

# The Nordic larp yearbook 2015



Edited by Charles Bo Nielsen, Claus Raasted & Erik Sonne Georg

*Rollespils Akademiet*





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# 2015

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## Foreword: A Brief History of Imagining

Dreaming and imagining have always been parts of human nature. In a world that is sometimes too cruel and sometimes too boring, it is only natural to use one's mind to conjure up alternate worlds, events, storylines.

The human desire for experiencing that which is not so has evolved through the millennia; from daydreams to Greek dramas to books to movies. We have constantly developed new ways of seeing the invisible, conjuring up illusions and 'experiencing' circumstances that we would never be able to live out in the real world.

But all these medias have one thing in common: They only allow us to participate as spectators. Even such a media as computer games, interactive though they may be, only allow the user to receive visual stimuli (and in some cases the added effect of vibrations from the control device) from the experience, thus engaging very few of the player's sense. Larp is different.

Where the other means of pseudo-experience (for lack of a better word) fail in fully committing the participant, larp creates what can only be described as the closest thing to the real, physical experience of the subject in question. This means that larping comes extremely close to achieving that great goal of the storyteller: To let the audience live a different life for a brief moment.

But why live a different life? Is the world so bad? The answer is that larping is not really about escapism; it's about experiencing something that you would otherwise be unable to. Have you always dreamt of experiencing life at a feudal court? Would you like to experience just what it would be like to be a refugee and have nothing, in order to better understand? Do you love the cloak-and-dagger intrigue of movies about secret societies and wish you could be in one?

Although larping is not the real thing as such, it's the closest thing most of us will ever get to actually living out that fantasy.

*Claus was unable to write the foreword and left it to me. (Photo: Juhana Petterson)*



This power of simulated experience is the magic of larping, the element that enables it to enrich our lives in so many ways, depending on the subject dealt with. From the educational to the purely entertaining, from the heartwarming to the horrific: Larping is full of experiences that, simulated though they may be, left the participants feeling like they had truly taken part something real.

This book seeks to document those experiences, though it can hardly do justice to a media that engages both body and mind. The texts and images go a long way towards giving the reader some idea why each of these larps was worth attending, though, and show off some of the best examples of the tradition, spanning over a variety of interesting subjects and employing a myriad of different techniques to enhance the illusion.

If you are a larper we hope that this book will inspire you to write a new larp, to sign up for one of this year's events or just to larp more in general. There are so many games out there that are just waiting to be played, and the articles in this book will most definitely include something that's right up your alley, no matter what your interests are.

If you are a stranger to larp, prepare to be amazed! You will most likely find that modern larp contains so much more than you ever imagined, from the exciting to the serious. We hope that this book will give you some insight into a media that is often both underestimated and misunderstood by outsiders, and that you will perhaps understand just why larping is a beloved pastime for so many people.

*-Erik Sonne Georg, Master of Tones*

*Larps can most certainly be spectacular! Fairweather Manor featured both dazzling costumes and a majestic location. (Photo: John-Paul Bichard)*



*Bichard*





**NEXUS-6: Narrativist Airsoft**  
- By J.C. Larpin

Nordic larp is taking France by slow-motion storm. After experiencing the awesomeness, people are setting up re-runs of classics such as *Mad about the boy* and *Just a little lovin'*. The next logical step was to make our own stuff, and *Nexus-6* was one of the first humble attempts.

## The inspiration

Ever since I played *Monitor Celestra* I have been convinced that *Blade Runner*'s 'replicants' are dramatic gold (for those who didn't get the reference, *Nexus-6* are the newest model of replicants in *Blade Runner*). I'm also fascinated by totalitarian regimes and the insane things they make people do. Then, for some reason, I thought it would be nice to give airsoft a try.

The result was a retro-future "*Battlestar Galactica* meets the battle of Stalingrad", where soldiers fighting a losing war for a North Korea-like state gradually realize that some of them might be replicants planted by the enemy.

## The mechanics

Most techniques I stole from other larps (who probably stole them from other productions themselves): Shadows from *Monitor Celestra*, letters from *Last will*, colored lanyards from *Life is cheap*, monologues from *Just a little lovin'* and many more, including of course safe-words from just about all Nordic larps. Most of these techniques are not particularly novel but had barely been used in France before, making the game a bit of an experiment.

The larp was also preceded by a big bunch of workshops. My only real invention was a voting technique, where players got to vote (by text-message) for the character they thought would be coolest to in fact be a replicant. This was one of the ways in which players were in control of their character's story. Players could also very much shape their character as they saw fit (and were encouraged to do so), as the character briefs were intentionally basic.

*"It was an emotional roller-coaster and I had a great time role-playing, airsofting, insulting, breaking people and being broken by others."*

-Participant who played Soldier DC-X-041



## The women

Another thing I learned from playing larps like *Hinterland* was that you need to show the people whom you want to play your larp that this is a game for them. In this case, a particular concern of mine was that people would think that *Nexus-6*, with its hardcore military vibe, was only for guys. So I took care to put a woman in the promo pictures, and to have a female friend record voices with me for the larp's "national anthem".

I also made all characters gender neutral and made sure to communicate this clearly in the larp's presentation. The result was that 30% of players in both of the game's runs were women, and I feel the games were better for it.





*Squad singing the anthem. (Photo: Philippe Carrère)*

## The experience

I wanted a hardcore game, because that's one of the things I love playing myself. The players got very little sleep, little food, some action and a lot of psychological pressure. They could tune the pressure level to their taste using the safe-words, lanyards and an off-game area. The location was also pretty uncomfortable and haunting: An abandoned 1920s hospital, used as a prisoner camp during the Second World War and surrounded by woods. The place is often used by local airsofters who were very helpful in showing us how to use our rented airsoft weapons (almost none of the participants had ever handled one before). To make things extra interesting, there was of course no water or electricity. Much of the experience was recorded by photo- and video cameras (handled by organizers, NPCs or the players themselves, both diegetically and not) – a good thing, especially for the busy organizers who did not get to see much of the actual game!

## The feedback

Players and organizers were very much overwhelmed by the intense experience. The larp was physically and emotionally exhausting, and very different from what most participants were used to (this was precisely why most of them signed up in the first place). The “get out of character” workshops and debriefing were well received, and it took days (in some cases weeks) for players to stop singing the game’s “national anthem” (adapted from a Soviet war-song – another idea I stole from a previous larp; in this case *Robota*). Some players recorded feedback videos, to be used for the benefit of future players.

*“What made this larp a success for me was the balance between hardcore in-game conditions and the safety of the rules and off-game environment.”*

-Participant who played Soldier DA-X-746



## The problems

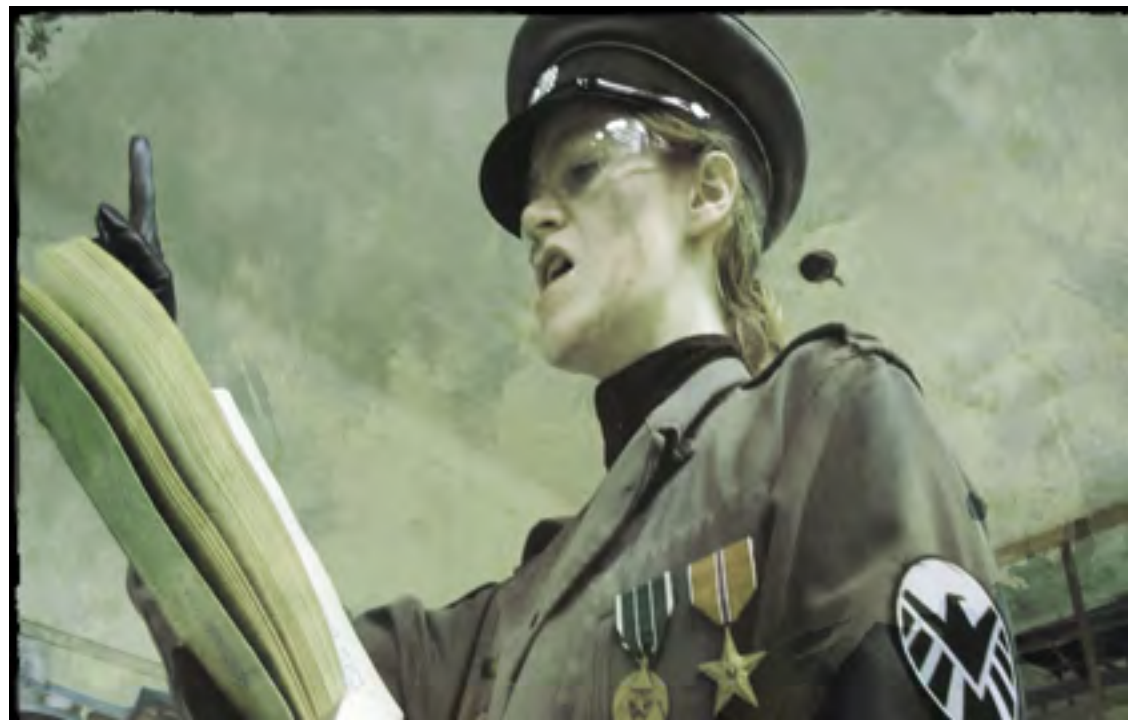
Everything did not run smoothly, of course. Luckily, the obvious things did not happen: Thanks, in part, to a very heavy focus on safety, no one got shot in the eye without their glasses on, and no one broke their neck falling down stairs in the dark. Some airsoft guns did malfunction, though, the local fire brigade had to come back and put out the fire they had started on-site earlier as an exercise and an unsanctioned airsoft team even turned up in the middle of the night (they were kind enough to leave once they realized what was going on)... Among other miscellaneous mishaps.



*Promo picture. (Photo: Hoog)*

## The airsoft

Airsoft and larp have been moving closer together for a while in France, and this larp certainly confirmed the potential. First off, the airsoft guns look pretty realistic. Knowing that it will sting if you get shot and hearing BBs hitting the wall right next to your head also contribute to the experience. It might seem obvious to some, but we discovered that, handled carefully, airsoft guns are just the same as latex swords for larping purposes. Better yet: Just like latex swords, they fit in just fine with a narrative approach, since you can simply decide how bad the injury is when you get shot (from a scratch to instant death). As already mentioned, airsofters helped out during the larp, and they were very much impressed by the passion we larpers put into what we do. I would not be surprised if a few of them turn up for a larp in the future!







*Punishment is never far away. (Photo: Rémi Dorbais)*

## The conclusion

I humbly feel *Nexus-6* has contributed towards making Nordic larp better known in France. The next step is to organize it again in the summer of 2016, this time in English, to allow more French larpers to interact with foreigners. The road ahead is exciting!

*"How was the larp? It was... It was... It was real."*

-Participant who played Commissar DC-X-811



**CREDITS:** Hoog (design and production), Baptiste Cazes (additional design and production), Matthieu Nicolas (production), Aurélien Duchatelle (video documentation), Rémi Dorbais & Philippe Carrère (photo documentation), eXpérience (logistics support), ARCAN (airsoft support)

**DATE:** July 24-26, 2015; July 30 - August 2, 2015 (two runs)

**LOCATION:** Aincourt, France

**DURATION:** 24 hours + workshops

**PARTICIPANTS:** 10 players per run (20 in total)

**BUDGET:** 1500 € for two runs

**PARTICIPATION FEE:** 5 €

**GAME MECHANICS:** Text-message voting to determine replicants, airsoft weapons, shadows, playing to lose, no character death before last act

**WEBSITE:** <http://experiencejdr.free.fr>



*Promo picture for Nexus 6. (Photo: Hoog)*

**NEXUS-6**  
UN GN EXPERIENCE



**Waiting for uncertainty: Can waiting around be a  
larp?**

**-By Simon James Pettitt**

Most of us have tried this: Picking up someone at the airport. Waiting with strangers, looking at them, noting how differently people prepare to greet their loved ones. Maybe you have even tried to wait for someone whose plane was delayed. Again, people react differently; annoyed, angry or sensibly changing the plans they had. That is the start of *Waiting for Flight GO901*.

*Waiting for Flight GO901* is a black box larp, which means that theatre techniques like light and sound play a part in the game, the game starts with a workshop, and it's experimental. Here the light and sound elements are small, only a monitor during the start and a meta scene using a spotlight at the end, but the experiments and workshop are paramount for the game. From the familiar beginning the game moves into what - luckily - is fiction for most people. The plane is more and more delayed until it disappears from the monitors. Annoyance turns to confusion and maybe even the first tingles of worry. At this point a member of staff (played by one of the larp organizers) steps into the play area and asks to get the attention from everyone waiting for passengers onboard Flight GO901.

All the players flock to the person, reactions so different; anxiety, anger, fear. Questions pour out. The poor attendant informs them that the plane is having technical difficulties and might be delayed for quite a bit, but if everyone could follow him, they have a meeting room where they can wait and get information as quickly as possible.

The players are moved from a big open space to a small room, where all these strangers suddenly have to be much closer to each other, just as their emotions are rising.

*"The rest of the memories are a bit of a blur. The flight being further delayed, time ticking away slowly. I can't really tell when I began to suspect that something was wrong. Maybe it was when they removed the information about the flight from the info board. Or maybe when they moved us to another room."*

- Elina Andersson, player

From here on the member of staff can only bring bad news. After some more anxious waiting, he informs them that they have lost contact with the plane. Next time he shows up, he can sadly confirm that there has indeed been an accident and that rescue personnel is on the way to the crash site. There's reports of few survivors.

*"People reacted in different ways. Some cried and others were angry. Some did not want to believe what we had just been told and some tried to offer comfort. At one point a pocket flask was sent round in the room, a ritual of sorts."*

- Elina Andersson, player

Finally, he turns up one more time; the casualty lists are in. At this point, the game switches to a metaphysical state. The lights dim, the players are moved to a dimly lit area and a spotlight turns on opposite them, creating a small, bright patch of light in the room. The staff member, now a kind of messenger of death, places different bags in the light, one by one. These are the bags the players used to create the one they are waiting for.





Whenever a bag used by someone in the creation process is placed in the spotlight, they have to go up to it and look in it. If they find a small glass heart, it means their loved one has survived. Sadly, very few ever find such a heart. When everyone knows the fate of their loved ones, the game ends.

## The origin of games

Game ideas come in very different forms: Some have to stew in the back of your head for years before coming to fruition, others pop into your mind almost ready to play. *Waiting for Flight GO901* was one of the latter. When I was a participant at Larpwriter Summer School in 2014, I heard about the plane that was shot down over Ukraine. I read somewhere that a large group of AIDS researchers heading for a conference were among the passengers. For some reason my mind made the following jumps: Imagine being the one sent to the airport to pick them up, that must be terrible... But that must be how it is every time... There's people waiting at the airport for all planes... I wonder how they deal with that at airports... That would make a great game... We are bad people.

My mind was already buzzing with ideas and techniques from the summer school, so the structure for the game came almost in an instant. It would follow how it must be to experience this: First anticipation, then annoyance as the plane is delayed, moving on anxiety and fear, and the big emotion: Uncertainty; *"Is she alive?"* I played around with the idea that the players would be both the ones waiting at the airport and the ones on the plane. At different stages this was the same players or two different groups of players.



*The last moment of uncertainty; all too soon they will know. (Photo: Jacob Nielsen)*



*"Opening it, hoping for her survival and finding it empty, brought down a gargantuan weight on me." (Photo: Jacob Nielsen)*

But in the end I realized that that was a different game. I wanted to focus on the ones at the airport, the uncertainty was my keyword. This was not about the fear of death, but the fear of losing of a loved one. The ones on the plane would feel like NPCs... Or worse: Just objects for the others' emotions.

## Can you feel for a fictional stranger?

This left me two problems that became the central experiments in this game: *"Can waiting be interesting play?"* And *"Can you feel for a fictional person you've never meet?"*. The first question was left open; that was basically what I wanted to see in the game. If it wasn't, well, then the game would never work. As it turns out, if you have some emotions to play on, and if they change and intensify during the game, then the answer is a resounding 'yes!'. This has become the strongest element of the game.

*"I remember that my brother's friend flirted with a girl opposite us. She was cute. She hadn't started crying yet."*

- Elina Andersson, player



*The staff member delivering more bad news. It's important as an organizer to remember that this is also just a character. Otherwise, it becomes a very hard part to play.*

(Photo: Jacob Nielsen)



It turned out to be an intensity tool. The design is organized in such a way that it's up to the player how hard an impact they want to play for. They can create a traveler that isn't close to home for less impact, or they can create an image of their own girlfriend, sister or even child, as players have done, for maximum effect.

Another aspect of the character creation turned out to also have positive consequences; the workshop starts with a lot of different bags and suitcases. The players are then asked to brainstorm with post-it notes, basically answering the question: 'who would travel with this bag?'. At this point they have not chosen a bag but brainstorm on all the bags. Only after having done this do they choose which bag to use, and groups are then formed based on this choice.

*The suitcases needs to be different as to create different travelers. This one seems to be popular among nordic larpers. (Photo: Simon James Pettitt)*



At this point they start to create the traveler, and from her the people waiting for her; their own characters. They use the post-its from all the other players as inspiration, but from here on it's their own design. It turned out that the post-it note exercise is such a creative kickstarter that the travelers and characters people make afterwards are much stronger than otherwise. That first exercise basically get the players into a creative mindset, and I did not foresee that in the design.

So, to sum up: The first experiment was a resounding 'yes': Waiting can be interesting play, if you have something to focus on during the waiting. Not necessarily something to do that is actually important. Doing something will distract you from your inner thoughts, your worry, and that is, after all, what we want from this game. You need something to worry about, though, and that needs to evolve and intensify.



*The game starts with a post-it note brainstorm asking 'who would own this suitcase?'. (Photo: Simon James Pettitt)*

As for the second experiment: Can you feel for fictional characters? Well yes, but in varying degrees... And that can be used to design your own emotional experience: How close to home do the players want it? Having the players create the traveler and their own characters themselves is definitely a big help in creating this connection between player and traveler. And finally: If you want your players to be creative, start out with an exercise that kick-starts this creativity.

*"The climax was reached with the spotlight, me, the bag, and a load of emotions that the wait had increased. Opening it, hoping for her survival and finding it empty, brought down a gargantuan weight on me."*

- Francesco Rugerfred Sedda, player



**CREDITS:** Simon James Pettitt

**DATES:** November 22, 2014; January 20 2015, February 14, 2015

**LOCATIONS:** Black Box CPH IV, Østerskov Efterskole, Knudepunkt 2016

**DURATION:** 5 hours

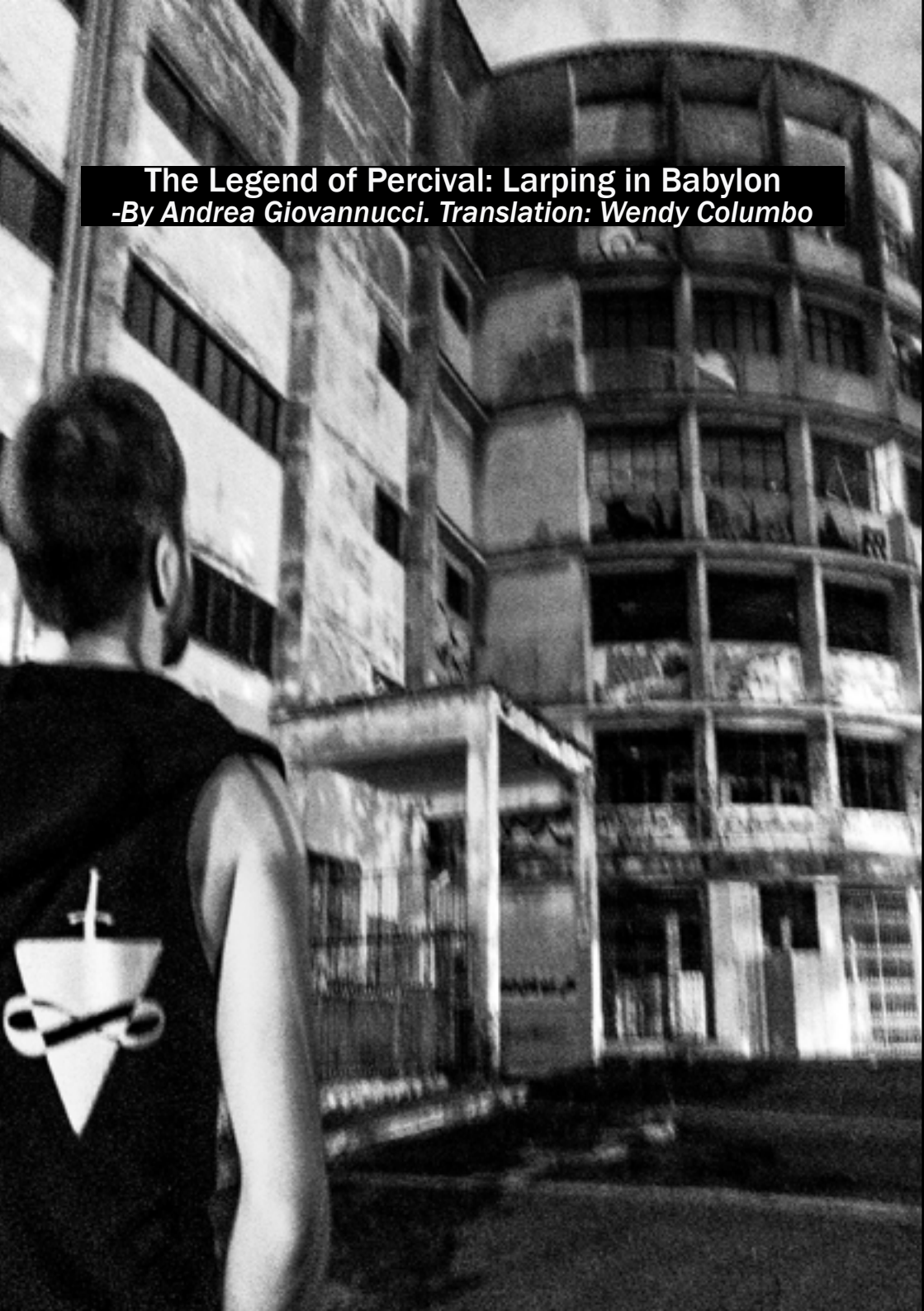
**PARTICIPANTS:** 4 to 20

**PARTICIPATION FEE:** Varying

**GAME MECHANICS:** Black box techniques (light, soundscape, tv screen), pre-larp workshop, workshop generated characters, randomised death technique and meta scene.

**LARP-SCRIPT:** A larp-script is not yet available but if you are interested in a script for the game, contact the designer at: [simonjamesp@gmail.com](mailto:simonjamesp@gmail.com)





## The Legend of Percival: Larping in Babylon

-By Andrea Giovannucci. Translation: Wendy Columbo

In September 2015, in the city of Rome, the Chaos League organized *The Legend of Percival* (*La leggenda di Parsifal*); a pervasive larp which cannibalised reality for a few days by asking its players to play the role of outcasts in search of their own physical and mental place: A search conducted within and without the self. Set in modern times and inspired by the works of Terry Gilliam (*The Fisher King*, 1991), Jim Jarmusch (*Ghost Dog*, 1999) and Alan Moore (*V for Vendetta*, 1982), the event was designed to delve into the concepts of marginality and morality.

The characters played in *The Legend of Percival* all shared a painful personal history and were persuaded to be the moral heirs of the legendary knight Percival. Their attempt was to establish a new community - the re-born Camelot - on values such as mutuality, moderation and strict adherence to the inflexible moral code of medieval knights. Plunged into the throbbing heart of a chaotic Rome, they struggled against the annihilation of humanity.

Needless to say, the underlying objective of this larp was to stimulate an unbiased debate about modern society - overwhelmed by individualistic views and interested only in the accumulation of superfluous objects - through the fictional expedient of larp. The style of play was 360° degrees illusion, without interruption and without use of meta-techniques.

## Collaborative Writing

Before actually playing, participants created their characters under the guidance and supervision of the organisers. In outlining their personal traits, players were asked to give special attention to the construction of what was labelled the “pillar collapse”. This meant a traumatic event supposed to be the starting point of a death-rebirth process for each character. In layman’s terms, the “pillar collapse” could be represented by a bereavement in one’s family or by disturbing experiences able to make the characters question everything in which they firmly believed, able to shake their ideas and their way of life.

Simultaneously, players were asked to begin to follow a training course, which would put them in an exact mental and physical state to face the larp properly. Participants were assigned meditation and breathing exercises (partly borrowed from the Zen tradition), which were to be performed on a daily basis for two weeks before the beginning of the game. For example, some of the assignments were based on selective auditory drills of self-listening and surrounding environment listening, in order to trigger an improved mastering of one’s interior space. The final goal of such training was to prepare players to the rhythms and concepts they would face during the live event, to reduce the impact with a reality very different from their everyday life.

The third phase of the “diffused game” (a pre-game stage which took place entirely online) introduced characters to the inner workings of the game.



Players had a series of clues to follow (the so-called “signs”), which showed similarities to a recently discovered ancient prophecy concerning Percival. In these analogies they recognized (or thought they did) their own personal histories. This led them to believe they were the recipients of the prophecy and were therefore called to action.

## The Signs

One of the main narrative devices of the game was that of the “signs”. These were enigmatic epiphanies that characters could grasp and freely decipher by virtue of their own peculiarity and eccentricity. Asked to interpret marginalized and cast out people, players were invited to construct their characters as slightly out-of-the-ordinary individuals who could be easily mistaken for hopeless misfits or weirdos in the eyes of the public. Yet, their unconventional behaviour became their strength as they were the only ones able to actually read the “signs” hidden in apparently disconnected fragments of reality. So, for instance, a strange stain of paint turned into a dragon and was interpreted as the coming of an evil creature; an inscription on a wall became a coded message to be cracked; an e-mail announced the advent of a Herald. Almost everything in the outside world - and, more interesting, outside the game - could be re-framed, re-contextualised and re-interpreted in the light of the prophecy, as an alternative reality which ran underneath the conventional reality.

Obviously, many of these signs were revealed to be dead leads (in the sense that they were not intentionally placed by organisers), mind tricks which nonetheless fit perfectly in the picture of a quest where knights are expected to learn and where mistakes are part of the process.



In particular, many characters started to believe in self-induced signs thanks to a great number of off-game coincidences. These turned out to be consistent since the players themselves were trying to make them coherent and consistent with the whole story. This helped to build up the overall context of the game by adding more depth to the narrative and by increasing the ability of players to perceive what surrounded them.

When considering that the play area was very wide (the city of Rome covers about 1285 square kilometers) and that the game included the possibility to move freely in the city after sunset, one can easily figure out to what extent players were encouraged to stay focused and filter reality through the lens of the game, thus increasing the feeling of self-estrangement. Pushed to the limit of their own psychological capability, they actually reached a new and exceptional awareness which helped them to move smoothly in the urban fabric.

## The Code

*The Knight's Code of Behaviour* that players were asked to follow was partly adapted from the original *Medieval Code of Chivalry* and partly invented from scratch. It served as a compass to find the way for soul searching and spiritual salvation. Each knight's duty was to study and apply it every day to the letter. The code not only represented the cornerstone of the community but was the innermost spiritual aspiration all should strive for during the game.

From a game design perspective, it ensured the focus on aspects deemed interesting and stimulating by the organisers. It included 13 strict rules, of which the following is an extract:

*Another sign. (Photo: Andrea Bucella)*

*1) I apply myself to loving my brothers and sisters more than myself, and to seeing only the worth of my fellow Knights.*

*3) I apply myself to possessing nothing and to living frugally.*

*4) I apply myself to training at the first hours of daylight; to exercising the body in the morning and the mind in the afternoon. Only after twilight will I step outside the community walls to face the world.*

*5) I apply myself at all times to speaking the truth, no matter what the cost.*

*6) I apply myself to talking only if I have something to say.*

*12) I apply myself to constantly observing my flaws and to disposing of them.*

## The Quest

Theoretically speaking, the problematization of an issue means to pose the correct opponents as obstacles. In *The Legend of Percival* the focus was not on the conflicts between players, but rather on the challenge of building a close-knit community which struggles against external forces. On one side, one finds an internal adversary represented by the former “self” of characters; an enemy within, against whom every player was supposed to measure themselves. The strict adherence to the code proved a very difficult test that required sacrifice and self-control in a continuous strife to improve.

On the other side, the external opponent was embodied by a corrupt politician who sought to drive the knights out of “Camelot” to build a gigantic shopping centre in the area they inhabited. He epitomised a diseased strain of society and its perverse egotistical dynamics. His strategy was to depict the knights as deviant and dangerous individuals who could possibly harm the general public. Should the knights back down, relinquish their faith in the prophecy and return to their former lives or stand their ground and face the consequences?



*The main entrance to Camelot. (Photo: Andrea Bucella)*



## Spaces

Rome is known worldwide as a city full of ancient monuments and fascinating history. It is, however, also a chaotic, noisy and tortuous metropolis where people are easily marginalized. The Chaos League envisioned it as a modern Babylon in contrast to the peaceful Zen-like sanctuary the warrior-monks were called to recreate in an abandoned train station. Of course, some aspects of the spatial background were exaggerated - above all as regards the degradation and grotesqueness of people and places - in order to create an uncanny and distressing collective imagery of urban life. For instance, one of the highlight scenes of the game took place during a 4000-people rave party with deafening electronic music and blinding lights. Here, surrounded by smoke and sweat, the knights had to look for a man whose face was unknown. Strangers in a crowd, they had to find the missing link to the resolution of their quest. The organisers' wish was to put players in the unusual situation of estranged beholders of everyday life who are unable to comprehend and come to terms with the contradictions of our shallow Western society.



*The knights' dormitory at Camelot. (Photo: Andrea Bucella)*

everyday life.

## Media and Reception

*The Legend of Percival* - which received the endorsement of Terry Gilliam in a funny video shot by some organisers attending a conference at which he was a guest - was a successful media event. Professional photographer Andrea Buccella documented the game in an extensive photo-reportage by taking part in the event as a player. Another participant, screenwriter and filmmaker Mariano Di Nardo, recorded a four-episode documentary “from within” which was aired on national radio (RaiRadio3) and heard by a large audience (approximately 530,000 listeners). Many participants praised the event as well. Some were so affected by their mission as knights they went as far as stating that they would be willing to make use of the teachings of the Code in their real ev-

## Conclusions

*The Legend of Percival* proved an extremely complex larp to manage and organise. It took many months of work and employed the whole team of organisers. When we started sketching the overall game design we did not know how it would go, especially with regard to what the players would be able to grasp and appreciate about the inner search around which the whole larp revolved. Nothing of the kind had ever been attempted in Italy before, and this increased the degree of uncertainty. Yet, at the same time, the knowledge of being the first thus far to research and experiment gave us the resolve and willpower to realise this ambitious project in the end.





*Arthur speaks to his knights. (Photo: Andrea Buccella)*

We are very satisfied with what we achieved, even though we are aware *The Legend of Percival* is not a larp suitable for all tastes (if ever there was one!). It is unquestionably more suitable for people open to self-questioning and to testing one's intellectual potentials since it requires an elevated degree of emotional involvement and blending.

It was nevertheless a successful gamble, although some critical issues emerged which need to be re-examined and sorted out for the future. Reassessment especially concerns how to structure and manage long hours of silence and meditation in the game and how to convey the style of play to newcomers. Critiques aside, *The Legend of Percival* was a highly demanding, highly intimate game where participants were called to play in all honesty, without exterior barriers or masks. It required dedication and concentration from everyone, above all from our play-

ers, the ever-present focus of all our creative endeavours.

**CREDITS:** The Chaos League

**DATE:** September 3-6, 2015

**LOCATION:** Rome, Italy

**DURATION:** 4 days

**PARTICIPANTS:** 80

**BUDGET:** 13,000 €

**PARTICIPATION FEE:** 170 €

**GAME MECHANICS:** diffused game, pre-game collaborative writing of characters

**WEBSITE:** Chaosleague.org



*Percival looks at the Snake (Photo: Andrea Buccella)*





## Beyond the Barricades: More than just a revolution - By Eva Wei

*It is finally here. The revolution. Never before have you felt as alive as when you stand in the middle of the square with the rallying cries roaring in your ears and the banners waving above your head. Never before have you felt as if you were a part of something so meaningful. The people of Paris are following you, and you are the guiding light towards a brighter future. Long live the revolution!*

-The Prologue

### The story

*Beyond the Barricades* is a flamboyant chamber larp about ten friends on a barricade during the June rebellion in Paris 1832. It tells a story about how a community is formed through a common ideal and how individuals from different social and economic backgrounds could unite against a common enemy. We wanted to explore how setbacks and injustice affects their struggle and how friendships are tested when they are ultimately forced to make the choice between standing tall for what they believe in or abandoning their convictions to survive the inevitable downfall of the revolution.

The game is played in three acts. The first one takes place just moments after the uprising, when the revolutionaries are bursting with a sense of joy, political unity and invincibility. In the second act some time has passed and the rain, the cold and the boredom strain their spirits. Doubt and hopelessness creep up on them, and friendships start to crack as the consequences of their actions are revealed. The third act portrays the last, trembling minutes of the revolution where everything is brought to a head.

The difference between nobility and workers becomes painfully clear when some people have a chance to leave the barricades and some do not. Who will stand tall and die for the fight and who will betray their friends by leaving the barricades to survive another day?

### The history

The main inspiration of *Beyond the Barricades* is the historical event of the June Rebellion in Paris 1832, as well as the fictional stories written about it, such as the novel *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo.

While creating *Beyond the Barricades*, we wanted to respect the actual historical events of the June rebellion and the culture it was set in. On the other hand we also wanted to allow our players to create their own story. Being a chamber larp with only around one hour of preparation time, this had to be done fast. Our solution was to present the story of the actual historical events, setting a fixed ending where all the characters either die or leave the barricades and then encourage the players to make up their own stories and affirm each other's tales with the historical events as inspiration.

*"Beyond the Barricades was for me a powerful and heartfelt experience. The game design and scenography are extremely clever and the characters well scripted, giving ample room for beautiful scenes and a great narrative. As a French born, I was also extremely touched by the respect and attention given to a lesser-known episode of my own national history. I would definitely quote this game as a must-play."*

-The player of Dominique (The poet), fifth run

## The play style

It was a great challenge to squeeze an entire revolution into merely two hours of game time. It required careful preparations and focused pre-game workshops. During the workshops we encouraged our players to adapt a play style that is flamboyant and emotional rather than realistic. The actions should be impulsive, the discussions heated and the reconciliation immediate.

This, along with the themed acts titled idealism, doubt and hard choices, made it possible to compress the story of an entire revolution to fit into a very limited runtime. This resulted in a fast-paced experience that left many of our players emotionally affected. To further activate the players each character was provided with a fate. This was an action that their character should strive towards during the game. It could, for example, be protecting a friend, shooting a guard or making the decision to either leave or stay on the barricades.

*The Red Banner, symbol of the Revolution. (Photo: Eva Wei)*



Another challenge was to make ten people form bonds tight enough to portray a group of close-knit friends who have known each other since forever. To deal with this, we used several layers of character relationships in order to consolidate the feeling of community. Firstly, each character was designated a mutual best friend whom they loved and cared for. Secondly, there were three different group constellations, consisting of economic background, social circle and attitude towards the fight. These groups provided the characters with a context where they normally spent their time. Thirdly, the entire group is united through their conviction to their common ideals. They all have similar political views, work towards the same goal and have planned the revolution together. To add some flavor, we also added a negative, non-mutual relationship to provide further depth to the group dynamic.



*The whisper of revolution... (Photo: Eva Wei)*

To make the game easily available for everyone, every character had a stereotype and some pre-written traits that the players were allowed to interpret freely. We also decided to remove the historical issues of non-equality in relation to gender, ethnicity, functionality, gender affiliations, sexual orientation, etc. All the roles are written as gender neutral French citizens and the players are welcome to play whatever gender and sexual orientation that they so wish.

*"The characters, with their motivations and relationships, are easy enough to follow. Coupled with a story you know will end in tears (at best), this makes it easy to invest your feelings into the larp as you know you can't win. You can therefore focus on building a better story for you and those around you."*

-The player of Maxime (the Fauxletarian), fourth run

## The techniques

To set the mood of revolutionary Paris, several techniques were used throughout the game. Depending on the activity of the players, some techniques were used more or less frequently in order to provide adequate intensity to the game. For example, a game master can affect the game directly by taking the role of a non-player character (NPC) in order to help the players play out their fates and move along the story.

To enhance the different moods of the game, we used a soundscape of non-diegetic music. This soundscape was controlled in real time by a game master and changed throughout the acts in order to remind the players of the themes. We also used diegetic sound effects, which the players were encouraged to play on.



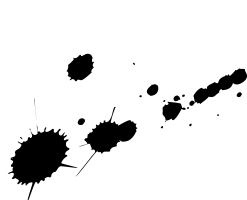
This way the game masters had a chance to regulate the intensity of the game without directly interfering. We also chose to use several costumes and props. The players were provided with some costume details for their characters. This helped the players to get into their characters and made it easier for the game masters to identify them. We also provided some weapons, propaganda, flags and other easily obtainable props in order to enhance the experience. The barricade itself was built from tables and chairs and functioned as a border of the play area. The other side of the barricade was reserved for NPCs, game masters and players who wanted to leave the game.

A game about revolution and martyrdom encourages the characters getting hurt and dying. In order to prevent every character from dying during the first ten minutes we decided to make the seriousness of the injuries escalate throughout the game. During the first act we wanted to enhance the feeling of invincibility. Therefore, none of the characters could die during this act. In the bitter end of the third act the characters will lose their lives to basically any injury they suffer.

Just because a character disappeared from the game did not mean that the player had to. Instead, each character had a corresponding ghost character. The ghosts served a meta-function in communicating the agenda of their fallen character. The agenda was either based on the most prominent trait of the character or the feeling that the other characters felt when the dead character was no longer around. This was a very effective technique to make the voices of the fallen ever-present in-game, although they had physically died or left the barricades.

*“Shoot! Do it now, before he shoots! Do it for the revolution; you’re dead anyway!” says Claude’s ghost angrily. “Don’t do it! Francis; you’re still innocent. Don’t lose that innocence, raise the white flag. He won’t shoot a child” says Florence. I look between the two. Back and forth. Scared. “What should I do?! I don’t know what to do!” I say, crying. From behind, the ghost of Aimée comes up. She protectively holds my shoulders as she whispers “Do what your heart tells you is right...””*

-The player of Francis (The child), third run



## The reactions

We aimed to create a theatrical larp with an easily accessible theme that was comprehensible and relatable. We predicted that it would gain some interest from political activists, music enthusiasts and history geeks. The reactions we got, however, went way beyond our expectations. Word of the game spread faster than what we could ever imagine, and by the time you read this article the game has been available for a year and set up nine times in three different countries.



From the feedback we got, we concluded that one of the most important reasons for the success of the game was in its theme. The subject is easily understandable and could be related to by most of the players. It takes the player on an emotional journey through all the stages in fighting for something one believes in, no matter what that might be.

*“Beyond the Barricades’ was unexpectedly emotional. An intense tear-jerker of a larp, replete with beautiful moments of improvisation and scenography. A hymn to blind revolutionary fervor, or a eulogy for the victims of that fervor? Each player decides, and they probably decide differently.”*

-The player of Maxime (The Fauxletarian), fifth run

## The future

As it is now we will keep running the game on request when time and enthusiasm allows, no matter if it is during larp festivals, conventions or in an entirely different context. After several runs of the game, we also decided to release it to the public. There is a script available on demand in Swedish, and we are currently working on an English translation of the script in order to spread the game to a larger crowd.

We are also working on a 360-version of this larp in Sweden in the near future. The larp will run in real time in relation to the actual revolution of 1832. We have high expectations and will do our very best to translate this intense and theatrical experience to a full force 360-game.



*Dreaming of a better tomorrow.*  
(Photo: Eva Wei)



*Change can be violent. (Photo: Eva Wei)*

*No matter what there will always be people willing to give everything in their struggle towards a better and more just world, and what would this world be without the people on the barricades? Long live the revolution!*

-The Epilogue



**CREDITS:** Eva Wei and Rosalind Göthberg

**DATE:** January 2015 and ongoing

**LOCATION:** Varies

**DURATION:** 1 hour of preparation and roughly 2-3 hours of play

**PARTICIPANTS:** 10

**BUDGET:** Varies

**PARTICIPATION FEE:** Varies

**GAME MECHANICS:** Pre-written characters, pre-game workshops, themed act-structure, soundscape, rules for gunfights, ghosts, non-player characters, time jumps and narrative voice-over between acts.



*Conflict was an important part of the game. (Photo: Eva Wei)*





## Hell on Wheels: Experience the Wild West

-By Filip Appl & Tereza Staňková

*The deafening sound of gunfire, shooters crouched behind whiskey barrels for cover, the smell of gunpowder. The long stares of gunslingers preparing for a duel under the burning midday sun. Beautiful ladies and distinguished gentlemen drinking tea on the porch of the railroad office. Cheap girls leaning seductively over the brothel balcony railing above the saloon. The battle cry of the native Indians that can be heard more and more often near the builders' camp. A party of freedmen workers drinking moonshine in a tattered tent behind the saloon. Love, hate, unexpected encounters, revenge and hope. All this can happen in a muddy town in the middle of nowhere. Do you think these are scenes from a western movie? You're wrong - this is the Hell on Wheels larp.*

### Once Upon a Time in the Czech Republic

*The Hell on Wheels larp is a dramatic game for 54 players taking place in Stonetown, a western settlement in the Czech Republic. It draws its inspiration from the US AMC TV series of the same name. It borrows certain characters and introductory plots from the series, but handles them freely and places them into a broader context of the trans-continental railroad construction in 1866. The game takes approximately 20 hours and is preceded by roughly 5 hours of pre-game workshops and gun handling training. Our journey to the western-like larp started in 2013 and went through different concepts. Eventually, we chose to convey a dramatic, film-like experience to the players. We decided to make a genuine western stuffed with all the clichés, character archetypes and scenes people remember from their favourite movies.*

There were gunfights, duels, brawls, prostitutes, Indians on horseback galloping across the plain, boxing matches, cancan in the saloon, whiskey... All emphasised by dramatic music, both recorded and live. On the one hand, the game is based on visually interesting dramatic scenes, on the other it gives the players room to experience relationships, intrigue, powerful stories, personal dilemmas and intimate scenes.

*"Hell on Wheels is mainly about a film-like experience; nothing too psychologically complex. Everything is done for effect, the inspiration coming from the Hell on Wheels Season 2 is palpable, one cliché follows another - but it's a damn western! They've given me exactly what they promised and what I wanted. Duels on a muddy street, brawls in the shadows, the howling of the Injuns riding past... What more could I ask for? Although it's not completely shallow. Racial hatred, the machinations surrounding the election of the mayor and the personal tragedies of the Native Americans living in a white town, all that adds credibility and pathos to the story."*

-Karel Cernín, player

### Production

Since realistic scenery and the visual aspect were our priorities, finding an appropriate location for the game was crucial. We managed to find a western town - it is small, but perfect for our purposes since it is period enough: There is a saloon with a brothel, an office, a telegraph station, a store, a barber-shop, a sheriff's house. At the same time, there are sufficient conveniences: Players are accommodated in themed log cabins and modern sanitary facilities are available.

By establishing a balance sheet we found out that if we incurred a moderate debt, we would be able to overcome the chief obstacle and get realistic-looking, working guns that we found essential for the game. Horses are also involved. They are mainly mounted by the NPCs and their presence greatly contributes to the movie-like ambience of the larp. The ambience is also significantly enhanced by the use of pyrotechnics. It makes wells blow up and covers the town in smoke and fire after shoot-outs. Players had to get their own costumes and it must be said that an overwhelming majority of them prepared their costumes with care and improved the overall visual level of the game.

*Lazy afternoon on the porch. (Photo: Tomáš Felcman)*



The first run was successfully held in the autumn of 2013. Visual promotion turned out crucial in a dramatic genre larp; stunning photos were one of the reasons why the game got plenty of the hype that enveloped the following Czech-language runs. When our game even started being mentioned abroad, we decided to risk additional time and resources and have an English-language run. The international run gave rise to several difficulties following from the blending of various larping cultures and different views of some of the delicate topics, namely racism and the gender question.



*The Indian chief leading an assault. (Photo: Tomáš Felcman)*

We decided to make minor concessions in depicting racism (instead of dark make-up, the freedmen were marked symbolically) and to expand the pre-game workshops that allowed us to better transmit our notion of the game's principles, topics and modes of playing. The players came from 12 different countries, mainly Italy, Denmark and Sweden. For many of us, hearing English in the *Hell on Wheels* western town was the one last thing needed for our movie-larp dream to come true.

By now, one international and four Czech runs have been played, endowing us with enough experience to assess the mechanics and topics employed. In the following chapters we will mention the principal ones.

## Topics of the game

The game is set in 1866 in Nebraska, USA, and revolves around the construction of the transcontinental railway by the Union Pacific Railroad company. The tent camp of the workers and those who follow them (appropriately called the *Hell on Wheels*) is slowly turning into Durantown, a new settlement. Some of its inhabitants are getting ready to follow the construction when it moves further; the company is hurrying to build the railway line up to the target point before its competitor. Others, though, prefer to start a new life in the town, and there are also strangers whose intentions are unknown. On top of that, the company leadership abounds with intrigues, the threat of an open war with the local Cheyenne tribe is growing and everything is influenced by a number of personal relationships ranging from love, faith and friendship to revenge, racism and madness.





Upon the preparation of the game, we decided to make a single main story that involved everybody, in one way or another. We worked together with a group of people who are involved in Native American re-enactment; they represent a major external danger which becomes a thread of the story. The main storyline is naturally densely bound with other plots („the Indians know where the gold is“, or „there is oil on the Indian land“) and with personal stories of individual characters („a specific Indian killed my husband“).



Settling scores. (Photo: Tomáš Felcman)



Animosity between different nations and ethnic groups constitutes a source of internal tension. Germans hate the Irish, Americans hate the Germans and the Irish; everybody scorns prostitutes and hates freedmen and Indians. This includes racism, the most controversial feature of the game for many players. The play of the freedmen group and the Native American characters is specific. It is not that much about enjoying a western movie, but rather about an inward experience of a racist environment. What is our goal? To transmit through personal experience the concept of racism and the way it works, and to stress its negative effects.

## Focus on drama

Before describing the game mechanics we employed, it needs to be stressed that we decided to subordinate almost everything else to the effect brought about by drama and ambience. We aimed at creating a profoundly convincing atmosphere of the Wild West for the participants, so that they would – as one of them said – „go home with the feeling that they know what the Wild West was all about“.

This is why we chose realistic guns (gas guns with acoustic ammunition) that behave like the real ones and also legitimately give the feeling of danger. For duels, we chose to base our game mechanics on body stances. Every gunslinger is given a number that determines the initial posture they start the fight in. The stances are known to all players, so each of the fighters knows before the duel whether they are going to win or lose. The shoot-outs were based on a dramatic acting out of the injury, according to the players' own preferences with regard to the logic of a particular scene. Brawls and fights with padded cold-steel dummy weapons worked in a similar way.

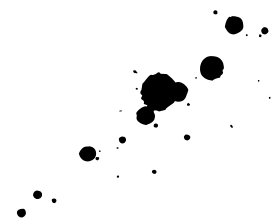
The larp also included a group of prostitutes and a number of romantic plots. Obviously, we had to find a way to act out sex scenes. We eventually chose the symbolism of pressing cheeks against each other and unbuttoning or removing a part of the costume or a costume accessory. We also set a mechanic for how both players can agree on a different (and more daring) way of acting out the scene without going off-game.



The game is structured into four chapters. The first chapter starts with scripted scenes and for each of the following three chapters, several major events are prepared in which almost all the characters can be involved, actively or passively. These events are usually related to the main storyline or some of the smaller storylines of particular groups or characters. When we were writing the personal stories of the characters, we made sure that each character has a specific issue to tackle in every chapter (every player had a meta-game booklet with instructions for the beginning of each chapter that offered them ideas on what and how to play or simply assigned them a specific scripted scene).

During the creation, we intertwined the storylines and prepared NPCs to intervene in the story if necessary. At the same time, there were several NPCs acting as normal player characters, serving to push the story forward or to help move plots that became stuck.

We also used the mechanic of “barbers”: Two organisers are available for players throughout the whole game to consult their characters, the development of the story, etc. If a player needs to consult an important in-game decision with the organisers, does not know what to do, is bored or needs to access a new plot, they can “go to the barber’s”. There, they can go off-game and discuss the matter with the organisers.



Finally, I would like to mention one more concept: Double characters. Some players' characters were intended to stay in the game only for half of the game. In the second part, the players arrived to town as new characters. The aim was to make some conflicts escalate during (in the middle of) the game, and at the same time enable some players to play two different characters, somehow (indirectly, but meaningfully) related to each other, thereby offering the player the opportunity of approaching an issue from two different points of view. The idea received a favourable response, and it turned out that it might be an interesting alternative for players who don't mind a limited space for developing their plot and a scripted end of their first character.

*"It's not wheels that make it hell  
Just hear the song of the preacher's bell  
Clouds are brown like cowboy's spit  
Welcome to this hellish pit"*

-Tom Tychtl, player



*A prostitute flirting with railway workers. (Photo: Tomáš Felcman)*

**CREDITS:** Filip Appl, Tereza Staňková, Tomáš Dulka, Ondřej Staněk, Jan Zeman, Jaroslav Dostál, Veronika Dostálová, Tomáš Felcman, Jana Isabella Růžicková, Jan Teplý

**DATES:** 5 runs in the years 2013-2015

**LOCATION:** *Stonetown* near Humpolec, the Czech Republic

**DURATION:** 2 days

**PARTICIPANTS:** 54

**BUDGET:** 3600 € for each Czech-language run, 6200 € for the international run

**PARTICIPATION FEE:** 60/80 € Czech-language run, 145 € the international run (due to translation of the texts)

**GAME MECHANICS:** Body postures in duels, meta instructions in players' booklets

**WEBSITE:** HowLARP.cz



*Poster for the international run of Hell on Wheels. (Photo: Tomáš Felcman)*

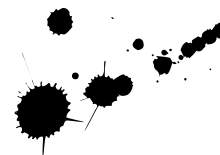




**Shame: A new larp about “honor” violence**  
-By Tayler Stokes

In the West, “honor” violence and “honor” killings - when a woman (usually) is brutalized, tortured, or killed by their family in order to atone for some honor based infraction - is often viewed as something that happens in far away and backwater places. In *Shame*, a new live action scenario, debuting designer Jay Sylvano of Portland OR, United States, illustrates how close to home “honor” related violence really is. One of the principal objectives of *Shame* is to recognize that even though we may not hear about the most extreme incidents of “honor” violence in the West, it is still a relevant problem globally. Our play of *Shame* was an eye-opening experience that raised questions that have been ignored for quite some time.

Players take up the roles of family members that have chosen to kill a young woman of the family for some “crime”, such as premarital sex, kissing a girl, or being the victim of rape. The family faces extreme social pressure to rectify this disgrace through violence. This game is not about drama, though: No amount of arguing will change the situation. Since the decision is already final, the game explores the justifications and emotional maneuvering as family members come to terms with the fact that they are putting one of their own to death in order to protect their community status.



## Pressure

According to the fiction of the game, the patriarch is clearly the antagonist. He and he alone has decreed that his youngest daughter must die in order to restore the family’s honor for what she has done.

In the play of the game, however, the young woman sentenced to die functions as a different kind of antagonist to the players. Her statements and actions will likely evoke compassion from the other players and make them feel trapped and powerless within their roles, to various degrees according to the nature of those roles. This is a very deliberately designed experience. Though a facilitator is present, the patriarch player guides play through a series of acts and phases that determine how the family makes certain decisions (what her punishment will be and who will carry it out), who may speak, and what they may say. While this does appear to grant him a position of power, he is also beholden to it; the other men expect him to unfailingly live up to the expectations placed upon him, and a deviation of any consequence is likely to be met with some kind of challenge.

The game ends with a brief ritual that dramatically represents the killing through the use of monologues and burning notes. In this final sequence the players have more freedom to speak their mind as the finality of the situation sets in. This final sequence makes for a quiet end to what is otherwise a game about voice and dominance.





The aftermath of the symbolic killing. (Photo: Jay Sylvano)

## Use of Power in Play

*Shame* uses a variety of techniques to express the gender and power dynamics of this situation. For example, the patriarch introduces a speaking stone and instructs the group to pass it around in order to speak. Men may resolve disputes for women, take the stone from women, and women who speak out of turn may be sent away by the patriarch. There are minimal, if any, consequences for the men should they speak out of turn, and for the patriarch, observing these rules at all is almost entirely optional in practice.



Additionally, the “crime” committed by the youngest daughter (the middle child) was discovered by the oldest son (the youngest child), who reported this information to their parents. The son did not know what exactly was going to happen, as he is simply too young, and finds himself torn between the pressure placed upon him by other male family members and compassion for the sister he loves. This structure expertly describes multiple dynamics of patriarchal “honor” culture. Even the son, the youngest child, the heir, has more say over the fate of the women of the family than they do themselves. Yet, if he does not cooperate he will be treated no differently than the women. Though *Shame* is not about this boy per se, it is also important to observe how boys are coerced into violent models of masculinity.

## Our Experience

The player who selected “M,” the daughter to be put to death, noted that she “didn’t feel like killing anyone today,” and chose the role because, despite being the centerpiece of the entire scenario, being the victim was a more comfortable space for her. Similarly, two male players chose to play women characters so that they would not be playing dominant and aggressive roles; though in the debrief, both of these players commented that their perceptions of gender dynamics as men likely influenced their play of those characters in this context.

During our play it became apparent that the game rules and proceeds exist in an ambiguous space that is both within and without the fiction; we know as players that engaging with the rules is an essential element of play, but the fact that they are delivered and enforced (unequally) by the patriarch as a character leaves it unclear if the patriarch’s directions are game rules or simply demands made by the character.

This created an uncertain relationship to the game procedures for the players. In almost any other game this would be a flaw, but in this case this seeming ambiguity emulates the social pressures that motivate practices such as “honor” violence in the first place. These social practices are created and enforced by groups of people, and though they might be prejudiced or arguably arbitrary, the consequences are still real. The game text the patriarch references while guiding the game had the dogmatic weight of a traditional sacred text, which is a thematically appropriate element for the play experience.

To facilitate the intensity and sensitivity of this game, the text includes a tool called Support Signals that is specifically designed with the goals of this game in mind. Support Signals is a non-verbal communication tool that gives players a means of asking for more or less of a behavior during play, and of responding to requests made by other players without interrupting play. This technique was very effective for our play and helped us to be more aware of the boundaries of other players, especially in the most intense moments of the game.

## Reflection

*Shame* is a particularly strong example of recent games that scrutinize social injustice and oppression, because it uses several key mechanics that are both procedural and representational of “honor” violence culture and motivations. More importantly, *Shame* refuses to apologize or back down in both concept and design. *Shame* leaves players painfully aware of the fact that it is up to us to raise our voices and take responsibility for what takes place in our culture. Perhaps the most moving section of the game text comes at the end, where the designer shares her own multifaceted relationship to “honor” violence. The point is very clear: “Honor” violence and other forms of shame-based oppression are an expression of the global issue of violence against women. Women are people, and that makes the issues that women face problems that all people must act to solve.





There is no “what is my business getting involved” or “this doesn’t apply to me/my country/my culture”. To make those excuses is to put your desire for comfort above the needs of others to be safe, respected and equal, and that is a grave injustice. *Shame* leaves players painfully aware of the fact that it is up to us to raise our voices and take responsibility for what takes place in our culture.

The debriefing that concludes play is constructed from a similar spirit. As a game, *Shame* is a consciously crafted experience worthy of attention. As a call to awareness, *Shame* does quite a bit more because in the United States there seems to be a collective effort to distance oneself from what happens between closed doors or on the other side of the world. Few people even know what “honor” violence is.

*The women of the family say their good-byes and regrets while the uncle of the victim looks on.*  
(Photo: Jay Sylvano)



*Shame* aims to make the subject more personally relevant by ushering the players through a vivid experience. The debrief concludes with the option to view some extremely graphic images of the aftermath of “honor” violence.

For those of you for whom viewing such images is only a matter of comfort, I hope you choose to look and relinquish your comfort for a moment, because there are many from whom this is a reality of their life and they were not given a choice.



*The matriarch and son embrace, after the patriarch banished them from the daughter’s interrogation.*  
(Photo: Jay Sylvano)

Ultimately, *Shame* places players in a situation, asks them to experience large emotions and then petitions them to hold onto those thoughts and emotions as they exit play. This goal is apparent from every element of design; from the rigid relationships and social pressures to the support tool developed specifically for this mode of play. Though the scenario will always end in a completely unfair death, for the players the experience gives way to hopeful, if bitter, empowerment.



**CREDITS:** Jay Sylvano (design and layout)

**DATE:** October 21, 2014

**LOCATION:** Portland OR, United States

**DURATION:** 4 hours

**PARTICIPANTS:** 8

**BUDGET:** 43 €

**PARTICIPATION FEE:** Free

**GAME MECHANICS:** Light; speaking rules, scene structure.

**WEBSITE:** [www.gamestogather.org](http://www.gamestogather.org).





## Chiave Di Volta : The Devil is in the detail

-By Chiara Tirabasso

1888. The extravagant freemason Lord Scarborough has invited the most eminent members of the European high society, alongside artists, intellectuals and rather whimsical guests, each accompanied by their own servants, to attend a posh and mysterious meeting.

### What is Chiave di Volta?

*Chiave di Volta* (Keystone) is a Nordic-style larp played in northern Italy in October 2015. It lasted from Friday to Sunday afternoon and was held twice to reach a broader audience. It is the biggest historical larp ever produced in Italy and one of the first “Nordic-blockbuster style” larps. *Chiave di Volta* merges together occultism, philosophy, politics, science and the fascinating esoteric-masonic tradition to frame the historical period of late 1800. The theme explored is power: What drives people to dominate or bow to others? What is it that makes someone powerful? Perhaps an intricate web of moral authority, science, money, love, deception and charisma, connecting the protagonists so that each character is *Master* and *Servant* at the same time, *Victim* and *Executioner* simultaneously. *Chiave di Volta* is an adult larp, featuring very intense and disturbing scenes and aiming to shock, break taboos and to surprise and thrill the participants.

### Two different games entwined: The Masters and The Servants

The *Masters* are high-society people, powerful, rich, influential and often tainted with crimes, secrets and guilt. Many of them are masons, some want to be. Several have strong opinions on political, social and philosophical matters and bound to conflict over colonialism, workers and women struggles, science, religion: Where to lead the future.

Not long after arriving at the Villa, Lord Scarborough’s family announces that the host has died, but not before putting in motion the creation of a new supreme masonic order and a secret plan to choose the Grand Master among the people gathered at the villa. Everyone could be the one climbing the pyramid of power... But in order to do so, they must be willing to step over their opponents’ bodies. As the larp goes on, the characters uncover Lord Scarborough’s grand vision and the tools, both political and spiritual, to bring to completion and take control of the plan. Characters can freely decide to nominate themselves as Grand Master, and the larp ends with the election of the first Grand Master of the New Order in a baroque and ruthless ritual where all the affiliates discard the candidates from the competition until only the most powerful one remains standing.

The main feature of the masters’ play is *politics*; a game of social intrigue, diplomacy, investigation and emerging leadership.

*The servants* are very diverse people, coming from a variety of, often dramatic, backgrounds. Some are not even servants; they are assassins, anarchists, spies, etc. Moreover, some of the servants are actually the masters of their own masters, being their lovers, only true friends, blackmailers or spiritual guides.

As the guests discover the truth about their meeting, the servants are almost invisible to them; ignored by their employers as it was custom at the time, they have access to every corner of the mansion and always have a good reason to be anywhere, anytime. After all, there is tea to be served, luncheons and dinners to be arranged, letters to be delivered...

Through simple, but thorough, gossiping (promoted by pre-game workshops), secrets and discoveries are quickly shared among them, arming the least important people with the widest knowledge of the overall situation.

As the larp goes on, two of the maids are murdered, but the tragedy and the potential threat aren't taken very seriously by the noble guests. The socialists and the anarchists among the servants try to convince the others to take action against the meanest of their masters. An arson attempt forces them to make a choice between leaving everything as it is, or to instead escalate the conflict and join the fight in unison. Knowledge is power and can be used as a weapon, but only if the servants decide to share what they know and use it against their masters. The main feature of the servants' play is *espionage*; a game of intrigue, investigation and moral choices: Work for one's individual benefit or for the common good, scheming for the election of a forward-thinking Grand Master?



*The beginning of the larp: Guests arriving at the villa by carriage. (Photo: Luca Tenaglia)*



*Investigations over the corpse of a murdered maid. (Photo: Luca Tenaglia)*

## The vision behind the larp

*Sumptuous.* We wanted to offer a luxurious experience and also create a broad and stunning series of characters, many of whom were historical figures enriched by fictional elements. The larp was staged in a 17th century manor with original furniture and pieces of art, but we also added real old books, vintage props and other memorabilia. Authentic *Encyclopédie's* plates were used as clues for solving an enigma; we forged a newspaper mixing both real articles of the time and some we wrote for the game; guests arrived at the villa in a vintage carriage trained by horses. All the music was played either live, by artists among the characters, or by a replica gramophone and, during the ball, by a string quartet.

*Surprising.* We provided unprecedented scenographic efforts to produce shocking playable moments, such as a real moving bookcase that hid a secret room, a huge explosion and consequent fire that characters had to tame and extinguish for real and a *séance*, where all supposedly supernatural elements were actually tricks staged by characters. These included a special table hiding a player, who moved the *ouija* token with magnets; the voice of the dead played by a hidden gramophone; a real-life professional magician among the players. The magician performed diegetic magical tricks during the scene. Players also interacted with a functioning cryptex, a vintage radio prototype used in-game to communicate with the outside and an electrical machine representing a safe version of a Tesla Coil.



*Outrageous.* We aimed for a larp with mature themes and intense, sometimes disturbing scenes. Six characters were presented as *hardcore*, warning players they were going to experience a particularly intense scene staged for them. These included:

- Being tied and closed in a trunk until freed;
- being shot at the edge of a pool and falling into water with consequent rescue, surgical extraction of the bullet and sewing of the (prosthetic) wound;
- being whipped (gently) while half-naked; being abducted by a group of serial killers (characters) and then tied half-naked to a tree in the woods as a creepy *tableau vivant* in a 'True Detective' style;
- being deflowered by a goat-masked occultist during a simulated sex scene in a pagan rite, with consequent virginal proof special effect (red stains on the petticoat after sex).

Both the protagonists (the virgin and the goat-masked man) were characters. Beside that, we (along with an accomplice) staged a semi-naked corpse to be studied during an in-game autopsy.



*The occultist and the virgin maid during the rite of sexual magic. (Photo: Luca Tenaglia)*



## Every character written as a tale

*At last, the servant who dared to insult Lady Johanna gets in position and the riding crop starts biting into his flesh. He screams, but this is not enough for Monsignor Mattei. "Son, show us your true repentance and pray with us. "Hail Mary, full of grace..." The crack of the whip and a muffled cry of pain interrupts the servant for a moment "...the Lord is with thee." And so it goes on. Outside the room somebody hears the screams and starts throwing himself against the door, trying to bust in. It's a lousy, weak cacophony, but it's not enough to ruin the sweet music of the prayer and the lash, the lash and the prayer...*

- Memories of Monsignor Mattei, the bishop

We wanted to portray cruelty, psychological dominance, obsession, greed, misery, self-destructive attitude and addiction, along with many other uncomfortable character traits, but we had to avoid clichés and flat villains and build characters you could still relate to on some level.

## The chain of power

*The young son of the Viceroy of India pounced with rage at his Indian valet just falling at his servant's feet, as if the burden of his guilt and inadequacy was dragging him on the ground. The master's face was as strained as the servant's was sad. The raging wolf had become a trembling puppy as the sheep revealed himself for what he truly was: The shepherd.*

An important design goal for *Chiave di Volta* was to involve everyone in the theme of power, so we wrote every character with many diverse relationships (conflictual or not) as usual, but then added two very special bonds. These particular and strong ties were built so that everyone was "slave" to someone and "master" to someone else, and they were based on the sub-themes of power: Charisma, love, knowledge (intended as both intellectual dominance and blackmailing potential), money.

## The Opium Den

An elegant, diegetic black box called "The Opium Den" where characters could experience drug intoxication and hallucinations in a sensorial journey through light effects, sounds, music, smells and fragrances. Real shisha smoking and symbolic laudanum (alcoholic absinthe), served with the proper victorian ritual, provided the atmosphere, along with exotic musical instruments to play with, and other interactive implements like kinetic sand, soap bubbles, massage oils, blindfolds and feathers. Characters were encouraged to lose themselves, play their darkest or most fragile nature, unleash their demons.

## The act structure and the "event inside the event": The Masked Ball

The larp was divided into four acts. We did not need this tool on a dramatic, fictional level: The larp lasted three days with no significant interruption, and so did the story. Instead, we decided to use it to give players enough time off, mainly to rest and think about their characters. In this way, everyone could be keen and focused during the game.

We encouraged the use of steering mainly during the breaks between the acts, and total immersion in characters during the game. This was done in order to provide the players with the proper tools to build their narrative arcs and still live a fluid and all-involving in-character experience. So we wrote detailed characters, with heavy burdens that went back to childhood, and explained their roots.

This was meant to allow the players to give their best performance, providing them with strong alibis: "full-rounded", believable characters, freed from moral boundaries and justified by macabre secrets. As a result, character sheets were twice as long as this article and written in literary, old-fashioned prose.

As the game was divided into episodes, we organized "The Masked Ball", a smaller larp that included 15 players, who only attended the Saturday evening act. Their characters were guests for the dance and covered crucial roles in the story: Enemies, conflicted relations or people who had the last word on relevant issues.







Servants fighting the fire. (Photo: Luca Tenaglia)

## Reactions

*"The aesthetic and realistic portrayal of the historical setting, the care for details by the staff and the costume efforts by the players were important factors, but form without content is a small matter. The narrative plot was the keystone that held up the building of this larp. It offered countless possibilities for stories, intrigues and personal choices. I had the freedom to follow my own story or simply dedicate my time to intellectual talks, and this made this larp absolutely alive and plausible.*

*The impossibility to follow every plot was the vital trait that kept on the suspension of disbelief for the entire game, despite its very fictional nature. I felt like I was in a world that was real, colorful, limitless."*

- A player of the second run, after the larp

The reception was surprisingly good, well beyond our wildest expectations. Players appreciated the historical details, the interactive props, the richness and breadth of the plots. Most of all, we were praised for the depth of the characters. After the larp, the players organized 6 meetings in different cities to tell war stories, sometimes in costume. Many asked for a sequel, and most participants wrote a long, literary epilogue for their character. In hindsight, this surprising reaction was probably due to a combination of two factors: First, the characters were very fictionalized, yet still very plausible, fascinating people, so the players didn't want to let them go so easily.

Second, *Chiave di Volta* doesn't end with a catastrophe (as most of the one-shot events in our scene), which is usually dramatic for the characters, but cathartic for the players. In this case, both characters and players didn't face a sharp closure and therefore wanted the shared great dream to live longer, to dwell again on shaping their fortune and misfortune, to explore some more of

## War stories

their nature.

*I'm crying alone. It's sunday afternoon. I'm chained in the cellar, tortured, covered in blood: I know now that I have no chance to survive. And I begin to sing.*

*"No more tradition's chains shall bind us; Arise, ye slaves, no more in thrall; The earth shall rise on new foundations; We have been naught we shall be all. 'Tis the final conflict, Let each stand in his place, The International Union, Shall be the human race."*

*(one of the most powerful personal larp scenes I ever played)*

- Memories of Jacques Palanche, the socialist servant

*In the darkness she's waiting for him, smiling. They follow the steps to the vineyard to have the privacy he needs for this special date; it's cold outside and she's shivering... "Take my scarf, darling; it's warm" says the Captain as he gently wraps the soft cloth around her neck with a glowing smile. And then he squeezes it, tighter and tighter. The girl tries to scream and fight as life leaves her... The first Thugee rite has begun.*

- Memories of Captain Lawrence, the Indian war hero

**CREDITS:** Chiara Tirabasso, Daniele Cristina (lead organizers), Cristina Jon, Martina Codognotto, Arianna Busti, Fabio Rebecchi, Enrico Francese, Daniele Dagna, Sonia Solci, Daniele Porta, Francesco Pregliasco. Marco Ascanio Viarigi, Francesco Beccalossi (scenic design, prop, make-up and special effects).

**DATE:** October 9 - 11 and 16-18, 2015

**LOCATION:** Villa Avogadro (late residence of scientist Amedeo Avogadro), Biella, Italy

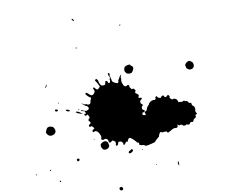
**DURATION:** 20 hours game time in 4 acts, 3 days total

**PARTICIPANTS:** 65 + 15 playing only the third act, per run

**PARTICIPATION FEE:** 68 €; +25 € for high society characters; + 25-65 € optional price for sleeping inside the villa. Some subsidized spots for 47 €

**GAME MECHANICS:** Act Structure, Pre-written characters, Play to Lose, Pre-larp Workshops, Light use of the Fate play, "The Opium Den".

**WEBSITE:** [www.grv.it/chiave](http://www.grv.it/chiave) (in Italian)  
<http://www.grv.it/en/item/465-home-chiave.html> (English version)



## Pneuma: The Game

-By Hallgeir Gustavsen

### About the Game

*Pneuma* is a surreal mystery-drama, seemingly about a random gathering of people stuck on a bus in the middle of nowhere. The larp is played over 4 acts. The style is inquisitive and dark. We are trying to attain a feeling of mysteries and confusion. The larp was a brain-child of Hallgeir; it also used elements from escape-rooms like riddles, puzzle-boxes and a cryptex.

### Before game

We decided to try something new regarding the workshops before the start of the larp. To that end, we gave the players some instructions on certain actions that should be taken during the workshop. This ranged from “3 times during the workshop you should try to be defiant” to “3 times during the workshop you should say something racist”. We wanted to do this to make the divide between the player and the character a bit blurry from the get-go. We also debriefed about this after the larp, so that the player forced to be a racist was able to explain.

### Bullshit personality-text

We wanted the players to feel that the character was written for them, and only them. To do this, we asked all the players some bullshit before the larp started, like: “What is your star-sign?”, “What is your favourite colour?”, “Which animal represents you?” and “Write down 3 words that represent you”.

In addition to this, we started all characters with the following:

*“We have tried to write the personality of your character based on which player is playing them. We do this to increase your empathy with your character and how to play the role. This is not the main theme of the larp, but we would like to use it as much as possible. If we have some misses, you are totally free to use whatever parts you want to use for play.”*

After that, all characters had the same text (Written by Derren Brown):

*“You are a person prone to bouts of self-examination. This is in sharp contrast to a striking ability you have developed to appear very socially engaged, even the life and soul of the party; but in a way that only convinces others. You are all too aware of it being a façade.....”*



### Playing

We divided the larp into acts in order to be able to change the blackbox and to give instructions and information to the players. All the characters were really aspects of one person's personality and inspired by a deadly sin or heavenly virtue. They were all a part of a mentally ill man's psyche. There were two stories playing out during this larp: What happened inside the two blackboxes (the consciousness and the sub-consciousness) and the story outside.

This meant that all players had their “opposite”, and we tried to create conflicts there from the workshops before the larp. The two blackboxes were set up to be the consciousness and sub-consciousness of the character of whom the participants were playing aspects. He was a disturbed man contemplating killing his 5 year old daughter, and what the players were really doing was deciding whether to kill her or not. So when, at the start of act 3, we held back 2 players and put them into the sub-consciousness, only being able to communicate with the consciousness (the other blackbox) through a magical mirror, the players could start figuring out what was happening and who they were. We used some riddle-solving and actual puzzles in addition to the meta-game that was going on. It is difficult to predict how hard riddles and puzzles need to be in order to take the appropriate amount of time to solve. This is the first crack we have had at blackboxes and also the first larp we have made that was explicitly intended for re-runs.

***Magical mirrors:*** Two-way mirrors with connected iPads behind the glass so that you can see out of the other mirror through the one you are standing in front of. -This could also be solved by a window-frame or some other gateway and instructions to the players not to speak through it.



**CREDITS:** Hallgeir Gustavsen - Tim Esborn - Ståle Askerød Johansen

**DURATION:** 5-6 hours

**ACTUAL PLAY TIME:** 4 hours

**PARTICIPANTS:** 14. Organizers can't participate as ordinary players.

**ORGANIZERS/HELPERS:** 2-3

**WORKLOAD:** Medium

**POSSIBLE LOCATIONS:** Black box, gallery, classroom, conference room

**EQUIPMENT:** Tables, chairs, sound-system of sorts, video-projector (not necessary, but better)

**PLAYING STYLE:** Realistic, riddle solving, but with plenty of improvisation


**NOTES:** Inspired by Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None*, and the movie *Identity* (2003). This larp used two connected Blackboxes and pre-recorded video and audio together with two “magical mirrors”. The players were not allowed to speak about the game between acts; a decision we would change in retrospect, as this could have helped solving the plot.



*The magical mirrors were an efficient tool for creating a surreal atmosphere. (Photo: Anonymous)*







## Neu Ismilia: A weekend microcosm

-By Verena

At the beginning, there was the wish to develop a game that would create nothing less than a fully functioning town. Not a tiny snippet, nor a mere simulation - but a complete, self-sufficing world; something that feels real to our players in a simple and engaging way. A world to explore, get lost in and feel at home in at the same time. After three runs, and thanks to our amazing community, we believe the city of Neu Ismilia has finally become this self-contained little universe; a small but multifaceted society that is driven by players who have taken ownership of their characters and their city.

*"The simulation of the town [is] so dense and complex that it is impossible for the individual to grasp [it all]."*

- Stefan (3rd time participant)

### The facts and figures

*Neu Ismilia* is a low-fantasy, high resolution city simulation the third annual run of which took place at castle Wildegg near Vienna, Austria in 2015. It is a fully casted game with around 160 participants that for 3 days assume roles within all parts of a pseudo-historic urban society - from the political elite to the shanty town low-life, the hard working craftsman to the aloof rich wife, the pedantic clerk to the benevolent preacher of the poor. It is framed by a highly elaborate world with an absolute monotheistic religion, a well-defined legal system, a fully functional financial and economic system and detailed historical and geographical background. The game is self-evolving based on pre-defined characters and background; no plot impulses are given by the organizing team during the game. It has followed the continuous development of the city and its inhabitants for three years now.

The game is based on a 'what-you-see-is-what-you-get' mechanism. This especially applies to the economic system which is a core aspect of *Neu Ismilia*. Almost every character has a profession or trade - be it legal or shady. By convincingly plying one's trade as a craftsman or day-labourer, merchant, artist, crook, etc. the characters assure their income in order to maintain or better their social status in the city. The struggle to find work or make money by other means is for many characters a defining element of their daily life.

The city's inhabitants consist of a variety of distinct social groups. The old elite are two competing merchant houses, illustrating two contrary ideological foundations: House Nurhn being the socialists while House Avesta represents the financial aristocrat's ideology. Struggling for power with the old elite is the movement of the Free Citizens, incorporating liberal and capitalistic world views. The bureaucratic Ordinatorium - being both the executive and the judicial authority - assures order and safety for the citizens. The religious life is determined by the Order of the Holy IO who is unchallenged by other beliefs. Outside the city walls is the chaotic shanty town, a lawless area dominated by gangs; the home of beggars, refugees, criminals and soldiers of fortune. Every game also had outsiders from other parts of the Ismilian World, who introduced new game impulses with regard to concepts like trade, religion or military threat.



The location is a mediaeval castle (later adapted to serve as a youth hostel) and its surroundings. The players are housed within the city walls or outside in shanty town. The game includes full board. Obtaining food, however, is part of the game. All of our five taverns, two street-food booths and the feeding for the poor are manned with player characters that buy at least parts of their ingredients on the game's markets and who have to be paid in the in-game currency "Kreuzer". As the game organization is fully non-commercial, our amazing kitchen team consists purely of volunteers who contribute their talent without receiving off-game pay, just like all the other craftsmen, artists and so forth.

The game is organized by the non-profit association "Ismilia Liverollenspielverein" which currently consists of five core members located in Austria and Scandinavia. The organization of each run takes almost a year and covers a broad variety of administrative tasks as well as the story development. The team is responsible for the definition of the setting, introducing new characters and creating new impulses in the pre-game phase. The development of those characters that have already been played in previous runs has been mostly handed over to their players, using IT-based feedback tools. With regard to many manual tasks, the team is supported by dozens of volunteers from our player community who help to craft and construct the physical world of *Neu Ismilia*.

*"I love that this game is so self-propelled with so much free space where so much emerges."*

- Rosa (1st time participant)



*Player dedication – House Avesta's emblem on a cup of cappuccino in the café in the upper city. Next to it the in-game newspaper that is daily written and distributed in-game.  
(Photo: Andreas Lorenz)*

## Uniqueness of Ismilia

What we believe makes *Ismilia* unique at the core is the combination of two, often seemingly mutually exclusive, game characteristics. For one, it is an event that allows, due to its size and complexity, very individual player experiences and completely detached storylines. On the other hand we aim at providing a dense and self-contained scenario with highly interlinked characters, which is usually typical of smaller games with a high attention to background cohesion. This allows players to explore their very own game interests. While some participants chose to experience the challenges of mental or physical disabilities, or the struggle of financial or social restraints, others just enjoy the simple life of a crafts-woman or watchman.

The result is that a variety of topics have been explored during the *Ismilia* series – some of them generally apparent, some of them just on the individual player's level. Amongst them were: Poverty, religious zealotry, migration and xenophobia, war trauma, social shunning, keeping up appearances and many others.



*"By offering a broad variety of playable character types and maintaining a complete openness regarding the plot development, whilst providing a broad range of crystallization seeds for interaction, Ismilia has become a "sandbox"™*

-Hannes (1st time participant).



## Conflict gaming

While being a sandbox for the players, *Ismilia* has also become a play kit for the organizing team, allowing us to try new ideas and approaches in the game. Many of those ideas revolved around the notion of interesting conflict gaming. From the very beginning we have been intrigued by the variety of facets – especially the non-violent ones – of how conflicts may unfold in the game.

Over the years we have had some – probably not so surprising – epiphanies. While we initially (naively) assumed that the seeds for conflict which we spread through the character and group descriptions would be taken up and developed by the players, we quickly learned that there is a strong drive for harmony amongst our participants. Therefore, our approaches towards introducing conflicts became more refined over the years. Some of the things we learned were:

To create inter-group conflicts, we needed to build much stronger cohesion within the groups. Thankfully, the task was this year assumed by the players of the groups themselves, who spent a lot of time developing shared group-identities. The pre-game framing of an "us vs. them"-view strongly supported the in-game conflicts between the various groups.

For inter-personal conflicts, economical or other factual-based feuds are much more willingly adopted than ones based on personality. While we were told that some personality-based enmities could not be played because the other character “was just too sweet”, competing economic and political interests led to interesting conflict play.

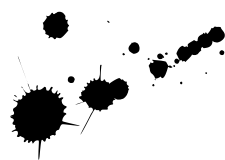
External threats need to be subtle so there is ambiguity as to whether it is more beneficial to team up with them or to collectively oppose them. We had long pre-game discussions with the inquisition group (introduced this year) regarding the building of a stake. When they toned it down to simply collecting kindling and piling it in some corner of the castle, the resulting uneasiness of the citizens created an interesting divide of sycophants, hidden rebellion and fearful believers. With regard to religious conflicts, many players cannot easily overcome their off-game secularism and be open to dive their character into the somewhat arbitrary mental frame of absolute belief. It takes a lot of preparation getting the players to adopt this way of thinking, and some will never be willing or able to drop their modern view on religion. However, after three years, many players now enjoy exploring this somewhat “alien” way of thinking.

*“At the first [game] the religion was strange, even ridiculous for many of us, the second brought a broad rapprochement to the faith and its contents, and now [...] it was for the vast majority so natural that I was able to have [several in-depth religious] in-game discussions [...]”*

– Kai (3rd time participant)



To get our players more engaged in conflict game, we this year offered Nordic larp-style workshops (held by some of our lovely participants) for the first time. The angle was threefold: Create better character identification, offer specific conflict-gaming workshops and reflect on the game world’s mindset, especially religion. Most of the players were very open to this new approach, although many of them are usually not engaged in the Nordic style.



## Outlook

We feel that we have created an increasingly self-propelled setting that we, at some point soon, may hand over entirely to our great community, e.g. through smaller community-organized games. For now we are working on the fourth and final run in September 2016 – after all, everybody in Ismilia knows: *“All good things come in fours.”*

*“Wherever I was and whatever I was doing, I knew that [...] on other sites completely other things were happening at the same time [...]. [I get] this great feeling of being a small cog in a functioning weekend-microcosm.”*

– Robin (3rd time participant; feedback to Neu Ismilia 1)

**CREDITS:** Ismilia Liferollenspielverein

**DATE:** September 3-6, 2015 (3rd run)

**LOCATION:** Castle Wildegg, Austria

**PARTICIPANTS:** 160 (approx.)

**BOARD AND ACCOMMODATION:** Full board. Beds in castle, tents, huts

**TYPE:** High resolution, low fantasy city simulation

**PARTICIPATION FEE:** 89-99 € (cooking crew: 29-59 €)

**WEBSITE:** [www.ismilia.com](http://www.ismilia.com)



*In the trader’s quarter you can get a shave, take a bath, buy books or household goods, and so much more. (Photo: Andreas Lorenz)*





**St. Croix - A "Danish" island in the Caribbean**  
-By Adrian Angelico Voje

*How do you find hope and keep your humanity when everyday life is a hopeless, inhuman situation?  
How does the horrible become ordinary?*

*St. Croix* was a larp that aimed to explore how people adjust to extreme living conditions. Finding hope amidst injustice. How we excuse treating other people as less than human. How easily the abnormal becomes normal. But also how love, joy and pride are kept alive. Staying human in an inhumane society.

## Setting

1792. A little known part of Danish-Norwegian history: Denmark-Norway's participation in the transatlantic slave trade and colonisation of the West Indies. *St. Croix* was a historical larp set on Hillerød estate on the island of St. Croix in the Caribbean.; a small property where, in the absence of sugar fields, the cruelties were »less horrific« than on the larger plantations, but no less degrading.

The white family had visitors from Denmark and neighbouring countries, and there were quiet rumours about a slave revolt brewing amongst the slaves in the vicinity, but the larp concentrated on everyday life and relations between people.

Playing another ethnicity, especially a minority group, has been a hot and much debated topic within larp the last years. There is not enough space here to go into this in depth, but we believe we can and should try to understand every aspect of humanity and history. In larp, the way to do this is obviously to play what you're trying to understand, as long as you approach it with respect.



*Many Scandinavians weren't used to the warm climate. (Photo: Martin Ø. Lindelien)*

Otherwise, a larp about slavery in the Caribbean, for a Scandinavian audience, would obviously have been impossible. A number of players switched characters between the acts (pre-planned), going from playing slave to free citizen and vice versa, which affected the circumstances for everyone around them.



## Culture, society, everyday life

It's impossible to find sources for every part of slave life. Not everything was seen as interesting or important enough to record (this is especially true for the lives of women, both black and white). In addition, social practices could vary from plantation to plantation, as slaves brought traditions with them from their respective birthplaces in Africa and incorporated them into their new society. It therefore made sense to let the players themselves define certain points that could influence play.

We wanted everyone to have something real to do for most of the day. Great portions of the play and interactions were done while working together. A benefit of having the slaves be the larger group was to have time for different types of work. They were divided into three groups: House slaves, kitchen slaves and field slaves, who each had their tasks and their social status.

There was room for upwards or downwards mobility between the groups during the larp. The free had some tasks or options for activities (such as lessons for school age youth), but generally had lots of time to experience the boredom or indolence which was a major part of life for many of the white people in the colonies (especially for women, who didn't work, and those who were not born there and were thus unused to the heat).



We knew music and dance would be a huge part of slave culture (hence the music workshop. The music was sourced from Caribbean folk music and African music traditions from the areas where most of the slaves in the Danish colonies came from). It became perhaps even more important than we'd anticipated. Boredom during work was alleviated through song. After work frustration, hopelessness and anger was expressed and exorcized with music, hard drumbeats and dancing. Joy soared through shouted notes and vigorous shaking of the body. Religion and spirituality was hummed in a soft choir sitting in the sacred tent. Whenever someone started to tap a rhythm everyone joined in, tapping their feet on the floor or a spoon on the side of a bowl. There was unity, strength and a hidden rebellion in music.

In act 2, the insurrection changed this:

*"I want to mention a design decision that influenced play for the slaves in the second act: Drumming was forbidden (with a possibility for dispensation) out of fear that the slaves used the drums to communicate and spread rebellion. This challenged the inner group dynamic because drumming had been an outlet for frustration and an expression of solidarity. It seemed like the frustration was internalised and there was no opportunity to show unity in the ways people were used to."*

-Stine Mari Haugen, participant

*Despite the hardships there's still a smile left for the camera. (Photo: Martin Ø. Lindelien)*

Another reason why we split play into two acts was to help with the focus on the everyday. The slow play, the little moments. We hoped two acts would prevent an accumulation of action and the need to »solve plots« towards the end. Having the story continue six months later underlined the fact that the world and the characters' lives didn't end after the larp.

It seemed people mostly played with this in mind, thus eliminating the common problem of having far too many dramatic incidents competing with each other on the last day of the game. This contributed towards bringing the smaller, slower storylines and interactions to the forefront.

## Reactions

Many people playing free citizens had a feeling of becoming supporting or instructed players because they had such a huge responsibility for the experience of others. At times too many demands, expectations or requests for particular scenes were placed on them. We had of course warned about this before sign-up – playing an oppressor can be a lot more draining than playing oppressed. However, it turned out possibly even more challenging than we'd expected. The larp was just as heavy for them as for players in the slave group, just in a different way. Something that also left an impression was how relatively easy it was to come up with excuses for horrible behaviour and to accept the system around you, simply because that was just the way it was.



**Playing slaves:** In the debrief a strong feeling of community, solidarity and unity was a recurring theme. Although people talked about how unsettlingly easy it was to submit and adjust to harsh living conditions and degradations, there were also positive feelings of support from others. -A feeling many players missed after the larp. As we'd hoped, there were other sides to being a human under these conditions than just misery, in spite of everything. The human spirit prevails.



*Brutality was commonplace in the colonies. (Photo: Martin Ø. Lindelien)*



*"My strangest experience now after the larp, and the hardest one to handle, is still the need for victim-blaming. The characters who were my brothers, my dad, my friends, were so amazing and considerate towards me, and I loved them. At the same time, I know the characters did horrific things to other people – which makes me instinctively want to push it away and think, "no, no, you don't understand, they're actually wonderful people; you just don't know them well enough. Incredibly interesting, but also quite tough."*  
-Alma Elofsson, participant

Afterwards, we have reviewed reactions and discussed what worked/didn't work, with a view to make the larp available for others who are interested in staging a rerun (in cooperation with us. If interested, there's a contact form on our website).

## Glimpses

*"Welcoming Sesar back from the sugar harvest on a bed of pine needles in the forest. Insults and sarcastic comments as we go. Suddenly admitting I've missed him. No insult as an answer. Joy and safety. Not long after the first visit to Massa's room, we go up to the tent, where it smells like burned herbs, and where we set the terms for ourselves. Hypnotic and intoxicated singing, screaming, grunting, writhing, rocking from side to side, telling about abuse from the white man, to celebrate that Lykke has had first blood."*

-Stine Mari Haugen, participant

*"The slaves are wearing masks and are waving sticks, and it feels unpleasant... Like they performed some curse. I have never seen them like this before. Damn animals, trying to threaten real men."*

-Simon Svensson, participant

*"Without the black in-between class, Hillerød wouldn't have worked, and the larp would instead have been all about how long we, as players, could delay the explosion. This is probably a rather good explanation as to why slavery as an institution survives to this day and age; the people at the top have people in the oppressed class as helpers."*

-Anders Ohlsson, participant

*"She seems shy. I hate myself for liking her. I tell her that I will miss her. I take a step back and feel done, but she starts leaving without my permission. I hit her, because she needs to understand that I don't see her as anything else than a slave. She shouldn't feel too special. It's all disgusting."*

-Simon Svensson, participant

**CREDITS:** Adrian Angelico Voje and Anne Marie Stamnestrø

**DATE:** July 4-11, 2015


**LOCATION:** Noresund, Norway

**GAME MECHANICS:** Minimal. Act structure. Time jump.

**WEBSITE:**  
[sverigeunionen.wix.com/sankt-croix](http://sverigeunionen.wix.com/sankt-croix)

*The life of a colonial lady: Pampered and surprisingly boring. (Photo: Martin Ø. Lindelien)*





## CoW 4-6: The magic continues -By Claus Raasted

### Why is this even here? It's not new, is it?

Last year, in the Nordic larp yearbook 2014, we wrote about *College of Wizardry*. It would have made no sense not to include it, since it was all over the larping community - especially the Nordic one. For the same reason it would make no sense not to include it this year, because even though it's technically not a new larp, it still in some ways is. But enough introduction.

### First, what is *CoW* anyway?

*College of Wizardry* - or *CoW*, as it is commonly called - is a larp set at a school for witches and wizards. It takes place at the medieval castle of Zamek Czocha in Poland and has been run five times in 2015. Every run has 140 participants who play students, professors and other inhabitants of the magical school. Joining these are 25-50 organizers and helpers who take care of running the show from backstage, playing everything from minotaurs in the forest to ghosts in the hallways.

The larp features a "the-victim-decides" spell system, a brute force design philosophy and a very large degree of player freedom and sandbox co-creation. But that's not what we're going to be discussing in this article.

### Going from established IP to original fiction

The first three *CoW* larps took place in the *Harry Potter* universe. It wasn't set at Hogwarts, but at the fictional college of Czocha in Poland, so there was no Slytherin and no Hagrid. However, *Harry Potter* existed in the fiction (as the head of the British Ministry of Magic Aurors), students were sent to Azkaban and Death Eaters and Dementors both visited the school.

Following a deal with Warner Bros, we had to leave the *HP* universe behind and construct our own. It still has a lot of *Harry Potter* feel to it, just like any space adventure will scream *Star Wars* to the uninitiated, but it's very much its own thing. There's no British magic school, no Great Wizard War, no soul-sucking prison guards (though plenty of soul-sucking in general!) and no boy with glasses around whom the world revolves. It's darker, more gritty and has room for both demons and sex.

It's of course still inspired by *Harry Potter*, but it no longer IS *Harry Potter*. As organizers, we were worried about how this shift from established IP to original creation would be received. It turns out that many players were very happy about it. Some are even happier with the new *CoW*verse (or whatever it's called now). For us it's been a large weight off our shoulders - now we can do what we want without having to watch out for stuff that could piss off Warner Bros.





And I know that if I ever work with an established IP again, it'll be officially. This whole business of not cooperating with, but still living in the shadow of a franchise - it's been draining, and I wouldn't recommend it. Especially since we're so good at creating worlds of our own. Be inspired by the work of others - but if you want to do something that gets you on the radar of the big boys, either do it with them or do it with them serving only as an inspiration. Learn from our experience and save yourself the sleepless nights I had before we heard where they stood.

## Players from 35 different countries

Another thing that makes *CoW4-6* interesting is the sheer internationality of it. This may not even be a word, but it still fits. For *CoW4-6* we had around 400 players from 35 different countries; Mexico. Taiwan. Brazil. Australia. Around 30% were first-time larpers, and for *CoW6* the number of first-time players was 40%. That's crazy. I'd done plenty of stuff for non-larpers (making larps for non-larpers is the main part of my job, after all), but nothing like this. And even when we've had a high percentage of new players participating, they were at least all from the same off-larp culture.

## Not so here.

Because of this diversity, we did some things in a rather heavy-handed way. We told people that "the other players are not necessarily idiots just because they behave that way" during our briefings, and made it very clear that it was perfectly ok to break the larp and say "Hey - I'm not really comfortable with that. Is it normal where you're from?". But we were also a bit more contro-

versial and told them at the after party that we had a "YES means YES" policy instead of a "NO means NO" policy. The explanation was simple: What's heavy flirting in one culture might be just polite conversation in another, and it's perfectly possible to ask someone about consent before you kiss them.

This doesn't mean that there were no clashes of culture. Of course there were. But by being aware and open about the situation, I think we got a much better result than if we'd just assumed that larpers would get along without any help - as we often do at larps. I'd recommend this to anyone doing international larps. Not only the YES means YES ideology, but also making it very clear to players that it's ok to come from different places. And of course the question that needs asking is "Was it worth it?".

Hell, yes. Diversity in larps is awesome!



## Spinoffs and Inspiration

When people try (or hear about) something they like, many of them want to do something similar. Having others be inspired by a larp is in no way unique to *CoW*, but the sheer scale is a bit daunting. We've been contacted by larpers wanting to make *CoW* larps in such exotic places as Israel and South Africa, and that's unusual for me.

So far, only two of the "other *CoW* larps" have dates and locations; the British *Featherstone College of Witchcraft and Wizardry* and the American *New World Magischola*. For *Featherstone* we just said "Sure! Run with it!" when they asked if they could do something in our world, but *NWM* is a bit different. Here, we've had long conversations with the two main organizers (Ben Morrow and Maury Brown of *LearnLarp*) and Maury flew over to help us run *CoW4-6* to get some behind-the-scenes experience.

*NWM* also completely blew up when their kickstarter sold out in mere minutes. It'll be really interesting to see how much of a gateway drug their event becomes in the US, and I'm already looking forward to reading about it in the 2016 edition of this yearbook.

This is the big stuff, however. On the smaller scale, there are spinoff larps made by *CoW* players, meetups, online hangouts, tabletop campaigns, etc. etc. For us, the important thing is that the *CoW* universe is made to be used - by as many people as possible. And while I'll gladly admit to feeling quite envious when the American *CoW* raised more money on their crowdfunding campaign in minutes than we'd done in months, I also know that I'm not stepping away from open source co-creation any time soon.

We started this whole adventure borrowing background fiction from someone else, so of course we support others piggybacking on our newfound success. And who knows - maybe in a year or two we'll be the ones piggybacking the success of a South African *CoW*!



*Zamek Czocha; an inspiring and beautiful location for the larp. (Photo: Anonymous)*



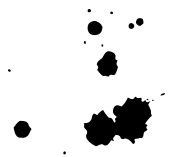


*Potions 101. (Photo: Anonymous)*

## A book of its own

*CoW4-6* has also now gotten a documentation book of its own - the sixth in the “*The Book of ...*” series. So if you’re interested in getting a deeper look into the new and non-*HP CoW*, there’s a shiny 252-page volume out there for you to gobble up. It’s of course also available for free online, and can be found at [www.rollespilsakademiet.dk/cow/thebookof-cow4-6.pdf](http://www.rollespilsakademiet.dk/cow/thebookof-cow4-6.pdf).

Self-promotion? Sure. But we’d do the same for any other larp documentation book. After all, sharing IS caring. ;-)



**CREDITS:** Agata Swistak, Agnieszka Linka Hawryluk-Boruta, Charles Bo Nielsen, Claus Raasted, Cleo Hatting, Dracan Dembinski, Krzysztof “Iryt” Kraus, Lasse Küchenthal, Maciek Nitka, Maury Brown, Mikołaj Wicher, Nadina Wiórkiewicz, René Bokær, Sofie Støvelbæk, Stefan Deutsch, Szymon Boruta, plus a team of helpers

**DATE:** November 12-15, November 19-22, November 26-29, 2015

**LOCATION:** Zamek Czocho, Poland

**DURATION:** 4 days

**PARTICIPANTS:** 140 pr run (420 total)

**BUDGET:** 45,000 € pr run (145,000 € total)

**PARTICIPATION FEE:** 345 €

**GAME MECHANICS:** *CoW* spellcasting system, *CoW* alchemy system, Gossip mechanic

**WEBSITE:** [cowlarp.com](http://cowlarp.com)

*More impressive architecture from Zamek Czocho. (Photo: Anonymous)*



## Hinterland: The will to survive

-By Olle Nyman

*Hinterland* was set a few years into the future - a future in which war had destroyed much of society and the infrastructure of modern civilization. Millions of Swedes now lived in overflowing refugee camps scattered around the countryside, at the mercy of ad hoc crisis authorities stretched way too thin. Life in the camps was harsh and many died of disease, malnutrition or violence, but where else would people go?

The real disaster was still to come, though. A few years into the crisis a new disease started spreading. The overpopulated camps and their malnourished inhabitants didn't stand a chance. Over the course of six months, almost the entire population of Sweden had succumbed to the disease (in camps or elsewhere). *Hinterland* was about a group of refugees from such a camp, those who fled in panic as the disease burned through the population. With nothing but the clothes on their bodies and weakened by years of malnutrition, abuse and trauma they marched off into the wilderness, hoping to get away from the disease.

We designed *Hinterland* to challenge a few of the basic comforts most of us are used to at larps. We wanted the game to be physically challenging and really uncomfortable, and we told the players to bring as little as possible (even removing a few items from players before the larp). We actively encouraged players to steal things, even items like sleeping gear or food. The idea was to make the players feel like they didn't have any resources at all, and to force them into "scavenging mode" from the start. The game area was an old farm in the middle of nowhere, where we had hidden items that they could make use of - things like food stashes, blankets, tools and other resources.

To reach the farm (which was unknown to the players before the larp) they had to walk a few kilometers down a country road, and that was how the larp started - a grueling walk on empty bellies.

Our idea was to have the players scrounge around the farm once they reached it, and to have them ration or divvy up the resources. They also had to figure out whether they could build or improve on the farm for the long run, or if they should just take what they could use and move on. Would players hoard or hide resources, or would they pool them together to give everyone a chance to survive? Would they fight over food? Would the characters that thought of themselves as "good" act in a selfish way, and vice versa? Would they act as a collective or would they divide into groups? What would happen to the traumatized refugees once they found relative security, a hot meal and time to process their experiences? And what would happen once one of them started showing symptoms of disease?

During the larp we had a few NPC scenes. One was an unexpected visit by a group of thugs that more or less rolled in with guns and dogs and stole anything laying around, including food and blankets. The idea was for the players to feel a bit better about their situation once they had found some food and other items, only to brutally have it taken away from them again. Another NPC scene was when two visitors from a farm a few miles away came by to look up the former inhabitant of the farm (now dead from the same disease as the one running rampant in camp). The larp ended with a group from the remains of local authorities arriving to perform quarantine duties (at which point many players ran off into the woods).



*"It amazed me how quickly the condition of our clothing and general appearance deteriorated. We all looked pretty disgusting in the end, but I still felt like a person on the inside. The point is that we looked very much like the people I see begging outside my local food store, and the tarp we put up for shelter during the larp looked like the shelters built by the people who come here to beg to provide for their families. So, today, when I see someone begging, or see the refugees arriving with all their belongings in a plastic bag, I remember this disturbing discrepancy between my outside and my inside and I figure it must be similar for them - the feeling that the people who are clean and well fed will not be able to see who I am behind the dirt and grime, they will not be able to respect me for my achievements or envy me my talents, because those things are invisible to them."*

- Eva Meunier

*Raiders steal food from the refugees.*

(Photo: Olle Nyman)



## Creating survivors

Character creation was left up to the players, in a process where they would answer some twenty specific questions about their character's life before, during and after the war. The questions were designed to streamline the character creation process and to get the participants thinking about the same issues, while leaving out things that weren't relevant to the story about to be told. "Where were you when the war came?", "What kind of person were you before the war?" and "Have you done anything to survive that you are not proud of?". All of these are examples of the questions posed. Players could then ask to have their character reviewed and accepted, or coached by an organizer if they were heading in the wrong direction.

Players were also required to create a few relationships, shared memories and a *sk-jebne*, fate, for their character. All of this was available in an online system, and players could read each other's characters and create further relationships. The character design was almost completely transparent. As a participant, one could choose which parts of one's background to keep accessible only to oneself and the organizers, and which parts one would have made visible for one's co-players. All fates were by design transparent, as to increase the potential of them coming true.



Promotion shot for *Hinterland*. (Photo: Sebastian Utbult)

*"Today, as I'm eating breakfast and listening to the news of refugees being treated like shit in Libya, or when I see facebook posts about beggars needing money in order to get home to their countries, I realize what this larp has really given me. Not awesome immersion and a heavy larp experience, but an aftertaste that leaves me defenseless when I hear about refugees and is now making me act instead of closing my eyes. Hinterland seems to have actually done what I was hoping it would do - making me more empathic (and acting on that empathy) to people in similar situations to what I've experienced. For me, there's nothing better or greater this larp could have achieved than nudging people like me out of my comfort zone."*

- Sofia Bertilsson

## Game mechanics

*Hinterland* was light on rules. We decided on not having any boffer weapons, instead using a combination of blank firing guns (of which there was only one available to the larpers, with a total of two rounds) and blunt weapons (like rocks, hammers etc) that were used more or less as modifiers to a confrontation, similar to the *Monitor Celestra* rule of "the one with a gun controls the situation" (our take being "the one with the largest rock controls the situation").





As to violence, we wanted to avoid pointless fighting and instead make violence have consequences. We also pointed out, and workshopped, a system in which fighting was mostly about postures, escalating to a point where someone backs down, or brawling on the ground.

Furthermore, everyone was well aware that their characters were very weak from malnutrition and lack of sleep, and hence would not be able to take a beating. Our game was loosely divided into acts, where any violence used got increasingly more dangerous as the larp progressed. You could choose to die whenever you wanted to, but you were not allowed to kill other players until the last act.

As the disease was a major plot element (*am I infected? Is anyone else and how do we treat them?*) we devised a system in which a group of randomly selected players were picked from a list and flagged as “infected”. All the players received a small ziploc bag containing a pill (or three pills, at the second run) to take during the larp. If the pill contained salt, you started manifesting the disease - at which point you could go to the lavatory and apply red powder makeup to your armpits or chest, which symbolized the red rashes you got from the disease. This gave a lot of players a sense of dread when taking the pill, and for many who were infected the taste of salt felt like a physical blow.

*“The raiders have left, taking most of our scavenged food and blankets with them. Now a group is checking everyone for the disease. I’m slowly removing my stinking shirt and jacket when I see it, the tell-tale symptom: a bleeding rash on my stomach. God, please, no...”*

- JC Hoogendoorn

Because of things overlooked at the first run, we decided to let a few players from the first run play run two as well, with the off-game responsibility to “hack” or push players out of situations where we thought the game might get stuck.

## Why?

We have always been interested in the ‘end of the world’-scenarios, but also in current politics. Far right ideas and anti-immigrant ideas are on the rise here in Sweden, and we wanted to counter that in some way. One way in which we know we could attempt it was to have people experience just a tiny sliver of the life of a refugee for a short while, in order to raise awareness. We didn’t by any means believe that our larp would be anything close to the horrors that refugees encounter, but we hoped giving players a tiny taste of the situation experienced right now by millions of people out there would give some of them a better understanding of the hardships war, and fleeing from one, can entail. We also wanted to try making something that was “hardcore” in sensitive areas like personal property, comfort and basic stuff like food and sleeping quarters. And, finally, another aim with this project was to donate the proceeds of the larp to a Swedish organisation that helps refugees, especially those already rejected by the system; paperless and illegal. This was our intent from the start, and something we were open about. In the end we managed to raise around 2000 € for that cause; an amount that we are very happy with.

*“I just can’t stop thinking of the events and feelings I experienced this weekend and the events and feelings that the real refugees experienced at the same time. It’s hard to grip. And there is more than one million refugees for every participant at the larp. I’d like to thank everyone for this larp that made me think and feel so much. Now I have to make something of those thoughts and feelings. What that will be I do not yet know.”*

- Martin Gerhardsson



Promotion shot for Hinterland. (Photo: Jonas Aronsson)



**CREDITS:** Sebastian Utbult, Olle Nyman, Erik Stormark, with the help of Karin Edman, Simon Svensson, Ida Eberg, Andreas Sigfridsson and others.

**DATE:** May 8-10 & May 22-24, 2015.

**LOCATION:** Rifallet, Sweden

**DURATION:** Around 40 hours, plus workshop.

**PARTICIPANTS:** 40-45 per run (two runs total).

**BUDGET:** 7000 €

**PARTICIPATION FEE:** 50-250 € depending on income.

**GAME MECHANICS:** Blunt weapons (representative), “phys-larping” violence, optional meta scene room, escalation/de-escalation techniques, disease system, playing to lose, act structure.



**Finnmark brenner (Finnmark burning)**  
-By Carita Bræstrup Løsnes Morlandstø and Marion Bræstrup Løsnes. Edited by Aron Bræstrup Løsnes

*Finnmark Brenner* was a World War II larp set in the Finnmark in the north of Norway during the last stages of the war.

## Setting and inspiration

Norway was invaded by Germany in April 1940; during the occupation most of the German soldiers became stationed in Northern Norway. As part of the Nazis' military campaign against the Soviet Union they launched an offensive in the North in 1941, targeting Murmansk from the Finnmark. For over three years the front was frozen in place at the Litza river valley on the Kola peninsula. During a Soviet offensive October 1944, the Germans decided to retreat from the Finnmark. Every person was to be evacuated and all buildings burned to the ground. "*Finnmark brenner*" was set two days before the evacuation order. It was inspired by the children's books *Sofie & Kathrine* by Grethe Haagenrud, who writes about two sisters from Finnmark and their everyday life during the war, the forced evacuation, the peace and the rebuilding of the region. The story about the evacuation was used as inspiration for the setting. We wished to make a larp that we would like to attend ourselves, and wanted the players to experience the atmosphere of 1944 and the tension between the Germans and the civilians. The aim was to give the players an emotional experience with deep social relations and personal dilemmas.

The main topics for the larp were everyday life during a state of emergency and difficult choices. Some of the subtopics were ethnicity, religion, resistance, love, family, responsibility, loyalty and longing. Topics like euthanasia, miscarriage and rape were also handled in the larp, by initiative of the players.

*"I had no idea of what I was getting into and ended up playing one of the most intense larps I've been to in years. I was pushed further than ever before in a larp, and everything just exploded around me. The tension between the local farmers, the refugees and the Germans was done to perfection. The language barrier and need for translators, the sparse food supply, the darkness and the knowledge of an impending Russian attack gave rise to fear, hate, love and a small hope."*

-Postlarp player reaction

## The story

The largest group in the larp was the civilians, containing the hosts, the Elilla family, locals and refugees from East Finnmark and Finland. The second group was the command squad of a German platoon, with two field nurses. The groups began the larp separately in order to let the players feel the tension that occurred during the first meeting between civilians and occupying soldiers.

For the people in Finnmark it frequently happened that German soldiers demanded to stay in their homes for a period of time. Late in the evening of the first day the command squad of a retreating German *Gebirgsjäger* (mountaineer) platoon arrived at the farm, demanding to stay there for some days. The civilians had to keep their everyday life going even with soldiers in their home.

This was not the first time the Elilla family had to shelter Germans, but there was still a tangible tension between the two groups. The civilians could no longer speak freely and had to consider the presence of the soldiers in everything they did.



Some of the characters were part of the resistance, while others planned to avoid the forced evacuation by running away and hiding. -Something that demanded caution and careful planning.

The Germans stayed in the house for two nights. During that time they witnessed the struggles and the sorrows of the civilians and were themselves torn between duty and compassion. In the morning of the last day the German commander received a radio message telling him to gather the civilians. It was time for the evacuation and time to implement the scorched earth campaign.

All players were gathered in the living room prepared to leave. At this point the song *Til Ungdommen (For the Youth)*, a well-known Norwegian song written by Nordahl Grieg, was played. It is a song with strong lyrics about human dignity and how war is contempt for life. The theme of the song, and the fact that it could represent both the civilians and the *Gebirgsjäger* platoon, made it an appropriate song with which to end the larp. Most of the players experienced the ending as very emotional, and tears flowed during the song.

*"When Til Ungdommen started playing, it was like getting punched in the stomach. The song summed up everything my character thought and felt. It was a strong, but good, ending."*

-Postgame player reaction.



Germans playing cards.  
(Photo: Hanne Eik Pilskog)

-Lieutenant Claus Schröner, 30 years old  
*My German Gebirgsjäger platoon made a fighting retreat from the east front. We arrived in Tana and were ordered to take part in the evacuation and burning of the area. I saw the individuals of my unit being on the brink of breakdown, but we managed somehow.*

*During the stay at the Elilla farm I was standing outside, looking at the children playing around and having fun, and it hit me that I would soon have to forcefully evacuate these children and send them out on an uncertain march. I would take away all the fun they had and ruin their childhood. It was not easy to balance the feelings of compassion and the importance of showing authority. During one lunch, my group had settled at what appeared to be the Elillas' regular table. The situation became tense when the matron said that no one would eat before they got their table back. I saw the room full of hungry refugees waiting for the outcome, but I could not back down. We did, however, not use that table again.*

*The last evening the priest's pregnant wife fell in the stairs. We offered our medical assistance, but we could not help and she had a miscarriage. I had to bury the baby in the forest. The next day I led the minister and his wife to the site, where they had a little ceremony of their own. I stood there in tears.*

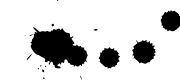
## Character stories

- Johanne Hildoen, 26 years old  
*The German going through my backpack grabbed the cake tin and opened it. I felt frozen. The film canister was hidden right there, under the biscuits. The note had said I should destroy it, rather than let the enemy have it. If I tried now, they would probably shoot me down, and Alfred too. My little brother was held at gunpoint right next to me, all stiff anger emanating from his every pore. -Dear God, don't let him find it!*

*The soldier was that horrible man who had ruined our chess game the other day, by slapping a fistful of pinecones on it, upsetting the pieces, while roaring that he did not appreciate finding them in his boots.*

*I know the kids did that, to annoy the Germans. He was one of the two scary ones. The other was totally unpredictable; small, wiry, always sneaking, leering- and quick to anger; like when he suddenly cut Pernille's long, beautiful braid clean off with his knife, just because the young girl had put a paper clip in it. This one was frightening in a way of potential violence contained; one could almost sense ill deeds, past and future, slipping through the cracks of his personality.*

*He thoroughly stirred around the biscuits, then his brow tensed... and I knew he had found it.*



## Design and mechanics

To make the implementation of the larp as smooth as possible we made a storyboard for the entire larp that we, the organisers, could follow throughout the weekend. This made it easy to make changes if the players made different choices from what we originally intended. It also made it easier for us to improvise events if needed. The storyboard was an indispensable tool for us.

Before the larp we did a two-hour workshop where all players received a personal workshop/debrief sheet. Different exercises were used during the workshop and debrief with the aim of meeting the personal preferences of most of the players, thus giving all the opportunity to begin and end the larp in a way that suited them.

The pre-larp workshop contained exercises focusing on the setting of the larp and on getting into character. We only had the safety rules 'cut' and 'break', but had a briefing about gameplay and vision. We also had an escalation curve so the tension would not hit the roof too early. We told everyone that we did not want the players to get into confrontations between the Germans and the civilians that were too big to plausibly deescalate.

The characters were written with different dilemmas and various sources of anxiety that the players could explore. They all belonged to a relational group and had some pre-set relations. The players had the opportunity to change or interpret the characters as they wished, but we asked them to keep the essence of their relations. We used language as a tool to support and simulate the dynamics between the Germans and the civilians.

English was used as the main language of our German group. This made it possible for some characters to function as translators. In-game we implemented improvised information to the players through letters, radios, and telephone. We also used these tools to give each group different kinds of dilemmas during the game.

When the larp ended, we handed out the personal workshop/debrief sheets and let the players answer the personal questions in silence. It was evident that the players needed some quiet time to ease back into real life. The sheets made the debrief more time-efficient and the debrief groups more independent, which made it possible for the organizers to be available for players, organize food and follow up on the groups.

From the organizers' perspective it was also very interesting to see all the reflections that came from the players after the larp.

-Both regarding the historical events in North Norway, what happens in the world today and how we perceive other people.

*"It has been an exciting and educational journey. I will probably never see the soldiers in the same way again - they are all someone's sons and daughters. I now go to work with more determination and mind to create positive attitudes, respect and humble curiosity in the differences of the latest generations of citizens in our country. I am left with a tremendous gratitude about who I am and that I am so lucky to live exactly my life."*

-Postlarp player reaction



**CREDITS:** Carita B. L. Morlandstø (Lead organizer, design and character writer), Marion B. Løsnes (practical organizer, design, and character writer) Elling Polden (Organizer and military history consultant), Idun Kløvstad (Character writer) Forening for Levende Historie (Association for Living History) (Costumes and supplies).

**DATE:** October 23-25, 2015

**LOCATION:** Ski, Norway

**DURATION:** 2 days

**PARTICIPANTS:** 35

**BUDGET:** 1300 €

**PARTICIPATION FEE:** 43 € regular/33 € subsidized price

**GAME MECHANICS:** Letters/telephone/radio/telegrams (to give players dilemmas, emotions, info). Norwegian and English (language differences between Norwegians and Germans). An ending song (to finish the larp and sum up the emotional experience).

**WEBSITE:**  
<http://finnmarkbrenner.blogspot.no/>





## Being a Monk: And building a cathedral

-By Alexander "Gray" Orlov & Vasily "Jolaf" Zakharov



БЫТЬ МОНАХОМ (*Being a Monk*) was a larp simulating the life of a Benedictine monastery in the Pyrenees during the Holy Week of 1202. The organizers were inspired not only by history and art, but also by their personal experience. The *Duende* larp held in 2010 in the Urals, where this larp's organizers were players and part of the monastery team, proved that the life in a monastery could provide interesting play. Another source of inspiration was the experience of pilgrimage on the Spanish Way of Saint James (*Camino de Santiago*). Thus an idea of a larp about a monastery on a pilgrim route was born.

### Unity of place and time

The core idea of the larp was to: Show the monastery structure as a hermetic microcosm; Make possible a unique and rich gameplay on religious subjects which are seldom touched; Make the monastery represent a moment in the history of the whole European religion; the Church's decline and crisis at the beginning of the 13th century.

The larp was focused on the idea of an individual within the structure, not on the structure itself – that is why the larp is titled *Being a Monk*, rather than, for instance, *"The Monastery"*. The Middle Ages were obsessed with the questions of essence and existence, and the existential aspect was crucial to the larp.

Why 1202? The idea of the Church on the edge of change was an important issue for us. The Franciscans and Dominicans were just about to appear, but their presence in the larp would make the answer too simple. The question was where the Western Christian world would go. Thus, the Benedictine monastery became the symbol of the Catholic Church, its inner problems – the distemper of all Christians, and the participants' answers defined the subsequent destiny of the Church.

Why the Pyrenees? It was important that the monastery was situated on a pilgrimage route, and the *Camino de Santiago* was chosen. Vivid Basque culture created another plotline, throwing together Christians and pagans.



### A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose

The key sources of inspiration were Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*. However, the larp was based not on the books themselves, but on their sources, on the archetypal plots and conflicts. A monastery (though in another region than Eco's), theological treatises, historical facts and legends, Benedictine regulations – it all formed the larp according to the spirit of the origin.





The process of building of Saint James Cathedral was a plot-defining event of the entire larp. The major conflict of the larp was a struggle (an ideological one rather than military) between Catholics and several groups of heretics and pagans. All those groups aimed to build the Cathedral according to their ideology.

The construction combined an actual building process with the inclusion of the symbols correlating to the sides of the conflict.



*The crossing is complete (Pre-game). (Photo: Olga Vasilyeva)*



An integrated and hermetic universe was an important part of the game. The monastery was planned as a closed system with no participants outside, and as a self-contained system of in-game knowledge. Not everyone is an expert in the Middle Ages, so there had to be a set of information adequately comprehensive, yet concise. The monastery had to be an entire microcosm for everyone who lived in it. The organizers selected a limited set of in-game information available to any character, and that information was collected in the Library available before the larp and later in-game.

Any references to other texts and sources were “prohibited” off-game. Thus the participants could be sure that they had access to everything they could need for the full-fledged play.



*Lifting the tower. (Photo: Olga Vasilyeva)*

## Spirit and body

Ascesis, both physical and mental, was another significant part of the game. It did not use any specific larp techniques, but rather authentic monastic practices that have been working very well for many centuries. Among them there was a daily session in which each character spoke about his sins in front of his brothers, as well as an obligatory confession.

The monk's day was divided into “hours”, and his daily schedule included five prayer services, even nightly ones. Lenten fare was used to influence the physical body of the participants. Large pre-game introductory texts of liturgy, history and game rules aimed to submerge the participants in the text traditions of those times, as well as served as part of the ascesis. Even the larp's length of three full days was chosen on purpose to immerse the participants into the monastery's rhythm of life, as the rhythm was a defining element.

Gender issues are unavoidable in such a strongly male-centric game world. Many female larpers wanted to have this unique experience of being a male monk. There is quite an old tradition of crossplay in Russian larp community (mostly with female larpers portraying male characters), but, although the number of crossplaying participants is usually strictly limited, in this case we allowed all interested girls to play monks.

The larp had 19 sets of rules, several simulated crafts and spiritual/heresy regulations known only to some of the participants. The most important rules were devoted to: *Spirituality*: These rules contained the doctrines of each of the conflicting groups. Following their dogmas, the characters could gain spiritual power. Obtaining spiritual experience was one of the most important game points for some of the characters. The most advanced characters were especially active in the ideological struggle for the Cathedral. Those, however, who had no interest in this field, were free to avoid this part of the larp.



*Crafts/Cathedral construction:* these rules connected the Cathedral with spirituality. Three main arts – mosaics, stained glass and murals – were a collective work of the majority of the monks. At a fixed hour, all participants created the concept of a future work, filling the template with symbols, which was an important opportunity for heretics to show what they were thinking. For example, by the end of the larp all the frescos in the Cathedral had turned out heretical (gnostic).

## Imagining the Cathedral

We should mention that there are many differences between Russian and Nordic larp traditions. Nordic 360° illusion means “everything or nothing” – if you can’t show something for real, don’t even try. Most Russian larpers consider this a needless limitation. They are ready to accept a certain (and rather substantial) extent of conventionalism if it suits a particular larp.

The construction of the Cathedral was therefore first and foremost a symbolic action, and there’s a huge difference between playing in the real cathedral and building a cathedral with your own hands. We thus needed something that could actually be constructed during the larp and by the participants themselves.

Things that inspired us were the gothic architecture itself and the novels *The Spire* by William Golding and *The Pillars of the Earth* by Ken Follett, both of which were, in their turn, inspired by the Salisbury Cathedral in England.



Our limitations when making the project of the Cathedral were the following:

The in-game building was to house and protect from rain all the participants (about 100 people) during the Easter mass at the end of the larp;

The style and structure of a gothic cathedral needed to be recognizable;

It was to be constructed by the participants and NPCs without any help from professional builders;

The time allowed for construction was 3 days before the larp plus 3 days during the larp;

The use of modern tools was to be minimized during the larp;

It was OK not to finish the building, as in reality cathedrals took centuries to build;

By the end of the larp the Cathedral was to be decorated inside with frescoes, stained glass windows, mosaics, sculptures and handmade candles.



We decided to construct the building from 1-inch wooden planks, and to cover the walls with cloth and the roof with tarpaulin.

This approach is typical for Russian larps, but this particular project was different from the others not only because of the size of the building, but because it was really much more complicated than anything done by Russian larpers before.

Our main limitation was scarcity of time and people, so the task had to be simplified as much as possible. We therefore decided not to make any second floor in the building and play only on the ground. Initially the 3D-model of Salisbury cathedral was taken from Google Earth and used as a reference. Then 1-millimeter precise project was created in Trimble SketchUp.

A professional engineer was called upon to verify the project’s feasibility and safety, and his suggestions were adopted.

Finally, a three-nave basilica with a transept and a tower above the crossing was projected (see the plan). Final dimensions of the building were 19 meters in length, 8 meters wide and 9 meters high.

In order to speed up the process we decided to assemble the roofs, facades and the tower on the ground and then raise them up as a whole using ropes and poles – yeah, not historically correct for sure, but definitely dramatic. The projected lift weight of the tower (with the spire) was about 111 kg.

## Raising the walls

There was an in-game architect that overlooked the whole process and could take a look (at his personal room where other participants couldn’t see him) at the 3D-model on his laptop. Looking at the model he made sketches by hand on pieces of paper and gave those sketches to the building foremen who oversaw the construction. Foremen further distributed the tasks to workers who performed them using the sketches, and the architect was monitoring that everything was being cut and assembled correctly.

The participants who were actually building the Cathedral therefore didn’t need any specific knowledge or skill except for the ability to climb a stepladder while wearing a frock and using an electric screwdriver. Those who didn’t know how to do it were taught on-site. In this way, everyone whose characters wanted to work got the chance to do so.

To make the building process look more authentic during the larp we invented historical designations for all the materials and instruments we were going to use. We pretended planks were stone blocks, the electric screwdriver was called a *brace* etc.

## Decoration

All the interior decoration of the Cathedral was created during the larp.

The participant who played the head of fresco painters was a professional painter (the only professional of all of us!). The statues of the Virgin and St. James were made of parts of a torso mannequin and a head mannequin with the addition of some insulating foam, plasticine and paint. The crucifix was made of plasticine and painted, the crosses above the Cathedral and the baldachin above the crucifix were covered with copper and brass foil respectively. The floor mosaic at the crossing was made of mosaic pieces for bathrooms on a plywood base. The simple campanile was constructed near the Cathedral and was fitted with brass bells 1 to 8 inches in size, brought by some of the participants from their homes.

The culmination of the larp was to be at the Easter mass at night, so the stained-glass windows didn't seem like a good idea for that, while we desperately wanted to make something with the same visual effect. At the end we suspended a bright hand-made stained glass lamp in the centre of the Cathedral, highlighting the entire building in colorful shades.

As a final note, we should say that we used about 3 m<sup>3</sup> of timber and the budget of the construction was about 2500 euros – thanks to the fact that almost all the expensive tools were borrowed from our friends for free. The photos pretty much say the rest.



**CREDITS:** Anastasiya “Domenica” Sarkisyan, Liudmila “Var” Vitkevich, Alexander “Gray” Orlov (Design & Production); Vasily “Jolaf” Zakharov (The Cathedral design and construction management).

**DATE:** May 6–10, 2015

**LOCATION:** Rented summer houses near Moscow, Russia

**DURATION:** 3 days (plus 3 days pre-construction)

**PARTICIPANTS:** 80

**ORGANIZERS AND HELPERS:** 20 NPCs and staff

**BUDGET:** 8000 € (30% location rental, 30% Cathedral construction, 30% other stuff)

**PARTICIPATION FEE:** 80 € (in advance) to 110 € (last moment)

**GAME MECHANICS:** Adapted ritualistics, Spirituality, Crafts, Construction of the Cathedral

**WEB SITE:** <http://monachum-sum.livejournal.com> (in Russian)

**Cathedral report:** <http://jolaf.livejournal.com/tag/cathedral> (in Russian, with lots of photos and videos)



*Brother James preaching to the birds. (Photo: Irina Abzalova)*







**La Sirena Varada:**  
**Courting madness under a bright sun**  
-By Juan Ignacio Ros Perez

## Inspirations

We have both a play and a song to blame for the idea of the larp.

*La sirena varada* (*The Stranded Mermaid*) was a theatrical play written in 1934 by the Spanish dramaturge Alejandro Casona. The original play portrayed a community of people who wanted to live outside common sense and social rules, and its inevitable crisis and decay. We took the motifs, themes and archetypes of the original and planted them in contemporary days. That was also food for thought: Why is it that the themes seem as fresh today as in the original time of the writing? Perhaps escapism is nowadays an even more attractive answer to routines, technification and social pressure than in past times.

The song was inspired by the theatrical play, and we heard it several years before knowing that the play existed. The song is also called *La sirena varada*, and was composed by the Spanish rock band *Héroes del Silencio*: Cryptic, passionate, deep as the sea. The band dissolved several years ago but is still regarded as one of the best examples of Spanish rock and known by the poetry of its lyrics.

Finally, an overarching inspiration was the Mediterranean culture, its myths and cultural nuances and underlying fights through all the centuries. We wanted to reflect them in the characters in a non-obvious way. At this point we distanced ourselves from the existing inspirations and turned the larp into a different work, even if it did share a name with the song and the play.



The design used adaptations of proven Nordic larp techniques such as *Ars Marte* and *Ars Amandi*, and also new ideas like *deathplay* (a diegetic way to allow dead characters engaged in the larp) and *child-like eyes* (that demanded from the players to approach each interaction with a new, fresh take).

Half of the participants were foreigners and half of Spanish heritage, but the only language allowed among *the Free* (as the characters called themselves) was English; this was a design choice. Having a minimum of Spanish players transmitted the Mediterranean flavour, but forcing them to use English ensured there was no communication barrier and established a common ground.

This has been the first larp based on and adapted from a theatrical play in Spain. Some participants have considered it one of the first examples of a Mediterranean larp “school”, due to its Southern themes and larping style.

## Reactions

The larp was tremendously satisfactory. The participants embraced the proposed way of life, with its laconic tempo, its exaggerated emotional outbursts and the overall creative approach. Moreover, we noticed that the participants increased their desire to create during the days and weeks that followed the event.

The techniques proposed were meaningful to the larp, and even if they could still be improved by more exhaustive workshops, the natural way in which the participants accepted them was impressive.

We saw their emotions change and evolve, their memories and convictions put to question inside a shadow space, their interactions going from sophisticated to primal in the other caves, the memories of the departed walking among them for their comfort and distress. As designers, we were particularly surprised with the way the *hammam* (arab baths), which originally was not intended as a symbolic space, was used as such by the participants in such an inspiring and powerful way that we have decided to fully integrate it in the larp for future editions.

*Characters were derived from the six archetypes of the original theatrical play, each expressing a way to approach or confront madness. (Photo: Esperanza Montero)*



Lessons to be learned were some logistic choices, the need for a better explanation through workshops of some concepts and of the proactive interaction attitude required for the larp, as well as reminders of the lack of overarching plot or grand finale.

*"Floating... I'm floating in the dark, my eyes closed. There is no hesitation, my trust in my companions complete. I hear humming and chanting through the water and I feel weightless... Free."*

-JC

## Stories

*Testimonies of participants and characters alike. Survivors of a larp shipwrecking on the cliffs of madness.*

*"It is hard to describe the magic of Sirena to outsiders. Somehow the characters, the location and the 'play to flow' concept came together in a leisurely Mediterranean dream that felt very real at the time. We discussed life and love and dreams and sex and magic. We had parties and games that - a first for me - did not feel like we were playing at having a party. We went into the wild to find materials to build crowns to crown ourselves kings. Mine was the crown of broken things. We tried to initiate a pineapple and failed. Everything made so much sense and it was warm and happy. -Maybe, the inevitable tears in that idyllic community were not noticed by me for a long time because it felt so real. I did not want them to be there. When it was too late it all ended as passionately and tragic and chaotic and dreamlike as the game had been. I have never been so content to have a character end in such a depressing way. It fitted. She and the whole community were too beautiful to last for long."*

-Karijn van der Heij

*"A collection of emotionally broken characters retreating from the world into their own fantasies, a few decadent wicked tempters pulling them ever deeper, and fewer still trying to rein it within the bounds of safety. For my character, gradually sinking into paranoia as it appeared to be turning into some kind of death-serpent-vampire cult, deliberately, gleefully fed misinformation and contextualisation by others seeking to drive him insane. Trying to covertly rally together those who might resist, only to be cornered, non-consensually hypnotised into committing terrible things. I woke the next day, wandered round in a shocked daze, was accused of said crimes by those who had set it up and driven to suicide out of misplaced guilt. I then haunted the guilty party with a silent gaze as she made out with her lover."*

-Nathan Hook

*"A little girl named Sigmund left everything behind to join the ship, bringing money and her gentle, innocent self there. As others strived for something, she didn't know what to do or what she really wanted, so she just wrote poems until she realised what she wanted at that moment: Her first kiss. By accident she fell in love with her teacher, Pyramid, who questioned the community. She then saved another man, Max, from committing suicide by becoming Death herself. Now divided to two, Sigmund and Death, she struggled between love and death, eventually hypnotized her teacher to symbolically kill Sigmund in her, then took the hand of Max, dancing to the night of broken dreams, where lovers and dreamers started taking their lives as Max and Death fell deeper into their love and madness."*

-Melina Cunelius





*"I really fell into madness... and discovered and loved it. -So much that I'm still in it. It's a pleasant place, indeed. Dark, brilliant, full of stars, ideas, love and... Death. Eternal and joyful death, as that is what we sought to bring our souls to a climax. Yes, that was my (our) madness. As The Magician, my life was intense. A double-sided view of life, the theatrical (faked, unreal) and the crazy (funny, magical, full of ghosts... and real). He will always be inside me. I enjoyed every minute, day and year of him. He started knowing that he was faking his madness, but ended in a group catharsis through a theatre play that brought us (the actors, writers and victims, we were all at the same time) to the eternal land of ideas. During the larp, he let me flow through the sun, the water, the wine, the madness of all of us... A unique experience.*

*Sometimes, at night, The Magician still whispers at me from that unknown and eternal land. And I miss him, and the sun, and my sisters and brothers of the Republic of the Free: Heart, Gothic, Shadow, Bird-speaker, Comrade, Voivode... All."*

-Daniel P. Espinosa

*"The kiss  
is more than I can take  
Symbol of purity  
I don't want to lose  
But I want to live free  
Not bound by me.  
Free of choice  
Free of words  
Shadows bring light  
hearts collide  
dreams collapse  
Earth shatters beneath our feet  
Pieces turn to pieces  
mirrors fake mirrors  
And I only fool myself"*

-Melina Cunelius

**CREDITS:** Inception, design and execution: Juan Ignacio Ros Perez, José Castillo Meseguer. Collaborators: Enrique Peregrín Pitto, David Pérez Vallejo, Irina Boltova, Jesus Pérez Zamora.

**DATES:** September 17 to 20, 2015

**LOCATION:** Cuevas Al Jatib, Baza, Granada, Spain (<http://www.aljatib.com/en/>)

**DURATION:** 3 days

**PARTICIPANTS:** 20

**PARTICIPATION FEE:** 95 €

**GAME MECHANICS:** Play to Flow, Symbolic Spaces, Ars Amandi, Ars Marte, Fluid Time, Child-like Eyes, Death Play.

**WEBSITES:**


<http://somnia-larp.wix.com/lasirenavarada>

<http://www.somnia.org/en/>



*The presence of grapes and wine helped to establish Mediterranean themes and as the larp was a contemporary one, pictures and portraits were diegetic. (Photo: Esperanza Montero)*



A group of people, mostly men, are lying on their backs on a dark floor in a dimly lit room. They are wearing light-colored, possibly white, clothing. Some are looking towards the camera, while others have their eyes closed or are looking away. The atmosphere is surreal and dreamlike, consistent with the theme of the article.

## Before We Wake: Weaving with the fabric of dreams -By Kristoffer Thurøe

*Every night when you sleep, a Dream Envoy, the part of your subconscious that directs your dreams and plays the part of you, tries to send you a message. To get the message through, the Dream Envoy has to find the most potent symbols in the chaotic weave of dreams and experiment with sketches of dreams to find a dream that will work. This is no easy task, since other Dream Envoys mix their own messages into your dream and the Dreamscape transforms and shifts right beneath the feet of your Dream Envoy. Some nights the message gets through and changes you, but most nights it fails, as the Dream Envoy has to do all of this before we wake.*

*Before We Wake* was a surrealistic, avant-garde larp that used the frame of theatre equipment in a blackbox to let the players create a dreamlike experience. The experience was based on inspiration from the player's own dreams, recorded in a dream journal before the larp, and the output of the larp was an individual dream written down next to the original dreams in the player's dream journal.

There was no shared story in *Before We Wake*. The players all had individual narratives in their minds, and these all interlaced with each other at certain points. Some players played the same dream over and over, while others developed it in the hunt for the best message. The players were told that they should use all input from the environment and their co-players and give it their own interpretation and meaning, instead of trying to find coherence with the other players. This meant that the players could interact and play together with different understandings of what was happening.

In order to direct this chaos, the larp had three acts that were designed to steer the development of the dreams. The first was non-verbal and physical, asking the players to explore the set and the ambience of dreams. The second act was verbal, letting the players sketch the individual dreams, keeping the interpretation to themselves. The third and final act opened up for the players to try to co-create and negotiate narratives in order to build strong dreams that contained elements from several players' sketched dreams. The aim was to deliver a final product for the sleeping player to receive.

We were not interested in the fiction of a dreamworld with mythos and a pantheon or in trying to find a framework story that would help build coherence between the players. We wanted to give them the tools to build individual, surrealistic, non-linear narratives that tied to the schematics of their personal dreamworld's logic.

We furthermore wanted to give them the possibility of creating a message that had transformative power for them. To achieve this, we gave the players five different roles in *Before We Wake*:

The first was a role that was not played, but only imagined: The framework story of the sleeping player, in whose mind the whole larp would take place. The second was the actual character of the player: *The Dream Envoy*, a symbolic persona or entity found in a dream journey in the pre-larp workshop. The Dream Envoy was the dream worker that could take on two specific functions: To create the dream or to visit the Night Café to analyze and discuss the dreams on a meta level with other Dream Envoys.



The third and fourth were the two functional roles: The first function was *The Weaver*, an entity co-created with other Dream Envoys, that could dive into and react to the chaotic weave and catch movements, sounds, themes, symbols or settings, that could then be used to inspire meaningful dreams in the Dreamscape. The Weaver was, at the same time, the ambient background for the other dreams in the Dreamscape. The other function was to play the role of *The Dreamer*, the first-person experience of the sleeping player, acting out and experiencing the dreams. In the Dreamscape, the Dream Envoy would also be perceived as the fifth role: Minor characters, environment or objects, whether deliberately put there or not, in the dreams being created simultaneously by other Dream Envoys.

The different roles of *Before We Wake* was a combination of larp design traditions, using both non-verbal, physical play (to function as Weavers), letting the players play alone in their imagination, co-creating in the Dreamscape and enabling them to plan and discuss on a meta level in The Night Café. It is not normal for a larp to ask its players to navigate between so many different play styles, and it made *Before We Wake* difficult to navigate for some players. For others it was easy, and it gave them the right tools to create the dreamlike experience that was the goal of the larp.



*Players were in different dreamworlds, even if playing close to each other. (Photo: Karin Pedersen)*



*The players used the flexible scenography to create their own interpretations. (Photo: Karin Pedersen)*

*"Before We Wake is the best scenario I've been to in many years: Extremely well-run, well-written, and with an ensemble that said 'yes' to everything. It doesn't get better than that in this particular corner of the Dreaming. I want to go back in."*

- Karin Tidbeck, player

In order to enable the players to play the larp, we facilitated a one-day pre-larp workshop. Here, the players would practice the different tools, build an ensemble that was able to improvise together and explore their recorded dreams, extracting elements that could be used to build meaningful narratives in the larp. The pre-larp workshop was structured in the tradition of some of our previous larps such as *Delirium* and *White Death*, using physical exercises more than verbal agreement to create characters and relations.

*Before We Wake* was designed to be played in a blackbox, and we wanted to use the wonders of the theatre equipment to create the perfect framework for the dreamlike experience. The scenography was roughly split in two: One was the Dreamscape with islands of set that could be used as scaffolding for the players to imagine anything. It contained a forest with eight trees, a hill of stage elements and a empty void, ending in a giant screen with a projection. The other was the Night Café, where the Dream Envoys pondered over the night's shift, discussed the meaning of the dreams and could borrow *Elements of Meaning* from the bar; objects that the players had connected to symbols from their own dreams in the pre-larp workshop. During the larp, an NPC creature called *The Spinner* would tie plastic ribbons between the trees to create new spaces in the scenography.

The players could tear it down or build on it, and it served as a visualization of the process of dreams being weaved.

We used many of the same techniques to design *Delirium* and wanted to explore the possibilities even more with a scenography that could react to the players and support the worlds they were creating.

We used AV projection, lights and sound to rig the set. All of the parts could react, but again we found that sound is the easiest way to extract output from the larp and transform it, in order to create a surreal experience. The desks were manned by professional theatre technicians. They really had a blast co-creating with the players, instead of just making a supportive scenography as they were used to. *Before We Wake* was the surreal, dreamlike, personal experience that we wanted to create. For some it was difficult or weird to navigate all the elements without a real character or a coherent story. For others it was the perfect frame for them to be able to weave a dream for themselves. In the end it was intense yet tricky to remember... Just like a dream.



*"I realized over the weekend that out of all the things I appreciate with the larp medium, one of the core things I want to do in role-playing is simply to play a character. The second most important thing might be for some kind of coherent, meaningful narrative to emerge from play. Both "character" and "narrative" were dialed down to near-zero in Before We Wake .... Play did generate some scenes that felt very dream-like: Shifting characters and more focus on mood than on action or clear-cut narrative. I also experienced a kind of forgetfulness that reminds me of my dreams. It is hard to keep track of the "story" in dreams."*  
-Ole Peder Gæver, player.

*"What sticks in my head is how some really powerful scenes just popped up organically. For example, I remember that at some point, I sat down in the big flat space and began paddling. This was a significant element I had brought with me from one of the pre-larp dreams we were supposed to record. Other people saw me paddling, and suddenly my "boat" consisted of four people. There was a three-person weaver nearby, and it started moving towards us, making wave-like motions and sounds. These got more intense and dramatic as they got closer. So, of course, when they arrived, we all played that the boat was smashed to pieces in the waves, and at least one person played at drowning."*

*For me, this was still a canoe. Others might have been on a steam boat. Or a viking ship. For me, the co-player who pretended to drown represented my baby brother - who had been present in the canoe in the original dream-fragment, and for whom dream-me had been responsible - and so, my dream took a decidedly dark turn for my part. The co-player didn't know he was my brother, of course, nor that we were in a canoe. He might have been the chieftain of a viking ship. Or he might have represented an oar.*

*The brilliant thing about this larp is that it just didn't matter which interpretation of events was correct: It was all true. It was a dream... And still, to me, coherent and meaningful on a very personal level."*  
- Eirik Fatland, player.



**CREDITS:** Jesper Heebøll Arbjørn, Kirstine Hedda Fich, Kristoffer Thurøe, Mathias Kromann Rode, Nina Runa Essendrop, Peter Schønnemann Andreasen, Sanne Harder and a team of 8 technicians and helpers.

**DATE:** August 5-8, 2015

**LOCATION:** Københavns Musikteater, Copenhagen, Denmark

**DURATION:** 6 hours + 1 day of pre-larp

**PARTICIPANTS:** 25 per larp

**BUDGET:** 6660 €

**PARTICIPATION FEE:** 120 €

#### GAME MECHANICS:

Pre-larp workshops, non-verbal physical play, meta- level area, fragmented narrative, dream journals, dream travels, individual coherence, surrealistic scenography, blackbox, close to home



*The players arrived in the scenography for the first time in character.*  
(Photo: Karin Pedersen)





**Rebels on a Mountain:  
The Last Night of Montelupo**  
-By Matteo Micelli

## Wedding in Montelupo

*It's a merry evening tonight in Montelupo: The upcoming wedding between Vincenzo Veronesi and Beatrice Malagoli is going to bring a moment of relief to the town. The last provisions or food were used to prepare the party; the people of Montelupo have suffered a lot and they deserve some leisure. Nevertheless, many worries still populate the hearts of the citizens of Montelupo.*

*The German soldiers are retreating, fights seem to have moved very close to Bologna and the sparse news from the nearby towns is alarming. Some of the men of Sirio, the leader of the rebel partisans, have been noticed in the streets of Montelupo: Augusto Malagoli, captain of the Black Shirts and father of the bride, has agreed to a truce with the outlaws. Nothing can threaten the wedding of his daughter.*

*But not everybody approves of this union: Adele, the sister of the groom, has joined the partisans after her family was slaughtered by the nazis, and according to the traditions she is supposed to meet Augusto tomorrow. Will this lead to a gunfight between fascists and partisan like it did at Easter?*

*Suddenly, an elegant and ice-cold person enters the tavern. Everybody falls silent while the man greets the bystanders with chilling politeness.*

*Siegfried Von Hoffmann and his Waffen-SS have arrived in Montelupo.*

## Intents

*I ribelli della montagna: l'ultima notte di Montelupo (The rebels on the mountain: the last night of Montelupo)* was a larp played in Lusernetta (TO), in Italy, in two runs during July 2015. It was the first historical larp of *Terre Spezzate*, a larping group active in northern Italy, originally dedicated to fantasy larps. In the last years, however, the group has moved its focus towards one-shots in various settings.

The opportunity for enacting this larp was the celebration of the 70th anniversary of the Resistance antifascist movement and the Liberation of Italy from the nazi-fascist forces during World War II. It was inspired by the tragic slaughter that occurred between the 29th of September and the 4th of October 1944 in the region of Monte Sole. The goals of the organisers were to keep the memory of historical facts alive and to support reflections among the participants about those terrible days. Moreover, the potential of the larp allowed the player to fully identify with the people involved in those events and experience the stress, anxiety and fears of such days.

One of the main intentions of the authors was to put the player in front of choices which were difficult or even impossible to make. Ideals, political issues, religion, personal beliefs, opportunism and family were some of the conflicting key factors that determined the choices of the involved characters. Since, as a deliberate choice of the authors, it was the personal choices of the characters that determined the course of history. One of the most important things that players had to feel was the burden of such responsibility.



The larp was organised under the aegis of A.N.P.I. - Associazione Nazionale Partigiani Italiani (National Association of Italian Partisans).

ISTORETO - Istituto Piemontese per la Storia della Resistenza e della Società Contemporanea "Giorgio Agosti" (Piedmontese Institute for the History of Resistance and of Contemporary Society "Giorgio Agosti"), a historical archive of national relevance, helped with the iconographic search, giving our press office some original historical photos.

After the end of the second run, Maria Airaudo, an actual partisan dispatch rider during the years of fascism, met the players to tell them her first-hand war experience.



Picture from the larp. (Photo: Lisa Muner)



## Perception

Although the events of *I ribelli della montagna* happened 70 years ago, the proposed thematics are still sensitive topics in Italy, having strong connections to current political and social issues. Many of the usual players of *Terre Spezzate* did not feel at ease at the idea of facing tragical historical events. The re-enacting of the circumstances in which real people were killed was perceived as a lack of respect by some people, and some did not want to be disrespectful towards partisans who sacrificed their lives fighting against nazi-fascists. Many were worried of playing the part of a war criminal. The distance between character and player was much shorter in *I ribelli* than in other larps. It was closer in terms of realism: *I ribelli della montagna* was inspired by real events and sought to recreate an authentic mood of anguish due to the constant menace of death and violence.

Events, places and even characters were not entirely imaginary, but rather relied heavily on inspirations from the real world; we made a serious effort to blend fictional and historical features seamlessly. The fantastical style of fantasy larps, and even the fictional one of contemporary-setting larps were totally missing, forcing the player to endure a realistic, stifling and long-lasting condition in which they couldn't find easy ways out.

It wasn't far in terms of temporal distance, either. Even if 70 years are a lot of time, the events of those days still have a remarkable impact on present day. Fascism and the Resistance are still hot topics in Italian political debates of today, often leading to reviews and deliberate misinterpretations of history. They are controversial subjects, difficult to discuss with objectivity, which often leads to arguments and partial, misleading interpretations.

Finally, the separation between player and character was reduced compared to other larps. The player experienced what their grandparents could have suffered, and this implied a strong emotional involvement and, in some cases, incapability to fully detach from the characters after the larp.

Conversely, the larp interested a lot of people not familiar with larping, many of whom had their first experience with the phenomenon. Since the larp was presented like an event less oriented towards entertainment and leisure and more like an occasion of reflection and in-depth insight, it was able to attract many people interested in this approach. In particular, some of the characters were reserved for foreign players, coming from outside Italy.



It was the first time for *Terre Spezzate* to have international players in a larp and, as far as the organisers know, also in Italy.

Non-Italian players were given foreign, English-speaking characters and, to avoid issues arising from the linguistic difference, many Italian characters were able to speak English according to their background. Of course, understanding and speaking English was a requirement in order to play such characters, but an English-speaking player could not use a foreign language if their character wasn't able to. This was deliberately meant to recreate the confusing final days of World War II in Italy, when Anglo-American downed pilots and stranded paratroopers could pass months among villagers who were barely able to communicate with them.

The larp benefited from a high level of attention from the media, who usually do not consider larps newsworthy at all - and are not even familiar with them. In addition to A.N.P.I. mentioned above, the larp was reported by local newspapers, web radio stations and even national radio. The event received some great media coverage, compared to that of other larps.





## The Game

*“I Ribelli della Montagna”* was a three day continuous larp. The absence of breaks during the game was one of the first things decided upon by the staff. In order to effectively recreate the feeling of continuous danger and uncertainty, it was agreed that the overall recreated reality was not to be interrupted by scheduled suspensions of the game.

Three main groups of characters were designed for this game: The inhabitants of Montelupo, the rebel partisans and the nazi-fascists. But these groups had a lot of differences, both internally and regarding how they related to each other. The inhabitants of Montelupo, the majority of which were women, included fascist supporters, secret partisans associates and neutral people who accepted the current condition. The town was managed by the fascist *Black Shirts*, who were born and had grown up in the town. They were natives of the town, and they had strong connections with their fellow citizens, friends and relatives, as well as with the member of the local partisan cell, the *Stella Rossa* (Red Star). This may seem like a paradox, but it is a fact that, during those days, many life-long friends found themselves being enemies; and yet, they still met each other at the local tavern and such.

However, not all the partisans were from Montelupo: Members of the *Fiamme Verdi* (Green Flames) and *CLN*, driven by catholic and communist ideals respectively, reached the town. But partisans were not the only foreigners arriving in Montelupo: There were the German *Waffen-SS*, heading North during their withdrawal, as well as their Italian allies, loyal to the *R.S.I. (Repubblica Sociale Italiana or Ital-*

*ian Social Republic)*; the state proclaimed by Mussolini after he lost the favor of the king. It's easy to see that the groups were not homogeneous and did not constitute compact fronts divided along a single line. There were many divergences inside each faction about motivations, ideals, political and ethical issues. This was another deliberate choice, made to reflect the complexity of the historical scenario, and a preeminent point on which the authors focused. They shared the view that the outcomes of historical events have always been determined by the final choices of the people involved. *Personal responsibilities and faults are always the consequences of the actions we decide to take - or not to take.*

Moreover, the groups were largely unbalanced in terms of resources and power. Even if resources were scarce for everybody, the nazi-fascists could rely on a slightly higher supply of weapons and ammunitions, at least in the very first part of the war. They also had the power, both military and political, to impose their will on and subtract what they needed from the inhabitants of Montelupo. On the other hand, partisans were hiding in the woods in a makeshift camp, their food supplies running short. Again, this was done to properly recreate the historical conditions in which the conflict was fought during those years. However, an important part of the control applied to the game was related to the mortality. To avoid the players having their characters killed in the first hours of the game, there was a specific rule stating that wounded characters could die only in the last day of the game. Moreover, the initial scarcity of weapons was introduced to discourage too fast an escalation of violence and deaths, which would be a very probable result in a real situation.

## Final Considerations

*I ribelli della montagna* was a successful experience, but most of all an instructive one: Both organisers and players learnt valuable lessons.

First of all, this larp proved that even sensitive topics and tragical events can be approached through larp in a proper way, while keeping a respectful perspective, both for the historical facts, the victims involved and the personal sensibilities of the participants.

The organisation of the larp offered the opportunity to examine many aspects of Italy during the Fascism and the Second World War in-depth. It was an occasion for everybody, players and staff alike, to shed light on their own country and history, discovering circumstances, background episodes and little-known details. Finally, the event was appreciated for its balance between thrilling and action-oriented scenes, like firefights, rescues, assaults and even a night bombing, and a strong emotional involvement, due to the uncertain fate of Montelupo, the personal dilemmas of the characters and the fragile, daily habits being shaken and threatened.

Brutal interrogations, scarce supplies of food and public executions: The hardcore element was well present.

The writing and playing of *I ribelli della montagna* was a great experience: Everybody felt enriched and proud for having contributed to an activity furthering the understanding of the past and the perpetuating of the Memory.

**CREDITS:** Andrea Capone, Elio Biffi (main organizers), Aladino Amantini, Andrana Vigone, Annalisa Corbo, Federico Barcella, Matteo Miceli, Mauro Vettori, Paolo Benedetti.

**DATE:** July 10-12 and 17-19, 2015

**LOCATION:** Villaggio delle Stelle (a small private mountain village near the town of Lusernetta), Torino, Italy.

**DURATION:** approximately 2 days and 2 nights, including workshops, starting from Friday afternoon until Sunday noon.

**PARTICIPANTS:** 65 per run

**PARTICIPATION FEE:** 60 € for international players, 70 € regular price for villager and female nazi characters, 80 € for partisan characters, 115 € for male nazi and fascist characters. The entry fee for nazi and fascist characters, as well as the one for international players, included the rental fee for a costume.

**GAME MECHANICS:** Single Act Structure, Pre-written characters, Play to Lose, Pre-larp Workshops, Light use of the Fate play.





**SHOWTIME:**  
**How a silly joke turned into an experimental larp**  
 -By Charles Bo Nielsen

During a christmas dinner last year, my friend (and then boss) Claus got drunk and played “truth or dare”. He ended up getting dared to announce a larp that same evening. Being of a minimalist nature, he got the idea of announcing a larp with absolutely no information, except for a title, some organizers and a date. People had to sign up and pay without knowing anything more than that.

His original thought was that when people signed up, he would send them their money back and tell them not to trust such a silly scam. For better or worse, he put my name as co-organizer together with Anders Ebbehøj (who had bought the rights to be named as main organizer at a Rollespilsfabrikken larp years back - but that’s another story). Claus and I were at the time high on *College of Wizardry* madness, so it seemed natural that he’d just put my name on a weird project without asking.

Unlike him, I didn’t wanna pass up the chance to actually make a larp, though. Especially not when my name was on a mysterious website about said larp! So I ended up telling Claus: *“Fuck your plan! We are going to do this! I will write a draft for it!”*

We stuck to the idea of running a larp in complete secrecy. Participants had to pay 250 DKK (35€) up front, with no knowledge whatsoever of the content. Even the location was just listed as “somewhere in Copenhagen”.

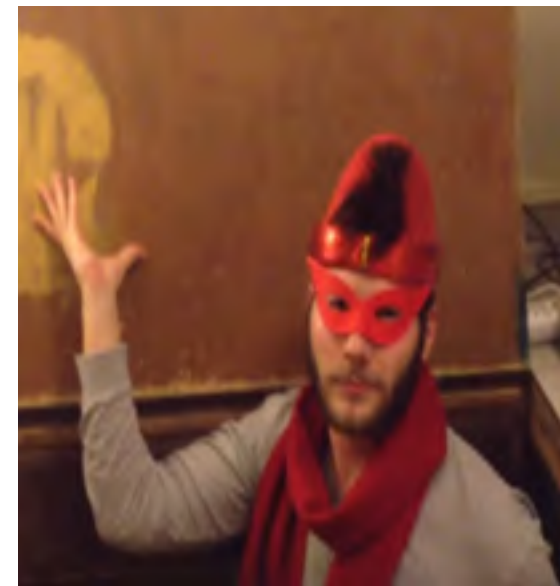
## Piling on the silliness

Once we agreed on doing it and on keeping it silly and fun, the ideas we threw into the pile had no end. *“How about if the main game mechanic is players drinking champagne?”*, *“We’ll make a gimmick out of Anders Ebbehøj being the only actual organizer and being super pretentious!”*, *“Let’s have players meet up on a public bar and hand them a letter and say we know nothing!”*, *“There should be a real prize for winning the larp. 1000 DKK sounds right!”*.

I hadn’t had this much fun creating a larp since I created a parody larp making fun of Swedish Jeepform. It was called *“We Åker Jeep - The game”*, but it was a lot more fun than it sounded. Anyway, this was even more fun than that. We basically laughed every time we got new ideas and said yes to everything.



Anders in ‘disguise’. (Still from the youtube-video)





## A highly competitive larp about pretentious larp organizers

We - that is me and Claus, and definitely NOT Anders, whose role will be explained later - ended up creating a five act story larp about a group of pretentious organizers meeting up after the first *College of Wizardry*; dedicated to making a better larp than that mess. It was heavily inspired by Martin Jordo's, Stina Almered's and Karolina Stael's comedy larp from 2014 about pretentious Nordic larpers; *"The Alpha Elite Larp Of All Times"*. -Except ours was even more outrageous and self-congratulatory.

Every act started with them opening a bottle of champagne and ended when it was empty. At the end of every act, they had to rate each other on their larping. We gave no rules for how to rate people, only that everyone had to give one of the other players a sticker for being an awesome larper. At the end, the one with most stickers would get a grand prize of 1000 DKK. Yes; real money. Also, it was about half our budget. The other half was spent on champagne. The third half we spent on pizza, thereby blowing our budget.

### Anders Ebbehøj presents

We decided early on that it would be Anders' larp. Anders had no intention of working on it, though, but neither Claus nor I saw this as a particular hindrance. In fact, this was even more fun. So Anders' role in the project was simple - he would be the star in an instructional in-game (oh, sorry, diegetic, you pretentious fuckers!) video that we put together, and we were to be his henchmen. He would be the diva of the production; showing up for our filming session and



reading from an already-prepared script while dressed in various silly outfits. For the actual larp he'd do nothing but appear at the after party and get the war stories and fame. Just as planned.

### No organizers on site

We (Claus and I; NOT Anders) met the players at a bar and gave them a letter with a map and keys to the location. They asked a lot of questions, but we told them that we didn't know anything either. It was all part of Anders' brilliant design and we were just the messengers. We also bought them beer. Then we wished them good luck and prayed for the best. On location we had prepared bottles of champagne and the video with Anders explaining the larp and how it should be played. What could possibly go wrong!?

*Anders explaining. (Still from the youtube-video)*

## Rerunnable larp

Since the complete design of the larp is described in the self-explanatory video we made in English, the larp can easily be run again by anyone interested in something crazy and fun.

This larp is clearly not for everyone, but when we met up with the players later after the larp, they didn't know what was up and down and had had a quite funny experience. Our only German player won, and walked home with a 1000 DKK cash prize, and of course we had players complaining about how they should have won instead, but played to lose. Beautiful.

You can find the video on youtube. It's called *"Anders Ebbehøj presents SHOWTIME"*

## Game Mechanics

### *The Rule of I*

In *SHOWTIME* you only talk about yourself, and never say "we". This is about your achievements and contribution. This was a mechanic meant to create alibi for even more outrageous competitive play.

### *Sounding important is more important than being important*

This is a larp about being pretentious and sounding pretentious, so you should play according to that, by focusing more on sounding important than on actual results.

### *Fear*

Since this is a competitive larp, you should embrace your fear of losing and use that fear as a motivator to outplay the other participants.

## They nearly sent away the pizza man

None of us were on site for the larp itself, but "Anders" had ordered pizza for them. They weren't aware of this, so when the pizza guy arrived with pizzas that were already paid for, they almost sent him away. Luckily, one of the players did a "Oh, wait, I ordered pizzas for everyone!" and let her character take the credit for it. More on credit-hogging later.



## Conclusion

There are a few things I take with me from creating *SHOWTIME*.

1. If you have fun while organizing, your players are more likely to do the same.
2. Sometimes it's great to just create a larp, without overthinking it.
3. Videos with a person explaining what is going to happen actually work!
4. Intentionally breaking with the rules of good design can be a great learning experience.
5. Watching the video one year later is hilarious.

*Anders being pretentious. (Still from the youtube-video)*

**CREDITS:** Anders Ebbenhøj and co. (Charles Bo Nielsen and Claus Raasted).

**DATE:** January 17, 2015

**LOCATION:** Rollespilsakademiet, Denmark

**DURATION:** 1 evening

**PARTICIPANTS:** 13

**BUDGET:** 435 €

**PARTICIPATION FEE:** 35 €

**GAME MECHANICS:** "The Rule of I", "Sounding important is more important than being important", "Fear"



*Anders displaying leader potential. (Still from the youtube-video)*





**Malcontenta:**  
**Opportunities and obstacles in larping court life**  
-By Thérèse Tangen

*"I have found a universal rule . . . valid above all others in all human affairs whether in word or deed: and that is, to avoid any kind of affectation as though it were a rough and dangerous reef; and (to coin a new word, perhaps), to practice in all things a certain sprezzatura, so as to conceal all art and make whatever one does or says seem effortless, and almost unpremeditated."*  
(*The Courtier*, page 32. Baldassare Castiglione)

The intention of the larp campaign *Malcontenta* is to explore the opportunities and obstacles you would face at court in a feudal society, although in a high-fantasy setting (the world is so much more fun with magic). Our goal was to take the concept of feudalism and truly make it the base of our imaginary world. Lots of larps have nobles, knights and ladies- but no larp that we know of has really treated the concept of feudalism with any degree of realism.

Setting a larp in a feudal court environment, a proximal to western European early modern times, is complicated. Larpers in general, and Swedish larpers in particular, are used to a life enjoying equal rights, democracy and personal freedom. But if you want to re-enact a feudal world, with a court and a nobility (as it was in Europe in early modern times), you have to accept that there is no democracy, no consensus in decisions, no equality and not really any personal freedom, regardless of your social class.

Creating a larp this way is, evidently, regarded as controversial. But we decided to do it anyway. The challenge, and the fun, in a larp set in a court environment is to explore the opportunities and possibilities of personal advancement in a strictly regulated atmosphere.

Regardless of who you are; a great lady, a landless knight, a servant or a king, you serve someone -and you are bound by rules and traditions to everyone around you.

## The Court

The concept of *Malcontenta* centers around the intrigues of feudal court. The court is a part of a much larger world, and the actions of the characters in-game affects the larger world, and this in turn causes impacts on the lives of these characters. It is a balance between the small space in-game and the much larger world that is the imaginative surrounding. We decided to use the French court ceremony as our inspiration. The regulated court was a concept that evolved in France in the 16th century and was most famously displayed during the reign of Louis XIV in the 17th century. You've got the power of court rituals and ceremonies to display the monarch and create an air of mysticism and divinity around that person. Rituals have always been a big part of court life. Not attending a ceremony you are supposed to take part in is therefore a political statement or an insult. Your place in the ceremonies depends on your own rank and status, and you must therefore be aware of your position at court. There is a big difference between being a duke/duchess, a baron/baroness or knight/lady. For instance, one is not allowed to sit when someone of a higher rank is standing. Dinner is a battle to get a seat as close to, or at, the high table as possible. Lie, pay, flirt or just sit down at the table before the others and claim your right to be seated close to the royalty according to your rank. The steward is the one getting richer when you try to get yourself a better seating than your status actually entitles.

## Religion and Magic

Religion is a big part of the *Malcontenta* world, creating a third dimension to the larp that the larpers have to relate to. Inspired by the ancient religions, such as the Greek and Nordic mythology, the gods and goddesses have a kind of court of their own. Their conflicts and relations, are mirrored by the humans. Also, gods and goddesses take part in the life of the people on Earth, falling in love with humans, starting wars, protecting holy places and demanding sacrifices, making the relationship between humans and deities more personal than in modern time. As a worshipper, you know you have to sacrifice and pray to keep the gods and goddesses happy. The more attention a deity gets, the more powerful he or she becomes. To help the priests and priestesses get a higher status at the larp, and to remind the larpers of religion, they are part of the morning ceremony at court. Every morning, there is a formal prayer to the chosen gods or goddesses. During the levé, the monarch decides which one to honor that very day. The priests and priestesses can get divine power (similar to magic) from their god if they are chosen and have enough worshippers performing rituals together with them. A noble person with magical powers would become utterly powerful. We solved this problem by creating a fourth social class. Magicians are educated in five different schools in the empire, which have always been competing. When you enter one of these, you leave your old life behind, incorporating yourself in another kind of social ranking, based on your potential power.



Magicians are not allowed to own land or marry. They must earn their money in other ways, which means they must serve a lord or lady who can afford to keep a magician at their court. Thus, even magicians are not their own masters. Magic comes at a terrible price, and not only a financial one. Someone has to pay the price of power. This is a cost that you might think is nothing... Until you realise you are getting weaker from it. Magicians do not want to pay the price themselves and are instead using knowing or unknowing victims.

## Intrigues

To play out intrigues in a closed context, you must be very sure of your place in it. This is really the hardest work for the intrigue writers. The larpers must have relations and know things about almost everyone attending the larp, as the setting is that you have been at court for years. You must know your family history, what your demesne looks like and legends about heroes and holy places. You have secrets that could cause the downfall of your entire house if they were brought into daylight. You might have ambitions to take over the



kingdom or the world - or to land a suitable consort. The larpers need to have their family tree, heraldic arms and holdings created. This also means that the larpers cannot write their own intrigues. The advantage is that you as a player know more than usual about your character's background. This gives you opportunities to intrigue subtly and to get to know your character better. The rule also says that you must always be polite, no matter what. If you want to insult somebody, do it as eloquently as possible, weaving the insult into the conversation. Never lose your face. Quarrels and conflicts are to be taken care of outside, where nobody can see you. Preferably with an assassination if you have to kill somebody. At court, the only thing you can be sure of is that your closest friend is your deadliest enemy.

Another very important thing is to make everyone at court essential for the story through their intrigues. Whoever you are, you carry a piece of the puzzle. Being highly ranked does not mean you are the only one that counts. You have to play out your part through the others, as you yourself are hindered from moving, either literally (by the court ceremonial) or by the Rule.

## Summary

It is very common among fantasy larpers to break the given context instead of taking advantage of it. In the end, you have so many context-breakers that you don't have any context anymore. Many conflicts and interesting choices for characters disappear since you can do as you like anyway, without any consequences. We wanted to make a larp where the characters have to obey the rules of court, forcing them to use brains and wits, while at the same time displaying a formidable court life in nice costumes and a grand setting. We thought this might turn larpers away, but it has not.

Instead, they have almost started a competition about who's the better dresser. A standard question from the larpers before a larp is: "How many costume changes a day does this larp require? Three?"

We are still working on perfection – one day we might get there! - And we are having a lot of fun along the way!



*A snapshot of the Emperor's Seneschal, the Duke of Ekhaga and his entourage. An example of how you dress at court in the campaign.  
(Photo: Staffan Rosenberg)*



## A very short summary of the current plot of *Malcontenta*

The old empire, Novion, has existed for three thousand years. Four kingdoms were able to keep some of their sovereignty when the empire was founded. The larp takes place in the northeastern one, Nordeport. These days the empire is slowly falling apart.

The Emperor is bewitched or just deceived by the Empress, who is apparently using black magic to get even more power. The very young King of Nordeport has declared that he breaks his oath of fealty to the Emperor. The elves, hated and feared, supported him in this decision, giving him the ancient crown of Nordeport, created by elves thousands of years ago. This has caused a lot of conflicts between his subjects, some of them supporting the King, some the Emperor. The Emperor stands ready to strike back, planning to take Nordeport by force as soon as the very hard winter becomes spring. Some say that the winter is sent by the Goddess of Water and will last forever.

Meanwhile, the nobles try to get as many advantages as possible from the King or the Emperor in these times of change. Some of them are happy just to keep their head, others want to get more land or honorable titles. The story continues...

**CREDITS:** Organized by Therese Tangen, Henric Granholm & Jessica Jansson.  
10 runs since 2012

**LOCATIONS:** Summertime larp at Kvarntorps Herrgård in Värmland. Banquet larp at Salsta Slott (2015 run).

**DURATION:** Summertime larp lasting 3 1/2 days. Shorter Banquet larp lasting 1 night.

**PARTICIPANTS:** 60 (approx.)

**PARTICIPATION FEE:** Summertime larp: 130 €. Banquet larp: 33-44 €.

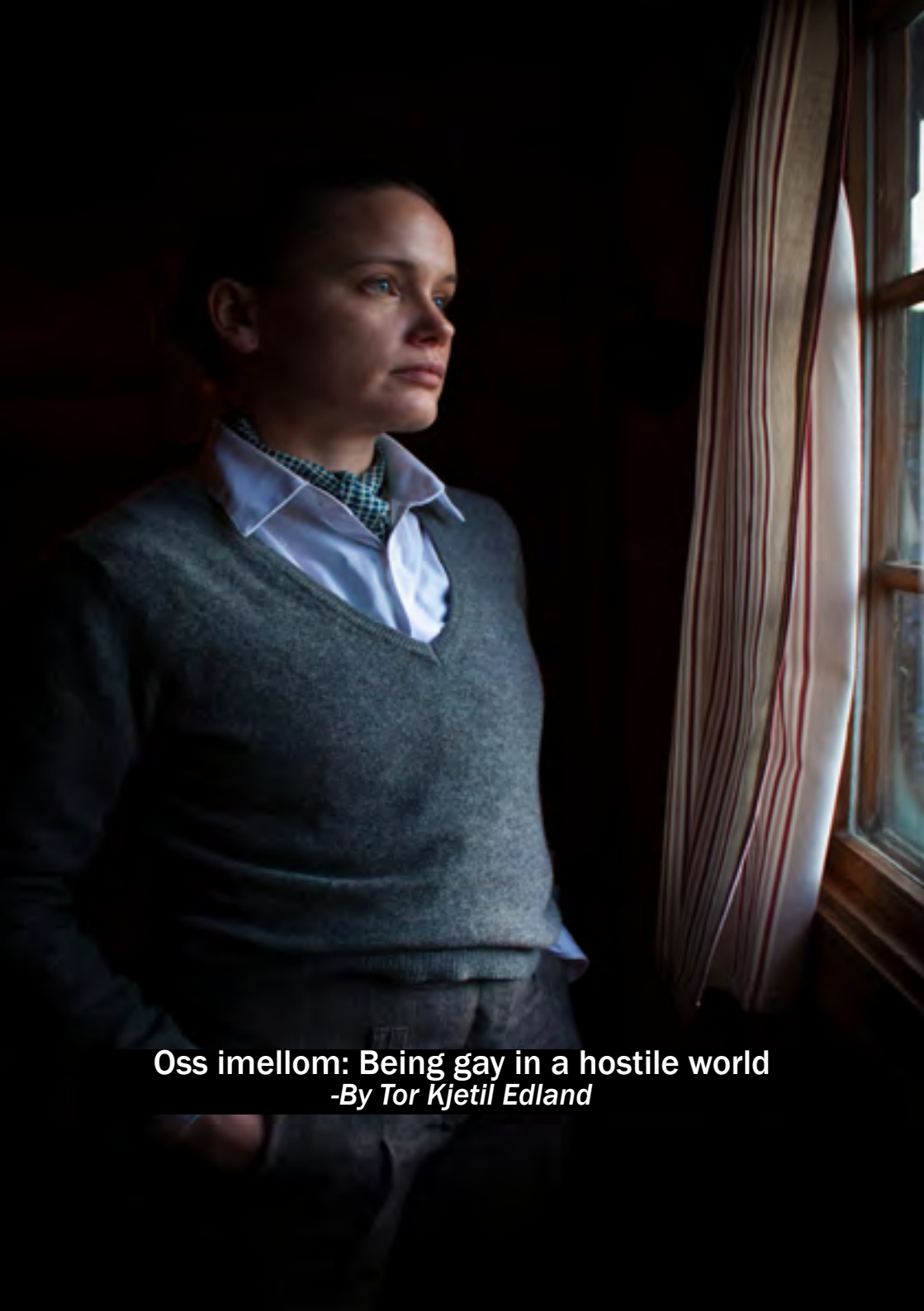
**GAME MECHANICS:** Illusion of court life, 'Living Intrigues'.

**WEBSITE:** [www.malcontenta.se](http://www.malcontenta.se)



*Tactical overview (Photo: Anonymous)*





**Oss imellom: Being gay in a hostile world**  
-By Tor Kjetil Edland

*Oss imellom* (“*Us Together*”) is a larp about the very beginning of the gay and lesbian movement in Norway. The larp was written and organised by Jeanita Hatlestrand and Tor Kjetil Edland. It is set in Oslo in 1951 and the first, and so far only, run of the game took place in November 2015 in Oslo. The larp is written for 20 characters and is played over two days with a break between day one and day two.

### Why a larp in this setting?

In 2015 the US Supreme Court ruled that the denial of marriage licenses to same-sex couples was against the constitution. In many other countries, including Norway, similar same-sex marriage laws have been passed during the last two decades, together with laws outlawing discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. Public opinion has shifted drastically in a short time. While politicians in most countries could previously count on pandering to homophobia among voters as a sure way of gaining popularity, Ireland proved in 2015 that it is now possible to win a popular referendum in favor of same-sex marriage.

One of the main reasons why we believed that it would be an interesting experience for our participants to play lesbians and gays in the early 50s was that it gave them an opportunity to explore how much our society has changed in this area in a few decades. In the 1950s, participating in a homosexual scene carried with it the threat of scandalisation and loss of home and work. The larp offered an opportunity for the participants to explore how these conditions might have affected the character’s understanding of themselves, their love lives and friendships and their hopes for the future.

### The organization for city and countryside

The physical location used for the larp was a scouting cabin in Oslo, only a few minutes away from the nearest subway station. This made it possible to have a larp over two days without the need for sleeping arrangements at the game site.

The scouting cabin was also reminiscent of the type of location that the organisation actually rented in the 50s for their social gatherings, under the discreet cover of “The organisation for city and countryside”. Each of the two acts had a similar structure. The first part of each act was a general meeting with an agenda prepared by the organisers.

The topics on the agenda were inspired by information gathered from memoirs and newsletters available at the *Skeivt Arkiv*, the Norwegian LGBT archive. Beginning each act with a meeting both gave the players a chance to reflect on and act out their character’s position on issues such as *‘how public should the organization dare to be in it’s work to create greater understanding and to abolish the law criminalizing homosexuality?’* The structured meeting in a voluntary association also represented something very typical of Norway in the 50s; it was the way to go about working on improving things in society, and a large part of the population were active in one or more organizations.

Between the first and the second act, a few months had passed in-game. We set this gathering for the second act to just a few days before Christmas.





*A homosexual man of the 1950s: Indiscernable from the crowd. (Photo: Anonymous)*

## **A place to dance and flirt (with angst lurking below in the basement)**

When the meeting part of the act had been concluded the characters moved to socialising, some of them giving short performances such as poetry readings and songs. And then, after a while, the bar opened and we played music popular in the early 50s as a backdrop for dancing and flirting between the characters. In the workshop brief we explained to the players how such a party presented a unique opportunity to dance and flirt with someone of the same sex hardly present anywhere else at the time. This made the atmosphere at the party sequence of the game joyous and friendly, but also mixed with a bit of melancholy and sadness. Several of the characters had complicated relationships to some of the other characters and, just like in real life, even though the opportunity for match-making is present doesn't mean that everyone ends up with someone. Even if they do, that doesn't necessarily mean everything ends in a happily ever after. Some players commented that their characters would both experience feeling like they were in a safe place, surrounded by friends, while simultaneously feeling alone in the crowd. We believe that this was a quite accurate portrayal of how it might have been being one of the persons regularly attending these gatherings in the 50s.



During the workshop before the second act the players made Christmas decorations to change the scenography of the room a bit, and each player was given a Christmas memory from the character's past to give some emotional content to the "just before Christmas" setting.

We chose to do this as Christmas is a very family-focused holiday in our part of the world. So it's obvious that for many lesbians and gay men living at that time, Christmas could be an emotionally difficult time of the year, many of them having broken completely with their families or having the prospect of getting by another year with lies and evasions in conversations around the family dinner table. Setting one of the acts around Christmas gave us the opportunity to highlight the often difficult stories these characters would have with their families.

In the basement below the discussions and partying happening upstairs we designated a room as the black box. Here the players could play out scenes happening outside of the timeline of the main story of the larp. This could be such things as scenes from the past and fears and hopes for the future. A designated space for this type of scene has become a quite common technique in Nordic larp. Aksel Westlund contributed to our game by composing mood pieces that we played as backdrops to the scenes. The setting made it a particular good fit for this larp. The meetings in the organization were a safe place for the characters.

The black box gave players the opportunity to play out things like the fear of being exposed as a homosexual, or the fear that happiness is something that is not attainable for "people like us". An example of this was a scene in the main timeline of the larp with a couple breaking up. While this was happening they played out a future scene in the black box. One of the former couple had gotten married and met his former boyfriend while walking in the park with his wife. A quick, sad glance was exchanged but no words were said. The emotions from this possible future scene could then be brought into their play for the rest of the act when they returned from the black box to rejoin the party.



## **A historical larp**

A larp set in a time and place taken from "real" history poses the question: How close were we in portraying history as it actually happened? And to what extent can we judge the success of the larp on how close we came to this ideal of portraying factually accurate history? This is a question historical larp shares with other mediums such as historical fiction and historical movies. We never have full access to actual history, so any attempt to make a piece of art or entertainment that is "historical" will always be based on interpretations of the sources we have available. And it can be a legitimate choice to sacrifice some historical accuracy for playability or dramatic effect.

For *Oss Imellom* we tried to be open about some of the choices that we made that probably diverged from historical accuracy. For instance, we included some characters representing networks of working class gay men at the time.

*... Or easy to spot. (Photo: Anonymous)*



These characters had a style and way of approaching life as a homosexual person that differed from the security-conscious and discreet middle-class people that was the background from which most of the characters came. Learning about the strict evaluations of prospective members, we realised that these men would most likely not have been granted membership. For the larp, however, we found it more interesting to include them in the setting, both in order to increase the diversity of character expressions and the dynamics between the characters and in order to use the opportunity to represent part of the homosexual scenes that were present in Norway at the time, including those that existed outside of the organisation portrayed in the larp.

### A rerunnable larp?

This larp was set in a defined time and location: Oslo 1951. All the written material is in Norwegian and several of the characters have important life events in relation to the Second World War and Germany's occupation of Norway in 1940 - 1945. To do a rerun of the game set in a different country at a different time would require translation and some rewriting.

The core concept of the game is transferable, though: The core setting is a time and place where homosexuality is taboo and criminal and where some people have just started gathering in an organisation to find fellowship and try to change society. In many countries there would be a time and place that fits this description. In some places in the world this could even be made into a larp in a contemporary setting.

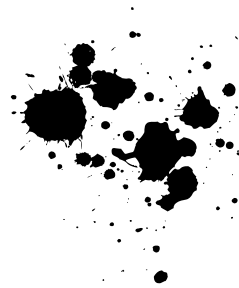
**CREDITS:** Written and organized by Tor Kjetil Edland and Jeanita Hatlestrand. Soundscapes for black box: Aksel Westlund

**DURATION:** 2 days (break between day 1 and 2)

**PARTICIPANTS:** 20

**PARTICIPATION FEE:** 50 €. No additional financial support

**GAME MECHANICS:** Black box for out-of-timeline scenes, Musical backdrop.



*The larp simulates a time when same-sex relations were frowned upon by the majority.  
(Photo: Anonymous)*





**Krigshjärta 7:  
The Gamification of Nordic Fantasy Larp**  
-By Hampus Ahlbom

## Setting of *Krigshjärta 7*

*Krigshjärta* (Eng. *War Heart*) 7 was the latest addition to the *Krigshjärta* campaign, a Swedish war larp campaign that has gained international recognition since its founding in 2006. The campaign uses a collectively developed renaissance low-fantasy fiction available online for public use. The main story follows the ongoing conflict between the capitalistic trade federation 'Gillet' (Eng. 'The Guild') and the fascist-communist empire of 'Cordovien' (Eng. 'Cordova').

The setting of *Krigshjärta 7* was a small incursion into the Cordovian homeland by Guild special forces as part of a war over a natural resource known as Cordovium, required to cure a viral disease that was spreading all over the world. The scenario took place in the mining areas of Cordovia, where this resource is extracted, and focused primarily on holding and extracting this resource instead of eliminating the enemy force. All players played soldiers or civilians in attachment to one of the armies, each with a main camp for immersion style roleplaying.

Both camps were separated from one another by a small game area used for combat, consisting of primarily wide open fields, a lake and some forested areas. At this game area three outposts and two minor bases were built and decorated to be used during the game as control points. The game attracted roughly 400 players and took place between Tuesday the 9th and Sunday the 14th of June 2015. Players were in-game around the clock between Wednesday lunch and Saturday afternoon.

## Swedish war larp 101

War larp in Sweden is not only widespread and grand, but a style that has rapidly grown in popularity during the last years. Where traditional Swedish fantasy larp generally avoids the international brand "Nordic larp" - major productions like *Granland* or *Krigshjärta* actively describes themselves as Nordic larp in order to attract international players. The style tries to uphold an immersionist tradition, while at the same time promoting gamistic elements like combat.

Swedish war-larping has many similarities to Swedish fantasy-larping, primarily a long tradition of historical design and craftsmanship mixed with a strong culture of DIY. Both personal costumes and shared equipment (like tents, furniture and banners) are amongst many players' top priorities.

Because of this, Swedish fantasy-larping fields some of the highest quality costumes and equipment available on the market today. Swedish war-larping is no different. Groups at a Swedish war larp is the organizational basis of the game. Groups create their own fiction and characters (though strictly within the bounds of the scenario) and are in charge of food, lodging and transportation as well as of all costumes and props. Because of this, most groups also play a squad together. Most games have substantial demands on in-game tents and furniture being historically accurate, and generally do not offer an off-game camping site. Almost all games take place at locations in the wilderness. Organizers supply the overall scenario and fiction, the location as well as drinking water and sanitary solutions for all participants.



## Location, location, location!

Traditionally, Swedish fantasy larp organizers look for a cheap location in order to save money, the result almost always being several logistical problems and a lot of game-time wasted taking care of easily solvable logistics like getting water or having to go very far to get to the bathroom. Sweden has also often had problems with large distances between the two camps, resulting in less action on the game area and long marching distances tiring the players. We wanted to change this. We rented a fantastic location with toilets and fresh water easily accessible all over the game area. A big lake alongside the entire area for in-game bathing, as well as off-game showers and electricity right by the camp. The area was a maximum of one square kilometer large, resulting in very short marching distances and the feeling that the enemy was always close by... Which they also were! We adapted the scenario accordingly, issuing a constant “hold the line”-order, allowing all squads to go into battle whenever they wanted – without having to wait for in-game orders from commanders.

## The rejuvenation of Swedish war larp

Making *Krigshjärta 7* we wanted to breathe new life into a scene that had been doing the same thing for ten years. We wanted to take a new look at the game design, so we did. To this end, the organisers recruited controversial game designer Hampus Ahlbom as well as the original founder of the campaign, Robin Berglund. The idea was to find a new approach to many of the common problems that had been plaguing Swedish war larps for years. We did.



The first thing we realized was that the entire game was heavily reliant on players of in-game officers on both sides successfully synchronizing the time and place for battles using (literally) medieval methods that failed most of the time. Instead, we created a system where the players were required to occupy different control points at scheduled times, earning points if they succeeded. We put a lot of energy into informing the players about this and thus managed to create several “naturally occurring” times and locations for those who wanted combat. It worked wonders. We had at least three times as much combat as ever before, something that we had always wanted. When the officers no longer had to worry about synchronizing battles, they could suddenly focus more on role-playing and upholding the immersion in camp. We wanted to use this, and we also wanted to make the players feel and think that the in-game world was bigger than only the larp area. So we started using NPCs and missions.

## NPCs and missions

Four to five times a day the game masters would send in a mission to the in-game officers, usually one mission per side. The objectives were very specific, and if the mission was successful, the team was awarded points. The missions would arrive in the form of a printed off-game document with some short fictional information plus the time, the place and the mission objective. The officers would then use that information to create an in-game order, adding all the fiction and roleplaying required to uphold the illusion. A squad would be dispatched, which was limited to a certain amount of soldiers and armor in order to ensure that they met a balanced resistance whenever possible. As most players participated in the game as part of a squad, the goal was that each squad at the game would get to experience at least one mission. Many had two.

*Officer in The Guild. (Photo: Eva Wei)*

The missions added an extra flavor to the game. This was partly because the players would almost always only encounter NPCs on the missions, thus adding to the illusion of there being a world outside the game area (new faces), but also because suddenly the game was more than just fighting the other side and hoping to win. The quests rarely had winning a battle as the objective – more often they were about rescuing someone, infiltrating a place or laying an ambush (and much more). The idea was to give the players a broader immersion into the life of a soldier. Because the missions were always created and performed by the game masters and NPCs we could guarantee a time and place to the players. As none of our NPCs participated in the actual game, but rather stayed in an off-game house when not performing missions – ready to act whenever required.



## Winning the game

For a long time Swedish fantasy-larping has frowned upon the concept of winning a larp, arguing that competitiveness creates friction and conflicts and that larp is an experience we create together.

This works well until you involve large gamist elements, where the will to win is a fundamental driving factor. *Krigshjärta* has always had an outspoken policy that one team can win the game, and traditionally this has been done by winning the final battle on the last day, thus ignoring all battles up until then. We thought this to be unfair and cheap.





Instead, we created the system with control points to be controlled and missions to win. Players would generate points for their team (Gillet or Cordovien) and at the end of the game the winning team would be granted victory in the fiction. Winning a battle didn't generate any points at all, thus making it possible to win all the battles but still lose the war. The result was a more fair competition, but it also made mastering not only combat but also logistics, endurance, speed and tactics necessary in order to win the game. The current score was updated several times a day throughout the game, and published at a discrete location in each camp. In the end the result was very close – with a victory for Cordovien.

## Conclusion

One of the most important things to know is that this new, and somewhat controversial, game design was in no way mandatory for the players to use. We actually called it *Krigshjärta Plus* and presented it as an add-on to the traditional way of playing *Krigshjärta*. Players were free to use it (or not) as they pleased. That being said, the goal of the new game design was primarily three things:

*Guild auxilia charging the Cordovian lines. (Photo: Kalle Burbeck)*



-To improve the quality and quantity of battles.

-To solve off-game communication problems between the two sides.

-To give players more control over their in-game experience, while at the same time maintaining the illusion of a military hierarchy.

This makes the game design of *Krigshjärta* 7 different from many other game designs in the Nordic larp tradition, primarily because very little of it focused on improving roleplaying or character immersion. Instead, it was a game in the word's more traditional meaning, with a clear set of rules for achieving victory, a scoreboard and a tactical scenario. By creating an in-game scenario with a constant in-game order (hold the line) we gave players the option of commandeering themselves into battle when they wished, without feeling that they betrayed the illusion by doing so. This was highly appreciated and saved many players a lot of downtime.



By creating a clear set of rules for achieving victory, we ensured that the game was not dependent on off-game communication between the officers of both sides in order to synchronize battles. This left these players free to instead create bonus content that the game was not dependent on, for example focusing on maintaining and improving the in-game illusion. This removed a lot of off-game responsibility from the officer players, which led to an improved experience for both them and those playing soldiers.

By using control points to generate points at specific times every day we managed to create a naturally occurring time and place for battle, so that those who wished to fight could do that without feeling that they were breaking the illusion. This made it possible for players to schedule their game, allowing them to plan festivities, heavy scenes or battles for themselves in good time. This allowed each player to have a broader playing style, being able to focus on different play during the game – without having the threat of an alarm constantly hanging over them.

The game design was a huge success and is already influencing future war games being created, both in Sweden and abroad.



*Army clerk in the command tent.  
(Photo: Torbjörn Walberg)*

**CREDITS:** Hampus Ahlbom, Robin Berglund, Peter Edgar and Maria Rodén.

**DATES:** June 9-14, 2015

**LOCATION:** Kopparbo, Västmanlands län. Sweden.

**DURATION:** 3,5 days in-game. 5 days with workshops.

**PARTICIPANTS:** 400

**PARTICIPATION FEE:** 50, 70 or 100 €, depending on income.

**GAME MECHANICS:** Immersive camp game and gamistic wargame

**WEBSITE:**  
<http://www.krigshjarta7.com/>



**Real Men: Defining gender identities**  
-By Mo Holkar and Kevin Burns

*"Take your mind back, I don't know when  
Sometime when it always seemed  
To be just us and them  
Girls that wore pink  
And boys that wore blue  
Boys that always grew up better men  
Than me and you"*

Joe Jackson, *'Real Men'*

*Real Men* is a chamber larp for 4–6 players, lasting four hours, designed by Kevin Burns and Mo Holkar. It's about the lives and friendships of men – taking a group of characters who meet as young adults, and following them through thirty years as events befall them and their relationships evolve and develop.

The precursor to *Real Men* is a similar game, known variously as *Women on the Verge...* Or *These Are the Days of Our Lives*, in which players build a group of female characters and trace their friendship as their lives develop.

When Kevin and Mo started working together on a parallel larp for men, though, it was decided to focus on the challenges men have in friendship: In being vulnerable to each other; in showing their feelings; in asking for and receiving help. Male difficulty in communicating, and the pressure that patriarchal society places upon men to behave in a certain range of ways, became a major theme of the *Real Men* game.

The game spans 30 years, beginning in the 1980's of the Joe Jackson song *'Real Men'*, redolent of that decade's confusion around male identity, masculinity and sexuality.

*"What's a man now, what's a man mean?  
Is he rough or is he rugged?  
Is he cultural and clean?"*

....

*Time to get scared, time to change plan  
Don't know how to treat a lady  
Don't know how to be a man"*

The characters are then in their late teens in the summer after completing their schooling, meeting for the first time. The 'metabox' technique, which involves the player drawing an invisible screen around his head, delivering an internal monologue that would be heard by other players but not by the characters, allows the players to explore the distance between the words of the characters and their true inner lives.

Subsequent scenes, each of 30 minutes, and accompanied by a period-appropriate soundtrack, were set in the 1990's, 2000's and in the present day, as the characters, who have become friends, reunite in various situations to explore their relationships and reflect on their life's journey over the previous decade.

Throughout, *'Real Men'* is used as a focus. It prepares the players for entry into the larp, and it closes each of the four scenes. Players know when they hear it that there are only four minutes to go until the end of the scene. And the meaning of the song's lyrics – its questioning approach to the perception of masculinity – will shift for each player, as their character evolves through the scenes towards middle-age.







Tommy (centre) welcomes his friends to his beachside villa.  
Real Men playtest, Lewes, UK. 4th October 2015. (Photo: Kevin Burns)

*"There was one deciding turning point for my character and my experience in the larp: The Game Master told us that the next reunion would be in a luxurious villa on the French Riviera, and asked whose place it was. Someone suggested my character and I decided it would be a very interesting turn. He hadn't rented it, he had bought it: I wished to explore what the money would do their friendship. It didn't survive. My character didn't realise that until much later. At the last scene, a funeral, he was again reaching out to what he thought were his best friends and got hit with harsh words and refused hugs. He left the funeral angry and confused, and that moment of the non-received hugs was so strong that it felt like the whole larp had been a build-up to it, and also the moment that really made me feel, as a player, what the game was about."*

-Björn Thalén (Grenslandet run)



The final scene is set in a funeral parlour, with one of the characters lying dead. The identity of the corpse is up to the players, and is an opportunity for the characters to speak certain truths, reveal long-kept secrets, or of course to remain shut-down and stoic. The deceased character delivers a monologue at the opening of the scene and can also whisper suggested memories into the other characters' ears.

Background music plays an important part in *Real Men*. It serves four main purposes:

- to help create a sense of period, for those scenes set in the past;
- to help govern the emotional mood of a scene;
- to provide cover for silences, and an alibi for quiet listening;
- to provide conversation material should it be needed.

## Character Psychology

Kevin, who has a background in counselling and who has worked extensively with men's groups, created a new approach to character psychology for the game. Each character was assigned a core wound which signified a deep psychological issue that would drive behaviour over a whole lifetime. The characters were offered two responses to the core wound: The first was a fantasy, which was the vain hope that they could simply avoid dealing with the problem; and the other was a dream, which was a vision of life in which others would be less likely to suffer in the way that the character had.

So for example, a character with a core wound of 'inadequacy' would have the fantasy that he could convince others of his greatness, thus avoiding the pain of the wound; but the dream would involve a deeper engagement with the fear of inadequacy, and perhaps inspire a life's work helping people who are seen as inadequate by mainstream society. Kevin reflected on this: *"When I was young I didn't feel that being a man in a patriarchal sense had much to offer, and it's only since I turned 40 that I've begun to try to explore and reclaim an authentic masculinity. This has led me to men's groups, to playing Kohana the masculinity guru in Just a Little Lovin', and to writing Real Men with Mo. I wonder now whether this in itself has been a core wound for me."*



## Runs

The game was trialled in Lewes in the UK with some mainly inexperienced or new male larpers, including some who had never larped before but were interested in the theme of men and relationships.

Based on this experience, Kevin decided to de-emphasize the game mechanics, such as 'Event Cards', that Mo had designed for the 'sister' larps, and to use the breaks between live scenes to refocus players on their characters' psychological journey - on the characters' stories, their core wounds, and whether they were trying to live in 'fantasy' or reach for a 'dream'.

At Grenslandet 2015, although the game was open to people of any gender identification, it was interesting that only men chose to play. The players seemed to feel drawn to exploring masculinity.

Dominic is ambivalent about Martin's death.  
(Photo: Kevin Burns)



## Gender agenda

The experience of designing and running these games based on intimate and everyday details of the lives of men and women has been rewarding and illuminating. We have encountered concern about excluding players of one gender or of none; and we have met doubts about whether such a loose structure, in which players make their own game, was capable of sustaining interest. We hope that *Women on the Verge...*, *These Are the Days of Our Lives* and *Real Men* can contribute to the wider debates around gender, inclusivity and player expectations.

*"I think my moment was when I sat at the funeral and realized I've lived in fear of trying (not of failure) for all my adult life."*  
- Michael Esperum (Grenselandet run)

**CREDITS:** Designed by Kevin Burns and Mo Holkar; GM'ed by Kevin Burns

**DATES:** October 4, 2015 (Lewes) and October 31, 2015 (Grenselandet, Oslo)

**DURATION:** 4 hours

**PARTICIPANTS:** 5-6

**PARTICIPATION FEE:** None

**GAME MECHANICS:** Meta-box for internal monologues; choice of life-event cards; random draw of relationship-dynamic cards; music for timing


**WEBSITE:** None as yet. <http://www.grenselandet.net/2015/08/sibling-larps.html> is probably the only current online resource.

*Red and Dominic proving that they're not drunk. (Photo: Kevin Burns)*



*Jonathan is concerned about Martin (Photo: Kevin Burns)*





## LEGION: Blood, tears and sweat - By Petr Urban

*LEGIE: Sibiřský příběh* (*LEGION: A Siberian story*) is a larp for 54 players with pre-scripted characters, running over 48 hours, with extensive workshops dealing both with the historical context and specific needs of roleplaying. It was first performed in the winter of 2014 in the Czech Republic and there are going to be more runs of the game in 2016, both for Czech and International players.

### Setting – History reawakens

The historical setting of the larp is the dramatic period of WWI and the situation after the Bolshevik revolution and Civil war in Russia, which took place between 1917-1920. It is also an important part of Czech/Czechoslovak history, as Czech soldiers (who were called 'legionnaires' - hence the name) played an important part in the Russian Civil war.

The game itself takes part in the Siberian area (which is of course represented by Czech forests) during Christmas 1918, after the end of WWI. The players are given exact information about the social and political situation – the world war has ended, but the civil war in Russia is at full strength and after the incident at Chelyabinsk (a revolt of the Czechoslovak legion against the Bolshevik regime on May 14th, 1918), the Red Army has in fact declared a war on the legionnaire forces. The situation is grim and winter is hard and unforgiving. It is time to get to the port of Vladivostok and then sail home. The help is only the whole of Russia away.

### Workshops - Be prepared

As mentioned above, the extensive workshops are essential for the players in order to fully understand the game and its mechanics. One can divide the workshops into the following parts:

In the historical workshops, players are introduced to the complicated situation in Czechoslovakia during and right after WWI (Czechoslovakia was only recently formed, after a long period of being a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) and also with the issues of Bolshevik Russia. We also focus on the different approaches towards the idea of communism in that period and possible interpretations suitable for the larp, as many real legionnaires found this ideology rather (or extremely) appealing.

Also, we deal with the theme of racism - the Czech and the Slovak soldiers were often not as friendly towards each other as one would think nowadays and we do not want to omit this (in our opinion important) part of the war. Another part of the workshops focuses mainly on the specific style of the larp - the players need to be able to "stay in character" during marches, which represent the main part of the larp itself. Players are not only given hints and suggestions about how to avoid getting into a mood of "just moving from here to there", they are also taught how this typical war phenomenon affected expressions of love, friendship or sadness and how to import these into the game.

Then, in the form of legionnaire training, the players are given careful instructions on how to operate the acoustic guns and foam melee weapons. The rules for conflicts and fighting are also discussed.

Finally, all players are given a costume for the character they are going to play and given instructions on how to play it effectively during the game. All the workshops mentioned above are based on the principle of discussion (as well as trial and error) rather than a monologue, thus making them as interactive as possible.

## The Game – A Long Way Home

The main part of the story focuses on a desperate struggle of more than fifty Czechoslovak legionnaires who long for one simple, yet almost impossible thing: To return home. They have to travel through forests and fields for two days on foot, struggle with the hardship of the Russian winter, the Bolshevik regime and also with each other.

### We're all in this together... or not

As mentioned above, the players and their characters form one unit of legionnaires, but it would be a mistake to think that the characters are all the same. The characters are divided into several smaller groups, and each of these has a common issue it has to deal with - be it treachery in the ranks of the group, an aggressive leader or the need to outshine all the other legionnaire groups.

Moreover, not all the players are soldiers. The unit also consists of a group of Red Cross personnel (which played a crucial role in saving the lives of wounded soldiers in WWI) and many civilians, who have all happened to join the unit for one reason or another. Another special group is a family of three Siberian hunters, who are the only ones that can find the way through the war-torn territory... For a price.



Furthermore, each character has his or her own goals that they hope to achieve. Some of them are noble, some of them are selfish... All of them are imaginative. Together, they all aim to recreate the atmosphere of the war and to illustrate how it affected the people caught inside it.

*„My dearest Vlasticka. I do not know if this letter ever gets to you, but I hope so. That's all we've got. Here in Siberia, one is offered only winter, suffering and a bullet fired by the Bolsheviks. But we have to return. We try. Just one step after another. I can do it. For you, Vlasticka. For you.“*

- Excerpt from the diary of a brother legionnaire

### The Characters and their Themes

The main goal in creating the roles was to create interesting, yet believable, characters, the morals of whom are dramatically tested by the horrors of war. During the creation and preparation of the game (the totality of which took approximately 14 months of working one or two days each week) we decided to form each of the characters around the following three Themes:

*How was this character affected by war? - Does he or she see it as a perfect opportunity for a better life? Do they hate it because it has robbed them of a loved one? Has this character had some horrific experience during the war?*

*Wounded soldiers just have to hope for the nurses to come in time...*

(Photo: Lukáš Makovicka)

*How does the character feel about his or her homeland? - Do they sympathize with the newly formed Czechoslovakia? Is his or her home in Russia? Is this character just searching for a new chance to settle down?*

*How does this character feel about heroism? - Is he or she a coward? Does he or she laugh at this idea? Is he or she an iconic person, with inner fears of letting the others down?*

Combining all the above themes and adding other important socio-historic background, examples of characters include a sister of The Red Cross who pushes herself above her limits in order to save everyone, a lieutenant who looks after his unit, two young lovers caught in the flames of war and many other personal stories, many of which are based on or inspired by the diaries of real legionnaires.

*“After the game, the word “brother”... It completely changed its meaning for me. Completely.”*

- Reaction of one of the players







Just a brief moment of fun in cold Russia. (Photo: Lukáš Makovička)

**CREDITS:** Adam Pešta (head of production); David František Wagner (head of the story team); Eva Mlejnková (characters design, story design, head of costumes), Madla Urbanová (characters design, story design), Ondřej Hartvich (props, story design), Lucie Chlumská (characters design, creative team), Petr Urban (story design, characters design); Hana Maturová (communication), Hana Lauerová (communication), Jakub Philip (communication), Milan Korba (web), David Michálek (graphics); Lukáš Makovička (promotional photos), Ondřej Petrášek (document research), Jitka Pešková (document research), Ondřej Benda (production), Václav Průša (weapons)

## War is just for guys!

Although the majority of the roles are male, there are many opportunities for women to participate in the larp – and their positions and dilemmas are often much more difficult than those of men! As mentioned before there are the nurses of the Red Cross, who often have to operate on wounded soldiers in the field. There are also many female civilian characters; representatives of the group who, along with their counterparts in tortured Russia, suffered the most during WWI.

Finally, there are the roles of women soldiers, who have joined the ranks of the legionnaires for various reasons and now fight alongside their male comrades-in-arms. In *Legion: A Siberian story*, female characters play a very important role, as without them, their suffering, determination and kindness, the war would not have been what it was.

## Legionnaire Diaries - the thing you want!

During the historical research for the larp, valuable information was gained from the diaries of the legionnaires, who tried to capture this period of their lives on paper. In *Legion: A Siberian Story*, each player is also given a diary before the game. This happens for two reasons; it gives them an opportunity to relax in-game and to write down all their thoughts (and any stress they may be experiencing) on paper. Also, it contains pre-written suggestions and tips to help the participants play their character. The pre-written part is divided into sections, each corresponding to a part of the journey, and at each of its stops (abandoned houses, trade stations etc.) a player is presented with some suggestions for play. At the end of the game, each player keeps their diary as a reminder of his or her game.

## Conclusion

*Legion: A Siberian Story* is a Czech larp for 54 players, the story of which takes place during the Russian Civil War in 1918-1920. It deals with the themes of war, heroism and homeland. It presents the player with the possibility to feel the atmosphere and harsh conditions of war and its horrors and dangers.

Players perform not only roles of soldiers, but also those of civilians, nurses, doctors and other people whom the war affected. Next runs of the game are taking place in February 2016 (including an international run) with possible runs in the winter of 2016.



**DATE:** winter 2014, spring 2015 (several runs)

**LOCATION:** Hvožd'any, later Rabštejn nad Střelou

**DURATION:** 37 hours + 8 hours of pre-game workshops

**PARTICIPANTS:** 54 players per run

**PARTICIPATION FEE:** 100 €. International price is 240 € due to the price of translation.

**GAME MECHANICS:** Pre-scripted characters, pre-game workshops, rules for combat, act structure, 360 illusion





**Murder by Midnight:  
Murder seen through the eyes of children**  
- By Eskil Mjelva Saatvedt

*A murder mystery placed in the rich uncle Charles O'Brian's summer estate. The year is 1923, we are playing members of the English upper class, located somewhere along the English coastline. We are here to celebrate his 50th anniversary together with children, siblings, friends and servants. A family larp in an Agatha Christie crime novel. A larp written for all ages, by children.*

## How it all came to be

One evening at Anita Myre Anderson's house Vilde (12), Tuva (12), Yr (12) and Sigrid (adult) went inside, and when they came out an hour later they had decided to write a larp. It was to be set in 1920s England and be a murder mystery. All three girls are 2nd generation larpers, with a lot of children's larps and a few larps for adults under their belt. Their parents are amongst the most active and experienced larp organisers in Bergen.

*Frifond* approved our application for funding, we found a wonderful place on the coast of Norway, at the *Bergen Sailboat organisation's* house at Stolmen, Austevoll. The house was perfect; museum quality. The date was set, one of the parents dished out a web page and a signup form. It was a fact that the larp was going to be held.

## The game is on

A scream was heard from the living room. Some girl had stumbled onto the corpse of Charles O'Brian's secretary, Rose Everdeen. She was lying dead on the floor, dressed only in her nightgown. The children were hushed away, a pharmacist and a nurse looked at her and photographs were taken before the corpse was moved to a better location - there was, after all, a 50th anni-

versary to celebrate. Scotland Yard was later contacted, right before the English breakfast was served. Rose Everdeen had been murdered, and the murder mystery was unfolding.

Two days later, when people woke up as themselves in the morning, the fictional family was in pieces. Another murder had occurred. A few of the once so wellborn family members were going to jail. Some were going to America to get rich, some would take jobs as stunt pilots or mechanics. A successful larp had been pulled off by 3 young girls, with assistance from Sigrid and their parents.

## The main murder plot

The murder plot were set up so a lot of people had reason to kill her. Rose Everdeen was not a good person and had blackmailed more than a few of the characters. Some of the things she had blackmailed them for were not even legal, like the theft and smuggling of art, homosexuality, drug trafficking and murder. To save their uncle and father, two of the characters had then killed Rose to protect Charles, as she was blackmailing him for murdering his wife 10 years before.

## The ideas of children

As part of the planning, all plots and stories the children came up with had to be used. So stories like: "One of the boys found a big emerald in an elephant poop" had to be written into the storyline. It then became a theft gone wrong, the gem was hidden in a banana to escape the police, the banana eaten by an elephant, and the gem was lost.



Amy Blackwood (9) stood there with a big smile on her lips. The two neighbor boys David (13) and Isac(13) Collins, and her best friend Emma(9) had just told Charles their amazing story. Charles had shouted down the hallway for Mrs Blackwood who came walking in from one of the back-rooms. "Mom, I have saved us. We don't have to sell the house." She looked up at her mother who stood there, confused, as she got hugged. "I have earned 500 pound sterling." The boys then retold the story. "When we were in India and visited our father this winter he took us tiger hunting. In a break my brother poked a pile of elephant dung, and we found a gemstone. We just sold the stone to miss Porter for 2000 pound. The two girls helped spy on her and negotiated the price, so we are splitting the sum in four." The boys grinned proudly while Mrs Blackwood stood there, confused, with tears in her eyes.



## A larp created by children, for families

What was special about this larp was that it was mainly written by children and had a lot of participants under the age of 18. I would call it a 'family larp'. The age limit was set to "you have to be able to stay in character for 48 hours", and we had both grown-up larpers and their children participating. Two of the children had not been to a larp before, while most of them, as well as of the adult players, were more experienced.

*"This larp felt just like any other larp. I did not notice it was written by children".*

-Stated by one of the players.



Group picture. (Photo: Kristine Pettersen Grønningsæter)

## To write a larp assisting my daughter

To write a family larp together with family is a lot of work. The children fail when the plots get too detailed, or when you ask them: "What sort of profession does this character have?", and have to be helped with creating a lot of the plot details. They still came up with the story, the main ideas and all main intrigue, any corrections by the grown-ups had to be agreed on by them. On the other hand, as every player knew it was made mostly written by these three girls, a lot of errors were forgiven by the players. Late characters, late information and unfinished material was therefore handled very well. To me as assisting writer, it was a much more forgiving audience than is normally my experience. This continued throughout the larp and made everyone do their best, take responsibility and ignore minor flaws in game design or execution.

It was very nice to show the trade to our children. To sit there dreaming up the life of a character. Giving the character friends, motivation, secrets in a strange, but not too strange, setting. Drawing out character mindmaps, friendmaps, family trees.

Also watching the three girls create homosexual characters, learn how illegal it was back then, to see them learn about the First World War, to learn how modern the 1920 setting is and also how much things have changed since then, this was a reminder on how grown-up and reflecting my 12 year old daughter is.

To learn about the 1920s and early 1900s was a challenge for them. We fell back to the most commonly known things from the time like the wrecking of the Titanic, The Great War, excavations in Egypt, known occult groups in India (like the one from *Indiana Jones*), female stunt pilots, female Metropolitan Police (who got the right to arrest people in 1923), smuggling, jazz



music, dance lectures, colonies... And we spent some time on discussing how male/female differences was part of the culture, also children/adults, poor/rich, and how this could have been a 100 years ago.

When people participate in a larp written by children they expect to play with the children, and almost everyone took their turn playing with them. The children all had proper characters; very short and funny characters for the youngest ones, and more serious characters with personal plots and intrigues for the teenagers. To stay outdoor a weekend, to play in the garden, fishing crabs, finding corpses, assisting in the kitchen, picking flowers for the table, baking cookies (as an emergency task in case of rain), having a obstacle course, was good and fun for all.

*"It was like a salt shaker. On friday there was some intrigue, on saturday there was some intrigue, and then, saturday evening, the top fell off."*

-Vilde, organiser.

*"The best part of the larp was going crab fishing"*

-The youngest participant.

## Conclusion

Our girls followed in our footsteps and created a larp, much like the larps in our recent history. They wanted and managed to make a larp true to their vision and the genre. Most of the players had a very good time, and I would say they did an excellent job above and beyond expectation.

*"It is good to see the future of larp in such good hands."*

- Kjell, participant

**CREDITS:** Black Cats Larp: Tuva Lovise Berge (12), Yr Helene Solberg-Mortensen (12), Vilde Andrea Mjelva Saatvedt (12), Sigrid Elena Hauge. Assisting: Anita Myhre Andersen, Eskil Saatvedt, Victoria Degenkolbe, Trond Solberg-Mortensen.

**DATE:** June 11 - 14, 2015

**LOCATION:** Bergen Seilforening, Stolmen, Austevoll, Hordaland, Norway.

**PARTICIPANTS:** 11 participants under 18 years, 23 participants over 18 years

**PLAYING STYLE:** Slow pace, making family intrigues possible and not lost in the chaos.

**BUDGET:** 3500 €

### GAME MECHANICS:

**Fighting:** The one who is attacked decides what happens.

One ghost showed up at a spiritistic ritual. All organisers were in character and played on equal terms as the others, except when it came to solving plots. Underlying order to let all secrets out.



Children running after finding a corpse. (Photo: Katherine Marion Rosland)





**Krosby-Parkers Family Dinner: A Soap Opera Larp**  
-By André Lilleland

The game was created by André Lilleland and Jørn Varhaug, and played in Stavanger area, South-Western Norway August 29, 2015. Stavanger is one of the most prosperous cities in the entire world with its immense oil-related business life. There are significant British, Americans, Dutch, French and German communities and several high-end stores, even if the population of the area is not more than about 400,000. Several artists and academics have criticized Stavanger for its lack of a cultured elite. The authors thought that it would be fun to mix Stavanger mentality with typical soap opera characteristics. We thought that it could be exciting to explore what some of the dark soap opera themes like deceit, adultery and murder would be like in a society very close to our own.

## Descriptions

There was no hard railroading in the larp, but several of the characters had specific plans for the evening written into their character description, sometimes also with suggestions as to on what part of the evening the acts might be applicable. The most important of these plans were the rich old family patriarch Tom Parker's decision that he would test his children this evening, in order to decide who was to become his successor as owner of the family company Ocean Subsea Drilling. His daughter, Ann Sophie, also celebrated her fortieth birthday this evening.

As the evening proceeds, it is revealed that his oldest son, Mark-Even, is married to his own half-sister; the second son's wife has had an affair with Tom, her father-in-law, for years, and Tom is the actual father of one of her children; Ann-Sophie, the third child, has accomplished her great work

achievements through extreme means - among other things the murder of two rivals. The youngest son, Steven-Alexander's, gay husband proves to be a leader of an organized crime network. After many dramatic acts Tom Parker faked a heart-attack and pretended to leave the building in an ambulance helicopter. He then reappeared with a final version of his will. The details of this final will were up to the player to decide.

## Inspirations

Our main inspirations were TV-series, especially worth mentioning are *Desperate Housewives*, *Dynasty* and *Hotel Caesar*. To promote the larp we made a collection of media-clips from these series with noteworthy, dramatic images. Inspiration for some of our characters also came from movies or literature and to a high degree from our own experience.

## Reactions

The larp was generally well received. In the debrief several of the members mentioned the nice flow of events, the rich imagery and how the play intensified. Most of the players also described their character's personal dilemmas and some mentioned how they struggled to reach their character's goals. We felt these reactions suggested that this larp concept had worked. As organizers we thought that our ideas were brought more successfully to life than we had ourselves expected. We think that this has much to do with the many excellent participants who contributed to this. If any of you read this, thank you!

## Perspectives

The more original elements in this larp were:

-The mechanism of negotiating the intensity level on the spot; a principle that we stressed throughout the workshop and during play. If you were assaulted, you could use the code-words “intensify” to provoke harder play or “break” to cool down. Everybody wore a tag telling what level of intensity they would like to reach in play. In this way, explicitly violent scenes could be played within safe boundaries.

-The mechanism of operating with three time-frames: Early - cool play; mid-part - upheated play; late - violent -all hell loose-play. By stating this so explicitly, players became aware of each others boundaries, and awesome scenes happened.

*“...You know the right people, have the right taste, and know what is worth knowing. You’re tuned in! You are the Krosby-Parkers!” (Photo: Frode Enge Taksrud)*



-How we stressed that the play-style should be serious. If your character cries, make it look real - don’t make a parody.

-That we suggested that the dress code should be between casual and glamorous depending on the character. It was important to us that there were at least a handful of really glamorous characters present.

-The decision that status-description should be an important part of the workshop, but with several different criteria; wealth, beauty and cool leisure-interests. In this way, different characters were able to define their own status hierarchy based on their character’s values, rather than being given a static status hierarchy.

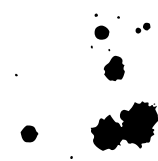
We explicitly did not want to have any specific educational or moral goal for the larp; it was supposed to be a playground for emotions, relationships and events.



*Andreas has been loose with his mouth. On Morten’s call, a thug appears on a motorcycle. “You owe me 150,000! Pay them now or I’ll beat the guts out of you! And from now on, make sure that you tell nobody nothing!” (Photo: André Lilleland)*

*“You know that you have been to a soap opera larp when dad is an alcoholic who sleeps with your sister’s best friend, and mummy spends all the family’s money while she enjoys boys that her daughter (who is also granddad’s daughter) takes home.”*

*-Participant’s Comment*



**CREDITS:** André Lilleland, Jørn Varhaug

**DATE:** August 29, 2015

**LOCATION:** Sola, near Stavanger

**DURATION:** 5 hours incl. 45 min workshop beforehand

**PARTICIPANTS:** 19 (capacity for more players)

**BUDGET:** 450 €

**PARTICIPATION FEE:** 36 € regular price, 26 € subsidized price

**GAME MECHANICS:** Family dinner; involving intrigues spread among the players





**Making Silence/Breaking Silence:  
A larp about misogynistic domestic violence  
-By Tayler Stokes**

## The Scenario

*The objective of Making Silence/Breaking Silence* is to raise awareness of and initiate a discussion about problematic narratives that encourage a culture of tolerance for domestic abuse.

The scenario intends to demonstrate the risks and challenges a victim of domestic violence faces while considering leaving their abuser. During play, players tell a story about a long-term committed intimate relationship as the intensity of abuse mounts.

One player portrays the abuser (Husband), and another portrays the victim of abuse (Wife). The remaining players act as the various people (Bystanders) the husband and wife interact with during their daily lives. What follows is a series of scenes over the course of a couple's marriage in which abuse by the Husband escalates and shifts in various forms and the Bystanders grow increasingly complicit in that abuse as the Wife attempts to find support and refuge from a terrifying, near lifelong ordeal that may end in her death.

There are valid concerns to be raised about taking the lived experiences of others as a subject for play, especially subjects as serious as domestic violence. Play in *Making Silence/Breaking Silence* is not intended to be entertaining. In this case play is an inquiry meant to result in enrichment and reflection.

The author's hope is that players will become more aware of how they knowingly or unknowingly behave in a way that reinforces tolerance of domestic violence and develop empathy for victims who are deeply ensnared in abuse situations.

## Mechanics

A notable aspect of *Making Silence/Breaking Silence* is the way in which violence and abuse are represented and made visible to participants. Depictions of emotional, psychological, physical and sexual abuse each have a way of being acted out with the use of sound, gestures and more nuanced metatechniques, while each instance of abuse is physically marked in some way on the body of the Wife player, thus serving as a constant reminder of the escalation of violence that is being ignored and allowed to go on as the scenario plays out. For example, if the Husband sexually assaults the Wife, it is portrayed by the Husband player wrapping duct tape around the Wife player's waist while the Bystander players turn their backs and look away. All of this takes place in complete silence except for the loud ripping noise of the tape, which none of the players can ignore.

The tactics representing misogynistic domestic violence during play are both subtle and moving and this scenario explores ways of getting players out of their comfort zones in what they are subjected to, what behaviors they choose to explore or witness during play and how much they are willing to lean into a serious and possibly difficult experience. *Making Silence/Breaking Silence* also seems to highlight new ways in which players need to provide support to each other during play and how we do this through gesture and awareness, while engaging with the subject matter to the best of our ability. The text encourages a great deal of care and awareness from the facilitator, and does everything to ensure a play group doesn't pick up the scenario at random but is instead fully informed about the nature of the scenario.



## Experience

There are few scenarios of this kind being designed and played in the United States and there is no doubt they are valuable as a growing number of people are showing interest in alternative and engaging forms of play each year.

Local play culture has for a long time leaned towards genuine emotion, empathy and human connection not entering into a play space fully, and it has been encouraging to see players embracing experiences like the one offered by *Making Silence/Breaking Silence*.

In the very first playtest, participants were visibly reluctant to push themselves to be vulnerable. Most notably, the Husband player did not feel himself capable of acting out abuse sequences and escalating them as the game intended, not wanting to act in a way that would be hurtful or upsetting to the Wife player.

*The husband (played by Tayler Stokes) initiates a rape scene by tearing off strips of duct tape as he approaches the wife (played by Jay Sylvano). (Photo: Anonymous)*

As such, the Bystander players seemed to have trouble driving a narrative of abuse, and the overall experience most likely didn't inspire the discussion and debrief it should have.

The third playtest was dramatically different, with a new playgroup much more interested in becoming immersed in the play experience. At one point a Bystander player withdrew almost entirely from the game, feeling they had assisted in the escalation of abuse to such a degree that they could no longer continue.

That playtest saw a lot of tears, an extensive, productive debrief and closer bonds being formed between participants as a result. When escalation of abuse in this game is allowed to gradually reach its highest point and abuse sequences explore the very worst acts imaginable is when this scenario begins doing what it should - making players acknowledge the very real existence of misogynistic domestic violence in all its shapes and forms and encouraging a dialogue about it.



*The husband and wife being intimate and talking about the possibility of having a child. (Photo: Anonymous)*

When we choose as players to shy away from the content within a game for fear of guilt or reproach, we continue to avoid acknowledging the subject matter we are trying to learn more about, and in that way we risk being complicit in systems of abuse in ways we might not realize. In this way leaning in and engaging with serious subject matter responsibly is an act of positive defiance and of self-awareness.

Overall, this is a potent and thoughtfully written scenario that addresses an important aspect of veiled and socially acceptable violence against women, an exercise in support and emotional play experiences and a new narrative that can be counted as lending a voice to the victims of misogynistic domestic abuse. *Making Silence/Breaking Silence* debuted at the 2015 Stockholm Scenario Festival, and is available for download at [scenariofestival.se](http://scenariofestival.se).

**CREDITS:** Tayler Stokes (designer)

**DATE:** November 14, 2015

**LOCATION:** Stockholm, Sweden

**DURATION:** 4 hours

**PARTICIPANTS:** 4

**BUDGET:** 44 €

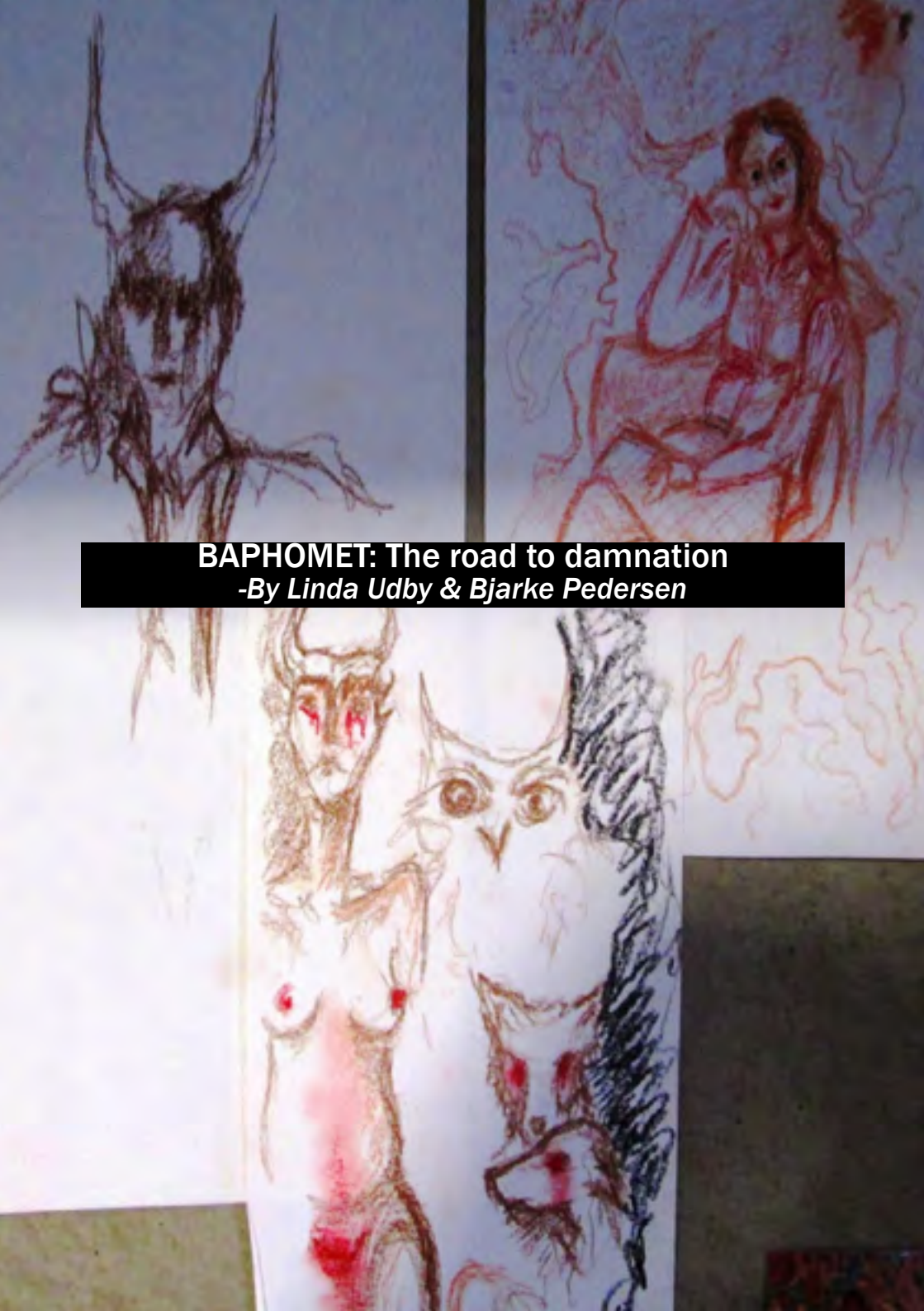
**PARTICIPATION FEE:** Free

**GAME MECHANICS:** Light; scene structure, writing and collaboration.

**WEBSITE:** [www.theactapart.com](http://www.theactapart.com)







## BAPHOMET: The road to damnation

-By Linda Udby & Bjarke Pedersen

*In 1937 all members of The Hermetic Order of Ardor disappeared without a trace. The Order was gathered to motivate its members to ascend to a higher plane of existence. Notes found at their estate suggest that, during one of the summonings run by the Lady Templar, two deities slipped through the cracks in the aether and slowly condemned the members to hell. The larp BAPHOMET was the story of what happened.*

### The Idea, story and setting

*BAPHOMET* was a larp about personal horror with the themes *terror, lust, desire, power and loss of control*. The story was about what happens when a group descends into madness together. During the larp, the two deities Pan and Baphomet possessed the characters, and their aspects filled the characters and slowly consumed them.

We wanted to explore a horror themed larp where the basis of the horror was not external monsters, but how we as human beings are capable of doing horrible things if we are pushed just a little. A larp with nearly no special effects and with a focus on loss of self-control through the use of meta-techniques.

*The Hermetic Order of Ardor* that the characters were members of was based on a mix of real hermetic orders from the turn of the 19th century. Teachings of Madame Blavatsky, Aleister Crowley and Danish couple Michael and Johanne Agerskov formed the basis of the world view of the order. The tome mediated by Johanne and written by Michael Agerskov, *Vandrer mod Lyset* (*Walking towards the light*), was used as the main inspiration.

Rituals were performed in the order to heighten the mental state of the members and initiate them in the next level. It was during one of these rituals that the two supernatural powers of the larp came into the world by mistake and started to corrupt the characters.

The outcome of the larp was locked from the beginning: Everyone would die at the end as they followed either Pan or Baphomet to their realms. The interesting part was not whether you died, but how your character would get to that horrific end; how a secret order would leave all sense of reason and mental illumination, give in to temptation and dive into madness.

The larp was set in what we called *The Vintage Era*. The vintage era looks and feels like somewhere in between 1910 and 1950. We wanted the visual style of the period more than re-enactment. So as long as the player's outfits, hair and makeup looked and felt vintage, we were happy.

### Sign up and Characters

*BAPHOMET* had three different kinds of characters: *Knights of the East and West* (regular characters), staff and a chef. Everyone was a member of the order. The ticket prices were different for the three types: 210 € for members of the order, 60 € for staff and the chef participated for free. This was because the staff participants had off-game duties, needed to help with various happenings during runtime, and could not expect to play the larp uninterrupted. The chef had so many duties during the larp preparing the food that time playing was limited.

If you wanted to participate as a member of the order, you had to sign up with a partner. The reason for this was that in the larp you would have a very close relationship with another character, and the larp demands a lot of trust between the two.

We also had a questionnaire you needed to fill in during the signup. The information requested was designed to help us understand the motivations of the player to participate and to decide what character we would like to cast the player as.

*"When signing up for Baphomet we were asked what we wanted out of the experience. I specified 'exploring the topic of madness in a safe environment', and this is one of the most valuable experiences I had during the larp."*

-Player feedback.

A secret agenda for the couple's sign up and the questionnaire was to raise the threshold for participation. A larp like *BAPHOMET* demands a lot from its players, and by making the threshold for participation high we wanted to make sure the participants really wanted to participate and not sign up and then later drop out. We also assumed that if you had signed up with a partner, the chances for you to drop out would be much lower since the partner also couldn't participate if you cancelled.



## Production and Location

Since we were only two people in the production team we wanted the production to be as easy as possible.

We rented the amazing Lungholm Slot, a pristine estate located in an isolated spot of the countryside and filled with antiques, old paintings and a grand piano. The quality of the location was one of the key elements for the larp to work and the larp was partially written for the location.

*"In my eyes the fantastic location was both the reason that the larp was a splendid experience but also the fault that it wasn't amazing. Due to the cost of the castle, the amount of participants had to be doubled compared to earlier runs of PAN. This meant that the relation drama-driven design was packed with secrets and intrigues, to a point where it became trivial that someone screamed and cried in the hallway every half hour. It ended up being 10 parallel explosions that dimmed each other, instead of five intertwined escalations that fuelled one another."*

-Player feedback

The runtime of the larp was done by the organizers from within the larp with big help from the staff and chef characters. To control the flow of the larp the organisers played the leaders (High Templars) of the order and could to some degree control the character's actions.



## The game mechanics

Since *BAPHOMET* was about possession and loss of control, we used a modified version of the possession mechanics used at *PAN* (See *Larp Yearbook 2014*).

A possession was symbolized by a necklace; one for each god. When the necklace was placed around your neck, your character's morals and ethics would fade and only the immediate needs and wants of the deity was present. You would be possessed for the other players to notice and interact with until you passed the necklace onto another player. The necklaces would move from player to player and leave a trail of intense, frightening and character altering experiences.



*A very bad omen... (Photo: Bjarke Pedersen)*

To keep track of where the characters was on their path down into insanity, each player had a glass container places on a small altar in the ritual room of the estate. Every time you had been possessed you went and put a bead in the container. A black bead for Baphomet and a white for Pan. The more beads, the more you were in the deity's control and your actions would be controlled even when you weren't wearing a necklace. We would also in some cases increase the amount of beads in a player's container if they forgot to do it themselves due to immersion in the game. This was also sometimes done to align the bead-visualisation of the progressing state of possession with the actual pace of the possession in the game.

To underline the mood of the larp, non-diegetic music played throughout the estate day and night. The music became more and more disturbing as time passed. This was also used at *PAN* and has shown to be very effective and highly recommendable.







Lungholm Castle; the larp's location. (Photo: Andreas Ingeffjord)

## The safety features

A larp like *BAPHOMET*, which is very physical and intimate, demands a lot of trust between players. We have to be absolutely sure that players are free to explore the themes of the larp and that they can opt in or opt out of a scene or interaction at any time.

First we all agreed on not disclosing what happened at the larp to anybody not playing it. This was not done to stop people from discussing or criticizing the larp; it was done to give the participants full freedom to do whatever they felt their character should, or should not do. To remove the element of competition of e.g. who larped the most intensely.

We then all agreed that the recipient of an interaction was responsible for steering the scene in a direction that was comfortable for them. This was done to remove some of the difficult nonverbal or verbal negotiations you always see in intense scenes. This works very well but needs to be workshopped before play.

We also used the *Tap Out* mechanic as a last resort if you were in a situation where you felt your boundaries were met and you didn't want to play the scene any more. You simply double tapped the other player with your hand and the scene would stop.

*"The combination of unsettling sound effects, extreme emotional play, and topics that were a little too close for comfort left me close to having to "tap out" on several occasions, but at every turn I was surrounded by caring, experienced players who made it possible for me to deal and explore, rather than fold and admit defeat."*  
-Player feedback

## The Experience

The larp experience at *BAPHOMET* was a very intense and unsettling experience. Several participants have reported weird and terrifying dreams many weeks after the larp. When the possessions started the feeling of time and space slowly crumbled and you went from one interaction to the next without any time to rest. This was both good and bad since the attrition pushed you further but also diminished the individual experience.

*"BAPHOMET was truly something else. The setting was magnificent, and as I felt that everyone shared this total suspension of disbelief, we trod down the spiral stairway into madness together. To the increasing presence of two malevolent entities possessing us in shifts. Constant immersion. Liberal amounts of champagne. Altogether overwhelming. The intense play between the couples was full of tragedy, insanity and heartbreak. And the envisioned horror was very much present throughout. This is one nightmare I long for..."*  
-Player feedback

*BAPHOMET* will be run again in 2017.



One last look in the mirror while waiting for damnation to arrive. (Photo: Andreas Ingeffjord)



**CREDITS:** Linda Udby (design, production), Bjarke Pedersen (design, production).

**DATE:** October 5-8 and 8-11, 2015

**LOCATION:** Lungholm Gods - Rødby - Denmark

**DURATION:** 3 days (2 in character)

**PARTICIPANTS:** 26 at Run 1 and 28 at Run 2. Players from Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Germany, England, Ireland, Poland and U.S.A..

**BUDGET:** 4750 €

**PARTICIPATION FEE:** 210 €

**GAME MECHANICS:** Possession mechanics, non diegetic sound, tap out safety rule.

**WEBSITE:**  
[looking-glass.wix.com/baphomet](http://looking-glass.wix.com/baphomet)

## Fairweather Manor: Edwardian larping for adults

-By Claus Raasted



*"I could die happy now I have seen this."*

The words are those of Szymon Boruta, one of our organizers for *Fairweather Manor*. The larp was originally a brainchild of Boruta and his wife Linka, who had a dream of doing a larp inspired by the TV series *Downton Abbey*. *Fairweather Manor* was the result.

### The setup

*Fairweather Manor* was a larp played on Nov 5-8, 2015. It featured 140 players from 11 different countries, coming together at the picturesque castle hotel Zamek Moszna in Poland. The setting was England in 1914, just before the Great War. The characters were nobles, servants, artists and local experts, invited by the fictional Duke of Somerset to his grand manor to celebrate his 60th birthday.

Though it is debated hotly what the term Nordic larp means, we promoted *Fairweather Manor* as a Nordic larp inspired by *Downton Abbey*. We jokingly said that it would be like 10 episodes of *Downton Abbey* crammed into a weekend. In reality I think it was more like a whole season.

### Hype and the dangers of it

*Fairweather Manor* was a very hyped game. Early in 2015 we released a 3-minute movie-quality atmospheric trailer showing off the location and some possible scenes. Due to our previous press work with *College of Wizardry* (which was done by the same team) we got solid press coverage in several big international media outlets, and interest was quite extensive. In May, we had a two-week signup period and then a lottery to determine who got to play.

This was the second time we'd launched an impressive-looking larp with very little info, and the results were impressive as well. For the 107 spots, we got 220 signups. Hoping to be able to please everyone, we booked the castle for some more days and let it be known that there would be two events instead of one, if the players were available on both dates. Many weren't, and we ended up doing just one event, but with 140 players instead of 107. That was both a curse and a blessing.

One thing that was more curse than blessing was our launching of a web page which contained only a minimum of info. It had worked well with *College of Wizardry*, but *Fairweather Manor* was a more complex beast, and when we started adding details some players realized that the larp they thought they'd signed up for wasn't the one we were making. A lesson to be learned from this is that while it's fun designing material for a full larp, it's also risky, since some players may have gotten something very different than you intended out of your sparse info.

### The lottery - oh, the humanity!

One thing we experimented with was a signup lottery. Here, we gave better chances to people who came in groups (since coordinating a 140-person larp with 10 groups of 14 is infinitely simpler than with 140 individuals) and to people who were newcomers. Sadly, we really blew this. Having a lottery with two relevant factors might seem smart, but it turned out that there were actually extra factors we hadn't thought about: Gender, character wishes, nationality... Just to name a few.



We had grandly stated that we didn't care about player gender - if someone wanted to cross-play that was fine by us. We'd just forgotten to ask the players what they wanted to play, so in the end very little gender bending went on (though there was a little). We also wanted players from different larp cultures, but hadn't included that as a relevant factor. And perhaps most importantly, if there are 43 servant roles, it doesn't really work unless there are at least 43 signups who want to play servants who also "win the lottery". Luckily, there were.

Oh, and the whole "we'll prioritize newcomers" of course went haywire since we also had the group signup and there was no plan for what took priority. In the end it was a mess, but we did as best we could and got an awesome cast of players. But that's definitely a lesson learned for both us and others; a lottery may sound nice, but it has to be thought through a lot better than we did.

## A larp well-suited for adults

*"Memories are still strong: an amazing breathless location, an atmosphere that put me, like a magic enchantment, in 1914 fulfilling one my dreams, a meeting with wonderful players of very high level, a joy for the eyes with costumes that would deserve an Oscar nomination: If I look at the photos I can think they are taken from one of the best movies. All those things made my experience at Fairweather Manor unforgettable."*

- Italian player, 57

One of the things we often fight as larpers is the perception that what we do is "child-ish". *Fairweather Manor* was an excellent showpiece in that fight.



*With authentic-looking costumes and a carefully chosen setting, Fairweather Manor was history come alive. (Photo: John-Paul Bichard)*

In the larp, one was owned by the American family and another by the Germans, so they also fit the fiction nicely.

And as one player put it afterwards: *"Not only did I get to ride in a beautiful vintage car, I got to do it in-character and in costume. That was amazing."* These experiences also became the focus of conversations and character interactions; the American who "owned" the car told us that he got a lot of interesting play because of it.

Schedules are wonderful. For *Fairweather Manor* we wanted to copy some of the success with tight schedules we'd had from *College of Wizardry*, even though the setting was different. Here, of course, it wasn't a school, but a party, though it still allowed for some scheduling. Mealtimes, activity blocks, planned speeches and events, etc. This is something I'd recommend to any larp designer (unless your larp functions best with a completely organic time table): Make a schedule that all players (and characters) are aware of. It just makes it easier to opt in to cool stuff if you're not busy with other things.

Themes were an idea we wanted to try out. Basically, we wrote one-page descriptions of 10-12 themes in our Design Document and gave basic positions for characters to have on the question of these themes. That way, every character would have a set of opinions on matters that were also interesting to other characters, making for easy conversation and unlikely alliances. The themes were central to the time ("Empire", "Art", "Servants", etc.), but the idea is easily copied for other larps. I know we'll take it with us to other projects, and I hope others will do the same.

There were many players in their 30s and 40s, and also some players in their 50s (and 60s, I think, though we didn't ask for player age, so it's just my estimates). This was very much a larp for adults, and when I have later showed the short 90 sec teaser trailer to non-larpers, none of them have had the "Oh, but this seems like a kids thing to me."- attitude.

A central goal with our big "blockbuster" larps is making them easy to approach for non-larpers, and in the case of *Fairweather Manor* I think we succeeded on at least one central point: Making adults feel welcome and at home. This isn't to say that there's anything wrong with doing larps for a younger crowd, but just that it was nice for once not having to explain that the 40+ players wouldn't stand out. They really didn't.

## Some things we'll do again and recommend

When we first launched the larp, some (potential) players contacted us and asked about costumes. 'Would it be possible to rent those?' they asked. In the end, we ended up having only 15 players rent costumes from us, but the ones that did were really happy from what we've been told. Having the option to just throw money at the problem worked wonders for some players, and it's definitely something we'll do again. It did take some work, but on the plus side we now have some nice Edwardian costumes for future larps.

We're also definitely putting in nice real-world experiences as well in future larps. Here, we rented a vintage car and a horse carriage that players could ride in.

## A success with a lot of room for improvement

*Fairweather Manor* went well - at some points extraordinarily well. Many people had amazing experiences (their words, not ours), the documentation looks fantastic, and it was a pleasure to run. Still, there were a lot of things that went less well than we'd hoped, and some things that just didn't work at all. Placing people at 10-person tables to make sure they have dinner conversation with more than just the 5 people around them - which is what would happen at a normal long table - doesn't work when there's so much noise in the room that you can only hear what the two people next to you are saying. Having a cook character when you can't cook the food anyway is less than optimal. Not having maps of the castle for servants was just a silly oversight.

*The vintage car was a big hit. (Photo: John-Paul Bichard)*



But here's where our design philosophy of rerunnable larps really pays off. One of the nice things about having a very experienced cast of players, as we did, is that their feedback is usually quite qualified. Since we're running more *FM* events in the future, this means we can "just" (no "just" about it!) sift through the feedback we've gotten and make changes accordingly. Of course, it's still a ton of work - just the character re-writing will take a lot of person-hours, but it's a more clear path.

We're very proud to have created the sandbox that the players made come alive, and we're even more happy that we get to do it again in April 2016 - this time with a lot of valuable lessons learned and a lot of both minor and major fixes.



*Gentlemen enjoying a quiet read. (Photo: John-Paul Bichard)*



To me, that's maybe the most important lesson of *Fairweather Manor*. That larps like this can function well as stand-alone one-shots, but that they work a lot better when there's room to refine and learn as you go along. And I'm REALLY looking forward to going back in April.

To wrap things up, I'll end with a quote from a participant that says everything we'd hoped it would say.

*"Saw an episode of Downton last night (S02E01). Holy shit, we really, REALLY nailed the Downton feeling. I could really see that now. Utterly impressed! Awesome work, everybody."*

-Swedish player, 30



**CREDITS:** Agata Swistak, Agnieszka Linka Hawryluk-Boruta, Akinomaja Borysiewicz, Alexander Tukaj, Beata Ploch, Charles Bo Nielsen, Claus Raasted, Dracan Dembinski, Ida Pawłowicz, Janina Wicher, Krzysztof "Ciastek" Szczęch, Krzysztof "Iryt" Kraus, Maciek Nitka, Mikołaj Wicher, Nadina Wiórkiewicz, Szymon Boruta

**DATE:** November 5-8, 2015

**LOCATION:** Zamek Moszna, Poland

**DURATION:** 4 days

**PARTICIPANTS:** 140

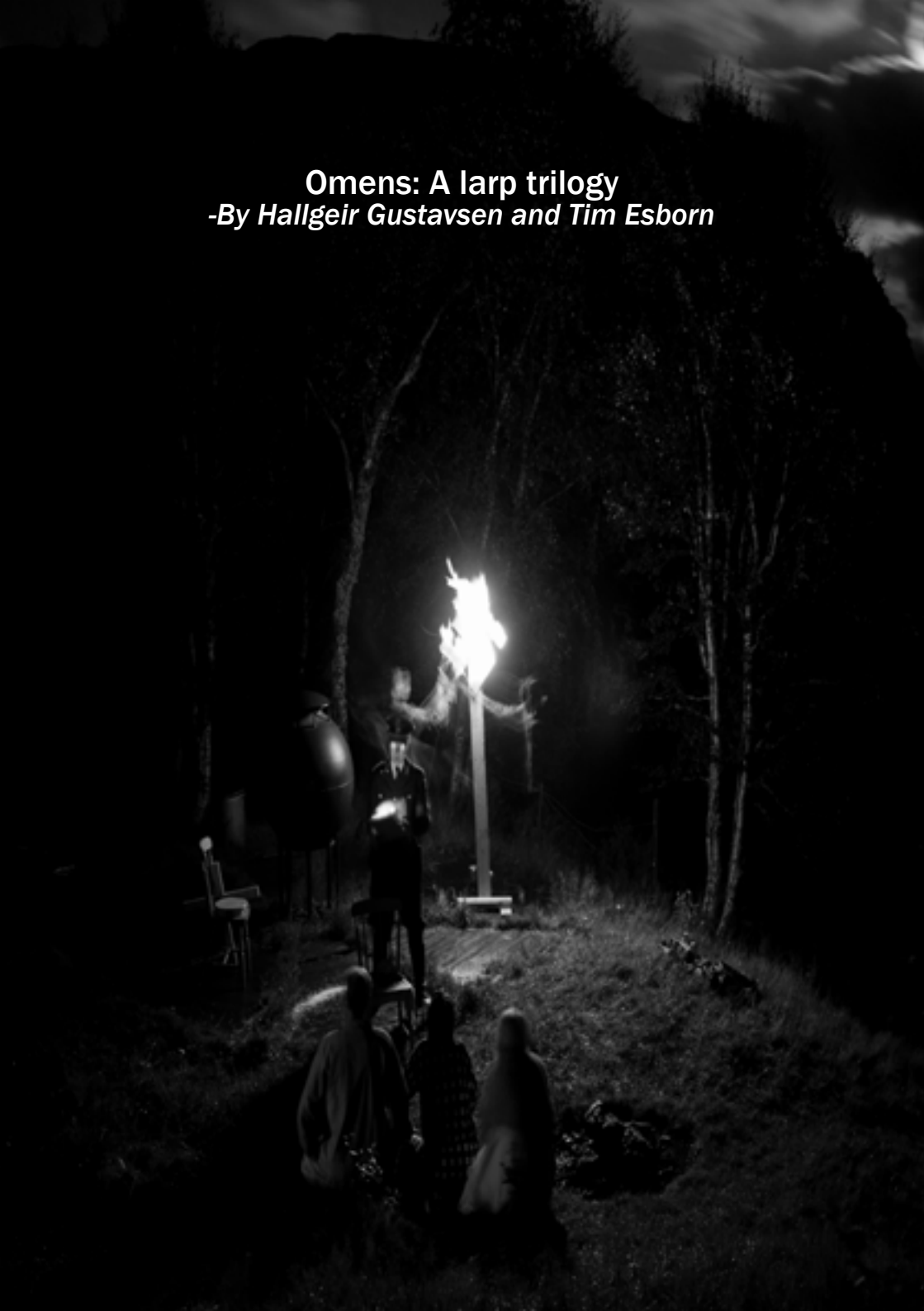
**BUDGET:** 40,000 €

**PARTICIPATION FEE:** 290 €

**GAME MECHANICS:** Gossip mechanic, "Very good, sir. The other servants will do it."

**WEBSITE:** fmlarp.com





## Omens: A larp trilogy

-By Hallgeir Gustavsen and Tim Esborn

*Omens* is set in the universe of *The Dresden Files*, a series of contemporary fantasy/mystery novels written by Jim Butcher.

In the world of *The Dresden Files*, magic is real, along with vampires, demons, spirits, faeries, werewolves, outsiders and other creatures. A more grown-up version of *Harry Potter* you might say, though the author would probably disagree. This gave us a rich world to pick from when making the larps with regards to possibilities, characters, creatures, locations and things people would recognise from the books.

Like any larp constructed around an existing world, be it *Harry Potter*, *Firefly*, WW2 or *Teletubbies*, we knew we needed to include a lot of the things from the books. But we felt we also had to come up with some of our own ideas, especially since the story would be set in Norway and center around characters not known from the books. We also agreed early on that we would not use any of the big main characters from the books in our larp. We wouldn't have the *Dresden Files* equivalent of Gandalf walking in on the players and probably not doing justice to the books. We wanted to create our own characters and stories and use the books as a familiar backdrop. This is how the idea for the main villain came about. Vali, or Våle in Norwegian, is one of the many sons of Odin, a prominent character in the books. He is pretty obscure, though, when compared to many of the other Norse gods and we were pretty sure Jim Butcher would never use him in his books. Once we had a villain in place the madness could begin.

## Going from one to three

In the beginning there was only one... Tim and Hallgeir had been to a stand-up show in Oslo and Tim pitched an idea for a larp to Hallgeir that weekend. A larp idea that would eventually morph into *Omens 3 - Consequencing Omens*. So, in the beginning we talked about one big larp set in modern time with vampires, angels, magic and so on. But then we started working on the story and the villain, and once we had created the villain we thought it would be cool to give the villain a story arc, going from good guy to bad guy and thus giving people a chance to get to know the character. What better way to do this than by making a small larp with 5-10 people around a campfire, set before the Viking Age in an old Iron Age farm house in our hometown Stavanger. This would end up being a 30 player / 10 helper larp with two locations and we should have realized where things were going already back then.

Once we had a villain and a prequel larp more ideas started coming. Vampire Nazis, plane attacks, family destinies, players having the same characters over all three larps even though they spanned 1500 years and so on. I want to say we had a clear plan from the start but like a lot of stuff there was often no more plan than "we need to do this because we think it is cool", a mindset we can clearly see coloring all the larps when looking back. But even if this led to some mishaps, it also made some of the magic happen along the way.

From that point, on we started working on the larps which would take over our lives for periods of time over the course of the next two years. Three larps in total.



Short note on the names: All the names are 'something something'.. then 'Omens'; the words are two combined words with dual meaning that say something about the larp. The author of the books on which the larps are based does this all the time.

*Primalry Omens*: A 30 player / 10 helper larp set in a actual restored Iron Age farm with a second location for the big ritual finale.

*Faek Omens*: A 40 player / 10 helper larp set during WWII in the mountains of Norway.

*Conquesting Omens*, which concluded the trilogy in a four day city-larp with 22 players / 25+ helper and almost 40 locations spread across and around the city of Stavanger, Norway.



*The cave was a powerful backdrop for the larp. (Photo: Anonymous)*



## **Primalry Omens - the first larp**

The first larp in the trilogy was held at the Iron Age Farm in Stavanger, Norway – built to look like those did 1500 years ago. The reconstructed farm buildings have been erected on their original sites just like they stood more than 1500 years ago and are run by Stavanger Archaeological Museum, who were kind enough to rent them to us. The farmstead consists of two longhouses, a smaller building, wells, stone fences and burial mounds; all built to look like authentic Iron Age structures.

The larp was about a big family living on this farm with their servants. They were visited by the god Vali, an ancient Troll, two winter faeries and the Winter Knight. The father of the family who was also jarl (chief) was tricked into servitude by Vali, the son of Odin, who had planned this for many years. His family was then bound by a blood oath to Vali to protect an ancient crystal that was to be destroyed on the third larp (MacGuffin). This would become the basis for the next two larps.



*The farmstead was built in Iron Age style, contributing to the authenticity of the experience. (Photo: Anonymous)*

The larp ended with a ritual at a second site and we divided the larp into two acts to accommodate the transport of the players. In addition, it was fun to work with The Museum of Archaeology in Stavanger. They helped us with family structure, some potential intrigues and the general history of the place and the people. And in cooperation with a local catering company, real authentic food from around year 515 was served. Some of the food was odd, but good. We can recommend wood sorrel salad.



## **Faek Omens - the second larp**

The second larp in the trilogy was held in Sirdal, 1.5 hours outside Stavanger. It was set in the year 1944 at the funeral of one of the characters from the first larp (yes; long life by magic). Many of the players played descendants of their own characters from the first larp, and we tried to get some sort of character development going - even if they did play different characters.

The larp centered around a funeral and the reading of the will. The deceased was very rich, so a lot of the guests were part of the high society of Stavanger anno 1944. Some were ordinary people who were mentioned in the will but did not know why. The rest were nazis.

After using the cave from the first larp and wanting to up the stakes, we tried to step up the FX on this one. We talked about attacks of some sort, explosions and other things.



But it was when we got word that we could borrow a real 1950ish airplane to use as some sort of bomber the FX plan really came together. We flew in a larper from Oslo who also knows how to (and is allowed to) blow things up. And that is how the first use of an aeroplane attack with bombs in a Norwegian larp came to be. For many participants this part really made the larp.

The point of this larp from the start was that the crystal had to get stolen from the player playing its custodian. That was really all we had in the beginning, and some of the players had roles that were there undercover specifically to steal it. It got stolen a couple of times amidst the air raids, British soldiers and scary scenes in the basement, but always seemed to be returned. In the end one of the players managed to snatch it, jump out a window and run his ass off with it.

## Would you do anything different today?

Lots of little things. Overall I think this one is the best of the three. There are a couple of big things I would change now if I could, though. One: The idea that the crystal HAD to get stolen. We could have easily written around it if it did not naturally happen, but at the time it seemed very important. Two: Some of the characters were paper thin (and not just when printed out, hehe). We would get a bit better for 3, but if we ever make something of the same size again, we need to spend a lot more time fleshing out the characters and making sure people have stuff to play on.



*The past becomes a problem for the nazis. (Photo: Tim Esborn)*



*"The bomber attack really made this larp for me. Rarely have I felt so tough as when I was running around, shouting "Feuer Frei !" while shots slammed up towards the plane. A big thanks to Olav that reinforced it all by lying in a fetal position on the ground, muttering the Lord's prayer."*

*-The player of Oberst Wolfram Hartwig Adlersflugel, loyal officer of the Wehrmacht.*

*(Photo: Tim Esborn)*

## Conquesting Omens - third and last larp

And so, we arrive at the last chapter: The original idea. From the start we wanted this to be a city larp type of thing, where players would travel freely around the city and beyond collecting clues, talking to NPCs and being in character most of the time until the end goal was achieved.

From the start we aimed high. We wanted this to be something big and, do I dare say it, immersive... "We knew we wanted to blow up a car"; one of the early ideas that stuck on. We knew we needed a lot of help from a lot of people to meet our vision, and we knew that we wanted the players to feel like they were part of an action- adventure style movie. With vampires. And gods. And magic. And trolls... We had no idea what we were getting ourselves into.

We started with 22 players, one of them being a plant who was found dead the first evening, so ending on 21. The players were working for Vali as part of one large group with a common goal: Get the crystal; destroy the crystal. Easy and straightforward. Within the larger group there were smaller groups with their own goals and motivations, but most everyone started the larp believing Vali to be a good guy. Scary as fuck, but good.

A small number of players had their doubts and had to use the next four days to find out more about him and about whom they could trust, while at the same time trying to find the crystal.



## Location, location, location.... Location, location.. Location

And this brings us to our main vision for this larp: The locations. We had over 30 locations on this larp. Probably closer to 40 if you count some of the stuff the players made up themselves (we had players going to the hospital, wandering round larping although we had nothing planned there). We used an app called Glympse to track the players, and sometimes the NPCs, with the GPS in their smartphones, calling people and having people text us to try and get a smidge of control over where people were at any given time.

But to be fair, the logistics of it all was a nightmare, even though the apps and all the other stuff helped. Simply put, without all our kick-ass helpers we could have just pulled the plug on day one. And although some things went totally wrong, a lot of things worked. -Especially because we talked to a vast number of people in our collected networks to get as many different and cool locations as possible. All the locations, bar the hotel we rented and the camp-site we stayed at the last night, we managed to borrow from friends or due to Hallgeir shamelessly calling and nagging people.

We have a friend who is a cop. A couple of players therefore got to “hack” a “police pc” at the actual police station, while another player had to smalltalk and distract an actual police officer (non-larper friend of ours). Another friend works at the NATO base in town, so some players got to go there and meet a werewolf that had information. We know a teacher at the local university. We knew of an abandoned house and got in touch with the owners. “Do whatever you want with it”.



We were going to blow it up, but the fire department would not allow it. We therefore ended up cutting down some walls and turning it into a big vampire nest that some players had to raid in order to rescue some other players. We got to borrow an entire bar in the middle of Stavanger and made “The End”; the local watering hole for all things supernatural in the city. The players all got to spend an evening here and blow off some steam. The number of cool locations used is too vast to fully list here. We used smartphones, sms and mail a lot and encouraged players to do the same. We also used things like 3D printers to make props like the crystal. This enabled us to make it whatever shape we wanted and to stick lights and gyros inside it that we could control.

*Using CCTV and a pre-recorded movie, we were able to let a player fight a troll in a ‘live’ broadcast. (Animation: Tim Esborn)*

We also used small flash cotton exciters that can shoot flash cotton up to 10m and make it look like you are hurling mighty fireballs from your hands. At least that’s how we remember it. One of the players who played a magician was allowed to use one of these.

The last evening of the larp, Tim and two of the helpers sat up to about 3 am trying to figure out the larp’s ending. We had made a chart earlier where we had plotted in a lot of big decisions people had to make along the way. And although we sat up late and discussed for a while, there was never really a question about whether or not Vali would become good again; the players’ choices could not undo his plans. So, in the end, Vali won.

..And that was that. After four days of running and driving our asses off in and around Stavanger, trying to blow up cars, organizing NPCs, changing the plot, trying to make and keep a schedule, talking to the police, helping players and trying to remember to eat, the larp ended. Under the stars, about 30 minutes outside Stavanger, with trees all around us and mountains beyond. With everything covered in snow and ice, not a speck of wind and with a roaring fire in the center of it all. The players had made all their choices, cast their die and performed the last ritual to destroy the crystal. Although they managed to destroy the evil that was trapped within, all the power from the crystal was transferred to Vali. Thus, the larp ended with his final words:

*“WE MARCH ON VALHALLA!!”*

One of our helpers made a big system for hacking. Sort of like a big quiz hunt where the players who were hackers ingame had to complete it to simulate their ‘imba pwnd haxorz skillz’ (hacking skills).

We had CCTV surveillance installed in the main bunker playing area and made pre-made movies shot from the same angles. This way we could fake an attack on the bunker by a superior force and a huge troll... And show one of the players go out and meet said troll and defeat it with magic. The face on the player’s face when the troll showed up on big screen was priceless.





## Would you do anything different today?

Having fixed downtime hours so that the players could relax and wouldn't have to be afraid of missing anything. Should have had more cars and drivers (we had 5 cars with 5 players driving, putting too much strain on those players). Aaaaand we never got to blow the car up in front of the players...

Saturday, the day of the car bomb, was the day everything went south. We weren't allowed to blow up the aforementioned house, so we just thought "Let's stick all the rest of the explosives in the car". What nobody thought of is that more explosives need more current to detonate. When we finally had all the players in one place, after the HQ bunker in Stavanger had been raided by the police earlier in the day, with Hallgeir having to explain what the hell we were doing there, which ate up several hours. The car bomb was supposed to go off right after they arrived. It did not. We stalled. It still did not go off. We paused play and found out it would not work. I yelled "BLAM! The car just exploded! Back to Play!" or something like that, and we got everyone out of there. They managed to blow it up about 30 minutes later when everyone, except for a couple of helpers, had left.

Being able to communicate better to the players the amount of freedom they really had would have been great. We were ready for almost anything and wanted the players to really play their characters as they see fit.



### *PRIMALRY OMENS:*

**LOCATIONS:** Iron Age Farm and a huge 100+ meters cave beneath Stavanger.

**DURATION:** 1 day

**PARTICIPANTS:** 30

**HELPERS:** 10

### *FAEK OMENS:*

**LOCATIONS:** A cabin complex in Sirdal in the Norwegian mountainside, about 1.5 hours from Stavanger (coastal town).

**DURATION:** 2 days

**PARTICIPANTS:** 40

**HELPERS:** 10

### *CONSEQUETING OMENS:*

**LOCATIONS:** 30+ - Including a huge old bunker complex, an abandoned house, the Stavanger police station, a huge sand-pit, an old bunker turned into an active crime scene, an old hotel, a big summer camp, a villa, the woods, The University of Stavanger, a NATO base, a bar in the middle of Stavanger, an office building, an industrial harbour complex, Stavanger Cathedral and many more.

**DURATION:** 4 days

**PARTICIPANTS:** 21

**HELPERS:** 25+



*A mischievous changeling in the winter landscape. (Photo: Tim Esborn)*





## Täydellinen ihminen: Making the Perfect Human

-By Juhana Pettersson & Jaakko Stenros

Stock photos are anonymous, generic images used by media companies and advertisers to illustrate their services, products, and publications. They are characterized by white backgrounds, bright lighting, and people who are not too distinctive. They are generic, yet positive canvases, waiting for meaning to be projected unto them.

*Täydellinen ihminen* (Eng. *The Perfect Human*) is a larp about the lives of the people in these photos. What do they do? What do they dream about? How do they relate to each other and the world? They look perfect and content in their pristine, yet impersonal surroundings, ready for happy action. They are facsimile humans, ideal and uncanny. They are obviously fake, yet they hold a specific allure. What would it be like to be one of these people?

Our particular take on the stock photo focuses on images of corporate success. People in suits and ties in clean offices looking at graphs that are always trending upwards. Our characters are employees in the consulting company Creative Solutions. They always come to work early and leave late, yet they also have perfect work-life balance. They love meetings and teamwork. They are constructive, motivated, and positive. All of their ideas are great. But most importantly, they are brimming with energy.



## Static Dynamic

The genesis of *Täydellinen ihminen* can be traced back to a tabletop role-playing campaign *Tuliunikko* (Eng. *Fireflower*). In this superhero game the designer and game master Juhana Pettersson introduced an adversarial corporation where all the workers were stock photo people. In one of the sessions the players switched characters and played a meeting as these antagonists – and it turned out to be great fun! Time passed, and the campaign ended in 2013, but the fascination with stock photos did not wane. This was the seed that ultimately blossomed, in the summer of 2015, into the larp *Täydellinen ihminen*.

The larp is extremely simple in its design and goes against the grain of much of traditional larp design wisdom. There is no drama, no tension – and hence no real story. Everything in the larp focuses on creating an experience of being a certain type of perfect corporate person, the one you see on bank brochures and in the advertisements of business-friendly right-wing political parties. *Täydellinen ihminen* was about experiencing the process, being a dynamic individual in the static day-in-the-life-of world of stock photos.

A key element in a larp about surface is the documentation. Tuomas Puikkonen is currently the pre-eminent larp photographer in Finland. He has the ability to capture the subjective feeling of larp like no other. He was brought into the project in the very beginning as this was not a larp where documentation is something that is added after the design is done, but something where it was integral to the vision.



For example, the lighting in the play area was designed by Puikkonen with photography in mind. After being a perfect human, the participants could then see themselves in actual photos, permanently part of that world.

*Täydellinen ihminen* was played in an authentic corporate environment, in a cluster of eight conference rooms in central Helsinki. The setting was a normal working day at a company called Creative Solutions, where all the characters worked. The larp had seven participants and lasted for three hours, plus one hour for workshops and one hour for debrief. The day consisted of internal meetings, meetings with clients, and lunch. There was no twist in the plot. The players had been informed in advance as to how the day would progress, and there were no surprises. Correspondingly, there was no character development. Things started exactly the same as they ended: In the euphoric state of glorious success.

## From Soviet Man to Happy Consultant

One of the ideas behind the project was the concept of “the Soviet man”, the perfect communist citizen. A popular idea in the Soviet Union, this ideal also revealed the problems inherent in the system. The state is not composed of ideal humans, but of ordinary people.

In *Täydellinen ihminen*, corporate stock photos replace the paintings and statues of Socialist Realism. They are the ideal people of contemporary capitalist corporations. Instead of the noble, strong factory worker, we have the happy, innovative consultant.

The perfect human of the larp is just one of the ideals we live with in today's society. Another ideal of capitalism is a super-competitive individualist motivated by greed, but we chose to focus on creating the world as it appears in the photos.

The larp featured pre-written characters, which were designed to embody different aspects of contemporary ideals about the perfect employee. We first created a list of ten generic positions, such as Account Manager, Management Consultant, Interaction Specialist, and Finance Manager. These were fleshed out into concise three-line character descriptions by drawing on the language recruitment ads. They are already written like characters: “You are smart, fast, independent, and widely networked.” Few people fill such requirements for ideal applicants, but in a larp we can just define those ideals as the character.



## Lean Closer

The aim of the larp is to create a simulacrum of the stock photo world, not a commentary on it or a critical examination thereof. This means that all subtext has to be banned. One of the key rules of the larp is that there is nothing hidden. Everything is as it looks. There is no hidden agenda, no double meaning, no irony, no sexual innuendo. The most important thing is the surface. It all needs to look and feel like stock photos, with the meaning apparent right there on the surface.

The challenge in designing *Täydellinen ihminen* is in creating the feeling and action that generates that right surface. We do not want the players to simply pose for the pictures, but to experience and embody the bright and wonderful world of stock photos. As a participant, you have to play the larp in a specific way, just living in the moment. In the design we settled on three elements.

First, we used *love bombing*. All the players are instructed to be not just supportive and encouraging to each other, but to absolutely love each other's ideas, to create an environment where not only is everything awesome, but *you specifically* are awesome. The aim is to give people positive energy and a continuous upward trend. Love bombing is used by cults to create a feeling of unity and belonging.

Second, from laughter yoga we borrowed the motto of “fake it, fake it, until you make it.” The idea is that if you pretend to laugh long enough, you will start laughing for real. Our emotions are embodied, and pretending to have an emotion will help that emotion to appear. Thus, the players were instructed to pretend until it started to feel real. This is, of course, how larp in general operates, but in this instance it was explicitly discussed and practiced in the workshop.

Third, to help create trust fast, sexuality was banned from the larp. *Täydellinen ihminen*, as a larp, is a fairly short one, lasting only a few hours. There is no time to spend a long time establishing the ensemble and slowly building trust – yet it is important the people are able to touch each other and stand very close to each other. Partly because safe bodily contact helps foster positive emotions, and partly because people in stock photos, like in films, are always too close, very much in each other's personal spaces.

In order to be able to touch each other in encouragement and hug when celebrating a victory without reservation, all innuendo, creeping, flirting and suggestive behavior is banned. Obviously all of these methods, and their reasoning, are explained and demonstrated at the workshop.

*Incorporating an art exhibition into the larp in Kiel. (Photo by Juhana Pettersson)*



## Capturing the Surface

One of the surprises of the larp was that the pictures Puikkonen took are clearly expressive of the aesthetic of stock photos -- but there is something subtly different about them. The characters and individuals in the photos taken at the larp have an intensity that you never see in real stock photos. They look more authentic. They look like they are genuinely stoked to be at this meeting, talking to these clients.

In a creative sense, this feeling of life in the corporate world we created was one of the revelations of the game for us.

We had expected the visual surface to remain on a more conventional level, but some of the power of larp to create emotions bursts through in Puikkonen's pictures.

Another source of inspiration for us has been the work of artist Brody Condon. He has used larp as a 'generative engine' (one that creates an interesting visual surface) in a number of his works. Pettersson participated in the Condon project *The Zeigarnik Effect* (2015) and co-designer Jaakko Stenros in *To Prove Her Zeal One Woman Ate Mud* (2012). In these works, as well as earlier pieces by the same artist, larp and video complement each other. A larp has certain qualities that are hard to achieve otherwise -- and those qualities can be captured on video, or in photos.

Puikkonen did not play a character and the participants were instructed to ignore the photographer, but it is clear his presence had an impact on the in-game dynamics.



When playing supporting characters, we noticed how we and others started behaving as if we were on camera, huddling together, facing in the same direction, even when the photographer was not in the room. It became part of the physical, embodied language of the game.

## Elegant Perfection

In the debrief of *Täydellinen ihminen* most players expressed that playing had been fun, perhaps more fun they had anticipated, but also emotionally taxing. The love bombing and excessive positivity had felt enjoyable and real, but they had also taken their toll. Still, although the feeling of the larp was quite clear, its meaning remains elusive. What does it mean to play a larp and become one of the perfect humans?

The larp did not have a clear message we wanted to impart. It was more about exploring this conceptual and aesthetic space. Indeed, after the larp had ended and the instruction to just remain on the surface passed away, multiple interpretations started to emerge. In the debrief discussion, participants had very different takes on what was interesting about the game, and some of them were quite personal. In a sense, this is not surprising: The images in stock photos are banal and ubiquitous, but they also represent an idealized world of success. They show people living perfect lives. We all have our own relationship to the dreams our society deems most worthy of dreaming.

*Characters changing venues in the Helsinki game. In-game. (Photo by Sigrid Reede)*

**CREDITS:** Juhana Pettersson (concept and design), Jaakko Stenros (design), Tuomas Puikkonen (photography)

**DATE:** September 20, 2015

**LOCATION:** Helsinki, Finland

**DURATION:** 5 hours total, 3 hours runtime

**PARTICIPANTS:** 7

**ORGANIZERS/ASSISTANTS:** 4

**BUDGET:** 140 €

**PARTICIPATION FEE:** 20 €

**WEBSITE:** [www.nordicrpg.fi/taydel-linen-ihminen/](http://www.nordicrpg.fi/taydel-linen-ihminen/)

