

DO LARP

Documentary Writings from KP2011



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Dedication

This book has been made as a part of Knudepunkt 2011 in Denmark.

Knudepunkt is an annual Nordic Larp conference organised by Bifrost, the Danish National Organisation that promotes roleplaying and other creative activities.

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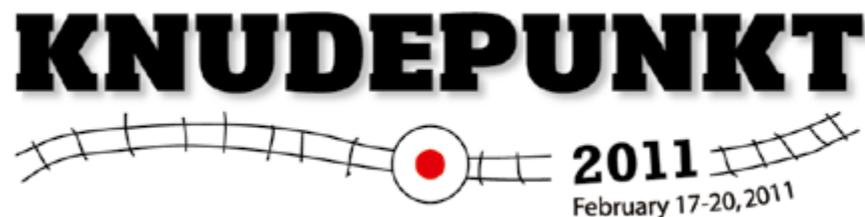
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Preface

The content of this book is both an experiment and a challenge. It began at Knutpunkt 2010 in Fiskeboda, Sweden, but springs from the lengthy discussion of larp documentation; somewhere someone uttered the statement that it is impossible to document larps in the same way tabletop role-play games were documented. Apparently that sort of documenting has its own word: boxing, such that it is possible to play the game, straight out of the box (taught to me by Aaron Vanek).

That statement may be true, but we (the later editors' group of this book) decided to take it to a discussion at Knutpunkt with the assumption that we may be approaching this whole documentation problem in the wrong way. For if it is true that you cannot box a larp, why should we even try. Perhaps other ways of documenting are more appropriate for larps, and may that be the reason that we don't see much factual documentation of larps?

During the discussion another problem was brought to attention; why would we want to document larps and who should the documentation be aimed for?

Valid points, founded in the general documentation debate; documentation is not a purpose in itself, and without the necessary motivation no documentation will be achieved. This quickly prompted the idea that perhaps we don't see much documentation of larps because there is nowhere to document it and no one to document for.

By making a playbook with documentations of larps and releasing it at the Knudepunkt 2011 conference in Denmark we could secure purpose, motivation and interested readers for the documentation, and we could pose it as a challenge to us and the authors of the texts in this book.

Blueprints

So this is the challenge: Find a way to document your larp with emphasis on the story, setting, game mechanics and specific designs that make your larp unique. The description should be short while containing the design, organization and evaluation of the larp, max. 20.000 characters; do not waste space telling about specific anecdotes from the game or about larp in general. These specific descriptions of larps we have named blueprints to distinguish that they are supposed to be design documents that explain the basic construction of the larp you made. Essentially the idea is that other larpers can be inspired by your designs and either reapply specific design ideas or fully reconstruct your larp from this document.

At the same time, considering how most larps will be organized and only documented afterwards, we want to make the documentation as simple and easy as possible. Preferably it should be possible to write the blueprint in one evening even though you are exhausted after spending nights and days organizing a demanding larp project. The solution: write a story about how you made the larp, and in that process you will automatically get to write, how the larp is made.

Blueprints should not be dry and boring documents, filled with academic speculation about larp theory or technical details of the very specific problems of a game mechanic you applied in your larp. For those issues, write an academic or technical paper and refer to it in the blueprint instead. The blueprint is supposed to be easy and interesting to read, after all the aim is to spread ideas about larp designs.

Blueprints are descriptions of the core designs of larps from larpwrights to larpwrights. You should not spend time explain what larp is, or how players interact in the larp through their characters. You address other larpers, we know about the fundamentals in larp. You should not spend time telling about how hard it is to organize a larp, or that food, sleep and sanitation is important for the players' well-being. Your readers are larp organizers, they know how it is; they've been there before. And larp warstories, we've heard them all.

Blueprints are needed

Through the process of working with this book it occurred to me, just how much these blueprints are needed for the progression of larp, or at least how much I've missed them before.

For instance by reading about the larp *En stilla middag med familjen* I realized how many parallels there are between that larp and my own larp *Agerlund*; two different games that both employ a very strong narrative design and apparently with some of the same experiences, yet I had never heard about Anna Westerling's larp, except for its name, when I made *Agerlund*. Had I known, would I maybe have done things differently?

During one of the final days before deadline Juhana Petterson commented on his blueprint of the larp *Muovikuppi* that he felt it lacked a proper reference list, and he asked me, if I thought he should add some references for further reading. I told him not to. It is noticeable how many of the blueprints in this book have very limited reference lists. To me more than anything this reveals that larps of today generally do not build from anything other than the larpwright's own experiences. Thus blueprints are needed.

Blueprints such as they are

This book contains the fine selection of thirteen blueprints of very different larps made by people from many different places in the world. We are proud to have representatives of many different genres and larp styles included in the book.

The authors have handled the challenge of writing their blueprint very differently; some are focused primarily on the design while others are more focused on describing the process of making the larp.

This reflects the idea that we are still searching for the best way to document a larp in a short and orderly fashion, and this book contains thirteen worthy attempts at this goal. In the end we may say; it may be true that you cannot box a larp, but you can certainly blueprint it.

Jesper Heebøll-Christensen
On behalf of the editors' group:
Charles, Jesper, Lars, Luisa, Marie
Copenhagen, New Year's Eve 2010/11

Agerlund (Acres)

Jesper Heebøll-Christensen

American folklore horror set the frame for a story about destiny, repentance and judgement. A two-day larp for around 40 players in a ghost town at the grace of the Lord and their host, Emmet.



*The benevolent father and his devoted daughter in a grim moment as they've been abandoned by God.
Photo: Jost L Hansen*

Introduction

Agerlund is a narrative heavy larp about a group of lost settlers that arrive at a desolate town in the middle of the wasteland. With them they bring sinfulness and old vices that upset the ghosts and the curse resting on the place. During a two-day period the new residents of *Agerlund* will be brought to face their sins and the eeriness of the place will increase until the final night, where everyone will be judged and forced to make their fatal choice.

Agerlund is a ghost story set in a universe inspired by the early American pioneers and draws heavily (and literally) on the ghost stories of that era as well as a load of biblical references. The basis of the larp is an ensemble of American folklore stories, ballads and poems selected especially as inspiration for the players, and from which they will build the world, their stories and their characters. *Agerlund* is a narrative game where an overall theme about repentance and punishment is the frame into which the players each fit their individual stories. Through a workshop before the game the players find together in groups and compose their story for the game. In the workshop players are instructed about the theme, setting and overall narrative of the game and the storytelling tools which will be used. With that knowledge they are asked to compose their personal stories in five stages that follow the narrative frame.

The composed stories will form the actual story board of the game. Each player is expected to perform the actions they have decided on at the workshop. This is the key in the narrative gameplay. However, they are free to seek audience, confirmation, and motivation from the other players of the game and from introspective role-playing of the characters' innermost feelings. As such the game will feel as a string of well planned events that tell a dramatic story, and the player's goal will be to enact the story and at the same time build and experience their character's personal development through the story. In many ways this is an inversion of a regular role-playing game, where characters are built before the game and the story is experienced through their interactions: Here the story is built before the game and the characters are developed through the experience of the game.

Setting

The world of *Agerlund* - and the game that went before it, *Agerbørn: Korsvejen* (2007) - is a gritty and dusty world inspired by American folklore.

Geographically the world is a distorted picture of the American continent in the early 19th century represented only through the four corners of the world; east is the industrialized cities, west is the newly settled lands, north is the raging war and south is the savage frontier. The corners of the world are kept in an abstract form, no names of the great cities are ever mentioned and no more than this description is ever given, except of course that *Agerlund* is placed exactly at the crossroads between these four regions.

The setting of the game is an abandoned ghost town - a generic group of small houses with a church, a hotel, a graveyard and other places that seem appropriate to the stories in the game. The player characters come to this town as wealthy families from the east, God fearing settlers from the west, refugees and deserters from the north and wanderers from the south.

They all come to this place for their own apparent reasons but during the game it will become clear that destiny has lead them here. The town is the place where they will face their sins of the past. As a rule these sins are all connected to the town in some way and the player characters will be brought to face them through the ghosts of the town.

The feel of the setting should be horror as in a classic ghost story, a creepy feeling of eerie uneasiness and underlying malice. The scenographic display should support this through the use of symbols that refer to the horror genre - crosses, cobwebs and scarecrows, but in the end the atmosphere should be carried by the players, who have planned the whole story in advance.

The players should be told to role-play the atmosphere, it should be a key element in their characters and stories, if they start disbelieving the horror theme it will fail.

The Story Frame

The stories that the players compose for their characters in the game will fit into an overall story frame, which is inspired by the classical folklore story, Wait until Emmet comes - a story about an unwelcome guest who spends an evening in a haunted house and even though the demons of the house try to scare him away he keeps his spirit up by reading from the scriptures. Finally, before the appearance of the host of the house, Emmet, whom all the demons have been waiting for, the unwelcome guest tips his hat and bids the demons good night.

In the larp the player characters will be the unwelcome guest, the demons will be the ghosts of the town, which are again other players (namely the supporting cast, see below), and at the finale of the larp the host, Emmet, comes to judge the characters for their deeds and misdeeds.



The baroness and her husband. The man was an imposter who had killed the real baron to take his place.
Photo: Sanne Harder

Furthermore, the story frame is built around a standard narrative model; the players are instructed that the plot should be divided into five main chapters and a finale in the following way:

Prelude and presentation. During the first evening of the game, characters arrive at the town, settle in, and a first few eerie events take place to set the mood for the evening. The players have been told not to search the town and surroundings for mysteries yet.

Development. During the second day relations between the characters develop, people get to know each other and more is revealed about the town they're in. Here the characters should invest time to involve each other in their respective stories.

Point of no return. During the second evening, events unfold so that the characters feel committed to stay in the town even though it is now revealed that it is haunted, it is specifically hinted that something sinister is to come.

Escalation. During the third day the hauntings and personal narratives are escalated and brought together, it is revealed that the hauntings are in fact related to the past sins of the characters.

Climax. During the third evening the hauntings and personal narratives come to their climax, people and feelings get hurt, truths are revealed as the cards are laid on the table, but the consequences are yet to be seen.

Finale. As the final conclusion of the story, Emmet comes to judge the characters late in the evening on the third day.

During our run of the game the chapters in the story frame were marked visually through the number of scarecrows raised against the sky on a nearby hill. We thought this would be a simple yet direct visual reminder of how far the game had progressed, but it turned out to be a completely superfluous game mechanic since everyone knew the chapters by heart.

The appearance of Emmet, the host of the town, marks the final scene of the game. Emmet is the fourth horseman that comes to pay judgement on the sinners in his domain, he will give each person a choice of fate; will they stay in his town forever to become one with the ghosts, or will they leave by one of the four roads that lead away from town. They should choose the punishment that fits their sins best. Each person will have time to make their choice and say their goodbye before the travellers leave and the remaining people go with Emmet.

Player characters and personal narratives

Stories and personal narratives are the alpha and omega of Agerlund and it is important for the game that the players make their own stories. This is done at a workshop some time before the game. The workshop consists mostly of a big discussion of the stories of the larp, which should be organised into minor debates and exercises, it should be noted that the workshop is very time consuming. The workshop is essentially divided into three parts:

The telling of the genre and mechanics of the game. It is important that the players understand the concept of the game, before they begin composing their stories, as the stories need to fit into the theme, the setting and story frame (the Emmet story).

The composing of stories. This is done in groups consisting of both regular players and supporting cast (see below), about 4-5 persons per group. In the groups the players will compose a story involving themselves as characters. They are given a number of folklore stories as inspiration. Also, the players have to make sure that each part has something to do during the larp.

The structuring of stories. By retelling their stories to the other player groups the stories become intertwined. During this process each player has to choose a character from their story. Furthermore, the players should fit their stories into the story frame and organise the story in a number of coordinated scenes that are noted onto the story board.

Two very good exercises we made during this third part of the workshop was when the players took turns writing the scenes they had cooked up on a massive time table that we hung on the wall, and when the player groups spent time to enact some of the key scenes of their stories to the other players. Both exercises gave reason to much discussion of the stories.



*Pictures giving an impression of the visual side of Agerlund.
Photos: Sanne Harder, Martin Qwist*

The important idea in the workshop is that the stories should go before the characters, the players should not create the stories because of their love for one specific character, instead stories, characters and play experience should be created equal. In principle though it may be difficult, the stories should be created before each player selects their character.

The stories are essentially made through free improvisation by the players during the workshop, but in order to give a sense of direction to the storytelling the players are instructed to use a number of folklore stories as their inspiration. Since we knew that free improvisation could be quite demanding, we wrote a series of story proposals that combined a few of the folklore stories into a loose plot idea to give the players a head start. During our workshop some players used the story proposal directly, some modified the proposal, and some chose to make their own story.

The folklore stories used during the workshop are a compilation of around 100 stories from the American folklore. Many of those are edited and retold by S.E. Schlosser and published in her *Spooky Series* anthology. The stories are mainly selected to fit the theme of the larp; some have very elaborate plots while others are mostly thematic. The folklore stories can be found at the homepage of the *Spooky Series* (www.americanfolklore.net).

Players and supporting cast

Before the workshop the participants are asked to decide if they want to participate as players or as supporting cast. The players will become the main characters of the larp and be the ones to make the difficult decisions and suffer the sad misfortunes, the supporting cast will be the ones to spur the unfortunate events, execute scenes and put the main characters in dreadful dilemmas.

The larp encourages two forms of role-play, one focused on the character and its unfortunate destiny, and one focused on the story and dramatic timing.

It is our goal to equalize the play experience of player characters and of supporting characters in the story game, essentially we want the supporting characters to be just as involved in the stories, only we want them to approach the role-playing experience from a different perspective.

During the workshop the supporting players are involved in the creation of stories along with the regular players, but their focus is on developing interesting narrative tools, such as supporting characters and sinful character backgrounds for the ghosts of the town, or such as physical plot implements: A leftover diary, a locket with a picture of a woman, some old love letters.

Just as in film and theatre the function of the supporting cast is to act as the driving force of the stories, by appearing as supporting characters in key scenes that propel the plot forwards. Their roles are the ghosts and demons of the town and various characters from the backgrounds of the main characters, and their function is to make a drama for the main characters at the planned scenes and in between.

The role of the supporting cast is essentially not that much different from standard NPCs, but the difference is that they are involved in designing the game in cooperation with the players and that the players should trust them with the power to execute the game - they are much more independent in charge than regular NPCs. In fact, a more accurate term would be 'co-game masters'.



The scarecrow was used as the symbol for Agerlund - here as seen on the web site for the larp. Webdesign: Jens Niros

Narrative game devices

Agerlund is a game designed for narrativistic role-play; the game devices are all constructed to handle the planned stories of the game. The main game mechanic is naturally stories that are planned with different scenes for the different chapters of the story frame.

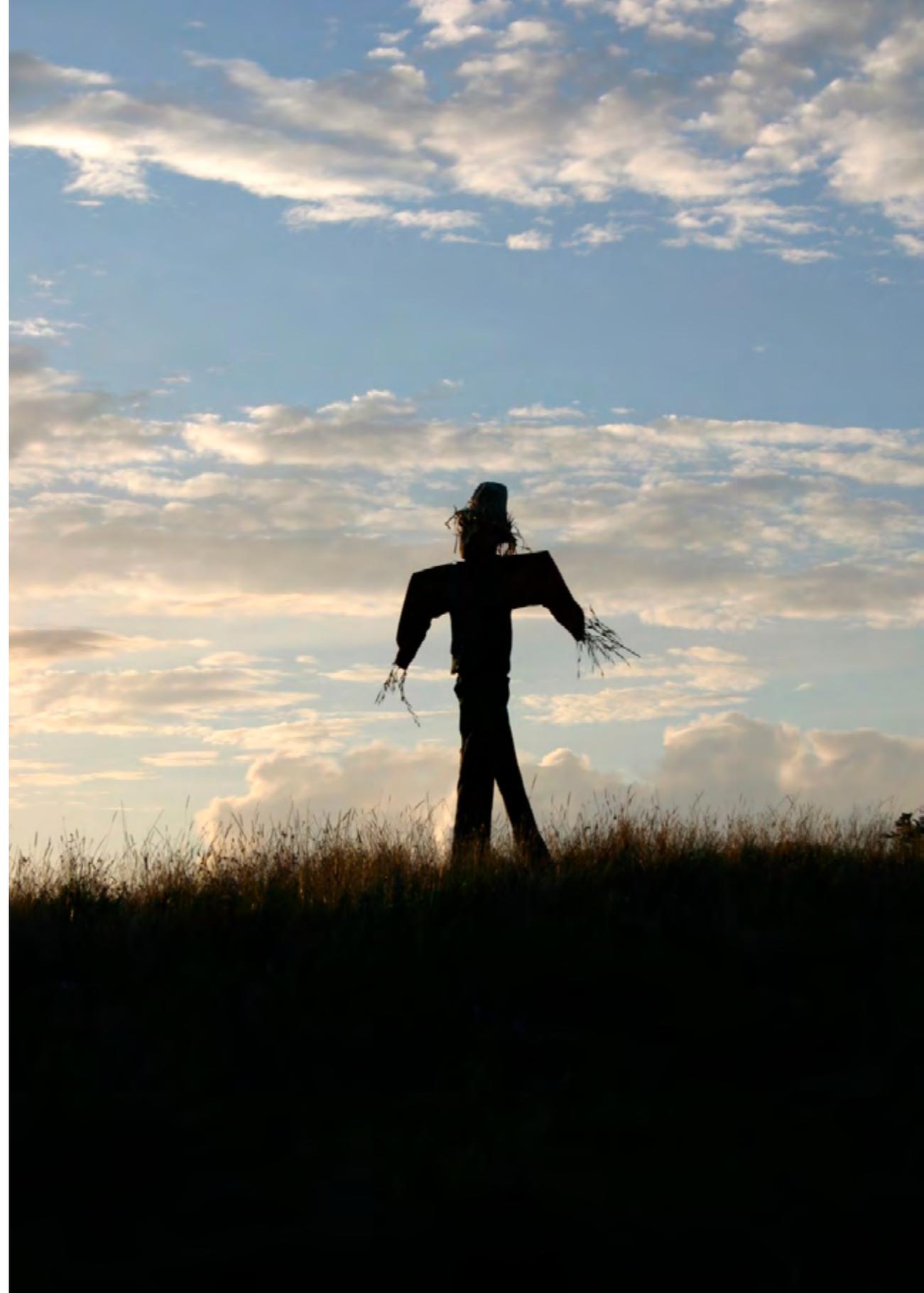
The pre-planned stories are organised into a number of coordinated scenes, usually a few scenes per story for each chapter in the story frame. These scenes are supposed to be the turning points in the stories, and all players are expected to perform as the group have decided before the larp.

Whatever happens in between the scenes is up to the players themselves, but they are encouraged to motivate their characters for the next scene, process their characters with respect to the previous scenes, and interact with other characters about their scenes. As such the scenes should be seen as pearls on a string, and the goal of the players is to find out what decisions lead to the next scene.

To keep track of the coordinated scenes they are all written into the story board of the larp, which is given to all players in printed form at the start of the game. In the story board all the major scenes of all the stories are written down, but during the game many of these may change according to circumstances. This can make the story board seem void in some cases, but overall it will still be 90% correct and a very handy tool to navigate the many complicated stories of the game.

The story board make it possible for players to have insight in each other's stories, even though it is hard to keep track of all the intrigues of the game. Some may see it as a spoiler, but the overall premise of the game is that players should accept this style of playing and try to immerse into the stories as much as their characters. Additionally we saw during the game that some of the weaker players really shined because the story board gave them a sense of certainty that they were doing the right thing - they weren't afraid to take action.

This photo from Agerbørn: Korsvejen (2007) was used as the symbol of Agerlund. It says everything that there is to say about the genre. Photo: Jens Niros



Freezing the game

To keep track of the story board, and to remind each other of the planned events, two offgame meetings are held during the actual larp, one on each of the mornings of the second and third day when the game has a natural downtime. The game is stopped for exactly one hour, during which the players gather to run quickly through all the stories and discuss the scenes for the coming day and night. Some scenes may be adjusted and the overall timing of the scenes planned.

The idea for these meetings is not part of our original game design; it comes from the larp *Sommertinge* (2009) that was held in Copenhagen approximately a month before *Agerlund*. Once we heard of this idea it was clear how well it fit into our design, so we copied it instantly, our only reservation was how it would affect the story-immersive style of play.

Our solution: the offgame meetings are used as a stylized intermission in the game's storytelling; when calling to the meeting the players should be told to freeze in their positions and look around at the resulting diorama, see if they can spot some evolving relations.

Likewise, when the game is about to start again, the players should position themselves in frozen scenes that signify a typical relation or situation between their characters, when all players are in position the game will progress. In this way the breaks are used to enhance the game in more ways than one. The meetings is a very potent tool for keeping the many intertwined stories on track, and for enabling the supporting cast to enter the play at the dramatically correct times.

The storytelling is the most important part of *Agerlund*, but it does not stand alone. Another important aspect of the game is the scenographic display, built in the 360-degree doctrine. The point is to combine the narrative play style with a traditional immersive play style. The goal is to achieve the immersive feeling that a good story can deliver when watching a good movie or reading a book.

This prompted us to work hard to produce the most complete scenographic display we could. The town was made of mobile set piece houses that we already had in our possession, but to increase the experience every character was given an ingame bed to sleep in, water was tapped from an artificial well, food was prepared authentically by the players, and we even built a set piece of an old-fashioned outhouse, so players could take a shit in character.

Running the game

During the game the organizers sit outside the play area completely secluded in order to maintain the 360-degree illusion. The main characters are basically never allowed to leave the play area while the supporting characters are allowed to move between the play area and the organizers' bunker.

During the game the organizers are the ones holding the responsibility for the story board though it was the players that made it. This is done mainly through a time table of events and scenes that the organizer is supposed to keep track of, but also through the other narrative game devices: the phases of the story frame and the two offgame meetings.

Additionally the organizers should monitor the supporting cast and receive information from the supporting cast about the progression of the stories whenever possible, it is almost unthinkable that everything runs completely according to plan and the organizers are the only ones with the authority to change the plan if a situation has changed.

The organizers should have a few helpers close by that they can send out to rearrange things in the play area: setup for specific scenes, clean up, cook dinner, and fix things that are broken. The only time that the organizers are in direct contact with the players is during the offgame meetings where the organizers are in charge of the agenda, the three main tasks at the meetings are to check up on every story of the player groups, make corrections if something has gone wrong, and review the time table for the following day and night.

Thoughts and experiences

Agerlund became a larp that stood somewhat between two types of role-play: early on we had planned that the supporting cast should be the ones to manage the story boards for the individual player groups in the game and that this should be done more loosely giving more authority to the supporting cast, but later out of doubt in the design we changed it such that the organizers were in charge of the complete story board of the larp and the stories were more meticulously planned. Unfortunately this created some confusion about the function of the supporting cast.

Some larpers are convinced that role-play where all important decisions are pre-made and everything is planned is not really role-play, but instead a certain form of theatre. Apparently it is important to some that the free will of the character is preserved during play. We had to fight this conviction before, during and after the larp, despite our attempts to explain the premise of the game.

Some participants in the larp were not aware that *Agerlund* was supposed to be a narrativistic and an immersionistic larp. They had focused solely on narrativism and did not understand why the 360-degree illusion was an important part of the game design. This created confusion and an incomplete play experience for these participants, but the majority understood the idea instinctively and had a great immersive narrativistic experience. In retrospect we could have been clearer about this part of the game design, but at least we proved to ourselves and others that this play style is possible and has great potential.

Making the 360-degree setting was a very taxing process. What we did was to build a small town in one week, and then tear it down in two days. Even though the houses were prefabricated, we still had to put them up. We relied on the players to participate in this process. Unfortunately we had not been quite clear enough about the importance of having many helping hands, so only a few of the players showed up during the construction.

Summary

Agerlund is a representative of a genre in larp that is still not very widespread (not in Denmark anyway), and we had to fight to make it visible and accepted in the Danish larp community. In my eyes *Agerlund* is a beautifully simple larp that offers the players a storytelling experience with a simplistic setting, a clear story frame, an ensemble of folklore stories and an overall narrativistic design principle. And what we achieved was to combine immersion and narrativism while involving the players in the process.

Ludography

Agerbørn: Korsvejen (2007): Jesper Heebøll-Christensen, Jonas Trier-Knudsen, Jesper Bruun, Elisabeth Nørresø Haase, Anna Balsgaard. Copenhagen. (English: "The Crossroads")

Sommertinge (2009): Jesper Kristiansen, Troels Fenger Palm, Stephan Melin, Morten Lahrmann & Rollespilsfabrikken. Copenhagen.

Acres (Agerlund)

Designed and organized by: Jesper Heebøll-Christensen, Elisabeth Nørresø Haase, Sanne Harder

Played on August 27th - 30th, 2009 in Ryegaard Dyrehave, Denmark.

Duration: 50 hours

Number of players: 39

Budget: 4.880 € (participation fee: 80 - 110 €)

More information: www.agerboern.dk



Babylon - Guns, mutants and retro futurism

Troels Barkholt-Spangsbo

Babylon was a game about 43 action heroes and heroines. It was an action-packed, visceral and physical game. We wanted to focus on the liveness and action in larp by building a massive experience or joyride for the players to try out. The game was designed to achieve an epic story. In the sense, that the players decisions would be world changing. The game lasted approximately 36 hours and was played at a fortress, from before WW1, south of Copenhagen in February 2009.

Fiction

Babylon was inspired by pulpy B-movies. In the first brainstorming sessions the original inspiration was the idea of copying the most classical sci-fi action plot of all time: the soldiers in no man's land exploring an unknown location. In our case a secret research facility in the middle of a mutant-infested wasteland, where the soldiers found that they had stumbled upon discoveries that could change their world for better or worse depending on their viewpoint.

The fiction was based on the theme of traditional sci-fi: how technology could affect human evolution and civilisation. As we were limited by the technology of our time we used a retro futuristic aesthetic - we used World War I as our visual design inspiration and instead of designing a high-technological world, we envisioned our own world torn in two by a conflict over ethics of technology. A world where the western hemisphere had forsaken most technological advances and had limited the rest severely - the east, on the contrary, had embraced the technological marvels and had possibly left their humanity behind. A convenient excuse for introducing mutants into the fiction.

After a great war, that almost tore the world asunder, the western nations banded together in a Union consisting of a lot of warring factions - and dominated by an old-fashioned christian church, which deemed most technology sinful and introduced the 3 laws:

- 1) Humans never kill
- 2) Humans never seek the forbidden teachings
- 3) Humans never sin

Humans of course being the citizens of the Union and excluding everyone else. The Union consisted of a multitude of different factions that ranged from the city-states of The House of Aegis - a mix of secretly genetically modified super soldiers and the Spartans as Frank Miller drew them in 300 - to the Technical Operators - a caste and organization dedicated to maintaining the technology of the Union, a sort of martyr-engineers who took it upon themselves to dabble in the forbidden teachings to save the rest of the Union. The different factions will be described in more depth later.

The player experience

One of the largest inspirations for the larp was movies. We wanted to organize a larp which was as easy to participate in, as to go see a movie. We wanted to hold the players by the hand from they signed up and until they arrived home again after the game. The webpage was rather minimalistic. A short presentation of the fiction and the different factions the players would play, a description of our vision of the gameplay and some practical information. The webpage can be seen at www.bolvaerk.dk/babylon.

To play *Babylon* you had to pay a fee of 1500 DKK (approximately 200 € - which was the highest price yet for a larp in Denmark at the time) and attend a workshop which lasted a weekend.

As a part of the sign-up the players could wish to be placed on different teams, but they were ultimately sorted by the organizers at the workshop. They were supplied with costumes, safety equipment and hardball weapons - everything the players needed to participate in the game. Quite a few players chose to supplement their equipment themselves and the supplied costumes was of differing quality, but it was possible to participate without spending extra resources on equipment aside from the participation fee.

During the workshop the players created roles and elaborated on the fiction both during group discussions, a few drama exercises and a lot of training in specific skills we had decided the different teams would need during the game. An example was how the Technical Operators was instructed in how to interact with the technical installations they would meet during the game. The Church Army was trained in traversing barbed wire and so forth.

Finally they received quite a bit of military drilling and training in handling the hardball weapons safely. When designing the workshop, we used the transition from civilian to military specialist as a metaphor for the transition from player to character. So when the players arrived they were greeted by drill sergeants who took them on a running exercise and slowly through the physical training and discussions the roles were created.

We did some large scale exercises where the players were asked to try and get the feel of playing military personnel. During the discussions, events during the physical training were used as starting points for the creation of, and memories for, the roles.

The game ran from Friday afternoon to early Sunday morning, and started with the players being transported from Copenhagen to a public school near the location. The schools gym made up for a locker-room for the players to change into costumes, do the final preparations and be sent ingame one or two factions at a time. The players approached the fortress in different ways. Some were driven all the way, some inserted on the beach nearby in an inflatable boat and some marched in under the cover of darkness. All of them met a contact from the Union on the way, who supplied them with their specific mission briefings.

The arrival and initial infiltration into the fortress was heavily scripted and coordinated. Different factions performed coordinated tasks, which allowed them all to enter the fortress early Friday night. From then on the game consisted of the exploration and investigation of the fortress and intrigues and conflicts between the different factions. The night between Saturday and Sunday, when the threat from the surrounding enemies became too grave, the surviving soldiers of the Union extracted from the fortress and began the journey home.



Scenographic detail from the bio-lab. The former residents on the base had, among other things performed genetical experiments with mice. Play. Photo: Peter Munthe-Kaas

Game design

The fiction was realized in the game design in several distinct ways. First of all the central game design of *Babylon* was based on the gradual exploration of the research facility. Based on our goal of making it physical the exploration was performed in a variety of ways. The game was staged in and around a fortress called Masnedø Fort near the town of Vordingborg. We built the scenography as lifelike as possible, including poo in the buckets in the prison block, clothes in the closets in the officers quarters and so forth.

Then we filled it with clues, diaries, movie-clips, sound files, schematics for the research and even two survivors from the revolt and subsequent mutant attack that had led to the emergency broadcast alerting the different factions to the existence of the facility. The exploration was made more physical by the need to climb through ventilation shafts and a series of mutant encounters as the players penetrated the sectors of the facility.

The exploration was paced by mechanical doors, that had to be hacked, short-circuited or repaired by the Technical Operators (who were the only players supplied with the necessary tools by the organizers), and happened gradually over the approximately 36-something hours the game lasted because the opening of the locks was mechanically delayed even after the puzzles had been solved.

To achieve the epic sci-fi narratives we wanted, we found it appropriate to design several plot-items, with the working titles Doomsday-devices, that were designed to have the possibility to change the game world. They were also the main objectives of the factions' different missions. They included schematics for a spaceship, presented in a homemade 3D-hologram, a sample of genetic material or super soldier serum and finally a bomb with a touchscreen interface, a timer which illustrated the countdown to the explosion and approximately 10 loudspeakers. The explosion was simulated by sound and supported for dramatic effect by being hooked up to the lighting in the fortress which blacked out a second before the explosion.

Factions

The House of Aegis

The heroes of ancient Greece re-imagined. Super soldiers shaped by generations of eugenic control of the gene pool by selection of only the strongest for procreation. Martyrs who expect to die heroically for others. Liberal when interpreting the three laws. During the workshop they were trained in room-to-room fighting, enabling them to shine, as newly discovered areas of the fortress needed to be secured.

The Technical Operators

This faction carried the burden of exploring technologies and, in collaboration with members of the church, deciding whether or not it was forbidden. They were also tasked with working alongside different armed forces as army engineers. At the workshop they were trained in solving the different technical tasks they would encounter in the game, and the safe negotiation of barbed wire obstacles.

The Gray Legion

A penal-legion. Members of the legion had temporarily been bereft of their humanity and continuously sent on suicide missions to redeem themselves. These tattoo-covered prison-movie clichés were chained together in pairs for most of the game, even when in combat, and their guardian carried a tazer to keep them in line.

I.R.I.S.

The propaganda-service of the Union. The team produced a lot of documentation – the photographs used in this article for example. We also had an editor on standby so that film could be edited immediately after it was recorded by the players and used during the game as propaganda-broadcasts.

One of the hardy Nomads wearing the distinctive camouflage cape. Photo: Peter Munthe-Kaas

The Church Army

The church had immense power in the Union and thus had established its own armed forces. This faction consisted mainly of volunteers from the different slums of the major cities of the Union. They weren't necessarily fanatics but all held the forbidden technologies in disdain and were the most staunch supporters and conservative in their interpretation of the 3 laws. To offset their lower status they were the largest faction and consisted of 11 players.

The Directive

The bureaucrats of the old union turned masters of deception, intrigue and espionage. They do whatever needs to be done to preserve the Union - no matter the costs. They were split in two teams and given different missions - which of course included silencing the other team. They were supplied with dossiers on the other characters before the game created as part of an interview exercise during the workshop, as well as UV-lamps enabling them to find secret signs around the fortress.

The Nomads

In the no mans land between east and west, the nomads were the first line of defence of the Union. Nomad-guerrilla fighters and the ones who knew the enemy better than anyone else. Being the most pragmatic and liberal of the factions in their interpretation of the 3 laws and in their view on the enemy they were the only faction who actively communicated with the enemy. They were trained in falling back while supplying supporting fire to each other.



The Gray Legion and the Technical Operators had made a run from the safety of the fortress and into the open to repair a satellite dish to re-establish radio contact with the Union. Play. Photo: Peter Munthe-Kaas

Hardball weapons and role-play

The use of hardball weapons was a part of our hope to create action elements that actually released adrenalin in the players and resulted in a lot of extra work. Even though we managed to secure a very generous rental agreement, it still cost a lot to supply 43 players with working hardball weapons and security equipment. Most of the players used electrical automatic rifles, but approximately 10 players used gas pistols. Hardball weapons also require careful planning of where you use them and it requires police permits and specific insurance, which is almost impossible to secure in Denmark.

We collaborated with a hardball organization which had the required insurance as we couldn't find an insurance company who was willing to make a deal with us. Finally we had to consider where we could fire the guns, as we had to avoid any damage to the fortress. To handle the security-issues, we integrated them into the fiction as described earlier. The collateral damage was controlled by only introducing enemies and gunfights in areas, where we felt certain there would be no damages. Some players loved the action elements and playing with guns - others hated it for the trouble and extra expenses it brought with it. A single lesson is very much worth remembering though - a mask makes it hard to role-play for extended periods of time.

Technical installations

As mentioned earlier we used a lot of technical installations and different hardware. From the simple - we installed light, hidden speakers in the fortress and build a radio which was connected to the organizers - to the complex such as computer terminals and an underlying system (which never worked during the game though) to different electronic locks on doors and an automated hydraulic airlock at the entrance (which burned out the engine Friday an hour before the players arrived). You might begin to notice a trend here. A lot of the technical installations were designed and built to include puzzles for the Technical Operators. That made them vulnerable to hacking so we tried to make sure, that there wasn't a single correct way of solving the puzzles. That way it would not necessarily be game breaking if the Technical Operators solved it in an unexpected way.

A few key installations never became functional and it was painful to see a lot of work wasted, but in retrospect it is impressive that more elements didn't break down since all of the installations should be considered prototypes at best and almost none of the hardware was used the way it was intended. And of course we began to run out of time during the production.

A few of the technical installations ended up playing a huge part of the game although only planned as support to the main installations. When the computer system never came online a simple land line radio became the major line of communication between the players and the organizers. Luckily we had introduced certain keywords to indicate if a player wanted to communicate offgame.

That way they had a possibility of reaching the organizers with practical questions and/or to clear up uncertainties which turned out to be lifesavers in several ways. Also the main computer built with 16 screens was transformed during the game. When the program that was supposed to give the players access to the captains log, surveillance cameras, a game of pong and much more didn't work, we began to broadcast single images on the screens instead. That way we could transmit simple messages to the players - such as different missions staged outside the fortress.

Game on

Babylon was an immense production. We had a building crew at the fortress for 3 weeks before the game, used countless hours assembling and sewing costumes and spent time designing and writing the game, fundraising, doing logistics, hosting a weekend workshop and much more. The workload was heavily affected by our intention of keeping the game location a complete secret for the players until they entered it in the game. During the game a crew of almost 30 persons, including technicians, npc's, drivers, kitchen staff and a film editor ran the game. A lot of effort was put into trying to minimize the contact between the players and the organizers.

We had communicated no way to contact us during the game, except the already mentioned radios.

To help us sort out unforeseen difficulties, such as the local unit of the Danish National Guard moving a lot of their equipment from the fortress without warning us beforehand, we had established certain safeguards such as specific symbols that could mean 'don't go past this' or 'don't touch this.' That way we could seal off the fortress and keep the players inside, while the technicians repaired some of our technical equipment. The different symbols was also used as a way of marking certain makeshift solutions as off limits - an example is how certain parts of the scenography couldn't be nailed to the walls of the fortress, because we weren't allowed to harm the fortress, and therefore could potentially be dismantled by the players, even when it wasn't our intention.

End roll

Games of these proportions are rare, and a lot is at stake for the organizers and everyone involved. *Babylon* was a brain-child of one organizer but ended up being a massive team-undertaking, and even though we were severely understaffed throughout the production of the game, we managed to carry through the vision, and enable the players to live out their private sci-fi action drama.

Babylon

Designed and organized by: Troels Barkholt-Spangsbo, Tim Spaanheden Dencker, Maya Müller, Dennis Pagh Asanovski, Søren Lyng Ebbenhøj, Mads Havshøj

Played on February 20 - 22nd, 2010 in Masnedø Fort, Denmark.

Duration: 36 hours

Number of players: 43

Budget: 26.500 € (participation fee: 200 €)

More information: www.bolvaerk.dk/babylon



Between Chancellor & Crown

Casper Gronemann

*Trying to re-invent High Fantasy in Denmark with
the help of Nordic inspired theory.*

*An innocent victim is about to be caught unaware by goblin steel. Promotional picture.
Photo: Jacob Hansen*

Re-making the genre

Some like it big, messy and for the masses. Some like it small, exclusive and directed at the “elite” *Mellem Kansler & Krone* (“*Between Chancellor & Crown*”) was a Danish larp set in July 2010 that attempted to be everything at the same time. It tried to both stay true to, and break entirely with, the normal structure of a Danish High Fantasy larp.

It tried to encompass the big need for huge fantasy larps, and the blossoming demand for more evolved gaming mechanisms. By implementing both “high brow” larp-theory as well as utilizing fairly intricate game-mechanics, the plan was to eventually make a larp-design that could handle the basic High Fantasy-experience, while at the same time adding an additional and much more complex layer. In essence,

Between Chancellor & Crown attempted to melt complex political intrigue with a children’s larp. When you look at it, it sounds downright crazy - “what the hell were they thinking?” - but for some reason, we the organizers weren’t really concerned at the time. We should have been, but for other reasons than are immediately apparent. In the following article, we discuss the fundamentals of *Between Chancellor & Crown*, by focusing on the simple basics, as well as the more complex theories and dynamics the event tried to implement.



The banners of the Children of Nimar fluttering in the wind as the faction gets ready for the coronation.
Photo: Jacob Hansen

Background

Between Chancellor & Crown (BC&C), was organized by a fairly inexperienced bunch of people, hosted by a semi-experienced voluntary organization, the Danish *Tempus Vivo*, and supported by another bunch of fairly experienced people. The fundamental idea of the organizers was that our corner of Danish larp (the big summer larp made as an extension of a monthly campaign) lacked something. It was stuck in a High Fantasy self-sustaining loop, in which loose organization and stock ideas were recycled to create simplistic designs different in theme only.

The differences between most Danish larps were not in game-dynamics or fundamental playing style, but simply in genre and setting. We wanted something different. High Fantasy is popular for a reason, and contrary to many other danish organizers critical of current danish larping, we didn’t challenge people’s lust for elf-ears or their desire to play Aragorn 2.0. The setting, we thought, didn’t matter as much as the fundamental dynamics on which the larp was build. Therefore, the idea was to create something entirely new using basic principles as old as the Danish larp itself.

The fiction

The basic story of BC&C was also an “oldie but goldie”: An empty throne in a troubled realm, with influential factions vying for power. The organizers didn’t feel the need to innovate on this area, since the important thing, in our minds, was the dynamics beneath the story and setting, not the story and setting themselves.

The basic plotline was as follows: The king has long since died, and his son has been left without sanity. The widowed queen has fled, and a corrupt chancellor now governs the land, accused of murdering the king to seize power. Pressed by numerous powerful factions, the chancellor has been forced out of hiding.

On the land of a powerful and neutral noble family, the Aratholls, the four factions competing for the chancellor's power, as well as the chancellor's own faction, have agreed to meet and once and for all decide who shall reign the land supreme, so as to avoid a civil war. Two of the factions, The Shieldborn and The Children of Nimar, count the distant descendants of the old king, Valdemar Narabond.

The first descendant, Adrian Narabond, wants true, royal rule, with a supreme king. The second, Tirri Narabond, wants a benevolent monarchy. The third faction, The Blackbloods, is a gathering of cast-outs and creatures of darkness, led by the old widow-queen, back for vengeance for her husband. The fourth faction, the chancellor's own faction, called The People of the Realm, hold that the land should be ruled by wisdom, and not by birthright. Lastly, merchants and more shady characters have gathered in a fifth faction known as The Freeborn, who wish democracy in the realm. The summer-residence of the Aratholl-family is to become the breeding-ground for political intrigue, assassination, and shady dealings.

The Danish larping clichés

The following paragraph mainly concerns the fundamental staples of most Danish High Fantasy larps, that *Between Chancellor & Crown* also made use of. *BC&C* used basic elements that we will refer to as 'the three-way model', 'the sandbox', 'the MEGAlarp', 'the epic story' and 'the member-based larp'.

The three-way model: The three-way model is the somewhat stale idea that larpers can be divided into the three categories of immersionists, gamists and narrativists. *BC&C* used the three-way model for a quick outline of the type of player we wanted to direct or game design at. We wanted a structure that allowed the players to essentially "win" the larp, by putting their own candidate at the throne. At the same time we wished to enthrall them with a good story that was to be the foundation for the competition between the factions. As such, our main focus was on the gamists and narrativists.

The sandbox: A typical, Danish, high fantasy larp, and frankly, many other Danish larps, often employ what is commonly referred to as the sandbox-mechanic. The mechanic is known from popular computer games such as Grand Theft Auto or the Gothic-games, but with character creation as a central mechanic. Every player is encouraged to make his or her character, with very few restrictions. With this character, players enter the world, mostly free to act, explore and roleplay however they like.

On top of this is an epic story, a main plot and some minor plots, but the players are never forced to take part in all this. Of course, most do, but the principle is there. In essence, the only thing predestined in *BC&C*, were the five major factions and their leaders, as well as the Aratholls, and the overall story-arc. Almost everything else was the result of player-based actions - sometimes acting on their own, sometimes acting in and making choices through pre-designed plots or events.

The MEGAlarp: *BC&C* had 370 participants. This makes one of the biggest Danish larps in quite a while. Danish fantasy larps tend to be big though, usually with more than 200 players. We had no "cap" on the number of participants; we wanted it to be as BIG as possible. In a "sandbox," with so much of the overall larping being dependent on player-based initiatives and player-initiated interaction, it is crucial that you actually have a large amount of players. The logic is quite simple, in reality. More people equals more stuff happening in the sandbox which equals more fun.

But, each and every player is also another mouth to feed and another full stomach that needs to be... emptied, at some point. It was quite the challenge for an inexperienced team such as ourselves to handle that high a number of participants, especially since we used an incredibly "spartan" location, with extremely limited kitchen and bath-facilities. We ended up having to build our own make-shift kitchen of pavilions and gas-canisters.

The epic story: The epic story is another staple of Danish High Fantasy larps. In a sandbox-environment, for it to be fun, one of the most important things in our mind was that players had the ability to make an impact the story and the setting in a major way. Not just small impacts here and there, but actively deciding the outcome. We did this by making the player-based decisions the entire setup for the story. We basically used another old staple - the lack of a true king on the throne.

We then created five factions with enough power to try capturing the throne. The players were required to support a faction, and the goal for the players was to make their faction win (or, alternatively, stab their faction in the back at the end, and jump ship). A sixth faction, The Aratholls, was present to secure the neutrality between the five other factions, so all-out war became impossible.

The member-based larp: As specified earlier, *BC&C* was paid for and produced by a voluntary Danish larp organization called *Tempus Vivo*. When you host a larp for a club or organization, its members will have certain demands that restrict your creative freedom. In our case, we had to use the fantasy world “Niraham”, the world in which *Tempus Vivo*’s monthly campaign takes place in. This was never more than a minor concern - as mentioned before, we didn’t feel the details of the setting were that important.

We also had to enable *Tempus Vivo*’s members to show up to our larp with their own characters, from the monthly campaign. This was much more problematic. The trouble with such characters is that they’re not created specifically for the larp you make. New characters at *BC&C* were created solely for the purpose of this larp, and therefore had the selection of a regent as their primary objective. Characters from *Tempus Vivo*’s campaign, however, had a score of other motives. For them, the selection of a king was a side-story in their career as a bad-ass wizard or stoic knight. They spent as much if not more time handling intrigues and narratives about the monthly campaign with other campaign-characters, as they did actively pursuing the story of *BC&C*.

Thus, you get characters playing a “larp within larp”, which was never the intention, and it can detract from or side-track the overall experience of the larp. In conclusion, everything we did was possible. But while I can only recommend using staples such as the sandbox-mechanic and the epic story the member-based larp and the MEGAlarp are a little more tricky. As for the “being big” part - it really does work, and it really is extremely satisfying to play amongst that many people, with the amount of ‘action’ it brings.

It also made the economy pretty damned solid. But it is extremely hard to handle such an amount. As such, the location as a bare minimum must be absolutely able to handle it. As for the member-based larp, it is essential that you find a way to fully include campaign-characters into the larp. The larp will benefit if characters are focused on complete participation in the larp - in our case, the focus being either attempting to win the larp or take part in the story in some other way. One way to do this could be through workshops or “pre-larp hype,” in which you actively make the larp become a top priority for the campaign-characters that will participate in it.



Promotional posters for the game were mostly made to impress the old farts. It worked quite well. Poster.

Taking it to the next level

In this section, we discuss what the organizers of *BC&C* felt were their addition to the Danish High Fantasy larp - in essence, the concepts and ideas *BC&C* used to “free” itself from the aforementioned loop of stock ideas and recycled game designs.

The valve-model: On a convention called *Forum09*, in 2009, two creative young gentlemen called Søren Ebbenhøj and Jonas Trier, talked about something they felt was quite sad in Danish larping. The thing that devastated these two otherwise happy and healthy danish boys, was the fact that Danish roleplaying was much about the spectacle, and little about the stuff in between. When orcs attack, the Danish larper is delighted, grabs his axe, and takes part in the carnage. When the ritual is held at the green at 12 o'clock, the Danish larper picks up his horse-skull and fake blood, and participates with much glee. In the time between these two events, however, the danish larper is just bored.

Nothing happens. This can be called the “comic paradigm”: If a larp is a comic, the actual drawings are the events. Here, stuff happens. The white borders between each strip, are flat time. Here, nothing happens. In the Danish larp, flat time fills up the main part of a larp, while the pictures, the events, fill up very little. Since Danish larps are focused on the events, which are few and far between, this gives bad larps. The solution is not to make the events last longer - make the images in the comic wider, so to speak - but to make plans for the time in between - shift the focus to the white borders between each picture and make them more interesting.

To do this, we used the valve-model. The principle is, that if you, as an organizer, utilize the events to initiate new playstyles, objectives and goals for the players, the events will become unimportant. The events are only used to make the time between them interesting, fascinating, and worth roleplaying in. The valve-model is called what it is, because events are merely “valves” through which the players transition to new and exciting themes and playstyles. Boring flat time is removed in favour of changes in the larp that give players new objectives, changes the narrative and so on.

Priestess of Nimar enjoying a quiet moment of devotion. Promotional picture. Photo: Jacob Hansen



In the organizer's mind, the valve-model was perfect for a sandbox larp. In a sandbox where players are left to their own devices, the problem with flat time occurs often. Why not use the valve-model to solve this?

BC&C used the valve-model by implementing a certain amount of elections in the larp. Each day, three times a day, some form of election would be held, in which the different factions had to vote on important topics that would alter the game-world. The elections thus became our events and were largely unimportant in and of themselves. The important and, for the players, exciting, times, were in between the events: Gathering votes with diplomacy or trickery, and living with the results and outcome of the last election.

Sadly, our implementation of the valve-model failed miserably. It did so for two reasons. Reason number one: because the leaders of each faction decided, on their own, what they should vote for each election, instead of discussing the issues with the players first. This had the effect of making players uninterested in the elections, since they had no influence over them anyway. Reason number two: Because we failed in making the impact of each election result matter.

If the event is to be unimportant in itself, the time before and after has to be mixed up, changed. In our case, this rested on the impact of each election. The elections had to change the way the larp played out. They didn't, because we'd designed the elections too poorly, plain and simple. We maintain that the valve-model is a stable and well-constructed theory, if it is implemented better, and more care is taken putting it into practice.

The pentagram-model: To avoid factions being neglected or winning on the first or second day of the larp, and to sustain a dynamic relation between the factions, we used the pentagram-model. The concept comes from the card-game *Magic the Gathering*, in which five colors of magic battle each other, each of them allied with two colors, while being enemies of the other two. The basics of this model is to take five factions, such as we did, and bring them into a pentagram-like constellation.

Every faction thusly must have two of the other factions as allies, and two of the factions as enemies. For example, The Children of Nimar had allied with The Freeborn and The Shieldborn, while the Shieldborn, in turn, were allied with The Children of Nimar and The People of the Realm. As such, factions will always have some influence even if underplayed, because of their allies. However, they must constantly fight for the loyalty of their allies also. The Children of Nimar, for example, has to fight with The People of the Realm for the loyalty of The Shieldborn. This creates an interesting dynamic in which your allies' ally is your enemy.

On the last day of *BC&C*, the idea was to blow this model into pieces and let everyone ally or antagonize without regard for the structure of the pentagram, so that the larp could end in an explosive finale of political backstabbing, fast deals and tests of true loyalty. In practice, this didn't work, because it was extremely hard to communicate with the large amount of players, once the larp had begun. We'd used all this time to knock the hard structure of the pentagram into the mind of 370 players, and suddenly we had to find a way to make them forget about it and just go off as loose cannons. We hold that it would have been quite the success if it'd worked, but sustain that some form of communicating this to the players must be found. All in all though, the pentagram-model was a success, although pragmatic problems - such as one of our faction leaders getting sick during the larp - tore it down somewhat.

The influence system: To give the players complete freedom and decision-making powers, we based the final solution of the larp - who will be the new regent? - on a rather gamist system of our own invention. Each faction started with 600 "influence." During the course of the larp, players could find incriminating documents, construct lies, and blackmail the other factions. Each time such information was uncovered and given to the organizers, we subtracted an amount of influence from the faction that was incriminated. For example, should the Freeborn turn in information about the chancellor's secret love affair, the chancellor's faction would lose 20 influence.



Thief entering the upper story of the main fortress unbidden. Promotional picture. Photo: Jacob Hansen

At the final day, each faction voted for the ally they would rather see on the throne, if they could not win it themselves. Each faction had a number of votes equal to their remaining influence - so if the Children of Nimar had 250 influence left, this was the amount of votes they cast in favor of the ally they chose, as well as the amount of votes they cast in favor of themselves. When the votes were counted, two victors emerged. At this point, the losers withdrew from the battle - having lost influence over powerful actors that would secure their hold on the throne should they win it. These actors were only “meta” - they did not exist in the larp itself, rather they were concepts existing in “the outside world” of Niraham.

At this point, the land of the Aratholls was assaulted by an ancient nemesis, one that would like to see the land descent into chaos, and therefore attempted to murder the two remaining candidates. The monsters descending upon the players would eventually kill one of the candidates, but only one. When one was killed, the monsters would withdraw, and the remaining candidate would be declared victor and new regent.

Two groups of NPCs assaulted each of the candidates’ armies. The army who protected their candidate long enough for the other candidate to fall, won. In our case, Adrian of The Shieldborn and Tirri of The Children of Nimar were voted into “the final round.” Adrian fell first in the battle, and therefore, Tirri emerged the victor. It could have easily gone otherwise - choosing the regent was, from the start, entirely in the hands of the players. We took no part in the decision, and never influenced it in any way.

In a nutshell

So did *Between Chancellor & Crown* succeed at its goal? To create a standard High Fantasy larp for children that appealed to intelligent adults with its complexity and design? It did, and it didn’t. Our core design - designing a larp that interested narrativists and gamists, using the pentagram-model and the five factions along with a plot-line and story that everyone could relate to, certainly worked. It attracted a large amount of players with different interests, who all in all had fun with the larp and were challenged by the new ideas that we presented to them. Our influence-system, giving complete control to the players, also played out very well.

However, the finer points of the larp - introducing the valve-model and entertaining kids and adults at different levels of play - failed, detracting a great deal from the overall experience. In some part, we succeeded at doing something no other Danish High Fantasy larp had done: entertaining a very differentiated player-base using a unique design. However, since we made some core slips in regard to that very design, we ultimately failed at creating an experience that was significantly better than the larps of *BC&C*’s genre that preceded it. Our overall idea - that Danish High Fantasy larp could be vastly improved upon - was, in the end, not proven. We maintain that it was not the theories or ideas that failed, but our realization of them. The final conclusion is this: The motley crew attending a high fantasy larp all want very different things, and done right, it is in the power of the organizers to give it to them. But it must never be forgotten that the implementation of the ideas is the most important thing, not the ideas themselves.

Between Chancellor & Crown

Designed and organized by Casper Gronemann, Troels Ejlerskov Jæger, Mikkel Hvid Amstrup, Janus Petersen, Thomas Nymark Bjerre, Danni Larsen
Played on July 27 - 31st, 2010 in Ulvsborg Historical Workshop, Denmark.

Duration: 108 hours

Number of players: 370

Budget: 5.000 € (participation fee: 70 €)

More information: www.mkok.dk



Conspiracy For Good

Jaakko Stenros & Markus Montola

Conspiracy for Good was a pilot project in pervasive transmedia storytelling combining elements of alternate reality games, mobile phone games, treasure hunts, benevolent gaming and live action role-playing. It ran for five months online and culminated in four live events on the streets of London in August 2010.

*SWAT team sent by Blackwell Briggs questions a player about the whereabouts of Nadirah.
Photo: Richard Chambury*

Created in collaboration by The Company P and Tim Kring Enterprises, funded by Nokia, *Conspiracy for Good* was a cloud of play modes and playful activities tied together by a distributed narrative. For the funder, the project was largely a marketing endeavour. The project can be approached from numerous perspectives:

One way is to understand it as a *transmedia narrative*¹, consisting of a networked story told through numerous media, live events and games. Players uncovered snippets of the distributed story through different activities, piecing the puzzle together from bits and pieces. Afterwards it was possible to catch up by watching webisodes that told the story so far.

It was also a *participatory drama*; a pre-designed and somewhat predetermined story, with an aim to take the audience in as participants and co-creators instead of mere spectators. While the narrative arc was fairly resistant to player influences, the goal was to utilize the aesthetics of *first person audience*², making the player feel like a protagonist of the story.

CFG can also be seen as an interconnected network of *pervasive games*³, featuring elements alternate reality games, technology-enabled treasure hunts and casual games played on mobile phones, which grew towards, and culminated in a *pervasive larp* played out in London.

Finally, *CFG* was a *benevolent game* with a critical message encouraging charity work, direct action and mistrust of corporate greed and post-colonialism.

1 Dena 2009
2 Stenros 2010
3 Montola et al. 2009

Distributed Stories

Conspiracy For Good weaved together the story of an evil corporation Blackwell Briggs and the global *unmovement* Spira that rose to oppose its actions. Blackwell Briggs wanted to build an oil pipeline through Zambia, destroying the village of Chataika, and to push through changes in legislation that would let the company to circumvent the Police and tap into public and private surveillance systems.

The players were drawn into this plot as *unmembers* in a conspiracy for good to save the village, uncover proof about the illegal actions of the corporation – and do some good deeds that would be actually beneficial in the real world. As is usual in alternate reality games⁴, there is a set course of fictive events that the players piece together. Putting the story together is a puzzle and some parts of the narrative were hinted at for months before the actual sequence of events was revealed. These kinds of projects have two stories: the fiction itself, and the story of how the players uncover that fiction – and as this was a case of participation drama, these two are intertwined as player actions have some input on how the story progresses.

It was revealed that an employee at Blackwell Briggs had discovered that the company fraudulently attained the rights to the land where the oil pipeline was being built. He wanted to bring that to light and to stop the construction but was murdered by the antagonist Sir Ian Briggs. However, with the help of Spira, the intentions of the company were revealed by unmember Ann Marie, who went to warn the people of Chaitaika, including Nadirah, a local teacher. Later on, Nadirah travelled to London with help from the players, to stop Sir Ian. The players were recruited to the ancient benevolent conspiracy, Spira, reviving the London chapter.

They were helped by Brian, Marcus and the Steward of London in setting up headquarters, hacking Blackwell Briggs security systems and in gathering evidence of the malpractice of the company. Finally the players infiltrated the Blackwell Briggs recruitment expo, and with help from an insider spy, proved that the Sir Ian is a criminal and a murderer, bringing down the company.

4 Martin et al. 2006

Building the Conspiracy

The production of *Conspiracy For Good* took over a year, requiring some 130 experts working behind the scenes in five countries across three continents⁵. For P the production was a clear continuation of the themes and designs of *Prosopopeia*, *Momentum*, *Sanningen om Marika* and *Dollplay*.

Like *Sanningen om Marika* and *Dollplay*, *CFG* attempted to feature immersive role-play and still appeal beyond the role-player crowd, teaching players to role-play on the fly, a task that is simultaneously very easy and dauntingly difficult. This was largely done through encouraging the players to pretend and make the fiction real, as was already done in *Sanningen om Marika*. The *CFG* website established the following rules for participants:

- 1) Suspend your disbelief! When you are in the story, it's for real. Take it seriously.
- 2) Don't peek behind the curtain! There is no point in checking source-code, hacking or hunting down inaccuracies that reveal the story as a fiction. We're not hiding that fact.
- 3) Select your own level of engagement. Join us to take action within your own comfort zone, meet like-minded people online and in person, and have some fun too. Lurk and watch, solve mysteries online, play casual games or go all in as a physical participant in the climactic London events that will take place in mid summer, 2010. But whatever you do, make your participation a part of the story. Post about the good work that you are involved in and help the Conspiracy For Good become real for all of us!

5 Nokia 2010

In the foreground Brian, Nadirah, Steward of London and Marcus brief the unmembers. Behind them there is a protest going on against Blackwell Briggs. Then the recruitment expo tent and in the background the corporate headquarters where the last part of the game was played. Photo: Jaakko Stenros



For Tim Kring this was the first foray into larp-informed participation drama, though not to transmedia storytelling; the television show *Heroes* which he is known for, did have an ARG spin-off and used online comic books to elaborate its storyline. For Nokia this project continued their interest in pervasive games that stretches back to the *Nokia Game* series staged a decade ago, and their involvement in EU-funded research project on the subject⁶.

The production was created to highlight various Nokia services. The mobile games could be played on Nokia phones, in the live events players used phones with image recognition technology that were vital for the treasure hunts. The casual games and map-based riddles and music puzzles showcased the Nokia Ovi Store.

Official figures are not available, but our estimate of the budget of CFG places it in low seven figures. This is a large budget for an event game, but comparable to an hour of a television show – or a targeted marketing push.

Towards a Larp

Production started with an online viral teaser campaign that had numerous people claim that they are not members. In these videos random people as well as celebrities such as Trent Reznor, Ringo Starr, J.J. Abrams, and Zachary Quinto would stare at the camera and say “I’m not a member”.

This kicked off an alternate reality game that, through online puzzles introduced Blackwell Briggs, and the lead characters. On the way the game used ARG techniques to challenge the players. For example the music of Ann Marie Calhoun, a violinist and singer, contained secret messages.

The game also blurred the line between reality and game by using Ann Marie not only as a character in the game, but went so far as to frame her “disappearance” in Africa. A small scandal was also created when some leaked Blackwell Briggs files found their way onto the peer-to-peer hub The Pirate Bay.

6 www.pervasive-gaming.org

Blackwell Briggs sent a cease and desist letter to Pirate Bay, which is known for publishing and ridiculing legal threats. Some people were momentarily fooled into thinking that the documents were real – and felt cheated when it turned out that it was a fictional production.

CFG even included three free mobile phone games, *Exclusion*, *Mainframe Liberator* and *Inclusion*. Similar to design of *Chain Factor*⁷, the first one served as a rabbit hole to the main game and unlocked secrets that helped in the ARG. In the second one and the ARG the players followed Nadirah from Zambia to London. The third mobile game was used to hack Blackwell Briggs security cameras in the live events. In total these games have been download over 900,000 times. The online play lead up to live events staged in London during four consecutive Saturdays. In the first one, *Get Her In!*, the players welcomed Nadirah to London and had to follow video drops taking them to an old Spira safe house. The players were initiated into the conspiracy by the Steward of London and received their hidden names. After this a Blackwell Briggs SWAT team stormed the place and the players fled.

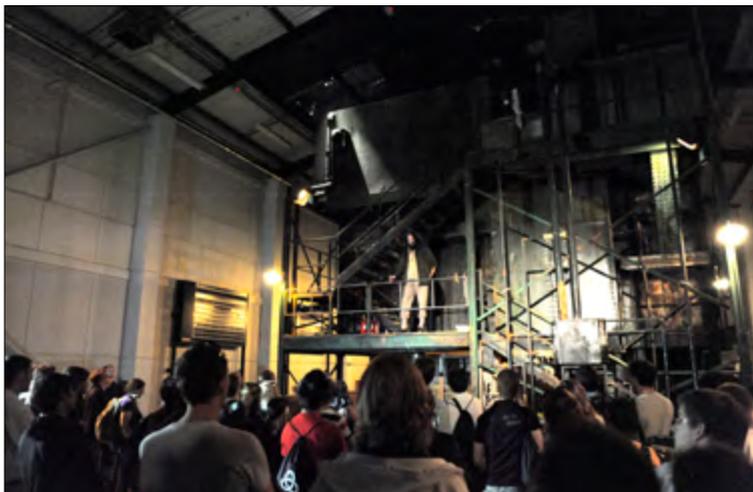
The first live event was a relatively simple treasure trail, a tutorial of the technology used in the game. The players used the DeadDrop application on the phones (built on top of Nokia’s Point & Find technology) and stumbled from the Tower Millennium Pier to Tate Modern and finally to a freaky performance space that was the safe house. During the day they were harassed by Blackwell Briggs security forces looking for Nadirah. No role-play was necessary, but it was possible to engage with the interactive actors (or *ractors*, as P calls their non-player characters).

The second event, *The House of East End*, was played around Truman Brewery and Brick Lane, a trendy part of town. This time the treasure trail had forking paths and the players had to do more to dodge the Blackwell Briggs goons – they also had help in the form of a dance flash mob and street musicians hiding clues in songs. The game concluded with the players unlocking their new headquarters.

7 www.chainfactor.com

The third event, *Following the Fallen*, had the players hack security cameras and then conduct a clandestine hostage exchange, giving incriminating documents to Sir Ian Briggs in exchange for a prisoner. Again the amount of interaction with ractors was more prominent than in previous events. As the ractors never broke character during play, the only way to interact with them was through role-playing. The players did not have characters as they are understood in larps, but then did play a version of themselves as members of a secret organization.

The final event, *Belly of the Beast*, was most heavily influenced by the P's background in role-playing. It was almost a *stealth larp*, subtly making players role-play without identifying itself as a larp. The setting was a recruitment expo for Blackwell Briggs which the players were supposed to infiltrate. The players were instructed to show up in corporate attire, and the organizers handed out jackets, ties, glasses and the like at the signup. The conspiracy also provided them with undercover identities – rudimentary role-playing game characters. At the event the players would be drilled by the ractors to see if they are corporate material. They also used the DeadDrop to access information left by the mole in the company telling them what each recruiter was looking and how to suck up to each one personally. The day concluded in a press release where Sir Ian Briggs was supposed to reveal the plans regarding the construction of the oil pipeline, but was thwarted by the conspiracy instead.



The Stewart of London greets new unmembers of Spira moment before the Blackwell Briggs security team bursts in. Photo: Richard Chambury

Between an ARG and a Larp

A central challenge that both alternate reality games and larps share is recruiting new players. Most ARGs are played by a small hardcore group of people organized around the *Unfiction* site. Though online games could facilitate play for large groups, most people do not play ARGs, they read about them. Larps, on the other hand, are limited in size due to their physical nature. Only a limited amount of players can participate in any given event.

Conspiracy For Good attempted to bring new players up to speed by publishing recaps online and by gradually building up the role-play. The recaps did not work as well as expected; at the first event most of the players were oblivious as to the storyline. In later events the players were provided with a rudimentary background and seasoned players were asked to bring any beginners up to speed.

However, it is possible to see the whole project as training for the last event, for a larp. Treasure hunts and technology-based pervasive games have become relatively widespread in the last few years, but opportunities afforded by the Nordic style role-playing have not entered the mainstream. *CFG* was a pilot project in smuggling those into mobile play.

The design choices that enabled this are interesting. The slow progress from easy treasure trails with dispersed performative characters to larp-like full fiction set-ups made the last game approachable. The events also provided a way to meet new people, as in each event players were divided into five member teams, and many players reported that these new friends were a reason why they came back. Also, the size of the team meant that almost all teams had someone who was apt with the technology, someone who enjoyed talking to strangers so that the ones who did not enjoy that did not have to do it and provided a way to externalize, evaluate and discuss the experience.

The teams were also a great way to build a player base as it was possible to recruit new players and assure that there would be a friendly face in the group.



Players are at Tate Modern. One of the video drops on the treasure hunt was triggered by Constant's piece *After Us, Liberty* (1949).
Photo: Richard Chambury

Indeed, during the three weeks that the live events were taking place, the players learned to understand the format so well, that by the end of the fourth event they were able to criticize it in a way that would have seemed alien a few weeks earlier. For example the events were conducted so that there were no off-game briefs – all information was given diegetically. After the last event many expressed that this was not the optimal way; the game would be better if there had been a clearer division between the game and the non-game.

CFG is reminiscent of a similar sort of leap in player understanding and recruitment that happened during the 1990s when playing the vampire-themed *Masquerade* became popular⁸. The frequency of the games enabled word-of-mouth recruitment and beginner-friendly nature of the events made joining in easy. Just like in Vampire games, in *CFG* signing up was easy, they were played in central locations, costuming was simple and single games did not last overtly long. Had the street events continued longer, a persistent subculture of play could have been established.

The positive impressions were enhanced by the plethora of free give-aways the players received. Everyone who participated received binoculars, a compass, a tiny flashlight, an easily distinguishable bag as well as a t-shirt, pins and all kinds of diegetic documents. In the final event, Nokia even handed out free phones, and all the events concluded in a party for the players.

8 e.g. *Loponen 2010*

It is also interesting to note that since there are two stories in these kinds of productions, the fiction and the progression of the players, the players have a very high tolerance for gaps in the story. Similar to mystery and conspiracy fiction in other media, such as *Lost* and *The X-Files*, the audience fills any and all gaps with speculation and once the reality is finally revealed at the end, many do not even remember which version of the events turned out to be true. Also, due to the participatory nature of these productions, the players do realize that not all plot threads will be revealed as relevant. When a game goes in an unanticipated direction, certain plot threads will be left dangling.

In *CFG* the plot was set from the beginning. Players did have an effect on it here and there, but the biggest impact was on the lack of players. The ARG part of the production did not gather as many players as was hoped for and expected. The production team identified part of the problem to be in finding ways to marry traditional and guerilla marketing, and in negotiating between the different corporate communication cultures in Kring's team, Nokia and P. Originally the live events in London had been planned as a culmination to a story everyone involved had been following for some time – instead almost all of the players who showed up in London were oblivious to the online part of the production, due partly to late initiation of the marketing campaign. This meant that the live events had to be redesigned.

Social media is inherently suitable for participatory, collective, transmedia storytelling and indeed *CFG* used it in numerous ways. The “I’m not a member” campaign was designed to spread virally in social networks like Facebook and raise interest in the project. Later the video recaps were pushed in the same way. In fact all the video material was available in YouTube. The central website had links to most of the content, but it was hosted elsewhere. The ARG phase was played online, so naturally the action took place there as well. The characters had Facebook pages, but since the production followed Facebook user contracts, they were not people pages, but fan pages. During the live events Twitter was used widely – at the last event most of the clues one needed to progress in the game were easier and faster to find on Twitter than by carrying out the tasks by oneself.



Benevolent Gaming

During the recent years, several pervasive games have been created with benevolent or charity agendas. For instance, *Akoha* is about doing favours and they encouraged you to “play it forward”, *World Without Oil* sought to understand problems and discover solutions to the looming oil crisis, and *Chore Wars* attempts to turn household work into gameplay. The most visible advocate of this approach has been Jane McGonigal⁹, who argues that gamers have expert skills that can be harnessed to make the world a better place.

Conspiracy For Good had a somewhat different approach to benevolent gaming. While the game did not directly push the player community into beneficial activities, it sought to raise awareness of numerous real-life challenges, with a simplistic critique of postcolonialism, delivered with a narrative reminiscent of Hollywood action films: good heroes, who build libraries, need to stop an evil corporation from killing people. Even though the charity work was not an integral part of the game play, the game collaborated directly with charities and championed certain causes:

Interwoven into *CFG* are partnerships with charities. The new approach created unprecedented interaction with the *CFG* communities and will result in providing 50 scholarships for young women in Africa and establish five children’s libraries in Zambia in association with Room to Read, and the libraries will be stocked with more than 10,000 donated books in association with the Pearson Foundation.

(Nokia 2010)

Many of the causes were integrated into the storyline, and they were certainly present on the websites and all the events, but ignoring them was quite easy – and quite common. That said, most participants were exposed to the charities – for instance in the second event players wore *Kids Company* t-shirts to avoid Blackwell Briggs.

⁹ www.ted.com/talks/jane_mcgonigal_gaming_can_make_a_better_world.html

Following the treasure hunt route lead the players on the bank of the Thames. Photo: Richard Chambury

For major organizations, benevolent gaming and charitability do not come without challenges. In early 2010 The World Bank financed McGonigal's game *Urgent Evoke*, a "Crash Course in Changing the World", with the aim of teaching players to think about world's various problems¹⁰. That game inspired a quick satirical response, *Urgent Invoke*, "An ARG to Save The World Bank"¹¹:

Invoke is a ten-week propaganda game inspired by the game *Evoke*. *Evoke* is a game commissioned by the World Bank, an international financial institution widely criticised for its practise of using crippling debt to impose its socially and economically destructive policies on the Third World. *Evoke* challenges players to become "social innovators" and devise solutions to the world's social and environmental problems.

Occasionally during the early weeks of *CFG*, a few players criticized the game with *Invoke* -style whitewashing rhetorics, arguing that if Nokia was serious about its commitment to the causes the game championed, they should have given the sizable budget directly to the charities.

Conclusion

Conspiracy For Good was a multifaceted project. All parts of the project did not work equally well and depending on the angle chosen it can be declared a success or not. The event generated a lot of press, visibility and good media impressions, but the true marketing value remains to be seen. In a project such as this, the stories told afterwards are at least as important as the production itself. However, the marketing of the project itself failed to bring in as many participants as the organizers would have hoped for. The benevolent gaming part reached all of its set goals – such as building and stocking a library – but in post-game interviews players reported that the game had not enticed them to taking part in charities and causes. Judging the transmedia storytelling and participatory drama is more complex. The story was coherent and well-constructed, but the players who joined the action half-way through the project missed the grand narrative arc.

¹⁰ www.urgentevoke.com

¹¹ www.urgentinvoke.com

There were recaps of what had previously happened online, but many did not care for them and for them the story remains incomprehensible. The drama also revolved around a simplistic good versus bad narrative, which made gameplay easier to take part in, but disappointed some players once they got onboard. Finally, striking a balance between participation and drama was not always successful: many players felt that the game was too railroaded, and once they adopted this attitude missed the parts where player input was crucial.

The plethora of different game activities was perhaps most successful: The ARG part struggled with a lack of players, yet managed to create a few memorable moments such as The Pirate Bay controversy. The casual mobile phone games were well-received, and the treasure hunts ran without significant technological problems. The stealth larp part worked quite beautifully: the players, many of whom did not have a role-playing background, understood the basics of larp well-enough to be able to offer constructive criticism. However, there was a clear discontinuation between the online and on street play.

It has been intriguing to see the progression in the works from P, as every step on the path that started from *Prosopopeia* in 2005 has grown in ambition, pushing for innovation in the art of bringing pervasive larp to the masses. As a pilot project *Conspiracy For Good* showed that though there are some kinks to work out, the basic premise does work. If the work is continued it has a possibility to develop into a rich and compelling work that bridges participation and drama – and brings elements of Nordic larp to a wider audience.

Conspiracy For Good

Designed and organized by Tim Kring Enterprises, The Company P, Nokia
 Online part kicked off in April, 2010. Street events started July 17th, 2010
 Duration: 4 months in total. Four game events lasting approx. 6 hours each.
 Number of players: "Street" 150-200. Mobile phone downloads: 900.000+
 Budget: Over 1 million € (participation fee: free)
 More information: www.conspiracyforgood.com

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Delirium

Jesper Heebøll-Christensen, Kristoffer Thurøe, Peter Munthe-Kaas

Love and madness in a mental institution, Delirium promises deep emotions and experimental gameplay for the mature hardcore larper.

Light testing at the activity room during setup. All scenes should be light tested, especially since the players will be wearing white costumes. Photo: Kristoffer Thurøe

Delirium is a larp about couples in a mental institution, a story about revolution and desire in a deconstructed universe. The larp uses ensemble play and workshops to develop a 50 hour experience for 38 players; played in a huge black box with theatrical set lights to break time flow and switch between scenes. It is designed as a high resolution larp involving many diegetic game devices to bring forth the feeling of insanity in the players.

Universe

The universe of Delirium is an abstraction of a modern mental institution. The player characters are institutionalized with psychological and social problems that they themselves are not aware of. The staff of the controlling institution, represented by three archetypes: the psychologist, the nurse and the porter, try to educate the characters towards mental health and normality, through pedagogical paternalistic means.

Story

Delirium is a story about a revolution. The game starts with the characters being suppressed by the institution but during the game they turn things around and take control, motivated by love and a desire for independence. No revolt is ever played, instead the revolution happens piece by piece during the larp and in the end some of the patients will become the new oppressors.

Design principles

Delirium is mixing elements from larp, freeform and theatre. Technical equipment from theatre makes it possible to break the 'togetherness of time and space' in larp and gives the opportunity to scramble the storyline and tell a story where the characters develop chronologically in their own insane logic, while the main story of the game is brutally cut and twisted to bite its own tail. Theatrical techniques also grant an opportunity to cut and replay scenes and skip the parts that are not important for the storytelling.

Ensemble play

Ensemble game design means that players and organizers share the privilege of designing the play experience from the core concepts and building blocks the organizers have provided. This concept is tied to the use of player workshops. When the game is presented to the players it is important to outline which elements are untouchable and which they will be able to develop. The players should be allowed to co-create as much of the larp as possible, especially game content such as culture and routines. The players should feel essential for the creation, as the larp will be nothing without this particular player group and the actual gameplay will vary much depending on the group.

High resolution

The concept of high resolution larp was coined by Andie Nordgren (2008) after the game *Totem* (2007) and is one of the major principles behind the game design of Delirium. The paper-thin characters and the environment around them are deconstructed to appear unreal yet in a way such that everything in the game world is of importance, almost hyperrealistic.

Close character relations aligned with multiple channels of communication allows the game to be played with subtlety such that every detail can be interpreted inside the scope of the game world.

Creation of larp in a theatre setting

Delirium focuses on bringing theatre elements into larp. The scenography should be created as it would be on a stage; not nature-like but as an abstract representation of the institution. The game uses light and sound as tools for creating the set. The theatre tools allows the game to break out of the usual connection between location and time that most larps are bound by and makes it possible to run the game on a very tight schedule.

Close to home characters

Delirium is designed to be a close personal role-playing experience with thin characters and strong relations. It is created for “close to home” storytelling where the players bring themselves in to the game and experience bleed. This aspect should be communicated clearly to the players during the workshops to give them opportunity to take precautions if they want a “safer” game.

The players’ experience of madness has one basic principle: The players should not role-play madness; instead their surroundings will be obscure and make them feel as if they are mad. Through multiple game mechanics, a fractioned story arc, changing scenography and controlled use of sound and light it is possible to create a setting and story that gives the players a foundation for experiencing madness.

Pair sign up

Players sign up for Delirium in boy-girl-pairs. This is important for many reasons:

- it allows the players to have a partner they feel secure with.
- it makes sure that they have an active deep relation in the game.
- it gives the players a focus for their storytelling.
- it makes the players think about why they want to be part of the game.

The partner sign up made it clear to us that the process for the players can start already when they sign up for a game. The amount of energy put into choosing the right partner made the players think a lot about what they wanted from Delirium and what kind of experience it would be.

At the same time the partner sign up was a great filter for only getting the players who really wanted to be a part of Delirium. Not least was it the best advertising stunt that made the buzz go on from the launch of the website till the sign up closed.

The original promotion poster for Delirium. Poster: Peter Munthe-Kaas



Each patient on the institution will have a partner from the other sex in the larp, their secret love interest. But the institution disapproves of contact between the sexes - except when monitored by the staff. This will further deepen the schism between the patients and the institution.

Gender

Patients are divided into a male and female wing at the institution, but in contrast to what the players know about their gender, the institution defines it otherwise. Men at the institution are the players that invited their partner to the game, and women are the ones that have accepted the invitation. Thus about 50% of the players of the larp will play the opposite sex in the eyes of the institution. This will represent another layer of mental madness experienced by the characters.

Relationship to the institution

At the workshops the players are divided into three groups, which favour the three archetypes (nurse, psychologist, porter) differently, to create differences in the way the characters behave towards the different aspects of the institution. Each character should favour one, be neutral towards another and opposed to the third archetype. In the groups the players should discuss their mutual fear or love of the specific archetype. This will also serve to define different aspects of the archetypes.

These relationships should be further developed by supporting the players in creating a schism between characters that wants to give control to the institution and those who oppose it - those who believe themselves to be insane and those who think that they are normal.

Personal flavour

The last layer of the character creation lets all players add their personal touches; this is done through two distinct methods.

Firstly the players pick their “profession” and name. A large set of pictures depicting different professions (sailor, judge, DJ and so on) is presented to the players who should each choose one. The profession is meant as an inspiration for the inner play and development of the character and is to be used as the player finds best. As a rule the character name should be derived from the profession.

Secondly the players are allowed to bring five personal items with them into the game in a personal box, which further define the characters through material possessions. As a workshop exercise they should tell each other what these five items mean to their characters.

The players used this possibility in many creative ways; typical artefacts in the game were objects that had a function in play, objects that could be sold for favours, objects that represented at special personal value to the character, or objects that could be used to mod their costumes or in other ways demonstrate the character's persona.



The story board. Each sheet represents an hour of game time, there are 36 of those. Photo: Andie Nordgren



The diegetic arts

Delirium applies the diegetic game tools of *Ars Amandi* and *Ars Ordo*, which have been previously described in relation to the larps *Mellan Himmel och Hav* (2003) and *Totem* (2007).

Ars Amandi is used for the amorous relations between characters. The supervision of the institution will not condone bodily contact between patients, which has caused them to shift their emotional behaviour to more innocent seeming gestures. *Ars Ordo* is used as the primary conflict resolution tool. Under the strict control of the institution no loud gestures are approved, so disputes are handled by staring contests.

In addition to the established arts, another is made specifically for Delirium: the Gearbox. The idea with the Gearbox is that the character should be able to communicate conflicting information about a given situation though body language. The gearbox rule is that removal of clothes (e.g. rolling up your sleeves) means 'yes' or an equivalently positive response, while covering up means 'no'. This is to be used as a secret language among the patients of the institution.

The tool got entangled with another idea that has been discussed in Copenhagen larp circles recently; that the players should be able to communicate about their desired intensiveness of the role-play in a given situation, which is where the name Gearbox originally came from. We thought that this tool could be used as a little of both, and in truth it was during the larp. Still, this tool requires more work to be fully functional.

Setdesign and scenography

Delirium is staged inside a large concert hall, devoid of daylight and outside disturbance; a huge black box where time and space are controlled by the organizers through lights, sounds and scene setting.

*Much time is spent talking at the workshops, in the groups and especially with your partner.
Photo: Kristoffer Thurøe*

Space

The space of the institution is separated into segmented scene areas made visible through theatrical lighting. It is only possible for the players to use a location if lights are on it, which is controlled by the gamemasters. In the darkness of the concert hall it is possible to see and hear what happens at other locations even though you aren't physically present. The mental institution is physically represented in the larp through a set of nondescript physical locations: the dormitory, the canteen, the therapy room, the common room, and the garden. Moreover the institution is represented through its NPC staff, which consists of three iconic archetypes: the psychologist, the nurse, and the porter.

Each of the three archetypes represents an aspect of modern mental health care: the psychologist is the academic mental professional who is both manipulative and paternalistic, the nurse is the loving mother that treats patients with caring empathy, and the porter is the dirty-working janitor who represents mental treatment through physical force. Each of the three archetypes has their own locations in the institution as well: The psychologist has his office, the nurse has the nursery, and the porter has the laundry room.

Scenography at the locations is kept abstract as icons to the physical rooms of the institution, with no walls and ceiling and only the most basic of furniture. In addition the scenography is turned and twisted and objects of greater importance in the patients' minds are placed in focus at the stages.

Time

Play time in the larp is separated into two fundamentally different segments: one where the institution has control and another where control is left to the characters; however they should choose to manage it. Thematically these represent the time before and after the revolution, but in the game they are divided into a number of 15 minutes blocks and shuffled around so that the chronology of the game will be completely messed up, making "before" and "after" inseparable. The patients will go through a lot of everyday scenes during the game, and the players should be told to perceive the chronology as they experience it.

Lights

The set lights are probably the most visually defining part of Delirium. All the isolated stage areas are lighted by red and white theatrical set lights. All of the stages should have their own natural lights to set the mood for a mental institution but it is the set lights that illuminate the stage.

The light dynamic is simple. When the mental institution is in control the set lights are white, and when the patients have control they are red. The staff of the institution is only present when white lights are on, when red lights are on both the staff and rules of the institution are absent.

The larp will start with several blocks of white lighted scenes. The revolution in the story of Delirium is orchestrated by gradually increasing the amount of red lighted scenes, where the characters can behave as they want. In white lighted scenes it will be impossible to rebel against the institution. If players try to stand up against the staff the scene will be shut down (by turning off the set lights) and started over. The very last scene is lit with both colours to illustrate that the story has come full circle.

A very important detail about the set lights is their contrast to the darkness that surrounds the stages, as the line between light and darkness represents the shift between consciousness and unconsciousness.

When players enter a lit scene their characters wake up to consciousness and when they leave again or the lights are turned off they return to unconscious delirium. The darkness is delirium.

Sound

The sound scape has an equally important position in the larp experience. The sound scape of Delirium is a mix of sound bits, tunes, ambience, and live recordings from the larp itself mixed live for the whole duration of the larp.

Important for the sound scape is the so called bleed-feed, a mix of the players own answers to three questions about love. These can easily be made through interviews during the workshops and will contribute to bringing the Delirium experience “closer to home”. The bleed-feed is played after the participants are put to bed.

A second important sound piece is the pathos-infused song “My Body is a Cage” by Arcade Fire, the theme song for Delirium. It is played at the beginning of the larp, every morning when the characters wake up, and at the final scene of the larp.

The song is perhaps the thing that players remember the most when thinking about Delirium, we were surprised how much this added to the game but apparently the use of a sound scape is a short-cut to people’s unconscious motivations. It should be used with care. In the end just hearing this song would bring tears in the eyes of both players and organisers alike.

Props and costumes

The physical design of Delirium is stripped of unnecessary details, cut clean to basic objects of the game. It may seem that the scenography is stripped bare, but this only enhance focus on the objects in the game and increase their application. Nothing is put in the game by coincidence; all should be used in the role-play.

Red objects

Red objects are used to represent the mental instability of the patients in a physical way. The red objects are malfunctional objects painted red to symbolize their special nature. The idea is that everybody except the player holding the object should react to it as if it is a standard object of its type (e.g. the red cup with holes in it is just a standard cup like any other). Thus a character finding herself with the very small red blanket, when going to bed, would be the only one seeing it as such, whereas everybody else would see a normal blanket and not understand the complaints from the character. Furthermore as a rule the character is not allowed to express the actual problem with the red object only her discomfort with the situation.

Costumes

The costumes of the game consists of full sets of hospital clothes for all players and two (a white and a red) sets of staff uniforms.

To represent the patient’s silent rebellion against the institution they should gradually be supplied with extra hospital clothes, blankets, sheets and other materials they can use to transform their plain white hospital clothes into more elaborate costumes that closer portray the personas of their characters. It is important that this is done gradually as the characters should transform more and more during the larp.

Additionally magic markers are supplied to allow the players to write on each other's clothes and skin. The idea is to write feelings towards another person directly on their body. It should be introduced as a therapy form (by the nurse or the psychologist) and should during the game run out of control allowing the characters to write deep emotional as well as very nasty things upon each other.

Red staff uniforms

To further the story of the revolution, red-coloured staff uniforms are presented to the players in some of the early red lighted scenes. These uniforms contain the power of the archetypes, and for all players the appearance of a character in a red uniform will be perceived as a member of the institution staff, including the player wearing it. In this way the institution's power to define rules is transferred to the characters. In the final scene of the game, white staff uniforms are presented to the players to stress the fact that they have now become the masters of the institution.

The players should already have practiced wearing the uniforms and how to react to them at the workshops. It is recommended that the uniforms are generally controlled by the group that favours the specific archetype. This group should also have rules for who gets to wear the uniform.

Workshops

Workshops are essential to the planning and creation of Delirium. By workshops we mean the type of player preparation that has been used in the creation of games such as *System Danmarc* (2005), *Totem* (2007) and *Agerlund* (2009). It is recommended to use a broad spectrum of methods ranging from impro and image theatre to energizers and facilitated brainstorm techniques. Different approaches and techniques for workshops are described (in Danish) in the *Workshop Handbook* (2008).

The workshop is performed by the organizers as facilitators and uses constructive alignment learning where the players get information about a certain game mechanic and then get to use it in exercises that also develop their relations as a player group. Through workshops the central points of the game are communicated to the players, the different diegetic arts are tried out and internalised and roles and relations are developed. The workshops are also important for creating an ensemble group, where all players participate in creation of the larp and they all feel safe and inspired to explore the game.



The dining hall during white lights. When standing on the lighted stage you see nothing of what's going on in the darkness around you. Photo: Andie Nordgren

Delirium is designed for five days of workshops.

- Day 1: Developing the ensemble group and presentation of the game and story arch.
- Day 2: Introducing and experimenting with diegetic arts, development of character groups.
- Day 3: Developing game culture, social norms, roles and relations.
- Day 4: Developing characters and their relations, frozen moments, flash forwards.
- Day 5: Reiteration of culture, norms and relations, personal preparation, warm up.

Production - running the game

Delirium is a larp with a high level of production, basically all parts of the production of the larp is put in the organizers hands, the players are only expected to attend the workshops and play the game.

The production value was very important for us and we focused on making the experience of playing the game as luxurious and complete as possible. This meant that we had our own team of semi-professional chefs who welcomed the players with a cheese buffet and ended the deroleing with a five course dinner and a bar.

Schedule

The game is run on a tight schedule with the 36 hours of game time (and 14 hours of sleep) split into 15 minute blocks describing what light, sound, NPCs and special equipment is to be used in each scene. The schedule makes it possible to coordinate the game between all the different people in the crew but requires serious commitment by all.

The schedule is handled by the backstage production crew, who should always be 15-30 minutes ahead of the players making ready for the next scenes. The changing of scenes in the game is decided by the game master that resides somewhere on the floor of the play area.

Crew

Delirium has five important types of crew members.

- The game master on the floor follows the game closely and calls the opening and closing of the different scenes.
- The technical crew controls the sound and the light.
- The stagehands work in the dark of the hall and prepare the setting for each scene and clean up after the scenes. They also make it possible to change the scenography of the specific locations during the game.
- The backstage producers brief the NPCs and prepare props used for each scene. In addition they keep track of the overall time schedule, coordinate with the kitchen personnel, and take care of any unexpected situations that may arise.
- The NPCs play the three archetypes running therapy sessions and interacting with the players.

Psychological safety

Delirium can be expected to have a big emotional effect on many of the players and it is important to work seriously with the psychological well-being of the players. This is done during preparation of the larp (especially by forming the ensemble group), under the larp and after it. Just telling the players to take care of themselves and listening to their hearts is a start; it cannot be done too many times.

Offgame room

The offgame-room is important for a game working on these emotional levels. The offgame room should contain the players' offgame equipment: medicine, toothbrushes, cigarettes and personal belongings that make them feel normal again, but most importantly it offers the players an opportunity to take a break from the game, relax or coordinate with each other.

Deroleing

Deroleing is the process of taking the players back home from experiences of the larp. After an emotional game like Delirium some players may be totally confused and require weeks of processing while other players may feel remarkably clear. It is recommended to use at least a full day after the game for deroleing where the players can talk about their experiences, get out of character and relax before returning to "the real world".

Summary

Delirium is a larp that brings a lot of different elements to the stage. Through the use of theatrical techniques and a theatrical display of scenography the larp breaks the continuity of time and space, through an abstract and aesthetical set design the role-play is removed from its doctrine of realism, through ensemble workshops the players make the game their own, and through diegetic arts and game devices the role-play is focused on exactly the two themes of Delirium: love and madness.



Light testing of the scenography in the laundry room. Photo: Andie Nordgren

Ludography

Totem (2007): Peter S. Andreasen, Rasmus Høgdall, Peter Munthe-Kaas, Kristoffer Thurøe & Mathias Kromann Rode. Copenhagen.

Mellan Himmel och Hav (2003): Emma Wieslander, Katarina Björk & Ars Amandi, Stockholm. Eng. "Between Heaven and Sea".

System Danmarc (2005): Opus Netværket. Copenhagen.

Agerlund (2009): Jesper Heebøll-Christensen, Elisabeth Nørresø-Haase & Sanne Harder. Copenhagen. Eng. "The Acres".

References

Munthe-Kaas, Peter, Andreasen, Peter S., Høgdall, Rasmus, Thurøe, Kristoffer & Kromann Rode, Mathias (2009): *Workshop Håndbogen*. Copenhagen. Landsforeningen for Rollespil.

Nordgren, Andie (2008): High Resolution Larping: Enabling Subtlety at Totem and Beyond. in Montola, Markus & Stenros, Jaakko (eds.) (2008): *Playground Worlds. Creating and Evaluating Experiences of Role-Playing Games*. Vantaa, Ropecon. The book for Solmukohta 2008.

Delirium

Designed and organized by Peter Schønemann Andreasen, Sanne Harder, Jesper Heebøll-Christensen, Rasmus Høgdall, Peter Munthe-Kaas, Mathias Kromann Rode, Kristoffer Thurøe

Played July 22 - 25th, 2010 in Tinghallen, Denmark

Duration: 50 hours + 5 days of workshop + 1 day of de-roleing

Number of players: 38

Budget: 8.900 € (participation fee: 200 €)

More information: www.delirium.mkromann.dk



Mad about the Boy

Tor Kjetil Edland, Trine Lise Lindahl, Margrete Raaum

Mad about the Boy is a larp about survivors of a global disaster that killed more than half of humanity. An inexplicable disease killed all the men in mere minutes. The surviving women are facing not only the enormous task of rebuilding society, but also the possible extinction of humanity.

*The first act ends with the arrival of the last man in the world
Photo: Li Xin*

Introduction

The world of the larp is inspired by the graphic novel *Y the Last Man* by Brian K. Vaughn and Pia Guerra. The larp does not use any characters or storylines from the graphic novel.¹

Our story is about a group of women who have applied to an insemination program initiated three years after the disaster. As sperm has become a very precious resource, there are only a few women who will be given this privilege.

The first act of the larp centers around the selection of who will get to enter the program to become mothers, and what new family structures will be the best ones to raise these precious children. Act one of the larp ends with a man entering - the only one who has survived the catastrophe. How will each woman relate to this man? Before the end of the second and final act the women will have to decide what to do with him.

A larp about a world without men will of course have gender as one of its main themes. What happens when “mankind” has become “womankind”? What does a world where women have to fill all positions and roles in society look like?

The original larp was played twice in the summer of 2010. Each run lasted three days, divided into one day of workshops, one and a half day of playing and an evening of debriefing.

The game was written and played in English to make it possible for non-Scandinavians to participate. We wanted to explore both an all-female game and a game where men could play female characters².

1 *The only exception is the character of Linn whose background is inspired by one of the characters from the comic.*

2 *Some reactions and comments from players of the game can be found here: <http://laivforum.net/threads/18990-Mad-about-the-Boy>*

Design decisions

Our larp was divided into three parts; a workshop and two acts. The two acts are separated by the event of the man entering the scene. The first act is more strictly defined than act two. It is focused around the selection process for the maternity program. Act two is hardly scripted at all. It is left open whether the characters decide to continue the selection process, overthrow the committee or whatever else the players decide to do with the story.

The only instruction we gave the players for act two is that it should be the choice of the women, either collectively or through some of them winning a power struggle, what the fate of the last man will be. He can try to influence what will happen through his interaction with them, but not completely override what is happening by for instance fleeing right before the last scene of the larp. Hopefully the character of Isak will also strike up different type of relationships hostile and friendly with the different female characters, so that he doesn't focus his play on one particular alliance or love story.

We chose to do all the preparations on site. In principle the only preparations the players needed to do were reading through their characters and bringing a suitable costume. We believe that you get more focused and coherent preparations when everything is done with all of the players present, immediately before the larp starts. By and large this worked very well. Some of the players chose to prepare more than this before the larp and this was possible as the characters were sent out in advance.

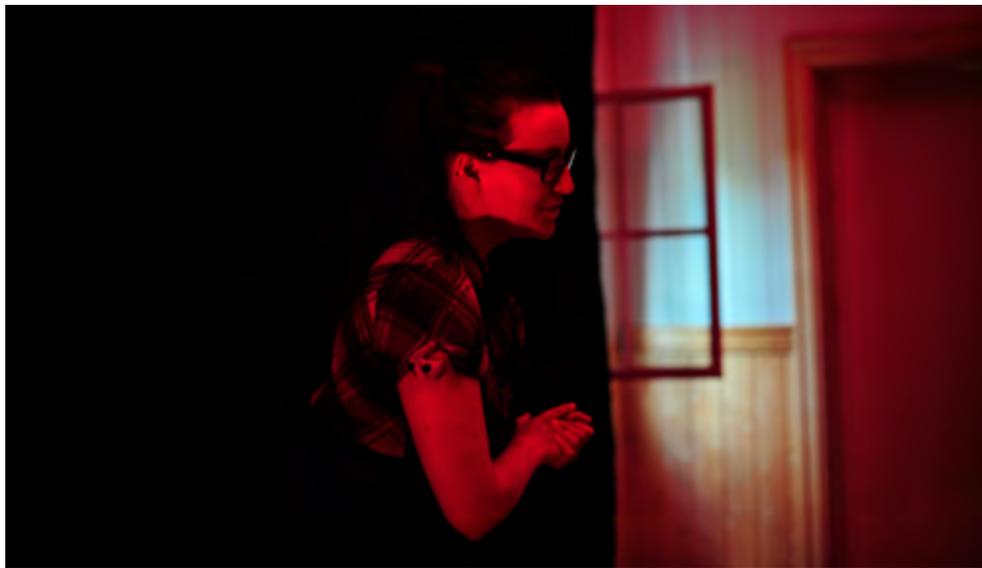
All characters were pre-written for two reasons. It enabled us to get a well balanced dynamic between the characters. The other reason was that we wanted the players to have very limited preparations before arriving at the larp. We developed a character template which was divided into sections like ‘archtype’ and ‘suggested function for the character in the dramaturgy of the larp’ to clearly communicate the playability of the character.

For this larp we were interested in exploring stories, inner lives and backgrounds of the women.

We find that meta techniques is a way to bring important aspects of the game into actual play between characters, so that important dramatic elements don't just remain in character descriptions or individual players' heads. The meta techniques we used are presented in more detail later in this blueprint.

We also decided on a great deal of transparency concerning the story. We believe we gain better play by telling our players what to expect and what we need from them to make our story come true. The framework for the larp is open information for everyone, so that the true surprises come from what the players fill this with. Because of this, we told the players that a man would show up and when that would happen. We wanted the reactions of the characters, not the players. We also published all the characters so all the players could read them.

As all characters in this game except one are female, if playing this with both male and female players we recommend having a particular focus in the workshop on the role playing challenges faced by male players playing female characters. We did this through physical workshops on female body language.



A character playing a scene in the black box
Photo: Li Xin

The setting of the game

The death of men happened very quickly and without warning. It is still not known what caused their deaths. Sperm is stored in sperm banks many places in the world, but governments have been reluctant to make use of it since tests indicate that only girl children could be born.

The Nordic governments have recently decided to use some of the sperm in a pilot programme, the one the characters of the larp have applied to. A committee has been appointed by the government to make the final selection of who will be accepted into the programme.

The leader of the committee, Maria the politician, is the ideological brain behind the programme. As the death of men is also the death of the nuclear family, Maria has decided that the recommended family unit for the insemination programme should be three women.

According to Maria this is a more robust constellation than the old one. Most of the other characters then arrive in groups of three, but the ties that bind the women together are different from trio to trio. When the larp begins they are all gathered at a secluded place where the final selection will take place.

Characters

Below is a short presentation of the characters divided into groups. There are 29 written characters. With fewer players, one or more of the trios can be removed from the game. In some of the trios it is decided who is the intended birth mother, in others this might be open for discussion and conflict.

Complete character texts as well as further description of the world after the disaster can be downloaded from <http://madabouttheboy.laiv.org>.

The groups

The Committee has been selected to choose the women who will get to raise a child in this first part of the new Nordic insemination program. In the first act they will organize a selection process, including interviews and tests of the applicants.

The Survivalists are a group of women belonging to a community which strives to be as self sufficient as possible. They are skeptical to the ability of the state to manage things in these present circumstances but go along with the programme to secure a child for their community.

The Artists are three women who are used to either taking the spotlight, or making sure they have a say in who is in it. Their plan is to document the conception, birth and childhood of a human being born into this world. It will be beautiful. Truly a work of art.

The Lovers are a polyamorous group of three and a fixture of the scene in the city offering art and entertainment in these hard times. Even though they can be a close knit unit they are three women who are not shy to occasionally let their personalities and temperaments clash in public.

The Wealthy Women. The heiress of a fishery empire, the entrepreneur and the housewife. Together they are a resourceful family unit wealthy enough to provide for all the needs of a child.

The Professionals. Who can be more qualified to raise a child than a psychiatrist, a teacher and a social worker? These three women are not a family and more acquaintances than friends really.

The Nuclear Family. This is the family that in the strongest sense resembles a family like they used to be: a mother, a father and a grandmother, only the prospective father is a drag king. The young woman in this group has a history of being treated badly by men in her life before they all died.

The Muslim Sisterhood. A common faith bind these otherwise very different women together. Compared to many secular women their faith might help them make sense of life after the disaster. The downside is that if they lose the belief that there is a meaning to the suffering, the existential crisis might become ever so much deeper.

Three Generations. The women left in this family are the dominating grandmother, her haunted daughter-in-law and the teenage granddaughter. Theirs is not a harmonious relationship, but they already have a family structure, and know each others faults and fortes.

Linn is not part of a trio and is a wild card in the selection process. She is a survivor, a person who is honest with herself, a no-nonsense, practical woman. Formerly a page 3 girl, she's now an undertaker, a scavenger and somewhat of an action girl.

Isak is the last man on Earth. Feeling like a lone sailor caught in a storm at sea. He has been hiding in the forest alone during the three years which has passed since the disaster, he was recently captured by a gang of women planning to profit from him. He managed to escape and has run naked through the forest for hours when he comes crashing into the game at the end of act one.

Act 1

The larp begins three years after the disaster to the day. The Song 'Mad about the Boy' plays while the participants have gathered in a circle with their eyes closed. When the song ends the larp begins. The committee and all of the applicants are gathered in a circle for a ceremony of remembrance. They are each holding a candle. One by one they tell where they were and what happened around them when the disaster struck. When one is finished speaking she blows out her candle. When everyone has spoken and blown out their candle the ceremony is over. Maria then holds a welcome speech, talking about the insemination programme.

During the rest of the day the committee will organize interviews and tests of all the applicants. Theresa is in charge of the psychological tests, while Julie is in charge of physical tests. The tests can both be individual (of prospective birth mothers for instance) or group tests of each prospective family. When not involved in the test the applicants will get a chance to get to know the other women who are gathered here and maybe establish possible alliances or animosities.

Shortly before the organizers have decided to end act one the committee should gather everyone to present their preliminary recommendations for who will get access to sperm and who will not. It is up to the committee themselves how many they choose, but approximately half of the family groups can work well. The committee is also free to recommend a rearranging of the family groups and/or to make a separate list of the most suited birth mothers separate from the list of the best suited family groups.

When the committee has concluded the presentation the characters are given a brief moment for initial reactions, Isak, the last man, comes crashing in the door, fleeing into a house he thought was empty. Everyone freezes and 'Mad about the Boy' is played. When the song has ended one of the organizers ask each character (except Isak) one by one "[Name] What runs through your head?", and they answer with a brief monologue. When everyone has spoken 'Mad about the Boy' is played again. When the song ends act 2 begins. In the original production of this larp, act one lasted from early afternoon to approximately midday the next day.

*The game is frozen during the break between acts 1 and 2
Photo: Li Xin*



Act 2

Act 2 begins right where act one ended – with all the women gathered moments after Isak came crashing into the room. Some of the characters will most probably try to take charge of the situation, but what unfolds now is wholly up to the characters themselves. The players make the decisions as to whether the selection process for the insemination programme should continue in parallel with the storyline of what to do with the last man.

Act 2 should last until sometime in the evening the same day. Some of the characters might decide to contact the outside world. This should be somewhat difficult and can be explained with phone lines and cellphone networks being down. If someone has a phone conversation with someone from the outside this can be played out in the black box, with one of the organizers playing the person on the other end.

The larp ends with a scene that in some way or other determines what happens to Isak. How this plays out should be up to the participants themselves. It could be a joint decision or some of the characters forcing through the outcome. Towards the end the organizers should be watching the drama unfold and be alert to what is to be the last scene of the larp.

When they decide that this is it, they should play ‘Mad about the Boy’ one last time. Everyone gathers in a circle while the song is playing and removes an item belonging to the character putting it on the floor as a way of saying goodbye to the character and to the larp. When the song ends everyone is out of character and the game has ended. We had a portable mp3-player, so the larp could end anywhere on the premises.



*The Committee and the last man (left)
Some women tried to run off with the man (centre)
Characters from The Nuclear Family (right)
Photos: Susanne Wehner (left and centre), Li Xin (right)*

Meta-techniques

This larp incorporates the use of some meta-techniques and some simulating game mechanics that can be employed by the participants. Meta-techniques are dramaturgical game mechanics that seek to enable play which isn't possible with a purely “realistic“ playing style. The aim is thus to strengthen the drama of the larp, by pulling what is inside the characters head into real game situations. Here is an overview of the recommended techniques for this game.

Inner voice

With this technique an organizer approaches a character who is currently not in the company of others. The organizers start playing the character's inner voice which the character responds to. Typical input can be giving voice to the character's fears and doubts or encouraging the character to act on a personal motivation. When the organizer walks away from the character the inner voice session is over. Several players reported that they had acted out things because of being exposed to this technique that they otherwise wouldn't have. A few people found it disturbing, but then the organizer should just back off.

Monologue Box

The monologue box is a technique where the inner thoughts of the character are spoken aloud. This is heard by the players, but not by the characters they play. What they hear in a monologue can be used in how they will play in relation to that character, but the characters should react in the situation according to not having heard what was said in the monologue. The start of a monologue is signaled by drawing a square box in the air with both hands in front of the face before speaking. When the monologue is finished the same sign is made and regular play resumes.

The monologue box is best used in scenes with few characters where everyone can clearly see the monologue sign being made. We experienced some misunderstandings on the part of the players when this technique was used in crowded scenes. In the second run it was suddenly used for communicating off-larp issues, stop this if it happens as this will create confusion.

Black Box

A room at the game site can be designated as a black box. The black box can be used to play scenes from the past, imaginary scenes and possible futures. An organizer can be present in the black box and give input and suggestions as a director to the scenes that the participants want to experience.

The black box is also well suited to play scenes of contact with the outside world (if the Committee contacts the government for instance). It can also be used by participants who want to have an off-game discussion about where the story about their characters is heading and agree on scenes they want to play out during the game. The black box can contain light and sound equipment to be used to enhance scenes, but this is not essential. The “black box” can be any designated room or area on the game location where the participants can play out scenes without being disturbed by things happening outside while they are in the black box.

Ars amandi

Ars amandi is a technique developed by Swedish game designer Emma Wieslander to simulate sexual scenes in larps. When employing ars amandi a sexual encounter is played out by touching each others hands, arms and shoulders while keeping eye contact with the other person(s) in the scene. No other parts of the body is touched. We found this method well suited for any sexual scenes that might happen in this game. We recommend that ars amandi is demonstrated in a pre-game workshop to ensure that the participants who might play sexual scenes become comfortable with it and everyone at the larp get the same understanding of how it is to be played out.

Simulated Violence

This is not a game with a lot of expected scenes of violence, but some of the characters have been given guns to make violence into a clear and present threat. The main reason we added guns to the game was that they represent the explicit possibility of not resolving conflicts in a peaceful manner. In particular we wanted that aspect included in a game with a majority of or only female players to see if and how the guns were used.

The players should be instructed that firing a gun should not be done before towards the end of the game. The character shot at decides whether she dies or is just wounded. Physical confrontations without guns involved, such as punching someone, should be played out safely. We chose to do this in a slow motion mode, but this did not really work well in high adrenaline situations. Situations were played out safely, but the slow-mo part was just forgotten.

Pre-game workshop – some suggestions

We wanted the pre-game workshop to be an integrated part of the entire experience of playing Mad about the Boy. Building the flow of the workshop, we wanted to work with the players starting with focusing on themselves and their reasons for joining the game, to reflecting on the game world and finally to become the character they would play through workshops on body language and playing out scenes as the character. Here is a sketch of the main points covered by the workshop:

Day 1

- 1) Organizers present themselves, the structure of the workshop and the two acts of the game.
- 2) Players introduce themselves and their motivation for wanting to play this larp.
- 3) The players are introduced to the in-game world through a guided meditation asking the players to imagine what their own reality would be like if all men suddenly died.
- 4) A physical workshops with focus on female body language. How are women’s body language different from men’s? How are “masculine” and “feminine” women’s body language different from each other; and women of different status.

Day 1, continued

5) The players present the characters they will play. The players then fill in application forms for the insemination programme as their characters.

6) Joint world building through discussing what the world after the disaster looks like in areas like: art & culture, media, education, sexuality & romance and religion & ideological movements.

Day 2

7) Hot seat is a theatre impro technique where one player at a time is interviewed in character by a couple of other participants. They ask questions about the past and present life of the character and all answers are improvised on the spot. This enables a player to deepen the knowledge of the character she will play before the game itself starts

8) A physical workshop with focus on finding the individual character's body language. This was particularly important in the game which included male participants, but can be a relevant exercise for almost any larp - finding how the character moves in a different way from the person's regular body language.



*Dismay among some of the applicants to the fertility programme as the Committee presents their recommendations.
Photo: Li Xin*

Day 2, continued

9) An introduction on how to use the ars amandi technique in the game. Everyone who have characters who are in an intimate relationship with each other can be encouraged to play out a situation using ars amandi

10) Explanation and demonstration of the other meta techniques previously described

11) Split into groups and act out scenes from the past of the characters. This can be scenes between characters who are in the game as well as scenes with other characters, for instance men who are now dead. Suggestions for scenes can be found in the manuscript on our website.

Concluding remarks

This larp was made as a collaborative project between three organizers. We jointly created the setting and the characters and did a lot of our writing together to ensure consistency and to motivate each other and avoid the feeling of "homework". Thanks to our players for making our vision come through, and we hope other larp-organizers will find some inspiration in this blueprint. The full manuscript for Mad about the Boy with complete character texts can be downloaded from <http://madabouttheboy.laiv.org>.

Mad about the boy

Designed and organized by: Tor Kjetil Edland, Trine Lise Lindahl, Margrete Raaum

First played on June 28th - July 1st, 2010 in Trysil, Norway.

Duration: 48 hours

Number of players: 23

Budget: 6.300 € (participation fee: 63 €) for two runs of the game

More information: www.madabouttheboy.laiv.org



Muovikuppi (The Plastic Cup)

Juhana Pettersson

A larp about breaking stuff. We define ourselves through material possessions, so why not use destruction as our means of expression?

Breaking 200 coffee cups on the ground leaves a mess. Sometimes players expressed themselves by crushing the shards under the soles of their shoes. This is a staged photo. Photo: Staffan Jonsson

Introduction

The inheritance from my father's parents was divided among us when my grandmother moved into an old people's home. My father is dead and my aunt lives in Copenhagen, so everything was divided among me and my three siblings. We all got some really weird stuff. My grandfather was the professor of history of the arts at the University of Helsinki. He believed that every civilized home must have a natural history collection.

I have a dried, stuffed blowfish and a soldier's helmet from 17th century Sweden. I have my grandfather's collection of empty artillery shells and a Samoan tapestry originally bought in San Francisco in the Fifties.

My brother got the zebra skin, the grandfather clock and the bolts from a burned-down old sawmill. These are all items that serve no practical purpose. Nevertheless, they have so much history it's impossible to throw them away. The blowfish is 150 years old, handed down from a sea captain ancestor. After I brought all these things home, my apartment looked like a museum.

The experience of dealing with this led to the conception of the larp Muovikuppi (The Plastic Cup). It's a game about stuff. Material possessions, some valuable, some not.

General description

Muovikuppi is a larp about a family coming together to divide an inheritance composed of strange items. The principal means of communicating emotion in the game is by smashing coffee cups on the ground. The joy of destruction is a core component of the player experience.

The game doesn't really have a setting. It can be assumed to happen in a vaguely contemporary English environment, or localized for a specific country. Localization may be achieved by changing the names of the characters. The game is for 20 players. A typical run lasts from 45 minutes to an hour and a half.

The game was originally created for the Freefall larp festival organized together with the 2008 Solmukohta conference. It was first played on a parking lot. The abstract, minimalist scenography of the game makes it easier to organize, and keeps the focus on the essential physical elements of the game, the coffee cups and the inherited items.

One of the things you learn from larp is that almost any system of behaviour becomes natural with repetition. I've had an ongoing project to explore new and more versatile ways to create stylized interaction since 2004 and the larp Luminescence I created together with Mike Pohjola. Luminescence used flour, offered to the players to be used as they saw fit. The idea was they'd express themselves using flour, in new and surprising ways.

Muovikuppi is another attempt at the same idea. This time, the stylized interaction consists of the destruction of coffee cups. The players are told to express themselves emotionally by throwing coffee cups on the ground. This creates a simple thematic link between the valuable objects being distributed and the ceramic objects being casually destroyed. It also brings a certain joy to the game: destruction is fun.

Larp differs from passive media in the sense that it is not enough for the participants to immerse in the fiction for the game to work. A central problem of art larp has been to engage the participants into the game. Muovikuppi attempts to achieve this by asking the players to do something exhilarating and fun that they can't do in their daily lives. After the first couple of coffee cups break on the ground, the participants loosen up.

A key part of stylized interaction is that the flour and the coffee cups have little or no inherent meaning. They don't symbolize anything beyond a broad thematic link. Instead, the meaning they have is imparted by the players whenever they use the flour or the coffee cups to express something.

Producing the game

Muovikuppi is simple to produce. The game can be done with a budget of around 100-250 euros, depending on what you can get for free and what you have to pay for. This is what you need:

- 1) 200 coffee cups. The cheapest I could find were the Syntes cups from Ikea, 50 cents apiece. If you can afford it, 300 cups could be good, but more would be too much.
- 2) Cleaning equipment: brooms, shovels and plastic bags to collect the waste from the coffee cups after the game.
- 3) A car for transporting the coffee cups and the waste.
- 4) A color printer for printing all the game material for the players.
- 5) (Optional) Water or soda the players can drink during the game. This is not strictly necessary, but can add to the expressive potential of the coffee cups. First you drink from the cup, then you destroy it. Utility makes the destruction more meaningful.

Next, you need a location. The simplest location for the game is a parking lot. Breaking 200 coffee cups on the ground damages ordinary floors, so finding an indoor location is problematic. Apart from the damage to the floor or the ground, the game can be run in many different environments. Many factories and industrial spaces have rough floors where a little splintering is not a problem.

An impersonal location keeps the focus squarely on the coffee cups, but if you have the stomach for it, run the game in your living room. You'll just have to be prepared to clean up the mess.

Running the game

From the organizer's perspective, the game has the following phases:

- 1) Setting up the game. This means cordoning off the location and placing the coffee cups so they're available to the players.
- 2) Briefing the players and distributing the game materials.
- 3) The game. It's good to have a clear starting and ending signal everybody knows. The game ends after the coffee cups run out, but you shouldn't wait for the last stragglers to destroy the ones they have in their hands. Experience has shown that players become very conservative with the cups when there's only a few left, so cut the game after the events seems to be on the verge of stalling. The game tends to take between 45 minutes and one and a half hours.
- 4) After-game discussion. Debrief the players, have fun destroying the remaining coffee cups.
- 5) Cleaning up.



Cleaning up after the game is over. Not the most enjoyable part of any larp production. A post-game photo. Photo: Suvi Korhonen

Briefing the players

Start by explaining the themes and general structure of the game. The short duration of the game rewards a melodramatic, expressive playing style. If you have a choice between keeping cool and going nuts, it's usually good to go nuts. The game is very light on rules. There are two major ones, and these should be explained to the players before distributing the characters:

- 1) The coffee cups - The participants and characters are to express themselves by destroying coffee cups. There are enough of them, so there's no need for self-restraint. The coffee cups should be thrown straight down to the ground, away from other players.
- 2) The normality rule - Muovikuppi has no off-game per se. Instead, all of the strange elements such as conducting the dividing of the inheritance on a parking lot or breaking coffee cups are to be considered as normal by the characters. They see nothing unusual about this, and have no need to talk about it. To the characters, the parking lot and the coffee cup destruction are utterly unremarkable. The purpose of this rule is to move the focus of the game away from the coffee cups: the participants are supposed to break the cups, not talk about them. The normality rule enables the player to deal with the abstraction of the scenography and the setting of the game in a natural way. In practice, it becomes second nature very quickly.

Giving out the characters

It's advisable to explain everything about the game, including the reasoning behind the design choices and the end of game criteria, to the participants in a transparent manner. Once you have briefed the players, it's time to distribute the characters. Each player gets the following things:

- 1) A character.
- 2) A list of items included in the inheritance.

Half-smashed coffee cup on the ground. In the background, the debate rages on. An in-game photo by an off-game photographer. Photo: Juhana Pettersson



In the beginning of the game one character has all the items included in the inheritance. In practice, this may mean they're on a table, since if you have good props, there's a lot of stuff. There are 20 characters, divided into families. There should be a number of characters with unisex names. The game is designed to be played so that the participants can just walk in, with no preparation.

Having a number of unisex characters makes it possible to deal with changing numbers of male and female players. Because the social groups of the game are family units, this has a significant if random effect on the composition of the families: couples might be gay or straight depending on how the players happen to be distributed.

Distributing the characters

The first character to distribute is that of the Count. Since the Count is the one who has arranged this whole event and has to make a speech at the beginning of the game, it's good to have a player you can trust in this role. If that is not possible, try to get someone who seems comfortable with being in the spotlight but doesn't appear competitive.

The Count is responsible for starting the game by making a speech welcoming everyone, and generally presiding over the division of the inheritance. He's also in possession of all the items, at least in the beginning.

The personality of the player of the Count has a large impact on how the game goes. Because of this, it's a good idea to brief the player well, but avoid the temptation to micromanage. This way, the chances of emergent gameplay are better.

Distribute the characters as groups, paying attention to the general composition of the people. I generally try to break groups of friends into different in-game families and make sure that all the shy participants don't get grouped into one family.

The families represent a cross-section of the various economic groups of modern society. There's the rich family, the upper-middle class family, the poor family, and the hippie family. I organized the social structure of the game along socioeconomic lines to reflect the general materialism of this game.

After everybody has a character and the list of items, ask the players to talk amongst their families, so that they all know each other. Talk to the Count's player and explain what's required of him. Go around and answer any questions the participants might have.

Final preparations

It's best to keep this part quick and informal. In my experience, family dynamics are something people find very approachable, so you can trust the players to come up with something on their own.

You can ask the players to come up with a specific source of disagreement among themselves relating to material possessions. After it seems that everybody knows their family unit, have one person from each family introduce their family to the rest of the participants and say a few words on what they're about.

The last thing to explain is the wishes of the deceased, as expressed in her will. She doesn't make specific wishes about who should get what, but she does say that she'd like every item to remain in the family. It's obvious that she feels nothing should be sold for money.

She says that she's certain that her family is able to divide her inheritance in a cordial and fair fashion. This is not a binding rule, however. Ungrateful inheritors can sell their part of the loot against the wishes of the deceased, if they choose.

After any last-minute questions you're ready to start the game.

Starting the game

Arrange the participants in a semi-circle, with the Count in the middle-facing the others. The preliminaries are already over, and the Count is just starting his welcome speech. Instruct the participants that the game starts when the Count starts talking.

The list of items

It's suggested to make a handout of this list so that the players can consult it during the game. If you have no access to props, you can have papers with numbers on them represent the items in the game. However, the best solution is to find a collection of bizarre things and come up with backstories for them. If this is what you do, you must discard this list of items and make your own.



The money shot: a coffee cup at the moment of dissolution. Scenes were restaged immediately after the game for the purposes of documentation. This is a staged photo. Photo: Staffan Jonsson

Item #1 - A preserved blowfish
Brought to Europe in 1833 by a sea captain ancestor.

Item #2 - A framed sketch by Jean Cocteau
Made by Cocteau and given to an ancestor in a bar in the harbor of Marseilles.

Item #3 - A collection of fossilized trilobites. Contains 17 specimens of various sizes.
Collected by the deceased, who believed that all civilized families have a natural history collection.

Item #4 - A steel grenadier's helmet from 1633.
Stolen by an ancestor from a museum in Stockholm.

Item #5 - A first edition copy of the F.L. Green novel Odd Man Out, from 1947.
Bought by the deceased in a bookstore in Bangkok.

Item #6 - An ivory tusk.
Exchanged by an ancestor to a tattered shirt in 1812 in what is now Senegal.

Item #7 - A Russian church ledger from 1877 featuring a woodcut of a worm-infested skull.
Given to the deceased as a gift on her travels in Russia.

Item #8 - An Egyptian figurine depicting the deity Sobek.
Stolen by the deceased from a museum in Cairo.

Item #9 - The skin of a zebra.
Purchased by the deceased in an interior decoration shop in Copenhagen in 1967.

Item #10 - An armor made of gold originally made in 1433 in Constantinople
Given to an ancestor as a gift by a suitor in 1922.

Item #11 - A collection of women's magazines from the 1950s to the present day.
Stored by the deceased in a shed in her back yard.

Item #12 - The saw of a sawfish.
Originally from a specimen caught by an ancestor in 1799 in the Caribbean Sea.

Item #13 - A Samoan tapestry made from palm leaves.
Acquired by the deceased from a Norwegian sea captain in the harbor of San Francisco in 1959.

Item #14 - A collection of the sketches of Picasso.
Found by the deceased in a dumpster in Paris in 1998.

Item #15 - A collection of Egyptian pornographic scrolls.
Given to the deceased by the Shah of Persia in 1971 in Teheran.

The character

This is a complete character template. The characters you give out should have all this. There's one paragraph of personal description. The other parts of the character are the same for everybody. The character description is short and concise, so it might be understood quickly. The player should be able to read the character brief and immediately internalize everything in it.

You can write your own character descriptions, or use the ones I have at: www.juhanapettersson.com/works/muovikuppi-the-plastic-cup.

The template:

Ceramic shatters but plastic endures. You are not someone who breaks. You may scratch, bend, and have a meltdown, but you never break. Be unreasonable.

Olga - Mother

A high-strung woman in her early forties, Olga is proud of her barely upper class lifestyle. Her values are based on tact, good taste and being better than most other people. She likes to think of herself as a cultivated woman of class, but her temper always lets her down: when she gets angry, insulted, flustered, happy or sad she forgets herself and lets go. After she calms down she pretends it didn't happen. Olga has all the crazy ideas of someone who doesn't have to work for a living.

What's happening?

You are a part of a huge extended family spread in many parts of the world. Not all of you know each other, and now a great-aunt has died, leaving a large inheritance. You don't really know exactly how you're related to the deceased. There is no money, but instead all kinds of strange objects, enough to fill a museum, and a binder with notes detailing the history behind every single piece. Some of the things are valuable, others worthless, all unusual.

Practical

Express your emotions by shattering coffee mugs on the ground. Make sure you'll have reason to shatter a mug before the game has run for ten minutes. There's plenty of mugs, so don't be shy. When throwing a mug into the ground, make sure you don't hit anybody, and always throw straight towards the ground.

The Aristocrats

Olga, the character in the above example, belongs to the wealthiest family. This family is old money, and the characters in it know that they will never be poor in their lives. They have a strong connection to tradition, and would like for everyone to get along. They have a very poor grasp of the social realities of everyone else. This family consists of the Count, his wife, and their three adult children.

The Social Democrats

This family consists of a childless couple and their family friend, a yoga instructor. The friend doesn't really have anything to do with the inheritance, but feels that she must involve herself to protect her friends from being exploited. The couple has a materially comfortable middle class life, and are not really concerned about the monetary value of the inheritance. They'd like for everything to be divided fairly.

The Upper-Middle Class Family

This is an upwardly mobile family of wealthy people who'd like to be richer still. The family consists of a working husband or wife, a stay-at-home parent, and their three children. The members of this family are successful and well aware of their social status. They are not blind to the social inequalities inherent in society, and wish to come out as winners.

The Polyamorous Threesome

This family consists of three characters that live in a polyamorous relationship with each other. One of the characters has a stake in the inheritance, and the other two are along for the ride. All three are pretty poor, so they have a material interest in the inheritance as well. All are young, and have alternative lifestyles. They might be motivated to try to get some of the cool stuff, and could be swayed by emotional arguments.

The Poor Family

This family consists of one unemployed parent, one live-in boyfriend or girlfriend, and two children. The parents are irresponsible and very bad at fighting for their own interests, while the children are sharp and keen to see they won't lose out on their one chance of getting a better life.

Lessons in destruction

“You were always rewarded for bursts of emotion: you got to break a coffee cup!” one participant said, describing his experiences playing in the first run of the game. Unsurprisingly, players have described the coffee cup destruction and the arguing as the focal points of the game.

According to another player, the destruction even gave rise to a kind of coffee-cup bloodlust: “Throwing the cups was a lot of fun, but maybe the parking lot wasn't such a great place for it. Walls, tables, shelves and other targets could have been useful, so it'd been possible to smash the cups against all kinds of surfaces.”

The game is about stuff, at least in my original conception. One player disagreed, instead describing it as a game about breaking stuff. “I didn't have a strong experience of touching or handling items. Matter is the opposite of abstraction, and it's hard to experience if there's so little of it. In contrast, breaking coffee cups is very tactile. It's easy to immerse in it.” He suggests adding more elements of destruction to bring variation to the experience.

The abstraction of the setting was seen as functional. “I've played a lot of tabletop games, so the symbolic nature of the game didn't feel strange.” Although there was no description of the diegetic setting, players made their own assumptions: “I felt that we were in a lace-decorated Gustavian family manor.”

Some felt inspired by the unusual surroundings. The first game was held close to railway tracks, and a player commented that: “the trains running past brought their own confusing touch. A parking lot next to the rail tracks is the spiritual armpit of suburban living, and has surprisingly little meaning for me. A very suitable setting for the meeting of relatives you don't like.”

One of the loveliest things I saw during the game was the players using the coffee cups as a counterpoint to their acting. A player might stand perfectly immobile, without betraying any emotion, and smash down a coffee cup to signify inner turmoil.

Ludography

Luminescence (2004): Juhana Pettersson & Mike Pohjola, Helsinki.

Muovikuppi (The Plastic Cup)

Designed and organized by Juhana Pettersson.
 First played on April 3rd, 2008 in Vantaa, Finland.
 Duration: between 45 minutes and one and a half hours
 Number of players: 20
 Budget: 200 € (participation fee: free)
 More information: www.juhanapettersson.com



A Nice Evening with the Family

Anna Westerling

A larp about family, Nordic culture and bridging the gap between larp and theatre

*Dinner is served. In the foreground Kristin and Jean from the play Miss Julie.
Photo: Emma Öhrström*

How do you make a game out of seven classical Nordic plays? How do you make a game that will give your players a deep emotional experience and how do you do that in just 41 hours?

A Nice Evening with the Family (En stilla middag med familjen) tried to do that. It was a larp based on several plays, by Vinterberg, Ibsen, Strindberg, Leffler and Jansson. These stories all centred around a contemporary 60th birthday party and the theme of facade, social heritage and the bourgeois family. The players all played characters from the plays and followed the pre-written stories.

The larp was set in a mansion close to Flen, Sweden in August 2007. It ran four times, three times in Swedish and once in English with participants from seven different nations. One game had 38 participants and lasted 41 hours including pre- and post-game.

Before the game

The theme and the plays

When we set out to do this larp we wanted to do three things. We wanted to create deeper and more immersive larp-experiences, we wanted to show that larp was art and we wanted to explore family structures with social inheritance and bourgeois facades. It was about keeping the facade, uphold patriarchal structures, stick to social heritage and display loyalty to the family at all times. No matter the cost.

It all begun with the movie *The Celebration* by Thomas Vinterberg. It is about a son holding a speech at his father's 60th birthday party about how the father sexually molested him and his now dead sister as children. But the interesting thing isn't the son, or even the father; it is the reaction of the guests. They all pretend that nothing happened and the party goes on. It is the bourgeois facade at its peak.

The larp was that birthday party, and just like the guests in the film the characters in the larp laughed and applauded the speech, and the larp went on. But who were these guests? To create them we added on other plays on the same the theme. One of the plays was for example *A Doll's House* by Ibsen. It is about a woman rebelling against the patriarchal structures in her own home and finally leaving her husband. This play highlighted the patriarchal structures of the bourgeois home. Another play was *Playing With Fire* by August Strindberg which highlighted the bourgeois ennui and what people do just to make something happen when they are bored. All this was actions that were played out simultaneously and in parallel during the birthday party.

The plays were:

- ◆ The Celebration (1996) – Thomas Vinterberg, adapted to a play in 2001
- ◆ A Doll's House (1879)– Henrik Ibsen
- ◆ Ghosts (1881) – Henrik Ibsen
- ◆ True Women (1883) – Ann Charlotte Leffler
- ◆ Miss Julie (1888) – August Strindberg
- ◆ Playing With Fire (1892) – August Strindberg
- ◆ Moominpappa at sea (1965) – Tove Jansson

The larp was set in a contemporary setting, but most of these plays were written in the late 19th century. This was an intentional choice. The larp asked what had really changed since then, concerning the family, and many values that still lay underneath the surface. What ghosts still remain and how far have we really gotten today?

All the plays were selected from the Nordic countries. This was the history of the Nordic family and intentionally close to home for our Nordic players. The family theme was also chosen with that in mind. We all have a family, and can identify with the story. We may not have child molesters in the family, but practical fathers, submissive mothers, bad relationships with partners, siblings or parents. And yet we all should be so, so happy in the family.

Predefined stories

We wanted to create a deeper larp experience, and make people really feel the story, and immerse into it, and for all to get a dramatic experience. I had been to larps when we didn't larp, we just acted out words feeling nothing inside; the larp didn't lift off. I didn't want this to be the case here, rather everybody got their larps filled with drama and feeling. It should be maximum action for the players. The shortness of the larp, the intense dramatic stories and the close-to-home family theme would all provide this.

This was also the reason to use predefined stories. This was not just stories we took inspiration from, but the sequence of events of the play were acted out during the larp. This might seem like an odd choice, but coming from a scene of freeform and jeepform role-playing as well it wasn't that strange. Freeform games are often pre-written stories that are played out in small groups of players with a gamemaster. I had sometimes gotten so much stronger an emotional experience from those four-hour games than from larps that lasted several days. I wanted to incorporate that intensity of drama into larp. Predefined stories gives you as a player a great story experience, while you're sometimes left to find one in a chaotic larp without directions of where you are going. Lack of direction also creates uncertainty among players, what to do and why? Players that are insecure don't take initiative and get passive, simply because they don't know what is expected of them. This creates bad larps with people searching for a dramatic curve in the game. By giving people plays we gave them a clear direction and the experience of a great story written by some of the best playwrights in the Nordic countries. Another important ingredient to make the players feel safe was we had no secrets.

The plays were played according to their scripts and if you wanted to know the ending you could just read it. No one could know exactly how our game would turn out and that was what the game was about. To be able to create those very intense and fragile scenes it demanded players that are synchronised with each other off-game. One other advantage with the players knowing each others' stories was that when you spoke to someone you could bring up subjects that you know were sensitive for their character and thereby increasing their experience even more.

Pre-game - a freeform scene between Christian and Pia from Festen (The Celebration). Photo: Bengt Liljeros



Larp is art + By adults for adults

We also wanted to prove that larp was art, not fun and games. Hence the famous plays and the heavy theme. This game still works very well in explaining what a larp could be about to a mainstream audience.

We wanted to do a larp “by adults for adults” and this gave us the shortness and the easy accessibility of the larp. There was 41 hours “pay and play” that we packed with action. Clothes were what you would wear at any 60th birthday party. All this since our players’ time is valuable and for every minute each player would invest in our larp they would get good payback. Instead of a workshop weekend before the game we had the pre-game that was 10 efficient hours held just before the game started where we had every minute carefully planned.

The dramatic curve

To help the players pace their game and know when to do what, we created acts in the larp. This also served the purpose of connecting the different plays, so this would be one larp with one dramatic curve and not seven larps with seven different curves. The acts were:

- ◆ Act I: A Family Act (3-7 PM)
- ◆ Act II: The Facade is Breaking (7-12 PM)
- ◆ Act III: The Demons are out (0- 3 AM)

The structures of these acts were simply a three-step program: from keeping the facade to losing it, which was the theme of the larp. When making an act structure that many players are going to adjust their game after it is important not to make it too complicated so that everybody can relate and apply it to their own personal dramatic curve.

The players were all told about the acts, their theme and length, in advance so they could adjust their game. There were no off-game breaks between the acts but the entering of a new act was marked by an event where all the players were present. This event served the purpose of adding the feeling to the next act, but also to make all the players focus on one thing for a short while.

The first act, *The Family Act*, started with the toastmaster holding a speech welcoming everybody to the birthday party of Helge (the father). The second act, *The Facade is Breaking*, started with Christian holding a speech at dinner about his father’s sexual molesting of him and his sister. The third act, *The Demons are out*, was about all truths coming out, and therefore started with the reading of a letter that confirmed what everybody had been denying, that the father was guilty. The demons were out.

Characters

Having seven plays also meant that we had a lot of different characters. To maximize drama we cut as many of the extra characters as possible and kept the ones most involved in the action. This gave us 38 characters.

But in some plays there were characters that had a small, but important function. We then grafted that function onto another character. For example the toastmaster has an important function in *The Celebration*, but doesn’t have much of a character. Instead we let Torvald Helmer of *A Doll’s House* act as the toastmaster of the party.

To unify the larp we took similar characters from different plays and formed new groups that we referred to as “the red thread” groups. For example the gentlemen’s lodge where all the plays’ patriarchs gather, or the Malmköping women’s society club, the kitchen staff, the bad boys, the girls from town etc. These groups served to create interaction surfaces with people from outside your own play-group, and to enforce the different bourgeois stereotypes.

We also connected the plays, so that all characters would have a reason to attend the party. We made some characters that were related to the Klingenfelt family, some were from work, some friends and so on. The purpose was to create a believable party. Since our off-game kitchen staff also were larpers the kitchen became an important gaming area as well.

Distribution of characters

With so vitally different characters how would we distribute them among the players? Swedish larp organizers sometimes typecast people, deciding who plays what. Since that is a method for acting rather than larping, and we believed that everybody could play all characters we didn't do that. It also typically promotes elitism and nepotism. Instead we decided to randomize the characters. So players signed up and about two months before the game we drew lots for them all.

Since this was a larp about gender and gender roles, we decided to keep the characters' sexes and not change them depending on player. So female roles had female players and male roles were played by male players. But to match the sign-up with gender we had three roles that could be played by both sexes. Those were Moomin, Little My (*Moominpappa at Sea*) and Gbatokai (*The Celebration*).



Pre-game. Reading the scripts. Photo: Bengt Liljeros

Pre-game

To get these stories from theatre plays to larp we ran what we called the pre-game. That was 10 hours before the game began. The pre-game had several elements. Most important was meeting the play groups where all the players of a particular play meet in their group of 4-8 people with their group leader, a director.

In the play groups the play was read, discussed and interpreted. We had no intention of the players going around saying the exact lines of the plays, rather taking the essence of the story and play it out. The story was broken down into action plans for each character. Here the acts became an important pacing tool and it let the players know when certain events were going to take place. These action plans were not made by the directors beforehand, but by the players in the pre-game. So it was their interpretation and agreement about the play that the larp was about. This matrix of agreements between people, where all characters had a goal and a meaning in the story helped the game lift off the next day. The groups all worked slightly different with the action plans, depending on play, players and director. Most groups wrote them down as a schedule on flip charts, with actions for each act, for others it stayed an oral agreement between the players.

In the play groups we also staged scenes from the play and did drama exercises. The scenes we staged were of three different types. The past, the future and the what-if future of the play. Both the players and the director could come up with scenes of interest to the play. These scenes were like freeform scenes, with the director acting as a gamemaster, which turned out to be a good tool. The drama exercises served to make players find their characters and establish relationships, and sometimes intimacy, between characters.

We also wanted our participants to work together as an ensemble, not just seven plays, so during the morning on the second day we spent an hour doing drama exercises as one group.



In the play groups the players were also given all the important information about the larp. Since this was a game by adults, for adults, and adults' time is expensive, we wanted to use our players' time as effectively as possible. Hence we never had big gatherings with one organizer talking to all the players at one time since that is a very ineffective use of people's time. People are not active, but rather just sitting. In a smaller group when you can ask questions, everybody could participate in the discussion and thereby feeling more included, and easily remembering what has been said.

The maximum number to do that is around seven plus a leader. *The Celebration* had eight participants, which we sometimes felt were too many. To ensure that everybody got the same information we gave our directors TV show host memory cards, with all the important information. The directors all knew the information from the beginning, the cards were reminders and to guarantee that all the players received the same information.

The game

The game started with a very nice garden party outside the mansion. We began with a drama exercise where everybody walked in silence as their characters, finding the motion of the character. All this to the larp's jazz soundtrack.

The larp then started to splendid sun, with the sweat running down our backs the toastmaster greeted us welcome to Helge's birthday party. We all applauded, smiled and mingled.

After the mingle, the guests were expected to change before dinner. This got the players up to their rooms where they could interact with their spouse or family. The room placement was done according to character: the high-status characters slept in the mansion, servants and the low-status characters in the east wing. From the first day when you as a player arrived at the larp you slept in the same room, as your character would, meaning for example sharing room with your in-game spouse, a person you might never have met before.

After Christians dinner speech his mother needed a cigarette. Photo: Emma Öhrström

When changed the guests gathered in the grand hall for an aperitif. This was a larp for adults, by adults, so we did have real alcohol, which is uncommon in Swedish larps. But we also allowed for people who off-game didn't want to drink any alcohol, but in-game wanted to drink a lot, to do so by using the code word "light". You could order a light wine and then you got wine that was with alcohol in the diegesis, but off-game totally alcohol-free.

After the aperitif it was time to get seated for starters. The dinner we knew could be a problem, having had both in- and off-game experiences of long boring seated dinners that prevents one from interacting with anyone but those right next to you for four hours. To avoid this we used a number of tricks. First we divided the dinner into three parts, starters, main course and dessert. During the starter Christian holds his speech, outing his farther and the larp entered the second act. This speech also provokes the party so much so the toastmaster decides that everybody should take a smoking break. This gave us the perfect opportunity to get our players up from the table and letting them be free to mingle and start the second act.

Between meals we changed the seating in order to increase interaction and make the characters meet new people. We had original seating plans but due to changes and characters missing the seating was done in the organizers' rooms during the running game. We seated the characters by status, so that for example the count would have the hostess to the table and so on. We also tried to take into consideration where the characters were in their dramatic curves and whom they would need to meet in the different acts.

After an hour of mingling the participants gathered again for main course. During the main course the drama of *The Celebration* continues. Christian tries to tell the truth and is being silenced by everybody. Even his mother, who knows it to be true, gets up and holds a speech about how he has just imagined it. In the end Christian is violently thrown out by the other guests.

Here we come to another factor that usually makes dinner parties boring; a lot of long speeches. People both in- and off-game tend to enjoy listening to their own voices. To avoid this we forbade anyone but those that were planned in *The Celebration* to hold speeches. This worked out very well. This also matched the policy that we should use everybody's time to the best and avoid one person talking to many.

The meta-hour

After dinner we felt that people's energy could be a bit low, so we wanted to give them an energy boost. Hence we had come up with the concept of the meta-hour. The meta-hour was one hour when all the participants gathered in their play groups with their director. During this hour the players did what we called meta-scenes, in essence different free-form scenes from the characters past or possible future.

All these scenes were unique to each game and created by the director in cooperation with players from what the needs of that particular group were. In reality it often happened as the director came to the meta-hour she had several ideas for different scenes and then from what the players did, suggested and altered them and took in their ideas.

The meta-hour also served the purpose of locating problems, for example if some essential element of the play hadn't worked out during runtime, one could retake that scene. The meta-hour therefore usually started with a round, with all the players getting to speak one at a time about how they felt about the game and if they were missing anything. Then the directors could capture if any part of the story needed extra attention and then do scenes about that. We also soon discovered that the players liked to talk about their experiences, and intellectualize around what their role was feeling. We cut that as short as possible in order to get people up on the floor to play and do scenes. The meta-hour wasn't an off-game hour and we could talk after the larp, now it was action.

The end of the game

After the meta-hour the party continued and a dessert buffet was served. The idea with the buffet was to avoid having participants sitting still and locked up in one position. Now we were also coming towards the end of the second act, and with participants with new energy from the meta-hour things started to heat up. The facade was cracking even more. To this we had dancing to a Frank Sinatra soundtrack.

All culminated at midnight with the third act that started with the Klingensfeldt family tradition; a long dance around all the buildings with everybody loudly singing a children's song about a train going out in the world. It is late, it is dark and the characters are drunk. When coming back from the train-song everybody gathers and one of the other siblings has a letter to read. It is a letter from the dead sister Linda confirming the truth of the sexual molestation, and her suicide is because of it.

Thus the demons were out, launching the third act. Now everything happened quickly, Miss Julie killed herself, Nora of *A Doll's House* left her husband, and the little brother Michael of *The Celebration* beat up his father. The game was over by two-three in the morning and people went to bed when they felt they were done.

The meta-techniques

Since this larp was about surface we wanted to get under the skin of the characters, to make the players play out what was inside their characters. Because a secret that isn't played out in interaction with others remains just a secret. In the story we never find out what happens inside the head of the mother of the molested child, but thanks to the meta-techniques we can. The player also gets to act out that drama, not just hiding what is most interesting during the entire larp. We wanted to reach further and explore these characters deeper and see their motivation behind their action, not just the actions. So we added meta-game techniques that we used in order to give the players a deeper emotional experience.

Directors

Besides the directors being group leaders in the pre-game and being game masters in the meta-hour, they also had a function during the game, where they were runtime gamemasters. That meant that they during the larp they were in the game, players being able to see them, but not the characters. To distinguish them they were all wearing black, but in the same nice evening wear style as the players to match the theme.

As runtime gamemasters they had several functions. The original idea was for them to help and support the players in playing a predefined story, since predefined stories might be hard for people to remember. In the end people managed very well with the predefined stories, and this became just one function among many.



Michael of Festen (*The Celebration*) is looking at his brother Christian, whose back is turned to make him shut up. Photo: Emma Öhrström

A director also coordinated events. If a vital scene in a play was happening and we thought someone should be present we just went and brought that person to the scene. But since the purpose of the meta-techniques was to enforce the theme a director could also interact with players directly. As inner voices or physically touching them in different ways to enforce their game. It could be a whisper or a push; the director could give the players new energy.

Directors were also very useful in scenes that were played out alone. Because larping by oneself can be quite pointless, it tends not to lift off. Instead your character would be alone, but you as a player wouldn't. The character's inner thoughts would now be played out in a dialog with the director. A dialog that really happened in the character's head. One example of when this became useful was after holding his speech the son is thrown out of the party, and is tied to a tree. During that time a director would come and talk with him about his feeling at the time.

We had one director for each play so there were seven directors.

The psychologist

In one room at the top floor of the mansion there was a psychologist that all roles could come and talk with at all times. Naturally Helge hadn't rented a psychologist for his 60th birthday party, this was something that existed for the players to be able to talk with someone about what was going on in their heads. To express and play out what is otherwise hidden. Talking to the psychologist, wasn't going off-game, you were in character but were able to express the drama that went on inside of you.

Since the directors were out in the gaming area the need for having a psychologist in a special room soon disappeared. Instead the directors would be run-time psychologists that any player could come and talk with at any time of the game. This was a very popular function that enabled players to act out their inner thoughts and feelings.

Monologue field

To amplify the inner emotions of the characters and make that a bigger part of the game we had what we called monologue fields. There was a small area in the room, in our case a small stage, that you could get up on and from there express the inner thoughts of the character. This wasn't something the other characters heard, but the players did so they could bring it into their game. For example if someone went into the field and expressed how he or she hated this type of parties and all the fake smiles. When getting out one of the other characters could smile and say: "Don't you just love this party?" The player had heard, not the character. Since this was a game about facade the monologue field played a special role in revealing what was under that surface to create a deeper game.

However we noticed that monologue fields in big rooms with a lot of people didn't work out very well. For monologues to work the entire group needed to focus and be interested in what was said, and in bigger groups not everybody would want to listen. However the field was used in smaller groups, as for example in the Lodge, with very strong play as a result.

Black box

The black box was basically the same as the meta-hour, but while the meta-hour was defined in time this was instead defined in space. It was a physical room that was open all the time during the game. If you wanted to do a scene, or explore your character more at any time in the game you could just go there. Directors were on hand for any assistance. The black box was used for a lot of different scenes, from scenes from the past to scenes of violence.

We also thought about how to act out a sexual encounter. Sexual relationships occurred in our plays and are an important part of the family-and-equality theme of the larp. The solution to this was the black box. We acted out sex through a dance improvisation to suggestive music involving many people. The dance was simply to push on each other's bodies. In the beginning soft and then harder as the dance increased.

There was no pushing of sensitive body parts, just arms and legs and so on. The reason we choose to involve many people was that doing it just two people could get very intimate; you would be very committed to the other person. With several people together you could be more anonymous and have a greater possibility to just indulge in the dance. The other people present would be directors and other players, especially from your own group. For example when Miss Julie and Jean had their sex-dance both Kristin and The Count would be present. This worked out very well, and gave all the participants present the right feeling.

Post-game

On Sunday morning the players were awakened by the larp's theme song that was played in the loudspeakers all over the mansion. They were then instructed to get dressed in silence and all gather in the big hall.

There we did a very theatre-inspired ending. We called up the play groups one by one, gave all the players a red rose each, and then everybody else applauded them. In the end we brought up the kitchen staff, the directors, and the main organizer, which would be me.

After this very joyful moment there was a social off-game breakfast. Then the play groups debriefed for 1.5 hours. There we talked about what the players had experienced and what they felt about it. We also let them evaluate some of the game and talk about the theme of the larp. What of this was still valid today and how did it affect us? This was of course a personal discussion that continued after the larp.

For example someone told me that he was an only child, and had spent the larp exploring that since his character was so as well. Then it was packing, hugs and goodbyes. The director crew now had five hours to prepare and sleep before the participants of the next game would arrive.

The legacy of A Nice Evening with the Family

A Nice Evening is now soon four years ago. But the ideas of it have spread. In today's fantasy larps in Sweden people do black box scenes in the middle of the forest. Or they say that they are going to do "meta". Meta-techniques is now common lingo on the Knutpunkt scene, signifying almost any technique that goes outside the classical 360°-larping.

Directors also are still used in the Swedish larp scene. Sometime the term shadow, to shadow someone, is used instead since it is less hierarchical. A shadow is just a shadow, while a director is expected to have some power. The term gamemaster is also used.

In 2007 there was very little free-form in Sweden, but after *A Nice Evening* it had a new beginning and ironically today in Sweden it is mostly larps that do free-form. This also led to the free-form convention *Höjdpunkt 2008*, where all participants contributed with games and experiments. Later this also created *Knutpunkt 2010* with its "show, don't tell" theme. Again the idea was to use participant's time for the best.

A Nice Evening with the Family

Designed and organized by Anna Westerling, Anders Hultman, Elsa Helin, Anna-Karin Linder, Tobias Wrigstad, Patrik Balint

First played on August 17 - 19th, 2007 in Föllökna Vängård, Sweden.

Duration: 41 hours including workshops

Number of players: 38

Budget: 35.000 € for four games (participation fee: 100 €)

More information: www.enstillamiddag.se

Neonhämärä (Neon Twilight)

Simo Järvelä



A look at mean streets, tough trolls and dangerous rock'n'roll in the underbelly of Helsinki

Troll Karra Hälve is fleeing from a couple of skinheads after getting caught breaking into their hang-out. 8th episode. Photo: Tuomas Puikkonen

Neonhämärä is an on-going street larp campaign played in the Helsinki capital area. It is about a group of regular people, humans and trolls, who find themselves tangled up in weird happenstances alongside their normal daily routines.

The campaign heavily utilizes supporting cast in creating scenes for the players. There is a strong emphasis on collaboration between game masters and players in all aspects of the game from character creation to writing and upholding the illusion of alternate reality.

Genre and themes

Neonhämärä is a mix of several genres of which realism is the most essential. The game is also influenced by magical realism, trollpunk, Finnish mythology and adventure genres. The mythological elements in the game are mostly present in subtle and close to realistic manner. The most obvious anomaly in the game world is the trolls, a discriminated minority in the society.

Then there are the more mystical spirit incarnations, *väki*. They represent the underlying elemental forces which also have more modern manifestations. Despite the contrasting fantastical elements, down to earth tone is a crucial part of the vision. The themes of the game are cultural differences and clash between the modern and the traditional beliefs.

The player characters are humans and trolls, e.g. folklore students, rock'n'troll band Sysikuu, lawyers and consultants, and a few small time criminals. In the end it's a game about quite common people and what they do when things start getting weird. The same setting could be played with different set of characters altogether and still the essentials of the game would remain the same.

Dynamic stylists / tv-show hosts from the 6th episode whose job was to do a complete makeover to a regular lowlife with only 100€. Photo: Suvi Korhonen

Street larp

Neonhämärä is a street larp using the whole city as its playground. The players are free to move as they like; there's no strictly limited play area. The real world is part of the game world with very small alterations. Finnish street larps have had tendency towards being small bubbles of fiction in the middle of reality. The contact with the outside world has been minimized in an effort not to confuse outsiders and to avoid elements that would conflict with the fictional elements of the game.

In *Neonhämärä* we aim to blur or even dissolve that boundary to at least some degree. We are using pervasive elements when we think it adds value to the game and players' gaming experience. So far the outside world has supported the game beautifully, for example troll band Sysikuu's guitarist was asked for an autograph by a complete stranger in a bar and fellow passengers congratulated the driver (supporting cast) when she threw the smelling trolls out of the tram. Pervasive street larps and boundary blurring have to be used carefully to avoid unwanted coincidences. Also different players' views have to be taken into account when designing events – not everyone will want to play in a heavily pervasive manner.



Structure

There are around 30 regular players and a varying amount of supporting cast. Players were originally split into groups that bind the characters together with common background, i.e. storytelling groups. The game masters created the character groups and very short description of characters in them and then those participating in the game could pick the ones they prefer. Casting was made based on players' interests and game masters' views on interesting player dynamics. After the initial casting the characters were created in collaboration between player and game master and some parts in collaboration within the group.

As the campaign has proceeded the group structure has naturally been diminished a bit and inter-group connections between characters have been created. However the groups are still heavily used when designing plots and events. They are also the basis for collaborative creation among players. Naturally, if the character relations change considerably, the storytelling groups have to be adjusted so that they remain relevant and meaningful in the game. That is surprisingly difficult as game masters' view is completely dependent on player debriefs and communication. Therefore it is crucial that players communicate clearly enough what is their preferred and currently most natural storytelling group. But retaining some storytelling groups really helps in making the plot creation less laborious and also more sensitive to character relations and social dynamics.

The length of the campaign is predetermined, however not by strict number of episodes but by conditions which end the game if they are met. Some of these conditions are diegetic and largely dependant on player behaviour, some related to real world events and some completely non-diegetic conditions. The non-diegetic conditions include how interested and focused the players and game masters feel, no point in continuing if there's no real drive behind the campaign. The plot related real world dependant end condition shall remain a secret as the campaign is still running at the time of writing, but an example of such a structure could be a certain voting result in a game with a political theme.



A group of city worshippers doing their ritual in rainy Helsinki in the 8th episode. Photo: Tuomas Puikkonen

It is also possible for characters to drive the campaign to a state where continuing it would be meaningless or would require changing of main premises of the campaign, for example if doing something that would put all characters in jail for an extended period of time in a realistic campaign. Naturally, this makes it hard to see beforehand how long the campaign will be, but also it leaves plenty of room to maneuver. The players haven't been informed of these conditions, however they have been hinted at. Some players might be aware of their existence, and as the campaign proceeds, the plot related end conditions will most likely become quite well known among players as several characters have plots related to them. It is of course possible that they might not consider it as an end condition but just a plot line.

Design principles

There are certain goals we aim at in *Neonhämärä*. We chose high resolution social interaction as the main focus of the game. We believe other elements in the game gain their meaning through social interaction and therefore it is a crucial part of the game. Actions have to have reactions and consequences to be meaningful and in larp most of that comes from social interaction between characters. It is also what keeps the game going in street larps when there's not necessarily actual game content around. We use certain principles when making all game mastering decisions to reach those goals.

1. Contrast

Everything must have some comparison to have meaning in the game and to create emotional experiences. The fiction, even in a realism genre, is floating around without strong connection to the real world, so all the contrasting experiences that create meaning through comparison must be present in the fiction. In practice this means that you should have the whole emotional scale in use from happiness to sorrow, fear to relief, love to hate to really experience them.

2. Non-escalation

We want to keep the game on the defined level, or at least control the rate at which the game escalates towards epic events. More often than not campaigns start to escalate uncontrollably when they pick up momentum and game masters have difficulties to keep things in control. Our main tool to keep epicness at desired level is constant reminding of players that their characters should be more like everyday people not role-playing game characters. Often the limit is set by how the game world reacts to characters' actions. In practice this sometimes means threatening characters with the police. Limiting the option space of characters to the level at which the police wouldn't realistically interfere with their actions is probably the easiest way to put a stop to the tendency to escalate.

3. Realism

We try to keep things realistic, meaning, that they could actually happen in the real world. Also, characters are not any smarter than their players, so players have to represent their characters in quite indexical manner, i.e. characters abilities are not that different from players' own abilities. The supernatural aspects naturally contradict this principle, however we try to keep characters options in relation to supernatural elements realistic, which, for example, means that characters don't know about such things any more than the players do.

4. Character involvement

Besides what would realistically happen we always consider how we could maximize involvement of different characters in any plot. Often in practice realism and maximal character involvement are contradictory and the end result is some sort of compromise between them. However, it is quite meaningless to have plots without characters so aiming at them is always important.

5. Emotional impact

Emotional experiences are why players participate in larp in the first place, so always designing the game to create emotional impact is only reasonable in that light. Designing for negative emotions seems easier, but we try to utilize the whole range of emotions, so that they have meaning through comparison to other experienced emotional states. Both the type and the intensity need to be varied to be effective.

6. Changing perspectives

We aim to give players new insight to certain thematic areas of the game, which could have impact beyond the game itself. Thus some design decisions are made based on our idea of how different players could be supported (or lured) into new insights about the world, themselves, the city, the people around them or their relation to them.

Rules and game mechanics

We have tried to keep rules to a minimum. All characters have 1-6 mental and physical points that can be compared if the result of a conflict (mental or physical) would otherwise be unclear. The one with the bigger score wins automatically. The scene is acted out in normal manner whether the rules have been used or not.

The rules are mainly for establishing some facts about the game world, for example that an average troll is physically superior to humans. However the points are scaled so that majority of characters have equal scores. When two characters have equal scores, the rules do not offer any clear solution to the conflict except that is up to the players to decide what happens and that the end result is some form of tie.

For example, two regular guys in drunken brawl would both end up beaten and bruised. Our idea in a nutshell is that a tie result is usually a lot more interesting in this genre, and only in very clear or supernatural cases should rules intervene with players' sense of realism. To our knowledge the point comparison have so far never been used in live gaming situation and players have always decided to use their shared common sense instead, which is of course allowed as long as the results are in line with genre definitions and game world.

Other rules include some directions on desired playing style etc. which are more about defining what type of campaign is in question than actual hard rules system.

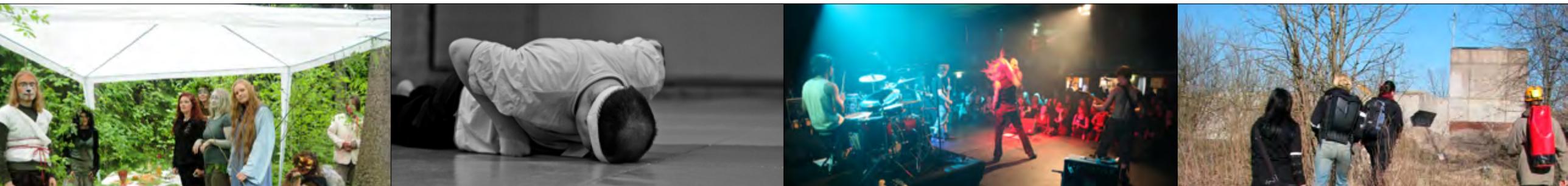
Methods

Collaboration

Neonhämärä is a collaborative effort of players and game masters. In a traditional Finnish larp all the material (game world, characters, rules etc.) is created by the game masters. We, however, wished to break the tradition and give the players a greater role in creating *Neonhämärä*. In our view role-playing is by its very nature a collaborative creative art form and we wanted to emphasize that in our choice of methodology.

Also, time and effort that could be put to running this campaign were known to be limited and we tried to come up with a method that would require a bit less work from game masters so we could actually hope to run this campaign for some time. In practice this method turned out to be laborious as well as we did not manage to delegate the workload well enough to the players.

We strongly believe that collaborative effort of thirty creative individuals produces ideas of superior quantity and quality over what two game masters alone could ever do. The expertise of different players is a great resource to utilize. Besides mere quantity of ideas, also the quality and the whole range of ideas generated collaboratively are significantly different. Especially in a campaign where new ideas are constantly needed, having more than two brains guarantees the ideas do not start repeating themselves too much. Also, input from players keep running the campaign more interesting for game masters as they will keep you constantly on your toes.



*Photos from Neonhämärä showing off everything from concerts and trolls to forest spirits and exploration.
Photos: Tuomas Puikkonen, Nina Talvela, Saša Tkalčan*

This is quite demanding for players who have sometimes had considerable difficulties in switching their perspective from player perspective to co-writer perspective. The transition from a player to co-writer seems to be easiest for those who have been game masters themselves at some point, others might need some encouragement and guidance. This demands more effort from players than usual, and it is advisable to be very explicit how much time and effort is expected from the players so they will know what they are getting into.

This collaboration has to be coordinated to be effective and it is what we consider as our main task as game masters. The general design principles mentioned above have to be taken into account when coordinating collaborative ideas. In practice this means taking the input from players and figuring out how all those pieces can be fitted together in a logical manner. Individual players naturally have only a limited perspective to the game. In effect players are writing material to a whole they are not completely familiar with and that has to be taken into account somehow.

It is game masters' task then to adjust and modify player created material so that everything fits together and is in line with genre requirements and diegetic logic etc. as players simply cannot do that by themselves. Sometimes this means discarding unsuitable ideas altogether, though usually there is a way to adjust ideas so that they can be used. The downside of this method is that players might feel they are not given enough power to really define elements as everything they write will go through a review round, so to speak.

On the other hand, when combined with other players' ideas that they were not aware of, player's own creations often metamorphose into something other than they originally were. This leads to the actual playing experience not being significantly spoiled by knowing too much.

Supporting cast

The use of supporting cast is also one of the central methods in creating the experience for players. Supporting cast is those players who are not participating in the game with a campaign character but have a smaller role in one part of the series, be it for the whole duration of the single game or just a small one minute role. The aim is to bend the magic circle and enable scenes where game events take place between more characters than just the campaign characters.

Supporting cast is recruited for each episode of the campaign as needed, usually ranging from a few to over a dozen. Depending on the role, the material given to support cast varies from near zero to extensive. It is not uncommon that briefing supporting cast is more laborious than briefing actual players. Besides character description and relevant history for the scene, they are also usually given meta-agendas regarding the scene and how it should turn out. Often supporting cast knows considerably more about the scene structure, background story, present characters etc. than the players do. Supporting cast is there primarily to provide regular players a scene which often means they do not follow the common player character logic but more general dramatic guidelines.

Also, even though players commonly identify themselves as such with a white arm band, sometimes supporting cast are left without ludic markers to blur the line and artificially create coincidences.

Between episodes

We use several methods to keep the game alive between the games. We encourage players to organize smaller events themselves. Email playing is widely used to both continue what was played live and to play smaller episodes between characters and NPCs. Email is also used to update other players what has happened recently as the game proceeds in real time and everything that happens in the real world is also happening in the game world.

All email traffic has game masters in cc so that we remain in touch of what's going on. Playing between episodes is quite demanding and in practice means reading and writing a lot of emails. Required amount of active participation from players might also be hard to accomplish and there should be a clear consensus among all participants what is the desirable level of activation and suitable practices for all.

Almost all characters have a Facebook account and those that don't have a meta-account. Characters use their Facebook account in pretty much normal manner, though naturally some plot hooks and references are quite common. Meta-profiles are used to update what's going on in certain characters life at the moment that everybody should know, even though the character itself wouldn't use Facebook. Game masters have a few profiles that are used to interact with characters, but mostly Facebook content is generated by players themselves.

Reports, emails, documenting

It is crucial in a campaign that game masters get as much possible information of what happened in the game. In street larps game masters are not present and cannot observe players (except with technology) and have to rely on players' reports. Thus written reports after every game are required, also keeping the game masters in cc in all email exchanges. This produces quite a large amount of email for game masters to read, but it is the only way to keep track of the game we could think of.

This also places some demands on player activity and punctuality, and motivating them to do all that is required can be challenging. It is advisable to be very systematic in how information is collected and stored. It is quite difficult to change systems in the middle of the campaign, so planning ahead will help a lot. We have used wiki in addition to emails, Google docs and such.

Troll band Sysikuu and fans during the gig in the 4th episode. Some of the players specifically learned to play instruments and sing for this, and all songs were originals. Photo: Saša Tkalčan



Time schedules, logistics

Designing episodes and events within them, especially regarding supporting cast is both time consuming and difficult. But we consider that as one of the main tasks of game masters and something that effectively is keeping the whole game together with some meaningful structure. Typically players have a few planned scenes that are put into their time schedules by the game masters and the rest of the episode is left up to them to fill with content, which usually consists of meeting with contacts and other forms of social play.

Plots, hooks and crooks

There are plots of varying length used in *Neonhämärä*. The so called main plots span throughout the campaign while there are always some smaller plots in each game that are not related to the big picture. Some of these plots are related to real world events that are unfolding at their own speed. Reality is often used as inspiration and we try to provide players alternate perspective to real world through the game. The biggest thematic main plots were designed before the campaign started but medium and small plots are designed together with players.

Player generated plot content goes through the approval and modification of game masters before appearing in the game. This is to ensure they are suitable for the game and in line with the design principles and genre statements and especially that they fit together with other elements in the game world that are unknown to the player whose idea it was. It is the game masters' task to adjust the ideas so that they fit. However, in our experience, if the genre is defined well enough, only rarely will players come up with unsuitable ideas, a vast majority of them can be used as they are.

Supporting cast and NPCs, either long term or short term, are used as plot vehicles in a pretty typical way, although we try to ensure that all characters in the game follow the same genre guidelines and limitations as player characters do.

Summary

The main ingredients in *Neonhämärä* are small amount of enthusiastic players, local folk lore and high resolution social interaction in realistic setting using the mythical city as a background. Using those elements the game is created in active collaboration with players as a dynamic collective. Players deliver more if pushed a bit within a supporting framework. Let players do their share and encourage them to really participate.

Neonhämärä

Designed and organized by Niina Niskanen & Simo Järvelä

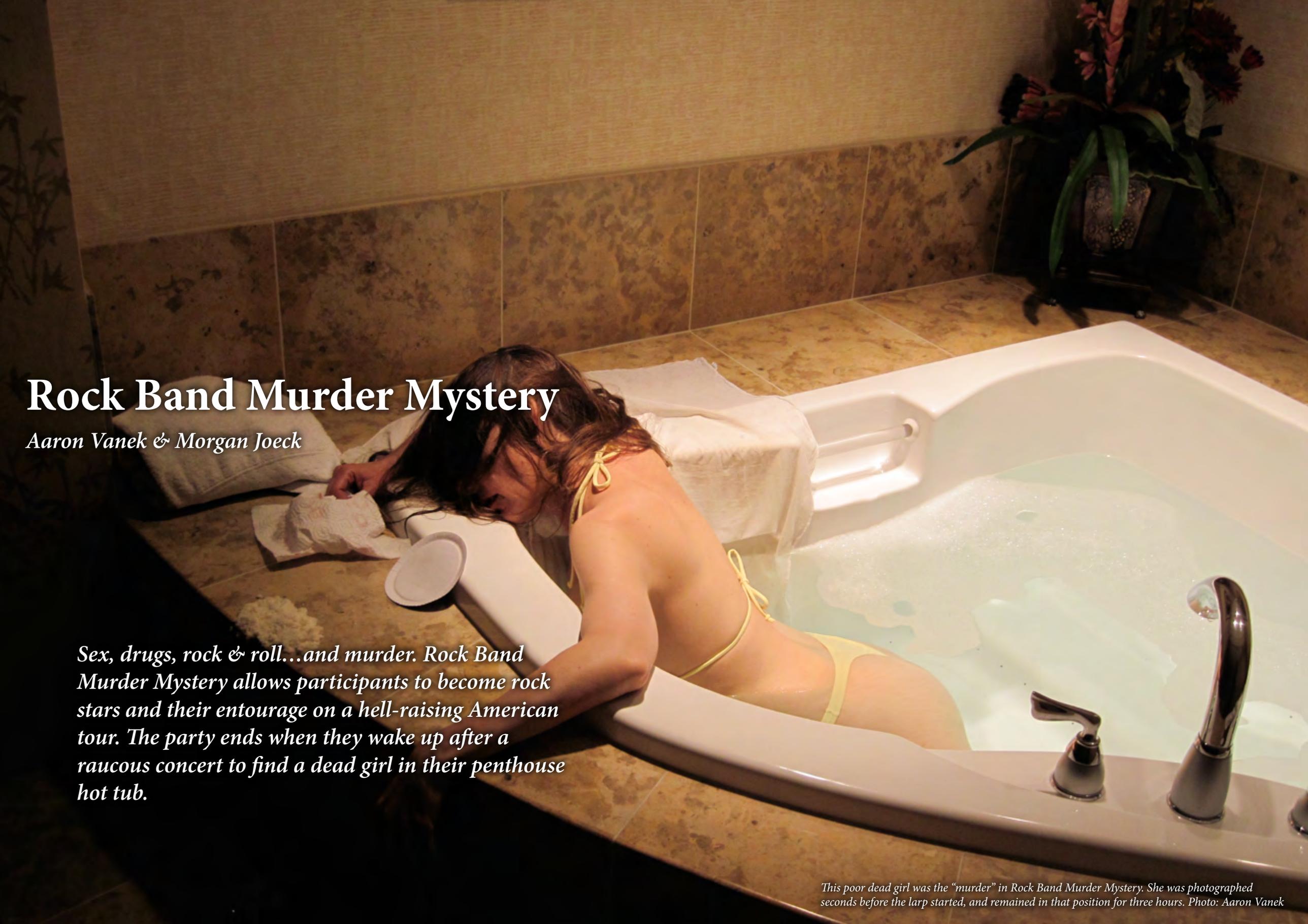
First played on in 2008. 10 episodes so far

Duration: approx. 10 hours

Number of players: typically 25-35

Budget: 250-400 € per episode (participation fee: 5-20 €/episode)

More information: www.neonhamara.kapsi.fi

A photograph of a woman with long brown hair, wearing a yellow bikini, lying face down in a white hot tub. Her head is covered by a white sheet, and her arms are resting on the edge of the tub. The hot tub is filled with water and has a silver faucet and handles. The background shows a tiled wall and a potted plant in the corner.

Rock Band Murder Mystery

Aaron Vanek & Morgan Joeck

Sex, drugs, rock & roll...and murder. Rock Band Murder Mystery allows participants to become rock stars and their entourage on a hell-raising American tour. The party ends when they wake up after a raucous concert to find a dead girl in their penthouse hot tub.

This poor dead girl was the "murder" in Rock Band Murder Mystery. She was photographed seconds before the larp started, and remained in that position for three hours. Photo: Aaron Vanek

Rock Band Murder Mystery (RBMM) was inspired by and designed for a specific location and situation: a four-hour convention larp in a private suite of the Hilton Hotel in Costa Mesa, California, during Wyrd Con I. Enigma Live Game Labs (ELGL), a loose collective of veteran larpwrights, chipped in to reserve the suite and run six different larps there.

I coordinated and managed the ELGL larps at Wyrd Con and was doused with inspiration during a location scout of the hotel's penthouse. The large suite on the top floor sported a wet bar, a hot tub in a spacious bathroom and balcony views overlooking smog-choked Orange County. It was colored and furnished in an early-80's style with a few 21st century touches, e.g., wide screen television and stereo.

The room evoked legends of riotous rock and rollers tossing TVs off balconies, snorting ants, and deep levels of debauchery reached only by the immensely rich and famous. I thought of the 16-year-old prostitute who was found naked, dead of an overdose, in the Hollywood mansion of drummer Don Henley at the peak of The Eagles' fame. I imagined a superstar group discovering a corpse: could one of them have killed her? Would the group lie to protect the culprit or try to expose the murderer? As a fan of the Harmonix Rock Band™ video game, I already considered using the game as part of a rock and roll larp. A concept coalesced.

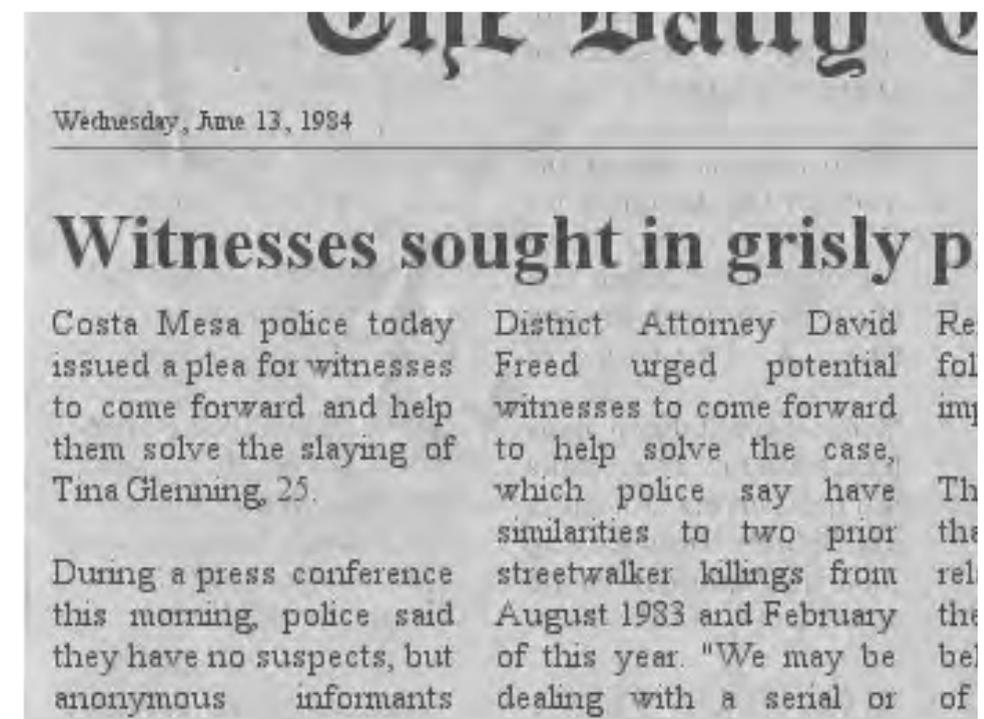
Production

I recruited fellow ELGL GM Morgan Joeck to co-design, as Morgan had experience running commercial murder mystery dinner parties and wanted to design one himself.

The general plot was outlined between Morgan and me relatively quickly: *a rock quartet and their entourage wake up to discover a dead girl in the Jacuzzi, and one among them may have killed her.*

Yet as the deadline approached, details were left dangling. Morgan, a math teacher, had designed elaborate spreadsheets outlining where each character was for the last 24 hours before larp start, plus their possible motivations for murder. Those elements were grossly edited, condensed, or tossed entirely. The bulk of RBMM was written in the 12 hours prior to running it. It was a long night, and we weren't entirely sure of who killed the girl or why until that marathon writing session.

The result was painted with broad strokes, which, considering the four-hour length and the lack of information about the players (the Wyrd Con registration system did not encourage player-GM communication or certainty of who signed up until the start of the larp), it worked out fairly well.



One of the clues for the murder mystery, a newspaper clipping. This was printed and photocopied, then distressed to indicate wear. Photo: Aaron Vanek

RBMM is intended to be as immersive as possible; that is, 99% of the location and the things in it are exactly what they really are. My underlying philosophy is that in the perfect larp, players will have no cause or need to interact with a GM once the event has begun (unless the GM is a character). RBMM didn't achieve my ideal, but it was closer to it than most other larps I've run.

One of the key ideas of RBMM is to implicate all players as a potential murderer. The possibility that the girl committed suicide or was the victim of an accidental drug overdose (of her own action or another's) was also seriously discussed. In the end, we felt it would be best for us to decide in the writing which of the characters was the murderer.

We also wanted to make sure the killer character was "protected" from everyone, including themselves, until the last act. This meant that whomever the culprit was, s/he wouldn't know for sure until the latter part of the event and thus wouldn't unintentionally give away their culpability. This led us to the idea of revealed memories.

According to Morgan, some commercial murder mysteries reveal characters through background knowledge envelopes that players open and read in between scenes. For instance, the envelope between dinner and dessert might reveal you as the killer. This mechanic was altered and integrated into RBMM.

As befitting a rock and roll band, drugs, alcohol and a long national tour with many different nights in many different towns caused forgetfulness. A big party the night before meant our killer wouldn't immediately recall taking a life. But the cold truth would dawn as unflinching sobriety took over.

The set

It's the morning of Saturday, June 16th, 1984. You are in the penthouse suite of the Hilton Hotel in Costa Mesa. You played your first show in town last night, and you have another one tonight, plus a radio appearance in a few hours.

It was important that the players recognized their area as a rock party zone. I scheduled RBMM for the morning after two larps that featured in-game bars. I insisted that we NOT clean up after the Friday night festivities, other than elements of other larps and the belongings of ELGL folk sleeping there. Empty booze bottles, pizza boxes, and room service trays remained.

We brought in a lava lamp, occult books, flasks, fake cigarettes, fake drugs with real drug paraphernalia, condoms, sex lubricant, porn magazines, and some 80's record albums. The remains of a poker game were strewn around a table with fake money and used ashtrays. Various articles of clothing and underclothing were scattered about.

Prop clues were also placed in the suite to be discovered, and one of our characters, a photographer, had an actual camera that could take real photos. Anything else was removed.

Two things about the set had to be explained, as they didn't quite operate the same in the larp as in reality. First, players were asked to imagine Rock Band™ as the quartet's real instruments and amplifiers, not a video game with toy guitars. The characters could select any song they wanted, and play their instrument at any level (easy to expert). Anyone could handle or play the instruments at any time, but the respective owner (the drummer or bassist) could react accordingly. In our run, the roadie character set up the instruments for the band.



There was no meta-game nor plot effect to playing Rock Band™. It was there to set the mood and tone, plus act as a foil and prompt for character interaction: who gets to pick the song? What if the drummer fails in the game, does the rest of the band threaten to kick him or her out? Would the band blame the dead girl on their poor playing, and thus possibly implicate themselves? Conversely, if the band nails a song, does that mean they're cold-blooded and unaffected by the body?

How the player actually played was intended to represent how their character played: why were they screwing up, or why were they so good?

It was intended that the band play two songs; they could do more if they wanted. The first is called for by the manager to make sure they're prepared for that night's concert, and the second is prompted by an NPC as part of a radio interview. These songs weren't required for the larp to function, but music is a key ingredient to the experience.

Second, the telephones in the suite—one in the main room, one in the bedroom—were available to players. They could call anyone they wished, but there was only one number to dial, which would connect to a separate room in the hotel where the NPCs were stationed.

Those NPCs would then role-play whomever the players were calling: police, friends, the record label, etc. This mechanic was borrowed from my reading about the Swedish *Hamlet* larp reported by Martin Ericsson (2002), which used a telephone in a similar fashion.

*The band's drummer and bassist (standing) stare at the body of the girl in their suite's hot tub.
Photo: Amanda Mielke*

Mechanics

RBMM is designed to be a rules-light game, with heavy emphasis on role-playing. However, I came up with some combat mechanics as a red herring. When the players signed up, I didn't want them to immediately know whether RBMM would be an investigative mystery, as in, "Someone is dead—whodunit?" or a killer game: "don't be in a room with only one other person, they might kill you." I wanted to leave open the possibility that a killer in the group could kill again.

The players did not know there was a girl already dead at the start. I hoped they would worry that killing might occur in game. Although not expected, it is certainly possible that a character *could* attack and kill another, whether they are the murderer or not. To allow for this and to throw the players off as to the structure of the mystery, I designed a simple combat system based on the rock-paper-scissors (RPS) mechanic prevalent in salon-style larps.

There wasn't any fighting between characters, but I don't regret suggesting that there could be.

Characters

Morgan and I developed 12 characters, but we cut it to 10 a few weeks before listing the larp on the Wyrd Con website. We knew we wouldn't meet most of the players until the morning of the game and thus wrote gender-neutral (and potentially homosexual or bisexual) characters. This was easier said than done, as some personas come across as stereotypically masculine or feminine. In our run, the two groupies (stereotypically female) were played by men. One was written with a crush on the guitarist, also played by a male.

In hindsight, we should have had a notice that, given the unknown gender and sexuality of players, some characters may thus be "involved" with someone of the same gender. I think the issue was merely ignored by players who didn't want to role-play that part of their pre-written persona. The band's name was left open. After handing out the characters, we gave them ten minutes to get familiar with one another and name the band.

RBMM roles and backstory

Jordan and *Avery* are siblings. Jordan, a singer, has natural musical talent. Avery, a bassist, had to hone middling ability through hours of practice and has always been in Jordan's shadow. They formed their own bands: Avery teamed up with drummer *Chris*, and Jordan met a gifted collaborator in guitarist *Andy*. Andy convinced Jordan to bring his/her younger sibling and Chris into their band, which became the original line up. Jordan also brought along *Hayden* as the band's roadie and drug supplier.

One of their first and constant groupies was *Casey*. On the band's first tour, a hit-and-run driver who wasn't identified killed Andy. That driver was *Shannon*, who, motivated by guilt, became the band's manager, and who encouraged the guitarist for their opening act, *Jody*, to fill Andy's role. This made Casey, the groupie who has unrequited love for Jody, very happy. Though Andy was badly hurt after the accident, he was still alive. Casey told Jody, who ran for a phone immediately, that it was too late for an ambulance. Her obstruction cost Andy his life.

The band is now on tour for their second album, which is a big success. They've been joined by *Pat*, another groupie who ran away from an abusive home, *Lynn*, a photojournalist with a secret voyeur-torture fetish, and *Kerry*, a freelance writer who is very conservative with little fondness for this libertine lifestyle.

Also of note, Jordan has become heavily interested in the occult, and Chris has been getting stalker-type fan letters. Each character has a secret that suggests them as a murderer, but none of the character sheets mention a recent killing.



RBMM larpers were blindfolded before being led and arranged in the hotel suite. Photo taken just before actual play began. Photo: Amanda Mielke

Introducing the PCs and touching rules

We purposefully kept the players out of the suite until the start of the larp. Once they were ready to begin, we blindfolded and led them into the suite while the video game played the sound of a cheering crowd at full blast. Players gave us permission to place or position them in the way their characters awoke when we called larp start: some were in the arms of others; some had shirt or shoes off. One character was tied with bondage ropes to the bed. No one woke in the main bathroom, where the body was located.

When all characters were stationed, we turned the sound off and called game on. We earlier instructed the players that they were to take their blindfolds off and use it as a marker for how “physical” they were willing to role-play. If they wanted to avoid being touched, they were to tie the blindfold around their arm. If they were OK being touched, they were to pocket the blindfold or give it to a GM. The blindfolds were not diegetic.

This is a very simplistic method for showing openness to physicality, but again, we were dealing with an unknown cast and limited prep time.

Memories

This concept was inspired by commercial boxed murder mysteries. Before the larp began, each character was given three sealed envelopes, each with a Greek letter on it. All characters received an envelope with the symbol and spelling of Theta (representing death) and Delta (meaning change). The band members and the manager received an envelope marked with Omega (end), while everyone else got an envelope with Zeta (zed, Z, the last letter, also an ending).

Inside each envelope was a slip of paper representing a memory specific to the character that would be triggered by something in the larp. It related to something that happened within the last 24 hours. When the character saw a Greek letter or heard the word aloud, they were to open the respective envelope and recall the memory.

This would be like a flashback, and while they could read it anywhere, they were assumed to be in a daze. Players could not trigger their own nor other players’ memories (they couldn’t say “Omega” and force someone to open an envelope), nor would seeing the envelope itself, e.g., if it fell out of someone’s pocket. Only by physically witnessing the symbol in the space or hearing it spoken by an NPC (or GM) would activate it.

Triggers:

Theta was painted on the forehead of the dead girl.

Delta was spoken aloud when the record executive, Harry Levi (played by an NPC in another room), called the room on a speakerphone.

Zeta was triggered by a female DJ named Katy Zeta (NPC in other room).

Omega was drawn on a pill case that was left in a trash basket.

Ideally, the planted memories would lead the players to think as follows:

Theta: “Could I have killed her?” (Self-implication)

Delta: “I think someone else killed her, or, I need to blame someone else.” (Shift culpability, or change)

Zeta: “I did not kill her, but this other character left a clue around a certain area.” (Seek crucial clue)

Omega: “I did not kill her, but this object had something to do with her murder.” (Backstory of crucial clue) The murderer’s Omega envelope detailed their actions.

NPCs

There are five other characters that appear (not all living) in RBMM. Although their parts may be small, they are crucial. We planned for three players to NPC, but at the last minute a large gentleman working security at Wyrd Con—who is in the U.S. Army and dressed accordingly—was talked into joining the climax, which sold the scene.

Our most important NPC was “Jeanette”, the dead girl. She lay in one position in a tub while wearing a thong bikini and did not react to anything—not an easy task under full immersion (see “What happened at the show”).

An NPC played Harry Levi, the record executive for the band. He stays in another room and calls the players on the phone (berating them for flagging sales).

NPC Katy Zeta, a perky local radio DJ, calls the band (from the other room) and asks them to perform a song as a preview for the interview later that day. Two NPCs portrayed police officers, arresting everyone in the room at the larp’s finale.



During play, the band’s manager took a private phone call from the head of the record label, played by an NPC. Photo: Aaron Vanek

The Mystery

In crafting RBMM, Morgan and I wanted a clear-cut plot—there is one correct solution that we programmed, and the players are asked to solve it. However, we endeavored to introduce a twist. Unlike the commercial murder mystery games Morgan has run, we hoped that once the solution was reached there would be one more quandary: “What do we do now?”

In RBMM, the players discover the corpse in Act I, and each person thinks they may have done it. In Act II, more information is uncovered and the possibility of someone else being the murderer leads to accusations. Act III, the last clues are discovered, the killer is determined, and the police arrive. Act IV, either knowing who did it or not, the players decide what to tell the police. Do they defend each other or sell someone out with false accusations? Was the murderer justified? Does anyone attempt to find out? How tight is the band and entourage? Although a brief larp, these are large moral questions that we sought to explore as we pushed a step past the commercial murder mysteries.

Clues in the Suite

Jeanette leaves behind a note that reads “Tina—see you soon.” We wanted this written in lipstick on the bathroom mirror, but instead it was on paper near her body.

Vomit is near the mouth of Jeanette’s corpse. Oatmeal was used and mistaken by the PCs for cocaine (corrected by GMs). This suggests she died of something ingested, possibly an overdose.

Inside the pocket of Jeanette’s clothes is a newspaper clipping detailing the recent murder of a hooker named Tina and the police request for any witnesses to step forward and help them catch the killer. (Clipping uploaded to the website: TK)

There is also a memory clue, a pillbox marked with Omega, hidden in the trash near the door. The Zeta memory identifies who threw it out.

What happened at our show

As the band untangled and prepared to rehearse at the behest of the manager, a groupie went into the bathroom and urinated (for real). When he turned around, he saw dead Jeanette, and said “Well, that’s different.”

This discovery led to a flurry of activity, with people trying to figure out who she was. Unfortunately, the memory trigger, Theta, was hidden first by her hair, then by a towel a player laid over her face in respect. We intervened so the players could unlock their memories. Some characters called the police early, but the NPCs rebuffed it as a prank call.

Harry Levi called and activated the delta memories, then spoke privately to the manager in the other room. On a second search of the suite, the newspaper article in Jeanette’s pants was found and discussed. An occult book brought in only for set dressing was authored by Eliphas Levi (a GM oversight). The band began to think that Levi was involved.

When Katy Zeta called, not all characters heard her name spoken so they didn’t get their last memory, but the band started playing a song. Halfway through, the cops burst in and demanded everyone hit the floor. The band “failed” the song in turn, and the drummer cried into the carpet. Each person’s hands were bound with a hair tie, and then I told NPC Jeanette she could relax, as police NPCs were in there checking the body. So, too, was the character of Kerry, hiding in a shower. He revealed himself about the time we realized one character wasn’t yet restrained. He was handcuffed and left with the others.

As the police interrogated the characters individually in the bedroom, Jordan knocked over the trash containing the Omega clue. I moved it so more people could unlock their last memory. The police brought everyone to the station, and in a post-game wrap-up, we discussed the plot. Only one player had the correct suspicion of the real killer. A crowning moment occurred when the GMs realized that Katy Zeta was still on the phone after the bust, and heard everything. The NPCs were falling over laughing in the other room as the arrests were made.

Conclusion

RBMM is a rare example (at least on the west coast) of a completely immersive larp, one with a near 1:1 ratio of player-to-character actions in the environment. The GMs were almost unnecessary, a goal I still strive for. Although given license to cut loose as rock stars, most of this cast generally kept things sane. Still, a few players commented that it was the most intense larp experience they had. It seemed to be enjoyed by all.

Hopefully, RBMM will inspire others, especially in America, to consider the importance of physical space in larp and use it to help players willingly suspend their disbelief. Maybe, too, U.S. larpers can more frequently delve into deeper issues than the common character advancement adventures.

Rock Band Murder Mystery

Designed and organized by Aaron Vanek and Morgan Joeck

First played in June, 2010 at Wyrd Con I in the U.S.A

Duration: 1/2 hour setup, 3 hours play, 1/2 hour wrap up

Number of players: 10

Budget: 75 € per episode (participation fee: part of Wyrd Con)

More information:

www.livegamelabs.com/wyrd-con/rock-band-murder-mystery



Renaissance: Formula of Love

Konstantin Vetlugin, Sergey Lobov, Ludmilla Vitkevich

A breath-taking journey to the Urals of today and Italy of the High Renaissance, and a look at Russian artistic larp ambitions..

Universe, setting, story

Italian Renaissance, 1493. We took the best, most creative part of life in the five city-states of the Renaissance (Florence, Venice, Rome, Milan, Naples). We wanted less routine of daily life and greater emphasis on art, politics, religion and war. To make the game denser there were minor departures from historical facts (for example, Lorenzo Medici is alive – he didn't die in 1492). Game genres were comedy of masks, adventure novel and political drama. There were stories for individual players, teams (like the Strozzi family, antagonists of Medici), locations (cities) and also game-wide stories. The game masters were the authors of the higher-level stories; individual stories were made in cooperation between game masters and players.

Imagine Italy of the High Renaissance. A young, rich country, divided into strong city-states, each with its own spirit – of art, knowledge, commerce, earthly and heavenly power. It is a time for daring, for new ideas, new faces - in art, politics, religion, war, love, anywhere. The Pope is dying. The king of France invades Italy. What to do?

Every young man in Italy has an overwhelming choice of destiny - to become a philosopher, an artist, a mercenary, a banker, a heretic, an inquisitor, a student, a saint. We carefully built the structures of the cities and their interaction, so that before the game players had a very wide range of roles (several hundreds), and within the game a character had a great choice of what to become. The High Renaissance was the time when the very notion of personality and identity was born. To become a person, man needed beauty and freedom, and we designed the game around these themes.

The main plot developed through individual players' actions within their own plots. The game was more about the feelings and actions of individual characters, about their weddings and funerals, poems and confessions, pictures and duels, travels and thoughts. Some of the global stories were: the great battle of the French and Milanese troops, the first and second elections of the Pope, the long struggle of the Medici and the Strozzi in Florence and the formation of a new knightly order in Naples.

On the third day the game at the location of Venice changed genre from “historical” to “symbolic”, archetypal, fairy-tale-like, authorized by the game master of Venice. Venetians threw their money into the Gulf of Venice, and began to pay the fare to the city (only access to Venice was by boat) not in coins, but in tales. This was perceived ambiguously by players from other locations, and attempts to extend this kind of game to other locations failed.

Rules

We made the rules simple. The atmosphere of the Renaissance was more important to us than economical systems, combat rules, models and schemes. The way of creating the physical cities were similar to what has been done in Russian larps during recent years – houses were travel tents or fenced by cloth, they had naturalistic representations of windows, doors and locks. Microeconomics worked through trattorias, handicraft shops and a variety of in-game services.

Location-wide economics were greatly simplified in comparison with other major Russian larps. There were very expensive items (for example, the masterpieces of art, recognized as such by the Forum Monopoli, which included the most influential people in the country), but they were few. Moreover, artists created their masterpieces within the game. We completely eliminated all the virtual economics and with that many hours of calculating how much “goods” one or another city made during a day.

The combat rules were just complex enough to allow for armor, melee weapons, firearms and fortress assaults and no more. We used a “hit-point” combat system commonly used in Russian larps. A person has 2 hit-points and up to 5 hp when wearing armor. A stab by a dagger or a hit from a one-handed sword removes 1 hp and a two-handed sword removes 2 hp. A shot from a arquebus removes 4 hp, which typically lead to a 0 hp condition - a “severe wound” - where you were only able to groan and crawl and would die in 30 minutes unless you got medical aid.

We had a “rule of final blow” meaning that to kill someone in battle, you had to touch a “severely wounded” person with any weapon and say “finished”. The only other way to kill a person in battle was a shot from a cannon or a catapult. There were rules for game medicine, poisons and sex. We tried to express the spirit of the Renaissance in the rules of the game and the rules for sex are a good example. Sex was represented by body-art. You could draw or write something with a brush, a finger or anything on the body of your partner, in any place he/she allowed. Opportunities are vast, there are all kinds of brushes, gatherings are possible and you can decide to remove or show off the traces.

We used the rules for game costumes generally used at Russian larps – “the 5 meters rule” – the costume is good enough if it seems like the historical prototype when you see it from a 5 meters’ distance. Each city had a color and for easy identification some elements of each citizens’ costumes were of that color.



Good old-fashioned tavern brawl. Photo: Andrew Platunov, Elena Sklyarova

Game mechanics

To support the internal games of the cities we created unions: all-Italian “guilds” of priests, men of arms, servants, merchants and women. The unions were powerful, they gathered every day, had their own goals and could influence the cities’ rulers.

Another mechanism was what we named Shakespearean play. Before the game all players could choose a second-level role, a role from one of the plays by Shakespeare. Then the character, for example The king of Naples, could choose to act as the actual character of the mad and cruel king Ferrante or as his Shakespearean role, the Duke of Verona. Interactions between the Shakespearean characters were some of the finest and loveliest parts of the game.

We also used a mechanism called Carnival rules as a way to connect the the stories of the different cities. Each day from 11 PM to 4 AM there was a Big Carnival in one of the cities and almost all of Italy gathered there. The Lord of Carnival (not a city ruler) had full power during the carnival. All the guests wore masks and the game rule was that you couldn’t recognize (or kill) the person behind the mask. There were strange guests, enigmas, ghosts, heroes of antiquity etc.

There was a special place for dead characters in every city (“mertvyatnik”, soul place). After the funeral the player whose character had died played the character’s soul and went to the soul place. Then there was the Final Exam or Judgement of the soul – corresponding with the style of the city.

In Florence, for example, the soul of a dead character would go to the studio of Andrea del Verrocchio. The workshop was divided into three rooms. In the first room a gatekeeper met the deceased, registered his name on the list of the dead and interviewed the soul about his past life. In the second room the deceased was presented with a huge easel and was invited to draw or write about something important and meaningful in his past life. That would take from 15 minutes to several hours.

After that, all souls of the dead had a tour of the gallery with pictures illustrating various stages of human life. Instead of the last picture the deceased was shown a blank sheet. A game master explained to him that this represented his new life (new character) and helped the soul define what this new life could be. In the third room, the new character was told that before returning to the world there was one last detail - a meeting with the Creator. Then he got a mirror, offering a closer look at his own image.

And then he was sent back to the game.

Every city had a concept, a spirit defining all its citizens and deeds. For example, Milan was the city of the (near) future, city of XVI century, The Golden City, The New City, the city of the scholars. Its citizens wore costumes from XVI century (not from the end of XV century like all others) and golden roses. The walls of Milan were made from sandy cloth and the only university within the game operated in Milan. And often you could recognize a Milanese not only by the golden rose but also by the desire to know and to create order. Similarly a Venetian was known by his pragmatism, and a Neapolitan by his southern pride.

Characters

All sign-up for characters were strictly individual and players could not apply as a team. The website application form included not only the character's biography but also his personality (his love, his struggle, his temptation, his nickname). Then the player and a game master in cooperation developed the character. Joint Creation was one of our mottos.

In addition to the individual sign-up there was the need for many in-game families and groupings. So a lot of stories were created both within families (e.g. conflicts between the head of a clan and the wayward younger generation) and within cities (fights between the houses for influence in the city and in Italy in general).



Role-playing style

The game ran for four days non-stop. It called for deep immersion in the character, and in the Renaissance style of thinking. There was no magic of miracles but, of course, there were events that could be seen as miracles by people of the Renaissance.

We were aware that the best of Russian larpers - those we wanted to reach - would rather play for immersion in their character than to win the game or to perform to an audience like theatre actors. The latter factions also existed, but they were a minority.

The process of making the game and running it

The game masters were from many different cities (Moscow, Ekaterinburg, St. Petersburg, Nizhny Novgorod, Bryansk) and most discussions were conducted via the Internet (e-mail, Skype, LiveJournal communities). Several times the game masters flew from Moscow to Ekaterinburg and vice versa. The main area of a game master's responsibility was a location (city). There were six locations.

The chief game master (Konstantin Vetlugin) created the general concept and later delved into parts here and there, making sure they matched the general idea of the game, combining the work being done by the game masters of the individual cities. The rules were written by joint effort and were widely discussed with the players. The structure of the cities, their aesthetic details, lists of characters, and similar points within the given locations were decided by the city's game masters.

De facto, the workgroup was divided into two parts, one in Moscow and the other in the Urals. Sergey Lobov coordinated promotion and contact with players in the Central region of Russia (Moscow region and surroundings), Yulia Zubareva did similar coordination in the Urals and Siberia. Those of us who were able to do some technical or logistic work (search for coinage craftsman, website development, search for a suitable polygon and so on).

Milan condottieri. These brave mercenaries once even stole the Pope from Rome. Photo: Menelnar

At some point the chief game master decided to exclude one of the original game masters from the workgroup. His vision of the location, he was responsible of, as well as his pace of work seemed drastically different from the rest of the organizing team, and attempts to solve the differences failed. In the end the chief game master decided that the integrity of the concept and the risk that the location would fail was more important than the risk of spoiling relations. As far as we can judge, the replacement of the game master was the right decision and had a good influence on the final game.

We were not able to find a game master for the French location. French culture at that time (and its contrast with the Italian) seemed very playable, and the French military threat seemed useful for the game. Thus, to avoid excluding France from the game altogether, the chief game master took the risk to keep an eye on it himself - half-time, together with its key players. But the game in France wasn't very successful and we realized that each location should have its own game master entirely focused on the location.



Before the game we presented *Renaissance* at the main Russian conventions: Zilantcon (Kazan), Chelcon (Chelyabinsk), Blincom (St. Petersburg), Sibcon (Tomsk), Comcon (Moscow). As another way to spread knowledge of the upcoming game Yulia Zubareva produced a mini-musical “Renaissance” with libretto by Eugene Susorov.

During the game the organizers had almost no influence on the development of the game stories. The game masters of different locations worked mostly independently. They also managed the soul places of their locations. All game masters had characters of minor influence and in-game costumes. Their decisions was based upon by the general game rules and mechanics, but also by the basic spirit of the game: Is it simple? Is it clear and light? Is it beautiful? Background and motivation

The themes of the Italian Renaissance makes for very interesting games but are difficult to design a game around. As far as we know there have not been any big Renaissance larps in Russia since 2001. We liked some sides of Renaissance culture (like painting), and we felt that we had almost the same style of game mastering. As the author of the initial idea the chief game master sees Renaissance as his favorite time in history.

In fact, we never doubted whether we should make the game. It's usually like this for any author. An inspiration doesn't give us a choice. We wanted to create the world of the Italian Renaissance. The chief game master wrote a game plan and people, ideas and opportunities came together. Under these circumstances making the game became not just important – it was natural. We loved it – so we created it.

Reflections

Most of our concepts and intuitions worked. We are satisfied with the individual concepts of the cities, primacy of the atmosphere over models, hosting the game in the Urals in the middle of the Russia, and creating the first (but not the last) all-Russian larp in five years. About 80% of players were satisfied or very satisfied with the game.

Renaissance is widely considered one of the best large Russian games of recent years, the memories of it will not fade away. Today, after Renaissance it is a general practice for players from Moscow and Siberia to travel to games in the Urals.

The large Russian larps of recent years - more than 200 players and more than 2 days of play - have shown six important trends:

- 1) They are quite expensive for the game masters and players (very good costumes, armor and weapons, complex in-game facilities such as towers or ships).
- 2) Their rules for economics, combat and other matters often reach a level of complexity where a player simply can't remember every rule, he needs to play successfully.
- 3) Larps became regional. The players did not venture to spend much time, effort and money on a trip to the game in another region. What if the game would fail?
- 4) These problems simply reduced the number of big Russian larps and almost completely wiped out the tradition of the all-Russian larps.
- 5) There was a noticeable number of combat larps with very simplistic role-playing.
- 6) A good trend was that a variety of relatively small games (50-200 participants, 2-3 days of play) flourished. They were (and are) relatively easy to create and control, good for all kinds of experiments.



Young Raphael and Michelangelo. Photo: Menelna

It would be impossible to make the game we wanted about the Italian Renaissance within all these trends. So we went against them all and made a somewhat old-fashioned game, like some of the large Russian larps of 1999-2003. The theme was quite broad and required a big game. It demanded ease, and a thick rulebook and complex facilities weren't suitable. It could not just be a combat larp. The theme was more complex and we wished to attract the best players from around the country. Furthermore, the players loved the theme but it wasn't tried yet.

Criteria for success

We wanted to make a game with a certain well-defined spirit: the youth, playfulness and creativity of the Italian Renaissance. It looks like we did so successfully.

We wanted to see the subtlety of Renaissance sensibility. Many players had and contributed to delicate, beautiful personal games, though not all. So, we mostly succeeded.

We wanted to rid the game of the usual large amount of rules, interesting only to their inventors and we did.

We wanted to see big and small stories that move through the game during all four days. We succeeded with some local failures, most notably, the French location.

We wanted to create special game modes such as carnivals, soul places, Shakespearean game and others. All of them except two, the Roman and French night games, were created and played well.

We wanted players from around the country to meet. We wanted to recreate the tradition of all-Russian larps in the Urals. So far it seems successful, it worked for the games of 2010.

We wanted to test the hypothesis that the spirit, the atmosphere, is more important for larps than the models and rule schemes and it seems that most of the players agreed.

What we learned from making *Renaissance*

We have learned the force of integrity in the art. Larp is a work of art, or at least, we like to think so. Everything in it must be combined well, the universe, the idea, the atmosphere, the models and schemes, game masters, locations, the desires of the players, the number of players, game-span and so on. This creates a focus for the players' impressions and experience, and this is the most important thing in a larp.

The most important part of the concept is the universe and setting. The space that take you to some other time and place in the world history, like with a good book or film. Players are guided by it. Game masters can only do so much if their choice of setting is wrong.

Nothing should "stick out" from the game. If it seems like a piece of the game stand out (for example, the rules for economics that only the game master of economics likes), most likely it is not good and will ruin something in the game. Such pieces should be removed immediately. The game should have a chief designer with the right to settle any possible issue in favor of the general spirit of the game. This person should have the courage to do so. Creating a complex and concentrated big larp requires serious study of many components based on the experience of previous games. This preparation may take a year or more - but it is well worth the time and it is very nice work in itself, if you love your game.

A significant part of the registered players (~20-25%) didn't come to the actual game. This is a known problem in most Russian larps, and also the recent economical crisis didn't help. But we learned that we can minimize the harm by linking game parts of individual, teams, location-wide and game-wide stories, and support the game construction with reliable mechanisms. Redundancy is the key. Triple redundancy of the stories is perfect.

Finally the game masters should restrain themselves. Their room for maneuvering is not that great. The game master is not an artist, who can bring anything he wants to the canvas. The joy of a larp is only between the players and only by mutual consent. The game master should genuinely love and strive to be familiar with his players - or really, really not even take on the task. Love and knowledge will nourish each other.

Today we would remake the Renaissance with more focus. We would remove several unnecessary, bulging things. We would immediately exclude an uncooperative game master from the workgroup, rather than after several months of negotiations. We would invest more energy into game-mastering the French location. We would raise the participation fee slightly, since the crisis is over. And we would use hand-held radios, since mobile phones are not reliable enough for the Urals' countryside.

Renaissance: Formula of Love

Designed and organized by Konstantin Vetlugin, Yulia Zubareva, Sergey "Fidel" Lobov, Ludmila "Var" Vitkevich, Yuri "Cardiff" Shchegolev, Nadezhda "Ariwenn" Denisova, Natalia "Yoll" Kirushina, Olga Zubareva, Olga "Winsdale" Pavluchenko, Dmitry Demchenko, Inna "Numenel" Kim, Olga "Almazka" Timofeeva, Eugene Susorov, Ivan Sikilinda, Yulia "Zmeisa" Grabovskaya

Played on July 28 - August 2nd, 2009 at Mikhailovsky, Russia

Duration: 4 days non-stop

Number of players: approx. 320

Budget: 4.300 € (participation fee: 15 €)

More information: <http://romulrem.com/1493>

SALEM TOWN-HALL

IN GOD WE TRUST

Salem 1906 - The Secret Sauce

Osher El-Netanany

Suppressed against life-and-death in a witch-trials larp after the legendary Salem Witch hunt story - a re-runnable larp for conventions and private parties.

*Believe it or not. The halo was part of the original picture and is NOT edited in.
Photo: Dvora Levin*

The Game

Overview

Salem 1906 is a freeform larp, set in a fictional suburb of Denver, Massachusetts, in the year 1906. It is strongly inspired by the 1692 Salem witch-trials that took place in the real Salem Village, New England in 1692.

The game is designed as a re-runnable larp, to be run at conventions and private parties. As such it aims to gather as much of the fiddling that comes with game production into proven patterns. This addresses both new and experienced organizers, in each case inspiring any producer to go to the next level of producing better games.

The complete game material contain character-sheet set, resource kit, flyers, a presentation and a beginner-to-wizard handbook. In the following I try to go over the basics of how the game is designed.

Part One, *The Game*, goes through the story and structure of the game.

Part Two, *Design Philosophy*, presents the tools used in designing the game.

Part Three, *Salem Anecdotes*, tells three anecdotes from my experience of running the game about 20 times. However, they come with spoilers.



Salem 1906 has been run more than 20 times - and in several different countries.
Photo: Matan David, Ayelet Bartov

Synopsis

The original witch trials were held in Salem, Massachusetts, during the end of the 17th century. The population was puritan - religious and superstitious, the governing was English - conservative and with an obsolete law system. The results were many recorded hangings of people from all social classes of society, in the name of God to cleanse Salem from the work of Satan.

Despite all these recordings, to this date we don't know if there actually was a witch in Salem. What if there was?

By 1906 the original Salem became Peabody, the government became American, the people became more modern and rational. The more religious members reform the community of Salem far off the modern center to protect their immortal souls from the corrupting progress. But now, 200 years after the original trials, foul deeds awake. The work of Satan is back in Salem. For if there really was a witch in Salem 1692, there could be a Satan worshipper in 1906.

It first looked like a horrible plague that science could not explain, that breaks the victim's minds, and kills them within 3 days. Then, with every casualty in Salem, it looked like a mist growing denser, covering the city, darkening the night and veiling the sky by day. Attempts to get help from outside of Salem ended with a curfew: no one gets in, no one gets out. Somewhere someone out there recognizes this plague, and conceals it to prevent it from expanding. The only help the town gets, is the supreme judge *Downsforth*, that is rumored to have encountered such problems before, and solved them!

The game runs on mixed-time basis: this means that while the time in play is played in real-time, once a day is concluded - we skip to play the night, and once the night is concluded - the day after is played. While every night the witches operate to infect more citizens, during the day the judge encourages the citizens to point out Satan Worshipers so he can have them hanged. However the citizens of Salem have nothing to distinguish witches from innocents, apart from what they know of each other.

And every night the plague expands.

The game ends naturally when all witches are found, or when all surviving city citizens are infected. However, it can also be stopped on a scheduled point in time thus ending unnaturally.

Game Goals

The goal of the game is to confront players with the grain of morals like taking action, caring, initiative, responsibility, sincerity and leadership, and their part in them

The player characters are the residents of Salem. In every round of the game each player faces the threat of death twice: either to be found guilty of witchcraft during the day, or to be infected by the plague during the night, and characters that die - die permanently. The only way to stop the killings is to find the Satan Worshippers and hang them. But accusing somebody for no reason can result in the hanging of an innocent resident, and not accusing anyone means standing idly by while Satan Worshippers take control of Salem.

The pressure that is created in the game is huge. The characters go through stress, helplessness, threat and dismay. Players report moving between extremes of repression, denial, paralyzation, distress and relief. Thus, using an extreme radical approach about life and death, the game achieves its goals, while imprinting a powerful experience on most players.

The rubbing

The only way to save the town is to find and hang the witches. However, there is no logical way to do so. On the contrary, all the information the characters are given are false leads, leaving them with their own weaknesses and their natural enemies. To find the witch the citizens must make accusations in court that will lead to conviction, hoping that they will eventually hang the true witches.

They can also try to solve it rationally by seeing who votes against who, who says what and when and thus uncovering lies. However, having none of the characters designed to do that, it rarely happens before a very late stage of the game, where the character and the player bleed together. Realizing that they do not know how to find the witch, and that false accusations may result in innocent people being hanged, the town falls to a stagnation that just gives the witches the time they need to infect the whole city.

We usually perceive citizens that are devoted social activists as moral and caring. But in this case, the only way to show care is to keep making accusations - which is in fact risking the lives of individuals without any substantial evidence. The situation gets rough where such a show of caring invokes vengeful feelings.



Photo: Dvora Levin

Design Philosophy

Here I share my design philosophy for re-runnable games, taken from my tool-box for designing, producing and running larps and repeatable larps¹. They appear here in abstract as I really try to avoid spoilers. However, you can find full details in the complete manual that is available online as a part of the game materials available on the game's web site².

The Captain

When leading a battle, knowing the field is an important advantage. When people take part in your own production - be it as producers or as players - they actually expect you to command and to know the field. But even when you conquer a new area - like running a pre-written larp from a booklet - you as a leader must make your troops believe that they are marching into a zone that *you know and own*.

The result of an attack is determined already in the preparations for it. For a larp this is the setup phase. The setup is the time span between deciding on the game all the way to welcoming the players. In this crucial time the production makes efforts in many directions at the same time. But what makes *Salem 1906* a good start for a new organizer - as well as a play ground for a maestro to fiddle with - is that as the game was designed to be a re-runnable game for conventions and private parties. A big portion of the work on these tasks has been minimized in *Salem 1906*, or is even rendered irrelevant.

- ◆ **Story building.** You get this for free. However, you still have to learn the topography of the area you're charging into, so you can lead your troops to victory.
- ◆ **Hype.** Beside the fact you're probably in a convention or private party - witchcraft is a hot issue that sells.
Plus - the game materials provide flyers :)
- ◆ **Casting.** The casting is done as part of the running of the game.
- ◆ **Scenery.** In a convention options for scenery are usually reduced to whatever can be fit into a slot in the program - a fact that has formed a bad opinion about convention-larps that I *must* object to.



Photo: Dvora Levin

On top of that, the game materials come with a beginner-to-wizard production and running manual, leaving new organizers focussed on their learning and maestros free to customize the game from their own experiences.

The game materials also give simple tools that are easy to make available for everyone with access to a black/white printer, and also suggest a simple and feasible way to create maximum impact with minimal effort to combat the bad stereotype that convention-larps suffer from.

If you still have problems - call headquarters. I'm there for you, Captain!

The Dealer

With *The Dealer* I compare the running of a game like this to playing a game of cards, where the person running the game - like any other participant - has a hand full of cards. Every participant can play one card at a time, and every kind of card that is played has a certain effect on the game. I would like to refer to the cards role-playing game *Hounds of the Sea*³ - which was the first game I saw taking this metaphor literally and making a great game of it.

Luckily, in larps the person running the game is not only the dealer, he can also decide what cards to deal to what players. A sloppy organizer will deal any shuffled deck and hope that luck places good cards in hands of good players to get a good game, where a good organizer will know exactly what cards to deal to what players - including himself - and make sure players understand their cards and know to use them.

The design of *Salem* takes advantage of this principal. The entire game is built like a set of cards, where each card is a character sheet, where the organizer concentrate on dealing the right card to the right player. It also opens the game to a comfortable scaling strategy, where while dealing the organizer can deal the cards he likes, and leave out whatever cards that don't fit in this particular running of the game. The design also facilitates working with large groups by forming the character-cards in family groups, and leveraging the natural dynamics of every group.



Play your hand: make sure players understand their cards and know to use them.
Photo: Dvora Levin

The Senses of the Player

One of the challenges in larp production is how to pass all the required messages to the participants so they can operate in the game in the best way. This becomes twice as hard when you're running in a convention with rigid schedule restrictions, where you only have few hours to get the player in and out of the plot, and leave the room in time ready for the next item.

The design philosophy of *Salem 1906* leverages several mechanisms to solve this:

First it uses simple and basic rules that rely on common sense. These rules are not communicated to the players with words only. The instructions for the organizer describe layout, looks, procedures and organizing principals that communicate to all of the senses of the player, wether she is aware of them or not (and if you think of only 5 senses - think again).

Secondly, knowledge is distributed on a need-to-know basis. Background is given up-front opening the game and creating a straight line between all participants about the witch-trials and what is behind them, the facts of the world that the story runs in, and the common rules - this takes about 15 minuets. For the casting the players are told to divide into to groups. These groups are then cast as families, and every family gets a family diagram that describes the relations in it, and the character sheets for the individual family members.

While leveraging the natural dynamics that led players to divide as they did, the group casts each player within the group as one of the characters of their family, and here again - group-dynamics are leveraged. This division takes up to 15 minutes, and includes reading the very simply structured character-sheets of up to 350 words each.

Finally, private data is presented to the players in private. Additional characters that enter during the game are instructed separately, and operate by mechanisms that were prepared for them while the common rules were being communicated.

The Cook

Once the game starts I like to think of it as a pot on a fire. Too small a fire will never get it ready, too hot fire will make it burn, and the organizer - is the cook. Once the game is started, it runs by a more or less defined cycle - during the night the witches infect, during the day the town conducts trials until someone is convicted, and so on.

This design leverages the cycle to construct control points in which the organizer can check the heat of the fire and apply any modifications required to assure that the pot boils well, and the design provides him with tools to control the heat using story, moderation and game mechanics.

While experienced organizers have this control mechanism built in their thinking pattern and skill - in Salem they find themselves safe and protected by this routine, and free to add their own secret sauce to the pot.



Above: Casting leverages the natural dynamics in a group. Photo: Dvora Levin

Left: Black fabric, signs & pictures printed on A4, and one wig gets even a group of seniors into a court room. Photo: Dvora Levin

Salem Anecdotes

No Escape?

Players generally handle pressure in two ways. The first way is deep immersion, strong drama, and strong emotional involvement - what I call the *Hough* effect. The second way is sarcasm, cynicism, and comic relief - what I call the *Haha* effect, a.k.a. LOL-play. In many places a player will not communicate in a serious tone what he can say in a sarcastic or comic tone. In my experience the latter works as an escape mechanism to handle the mental overload that appears in the game.

Rationally, I would rather have a player connecting to a conflict through comic eyes than not engaging in it at all. But initially being a sworn fan of the first way, I was first introduced to the second when running *Salem 1906* on a hiking tour with the gamer group *The Fellowship* in the Golan Heights in May 2006.

Now, how does running a confronting moody game like Salem work on a hiking tour full of laughs and fun? That's what I thought when during preparation for the tour I was dared to run the game. By then I was practiced in running the game and had everything I needed for the game ready in three boxes and a folder: fabrics, costumes, and all the character-sheets. And since I owned one of the cars we planned to take - I was easily ensnared to it, and I'm glad I was. Evidently, a bunch of hard-core role-players like *The Fellowship* were not exhausted in the end a hiking day and while Udi the cook was working on the huge pot of dinner we planned to feast on, I went to work on my own pot.

With the help from party members I hung the fabrics between trees and formed an assembly hall, and hung pictures and signs on it's walls. I used park-benches to form the speaker-stand and used anything that could be used as a seat to form the ordered assembly. I skirted everything in fabric and minimized distractions around, so by the time the cook announced that all his pot needed now was a long simmer over the fire, we were all ready for the game.

However, it was clear that the atmosphere was not fit for a serious game like *Salem 1906*. It took only a short time for the game to take an interesting turn to the *Haha* side, where everybody took their characters to an extreme comic point, extracting cheerful comments from people around, and making comments of their own - all that, while playing the game, and making good fun of it.

My favorite punch line of this run, occurred shortly after the natural enemies by plot Captain Hardin Raynolds and Rebecca Nurse both lost a child in the trials, thus breaking the ice between them and giving them common ground using their age and conservative patterns. Then, when Rebecca Nurse was accused and asked to choose a defender to speak for her - she chose the Captain. Later he viciously turned against her while using the defense speech to air his own beliefs. The cruelty of the situation was enhanced by a humorous play of words.

The confession

When a character is found guilty he or she is sent to the gallows, and taken out of the game. When I run the game I define a place for convicted characters to give their farewell scene. I do that by asking them to confess, and maybe to redeem their immortal soul. Design-wise this encourages foul play, like a brilliant move I witnessed at KP 2008 where the convicted *Tabitha Nurse* chose to confess.

In her confession she addressed the community and turned the accusation against her accuser - *Richard J. Raynolds*. She claimed that he made her do what she did, that he is the true leader of the cult now trying to dispose of her because she would - in favor of her beloved city - disobey him and oppose his control. She explained the hostility between the two families as an act, and begged the community to open their eyes, claiming her soul would not rest until she sees the town purged and returned to God. The entire confession almost worked in a disturbingly efficient manner.

As an organizer this is what you want to happen. You want to take advantage of every accusation and confront as many players as much times with threat of death and provide them with as many possibilities to get dirty.

The Power of Repression

One of the first runs of the game took place in April of 2005 during the Israeli annual convention *BIGOR*. What happened during this run helped me understand the power of repression. It became clear how important it is to create a clear understanding of the situation in the game and the way to resolve it, and even though I improve the game in this point after every run - it is never enough. You might wonder - what's to think about? All they have to do is find the witches and hang them.

However, what happened during that run in 2005 was that one of the players chose to develop her character in the more rational direction, and offered the idea that there was no plague and no Satan Worshippers, and refused to take part in these homicide trials. This provided many players with a way of avoiding the act of making confronting accusations.

The game could not progress for two in-play days on the town's side, and the witches kept infecting. Rebuking the characters did not help, and when bleeding started - arguing with them started to feel like arguing with the modern minds of the players. The only way out was to solve it through mechanics.

The next night we gave the Satan Worshippers double the amount of souls to infect, and the epidemic of infected characters shook the town back towards doing something to find the witches. We could not balance it back with Dr. Atkins antidotes - because that would have strengthened the rationals, so characters simply had to die just to make a point.

Since then we have added the mist around the town, constructed the judge's first speech to make these facts clear and make every character in town accept them. However when the bleed starts even the most superstitious character can suddenly become a believer of science, claim that all they have to do is wash their hands before meals, and refuse to cooperate with the trials, even when her closer relations fall victim to the plague.

While the game works even when this repression appears and takes hold in the community - to my observation - it is much more fun and flaming without it. This is your biggest enemy as the Captain, and you should do all you can to get it out of your way.

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2. The site of the game - <http://sites.google.com/site/salem1906/> where you can find *The Complete Production Handbook*, available at <http://sites.google.com/site/salem1906/handbook>
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Salem 1906 - The Secret Sauce

Designed by Osher El-Netanany and Yair Samban
 First played in 2005 at the BIGOR convention, Israel (over 20 runs to date)
 Duration: 3-6 hours
 Number of players: 12-33 players
 Budget: 30-180 € (participation fee: varied)
 More information: <http://sites.google.com/site/salem1906>



The stuff that dreams are made of

Lorenzo Trenti

*Made in 2008 the murder mystery larp *La materia di cui sono fatti i sogni* (The stuff that dreams are made of) was an exercise in how to involve a non-larping audience and to present larping as part of a 'serious' cultural event. The game was played two times during Festival Filosofia, the nationally famed philosophy festival in Modena, Italy.*

Why a fantasy costume in a murder mystery? It's easy, if the character (played by Francesco Iori) is a mad man inspired by the reading of fantasy novels. Photo: Lorenzo Trenti

La materia di cui sono fatti i sogni was a widespread murder mystery game, set in the present. The local players' association (Club TreEmme) wanted to organize one big gaming event during the Festival of Philosophy as a preview of Play, the upcoming gamers' fair the following week. The purpose was to bring attention to intelligent gaming in general, and spread knowledge of the strong community of gamers in Modena.

The theme for the philosophy festival was *fantasy*, which indeed seems very appropriate for a gaming event. Also, the festival organization gave us a little square in the city centre, Piazza della Pomposa, as location for the game. The neighborhood has been one of the worst in the city but during the last few years the municipality has succeeded in revitalizing the area. The square is approximately 2,000 m² and surrounded by ancient buildings. In the centre there is a church with the tomb of Ludovico Antonio Muratori, a famous Italian philosopher who in 1745 published the treaty *About the strength of human fantasy*.

This was just too good not to use in the game. So the plot revolved around a lost copy of this treaty, a conference which was to be held in Piazza della Pomposa about Muratori, and a series of fantasy novels (*the Gondwana cycle*). The latter were advertised as “told in dreams by supernatural spirits directly to the author”.



The organizer, surrounded by the NPCs at the end of the game, listens to the solutions given by groups of players. Photo: Michela Iorio

Introducing the game

The players had to sign up by phone before the game. It is unusual in Italy to subscribe to games by phone (here like in other parts of the world, e-mail is a lot simpler and more useful), but the festival organization wanted *every* event to be accessible also for people that didn't have an Internet connection. The manager of the festival had insisted that I use my own mobile phone for players' subscription but in the end a phone number was courteously offered by an artisan working in Piazza della Pomposa.

We decided not to have more than 30 players for each of the two runs of the game. In addition to the phone signup we had a little table in Piazza della Pomposa, to fill up the few slots that were still free before the game started. We also used it as a kind of information-booth, specifically for the larp but even on gaming in general.

The subscribed players gathered in the square and listened to the introduction from the organizer. They are here to attend the conference, but unfortunately the main speaker has just been murdered. The police is trying to solve the crime and the players are kindly asked not to leave the area during the investigations. This was presented by me as the game master, not as character of the game, informing them of the premise of the game.

Characters and plots

Each participant received a character kit with a map of Piazza della Pomposa and the surroundings, ten names of NPCs (witnesses and possible culprits of the crime) and ten places on the map where they could find those NPCs.

There was also a “low-threshold” character for each participant, that is a 1-2 sentence description of a very vague character: maybe “you're an undercover agent and you want to investigate the murder”, or “you're a CSICOP skeptic (more on this later) and want to disprove anyone who believes in the supernatural”, or “you're a thief and want to obtain the lost copy of Muratori's treaty”.

So, for one reason or another, everyone had an interest in investigating the situation. The game was made of wandering around the square and surroundings for exactly one hour and speaking to the witnesses to get clues on what was going on.

The low-threshold character was completely optional. If a participant wanted just to investigate, he could do so simply by asking questions to the ten witnesses. On the other hand, if the participant wanted to role-play, she could use the character as a starting point for interacting with others.

Ten experienced players were involved as the witnesses/culprits. They were spread in Piazza della Pomposa, each with a character sheet detailing their character; how it relates to the other NPCs, what the character knows and the “what you *have* to say” box (the most important part in a murder mystery game from my point of view). This is the evidence for the mystery, facts that sooner or later must be told, even if the participants don’t ask. If the murder mystery game is well designed, these facts usually trigger new questions to other characters and strongly advance the flow of the game.

The NPCs were instructed to repeat the same information when new people came to ask. At the same time, we tried to make those ten characters interesting enough so that they were not just “information dispensers” but three-dimensional characters that you could have a nice in-character talk with. For instance we had a gypsy foretelling disasters, a psychotic fantasy author and his shark of a manager, a flamboyant historian, and a guy who went crazy and believed to be a fantasy character from the novels.



Piazza della Pomposa, with different groups of players talking to each other (you can see a promotional stand-up for the Play gaming fair). Photo: Lorenzo Trenti

Ending the game

After one hour of play, the NPCs “turned off” and everyone gathered again in the centre of the square. The participants received the forensics report and then they had to guess the “who, how and why” of the crime. Everyone presented their solution and then the truth was revealed by the organizer, like in every murder mystery novel, tying together all the loose ends. Congratulations were given to the few who guessed, followed by cheers to the actors and all the participants.

The backstory also had a theme related to fantasy. There were a lot of seemingly supernatural events, and finding a rational explanation for them was a further clue to solving the crime. This mirrors a certain wave in classic murder mystery novels, like the ones by John Dickson Carr: there’s a series of impossible and/or unnatural events related to a crime that would suggest a ghostly intervention, but in the end the investigator explains everything in a perfectly rational way.

Rationally explaining miracles was also the centre of Muratori’s treaty from 1745 and part of the plot itself, where characters from the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSICOP) strongly wanted to disprove the existence of supernatural phenomenon. Thus, for example, the Gondwana novels in the larp were not inspired by dreams. It was just the psychotic author who believed himself to be visited by spirits while asleep, and his agent doing a wonderful job of creating a myth to promote the books.

The game worked smoothly. The solution was not simple, some found it too difficult, others said that there wasn’t enough time to talk properly to each character. Both are good points and were I to rewrite the game, I would probably simplify the plot.

But on the other hand I want my mysteries to be difficult (if everyone can guess it, where’s the challenge?) and I intentionally designed the game so that the players had to work under pressure, having a relatively short period of time to solve the crime.

Non-larping audience

One of our main purposes was specifically to involve non-larpers in the game. In Italy larping and role-playing are relatively unknown hobbies, but in later years we have had an overwhelming growth in numbers of murder mysteries, murder weekends, dinners-with-murder and so on. There is an increased interest in this kind of activity and it is easy to attract people to these games, because it's something that a lot of people have heard of, and more and more are curious to try them out. Usually people are held back by the costs. Taking part in a murder dinner with actors can be fairly expensive, while our game was completely free of charge. As a result a lot of non-larpers played the game. There were just two or three long-time larpers and some *Dungeons & Dragons* players, but no more. All the remaining participants were completely newbies. And it was great to have a participant of 65+ years running around trying to solve the crime.

One of the main concerns came from the majority of participants potentially being new to larping. Would the game work with unexperienced players? We also needed a game that would work with any number of participants, and I mean any number (from 1 to 30). From these concerns we decided to have the clues all in the hands of the NPCs, and a very variable number of player characters. If vital clues are tied to character number 10 and you only have 9 players, the murder mystery will fall apart. This ties directly to the self-imposed rules of mystery writing, like the ones by S.S. Van Dine: the reader (in a game, the player) must have all of the clues needed to correctly guess the murderer. By having all the clues connected to the NPCs we made sure that the whole evidence was in play.

Also, I particularly appreciated the low-threshold characters that allowed for easy adjustment to your desired level of involvement in the game. If you want to test what role-playing is you can do so by using the short character description, while if you just want to investigate the murder puzzle, the game works the same and won't fall apart. And everyone was fine. Not a lot of players related to each other playing their role, but everyone talked to the NPCs staying in character (apart from the occasional lady exclaiming "you guys are very good actors!").

One of the NPCs (the psychotic author, played by Maurizio Corsaro) reads the Forensic report along with the other players. Photo: Michela Iorio





Another good experience was creating the game from a given situation with very strong restrictions. The theme of the philosophy festival, the location, the fact that the festival asked us to involve a lot of participants offered us a way to focus the game. Working with the festival was quite smooth. They were very open to everything we wanted to put into the game.

The festival usually puts together events which are very loosely linked to the theme, and role-playing games are generally very close to the idea of *fantasy*. Their request was merely to involve as many people as possible – hence the two runs of the game – and they were very satisfied with that. Probably they would have liked anything related to role-playing games (like for instance, a *Dungeons & Dragons* tournament), but using a “real” philosophical theme, double-linked to Muratori’s treaty, was a touch that demonstrated that you really can entertain people in a clever way.

Summary

All in all, the main success for the game was presenting a game as part of a “serious” cultural event, which in Italy is far from being usual. I hope this has opened the way for others who want to explore this idea.

The stuff that dreams are made of

Designed and organized by Lorenzi Trenti, Francesco Iori, Nicola Ferrari, Andrea Cupido

First played on September 20th, 2008 at Piazza del Pomposa, Italy

Duration: 1 1/2 hour

Number of players: approx. 30 + 10 NPCs

Budget: 0 € (participation fee: free)

More information: <http://flyingcircus.it>

*The bombastic historian (Raffaele Manzo) explains his non-requested theories to a player.
Photo: Lorenzo Trenti*

This book is an experiment and a challenge.

We need a way to document larps that encourage common reflection on why and how we make the larps we do. We believe that from sharing thoughts and tools among larpwrights will come even greater games in the future.

The descriptions in the book are called blueprints to distinguish that they are design documents outlining the core designs of a larp. Emphasis is on the story, setting, game mechanics and specific designs that makes the larp unique.

We are still searching for the best way to blueprint larps in a short and orderly fashion, and this book contains thirteen worthy suggestions.

Rollespils Akademi



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