A street larp campaign in 1920’s Helsinki.

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This is a documentation of Tonnin stiflat (Thousand Mark Shoes) season 1, a three episode street larp campaign set in the 1920’s Helsinki.

Documenting a larp is a mission doomed to fail. The ephemeral one-time nature of larps makes it impossible to really capture the whole larp, but perhaps some picture forms from the snippets collected here. Too often are larp documentations merely reinstated vision statements written by the game masters leading to canonization of the larp in a form that never actually took place. We tried to battle this by combining our own writings with those of several of our players. We describe the facts, what we went after, why, and which design choices and tools were used. The players’ writings approach the game from quite many different angles — some operate on the fictional story level of their characters, and some are more analytical meta-level pieces on various themes or methods from the game. This shotgun method of documentation won’t produce a full all around description of the game, but it will hopefully be more truthful to what Tonnin stiflat was actually like: a complex game that appeared quite different to each player. As in the game itself, our players’ input is hugely important in this documentation. Larping is a collaborative effort and we hope to catch that same spirit also in this documentation.

In Helsinki, February 2015,

— Simo & Niina
Tonnin Stiflat
Season 1

CREDITS
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DATES: 16 August, 11 October & 22 November, 2014
LOCATION: Helsinki, Finland
LENGTH: 8-9 hours each
PLAYERS: 16 players, and 40 supporting cast

BUDGET: 2500€
PARTICIPATION FEE: 50€ per game
PHOTO CREDITS:
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HOMEPAGE:
https://tonninstiflatlarp.wordpress.com
PHOTO GALLERY:
https://www.flickr.com/photos/darkismus/sets/72157649584799406/
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Setting

The 20’s in Helsinki: urbanization, the admiring gaze towards Europe; jazz and lipstick, daring women in the public sphere; a country divided by the bitter civil war in 1918; prohibition and the tsunami of illegal alcohol and booze-related crimes. The vision of the game was clear from the beginning. After having published two novels set in the same milieu there was a reasonably amount of research work already done.

We decided to construct the game of seasons and episodes and to work on one season at a time. Thus we could create and plan
characters, plots and themes not only for each game but for the whole season. Also, we wanted to imply continuity in the form of possible following seasons. The first season consisted of an obligatory 8-hour workshop in June (See Toolbox: Workshopping) and three games in August, October and November.

Helsinki as a city and state of mind was a central theme in the game. Therefore we decided to have the best of it and play in the streets. Helsinki nowadays is, of course, different from the one nearly 100 years ago, but especially in the central areas there is plenty of architecture, cafes, restaurants and parks still same or holding the same atmosphere as in the twenties. But there was no getting rid of 2014: masses of modern cars, buildings, shops, modern air and ware of all kind. The question of immersion was very relevant. In every game we determined a certain area in the central Helsinki for playing based on for example architecture or atmosphere. We also were prepared to change the setting if our players would find street larp too difficult to play.

**Stories**

We planted the seed of the story, and the players’ right and responsibility was to grow and develop it in their own character. The stories were set mainly in the lower social class, as heterogeneity would have caused too much scattering in plots and agendas, and also in the geography of the game.

One of the main stories was, of course, smuggling. Two leagues competed over clients and deals, and the plot thickened in the first game as the other boss was arrested and her right hand accidentally shot. This was pre-planned to create a void of power for other characters to fill. The arrest and the death also launched different smaller plots.

When playing in the Finnish 20’s there is no avoiding politics. The
civil war fought right after the declaration of independence from Russia has effects even now, let alone only ten years later. The stain of communism sat hard on the defeated - those who survived concentration camps, diseases and hunger. The communist workers in Tonnin stiflat were hard working, sick and poor but strong in their ideology. Their actions crossed with the security police with nasty results.

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

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

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

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

In a similar manner, while Stiflat was a historical setting, history was there to serve the larp, not the other way around. Playing a street larp campaign set in 1920’s in modern surroundings relieved us from historical accuracy from the beginning by making it impossible to achieve 360-illusion. While the themes, costumes and the setting was historically relatively accurate, utilitarian approach to history enabled us to for example let go of the traditional gender roles and in general stick to elements that actually work in a larp.

This high precision experience design required an active communication with the players before and during the larp. We collected extensive information on every players’ wishes and tried to fulfill those and remain responsive to which direction the players felt their own character’s story arcs where developing and support that -- and still retain the necessary surprise factor. This process started already when recruiting and casting the players, and then throughout workshops and the first season. We wanted players who besides enthusiastic are able to communicate their wishes, deliver their share to the collaborative effort, also also to give constructive feedback.

In a sense Tonnin stiflat was somewhat demanding and not easily accessible, however a certain efficiency in design and processes was also of utmost importance and all the effort put into the game by us or the players was intended to have a clear impact on the game.
**Goals**

Tonnin stiflat had a set of defining design goals. These are elements that would define the larp aesthetically and form the structures that help the fiction come alive. The central aim of season one was high resolution social interaction between dramatically interesting yet realistically portrayed characters. For this we wanted a strong emphasis on power structures and relations between characters.

Another design goal was that all the plots and storylines would somehow materialize during the game-play and there’d be a strong focus on those plots and minimal effort be put on other plots that cannot be brought into the game on a concrete level. The characters were forced to make choices that had consequences inside the game and those choices would ultimately form an unique story arc for each character climaxing in the third episode.

For those choices to have a meaning, solid structures were needed support the interpretation and evaluation of consequences. If the players wouldn’t be able to assess what everything actually means, none of the goals could be reached. Once that is established, it is also possible to play meaningful moral dilemmas where there are no clear cut black and white solutions, but realistic feeling tough choices that have consequences the characters have to face.

Violence in larps is too often cinematic and detached with clear winners and losers and polarized results where you either shrug of the effects of the violent encounter or you die. We aimed at having the same meaning and resolution to violence also, emphasizing the social nature of violence so that all violence would have an social impact as well.

And most importantly, we wanted the larp to be played in a trusting ensemble between all participators.
Tonnin stiflat utilized a selected set of tools to attain the vision. Most of them are control measures which were used to create structures that enable gameplay that elicits the type of player experience we were after.

**Written characters**

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

This process aimed at achieving the best of both pre-written and player written characters, that is, having a set of characters that are thoroughly written into the larp and that from a meaningful group of characters, but that are also tailor made for each player and in accordance to their own vision and wishes.

The original short descriptions and character concepts were gender neutral and were given a surname with both female and male first
names. We chose equal options for all players to be more important than any historical accuracy. The gender roles as such were not a selected theme of the larp, but simply a matter of how we wanted to run it. This was our only explicit anachronism: every gender has the same possibilities to act in the game, and no kind of gender-based discrimination is allowed, nor in speech or game constructions. Crossplaying was also possible. To name a few, the cynical private detective was female and the luxury-yearning prostitute male, the heroic bootlegger was male but as smuggling bosses we had powerful queens, not kings. It was also possible to enrol as supporting cast (see Toolbox: Supporting Cast) for different roles.

**Casting**

The players were chosen from the roughly 70 registrants that signed up in due time. The casting was made on the basis of mainly two things: player’s enrolment info including her/his wishes and capabilities, and our aim to avoid conservative gender stereotypes. The players had to fill up a rather detailed form, which had multiple questions regarding their preferred playing style and content, when signing up. This information was utilized when selecting the players and when casting them into roles. This was done in order to get players who are seemed suitable for the game and also to provide the selected players with the type of characters and themes they preferred.

In a small larp that as a certain degree of collaboration and effort required, a careful selection of the participants is required. A trusting ensemble cannot be built if the participants are not suitable in the first place. But it is also important to mix it up a bit so that you include some players you’re not familiar with and not just the same old players every time. That way it is possible to built a new positive group dynamic within the group because there isn’t a strong established one that you’d need to try to change. This of course underlines the importance of the questions in the sign-up form and how they are answered.
Supporting cast

The biggest and the most multifaceted tool used in the game was the supporting cast of almost 40 players (approx. 12-20 per game). Their role was to create pre-planned scenes and deepen character histories, bring in new plots, surprises and information, be found dead or die in the hands of the players, perform music and dance, and in many ways bring the game world to life so that it doesn’t feel like a tiny bubble to the players. Their role was always to support the main player characters and work towards making their game experience better. A supporting role could last the whole season and develop in different ways, or it could be a ten-minute scene with only one player in it.

Supporting cast had an important role in guiding the scenes into suitable directions. They were insiders to the game design and depending on the role often were thoroughly briefed on what is their function in the game, what are the supposed dynamics of the scene they are in, what themes of the game they are to emphasize, what are the hot buttons for the characters involved, how to best support the player character’s concept, what to avoid and what is the preferred schedule for the scene etc. These were the framework and guidelines written for each supporting player for each scene. Naturally, they also had to extensively improvise also and it was important they knew the meta level purposes also so they could improvise to the right direction. In practice, a vast majority of run time game mastering was done by supporting cast. Supporting cast were also the eyes and ears of the game masters providing us with information on how the game was proceeding and if there were some issues we need to take care of during the game.

Despite the heavy duties of supporting cast, the roles were designed
so that they could also enjoy playing them as much as possible. In fact, many supporting players prefer that position, as they can really let go and not think of the possible nasty consequences for their characters, they know exactly what they are supposed to be doing, they can be part of game masters’ schemes and still they are not required any long term commitment. And most importantly, they just simply enjoy making the game better for the players.

**Season structure**

We decided to construct the game of seasons and episodes and to work on one season at a time. Thus we could create and plan characters, plots and themes not only for each game but for the whole season. Also, we wanted to imply continuity in the form of possible following seasons. A second season can also be made sometimes later and doesn’t have to be immediate continuation to the first season. This way it feels more natural to do something quite different for the next season and it is also easier to let go of those elements that were not working as well as they should have in the first season. We also wanted to make sure that the first part would form a concise whole with complete story arcs and a proper ending.

**Feedback**

Throughout season one — starting already in the sign-up form — we encouraged players to give us feedback. It is essential to hear what elements of the game are working and what could be improved still. Besides the actual feedback, it also changes the social dynamics and communication in the whole group to more collaborative and equal direction. Quite many of our players were game masters themselves, and giving them the opportunity to really use their own experience in making the game better puts them in a quite a different mode than the regular rather I’m-just-a-player-mode.

After each episode all players filled out a mandatory report form that included separate parts for what happened in the game, future plans
of the character but importantly also feedback to us how everything went. Besides general feedback, some more specific questions about the role of supporting cast etc. were also asked. Naturally the feedback and discussions were not limited to the feedback form only but email was also used frequently.

In addition to actively collecting feedback from the players, we also gave feedback to the players after each episode. In those larp games we have played ourselves we have rarely if ever heard any feedback from the game masters how they thought everything went and how we as players performed from their perspective. So, we decided to provide that feedback to the players. We also considered it an essential step in developing an open culture where all participants could discuss their experiences and design solutions freely. Our feedback to the players was also a method of thanking them for all the effort they have put into the game and also a efficient way of reinstating our vision for the game and direct it towards it. A major challenge for us in giving the feedback was that we as game masters were nearly never present in the game so we had to rely on other sources of information, but therefore it was all the more important the we strived for an open communication culture.

The third aspect of feedback giving was player to player feedback
which was designed to be a central part of the post-larp debriefing process. Supporting other players’ characters was a central element of the playing style we tried to have in Stiflat, and it is very much easier if players feel comfortable giving each feedback and discuss the dynamics of the game on a meta level.

**Debriefing**

Typical Finnish larp debriefing sessions consists of the everyone gathering in the same room, game masters saying a few words and then every player saying something about what their character did in the game in their own turn. In our perspective, this is time consuming, inefficient in separating the player and character, very ego centered and does not help at all if there are some strong scenes that require defusing.

We developed our own method for general debriefing. The core idea is that in turn each player steps up and other players give positive feedback to her/him. This method provides feedback to the players own their own playing — something that is all too rarely given —, it separates players from their roles immediately as all feedback is given player to player, it starts a positive feedback loop and sets the tone for after game discussions, and at the same time a shared idea of what happened in the game is formed.

This method was not entirely without weaknesses though. While the clear separation of player and character after the game helps in psychological debriefing, if the game contains very strong scenes, a separate method for that is required. For this we encouraged all players in such scenes to discuss them amongst themselves to make sure that everyone involved is ok and to establish a supportive atmosphere. If necessary the game masters could facilitate such a session. It was also the rule that if the safety word was ever used, all those involved should have a separate debriefing session afterwards. Another, more important in fact, downside to this method was that as it is time consuming, we opted to run it only for the main players and
not the supporting cast. This method’s capability to strengthen group cohesion surprised us and not including the supporting cast into the same ring created an unnecessary negative gap between them and the players.

**Predesigned scenes**

We constructed the game for each individual player. In this we utilized predesigned scenes that were designed, prepared and briefed for the players and the supporting cast as necessary. The purpose of those scenes is to ensure that the plots are going forward, cool things happen, story arcs form, chosen themes of the game are manifested in the game, and that all players have a suitable amount of content in their game. They also allow precision experience design for each individual player that is custom fitted for their character and player’s wishes. As a method, they increase game master control over the game and leaves less up to luck.

The predesigned scenes need to be scheduled also. In addition to background information our player briefs always contained a timetable when and where the character should be. So in essence, a vast majority of the game master created content was scheduled and players knew when and where something would happen that is relevant to their characters. Often they were jobs they had to do, or meetings they had agreed. Scheduling all events of the game and the supporting cast and the photographer was a quite laborious task, but it enabled designing the tempo and the rhythm of the game. It is important to see that there is enough but not too much to play for each player and take their personal preferences into account if possible. In this way we could quite well prevent overlapping of events and downtime where nothing really happens, which makes the game design more efficient as close to 100% of what is prepared for the game takes place. It is essential however to also leave enough time for free play, social play and figuring out the consequences of the predesigned scenes. This same leeway also helps when the schedules don’t hold for some reason and some unforeseen things happen. Indeed, freedom and chaos are fundamental elements of larping, and we did not want to take those away with predesigned scenes.

**Meta instructions**

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

Using meta instructions was partly a matter of efficiency and robustness. Instead of trying to imply and implicitly direct players to the right direction, we decided to give those instructions explicitly. It also makes the design principles more transparent. Another benefit of using meta instructions is that they emphasize the player’s responsibility in steering the play into the right direction and how all players are creating and supporting other players’ game experience. This explicitly shared responsibility helps to build the ensemble we were after.

Workshops

We had one day workshop two months before the first episode. The aim for the workshop was simply that the players would get to know each other, they would get to try out their characters a bit before developing them further and then practice the playing style we were after. We had a quick hot seat exercise to develop the characters a bit and to present characters to everybody else. We also had a photoshoot session where the players had a chance to practice the mannerisms of their character. Photoshoot was conducted in small groups where other players gave feedback to the one being
photographed and suggested different poses and expressions to them, and so in a sense they collaboratively built the physical habitus of the character. Also, having a good photo of the character well in advance before the game gives the player a reassured feeling that they will look like the character.

In addition we had three different workshop exercises aimed at developing the playing style we were after. All these exercises were run a short scenarios in groups of three and in character.

In one exercise we practiced interimmersion, or the support other players character concept. The same short given scenario was played three times in a row but the focus character was switched every time. The idea was simply that in each run everyone is focusing on supporting the focus character’s concept. For example, one scenario was a scene where a pickpocket’s friend is distracting a gentleman while the pickpocket is stealing the gentleman’s wallet. When the focus character was the pickpocket, the friend and the gentleman tried supporting the pickpocket so that he seemed skillful and smooth. When the focus was on the gentleman, the pickpocket and
the friend tried to support the gentleman’s aura of respectability and authority (while still stealing his wallet). And the third variation was when the focus was on the friend who distracted the gentleman and here they tried to help him be a very smooth social small talker who could easily grab the gentleman’s attention while his wallet is being stolen.

Another exercise aimed at practicing sensitivity to the power structures and the minor changes in them. A given scenario was played three times a row with small changes every time that affected the power balance between characters. The bigger elements of power structures remained identical as we tried to emphasize the smaller contextual elements, such as someone knowing something others did not etc.

The third exercise was about practicing more nuanced social interaction. The same scenario was again played three times in a row, the first time regularly, the second time in a clearly exaggerated manner and the third time very delicately and the aim was that what was communicated and felt remained the same. This exercise intended to widen the scope of expression and also give others the permission to interpret even the very fine nuances and expressions of others.

Naturally workshopping also helped to improve the team spirit, increase trust among the player group and help future communication.
The many faces of supporting cast
BOHEMIAN DEPENDENCE
Now as I think about Anna, she seems to embody my conception of the 1920's “crazy years”, a young bohemian carelessly having fun without recognizing that darker times are just behind the corner. She really tried her best to live and celebrate passionately through a short period of false optimism, hold on to her exaggerated “Parisienne joie de vivre” so desperately it became tragic when life around her started to fall to pieces.

Anna was an aspiring artist, just returned from studying in Paris, believing herself to be almost on the brink of international success,
yet sucking up to rich housewives in order to sell her paintings. She was stylish and charismatic, yet insecure and constantly seeking for reassurance. She wanted desperately to be free, yet she never became truly independent. She relied on her patron for money and connections, and her friends for admiration and support. She was also addicted to opium.

This contradiction between dependence and freedom was the central theme of Anna. Her addiction and her relationship to her patron were harmful in a very similar way, but in the beginning she didn’t view either as terribly problematic. She thought of opium as a way to liberate her mind and body from everything unpleasant in her life and free it to dream and create. Her patron she thought of as a nuisance: for her upkeep she had to sleep with the man, but she tried to convince herself that it wasn’t so bad, that it was all just a part of being a modern woman and a bohemian. And even if she didn’t enjoy her duties towards him, she respected him as a mentor and trusted him, because he was also her godfather.

“Is it possible for Anna to fall in love without losing her art?”

During the campaign she slowly started to see that opium was a problem itself, not a solution to the other ones. She never resolved her addiction for better or for worse, but at least she realized she had an issue with the substance and that she would have to decide soon whether she really wanted to do something about it or follow it until the end. Her relationship with her patron, on the other hand, revealed its true colors abruptly, and ended up in a disaster. Destructive as the relationship was, it defined Anna and her story.

Before the game I had expected that in Anna’s story the main function of the patron-character was to create a conflict of jealousy. In the character’s backstory there was a question: “Is it possible for Anna to fall in love without losing her art?” I thought that Anna
would be hiding a passionate affair under the nose of her godfather and eventually have to decide between her lover and her career.

How wrong I was! Sure, there was a secret romance and perhaps even some jealousy. However, those hadn't gone on for very long before Anna found out that her godfather was sick with syphilis, had been for a while, and had known about it while still taking advantage of his goddaughter. This turned the drama into a whole new direction. Anna could well be terminally ill herself, and so might her young lover. She might have unwittingly ruined his life, and anyway she could not touch him anymore in case he was healthy.

Despite the abuse, Anna's relationship to her godfather was close, even loving. He had known her and encouraged her all her life. She didn't want to warm his bed, but she would have, ironically, trusted him with her life. As a player I decided Anna would consider her godfather as a father figure, so that leaving him would be difficult even if she had the opportunity to do so without sacrificing anything else. Naturally as a larper I also wanted to relish in the tragedy of these contradicting desires, Anna wishing to be loved as a protégé and her patron wanting to be desired as a lover.

Of course, that decision made it even worse, when Anna found out about her godfather's reckless gamble with her life, about his uncaring lust and it's consequences. Learning the true nature of his illness was such a shock, that it felt confusing even as a player. How should Anna feel? Not more than a moment ago she had been worried about him, she still was, seeing him

“Naturally as a larper I also wanted to relish in the tragedy of these contradicting desires, Anna wishing to be loved as a protégé and her patron wanting to be desired as a lover.”
weak and coughing, and she hated herself for it. She wanted desperately to be angry with him, to let it out, but her anger was muffled with amazement at his betrayal. She had repressed her disgust towards the abuse for so long, that now when it tried to surface with its full force, she wasn’t sure she could handle it.

“...she did what came naturally to her and concentrated on herself.”

This was the third turning point in Anna's life that followed from the revelation. Not only was her blooming romance and her trust to her mentor in ruins, her own possible illness and the cause for it made her look at herself differently. The realization had been coming for a while, but now she couldn’t deny it anymore: being an artist was just her dream, but being a courtesan was her profession. She knew that it had most likely been a prostitute who gave her godfather the disease, and she herself was no different from them: she hadn’t even been more important to him, so that he would have kept her safe.

All this escalated her drug abuse, especially when her godfather was given a prescription of morphine for his pains. In the last game she gave him a lethal overdose, not because she wanted to, but because he asked, and it was easiest to comply this one last time. Her lover deserted her because of her probable illness, and in the end she lost her best friends as well. Drowning reality in fierce partying didn’t work anymore, everything felt empty. She had started out as naïve and narcissistic, but ended up self-loathing, bitter and suspicious. I do not remember ever before experiencing a larp with such a cathartic loss of nearly everything my character held dear. What a delicious tragedy.
Being supported as a player and as a character

Luckily I had the possibility to meet and talk with the godfather’s player thoroughly over tea before the game. Naturally we discussed physical contact and some details of our characters’ relationship, but in two very important ways this was different from other similar pre-game discussions that I’ve had.

First of all, he told me a little about who he really was in real life, which was, in my opinion, not only nice but also very smart considering the nature of the characters’ relationship and all the unpleasantness I didn’t know about yet. I believe this made the game experience more comfortable for both of us.

Secondly, I’ve never played such a central relationship with a supporting character before. He gave me an hour of his time to make sure I would have a good experience in the game. I wouldn’t have to keep any secrets about my character from him, but he couldn’t discuss everything as freely. I could, and actually even had to, define some details on the character’s relationship myself. Of course he would have a say in it, but essentially it was mainly my game that we were discussing.

I believe we all wanted for the supporting cast to have a good campaign as well, but I at least had this feeling of us players being carefully catered to by the organizers and the supporting players. It felt both strange and deeply moving. The godfather’s player would follow his secret instructions on how to push Anna to uncomfortable situations and emotional turmoils that were so enjoyable to me as her player. And yet I did not have similar instructions, equal means to give something back to him, and the organizers would not have a chance see the fruits of their work.

I think this is why many of us players were left feeling so grateful after each game: so many people were working to give us lucky few the best possible game. Playing through such a tragic story, an intense and icky relationship and some very heavy themes could have caused a great deal of anxiety or needed some aftercare. However, through all Anna’s distress I felt safe. I think this was mainly because of the meeting I had with the godfather’s player before the game, and the possibility to develop and debrief my game with the organizers and other players. So I didn’t need to go through any traumas after the campaign, but how do you debrief an overwhelming feeling of gratitude?
Sometimes the designers do things just right, and it feels completely natural to play a non-player character. Tonnin Stiflat exemplified that situation. I was asked in as a nearly last-minute replacement for the supporting role of Robert Holma, a rich investor, patron of the arts, and godfather to Anna. The whole purpose of the character was to present more playable material for others - a task that in my opinion is oftentimes quite hard to accomplish. Not this time.

The organizers were kind enough to also provide me with a reading tip to help me get into character much faster: a period novel from Juhani Aho, which describes a lonely artist selfishly in love and full of self-deception.
The key to Robert was in understanding that he was a melancholy, yet very selfish person. He was someone who did things one might consider evil, but out of being inconsiderate rather than any malice. Because of that, it was easy to draw on a depth of personality, instead of just acting out plot points. At the core of the concept was that Robert was to die a meaningless death, yet create meaning out of that for others. The key actions were all scripted in advance, but I had freedom to make them happen as I saw fit.

Robert knew he was dying of Syphilis. He also knew that since he had been taking advantage of Anna since she became an adult, in exchange for financial support, it was quite obvious to him that she might have been infected. Especially since the first game contained a (not played) sex scene between them, at a time when he was already aware of the infection. Like in many things, Robert was in denial about it all - that it was exploitation (maybe mutual exploitation, though), and that he was causing harm (“You were just so beautiful that I could not resist that one last time”).

Escalating the situation at each game was easy, with the end result of Anna giving a crying Robert too much morphine in the third game, leaving him to die of an overdose. My memories of that final scene are very vague, as it was an incredibly immersive experience despite the fact that I had a set of instructions that I had to follow.

Robert was not written for just Anna however: for others, he represented wealth
beyond their grasp, business
opportunities and even, just maybe,
love. Playing a gentle, understanding
platonic relationship with Alma while
also being in a dysfunctional situation
with Anna was mentally exhausting,
yet marvelously realistic-seeming.
That sort of defines Tonnin Stiflat for
me: the same way that when we walked
the streets, the modern people and
cars were there, yet blurred into the
background, the playing instructions
blended for me into simply something
that was taking place. I no longer
needed to think clearly of them, just let
Robert behave like he would, and all
the pieces seemed to fall into place.

The strangest thing, however, was
after the second game, seeing Tuomas’
wonderful pictures from the hotel
room where Anna found out why
Robert was ill. The photographs look as if Robert is consoling Anna –
when she in truth was struggling to get out of his possessive hug.
“That’s not how it happened” is a strange way to feel as a non-player
character, indeed.
I had never larped before summer 2014.

Then I happened to see photos from Tonnin stiflat I Tuomas Puikkonen had taken. They were simply charming. Real 1920´s Helsinki was in front of me. From that moment on I was obsessed and just wanted to join Tonnin stiflat as fast as possible.

Soon after that it was not me anymore walking around the city. It was Alli from the 20's. I became quite a young girl with a messy background. I started to see the city from Alli's perspective, the beauty of the buildings that existed already in her times. I dreamed about amazing dresses of that era but realised Alli had to wear something else. I counted that she could not afford a cup of coffee in any restaurant.

“Champagne, bootlegging and murders just created the scene for us to realize what drives people forward.” TP
Before the game I was prepared for some serious history geek stuff. I studied the history of the 20’s without knowing what larping would be. When the game started I soon learned how complex this setting was. It was way beyond just knowing the facts. But more important was to be Alli.

I was amazed by the immersion the game created. In the beginning I played alone walking around with my working class girls clothes. They made me move differently. I was poor as a rat but had a feeling that anything could happen.

I had an assisting role in the game and my tasks were to deliver messages and get people to meet each other at the right time (see Toolbox: Supporting Cast). That offered a great opportunity to look behind the scenes and observe game masters’ work during the game. It was a lot of fun to hide from the characters and use the offgame phone to reach the right people. Setting where ingame and offgame were so intertwined was challenging. It didn't brake the immersion but caused some tricky situations. I was terrified of ruining the plots — enormous offgame fear! Timing was everything and it was difficult to guide strong players. In one situation police was about do a raid as planned beforehand but people wanted to escape which would have prevented the scene from happening. I called the assisting cops to run faster and yelled to characters that they can't go out because there are cops everywhere. After being afraid I learned to let go and let things happen.

As a beginner I didn't know if this is normal larping or some really special one time experience. I felt privileged to be part of it. Having no common history with the other players it was easy to believe they really were from the 1920's. That magic is only possible in the first couple of games. Also it was great to leave the game and get to know the real people. The game was socially easy to get into. Community seems to be healthy, relatively small but welcoming, multifaceted and

“Far enough from the reality there was a possibility to reflect and share something that really matters.”
rich with dialog.

Alli’s days in 1927 were amazing. She was ready to do anything to get a better life. And she did. She dreamed, got money, had sex, made promises, betrayed a friend, fell in love, drank champagne, worked as a waitress, blew her chances and ended the game standing alone. Still she learned nothing.

Was it me or her? Me going around second hand shops trying to find something she could wear? Or she running around the streets of Helsinki just to find anything to hold on? Who was she after all? Someone totally fictional? After facing these questions as a beginner larper I realized I don’t want to be afraid of the bleed. From the beginning I really enjoyed the Nordic larping style of making things as real as possible. In Tonnin stiflat I was able to play something that resonated with the real life issues. Far enough from the reality there was a possibility to reflect and share something that really matters. What is there to be afraid of? For me a larp without any bleed would be mere play. Reality and fantasy work nicely together. Larping is a chance to get far and to look close. Certain lessons can’t be learned anywhere else.

Part of that little Alli stayed in me. And larping did too. After these two games of pure anxiety, fear and hope I really think larping has a lot to offer. It was great to see history come to life but in the end Tonnin stiflat was more than that: a depiction of human beings. It simulated misplaced people struggling to survive. Champagne, bootlegging and murders just created the scene for us to realize what drives people forward.

Larping is a form of art that has the potential to change the state of things. Perhaps it’s not always the main purpose but we can’t prevent that from happening. I would like to see larping in all areas of life. At the moment the possibilities are wasted. At the same time larping has to stay on the edge, strongly and madly doing its own thing. And then there’s a need to be open and to prevent things from getting too serious. It’s more about freedom and joy than pushing excellence to its limits.

“She was ready to do anything to get a better life. And she did. She dreamed, got money, had sex, made promises, betrayed a friend, fell in love, drank champagne, worked as a waitress, blew her chances and ended the game standing alone.” TP
ANATOMY OF A MURDER
In Tonnin stiflat, one of the subplots was the murder of a police officer. The story arc sparked from a prearranged scene in the first game of the campaign: two police officials lay in wait for bootleggers to emerge, apprehend the ringleader, and amidst the extremely tense situation, an accidental discharge of a service revolver takes the life of a young, unarmed woman. The game masters arranged all this meticulously in concord with the supporting cast, i.e. the police, the ringleader and the victim, so it would all go without a hitch and be quite a surprise for the three actual players who would survive the ambush and tell the tale.

The demise of Viki, a bright young woman with ambitious plans for kicking the bootlegger ring into a much higher gear, shoved her beau, Jallu, into a steep downward spiral. Jallu was a morose and hot tempered roustabout who had given up believing in a brighter tomorrow long before the events of the first Tonnin stiflat game.

Given that background it would’ve been a terrific scene to have Jallu commit suicide, preferably a very visible one, but I, Jallu’s player, a pretty nice guy all in all, wanted to explore what violence and violent tendencies feel like and how they can be factored into a larp. So, the game masters and I started instead constructing a revenge plotline where my character, Jallu, would exact his terrible vengeance on Mujunen, the hapless police officer who had accidentally shot Viki.
We wanted to let things simmer for a while, in order to create more tension and let sentiments and emotions come to boil. This was diegetically explained by Jallu’s cold blooded approach to murdering Mujunen – let the doomed copper believe she’s off the hook, and then, when she thinks she’s safe, start slowly tightening the noose. After the second Tonnin stiflat game the game masters and I agreed that Jallu would now start terrorize poor Mujunen, bumping into her while she’s walking, watching her house from a shady street corner, leaving a gasoline can and an unlit lantern next to her bedroom window, carving markings on her door, and other mean spirited scare tactics.

When the third game came, it was time to finish the story arc. Jallu would murder Mujunen in cold blood.

I contacted Satu, who was playing Mujunen and one of the supporting cast, and we started talking about this terrible deed: where would it take place and how it should play out? We both absolutely agreed that this would not be a scene that’s easy to act out, nor should it be. We were talking about taking a life, and it should look and feel as terrifying and cruel as we possibly could. This scene would not be a moment of exhilarating action you often see in games and movies, when acts of violence are harmless and you can see the players grin from elation and excitement. This scene would be horrifying.

Satu and I started by talking about ways of how Jallu would kill Mujunen. We discussed briefly the benefits of strangling and shooting, but both solutions seemed unusable in the end. As Jallu’s player, I thought Jallu would not shoot Mujunen because it’s not personal enough: Jallu’s toxic hatred towards Mujunen has completely corrupted his mind, so he would want this moment of final vengeance to be as personal and hands-on as possible. So, even if...
shooting Mujunen would be beautifully poetic justice as Mujunen killed Viki with a gut shot, guns would not do. Strangling, on the other hand, would make a terrific death scene: horrifyingly brutal, it would be an act of complete power of the murderer over his victim. This would be definitely personal enough, but it lacked one major component Satu and I both wanted in this wicked deed: what part the others players would play.

In this thirst for blood, Jallu was not alone. As the main aggressor, Jallu had dragged and manipulated two of his gang members, Aksu and Loviisa, to be part of the showdown. Here, in this final moment, Jallu would pressure his friends into taking part in this heinous act. This was a terrific power play — you can’t walk away from killing a police officer, so this act of premeditated murder would stain them with blood and that would bind them together. This would reinforce Jallu’s position in the gang and give him power over his accomplices. In other words, while this terrible deed would certainly be an act of very personal vengeance, it would also rearrange the power structure of the gang, with Jallu snatching the upper hand over his friends.

So, because we wanted to work the power play into the murder scene, strangling Mujunen would not be the optimal way for killing the poor woman, as you can’t half-strangle someone and then let another take your place. We needed something that’s still personal, but something that could be easily taken part of. We ended up with stabbing Mujunen for multitude of reasons. One was that we could pass along the knife from one character to another, thus reinforcing the theme of Jallu exerting his influence over his peers: take this knife and stab Mujunen, or there’ll be hell to pay. The second reason was that this would be a very cruel and brutal way of killing someone — a knife in the back would let both Satu and I play out our body language to the maximum impact for the benefit of the two other players, giving Satu room for surprise, shock, and terror, and for me expressions of complete hatred and calculated strong-arming. The third, and
absolutely the most important reason was that it also gave us the perfect exit strategy.

Every time you plan out an act like this, it can pan out wrong. Players can become too agitated or can’t bear the realism level we were aiming for. It might be that the feel from horrifying and not-at-all-funny violence may be too much to bear for us, too! This is why we decided from the get go that we should have an exit strategy, and that Satu would be in control at all times, no matter what it would look like on the outside. In practice, I would guide Satu into a position where she’s facing the others with her back towards me, and wait for her to assess the situation. If it would at any point look like we have to pull the plug, she would give me the signal, and we’d abort right then and there. Our signal was Mujunen closing her eyes and starting reciting the Lord’s Prayer. By closing her eyes players would immediately know to step back because if the other player, in this case the victim, can’t see what you’re doing, you have to tone it down, and that would help us break an immersion gone too rough. Diegetically it would also be a perfect solution: Mujunen would accept her fate and become calm. Should Satu give me the abort signal, I would lead the others away with a nice diegetic exit, a wicked grin and a whispered “Just kidding, copper, just kidding... See you later, and do watch your back”. If the scene would be aborted, no harm, no foul, as it would be a great scene no matter what. If, however, Satu deemed the situation was ok, she would give me the go-ahead signal — breaking down in hysterical crying — and we would commit to the act of killing.

“If you get to the actual act of murder, we should know how the scene should play out. I suggested that the first stab would ultimately come as a surprise to Mujunen — nobody really believes they’re mortal until that illusion is irrevocably shattered — and when Jallu twists

“When a game master sees photos like this and barely even recognizes the player because the expression is so alien, he knows that the game was a success. TP

“Nobody really believes they’re mortal until that illusion is irrevocably shattered.”
the knife with a grunt and rips the blade upwards, Mujunen would still be numbed by shock. With our faces towards the players of Aksu and Loviisa, we could show them that something happened, but due to the downplayed vocal reaction to the pain, they’d be uncertain if Jallu really stabbed Mujunen or not, emphasizing the unnerving surreality of violence. On the subsequent stabbings, those Jallu would force his accomplices to do, Mujunen would not cry out nor yell in pain, but give out this absolutely horrifying croak from the back of her throat.

So, now Satu and I had now agreed on the method of murder, how we would act out the scene, and the exit strategy. We also knew that we’d be in a secluded location for this, so we could use fake blood. Satu devised a mechanism of using condoms as makeshift blood bags that she would tape to her belly under her clothes, so she could puncture them with a thread ripper hidden in her palm. The result would be Jallu stabbing Mujunen who would then grasp the wound, clandestinely puncture the condom underneath, and start leaking blood in earnest.

It would be a terrible scene to play out.

It went like clockwork.

Jallu and Aksu led poor Mujunen to a clearing on a hill. This small, round clearing was framed by stones that looked like something between tombstones and stony, broken teeth jutting from the ground. There was fresh snow everywhere, and the pure white was in vicious juxtaposition to the black worn by the criminals and the cold stones circling us all. Satu faced the two other players, turning her back to me, assessed the situation and gave me the go-ahead signal. The blood spattered the virgin snow in crimson. The scene was quickly over, and to make sure we were all okay, we broke out of character and did an immediate debrief.

Instead of walking out of the scene like our characters would have,
we turned back and went back to Satu, who had slumped down in the snow in her character’s final moments. We helped her get her coat back on and rubbed warmth back to her fingers, and hugged her a lot. This was a wonderful way to end the scene: it was the characters who had walked away, but us, the players, we’re okay, we’re fine, and more importantly, we’re all here, together, and there’s no bad blood whatsoever between us. This moment helped us shock out of the cruel mindset of our characters, and snap back into what’s important and what is not.

For me, the aftereffects of that scene lingered for days. I am not a violent person, but acting out that murder brought out the beast in me. I did not recognize myself in the photographs taken. It was a terrific scene, clearly one of the best I’ve ever played out, but a damn tough one to digest. Considering what the scene was about, that is absolutely a good thing.

Tuomas, the photographer, stated after the game: “I know that when people see this camera they think that we’re doing nobody harm, that all’s good, but somehow I still hoped someone would intervene when they see two thugs escort a crying woman into a secluded location.”

I agree with that sentiment.
ANATOMY OF A MURDER
Since 1996, I’ve played in various different Finnish larps. My usual game experience has been something like this: I register to the event and answer to some questions of my preferences as a player. I receive a short character description for the game and start planning for proper clothing and other prerequisites for the game. Later, I receive an actual character text, typically a 5-6 pages long mini novella describing the history and motivations of my character. Few weeks later I appear to the larp venue, propped up as my character. Ready to go! Usually this way of going about has been working quite well for me, but sometimes I’ve found it difficult to connect to my intended character or find depth in relations with the other characters. Character development in Tonnin stiflat required a bit more from the
player but was also rewarding in context of really knowing who my character is, and reaching the immersion during the game play.

Tonnin stiflat combined traditional Finnish game master based game design with player driven character building. This meant that the main story arc and the character concepts were predetermined by GMs, but the players were responsible for developing the characters further and for suggesting plots and concepts that they would enjoy playing. Good communication was in the very essence of this campaign from the very beginning. Already the registration form contained a thorough questionnaire about player’s preferences, strengths and weaknesses. This itself was not exceptional in comparison to a “traditional” game registration, but the questions required a bit deeper introspection of one’s characteristics as a player than average. In addition, the registrants were asked to give feedback on the game website and encouraged to provoke discussion on game practices. Thus we were tested for our readiness for discourse already during the registration.

“Tonnin stiflat combined traditional Finnish game master based game design with player driven character building.”

After receiving my character I was invited to pregame workshop, and was encouraged to communicate with my fellow players to deepen and create contacts between our characters. The workshop started with getting to know the fellow players and game characters, and continued with methodological exercises (see Methods: Workshop). The latter dealt with such aspects as how to support other players’ game, and how to find the nuances in the action. The workshop was organized well in advance (1,5 months) before the first game, to leave time for the players to develop their characters and contacts based on the ideas seeded during the workshop. For me this worked well: the group dynamics of my contact group — “the bootleggers of the Vainio gang” — were formed during the workshop, after which it was easier to further develop the character relations and my own character’s personality. I also found

A slightly shocked Eekku after a surprise meeting with her long lost daughter. TP
it easier to create new ad hoc contacts with unconnected characters after talking to their players in the workshop.

During the player driven character processing, I consulted the GMs through e-mail and by leaving open questions in the shared character sheet in Google docs. After I had finished processing my character, the GMs filled in predetermined scenes and storylines and added some meta-instructions to invigorate my gameplay. Moreover, they connected some background that I had created to the plots of the game.

I didn’t find the character development too time consuming or demanding. Since the main contacts for the characters were predetermined by the game authors, the active communication with fellow players was not absolutely necessary, but was a recommended option to improve one’s own game experience. Personally, I exchanged a couple of messages with fellow players and spent two evenings thinking about the background for my character. This created two new character contacts for me and both of them connected to the plots and activities of the first episode. The GMs reported that all but one of the players developed their characters further before the first episode.

After each episode, players were required to fill in a feedback questionnaire dealing with ingame events and players’ personal experiences. This took much more time than writing a “traditional” game debrief shortly describing character’s game events. In addition to game events the report contained questions such as “What aspects of the game worked for you, and what not? Why?” or “How did pre-written scenes work for you in the game?” Thus both the positive and negative experiences were inquired, and the personal experience of the player was in the center of the feedback. This made it much easier for me to give also critical feedback or suggestions in addition to the positive experiences. Detailed questions also made the positive feedback to more constructive, describing “what you enjoyed” and “why”, instead of just stating the general liking of the game and the character.

I typically wrote my report during two to three evenings. Some players might find this kind of extensive reporting quite tedious. I,

“Thus we were tested for our readiness for discourse already during the registration.”
however, found the time well spent, mainly for two reasons: first, I had to contemplate my game experience more deeply than usual, which gave me some new insights on how I see myself as a player and what I expect from a good larp experience in general. Second, feedback on the personal game content and meta-techniques did reflect on following episodes of the game, making the game experience better. This meant that if you wrote that you would like to play scenes of certain type, your next game would most likely contain some scenes to your liking. The more clearly you had written out the preferred setup, the more likely you would get what you wanted. The same would be true for the other aspects of the game, such as frequency and timing of preset scenes.

In the name of reciprocity, the GMs also gave their feedback after the episodes (only the first two actually). This produced the game designers’ view on the game experience. The GM feedback consisted of practical details and game authors’ personal experience of the game event. The practical part announced the number of players and supporting cast, success of time tables, the budget etc. The GM’s personal feedback explained what they counted as successes or disappointments and why. It also elucidated game authors’ visions and aims about the game. I enjoyed this feedback on two levels. As a player, it was interesting to get an overview feedback from the persons who see the big picture of the whole game. As a game designer, it was quite useful to read the GM report on what did or did not work and why, not having to dig this information from buzz talk that might come to my ears or not.

The group dynamics and character personality were developed also between the episodes. After returning the feedback form, players would have a period of time to improve their characters. This was voluntary and it was up to players as to how to approach this. Since I was quite new to the player driven story line development, I counted myself quite lucky that I had in my contact group a player who had played in a previous campaign by Niskanen & Järvelä, and knew Vainio’s bootlegger gang. A group photo from pre-game workshop photoshoot. TP
 exactly what to do. So, one evening, we gathered in a pub and discussed the aspects we did or did not enjoy during the first game, how we’d like to develop our characters and story lines, and how we saw the group dynamics of our little bootlegger gang. We also collected a list of suggestions and ideas for the game masters, such as “We would like to deal with some actual bootlegging and have more direct action during the next episode.” Obviously our little gang was facing a police intervention during spirit smuggling in the second episode, and many of us were happy in general for the increased amount of action. Since I had to skip the second episode due to a personal force majeure, I got quite easily updated on the game events from my fellow players, thanks to established connections. The communicative atmosphere made it much easier for me to jump back in to the gang and feel included.

How about the weaknesses and drawbacks of this kind of profoundly communicative game-weaving? In my opinion they are quite few. The most obvious risks would be underdoing or overdoing the communication. Neglecting the conversation with other players would mainly reflect only to that player’s personal game experience. However, if many of your contact players are not responsive to your discussion attempts that will likely depress your game experience as well. Overactive communication on the other hand, could be exhausting to some players and might even lead to excluding the less active players from plots and ingame social circles. I, however, experienced neither of these in Tonnin stiflat. Even the only player who gave only short responses to my openings about character relations turned out to be a “supporting player” whose character left the game during the first episode before our characters even met.

I frequently hear people blaming the game designers for a dull character or boring story line in a larp. Sometimes they might be barking up the right tree, being unlucky recipients of a hastily made “fill-in character” with little to play. On other occasions they may have been given a balanced and well-built larp character — one for someone else to enjoy playing. I believe that in many cases more
satisfactory game experience could have been created if the player’s expectations were discussed with the game masters and fellow players more openly. It’s impossible to produce exciting scenes for a player if neither the co-players nor the game masters are aware of what one would like to experience. In Tonnin stiflat, discussions between the games dealt with these issues in quite practical level: “To which direction you want to develop the relation between our characters, and how intensively you’d like to play it?” “How should we approach your character about the stolen money to make an interesting scene for us all?” In contrast to my initial reservation, common agreement in how to play the game did not reduce the surprise factor I enjoy playing. The surprises would still be there either provided by the GMs or by little twists added by the co-players. Instead, reflecting the game in beforehand brought more substance to play and more scenes I enjoyed playing.

As a summary, I would say: the more you make effort for the game as a player, the more you get from the actual game event. If also the game masters do their best to entangle characters to the narrative of the story, we are approaching a very good game!
What follows is a narrative of one of the defining scenes for me in Tonnin Stiflat in a way that describes how the scene unfolded from my character’s perspective and how off- and metagame information impacted my actions as a player. Instances of steering and other rationalizations for ingame-actions due to meta- and offgame motivations should be evident. I’m relying on my memory alone, so now 6 months after the fact the exact events and especially the lines of the characters may be misrepresented, but I’ve done my best to get the mood and all non-trivial parts of the story right.
I arrived at the island a bit early. I found the person I was supposed to start the game with and we left for the location of the first scene. Through some cautious probing, we realized that our interpretations of the briefs did not match 100%. We decided to rewind the scene to a few moments before the official start, so we could set up the beginning with both of us on the same page. This way, we avoided possible problems from conflicting briefs.

Johannes was larger than life. An unabashed bootlegging hero who wore the highs and lows of the rumrunning life like badges of honour. A smart, industrious and downright cunning guy who was always looking for an edge. “Seize the opportunity!” he was fond of saying. And that’s exactly what he was doing: wading alone to the shore after the borrowed boat’s engine gave up the ghost mid-way, having had to take the gig alone since everyone else in his gang was either missing or too hung over for the job. The engine was not the only problem with Johannes’ boat. The complete lack of oars and tools was another.

“Things have a tendency to sort themselves out somehow in Johannes’ universe.”

Not sweating the small stuff -- things have a tendency to sort themselves out somehow in Johannes’ universe -- he went to see Maria Lax in the agreed-upon place at the right time. There she showed Johannes the location of the “Pike”, a torpedo-like contraption made of ten 10-liter canisters of spirits encased in a steel frame, designed to be towed beneath the waves behind a bootlegger boat. Maria informed Johannes that she had also invited a rival gang to share in the spoils as well. She then left to fetch the Lung gang - leaving Johannes with the small fortune in alcohol. Johannes was alone. Lund wouldn’t be. He had to act fast.

He took a look at the situation. The “Pike” was 2 meters long and was submerged in Pentala lake, hidden under overhanging shrubbery.
near the lake shore. The rocky, forested hill sloped somewhat steeply into the lake. But some tens of meters away there was a smooth, bare rock on the shore. It would have been a good place for a swim: the rock was smooth but slippery, and the lake deepened very quickly. Also, there was a slight depression in the mossy ground under a pine tree maybe ten, fifteen meters up the hill from the “Pike”. Perhaps there was a way of pulling a fast one over Lund and maybe coming away from this gig with something other than a kick in the teeth?

Maria and the Lund gang wouldn’t be there for about ten minutes. Johannes rolled up his sleeves and untied the rope that held the Pike in place. Inch by inch, Johannes dragged the Pike out of the lake towards the pine tree. After heaving, pushing, pulling, lifting and cursing the Pike was finally where Johannes wanted it. The struggle had left the ground looking like a drunken elephant had dragged a panzer division from the lake to the tree, and the shining metal of the Pike gleamed in the sun. Johannes quickly covered it with a few loose branches, tossed some dry leaves over the most obvious signs, restored a few tufts of moss along the path and swept some scratch marks off the ground with a branch. It was a pathetic attempt of a camouflage, but it had to do. Then he ran towards the inclining rock at the lake shore and stripped off his boots, socks and shirt. He splashed some water around, tossed the other end of the sturdy rope in the lake, and waited.

Johannes hid the torpedo. If Lund couldn’t find it, Johannes could return later with his own crew and claim it. The mess made it highly unlikely, but a man’s gotta try, right? In any case this might be a way to spark some drama before Lund takes the Pike. Offgame I was naturally convinced however the scene goes, the plan included a ride off the island for me.
somehow. Ingame, Johannes was not so lucky.

“God damn fucking Eronen!” sounded the less-than-friendly greeting from the forest. The Lund gang had arrived, guided by Maria. Lund, a tough-as-nails ex-boatman turned bootlegger queen stomped in, accompanied by her right-hand woman Viki Leppänen, her lieutenant Aleksanteri Halme and Loviisa Trast, one of the nastiest thugs in the city.

“Well hello to you too darling. What brings you here on this nice afternoon, love? Nature?” replied Eronen.

“Cut the crap, you dipshit. What the hell are you doing here?” Lund wasn’t in the mood, obviously. She never was.

“Well, I was just --”

“Shut the fuck up already. Where’s the torpedo?”

“Well, as it happens, there was a slight complication there.”

“Spit it out. Or you’ll spit your teeth out.”

“Don’t be like that, dove. You see, I tried to be helpful here and drag the damn thing out of the lake, having some free time and all. And..”

“What the hell are you mumbling you dumb shit?”

“Come on, no need to get personal. It wasn’t my fault the rope was badly attached. I pulled it here no problem, it swam prettily, but once I tried pulling it out of the lake the rope got loose and the whole thing slid right down. Those things are pretty damn heavy, you know!”

The rum torpedoes were heavy enough to sink in case the runners risked getting caught by the law and it had to be ditched. This one actually floated, just barely, but the other players had no way of knowing that.

“What?” Lund barked incredulously.

“Yeah. It’s pretty steep and slippery. You can see some scratch marks
over there”, said Johannes while pointing at some white lines on the rock. “It's probably just somewhere around there. I tried to fish it out but since I'm alone here.. how 'bout we split the load 50-50 and we'll fish it out of there right now?”

“I'll split your spine 50-50. Step away, you moron.” Lund looked at the depths and started removing her footwear.

"You don't need help, fine."

Viki pat Johannes's shoulder with a heavy hand. "Yeah, I think you already helped plenty, darling." she said and seasoned it with a honeyed wink that still managed to promise ass-kicking instead of kisses.

"You haul your ass in here and drag it out and I might consider offering you a boatride off this island. On the boat and not tied to the torpedo. We saw the bucket you came in" shouted Lund while carefully wading down the slippery rock.

"Nah, thanks. I'll get wet swimming home. While you're in there you might think about working on your leadership. It ain't too strong on the motivational front it seems."

Viki quickly purred "Don't push it, hun. We'll end up pounding you silly if she gets riled. And it isn't good weather for that, sun and all."

Johannes sat down and made himself comfortable. Even got to use his backpack as a pillow after Trast had searched the bag and frowned menacingly at the large knife Johannes had in it.

"Hey boss!" said Aleksanteri, looking at her wading waist-deep in the lake. "I'll get you a stick so you'll have a better reach." Aleksanteri started walking directly toward the pine tree standing over the Pike, looking around for a stick.

"Yeah, a stick! Good idea!" blurted Johannes and bolted in the opposite direction. "There's a good one.. umm.. right here!" he said, and grabbed the nearest one, which by some goodly stroke of luck
happened to be an excellent stick for the job. Aleksanteri turned around and watched Johannes give the stick to Lund. Maria suspiciously watched the whole circus unfold.

"Ok, I can be reasonable; you give me four of the cans and I'll help, just out of my sheer reasonableness!" offered Johannes.

"Shut. Up."

This was pure luck indeed. Aleksanteri's player stopped in the nick of time and for some reason hadn't noticed the Pike.

Lund waded around the exposed rock, being unable to see or reach the bottom end, while Johannes did his best to give sometimes conflicting but fully earnest and completely useless advice, running his mouth but just barely not enough to get mangled by the Lund crew.

The player of Lund was persistent. Very persistent. This was starting to feel it wouldn't play out the way I thought. They never even checked the original hiding place! And she'll freeze soon; end-of-the-summer waters aren't warm in Finland. Time to sneak a call to the GMs. Alas:

Johannes stood up and started to walk towards the trees.

"And where do you think you're going?" Asked Viki.

"Umm..I'll just..."

"Eronen perkele sit your ass down right now!" shouted Lund.

"I'll just take a leak?"

"You sit your arse down now if you feel like being able to stand up again sometime in the future!" Lund was pissed.

Lund continued searching, assisted from the shore by Aleksanteri and Viki. Time passed and the futile search dragged on. Maria started to get pissed and the crew grew more and more frustrated. Johannes tried to make the best of the situation, nursing his hangover in the gentle sun.

She was persistent, though didn’t yet know why. I was getting worried; this was taking a long time and I started to suspect the optimum solution for Johannes might not be possible even if she quit searching.
Maybe the Pike cannot be left on the island to be picked up later in- and offgame? I also knew Maria’s player was the one who had arranged the location for us, and she seemed anxious. Did she just go in the forest to call someone? I needed to contact the GM asap.

“Aleksanteri! Go check if there’s some scuba gear in the boat!” shouted Lund.

“Ok”, replied Aleksanteri and left for the wharf.

Johannes stood up and said “I’ll go with.”

“You! Sit down!”

“Nah, my ass is sore. Besides, where can I run? And you know Aleksanteri, he’ll need all the help he can get!”

“Smartass!”, said Aleksanteri, smiling.

The duo started to cross the forest towards the wharf and the sea. Maria left behind them. Johannes’s hangoverish, pounding head slowed him down, and Aleksanteri left him to catch up. Even Maria
walked past the suffering protagonist.

I slowed down so that I could call the GMs. Maria’s player caught me, and I quickly made the “offgame”-sign and told her I had hidden the Pike and everything was ok. She didn’t seem convinced, but before I managed to explain, the GMs answered and I had a hard time making out what they were saying. The connection wasn’t very good and there seemed to be some kind of a hassle going on at the other end. So I tried to communicate the main points as clearly and briefly as possible.

“Hi, It’s Janne. In case you’re worried, things are fine, I’ve got everything under control. Tell me: Can we leave the torpedo here, or do we need to take it with us now when we leave?”

After a short confusion and a few repeats, the reply was clear: the players are needed off the island pronto, and the Pike needs to be with us!

I picked up my pace and started thinking how this could play out.

**Johannes managed to get to the wharf a moment after Aleksanteri. He asked if the boatman had his toolset onboard.**

And I again made the offgame sign, and told him not to give out any scuba gear that wasn’t period gear. Slim chance of something like that existing in the boat.

**There was no scuba gear, but a good enough toolset was found.**

“**Aleksanteri, enough of this bullshit. Let me show you how it’s done**” said Johannes, vexed, pocketing a pair of spanners. Johannes started stomping towards the lake, muttering about having to endure such
crap hung over. Aleksanteri and Maria were in tow, bewildered.

The hangover was already established in the game, and since Johannes didn't care about money – it was all about the action for him – maybe he just had gotten pissed and wanted home, booze or no booze. Besides, rubbing this in their faces would definitely be fun or at least interesting, in- and off character!

After the walk through the forest path, Johannes called Lund who had left the lake to warm up a bit.

“Lund dear, let’s do it the right way and we all can leave this damn island. Three of the cans are mine, and I'll get you the torpedo in five minutes or less. How about it?”

“Johannes, what the hell are you up to now?” asked Lund, suspicious.

“Let the pros handle this. Three cans. Less than five minutes. Ok, two minutes. Deal?”

“What..? What’s your game, you sack of shit?”

“My game is a torpedo in two minutes for three of the cans. Or, you know, you can resume your .. bath. Though it is a good idea to take one from time to time in your line of work, that’s true.”

“Fuck you. Two cans and a ride home? And if you play me here I'll have your nutsack for bait, you hear?”

“I hear you. Two cans and a ride; a canister for a ride with you two doves is a bargain. Shake on it.”

She did. Johannes gave her his spare wool sweater.

She was or was going to be cold. I wasn’t. And hey, Johannes is a nice guy. So why not?

“This is how it’s done in the big leagues.” The five of them eyed him as
Johannes rolled up his sleeves and started towards the pine.

“Dropping it in the bottom of the lake my ass. It's here, all fine and dandy waiting for thirsty souls right here..” Johannes said, removing the few twigs. The realization slowly dawned over the onlookers.

Viki was the first one to lose it. She threw a nasty left hook in Johannes’s gut.

“Come on, you deserved it; you guys were eas..”, said Johannes, interrupted by a right jab, smack in the face. The punch threw him on his back down the hill. Trast looked menacing as she approached him, fists clenched. Johannes half crawled, half scampered to his backpack and lunged for his knife. He produced it just in time to point it at Trast’s throat as she caught him by his collar.

“Trast, you let go before I count to three, or I swear to God I’ll slice your throat!”. The standoff was cut short by Lund’s call to stop it. Trast let go. Johannes gathered his belongings and what was left of his dignity and started towards the Pike.

“It’s too heavy. There’s no way we get it to the wharf through the forest. You’re welcome to try, but the two cans won’t buy my assistance. So there’s that option, or we can do it like the pros.” Johannes took the two spanners and started to take the Pike apart with Aleksanteri. They removed five of the canisters from the Pike and made a harness of sorts from the rope. The loose cans were taken by the crew, and Johannes and Aleksanteri carried the Pike with the rest still inside.

After a few moments of blood, toil, tears and sweat, the Pike was finally at the wharf, reassembled and tied to the boat. The boat ride was slow but uneventful. They arrived at the secret landing place and beached. After the Pike was dragged onto the shore, two people stepped out of the shrubs.

“Let me see your hands! You’re all under arrest.” The police had pistols, and they were both smiling. “Well well well.. Lund, Leppänen, Eronen, Halme.. this is starting to look like a good day -- for us!”

The expected haggling, bribes and insults started flying. The
situation started to heat up while Johannes slinked, inch by inch, towards the nearest bushes. Half of the people on the shore were shouting, few looking at opportunities for escape, and the police were getting more and more agitated. A shot sounded, someone screamed and Johannes bolted through the bush and sprinted in the forest, not looking back.

After the game I found out that both Viki and Lund were not actual player characters, but assisting roles. They had strict instructions to bring the Pike back, and so naturally couldn’t stop looking for it as long as they believed the it was in the lake. As my hijinks sort of took a life of its own, I was conflicted. Especially after hearing the tone of the distressed GMs through the bad connection: did I take it too far? Did I ruin the game?

When things didn’t seem to resolve on their own, my game – immersion and enjoyment – started to be affected. Especially after more and more time had passed and I was beginning to worry about the impact on the rest of the game. Having a solid in-game reason for the decision helped, as did being able to come up with a believable resolution, in which Lund’s player helped a lot by agreeing to the price increase. And after the Pike was revealed, the small action scene that ensued brought a climax of sorts and we were able to wrap up the scene.

After being exonerated by the GMs and other players and finding out about Lund and Viki being assisting characters, my guilt was pretty much lifted, and this whole thing became a definite highlight of the game. And as far as I know, even Lund’s player has forgiven me, even though she still hasn’t stopped greeting me with “Perkeleen Vuorenmaa” (~ goddamn Vuorenmaa).

Oh, in case you were wondering: Lund was arrested and Viki got shot. The rest fled. At the end of the campaign, Johannes ended up being made the Capo di tutti capi in Helsinki. For a while, at least.
IT TAKES TWO+ TO PLAY ROLES

Jukka Oksanen & Hanna Erkinjuntti

“I’LL BE YOUR VICTIM, COME ON, FUCK ME UP
IT WON’T BE EASY, SEE IF YOU CAN CUT ME UP”
“I’LL BE YOUR VICTIM, COME ON, COUNT ME IN
I CAN’T WAIT TO FEEL THE PAIN, IT’S SOMETHING I BELIEVE IN”

SIX FEET UNDER: SICK AND TWISTED

Introduction - Why?

For a long time a prevailing view in the Finnish larp scene has been that good roleplaying is based on individual’s mindset. A common joke is that a good player gets the best vibes by locking himself in a closet. Another wide spread view is that only game masters can
create the framework for the game and players can only interpret their character within the framework, but not actively participate in the creation of the character or the framework.

In Tonnin stiflat we decided to break that mold. One whole day was used for workshopping the characters. Players were also encouraged to actively create their characters together with the game masters through the Google Docs. This method made it possible to expand your limits as a player. Feltta’s player wished to gain more experience with relationship playing because he had previously received feedback that he’s too careful when playing relationships. Kapi’s player wanted to play a really challenging and difficult human relationship in an adult manner. These wishes combined into themes of victimization-complex with nuances of sadomasochism and playing with fire.

Our characters formed as two delinquents. Felix "Feltta" Lintunen was one of the most feared sakilainen (a gang from Helsinki) but as he got old he started work as a goon for the bootlegger queen Hanna Lund. Katri "Kapi" Nurminen, a cunning street rat, works for the competing bootlegger queen Mrs. Vainio. How did these two characters end up as a couple?

"Kapi needs someone to hurt herself and who could do this better than Feltta?"

One of the specialities of this game was that every character had meta instructions for other players (see Methods: Meta instructions): one strength and one weakness that other players should support with their own playing. Feltta’s weakness was laziness and strength was intimidating reputation. Kapi’s weakness was victimization and strength was excellent fast talk. When you combine this with Kapi’s need to climb up the social ladder Feltta’s and Kapi’s natures matched perfectly. Kapi needs someone to hurt herself and who could do this better than Feltta? On the other hand Feltta was too lazy to lead so Kapi had the

We propose that the players should take the responsibility for creating the characters' interaction, if necessary, even without the blessing of the game organizers. Even before the game the players should plan and practise the interaction between the characters' activities. Especially if the relationship between the characters is intimate. We recommend active contact, open dialogue and physical exercises for creating the relationships between characters. They really can deepen the experience of the game.
upper hand on this matter.

**Method - how?**

The character creation started before the game but the relationship between Feltta and Kapi started to form after the first game. The personalities of the characters were workshopped beforehand and now we started to mold them together. This happened mainly by face-to-face and Facebook discussions between the games.

From the very beginning two main principles were decided: firstly the genre shall be tragedy and secondly we decided to knock off the surprise element which usually is essential in the Finnish larp culture. It was too uncertain that a surprise element would enable the themes and events we had planned. For example, we wanted tragedy and that the relationship of the characters would leave a bitter taste even for players, and this would require somewhat conscious and systematic episode structure and planning.

It was also clear that this kind of game would require undisputed trust between the players. Creating the story and episodes together and unraveling together personal mental, social and physical boundaries made this trust possible. It didn’t require complex techniques but merely time and want to discuss the matter. Because the relationship was very physical the preparations required physical activities. In Finnish culture touching another person is not mundane so even a simple hand shaking and hugging breaks the ice let alone practicing simulated violence in a dojo.

**What happened?**

The tragedy unfolded specifically in two separate scenes: a preplanned alley scene and an improvised corridor scene.

The alley scene was based on the idea that Kapi starts to dare Feltta during the game again and again. Feltta is amused by this and wants to test how far Kapi is willing to go. The scene escalates as planned to the worst possible situation — a violent rape. Because of the nature of the scene it was planned rather thoroughly. The alley was checked and picked so that outsiders wouldn’t get confused by it. Even the fighting moves were choreographed. But a little surprise element was included in the
design — the scene needed audience but it was left open who it would be.

In the game everything worked as planned. The electric quarrel between Kapi and Feltta ended up in to the alley as planned but there was a little problem. Most of the players didn’t grasp the chance to get involved with the situation. Luckily Oskar took the bait as this character was bewitched by his own vices. After Feltta had ended his cruelty he spontaneously left Kapi as a gift for Oskar who had witnessed the whole affair. This coincidence created a lot of more play in the future.

The latter scene, the corridor scene, took place in the last game. This time the technical plan for the atrocity was left open. The responsibility was on Feltta’s player as he had to be the commencing party. Idea was just that something wicked shall happen. At some point Kapi stated that she had felt the presence of Oskar as unpleasant and disturbing. This made Feltta’s player to think that Oskar had taken the advantage of the alley scene. So what would be more disturbing than to repeat it again now that Kapi had started to trust Feltta again! So Feltta waited for a moment when Kapi was happy and unguarded...

“...and for a moment there was a pure and innocent glimpse in their dark and tension-filled relationship.”

Feltta offered Kapi to Oskar. What was he to do? Oskar pondered Feltta’s offer for a moment but instead of accepting it, he poked Feltta in the eye with the temple of his eyeglasses. Feltta fell to the ground, giving Kapi a chance to escape. Feltta started to yell and throw insults which made Eino, the host of the party, to come...
around and see what was going on. He started to rebuke Feltta but the situation soon took a new turn when Feltta told Eino how things really were (from his own point of view, of course...). According to Feltta Oskar was a notorious rapist, who had killed the pharmacist. And they said Feltta was evil! He was only trying to help Oskar, as he felt that Oskar needed some cheering up while the police were chasing him. Having to question the goodness and innocence of his friends gave some new depth to Eino’s character, especially when Feltta unselfishly gave the last of his stolen money to Eino. Who really was good and who was bad?

In the end of the second game some more tension was added to relationship of Kapi and Feltta in the form of Alli, a supporting character. She was looking for a home and unexpectedly she felt that Feltta was the best option. His laziness gave her the opportunity to gain power and safety in the form of a gang, but she was unwilling to share Feltta with Kapi. Both of the ladies discovered the existence of a third party in the last minutes of the second game, in a situation where Feltta had decided to start a gang of his own and abducted Kapi from her own gang. It was a nasty surprise for both of them, as they both had believed they were the only ones for Feltta. Especially for Kapi being kidnapped into a new gang meant that her whole life went upside down and the new circumstances were not in her favor. In her previous gang she was just an errand girl and was used to someone else making all the decisions and taking orders from them and being responsible only for her own performance. Besides that she used to be very independent in her personal life. Now she was facing a situation where she was forced to take responsibility, make active decisions and was heavily dependent on others. Also having a competitor forced her to ponder what Feltta really meant for her, at the same time being painfully aware of the fact that she was playing with fire and would probably get burned.

As Feltta had no interest at all in leading his new gang, both Kapi and Alli had to take responsibility and decide how to run the gang business in a situation where they were competing for leadership of the gang and Feltta’s attention. The fact that Feltta seemed only to enjoy watching their competition didn’t exactly make things easier.
In the last game Feltta abstained from making any clear decisions and ended up hurting both Alli and Kapi. The triangle drama generated a lot of tension especially between Kapi and Alli, as they were now the members of the same gang and despite their disagreements had to work together in order to keep things running, as both women’s income was now dependent on gang business. Towards the end of last game the tension between them started to erupt as verbal threatening and physical attacks. The relationship between player and supporting characters was constant balancing between intense jealousy and attempts to find even a fragile mutual understanding. The situation came to an end when Alli became aware of how destructive the triangle really was. She told Kapi that she’d back off, but only with one condition: she wanted to hear that Feltta really meant a lot for Kapi, meaning that Alli wouldn’t make an unworthy sacrifice. She got her confirmation and decided to leave and suggested that Kapi would do the same. However the game didn’t get a happy ending but instead ended up in a chaos for all three of them. It was clear that if the game was to continue, the destructive relationships would stay that way no matter how hard the characters tried to struggle themselves free.

Results

Thorough planning supported the relationship of Kapi and Feltta effectively. Actually so well, that we dare to claim it worked out better with careful planning than if the plot had been left at the mercy of chance and surprise. This may also be a matter of individual playing styles, but in this context planning in advance and leaving only a little space for surprise clearly improved the players’ performance. Having even a rough impression of what to expect gave the players a chance to ponder some possible ways his or her character might react, which made playing the actual scenes smooth and natural.

Mutually constructed aim for the story was loose enough to leave space for improvising and chance, but still helped in aligning the actions of the characters during the game — and the goal was reached in the end. Besides that, the thought of continuing the story
felt natural and ideas on how to develop it came up effortlessly. One thing that also helped to create the game and supported planning the story was the well-working chemistry between players. On top of that a clear impression of what kind of people the characters were and what was the relationship between them like smoothed the transition from everyday self to character when the game started and helped getting a grasp of the game quicker.

The game experience had two kinds of consequences. First of all it changed the other player’s playing style and made playing relationships much easier. This experience produced an idea, that one can independently contact co-player before the game, without any specific urging from the side of game organizers. Secondly, for the other player it created a realization how to play scenes in a way that they generate content also for other players or even how to involve other characters with the scenes.

Physical training in advance is a very good idea. In Finnish culture touching others is not a very natural thing to do, so practicing it helps a lot. When the threshold for touching another person has been crossed in a practice situation, it’s a whole lot easier to act as characters in the game. A technique called Ars Amandi has been said to have the same effect: using it made playing relationships and simulating sex easier and improved having a deeper gaming experience.

The experience, especially the aforementioned scenes, were debriefed by discussing them after the game. Right after the second game the players went through the alley scene and made sure that the means used were okay and that everyone was alright. Otherwise the discussions between second and third game were more restricted as the story was still going on and the plots still open. The things experienced during the games were more thoroughly discussed after last game, when the story had come to an end. Another thing that helped to debrief the experience was a report that every player was expected to write after each game. The report sheet had spaces for
description of what happened to the character during the game, what did the character do and a space to analyze what kind of impact it all had on character and his or her future. Besides being a communication tool between players and game masters, it was a great tool to put an eventful experience into a more structured form. This way everything that had happened to character became part of his or her personal history and this process also helped the player to debrief the gaming experience.

The discussions between games helped building mutual trust among the players. When boundaries and ways of doing things had been set in advance, it was easier to play freely without needing to think if this or that really was okay with everyone. Besides enhancing the feeling of security the discussions also made it more fun and the result was a good, mutual experience of playing difficult and demanding themes. Gaming that was based on trust definitely helped building off-game trust among the players.

Especially important, though definitely not easy, was sharing player’s insecurities before the game. Games should have suitable methods for doing this, as bringing this kind of subjects up may not be easy, yet being able to talk about one’s own insecurities, fears and wishes is important for two reasons. First, being able to share these things supported the thought of us as a group of people who are able to do demanding things in a game and secondly, reminded how important it is to verbalize one’s wishes. Part of this culture are the questions in a game’s sign up form, where the player is asked what kind of themes or situations he or she definitely doesn’t want to play.

**Summary**

The whole experience can be summarized in a sentence “Make it together”. The game masters create the setting and support the game, but eventually the players create their game experience themselves. The method we used was one way of doing things, it may not suit everybody or be applicable to every situation. Thus we encourage players to come up with ideas, trying them out and finding a best possible way for themselves to create a magnificent game experience.
I participated in the larp series Tonnin stiflat, season 1, last fall. The series of three games was set in Helsinki in the 1920s, the era of Prohibition and smugglers, but also of post civil war trauma.

I was very happy that I was cast to play Marjatta KULORANTA, a private investigator. She was an interesting, complicated character, who had all the outward appearances of a cynical private eye, but she had her own issues and a few close friendships to balance the loneliness of her role. However, in the dark world of the game, the political turmoil of Finland in the 1920's and the noir aspects created...
by the game masters, her previously stable relationships would soon be complicated.

The first game began when two police officers asked Marjatta to go to do some legwork for them. They wanted her to check out an apothecary named Tatjana Komarova, a Russian-born woman who allegedly was selling drugs to abusers. Marjatta, secretly insecure and in want of moral support, enlisted Lauri, a male prostitute and her occasional helper, to go with her to the place where the apothecary lived. To their surprise and shock, they found that she had been drowned in her own bath tub. One clue, a handkerchief with the initials O.E., was immediately found.

A certain O.E., teacher Oskar Eronen, was interrogated by Marjatta as well as by the police. He had had an intimate relationship with Ms. Komarova, but seemed to be innocent as regards to the murder. Then things got complicated, and political issues started to play a role.

During the Finnish civil war, Marjatta had been on the side of the Whites. Two of her close friends, Hjalmar “Jallu” Haavisto and Captain Kaarlo Aura, had been there as well — Marjatta and Jallu had fought side by side and the commander of their unit had been Captain Aura, who had also afterwards supported Marjatta, offering her jobs through his contacts etc. Marjatta was frequently sarcastic when she heard someone of “the Reds" still spread their socialist propaganda; nevertheless, for her, the war was over and she just wanted to move on.

However, the division between the Whites and the Reds was strong, and while Marjatta did not care, others did. Captain Aura wanted all the Reds still politically active charged for spreading illegal propaganda, and tried to get Marjatta to acquire proof of their
activities. Marjatta, however, pitied the Reds, sickly Eveliina Holmström and idealistic but naïve Heta Pohjanvuori and felt that they had already suffered enough for their political views. Suddenly, this political divide became tangled with the murder investigation, when Captain Aura started hinting that Eveliina Holmström, seen close by on the day of the murder, might have murdered the apothecary. On the other hand, Holmström and Pohjanvuori argued that Captain Aura himself might be the murderer. This created a very interesting play, in which I was genuinely puzzled and uncertain whom to trust.

Finally, some new evidence was discovered: some neighbors of the apothecary had heard a loud row on the day of the murder and then seen a tall man with a bad leg leaving the apartment. The description matched to Captain Aura. Marjatta was shocked to find out that her friend had lied to her and was the probable murderer. More unpleasant surprises were to follow. In the game brief I received for the third and last game of the season, I was told that Marjatta had already tried to confront Kaarlo Aura about his lies and the murder, but he had avoided the subject, complaining about the severe pain in his bad leg. Marjatta had given in, but knew that something could be done.

She decided to go to the police with the information she, Heta and Eekku Holmström had gathered. In the last episode of the first season, there was a scene where they met a police officer in a park. Marjatta, a former policewoman herself, was optimistic that the police would do something, at least interrogate Captain Aura again. Heta and Eekku were more pessimistic and cynical; they had been harassed by the police before because they were known socialists. In the scene in the park, it turned out that they were right; the police dismissed the evidence as hearsay and stated that Captain Aura was an esteemed citizen and friend of the police. He would not be arrested for the murder; they saw the whole business as a good way to get rid of some politically inconvenient person, to whom the murder could be
It was ironic that naive Heta turned out to be right and cynical Marjatta had been naive about the neutrality of the police. In addition, the police had warned Marjatta not to associate herself with "the Reds" too much. However, Marjatta had decided to follow the truth, no matter the personal cost — the whole thing had become a matter of honor. In the last part of the game, a birthday party of one of the characters, Marjatta confronted Kaarlo Aura, and accused him of the murder but also of lying. He broke down, arguing that the death was an accident. Marjatta was shaken, seeking comfort from her other friend Jallu, and realized that she did not have anything else to say to Kaarlo.

Overall, the simple murder investigation turning into a complex web of lies, corruption and uncertainties created a great noir-type playing experience. Playing a cynical private eye, a stereotype so frequently seen in movies, was a great experience, not only because it is a role rather rarely available for female players, but also because the combination of the easily accessible stereotype of such a character and the softer, or more complicated side made very much alive by the easy co-play with other players.
"I've got an exceptional vintage stashed away in my hotel suite," the champagne heiress said.

"Oh?" replied the rough bootlegger.

"Mais oui. Very rare. Something I only share with close friends," she purred, stroking his collar with her fingertips.

"Are we friends?" he asked.

"Mmmm. Why don't we go back to my hotel and see about... popping a cork."
I couldn’t believe the words coming out of my mouth. I blame the GMs. My job as an NPC was to complicate things. Seduce people. Wantonly fling monkey wrenches into player machinery. "Hold nothing back," they said. So I complicated. I seduced. I flung and held nothing back.

Rewind about 8 hours to the beginning of the game - my first-ever larp - and you’ll find me hiding in the courtyard behind the speakeasy. Shaking from stage fright and late for my entrance. Applying and re-applying my lipstick, fumbling through the little props I had stuffed in my purse, trying to remember the things I should say and do and afraid I’d say and do things I shouldn’t. Dredging up the courage to walk into the speakeasy like I was a French millionaire slumming in Helsinki, as effervescent and irresistible as the black-market champagne she peddled. I was terrified.

In the end I’m told that my role as the manipulative, magnetic Madame Clicquot was totally believable. If so, I can only thank the GMs and players for that. But since I’ve been asked to write about the transformation from nauseated noob to NPC, here are some things that I hope will help future noobs and the GMs who give them a chance.

1. Prepare

“I have quite literally traipsed into third world warzones with less preparation than I did for Tonnin stiflat.”

I have quite literally traipsed into third world warzones with less preparation than I did for Tonnin Stiflat. I absorbed articles, videos, photography and fashion columns from the 1920s. I created a rock-solid background for my character, because I didn’t want to get caught not knowing the answer to something about Isabel Clicquot’s experiences or personality. The GMs were immensely understanding. They patiently answered all my emails about whether Isabel could be like so, or have such-and-such, and if she could have various ulterior motives. Hey
psst all you GMs — communication goes a long way to getting the kind of NPC you want.

And oh, the props! As someone who never quite knows what to do with her hands, I began to have ideas for things to hold. A French heiress, I reasoned, does not anxiously chew her fingernails as I do. Also, props make easy conversation pieces. I made vintage bottles of Veuve-Clicquot champagne as samples of my trade, I crafted a small incriminating accounts ledger that someone could steal if they wanted to, and a very naughty catalogue of 1920's erotic photographs displaying the wares of one of Isabel's more notorious Parisian boutiques. They helped immensely. The first thing I did when I stepped into the speakeasy was plop myself at a table and begin to scratch furiously in my ledger. Nobody suspected that I was just covering up my nerves. Later in the game, I pressed the erotic photographs discreetly into the palms of ladies in the room, asking them to rely on me for their boudoir needs. Or I slipped them into the pockets of potential conquests with a raised brow and a wink. The props were a very practical mechanism for starting a conversation or sparking some controversy - not to mention establishing the kind of person Isabel was.

Preparation was a big reason my foray into larping was successful. Luckily the GMs were happy to have my input into my character. This was very smart of them, because I became invested in the character. It’s so much easier to play a character you have helped to create. If they had insisted I play a stodgy German businessfrau instead, I very likely would have tried and tripped on my own strumpfhose.

2. Know your goals

The GMs were incredibly smart to give a first-timer an NPC role that was rich with possibility but that held no actual responsibility. At no point during the first game was Isabel a crucial piece of any plot. If I bombed as an NPC, there would be no damage to the game. However, I
was given a tremendous amount of freedom to fling her personality around and ensnare players in an array of side quests, if you will. Isabel started out as an elaborate piece of set dressing.

With the GMs' approval and guidance, I created a dozen or so plans that a smart, ruthless businesswoman like Isabel might want to set in motion in the underworld of prohibition-era Helsinki. But my intent was never to force the plans into the game. Rather, it was to offer up a smorgasbord of opportunities that the players could grab or reject as they saw fit.

Of course, I was careful to communicate everything to the GMs and get their approval beforehand. (Kind of. See the Section #3 for exactly how it went to pieces.)

Once the game was underway and Isabel got to know the player characters better, I kept asking myself, "Is there something Isabel can offer this player's game to either enhance or complicate it?" And if there was, keeping in mind the GMs' mandate to stir the pot and hold nothing back, I'd spring one of Isabel's little traps or improvise something new. Sometimes the best thing I could offer was simply a glass of champagne and Isabel's twisted friendship.

In the third game, I did have more of a concrete role in some of the plotlines. The GMs were clear that this time, my goals were to tie up all the loose ends I'd unraveled. So throughout the game, I made sure to check in with the PCs I'd engaged with in the first game and do what I could to nudge them towards closure. Once, in the middle of the game, I sought out the GMs to ask their advice on whether from their perspective it was better for Isabel to stay true to her bootlegger lover or betray him for a better business deal. It was nice to know that the GMs were there if I hit a patch of indecision.

Clear thematic goals were very useful. At any point in the game I could orient myself to that goal and act accordingly. In the last game, it was closure. The middle game's goal was observation. The first was mayhem.
It worked so well, that after the first game I was under *strict* instructions not to cause any more mayhem.

3. **Improvise - then apologize**

About that mayhem... I believe I inadvertently ended up creating a little more bedlam as Isabel than the GMs anticipated. Little did I realize how much improvising I'd end up doing, and just how much havoc my little traps ended up causing. In my defense, all I did was follow orders: 1. Improve player experience and 2. Hold nothing back. For a Machiavellian character like Isabel Clicquot, this meant flashing the possibility of fulfilling their greatest desires — usually at a terrible cost.

Improvising around my given themes turned out to be easier than expected, thanks to the amazing reciprocity of the players. Those with whom Isabel struck up a relationship allowed her to tease out their weaknesses. When I attempted to do something dazzling, they obliged by being dazzled. When I tried being crafty, they agreeably stepped into my trap. I was arrogant, aloof, entitled -- and the right people despised me. Every encounter with a player character made me more confident as the woman whose demeanor I was wearing. To any noob NPC, I would say this: trust the players around you and embrace what they give back to you. It creates a powerful feedback loop.

So, in any case, I submitted my report to the GMs after the first game. I believe they must have thought I had gone completely off the rails. My list of crimes included tipping the balance of power in the game, whisking two players off to Stockholm to do my bidding, and offering an escape from one player’s sad life of abuse and broken dreams. One of the GMs told me later that my meddling meant they had to completely re-write large parts of the game. I was mortified. I think I whimpered something about not holding anything back and then apologized.

But you know what? They said they LOVED it. They were on the receiving end of their own powerful feedback loop. They took in all the bedlam that I and the other NPCs and players had created and
poured it back into the game. After the first game, we worked together to develop the madness I had sown into meaty plot twists. I suppose this depends on what kind of GMs you’re working with. Some might have banned me from future games. But these two took everything I handed them with a kind of Mephistophelean glee.

I suppose GMs like to see their creations come to life too.

4. Fake it till you make it

One of the most intimidating thing about NPCing for me was whether I would be credible or not. And let’s face it, not all of us have the required physique for our roles. I certainly didn’t fit the type for a 1920’s boyish beauty. My run-of-the-mill insecurity compounded with nervousness about staying in character for 10 hours, convinced me that I needed a little practice being the predatory Madame.

So for a couple of weeks before game one, I could often be observed flouncing around my flat, pointing emphatically at things with an imaginary cigarette and saying pithy things in a mixture of Finnish and French. Oh yes, I scripted a lot of my charms, threats and innuendos. And I watched a lot of Mae West videos. I practiced

Run, Anna, it’s a trap! (Seriously, this was the moment when the characters and the players became real friends. Pretty twisted. And definitely a new experience for me.)

TP
saying things like "My husband died in an automobile accident in Switzerland. His mistress was killed too, so it wasn't a total loss." Basically, clinging to a cliché made for a much more consistent performance, in addition to being a tremendous amount of fun. When I didn't know exactly how to react in a situation, I asked myself, what would Mae West do?

It might sound absurd, but it was tremendously useful. Fake being a certain thing long enough, and you'll find you've become it. It got frighteningly easy to slip into Isabel's sinister mind.

Ironically, the more confident I grew as Isabel, the easier it was to change her. By the third game, I was learning that as an NPC not only was I shaping the game, but I could allow the players to shape my character. It was their game, after all. One player character worked hard to get on her good side, and in return she trusted him to run her business. One character was terrified by her, and she obliged by being cruel. And in one truly heart-wrenching scene, a young artist that Isabel was setting up for a predatory relationship suddenly became her closest friend, a mirror into her own horrid soul.

And what of Isabel and her bootlegger lover? Well, from the moment she purred lasciviously into his ear, my fondest desire for the entire campaign was to enact upon him such a horror of betrayal, that he would throttle Isabel to death with his bare hands. I even practiced everything I would say at that moment! I worked on hitting the perfect note of cruelty and desperation. I envisioned Isabel laughing at him with her last breath, scratching at his hands as life drained out of her.

But he and his original business partner simply outplayed me. And I mean that they as players outplayed me as an NPC. They smelled the possibility of betrayal. Their characters charmed her and placated her and removed any logical reason for Isabel to stab him in the back. Oh, she was poisonous enough to do so anyway - but I really had to give them their due. They deserved their victory.

So what was a suitable downfall for Isabel Clicquot? Love, of course. She fell in love with the man she thought was her puppet. Isn't that just perfectly, wonderfully dreadful?

5. Buy a pretty new dress
Can't hurt. Might help.
IN RETROSPECT

Simo Järvelä & Niina Niskanen

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

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

Looking back at Tonnin stiftat season one, we can say that we succeeded in what we set out to achieve. Not everything went 100% as planned and there is always room to improve, but overall we are very satisfied. We managed to share our vision with players, and players took it as their own and played in a terrific ensemble. We are especially happy that the character interaction was as nuanced, immersive, powerful, and multi-faceted as we hoped it would be. We managed to build structures that gave meaning to different twists in the story and to the decisions characters had to make. Also most storylines manifested as concrete action in the game, and they were brought to conclusion at the end of the season. All this was made possible by the smooth collaboration between all participants.

In retrospect, three games in three months was too tight schedule. The original idea was to design all three games before the start of the season, but it was soon clear that if we wanted players to contribute and decide what their characters do between the games, we can’t really design beyond the first game that much. We also somewhat failed at communicating what is useful and actionable input regarding character’s actions and plans between the games. Yet, especially in the second game where we had the most input from the players, we ended up putting up too much content in the game and in
result too little time for free play was left. Among lessons learned are also how it is nearly impossible to arrange “coincidences” in street larp with any degree of certainty, how violence tends to escalate to rather extreme despite all efforts to the contrary, and how having both players and supporting cast can backfire when utilizing team spirit enhancing techniques.

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