This is also the backbone storyline of the larp which drives the flow of the game and makes it cohesive, but it is followed by a number of smaller relationship-based plots. There were also three time points in the game which served as bottleneck for the players.

All of these were speeches, which redefined the situation and focused characters back on the main story plot. In the last one, the governor could choose one of the pre-written texts to decide whether the Moon colony would go to war or accept the occupants. That is the way we ensured a dramatic ending of the larp.

To make the game more authentic all the speeches were based on real historical materials (the Munich Agreement for example). It was a kind of easter egg for players, just like the names of the characters, which referred mainly to important Czechoslovak politicians or characters from well known books of the given period. This was surprisingly highly appreciated by a number of players afterwards.

The second interesting game design aspect is the storyline itself.

The whole scenario contains five smaller compact chapters linked together mainly by interpersonal stories and the history of the Moon colony itself.

Each character took part in 4 of 5 chapters. From the game designers' perspective it worked well. It was easier to indicate if a certain character had enough content to deal with during the game, and the plot lines were logically coherent.



We accomplished coherence by a quite simple trick. There was a rule for adding any object or person to the plot: It has to be connected to as many characters as possible. So, for example there were messengers who were carrying important medicine and some message was given to them. But they were killed by another character, who stole both: the message and the medicine.

There were also someone's friends, who were furious about their death. Finally, the fate of the messengers was important for every character. And this brought to the game a sort of complexity where unintended conflicts and links between characters emerged (we used this technique in a more developed way in our newer games).

However, the chapters and connections were used only as a game design tool; for the players they were invisible. We wrote all the characters in the form of a story. As they were quite long (about 5 - 10 pages), each storyline or important information was repeated at the end of the text.

Metatechniques in Moon

Our intention wasn't to have a game full of rules, but some game tricks were necessary. After some discussion we picked three (four, after few reruns) of them.

First of all, there was an "intro" made of three scenes, which were written by us, and so became more like coordinated drama scenes. The reason, why we have decided to use this was in our experience of slow booting of chamber larps in that period and we didn't want to have a game with a slow beginning.

This sadly proved that we probably weren't able to manage them in the right way anyway, because in almost every run of the game, there was someone, who failed to do what was asked. It is possible that just writing a set of non-specific instructions on a piece of paper and leaving the rest to the players wasn't such good idea. The basic problem was probably in the strong chain of specified actions spread among different players.

A second meta-technique was special costume props. Aside from flags, hats, and so on, we had grey berets and brown pelerins. According to the *Firefly* universe (and our intention) there are two opposing sides of the conflict, and we needed players to have the possibility to show their affinity to the Browncoats or the Alliance explicitly. Anyone, who was wearing one or another, was for that moment publicly declaring "I am on side of..." This was also used to escalate conflicts between players subconsciously (and was also pretty and cool).

A third special rule was using a bit of music. For the whole runtime, there was music playing in the background (we've spent a significant amount of time picking music that would be fitting - surprisingly using the "shuffle" mode during the first few runs came up with mindblowing scenes combining tough situations with precise lyrics). And when we wanted to intervene in the game (like radio broadcasts and booting scenes) we'd just turn the volume up, which intuitively made the players listen up for what would come next.

A fourth added technique was the rule of non-specific informations. It turned out, that players were forced by the large amount of information we had given them to investigate issues in detail. But that wasn't our intention. So we added a simple rule of "the character who is the expert in a certain field is always right in discussions about that field". So when the players were talking about something we did not write into the game, it was up to them. We wanted a dramatic game, not an investigation of specific actions in an exact time and space.

The last specific thing was running a betatest of *Moon*. We weren't sure, if everything would go right or not, so we needed feedback to improve the game.

We picked a group of selected players we knew and ran it in small clubhouse. These players were chosen to fit the characters we'd written and also by their ability to give us the feedback we needed. Thus we were able to improve the game after the betatest.



Reflection / Feedback

The structured feedback was divided into two parts. The first was rather quick. Each player got a chance to briefly summarize their current impressions and emotional state. This simple step helped the players to concentrate themselves on the next parts, as they were given space to express what was close to their hearts.

This step also served as the first psychological safety check for organizers. More detailed questions followed. We focused on the highlights of the game:

"What was the most interesting scene that they did not take part in?", "When did the character reach the final decision?", "What was the key argument?"

The second part reflected the topic of the game. We created a line, where the ends represented the two poles of a decision: war against a much stronger enemy or acceptance of occupation. Participants were at first asked to choose their character's place and then their own. Usually it was followed by a spontaneous (but mediated) discussion where a lot of arguments and points of view were mentioned. The last activity was a structured discussion in couples to ensure everyone got time to formulate his or her opinion.

Afterwards the participants responded that this experience was far away from the prevalent rational historical discussions about what Edvard Beneš should have done at that grave moment of Czech history. It brought before them a completely new perspective to the problem, as they were forced to make a decision themselves in the context of arguments which were all around them. We have never mentioned it explicitly, but as you could see above we implemented a number of indices into the game.

Moon release session

After approximately 30 runs of *Moon* we came up with an idea of releasing the game to the public. When we started out, we had decided not to, but time changes things.

We had been enthusiastic about doing more and more re-runs of the game. But at some point the next year this enthusiasm left us. So we decided, that we'd send it into the world, but not just by uploading it online. That was the birth of the "Moon release session".

The idea was to get some fans and capable promoters together and teach them how to work with *Moon*. We had written an article about what we were up to, and published it on the website larpcz.cz (and of course pushed it through facebook).

We had enough applicants to choose from. Finally, there were 12 people from across the whole of the Czech Republic who learned how to promote *Moon*. The whole thing took place in a cottage, where we had prepared several activities. From learning the story background, to diving into the game mechanics; both gamedesign and technical stuff. And partying, of course!

We did not have any proper timetable for running the game, so the participants also had to make their own notes about timing, and how to do it all (the fact that there was no timing for the game was one of the reasons, why we did the weekend session, since none of us wanted to write that terribly long instruction manual).

Costumes were discussed, and now there is more than one set of the props in existence in the republic. After this session, there have already been several re-runs of *Moon* not done by us. Which means we've reached our goal - the game lives on.



Conclusion

We are proud that *Moon* is still able to compete with newer chamber larp, because the Czech chamber larp scene is evolving a lot and dozens of chamber larps have been written in the last four years. So far, more than forty runs have been done.

And it's still flying.

Moon

CREDITS: Martin "Pirosh" Buchtík, Jindřich "Estanor" Mašek, Petr "Drrak" Platil, Filip Kábrt, Roman "Gordhart" Čech

DATE: February 2011 - till now (more than 40 runs in total)

LOCATION: Various

LENGTH: game - 3 hours, debriefing - 1 hour

PLAYERS: 10

BUDGET: Varied

PARTICIPATION FEE: €2 - €7

Web site

moon.madfairy.cz



John Raw, old badass waiting for fulfillment of his old mission (Play, Martin Buchtík)



Morgenrøde

A Game at the Dawning of the Age of Aquarius

Anders Ebbelhøj, Jonas Trier-Knudsen & Klaus Meier-Olsen



One of the joint meetings where everyone was present to discuss everything from buying a saw to taking away the right of individuals to their own body (Play, Jonas Trier-Knudsen)

Morgenrøde (Morning Red) was our take on the Danish hippie movement. Through three acts, 31 players portrayed the peak of the Danish hippie community and their endeavors to establish Denmark's first grand commune: Morgenrøde - the utopia of their dreams.

Spanning the late 60'es and the early 70'es, the game showed the commune's rise and fall. From an initial summer of love to the grinding frustrations of clashing ways of life to a final collapse, when the distance between Marxist revolutionary and flower-power protagonist became too great.

Our aim was never to reenact the heyday of the Hippie, or give the players an experience of actually being there. Rather, *Morgenrøde* was focused on the overarching story. We tried to sketch out a social movement and – more importantly – the consequences for the people who lived that movement.

A Dialogue with Parents and Traditions – Making *Morgenrøde*

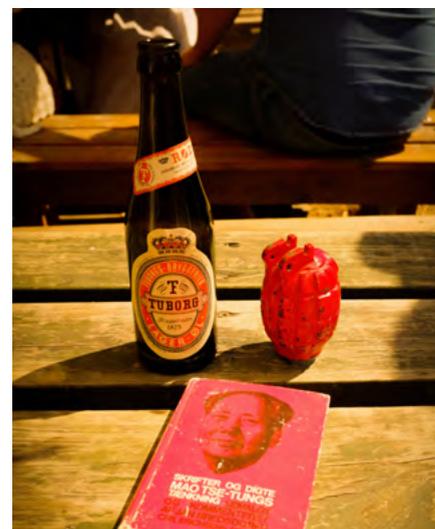
We had many reasons for making *Morgenrøde*. First and foremost, we shared a fascination of the time. Most of our parents were young when the rebellion against everything established was driving the counterculture forward. Some were a part of the struggle. Others watched from the outside.

But none of them can escape the influence stretching from The Summer of Love over the hazy days of Woodstock and all the way to the present. In all their handicraftyness, the hippies made a permanent mark on our culture, which we wanted to explore with equal parts love and critique. We love living in a world of freedoms won by the pioneers of past generations, but we do not agree with all their ways of changing the world. In that way, *Morgenrøde* was a personal game for all of us.

Furthermore, we were very much inspired by both recent larps from the Nordic scene – such as *Just a Little Lovin'* – and by the Danish freeform tradition, as it is seen at the convention Fastaval. We did not start with the intention of making a hybrid between the two scenes, but that is more or less what we ended up with. The game was split into acts with workshops before, after and in-between, something that has been seen many times before in the Nordic scene.

We started two of the acts with a freeform scene, meant to capture the vibe of a joint meeting in the commune, where every minute detail of daily life was discussed and voted on. These scenes were run by an organizer who assumed the role of a game master not present in the fiction of the game. By mixing and matching the two traditions, we sought to make a game with the narrative focus of a Fastaval freeform game and the immersive and physical qualities of a Nordic larp.

Morgenrøde was thus created as a dialogue between both the world of our parents and the present, and between different schools of larp and roleplaying.



Love, Liberation and Revolution – The Themes of *Morgenrøde*

The more we dug into the time period and the counterculture the more we realized that the hippies were far from one group. It was a far-ranging movement of everything from Marxist revolutionaries over flower-power spiritualists to bra burning feminists fighting for women's right to equal opportunity.

Most spoke about a revolution, but what that meant ranged from the violent seizure of the means of production to the dawning of the Age of Aquarius and New Age of spirituality. We chose to limit the themes of the story to love, liberation and revolution, which still gave a number of different interpretations of the purpose of *Morgenrøde*. The characters were all pre-written and the themes – and clashes between them – were thus worked into the very core of the game. In the end, it was these differences that tore the commune apart.

One Pill Makes You Larger... – The Mechanics and Design of *Morgenrøde*

We tried to make our triad of themes as pervasive as possible. We kept love, liberation and revolution as the guiding principles for all design decisions. In our game design, this led us to designing a series of mechanics, which should enable the players to act out the three themes.

One common thread with these mechanics was a high degree of voluntarism. The players could choose which mechanics to use when, which in turn helped them steer their game experience towards one of the three themes.

For the political theme we applied house rules for *Morgenrøde* which the political characters could enforce, mostly via self-criticism, inspired by a quite vicious form of social control, practiced by the Maoists of the time.





We tried to give the die-hard political a micro society to shape and manipulate. The rules were modified during the freeform scenes of the joint meetings and applied to the inhabitants of Morgenrøde as guidelines on how to live their lives. The three basic rules, which we wrote pre-game, were:

- 1) Love your fellow inhabitants of the commune.
- 2) Fight capitalism in all its forms, together with your comrades.
- 3) Expand your mind, and always be ready to experience new things, together with the rest of the commune.

Seeing as hallucinogenic drugs became somewhat popular among the hippies, we chose these as the game mechanic backbone for the spiritual theme. In our experience, pretending to use drugs during a larp, whether it is snorting powdered sugar or eating candy that symbolizes pills, and trying to fake the high afterwards, never really works all too well. Thus we needed a way for the characters to take LSD without the players having to fake the following high. This became the Drug Box.

We decided that marijuana and anything like that was recreational and as such would have no effect on the characters, just as drinking a beer (which was non-alcoholic). All other substances were equal to LSD, symbolized by small squares of eatable paper with a white rabbit print on it. Taking LSD was never done alone and affected the relationship between the two or more characters taking part.

The trips themselves were played out in the Drug Box - a blackbox with a white sheet wall which had psychedelic visuals projected on to it and a matching soundscape. An organizer played a spirit guide and game mastered the session.

The essential thought was that a trip could be good or bad, and that the nature of the trip would decide how the personal relation which the players brought into the trip, would be affected. The art for the spirit guide was to match the psychedelic story of the trip to the changing relationships. This ended up including, but far from limiting itself to: Deer grassing in a grove, two souls trapped in a cellar being flooded, a mother-of-the-revolution carrying her child across the ocean in a train and some forty-odd trippier scenes.

For the theme of personal liberation we implemented two game mechanics. One was the option for the players to be undressed during the game (with some limitations). This was very optional and not treated as a game mechanic as such. Rather, we tried to create a safe atmosphere, where it was possible for those who wanted to explore that part of the movement. Then there was the “love room” where characters could always go to have sex.

Many of the original hippie communes actually had these love rooms and as such it seemed like the obvious choice, but it also provided a way for the players to play out sex scenes in relative public, without it being frowned upon. As such we hoped for the sexual liberation to add to the stories.

Three things we learned from Morgenrøde

To us, *Morgenrøde* was a success. We were happy with the outcome and loved the look and feel. But that, we suppose, is what most organizers would say. So instead of the usual anniversary speech-style finale, here are three things we learned as game designers:

1) Continue to explore the crossovers. The freeform and Nordic larp-scenes have been merging for some years now. Find the interesting interactions and try the impossible. For us, this meant freeform scenes with thirty players and a highly specialized (and we dare say awesome) way of simulating drugs.

2) Remember that history is also last year. Historical games are hard and demanding when it comes to gear and accuracy. Games about contemporary cultural history are easier and the players’ knowledge can be a lot more nuanced than is the case with most of the medieval counterparts. We are certainly not the first, but more and more games are exploring recent history. It’s worth it.

3) Clash of playing culture should concern you. Perhaps the Nordic larp scene is becoming so homogenous, that we’ve stopped to consider it. But a lesson is that you should always be very clear about how a game is played, the characters should be read and what can be expected when combining players from different national and/or international scenes

Morgenrøde

CREDITS: Anders Lyng Ebbenhøj, Astrid Andersen, Silas Boje Sørensen, Troels Barkholt-Spangsbo, Søren Lyng Ebbenhøj, Klaus Meier Olsen and Jonas Trier-Knudsen.

DATE: August 12th-15th 2014

LOCATION: Græsrodsgården, Kalundborg, Denmark

LENGTH: 2 days

PLAYERS: 31

BUDGET: €6.900

PARTICIPATION FEE: €110

GAME MECHANICS: Varied. See text.

Web site

morgenrode.dk



□ Tripmaster Ole, who was in charge of mind exploration via drug use at Morgenrøde (Pre-game, Jonas Trier-Knudsen)



□ Players remarked afterwards on how natural partial or full nudity had felt. (Play, Bjarke Pedersen)



Nemefrego 2014

Old School fantasy with new ideas

Morten K Tellefsen & Frederikke B Høyer



Bakker-Hviide, one of the great families plotting to seize the crown. (Play, Mai Isager Nielsen)

Since 1995, the Danish non-profit organization Einherjerne has made one large fantasy larp in the summer with 100-300 participants. Every larp has built on the experiences of the earlier years, with core elements of the larp being a village surrounded by a magical forest inhabited by mythical creatures. This is the *Nemefrego* larp series, that is continuously being rewritten with each new installment, and which functions as a melting point between organizers striving to renew and participants trying to replay the previous game. An organiser using the brands “Einherjerne” or “Nemefrego” sets certain expectations. This can be a two-edged sword. The story of *Nemefrego 2014* is about four of those edges.

Nemefrego 2014 overview

The *Nemefrego 2014* storyline was centered around the election of a king from five great families. *Nemefrego* larps happen in roughly the same setting and family names are often reused, but just about everything else changes. The reason for this is to make new players feel that they’re entering a brand new larp instead of “the middle of a series”. Some of the larps aren’t even called *Nemefrego*, though they are part of the tradition. This time, the players were divided into two distinct geographical locations. Most players lived in the town and the tents near it, while a portion of the players were in the forest portraying various mythic creatures. And when we say town, we actually mean something quite close.

A pre-fabricated village

The people in Einherjerne have built pre-fabricated larp houses, that can be stored in large ship containers since the early 00’s. These can be stored in containers and then quickly be assembled when needed for a larp. This has been perfected to a point where a whole village, including a two-story building

and several buildings the size of dining halls are neatly fitted into 40’ ship containers, packed tight from floor to ceiling.

The containers can be moved by truck and sometimes they are leased or lent to other projects such as *Aarbus Medieval Festival* or other larps. A mobile medieval town is quite a resource, and several other larp organisations - including the Danish boarding school Østerskov - have copied the Einherjerne idea and now have their own pre-fab buildings.

Intrigue play vs. status play

One of the central pieces of *Nemefrego 2014* had to do with getting conflicts and plots out in the open, where they would include as many people as possible. This could include gift spending, intimidating, great speeches and the like. The goal was simple: steering the characters towards slowly escalating conflicts and tension, while avoiding resolve until the final hours of the game where conflicts would play out and conclude as publicly as possible.

We call this play style; “status play”. The opposite, which we call; “intrigue play”, is a style where problems are resolved as quickly and discreetly as possible.

“I empty my mug and placed my purse on the table. “How about a game of dice?” My fellow soldiers encourage the closest prey to participate. A man is about to stand but we all look at him with piercing eyes. “So you think our game is not good enough for you?”. He hesitates and then replies: “but I have no dice”. I smile: “No problem, I have dice you can borrow.”. He sits down, and I extend my arm around his shoulders: “by the way, there are a few special rules concerning the borrowing-dice. Nothing much...”. He stiffens but notices I have a hand on my dagger, and lets go of a sigh.”

(Player)

We had many great examples of status play that worked and players who enjoyed it. One thing we experienced however, was that without a central town square, we saw status play reduced to only include small segments of the participants, rather than the majority. A town crier was implemented at some point in the game and made a big difference, since this brought information of various conflicts to many more people. Utilizing a central square seems optimal for this type of play, though. And however much we tried to get conflicts out into the open, we still encountered an old friend of a problem; sleeping bag murders.

The sleeping bag murder paradox

In Danish larps where conflicts are sometimes resolved with violence, and in which the players sleep on location, there is a risk of characters being killed during their sleep. This is a time-honoured (but despised) tradition in Danish larps known as “sleeping bag murders”, due to the fact that most players sleep in sleeping bags. At *Nemefrego 2014* it was explicitly stated in the written game material that this was forbidden, but one player did it anyway - bringing several other characters down with him in the vendetta that followed.



“I remember slowly becoming aware of my surroundings. I heard steps and instantly knew someone was in the tent. I also knew I slept with an ingame dagger just out of old habit. But just before I opened my eyes I hesitated. I thought this is stupid. The rules were specific: “no sleeping bag murders”. Then someone shakes me and I open my eyes and see the weapon in his hand. Seconds later the whole family including us guards were slaughtered.”

(Player)

Organizers and participants, whose roles were dead, had a constructive dialogue afterwards and players were reinstated where it was agreed the story needed it the most. When playstyles and rules/participants clash, having a short break followed by open dialogue including all sides can prove fruitful, as it did in this case. The optimal thing is if things don’t happen when they’re not supposed to, but sometimes it’s also good to have a “what if” plan if going up against tradition.

A mythic forest

Surrounding the town, in which the majority of roles lived, was a magical forest, inspired by dark mythological folklore. It was meant to spawn stories of gloomy tragedy as well as heroic deeds. Unlike many other Danish larps, which utilize an organizer-controlled NPC group - the creatures inhabiting this forest were portrayed by a group of players, with great freedom to incorporate magic and mythic creatures in their stories and roles (some even played multiple roles).

There were no rule restrictions on the group, and the forest group would continue playing in the forest whether town players would come out or not. Forest creatures would not always agree amongst themselves and they had many power struggles - something town players often ended up being pawns in.

The forest group's goal was simple; the creation of great stories featuring a small selection of the other players: Namely those who would understand the genre and play along with the terms set by the forest. The majority of players did not interact directly with the forest- but only hear rumors - creating a mythic feeling of insecurity and a lack of knowledge of what actually happened in the woods.

Some players were frustrated by this and felt left out because the forest play was not easily available to everyone, but many liked the uncertainty and enjoyed not directly interacting with the magical elements of the forest. Those who entered the forest and actively contributed to the mythic storytelling had a wonderful experience. The town and the forest were in effect two play zones with different visions, rules and narrative styles, even though they were very much part of the same larp.

Trade in the forest would be conducted in magical promises rather than in coin. Receiving help from the forest meant that you would be bound by a magical promise - something the characters were not always aware they had accepted, even though the players knew it. These could be small actions; accepting a gift could mean you had also accepted a price, even if nobody had you informed of the "cost" of the gift. The price would always be high (relative to the one having to pay it) and the forest would make sure you never forgot your promise. The consequences for breaking a promise were devastating.



The forest witch and I stared intensely at each other while one of her kin played a flute to keep the faun enthralled in it's trance-like state. The witch drew a knife from her pocket and offered it to me. I broke eye contact and looked at the metal knife. She asked me if I needed it for my first knight trial. I hesitated but knew she was right.

I had to bring some of the fauns beard to pass the first test. I took the knife and gazed at the blade reflecting the playful light from the nearby bonfire. The witch cracked a gruesome mocking laughter and only then I realized that by taking the knife - I had also accepted a bargain. She could ask whatever she wanted since I had already accepted. My first born was now promised to the forest...

(Player)

The forest was primarily active at night and most creatures did not go near the town. This enhanced the mystery surrounding the forest. There were certain unwritten rules when entering the forest. The most prominent was that you should not bring metal into the woods since many otherwise peaceful creatures would react aggressively to weapons - and some of these creatures were beings of pure magic and thus immune to mundane steel.

Ironically one type of creatures would always be hostile - and could only be handled with weapons. This greatly supported the vision of the forest being a dangerous place far outside any town character's comfort zone.

This was especially the case for members of the five great families who had to leave their status symbols - swords, which they were the only ones who were allowed to carry - behind. The end effect was of a seducing, intriguing and mystical forest, and those characters who went there never came back unchanged.



Nemefrego 2014

CREDITS: Einherjerne
 DATE: July 17 - 20, 2014
 LOCATION: Forlev Spejdercenter, Skyggelundsvej 3, 8660 Skanderborg, Denmark
 LENGTH: Afternoon Thursday to evening Saturday.
 PLAYERS: 112

BUDGET: €13.000
 PARTICIPATION FEE: €110
 GAME MECHANICS: Status play, simple combat rules,
 Web site
 nemefrego.dk





Pan
Horror & Therapy: A potent cocktail

Nathan Hook



The haunted Victorian castle/folly Yannon Towers (Post-game, Nathan Hook)

"No one could begin to describe the cumulative suspense and ultimate horror."

That was how H.P. Lovecraft described the short story *The Great God Pan*, written by Arthur Machen in 1890. Along with the art film *Antichrist* (Von Trier, 2009), that story was the inspiration behind the larp *Pan*. It is a horror larp. Not in the sense of vampires, zombies or tentacles, but psychological horror exploring the themes of identity and nature.

The premise for the event is a modern day weekend retreat for four or five couples undergoing relationship counselling, led by an 'eclectic' therapist couple mixing bad therapy techniques with 'folk wisdom' occult methods. The therapy gradually gets out of hand as everyone present falls under the influence of Pan, releasing their hidden desires and inner nature.

Pan is played under a strict confidentiality agreement. What happens in *Pan* is kept private among those present. This piece focuses on the design of *Pan*, not on what may have happened in play. We do not allow photos during play, with the only exception being posed character portraits early on. Physical interactions are one facet of *Pan*, but only a part of a much bigger whole, so it would be a mistake to excessively dwell on that part.

Productions of Pan

The original authors Bjarke Pedersen and Linda Udby organised *Pan* twice in January 2013 in Denmark; for mostly Danish players. Seventy-five people tried to book to play it, which demonstrates the interest in events of this nature. They organised a further run in November 2014 in Norway. Working with the Finnish larp organiser Kielo Maria Blomqvist, I organised the first international rerun to take place in April 2014. Our eight players came from three different countries.

We organised a second run in a 19th century folly castle in the UK in November 2014. I organised a further rerun with Dutch organisers Miriam Dik-Knopert and Nina Elzinga in the Netherlands in January 2015. This text primarily refers to my presentations.

It should be noted that *Pan* is also intended to be the first of a trilogy of thematically linked larps, but we are here dealing only with *Pan* itself.

Briefing: Defining the characters

Players were encouraged but not required to book with a friend to play an in-game couple attending therapy. This ensured players were comfortable together and better able to portray a couple, with confidence to play with and against each other. Playing with a real life partner was not recommended, given the relationship therapy context. Alternatively, players attending "alone" could be matched up by the organisers. We had a mix of single and double bookings in all of my runs.

The characters were pre-written from the previous runs, but only a single page long. They were all mundane modern people, but each of the characters were modelled on one of the Gods of Olympus. Players were asked to read both their own character and that of their in-game partner.

Players were encouraged to expand on their characters together and research the deity on which each of them was based. In addition players were invited to roleplay for a few hours together as their character couple before coming to the larp, e.g. have dinner together one evening. The therapist characters played by the organisers were written in the same way.

The pre-game workshop included a hot seat exercise, where players in turn answered questions as their character for three minutes. This increases the level of transparency for other players, without needing a lot of pre-game reading. It also helps players consider their character's views on different topics.

Casting the players to pre-written characters was a deliberate strategy by the original writers to give the players a stronger alibi. The players know they and others were playing a role they had not chosen (despite actually deciding most of the details themselves), and so had the confidence to act because it wasn't their choice.

The player could decide whether to play as 'thin' close-to-home characters or play them very differently from themselves. Being based on mythic figures they tended to be strong archetypal characters, slightly hyper-real.

In our international runs, characters also took on the nationality of their player. Though the larp was played in English, this meant background cultural details and topical news could be referenced, and a player could slip into their native language without breaking character.





Therapy: Deepening the characters

I didn't play the original runs, but was fascinated by *Pan*. I had previously played *Level 5* which Bjarke Pedersen had also been involved in organising, a larp about bad 1970s group therapy.

What I brought to the international rerun was expanding the therapy content from the limited (and google-translated) notes available. Unlike the original authors I have a real background in academic psychology and additionally had studied counselling theory.

For the event I researched and developed a set of bad therapy techniques. Some of the techniques were based on real methods for individual therapy wrongly expanded into relationship therapy. Some were two incompatible methods mashed together. Some were actually intended to be diagnostic tools rather than therapy. To this toxic mix I added some guided meditation adapted from my experience of mindfulness training and hypnosis.

For example, the first therapy session was based on the twenty statements diagnostic test (devised by Kukn and McPartland, 1954): the participant completes twenty written 'I am...' statements about themselves, then the list is analysed to see whether the focus is on physical descriptors, social roles, personality traits or existential statements.

I 'adapted' this by having therapy clients complete a second sheet of 'My partner is...' statements, and then publicly compared how each person saw themselves with how their partner saw them; for example, someone might define themselves by their personality, whilst their partner defines them by their physical features.

This brings into focus tensions within each relationship. Other therapy sessions were based on humanistic counselling and psychodrama badly combined, mindfulness and NLP mixed together, the *Five languages of Love* questionnaire, and verbally guided meditation. Most sessions were conducted with the whole group together, but we also included private sessions with tarot readings and inkblot tests.

The early therapy techniques served to deepen the characters. In some ways, they are not so different from a character creation activity or pre-game workshop – only done in-game, rather than off-game.

In terms of pacing, the larp started quite tightly structured, with the organiser character therapists guiding timetabled activities. This gradually became looser and more open, both in therapy content and when the possession elements began. This 'tight-to-loose' structure first created a well developed situation, then trusted and empowered the player characters to act freely within it.

Possession: Dissolving the characters

Pan uses two meta-techniques to represent the supernatural elements of possession. One was a necklace that entered play at certain points. When wearing it, the wearer focuses immediately on their own satisfaction, regardless of how inappropriate it is. Others perceive the wearer as the most charismatic person in the room, and forget about other worries when around them. Within an hour, the wearer has to pass the necklace onto someone else, so that it passes around the group. Players later described the experience of wearing this necklace as complete freedom. They had an absolute (and physically embodied) alibi to freely act on what they desired, and everyone else would follow their lead.

This mechanic also means each player gets their turn in the limelight, and everyone gets to experience their particular style of mad desire.

From an organiser perspective, it can be quite terrifying once the necklace enters play. You realise that the player character with the necklace has complete authority to direct the larp as they see fit, and you don't have any control over the larp any more.

The second technique was a series of glasses, one for each character. Progressively during the larp beads were added to the glass, indicating Pan's influence growing stronger. Initially this manifested as fits (In English, 'Pan' is the word root of 'panic attack') of being elated and acting on instinct. As the number of beads increase, the fits become more common, the flow through the characters actions.

At higher levels, characters stopped feeling guilty for what they had done, and stopped trying to justify or rationalise their behaviour afterwards. Their superego/'higher self' faded away until they lived only to follow the pipes of Pan. From an organiser perspective, this technique offered a limited way to guide the general pacing of the larp, without actually directing what happens.

In addition, we used meta-music from a speaker during the supernatural parts of the larp, to influence the mood indirectly. The song list included a piece with the words from Crowley's *Hymn to Pan* as the lyrics.

Together these meta-techniques enable players to think 'I have to act on my desires. That's what the social agreement says. I'm just following orders.' It removes any feeling of social anxiety from acting in an unusual fashion.

However, the player wearing the necklace and the players idolising them still have complete control in what direction and how strongly they choose to act. No one actually tells the players what they should or shouldn't do.

The possession meta-techniques gradually dissolve away the identity of the character, revealing their inner nature. The horror comes not from external monsters, but from being confronted by the true nature of yourself and your lover, the primal urge for selfish pleasure. That might be called the Id, or Great Cthulhu sleeping in the depths of the metaphorical sea of the unconscious, or Pan, great god of nature, both the natural world and human nature.

Reflection

Academics speak of the 'magic circle', the notion that play occurs in a sacred space set apart from the everyday world where different social rules apply. Whether that is the boxing ring or the black box, the magic circle gives players the freedom to act in foolish, dangerous and normally inappropriate ways. This is true of *Pan* as it is in larp generally. The necklace and the beads together are a second embodied magic circle within the magic circle of the larp itself; freedom to give in to one's desires and the power to lead all others present in the great dance to the tune of Pan.

As people, we wear social masks all the time; the mask we wear at work is different to the mask we wear around our family. In larp, we create a new additional mask to wear in the role of our character. The question remains what is revealed when the character is dissolved by the shining light of *Pan*? Perhaps it is the true self of the character. Perhaps the character is only a mask, and what is revealed is the true self of the player. Perhaps that is a false dichotomy.

Perhaps no one could begin to describe the cumulative suspense and ultimate horror of the secret mystery that burns at the heart of all life, that which the poets veil in the name of the Great God Pan.

Io Pan! Io Pan! Io Pan!

Pan

CREDITS: Original writers Bjarke Pedersen and Linda Udby. Translation and additional content by Nathan Hook. Further organising by Kielo Maria Blomqvist and Miriam Dik-Knoppert

DATE: January 2013 (two adjacent runs in the same location), April 2014, November 2014 (two separate runs), January 2015

LOCATION: Holiday homes in Denmark, Norway, UK and the Netherlands. An empty farmhouse in Finland.

LENGTH: Approx. 36 hours playtime, plus 2 hours pre-game workshops and 30 mins post-game workshops

PLAYERS: 10 players for one run in Denmark and the Norway run, 8 players for the other runs.

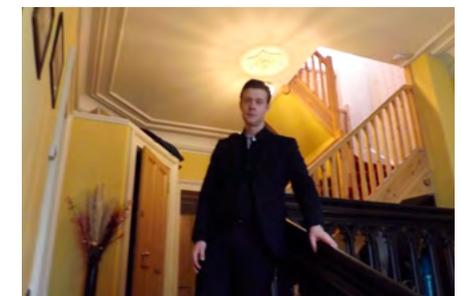
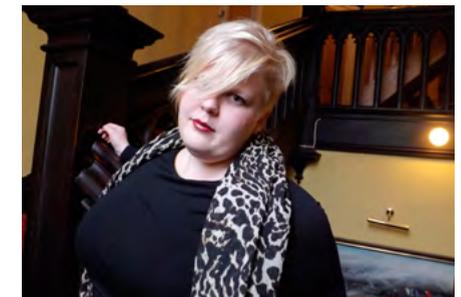
BUDGET: From €240 (Finnish run) upwards.

PARTICIPATION FEE: €105 (Danish runs), €30 (Finnish run), €250 or €140 (Norwegian run), €195 (UK run), €120 (Netherlands run)

GAME MECHANICS: status meta-items, meta-music, escalate-ward physical interactions

Web site

bjarke.com/larp/pan



- A bedroom, as left by a dysfunctional couple. (Post-game, Nathan Hook)
- Front approach to Yannon Towers (Post-game, Nathan Hook)
- Amanda Hjerta, posing for a portrait by her partner (Play, Pan player group)

- The only photographs permitted were taken early on in the event. (Play, Pan player group)
- Heading to Pan in the UK, players stop at Stonehenge. (Pre-game, Pan player group)



Saint Summer

A 60's tale of music and hope

Olga "Shaggy" Showman & Mark "Qwertz" Showman



"Roses are blue, violets are green / where will you be when the acid kicks in?" (music drugs)
(Play, Roman Vorontsov)

Genre: Rock opera

Theme: Utopia and its Fall

Setting: Rock'n'Roll festival in the late 1960's, US

Sources: Aldous Huxley 'The Island', Jesus Christ Superstar, Platoon, Hair.

The Messiah has been gone for two millennia. The times of rockstar messiahs ended half a century ago. We have mass communication galore, but the same questions still stand. In this larp we hoped to find some answers. Many say *Jesus Christ Superstar* is the best rock opera ever written. Perhaps that's because the USA of the 1960's was very much like Judea of the 0's. In both, the paradigm of the System, the Society, the 'You are what you do', the Leader, was being replaced by the paradigm of the Individuum, the Human, the 'I Do What I Am', the Messiah. Both approaches have their pros and cons, and Russia nowadays is a battleground for the two (again).

In JCS, the story of Christ is rewritten as a story of the individual; a story of a idealistic madman who dies, not for idea(l)s but because of other people. By his death he declares his ideals, becoming the iconic representation of these ideals in the minds of people. His personality and deeds are erased, replaced by him as a personification of his ideals. Incidentally, this is as true of Judas as it is of Christ. That story of sacrifice and ascension has been retold in innumerable stories: *Hair*, *Platoon*, *One flew over the cuckoo's nest*, etc. and played out in many larps. In our larp, we wanted to create a rare opportunity to "strip away the myth from the man", experience them in their full complexity, play their stories, and see how myths are created.

Visions of Utopia

In a sense, the game was set in the USA of the end of the 1960's and the start of the 1970's, at a hippie festival; at the same time, it was also set in biblical Judea, and, in more than one sense, in modern day Russia.



The game space was centered on The Stage. Before the Stage the Saint Summer community radiated out in a rainbow of seven groups. Behind the Stage stood the Wall, beyond which was the System. Between the Stage and the Rainbow, there was a large open space. Completely by accident, in the middle of that space stood a single apple tree, which became, more or less by itself, the Tree of Eden. We placed a toy snake in it. The players then put a haystack under it, and it became the place of much merrymaking.

There were seven character groups, representing the colours of the rainbow. Each group was historically accurate as to 1960s USA, and each strove towards a different ideal of Utopia.

This, on one hand, created the conflict, and drove the game forward. On the other, all these teams fit together and, between them, fulfilled every need a society could have.

- Red was the New Left and Socialists. For them, Utopia was social justice, freedom and human rights.
- Orange was Brahmins. They sought Utopia through personal transformation, enlightenment through study, meditation and the teachings of gurus.
- Yellow, the Diggers, were the smallest group. They saw Utopia as the absence of suffering and hunger, and they fed, clothed, and cured everyone.
- Green, the largest group, were the Free Communes, the Flower Children, the iconic hippies: Utopia as eternal childhood, NeverNeverland.
- Cyan were gonzo journalists. Utopia was the Truth, and all the truth. For everybody.
- Blue. Bikers. Utopia as freedom. Urban nomads.
- Purple were the followers of Timothy Leary and Ken Kesey, they called themselves the Brotherhood of Happiness. They saw Utopia as a transcendence, and the freedom to do whatever you desire with your consciousness.

This rainbow was opposed by the Grays and Blacks of The System, a grotesque, cynical, and very efficient instrument of oppression: Police, Army, State Propaganda, and The Asylum. They, of course, had their own vision of Utopia: order, conformism, stability, sanity, victory.

Tools and Rules: Sex, Drugs and Rock-n-Roll

"After silence- that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music"

(Aldous Huxley)

Our game, as many Russian larps, was relatively rules heavy. Still, all the rules were carefully tailored to produce the theme and style of play we wanted. Without going into all the details, we'd like to outline the central game design elements that, in our eyes, 'made the game':

Sex, Drugs and the space beyond the Wall.

Music was the central medium of the game: everything, all the game rules, from sex to fighting to drugs, involved music. In contrast to other games with a musical engine, e.g. *Дом в котором Мир звучит/Dom v Kotorom mir Zvuchit/The House where the World Sounds...* (2012), where every character was enclosed in their own soundtrack, we made music a uniting experience. It was loud, coming from The Stage, as well as being created by the players, and it was as "Woodstocky" as we could make it.

Free love was of course an indispensable part of *Saint Summer*. Russian larps are quite shy, and most larp restrict diegetic sex or make it taboo. But not here. ☺

To express the pervasive nature of free love, the rules defined that anything creative done with music could be considered as having sex, if the participants so decided.

To express love as sharing, after the deed the players were told to exchange tokens of affection. These depended on the character's group: hippies gave bead bracelets, leftists pin buttons with slogans, bikers tattoos, etc.





Drugs came in three types of ingame drugs (we did not count the other stuff). The simplest, weed, was simulated by incense sticks, and it was everywhere. To 'light up', one put some appropriate music on, and lit the incense, and anyone could join if they wanted. The players were expected to behave more emotionally and be more empathic when high, but also to react more emotionally if things went bad. Personal chemical hallucinogens were modelled using playbuttons; small mp3 players that looked like pinbuttons with the game logo. Each playbutton contained a 10-30 minute story that guided the player down the rabbit hole.

About a dozen such tracks were recorded: a combination of music, sound effects, descriptions of what a character sees, as well as direct orders to do something, and a "post/after" effect. Everyone could get a button from a Purple group dealer.

Lastly, every night a shared trip on the Stage, led by the GMs and joined by everyone, set the atmosphere and, in some sense, agenda for the next day. The first night's trip, "Celebration of Misbehaving", was all about breaking free from The System.

It started as a humiliating lesson in a boarding school, and then morphed into a concert, where four deities: Jesus (accidentally female but it worked perfectly), Shiva, Bacchus, and a native American spirit, led the crowd in a Beatles singalong, sharing wine and chocolates.

The second shared trip, "Armageddon" focused on the fears of the 1970's. It started with everyone playing a competitive game of tag, with loud, somewhat aggressive music playing.

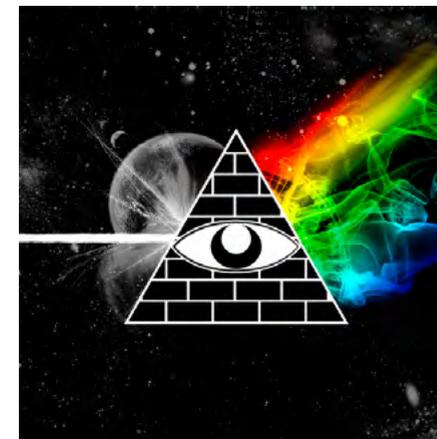
Gradually the game changed: the ones tagged were told to play dead, and increasingly violent clips were projected onto the Wall: Disney toons, then 1970's street riots, then Vietnam war, and lastly nuclear explosions. At the end everyone dropped dead, the video showed the aftermaths of nuclear war, and the theme song from the Requiem for the Dream was playing.

Whenever a character crossed the Wall, they momentarily left the game and went into a metagame 'limbo' where player, as an actor, decided with the GMs, as scriptwriters, where to take the character.

That was done because, in our experience, when the game changes drastically to the worse, many players either drop out of character or lose their motivation to play, and we wanted to give the players a moment to stand back, reset, and look at their character from a narrativist, not simulationist, perspective. We think it worked, because there was very intense gameplay beyond the Wall. Some players, however, hated this 'limbo', partially because a similar system was used in the larp *Стоимость Жизни / Stoimost' Jizni / The Value of Life* (2011), a powerful arthouse larp about consumerist society that left many players with a very bad aftertaste.

Prison, Asylum and Vietnam, locations beyond the Wall, were run by the GM team, providing "Passions"; hard moral choices for the character, pushing them to become either a Messiah or a Traitor (or, in one rare case, both). Those who chose sacrifice got a white rose and died; those who chose betrayal got a red rose and returned to Saint Summer. Players who did not choose at all returned as well, telling stories.

Of those, especially Vietnam was successful. We invited a dedicated group of players who, for the last seven years, have run a Vietnam war larp. They brought with them full Vietnam war kit, but more importantly, they brought the right atmosphere; the war mentality, the disgust of the hippies. From the start in the 'Fort Summer' bootcamp, heavy use of obscenity in marching songs stressed the harsh, masculine, polarised world of the war as opposed to the soft and inclusive Saint Summer.



Endspiel

At the end of the third day, the police raided and razed Saint Summer; the bulldozers mowed the Wall and the 'art installation' barricades. Many left before that. Most groups had traitors. Others stayed. The overt message of the larp was that Utopia is impossible because humans are made to fall. But the victory of the Utopia starts from its ruin. Messiah crucified, paradise lost, Woodstock ended, but in their destruction they create the dream, and the seed of hope.

To make the players feel this victory from the ruins, to feel this faith that is stronger than facts, we made the ending ambiguous: ingame, in the finale the police laid down their weapons, while the last news flash, released after the game, said that the police shot down everyone who stayed in Saint Summer. Many players did not believe the news flash, and argued passionately. That is exactly the moment we were driving for. The moment of belief that there is no death, that Jim Morrison still sings, that once in history, the Summer is forever.

Святое Лето/Sviatoe Leto/ Saint Summer

CREDITS: Olga 'Shaggy' Showman, Ekaterina 'Freexie' Godneva, Elena 'Mirish' Khanpira, Anna 'Shakty' Shekhova, Maria 'Lotta' Grubaya, Dmitry 'Mityaj' Gruby, Xenia 'Xenyaka' Kuznetsova, Seraphima 'Arnaksha' Melnikova, Mark 'Qwerty' Showman.

DATE: June 13-15, 2014

LOCATION: Empty field in the Moscow Region.

LENGTH: 3 days

PLAYERS: 97

BUDGET: ~€2.000

PARTICIPATION FEE: ~€25



Salon Moravia
Cabaret for women only

Radim Bondy



"If you don't tell, take a good look in the mirror so you remember what you looked like."
(Play, Michal Kovář)

The door shut and he was gone. At that moment, Evženie forgot his rank. But she would never forget his short moustache waving over her, how the lips under it were feverishly mumbling something in that repulsive language. How he snorted when he humped. She slid down to the floor. Her back against the wall, she lighted a cigarette and again read the letter with a brief and clear instruction. She spilled the powder from the little vial to the General's glass. Was he the same man with whom she slept that night? Evženie did not know that. Everything blurred together, she saw everything through a fog...

Salon Moravia was the first larp in Czechia organised for women only. A total of 40 players attended, and according to their ratings on the Czech and Slovak larp database, it was the best chamber larp in the Czechia and Slovakia.

It was a scripted narrative dramatic game set during World War II. The players could experience the ambiance of an exclusive brothel, the difficult role of women, and the burden of that historic era. Each player could influence the story by a series of decisions.

Salon Moravia had a detective plot which was the primary focus in the first two runs, but we gradually de-emphasised it. Starting from the third run, we included more political, national and social plots. We also emphasised the terror of inhumane actions. The conflicts among the players characters and between the characters and NPCs were expanded, concentrated and more strongly intertwined wherever player feedback showed us any weak spots.

In six (seven in case of the last two runs) approximately one-hour-long chapters, we followed the characters through six years of the duration of World War II in Czechoslovakia, and we gradually transformed the mood in the brothel using inputs (from NPCs and letters to characters).

We started out with an impression of luxury, carelessness and light flirting mood of the 1930's and gradually tightened the mood by the gradual disappearance of Jewish and Czech characters and the appearance of German soldiers during the occupation, and by messages from the characters' relatives about events in the country.

The diversity of *Salon Moravia's* employees reflected the diversity of the inhabitants of the Czechoslovak Republic at that time, including their nationalities (Czech, German, Slovak, Jewish), education (from illiterate to higher education and even business experience), social position (poor village girls as well as ladies originating from upstanding urban families), and even political ideas (from complete disinterest to excitement for the ideas of national socialism or communism).

"I really thought that their killing of one of us would be the worst that could happen... And then I saw another girl on the verge of collapsing to the ground... her face... I came to her and asked what was wrong. She handed me the letter and the attached yellow Jewish star. My mouth went dry. No. Not again. I cannot bear to lose another girl. I cannot let it happen. I quickly wiped her tears, took the letter, and told her: "Come with me. It won't happen again. We won't hear another shot from behind a closed door spelling death. This time, it will be different."



Before the game

The format was inspired by the lack of similar games around us and the apparent shallowness of female characters in various games we had played. We wanted to challenge ourselves to create believable, interesting and strong female characters.

We assigned the prepared roles according to a questionnaire wherein the players marked preferred types of experience, their comfort limits concerning intimacy and violence. They also prioritised preferred characters, marked interest in key game topics (romantics, violence, rape, betrayal, collaboration, death). According to feedback it would be preferable to update the comfort limits just before the game.

After selecting our players we would actively continue to work with them online. We had a dedicated Facebook group for each run and in the months and weeks before the game we would discuss any issues concerning the game itself, their clothing (which they had to arrange themselves), make-up, hair styling, etc. A useful technique for verifying the players' engagement in the pre-game online activities was asking them to "like" it to confirm that they had read and acknowledged it.

In the entire game we strived to create a 360° illusion of authenticity, but we did not maintain historic accuracy; our aim was only to represent the ambiance of the era. We therefore focused on selecting the right location and supplied a lot of material to the game: paper money, uniforms, handwritten letters, photos, and various other items. In all possible extent we also modified the locations to minimise modern features (although we were obviously limited to reversible changes).

We decided not to use *Ars Amandi* or any other representation of eroticism to keep our game as technique-less as possible.

Our solution was simple and relied on our NPC players' responsibility. As a player would approach her intimacy limit, she could use the safe word "decadence" (selected so that it would not disturb the game). One could also encourage her partner to be more courageous using another key word. We used a similar technique for alcohol - when ordering a drink the players could order "as usual" to get water. This technique was inspired by the *Skoro Rassvet* larp.

After the second run we also modified and expanded most characters focusing on their political and nationalist ideas. Before each run we expanded the NPC team from the original six to the final thirteen people who represented more than twenty characters. We also added a new expendable player character to further tighten the mood in the game by killing her off after about a third of the game. This deeply impacted the other players as this "cuckoo" player would register, engage in pre-game activities and played the first third as one them.

The players much appreciated our selection and management of the NPC players. We always chose people we knew personally to be responsible, which was necessary to make sure that no NPC would surpass any player's comfort level. Most of them were even willing to shave mid-game to better separate the different NPCs they portrayed.

We designed the conclusion by escalating all plots before the arrival of looting revolutionary militia and Soviet soldiers who punished virtually the entire staff of the brothel for collaboration with the Germans. This punishment was deliberately inadequate and unfair to drive forward the point of injustice and randomness of certain historic events. The game ended with us turning off the lights mid-scene, and one of us would read aloud the outros for all the player characters and major NPCs, reflecting the players' choices.



- "Don't be shy!" (Play, Jiří Dukát)
- "My dear daughter..." (Play, Jiří Dukát)
- "Rose-tinted glasses?" (Play, Jiří Dukát)

- "Peace in our time" (Play, Jiří Dukát)
- "A new age..." (Play, Jiří Dukát)
- "Who could pay more?" (Play, Jiří Dukát)

- "Dear sister, I must go and protect the right of everyone to live in freedom. I hope you understand." (Play, Jiří Dukát)

"Tears... tears everywhere. How many girls did I have to console? How many trickles flowing down their cheeks did I have to wipe? I had to pretend everything was alright and that it would end soon... But it won't. I realised that after that Kraut led me downstairs, humiliated me and took me roughly and violently. We are all collaborator whores. Nothing more, our pride, honour and conscience, everything gone.

I see his face in front of me, feel his hands taking me and hear his voice talking to me. Does it make it any better that I did it for her so that she has enough money for her baby girl? I doubt it. I fall to the floor, pulling my hair with one hand and helplessly slapping the wall with the other. One of the girls appears. She pushed a glass in my hand and she said precisely what I always said. "It's going to be alright." Does she know that it never will?"

The post-game responses were generally very favourable, while providing us with useful feedback especially in the first two runs. We realised that people were expecting a more mature and terrifying game than we initially envisioned. Some of the players were also very creative and provided us with post-game stories from the characters' perspective, initiated an after-party a few weeks later and even filmed video confessions. We would like to provide some space for the players' own comments from the Czech and Slovak larp database.

"There occurred several emotions that permeated through all of us girls... It was fear, hopelessness, humiliation, fleeting joy and inner strength allowing us to get up and keep going."

(Šuhi, player)

"The game is very well thought-out. For the entire time I felt my decisions are my own, that I can choose and that nothing in the organisation manipulates me, and even so they could steer my story where they needed. As much as I can tell each player's story was full and intensive, everyone was a main character with enough to do, and each experienced their own burdens.

The NPCs were crucial for this, there were more of them than players, and most played several roles over time, which was expressed by very different costumes and roleplaying. Most conflicts in game therefore were not between the players, but occurred due to the need to respond to external inputs (speeches in the radio, letters and NPC plots) which nevertheless felt very natural."

(Katerina Midori, player)



"...I salute the organisers because in this topic I am quite sensitive to excessive tear-jerking and historic lapses, and I encountered none of that here. In contrast, most big topics in the game were presented in a very believable manner and not black-and-white, which I appreciated a lot. For me was tense, dramatic, well-escalated and full of strong emotions. I would like to give extra praise to the NPCs – the gentlemen were awesome and perfect..."

(Mivka, player)

"Before the first run I was a little worried about characters designed without prepared relations and clearly defined goals, but it was a pleasant surprise how such "incomplete" characters developed directly in-game under the pressure of external inputs. Each character has scenes prepared just for her which I really appreciated."

(Lujza, player)



Salon Moravia

CREDITS: Radim Bondy, Veronika Bondyová, Jan Fiala, Blanka Hanzlová, Sára Komarová, Anežka Müller (by surname in alphabetic appearance)
DATE: 17.11.2012, 02.02.2013, 16.11.2013, 22.11.2014
LOCATION: Brno, Czech Republic (and Slavkov u Brna for the last run)
LENGTH: 6 - 7 hours + one hour pre-game workshop
PLAYERS: 10 players, 6-13 NPCs

BUDGET: €1.000
PARTICIPATION FEE: €17 per player (average)
GAME MECHANICS: Minimal, only safe words for intimacy, violence and alcohol.

Web site

www.pojd.name/salon





Skoro Rassvet

Vodka, tears and Dostoyevsky

Tomáš Hampejs

□ The family of Derevyanskiy in front of their family villa. (Play, Martin Buchčík)



"My new novel is very special. It is not about people, Yelena Pavlovna! People are just characters, it is about life itself!" (Play, Martin Buchčík)

"Man will vanquish by his will and reason over the nature. He will understand that he is mortal that he has now hope for resurrection and he will accept death and he will accept it with satisfaction. He will be as God and everything will be allowed to him and as soon as man becomes God any law will cease to apply. Everything will be allowed!"

(F. M. Dostoyevsky –The Brothers Karamazov)

Breaking dawn at a Moscow villa

Skoro Rassvet was a Czech larp for fifteen people using topics from the history and literature of 19th century Russia. The design project strived to create an atmospheric „all inclusive“ repeatable larp (players get the game in a ready-to-run packaged weekend experience) with seven hours of emotionally and intellectually intense immersive gameplay.

The game was full of personal existential dramas on the background of social and cultural changes of the era. The players enacted detailed and mutually entangled characters from the Russian aristocracy during a small household celebration in the year 1855, shortly after the Crimean War. The dramatic arcs of the individual roles were designed as tense opportunities for meaningful personal transformations mirroring the global dimensions of both historical and cultural clashes of modernity with tradition.

To an outside observer, it may seem that the game was aiming at material and cultural authenticity. Nevertheless, it was more of a gently molded theatrical illusion and a carefully constructed interactive abstraction from Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy books and Chekhov plays.

The historical background was utilized as a meaningful reference frame for the plots and material culture of the game, where the chosen themes, substories and characters from the books were reconstructed into new, yet still recognizable forms that were the real moving forces behind the dramatic animation.

To create a cultural experience of the „other“

The main design challenge was to create a both sensual and reflective experience of the „cultural other“ in the scaffolding of an interpersonal drama larp. The atmospheric elements of the game; like costumes, cuisine of the period, combat pistols, glasses of vodka and verbally abundant toasts, also had their substantive place in the game's interactions mechanics.

They were designed as extra-diegetically minimalist, following the Nordic larp tradition, which stresses the overlaps of the abilities of the characters and players. The aim was to connect each background element of the setting with an opportunity to act. Cultural references weren't just a static frame.

The game provided the frame for living in a Russian novel through the scripted plots (based mainly on mutual character conflicts). But they were meant to feel more like a frame of possibilities to play from personal interpretation of the game topics, than at set of instructions.

Different game layers were meant to create synergic effects able to elicit and maintain the atmospheric and effective bodies of the story so the players could seamlessly concentrate on the creation and perception of the individual game experience for themselves and each other.

The managing of the game development used some external stimuli and a basic frame of scripted events, but the main dramatic action was facilitated by players themselves; by their own mutual mediation of conflicts, resolutions or kind-hearted agreements and sharing of thoughts.

The enactment of a dramatic game, ie. the timing, was in the player's hands. The freedom of play was ensured by five organizers, playing silent servants (muzhiks), who managed the household (mainly taking care of the food and drinks) and who could, through this diegetic presence, maintain an indirect influence on the game itself and perceive its heartbeat.

Teaching to believe in God, Czar and Russia

For this almost self-managed gameplay, the background and how-to-play workshops were a crucial part of the larp event. They took more time than the game itself and went through small interactive lectures to theatrical enactment of pregame scenes.

The players were encouraged to play the game on the borders of immersive (from feeling and experience) and dramatic (for the visible dramatic gesture) role-playing. *Rassvet* was in its core an extended conversational chamber larp, but the workshops enabled and taught players to live the small everyday moments as the dramatic ones, so they were able to enjoy the game in the „silent“ natural pauses of their own drama cycles.

The content of the workshops led the players through brief historical facts, where the focus was more on the mentality and lifestyle rather than political history. The triad of values – God, Czar and Russia were amplified through the workshops so that the player could feel comfortable with their character's position on these values and in the best scenario, could portray their own philosophical life reflections in the language of the game.

An interesting level of the game and one of the design challenges was creating gameplay of the everydayness of the Russian Orthodox religion and private family life.



There was no direct religious authority and we wanted players to breathe in the religious thinking and behavior, to feel the Dostoyevsky stress of religion as a moral structure, but did not want the religious themes to dominate the game.

Religion was then designed mainly as a cultural background source, but an entangled source - the opportunity and constraint to act at the same time. At the end it definitely was a part of many in-game conversations, where the religious notions served as tools for the social world structure and borders exploration through the contrasts of eternal and temporal orders of reality. The players had to consume a lot of background information, but to the surprise of organizers, the explicit feedback just for these parts of the experience was generally very positive.

Beyond talking – living in the book itself

Rassvet was not a static club of talking intellectuals, the philosophical content was actually more enacted by the gameplay itself than in abstract words due to its theatrical origins. The universal (or at least in the Eurocentric sense universal) values and entanglements of human life hanging in the larger net of specific strong socio-cultural constraints were „materially present“ in the air.

The collective shared representations, partly existing in the players' minds and partly in the organic, the enacted instance of social order constructed a reference frame in which small gestures and accidentally overheard words could be highly meaningful. This was one of the most interesting emergent effects of the game; the players often created their own encounters transcending seamlessly the initial design of character relations and drama opportunities.

It was usually not by their own dramatic reflection and action, but through the intuitions of immersive feeling of the enacted role. From this moment and on, there was a stable layer of „living“ the game content instead of just „playing“. In almost every game, there were players who reported strong after-effect experiences. Individual player experiences of course significantly differed based on their own immersive capacities and habits, but the main effect was not only a personal emotional experience. The players felt that they were a part of an organic story, and the game immersion got to the collective level.

For all this - huge credit belongs to the literary sources of Russian classics, which are truly masterpieces of combining everyday problems with the universal dimensions of human life. As Sigmund Freud said, Dostoyevsky was without doubt one of the greatest psychologists of the 19th century, and this praise could probably be extended to many other authors of that time and space. To play the game, it was not necessary to have a personal reading experience with Russian 19th century novels, but the players who had were able to achieve wonders with seamlessly taking the fiction beyond any explicit game design. As one of them said:

| „... it was like living in the book itself“.

The characters of the game were written with detailed interpersonal relations, their selves were not given by their ego description, but were described as dramatic transactions with other characters and shared life events. The game core event contained an encounter of three interconnected families, where many characters shared life-forming histories. Nevertheless, the game design stressed brief dramatic sketches more than rich written novel-style personal history.

Role descriptions briefly portrayed what the character had done and how, but usually not exactly why – this was open to the player's interpretation. To familiarize the player with the mood and fate of a character, they were also framed emotionally by specific music. During the game no mood enhancing extradiegetic instruments were used, but prior to the game and at the finale Russian folk music was used as atmospheric background. Many players were able to connect their game experience with the music, and it helped them to position the whole larp deeper into the depicted cultural context.

Technique - synergic combination of the known

To balance the appraisal of the game and its principles, it should be said that the game design itself was an organic process and even after almost 10 runs, it is not easy to assess whether the game was intended like that from the beginning and how it just happened that way during the year and half of the creation process. Behind the larp was a diverse team of six people, who joined their forces just for this project.

Many layers and details are a product of distributed process of co-creation – writing *Skoro Rassvet* was a special and spontaneous experience itself. From its beginnings, the project aimed at the form innovation – it wanted to explore the medium format game, which is strongly based on real cultural background. It wanted to translate the cultural experience of the specific „other“ and prepare a game, which utilizes larp fun as a means for transformative learning experience.

That was successful, but moreover, something new was discovered in the process. The treasure of larp innovation does not lie in one new technique, but in a precise synergic combination of the known.

Rassvet has been praised by its players exactly for that – for soft and many interconnected layers of content, which enable slow but deep and gradual immersive journey to the storyscape where, in the roots, is the life itself.

Skoro Rassvet

CREDITS: Martin Buchtík, Sarah Komarová, Petr Platil, Markéta Haladová, Tomáš Hampejs, Jaromír Vybíhal
LOCATION: Hunting villa Vacíkov, Czech Republic
LENGTH: 12h workshops, 7h game
PLAYERS: 15 players (7 men, 8 women), 5 organizers per run (7 runs in total)
BUDGET: €700 (for each run)
PARTICIPATION FEE: €50
GAME MECHANICS: dramatic/immersive play, play to lose, 360° aspiration, pre-written characters

Web site

rassvet.cz





Ticket to Atlantis

Fear, Love, Death, Life...

Nadezhda Vechorek, Vasily "Jolaf" Zakharov



Welcome to Atlantis. (Play, Julia Tishkova)

Atlantis is a small town in Washington, USA. It's surrounded by woods, has no phone line, and the mail service works poorly. The only way to come there is by the railway, and the train is the only way to leave. The ticket office is closed, and the quizzical Conductor (somewhat resembling O. G. Grant) won't let you on the train without a golden ticket. Sometimes a swirling mist comes from the forest, people not hasty enough to hide in their homes and caught by the mist on the streets get ill, or die. But that is not a problem – as everybody who comes to Atlantis is already dead.

Characters of our larp didn't notice their death, and all of them decided to board a train to Atlantis for some reason. Some were escaping something, others were looking for a place to start a new life. Some were just traveling without a particular destination. They thought they got a shiny golden ticket to Atlantis in the moment when they actually died. We asked players to fabricate how their characters got their tickets. Their choices varied from trivial; "bought at the ticket office" to strange; "found in a dead man's belongings" or unlikely; "someone forgot it on a cafe table". We wrote how the character really died based on these stories. For example, the man who thought he had won the ticket playing poker was actually shot by the loser in a poker game.

Our players didn't know that their characters actually died in "reality". Their characters thought they just moved to a new place, having decided to change something in their life. Having come to Atlantis at the beginning of the larp, they did what any of us would do if we were them – looked for accommodation and jobs, got settled, talked, danced, drank...

Participants still had to find out that their characters were already dead – either by dying in-game, or after the game from game masters.

Inspiration

Ticket to Atlantis was a synergy of music, electronics, Stephen King's despairing nostalgia about the lost 60's and the question of what is death and what lies beyond.

Using music as a meta-technique, as a building block of a larp in one way or another, has been a trend in Russian larps for the last five years.

Our design team gathered three years ago to create a fully music-based larp *House where the world sounds...* (2012) based on a Russian bestseller novel *House where...* (2009) by Mariam Petrosyan. We were so fascinated with how our "musical engine" worked, that we decided to definitely do something more with it.

In *House* portable MP3 players were used, and the participants had to switch their musical tracks manually, according to specific rules. But in the following year Moscow electronics-for-larp engineers from Ostranna CG made a step forward, so for *Ticket to Atlantis* we were able to use custom made electronic devices that could switch music tracks automatically, depending on where the player was and what other players were around.

We read *Hearts in Atlantis* and are fond of this book. Music is extremely important for its characters, for the atmosphere, and for the book as a whole. Having our experience in creating and participating in music-based larps the idea of making *Atlantis* into a larp was pretty obvious.

In the team, we are all in our 20's or 30's. We heard about the 60's, Stephen King's Atlantis, we read about the epoch, we watched movies, we felt that anguish at the 60's King writes about, and we regret we weren't there. We are afraid of the 60's because we know what they did to people.



Inspirational pieces: Stephen King's Hearts in Atlantis (mostly second half), Interstate 60 (2002), Twin Peaks (1990), Across the Universe (2007), Hair (1979), Platoon (1986)

Hearts in Atlantis is not about the 60's, it's about people who survived the 60's, and are still somehow connected to them. And so was our larp.

Ultimately, we wanted to talk about death. Death is a thing that's frightening yet marvelous; marvelously frightening. One is afraid to die, and to deal with that fear, to live with that fear, one has to talk about it. That was our idea. But such talk is not easy, and not many people are ready for this talk right away. So we decided to talk about death without naming it. We decided to ask some questions and find some answers before saying what we were talking about out loud.

Afterdeath

We wanted the players to find out what was going on during the larp. It was possible when they died – from a knife, or bullet, sudden illness or a touch of mist. So in-game death was the major instrument here.

Those who died went out-of-character to a special designated place just outside the playground. What they found there was a room with walls covered with 1970 newspapers from all corners of the USA, with obituaries in them of all the characters with circumstances of their death; photos and short biographical accounts. In that moment they understood at least that what just happened was definitely not death in the usual sense.

After taking one's time in the newspaper room, overwhelmed players went to another room representing a train car, and an NPC representing a random, semi-real fellow passenger, almost an inner voice, talked to them for some time while the wheels rattled, helping to sort out what happened and to embrace the new state of mind.

In most cases it wasn't a fully in-game talk, but rather a conversation of two people (each of them just slightly covered by their roles) about life and death.

We tried to make it as comfortable for players as possible and used this communication, besides other, to find out if the player wanted to play on. And to play on was not so easy – as the train was heading back to Atlantis, and player stepped off the train on the same station, in the same role, with all the character's memory intact.

The only thing that changed was character's name, confusing and arousing suspicions in fellow citizens. Special Dark Secret rules prevented the returning characters from discussing the fact that everybody in town were already dead, and forcing them to deny the idea that they had been in the town before and not just recently arrived by train.

We never considered Atlantis as Hell, or Heaven, or Purgatory, and avoided religious rhetoric altogether. We thought of it as of a place where some people went after they died, just because that was the place they needed to go to sort out what they really needed to sort out, but hadn't had a chance to while living.

We refused to judge characters in any manner on purpose. According to our idea, Atlantis consisted of common beliefs of people who came there. They thought it was normal for money to exist and to be dollars – and hence there were dollars.

They wanted to have a lot of money – and hence the salary for one hour's work was a thousand dollars. They had subconscious fears – and hence there was the fearful mist (represented by NPCs in silver gowns and masks, bearing smoke flares).



They had an inner demand for order and the habit of having a job – and hence the town had a Selective Service System office, paying good money for sorting the forms of draftees (with their name, age, color, family, children, job, education etc.) to decide who would go to Vietnam and who would stay in the rear. Grave ethical disputes sometimes arose over these essentially faceless papers.

We tried hard to create the fundamentals; the core of each player's game, not of some events but of their character, and insisted on players creating characters as elaborate and interesting as possible. Besides other issues we asked players to take note of Important People who changed their character's life in the past or just sunk deep in their minds, and of an Important Item that once meant a lot to a character (like a handgun that misfired at a suicide attempt), but were lost long ago.

For each character we looked for similarities, “reflections” of their important people in other characters and used the “music engine” to suggest feelings similar to those they had had towards their Important People to occur when they met the corresponding characters.

One could leave Atlantis – by finding the right person who could give them a ticket to a departing train and saying the right words to him – essentially stating that one had had enough of this town and was ready to move on. The train would take them away – ending the larp for the player and taking the character... who knows where, but definitely to some place where they needed to be.

The Music Engine

In larps designed using a technique that we call “the music engine” music mostly doesn't exist for the character. It serves like a personal soundtrack to the player's experience, and suggests character's emotional state.

While creating the characters, players sent us a number of musical tracks, and specified for each track what emotions this music evoked in them. Or, in other words, what music should play when the character was in that particular emotional state.

We used such emotions as happiness, sadness, joy, fear, interest, anticipation, despair and so on. For *Ticket to Atlantis*, we created a list of 80 emotions that thus could be provided with special soundtracks, and the number of music tracks players sent us varied from 50 (when a participant used just one track for some of the emotions) to 500 (multiple tracks for each supported emotion).

All the player's music and information on emotions was put into an electronic device we call Armllet, that players wore on their wrist. This device played music like a portable MP3 player into the participant's ears via earphones so a player had a continuous soundtrack for their larp.

The earphones had to be picked and adjusted carefully beforehand so that player's ears could endure many hours of continuous use and players could listen to the music and perceive the surrounding sounds in the same time.

Armllet is an STM32-microcontroller (the same kind that is used in modern “smart watches”) based device with a screen, some buttons, digital audio playback chip, standard earphones jack and digital radio chip for data exchange in range of up to 30 meters. Other devices of similar design but simpler, with no screen, etc. (we call them Beacons) were placed around the playground marking specific in-game locations.

All the devices were constantly exchanging data packets, and thus each player’s Armllet knew where the player was (by receiving data packets from Beacons) and what other players were around (by receiving data packets from other Armllets), and who was closer (judging by radio signal strength). Using this information and information on emotion-to-music relations specified by the player, Armllet chose what music to play. Reacting on characters that were reflections of one’s Important People was the most notable case.

The critical point that makes this approach completely different from every other way the music is used in Russian larps is:

Organizers didn’t choose music for the larp and didn’t have to rely on it would trigger the desirable emotions in the players. Instead, the music is chosen by players for themselves according to their own musical taste and emotional reactions. The electronic device maps the emotions (specified by organizers for different situations) to the particular player’s music, thus creating for players their own, special, unique soundtrack that pulls exactly the right strings in the right moments.

In some situations instead of music a player could hear a voice describing their feelings or giving them imperative instructions. It was used for drug effects and in case of a character’s in-game death. Drugs were represented by tiny electronic “pills” connected to Armllet, and lack of a pill in case of addiction caused continuous playing of a special addiction track that forced out all other music for hours, until a new pill was obtained.

The player’s ability to influence the device directly was very limited and rarely needed, thus most of the time player could just listen to the music. A player could only specify (using Armllet keypad) a limited number of intentions (like going to kill someone), and Armllet reacted, for example, waiting for some time (representing the character psyching herself) and then playing a special music track (that a player specifically chose for killing), and while the music was playing the character could actually kill – hence the combat rules.

Passing one of the earphones to another player was treated as empathy, a desire to share one’s feelings with another person. However, different people naturally feel different emotions while listening to the same music. This pretty well represented the chasm of human misunderstanding. Sex was represented by taking some of the clothes off and dancing while sharing earphones and listening to one of the players’ special sex music.

Most other rules of the larp (like rules for representing brawls) was also based on some special tracks that could be played by Armllet at some particular time or as a result of player’s interaction with Armllet.

The Forest

Atlantis is surrounded by woods and we made the forest a mystical place, accessible at night only, much similar to the Black/White Lodge in *Twin Peaks*. There were gazebos there, depicting typical locations in a typical American expression of that epoch – boy scout tent, movie theatre, perfect housewife’s living room, Vietnam bush trench and so on.

In those places there were Important Items of the characters. Having another character’s Important Item could give you enormous (and definitely not kind) power over that character, but you could bring only one object from the woods so you had to choose whether to take your own item or someone else’s.

The woods had a special soundtrack, and gazebos were connected by trails made of LEDs (essentially Beacons) that reacted to Armllet presence by lighting up before a character, and going off behind them, and one only could walk from one LED to another. Different trails reacted to different characters, so each character had to find their own way in the woods.

Perspectives

Though created in Russia with little to no awareness about Nordic larps, the game seems to follow the Nordic tradition pretty closely. It lasted without interruption for 38 hours, and it used some meta-techniques like music as an instrument for influencing player to affect characters. Of course, Armllets and earphones didn’t exist in-game, a train car was symbolically represented by a room with properly

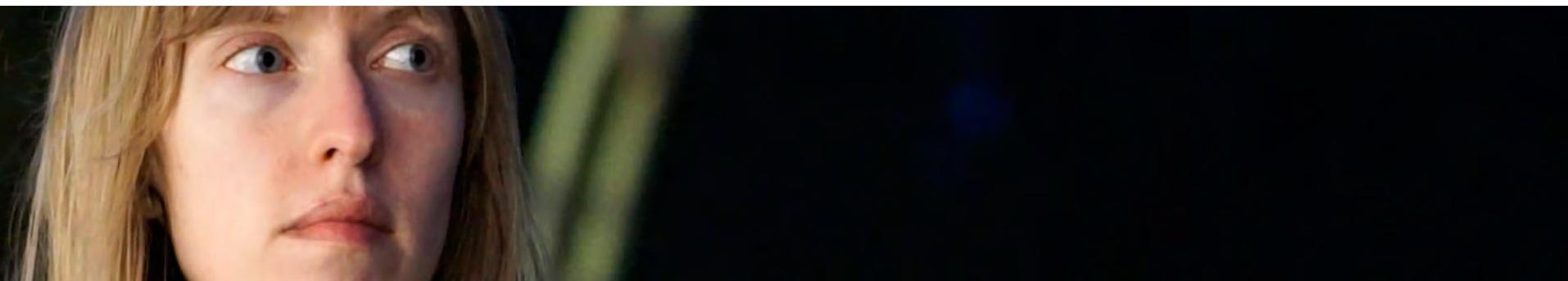
arranged chairs, and NPCs in gray were only representations of swirls of mist, but mostly what you saw in the game was what your character saw. Moreover the larp was psychologically challenging and made participants face some existential issues.

It was our second larp using the Music Engine. In general, it used the same paradigm as our *House where the World Sounds...* (2012) though the technique was almost fully automated, creating a personal context-based soundtrack for each player, reducing player’s interference to minimum.

There have been something like 5 - 10 music-based larps in Russia, the trend appeared around the beginning of 2010’s, though games besides the two mentioned above used completely different approaches to using music.

Another important game that must be mentioned here is *Saint Summer* (Moscow region, June 2014). Based on *Hair*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Across the Universe* and *The Wall* and created by our friends completely independently of *Ticket to Atlantis*, that rock-musical larp explored the 60’s at their peak – with sex, drugs, rock’n’roll and Vietnam war.

From a musical point of view, it was a complete opposite to *Ticket to Atlantis* – it used a stage, loudspeakers and hit music to set the pitch and drive the action of the whole game from one extreme to another. Set a few years before *Ticket to Atlantis* and held three months before, it served as a prequel for a number of players who participated in both projects, some of them playing the same characters. It is also featured in this book.



Reactions

We were doing what we called “a kind larp about the good”, though it was neither simple to do nor easy to play. It appeared to be a larp about realizing some simple yet important things. One of our players, talking to an NPC on a “train” after his character died, said that besides his own death, he was much more disappointed with the fact that all other the nice and wonderful people he met in Atlantis were in fact dead.

The fact that they were dead made them less valuable to him. Well, we tried to convey the idea that death is a choice. Some people die by their own choice long before their actual death, and some continue living even after they die. Our characters had no real cause to consider themselves dead except the fact itself, presented to them in the way of obituary. They could live on, the only thing they needed was the courage to live on. Death has no power over those not afraid to live.

We should say that in the end, after a larp that definitely was not easy; even really difficult, after some reconciliation with themselves, most players came to feel what they called “warm aftertaste”. And we felt a lot of joy after reading reports about the larp settling down in heads and hearts, people giving up pain and struggle and moving on with joy. It was very warming to hear something like “It wasn’t a larp about death. It was a game about life and about the absence of death”. We are very thankful to our players for saying that and helping us to believe it’s true. We end with some quotes from reports:

Atlantis was a larp about life that looks like death to those who gave way to fear. I don’t know if I overcame my fear. But I know that this larp made me touch the most frightful fear in my life, fear that pursues me all my life.

(Oleg “Luterian” Lutin, player)



During the larp I faced all my hidden fears: the fear of loneliness, the fear of losing the sense of living, losing the anchor, losing my place in the world. Sometimes this fear raised up to panic, when the Mist appeared and my head was full of Toccata and Fugue in D minor that scared me in my childhood. When my character was killed in the middle of the larp I suffered from the character’s death much less than from my inner player’s fears.

(Olga “Vorobeyka” Vorobyeva, player)

Ticket to Atlantis

CREDITS: Nadezhda Vechorek, Vasily “Jolaf” Zakharov, Evgeniya “Nel” Patarakina, Philipp “Phil” Kozin, Dmitry “Kudryavyj” Roldugin, Anastasiya “Suliven” Dobrovolskaya. Electronics development, Ostranna Creative Group: Gennady “Krey!” Kruglov, Roman “Jam” Leonov
DATE: September 11-14, 2014
LOCATION: Rented summer houses near Moscow, Russia
LENGTH: 38 hours
PLAYERS: 70
BUDGET: ~€6.000
PARTICIPATION FEE: ~€85

Web site

Atlantis1970.livejournal.com/271.html

For me it was a larp of life and one’s place in it. It was about you really can put off the question of whether you should get back to depressing past or start something new, over and over again. Or you can admit there’s no longer you for that past and change your life. Hopefully, to the better.

Alexander “Eden” Raev

For me it was a larp, like someone said, about death that becomes life when you feel love. It was a larp about love and loved ones. I recalled why it is so important to love, why is it pleasing and what does it mean to have someone important by your side. And I recalled that there’s no death.

Sergey “Opalennyj” Belov



A woman lies on her side in a snowy outdoor setting, her right hand smeared with blood. A police officer in a dark uniform and cap kneels beside her, looking down with a somber expression. A black and white dog lies on the snow in the foreground. The background shows a chain-link fence and snow-covered trees.

Tonnin stiflat: Season One

To booze or not to booze...

Simo Järvelä & Niina Niskanen

□ Police officer Mujunen pays for her mistake.
(Play, Tuomas Puikkonen)

Setting

Helsinki in the 1920's: urbanization, the admiring gaze towards Europe; jazz and lipstick, daring women entering the public sphere; a country divided by the bitter civil war in 1918; prohibition and the tsunami of illegal alcohol and booze-related crimes. The perfect setting for a larp, and as Niina had published two novels set in the same milieu a reasonable amount of research was already done.

Helsinki as a city and a state of mind was a central theme in *Tonnin stiftat* (Thousand Mark Shoes). Therefore we decided to make the most of it and play in the streets. Helsinki has, of course, changed in 100 years, but especially in the city center plenty of old architecture, cafés, restaurants and parks still remain or have the same atmosphere as in the twenties. The omnipresent modernity cannot be avoided, though, so we focused the game to areas with the most suitable architecture and atmosphere. However, playing in *Tonnin stiftat* certainly demanded selective attention and active disregarding of a lot of surrounding anachronisms.

Stories

One of the main stories was, of course, bootlegging. Two leagues competed over clients and deals, and the plot thickened in the first game as the other boss was arrested and her right hand woman accidentally shot by a police officer.

This was pre-planned to create a power vacuum for other characters to fill. The arrest and the death also launched several smaller plots.

The civil war fought soon after the declaration of independence from Russia has effects even now, let alone only ten years later. Consequently, politics were present also in *Tonnin stiftat* and many characters had conflicts dating back to the civil war.

The stain of communism sat hard on the defeated - those who survived prison camps, diseases and hunger. The communist workers in *Tonnin stiftat* were hard working, sick and poor, but strong in their ideology. Their actions crossed with the security police, which resulted in one of the most violent scenes in the game.

The twenties can also be seen as a stage for art, obliquities and the decadent. Paris, for a few characters, glittered as a paradise full of drugs, luxury, art and love. This kind of life also had its reverse side of addiction, abuse, venereal disease and general not-being-in-the-paradise, a constant longing for something better. The young painter gave herself to her godfather's use in exchange for money and art education, and sat finally by his bed when syphilis devoured him into painful death. The conservative teacher struggled with hopeless love and a death in his past, and the only escape was suicide.

Murder is part of the noir genre, and where there is murder, there is revenge. As death in larp easily becomes a short term curiosity and is soon forgotten, every death in the game was initiated or authorised by us. An apothecary found dead, triggered the detective's game, and the death of the bootlegger caused her sweetheart and friends to seek revenge. Both cases were solved in their own way in the last game.

Characters

The 18 characters were written iteratively in collaboration. After the casting, the core concepts of the characters were written into full characters by us, and after the pre-game workshop and players' own additions and changes, the final version of the character was written. The players had a big responsibility in fleshing out their character and in specifying relations to other characters. In-depth personal histories etc. were also up to the players to develop, while we focused on the functional core of the character.

The players were chosen from the roughly 70 registrants. The casting was made on the basis of mainly two things: player's enrolment info including her (or his) wishes and capabilities, and our aim to avoid conservative gender stereotypes.

The core character concepts were gender neutral, and players could also choose their character's sex. Our principle - and our only explicit anachronism - was that gender should not limit the characters' actions or possibilities in any way. To name a few, the cynical private detective was female and the luxury-yearning prostitute male, the heroic bootlegger was male but as smuggling bosses we had powerful queens, not kings. In the end, we were quite happy with the casting as players' wishes and our vision aligned nicely.

It was also possible to enroll as supporting cast. The supporting cast of roughly 40 was the most central and multifaceted tool used in the game. Their task was to create pre-planned scenes, enliven character histories, bring in new plots, surprises and information, be found dead or die in the hands of the characters, perform music and dance, etc. A supporting role could last the whole season and develop in different ways, or it could be a ten-minute scene with only one player in it. The supporting cast were instructed carefully for each scene they appeared in so they knew their purpose and the aim of the scene. They acted as instructed or improvised to the desired direction.



□ From grief arises revenge. (Play, Tuomas Puikkonen)



□ Bootleggers have dragged a torpedo full of spirits to the shore. The police will soon attack. (Play, Tuomas Puikkonen)

Design

The design in *Tonnin stiflat* aimed towards high precision experience design. The idea was to provide individually tailored experience for each player. This required a different set of tools than e.g. larps relying on brute force designed sandbox or 360-illusion. The small number of players enabled us to do precision work that would not have been possible in a larger larp without significant increase in resources.

The central design goal of *Stiflat* was high resolution social interaction between dramatically interesting yet realistically portrayed characters. For this we wanted a strong emphasis on power structures and relations between characters. It was essential that all plots and storylines would somehow concretely materialize during the game-play. The characters were forced to make choices that had consequences inside the game, and those choices would ultimately form a unique story arc for each character and climax in the third episode.

Most of the design tools used were tools that increase control over the larp. However it was of utmost importance that they were utilized in a manner that does not sacrifice what we consider the essence of roleplaying -- immersion, action in character, high definition social interaction between characters and meaningful decision making that has consequences in the larp. Indeed, by increasing control and stepping away from purely open sandbox playing, we aimed at enabling those features and providing solid structures to support them.



Tools

Tonnin stiflat utilized a selected set of tools to enable gameplay that elicits the type of player experience we were after. Our toolset included pre-game workshopping, iterative character creation, supporting cast, pre-planned scenes, meta instructions, custom debriefing methods, reporting and multi directional feedback, etc. Pre-planned and scheduled scenes were one of the defining design features of *Stiflat*.

In their written briefs before the game the players had a schedule for the game and typically from two to five different pre-planned scenes. The scenes varied significantly in duration, the amount preparations and supporting cast involved, and the degree of fateplay involved. These were designed in order to guide the storylines, dramatic structures and geographic locations of the players so that all players would have game that is meaningful, full -- but not too full -- of action, where their wishes are fulfilled, and that would provide maximum support for character interaction and dynamics.



We also tried to schedule sufficient time for free flowing playing so that the pre-scheduled scenes would not dominate the larp entirely and that the players wouldn't feel that they have no agency in the game.

Different types of meta instructions were also used in directing the players to act in a desired manner, to explicate interaction possibilities, and to enable interimmersion and the support of other players' character concepts. These were always given well in advance so that the required steering would feel more natural. All characters had a weakness and a strength that was known to all players ("X is willing to do anything for money and luxury", or "It is very easy to open up and discuss private matters with Y"). Also from episode to episode, we had varying meta instructions to direct the play and encourage certain interactions (e.g. "Accuse X of apothecary's murder", "Pay attention to Y's mood", "Recount how tough it is to be a private detective to the bartender"). We designed all meta instructions to activate, enable, and drive things forward instead of disabling or blocking anything.

In retrospect

"...this really was one of the best games I ever been to, and I don't how to thank you so that it would convey the message. Technically this was very well conducted: railroading, scenes, the use of supporting cast and the whole structure of the game was all fantastic -- I have never been in a game that would have been so much built for my character and that had such a clear story arc and still have so much everything else going on around you at the same time."

(Player)

"This game showed me I can feel uncertainty, anxiety, guilt, comradeship, desperation and love in a refreshing way when larping. Not many games elicit these feelings."

(Player)

Looking back at *Tonnin stiflat: Season One*, we can say that we succeeded in what we set out to achieve. Not everything went 100% as planned and there is always room to improve, but overall we are very satisfied. We managed to share our vision with players, and players took it as their own and played in a terrific ensemble.

We are especially happy that the character interaction was as nuanced, immersive, powerful, and multi-faceted as we hoped it would be. We managed to build structures that gave meaning to different twists in the story and to the decisions characters had to make.

Also most storylines manifested as concrete action in the game, and they were brought to conclusion at the end of the season. All this was made possible by the smooth collaboration between all participants.



□ Private eye and her assistant discover apothecary's dead body. (Play, Tuomas Puikkonen)
□□ For some it all started as slightly decadent mostly innocent (Play, Tuomas Puikkonen)

In retrospect, three games in three months was too tight schedule. The original idea was to design all three games before the start of the season, but it was soon clear that if we wanted players to contribute and decide what their characters do between the games, we can't really design beyond the first game that much.

We also somewhat failed at communicating what is useful and actionable input regarding character's actions and plans between the games. Yet, especially in the second game where we had the most input from the players, we ended up putting up too much content in the game and in result too little time for free play was left.

Among lessons learned are also how it is nearly impossible to arrange "coincidences" in street larp with any degree of certainty, how violence tends to escalate to rather extreme despite all efforts to the contrary, and how having both players and supporting cast can backfire when utilizing team spirit enhancing techniques.

Now that season one is finished, we are left with the option to stop here or to continue in one way or another. All the main storylines are finished, so whatever season two will be about, it will be something new and different.

Tonnin stiflat: Season One

CREDITS: Niina Niskanen (setting, background materials, characters, storylines, drama and interaction design, workshops, props), Simo Järvelä (characters, storylines, drama and interaction design, game mechanics, workshops, props), Tuomas Puikkonen (photography)

DATES: 16 August, 11 October & 22 November, 2014

LOCATION: Helsinki, Finland

LENGTH: 8-9 hours each

PLAYERS: 16 players, and 40 supporting cast

BUDGET: €2,500

PARTICIPATION FEE: €50 per game

GAME MECHANICS: Supporting cast, meta instructions, preplanned scenes, workshops

Web site

tonninstiflatlar.wordpress.com



Thank you for reading.
Thank you for caring.

“A Nordic larp is a larp that is influenced by the Nordic larp tradition and contributes to the ongoing Nordic larp discourse.”

- Jaakko Stenros, Games Researcher, 2013