

THE BOOK OF THE WHITE WAR

DOCUMENTING A LARP PROJECT ABOUT CULTURE CLASH IN AN OCCUPIED LAND



EDITED BY CASPER GRONEMANN AND CLÅS RAASTED



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THE WHITE WAR

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Foreword

by Casper Gronemann & Claus Raasted

It is a curious thing. When you look at some of the most impressive political larps made in Denmark – the ones we, the editors, hold as the epitome of what we have done so far in the genre – one concept seems to permeate most of them: they are exceptionally linear in the stories they tell and the political themes they convey.

There is often a point to the story – a morale, something the organizers want to tell the players. In other words, larps like System Danmark, KAPO et al. either have a strong narrative point, or a certain opinion of a concept or political issue, and the point of the larp is to have the player experience that opinion or point.

While this is in no way a “wrong” or “bad” way to organize your larp – we count System Danmark and KAPO as some of the best larps in the history of Danish larp – it is striking that we have so few non-linear political larps considering our medium, larp, is so well-fitted for non-linear narratives with strong player control.

Traditional media like books and film have difficulty with non-linear narratives, assuming they are possible within the media at all, and it is certainly rare that the story is audience-driven. Larp has a strong edge here, because our media by definition has tons of player-input and opportunity to design it with audience-driven mechanics in mind.

Why is this important for political larps? Because besides instigating discussion on the theme your larp deals with, you can have two main goals with your larp: you can deliver a political point, or you can raise awareness of an issue. Delivering a political point, “the war in Iraq was a bad decision,” for instance, is different from raising awareness because the latter concept simply bestows upon you information and suggests you use this information to help your own decisions on what to think.

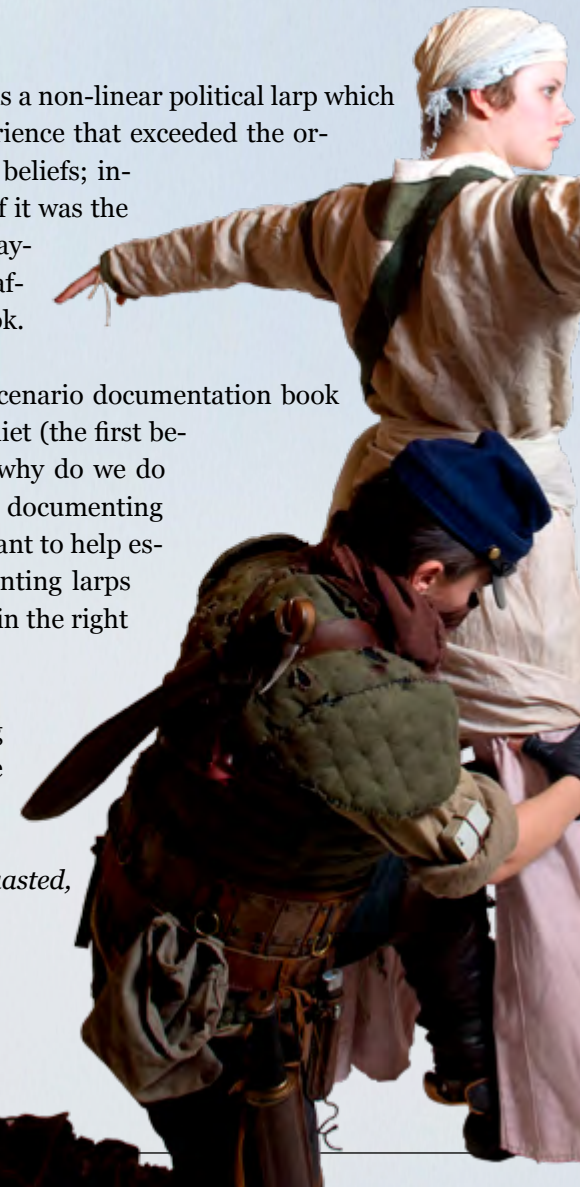
Den Hvide Krig is interesting and in many ways refreshing precisely because it does not presume to teach its players what to think. Rather, the vision seems to have been to create a believable space with some key themes and events that could take place during an occupation, letting the player’s own character move within this space, simultaneously raising the player’s awareness on issues and allowing him to contribute to the events that will raise the awareness of the other players.

In this way, Den Hvide Krig was a non-linear political larp which succeeded at creating an experience that exceeded the organizers’ visions and personal beliefs; instead the story and the point of it was the sum of this vision, how the players interacted with it, and the aftermath of it, including this book.

This book is the second larp scenario documentation book published by Rollespilsakademiet (the first being *The Book of KAPO*). And why do we do this? Because the quest for documenting larps is in full swing and we want to help establish a tradition for documenting larps better. Hopefully this is a step in the right direction.

We’ve had a great time doing this book and we hope you have an even better time reading it.

*Casper Gronemann & Claus Raasted,
Copenhagen, September 2012*



What's in this book?

by Casper Gronemann & Claus Raasted

This book contains reflections from players and organizers on the Danish larp, Den Hvide Krig. We, the editors, consider Den Hvide Krig an achievement and a milestone for Danish political role-playing. What this book hopes to accomplish is to answer the following questions:

- What was Den Hvide Krig?
- What was the vision of the organizers?
- What kinds of different experiences did the players go through during the larp?
- To which degree did the larp succeed from the viewpoint of players and organizers alike? And, perhaps as important, was it any good when viewed by those who were there?

To achieve this goal, we divided this book into chapters which should answer these questions effectively. Contributions to the book consist mainly of texts from the organizers and the players, who has helped us answer the above questions by providing their expectations, experiences, analysis and afterthoughts. The book is structured in the following way:

- **Introduction:** The pages describing the book, the larp itself and other introductory texts.
- **Chapter 1:** In this chapter, written by the organizers shortly before the larp started, the organizers talk about their expectations, fears and visions for the larp. This should contribute to the answer to the second question, as the organizers outline what their hopes are and, more importantly: why they were even making Den Hvide Krig.

- **Chapter 2:** In this chapter, you will find texts written by players on the subject of their experiences during the larp. The texts vary in form, but all describe one or more concrete events in the players' characters' time in the larp. From Pashura encounters with the Tarse to thoughts on the conflicts the players were subjected to, this chapter tries to figure out how the players experienced actually playing Den Hvide Krig.

- **Chapter 3:** This chapter constitutes one of out two chapters (the other being Chapter 4) which attempt to answer the last question. In this chapter, the players analyse their experiences, the larp's design and the mechanics they were subjected to. This chapter both evaluates Den Hvide Krig and tries to make sense of the experience from a player standpoint.

- **Chapter 4:** Together with Chapter 3, this chapter should be sufficient to answer the last question. Here, the organizers contribute their own evaluations and afterthoughts on the project. They discuss how the process has been, how the larp played, and why the larp did or did not work, according to them.

In short, we, the editors, have attempted to provide you with the key to unlock the larp Den Hvide Krig, and extract useful information, ideas, experiences and mechanics from it that made it a landmark larp. This book will not provide you with guidelines for how to handle the logistics of setting up a camp of tents, or handle 70 players' need to relieve themselves or their bodily contents during your larp, but it will tell you which game-design decisions and techniques worked for this larp, and which did not. In lieu of this, it should paint a picture of what kind of experience participating in this larp was.

We hope you enjoy it.



What is Den Hvide Krig?

by Jonas Trier-Knudsen

Den Hvide Krig (en: The White War) was a larp and an analogy to the military occupation of Iraq by Denmark, as part of the US-led coalition. It was a story about a clash of cultures and about the seemingly impossible task of maintaining peace and stabilizing a society in the aftermath of war.

It was set in an anachronistic world where a local dictator and warlord had been overthrown by a foreign federation. The story took place in the difficult times after the main part of the battles had been won, where the troops' mission had gone from fighting a war to winning the peace.

The game had seventy players of which twenty-five played the part of occupying soldiers while the remaining embodied a small local community. Den Hvide Krig was about war, but not about combat. It was a story about cultures and the dilemmas soldiers and locals alike face every day.

The Soldiers

The Tarse Federation is a cluster of countries and city states, governed from the capital of Tarses. In structure it is not unlike historical Greece. The federation builds upon a set of principles known as The Tarse Peace. The ideals are secularism, rationality, enlightenment, rights and duties of the individual, violence as a last resort and finally the further spreading of the The Tarse Peace.

It is with the final mandate that the Federation waged war on the dictator. He was responsible for a massive suppression of the local tribes and was set on a path that could lead to an even greater conflict than what came to be known as The White War.

— Wars are fought in the shadow of victory

The Tarse troopers' story was structured around a series of alterations of the locals' society. These assignments were communicated through a standard operation briefing and daily orders. The assignments were to conduct various structural interventions such as forced vaccinations, distribution of personal papers and the erection of infrastructure and a telegraph station.

The Locals

The Pashura is a small society that inhabits the Chalk Steppes: The barren homeland that the scattered tribes managed to live off through generations of experience. The Pashura are a collectivist culture, stressing work over time, fertility, respect of ancestry and the close ties between the families.

Because of the dictator's fall, the Pashura are without native leadership; a task the Tarse have taken upon them to correct. The Pashura lived and were organized in family groups consisting of young, unmarried people, adults married in relationships consisting of 2-4 persons of all genders, and the old who were no longer fit to work. The old were supposed to guide the young in the teachings and stories of the Riark of the family: the founder of the line and epitome of the family virtues.

The Pashura had little or no personal space and lived their daily lives in the common tent in their tented village where all tasks were done by the community and the highest virtue was to contribute to the community, normally giving the farmer families the upper hand due to their stable production of food.



The Book of The White War

The conflict

The larp Den Hvide Krig took place during the Pashura Harvest Festival. Normally this is during the harvest, but the fields have been laid barren by the war, and only the shepherds can contribute stably to the community. The Tarse were distributing relief aid rations, which was nowhere near the traditional standards of the locals' food supply.

The central dilemma for the Pashura was how to maintain a cornerstone in their culture with little to no resources. Were they willing to risk famine in order to keep what was uniquely theirs?

For the Tarse, the story was about how to aid those who do not want your help. The mission of the contingent of Tarse soldiers was dependant on the cooperation of the locals. The mission would end only when the locals' society was transformed into Tarse standards; a mission that proved to be almost impossible.



Thank you for your help

by the Organizers of Den Hvide Krig

We wish to gratefully acknowledge the Youth in Action Programme and Bifrost – The National Association for Creative Development of Adolescents and Young People for believing in the project and for the financial support.

Thank you!

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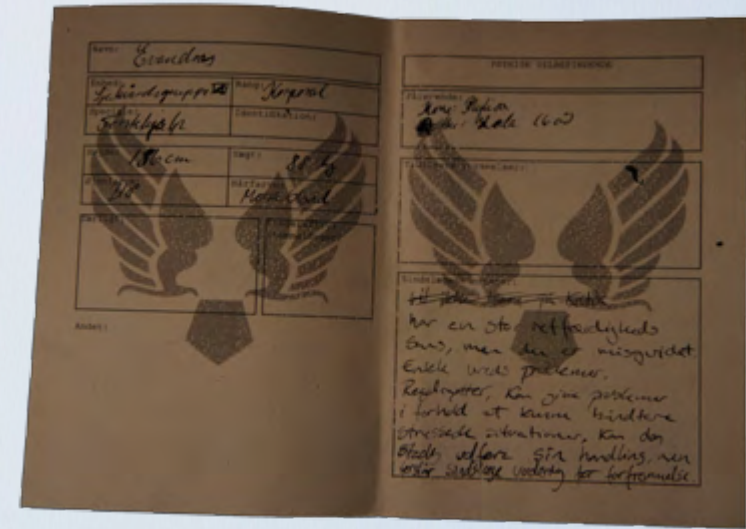
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And finally we wish to thank the editorial team behind this book for all your effort, and for caring.

Casper Gronemann
Claus Raasted

Our deepest felt thanks to all of you, and anyone else involved in the project.

Søren, Troels, Carsten, Jesper, Jonas and Jakob, September 2012



Chapter 1

Organizer Expectations



A micromanaged sandbox

by Carsten Brorson Prag

I was originally drawn to this project by the grand idea (and alcohol). Now I have ended up loving it for all the small ideas and how they are designed for cultural clashes. Ideas like how the Pashura establishes status through donating food, tools and labour to the community, the difference in the intimate spaces of the different cultures and the way a scarf can turn a known face into one of the crowd.

I am very anxious to see how these small mechanics work. To me they are the backbone of the experience as these small social mechanics are all tied to the central conflict in some way. Without them I fear the experience will be stale and the cultures will end up feeling fake. I am however, not overly concerned as the cultural footnotes have been well received at our workshops and I have faith in our participants and their ability to make ideas come alive.

When it comes down to it I have but one large concern, really. This project has ended up a strange beast. The larp is supposed to be a sandbox and at the same time it has ended up being the most micromanaged project I have ever worked on. In our need to create a sandbox and tools to explore our themes we have ended up meticulously hand-crafting every nail and board to a degree where it is hard to let go. I hope that once we cut the umbilical cord and start the larp, this will pay off and the participants will have exactly the tools they need, no more, no less and an interesting scene to use them in. My fear at this moment is that we have gone too far in the micromanagement and paralysed our players.

I believe these points are the interesting parts of the experience and as such they are also the most likely to explode. Thus I think we will have an unstressed run, he said defying the gods, since the parts that can go awry are also the parts that are practically impossible to fix. Here is hoping we will not have to adjust the cultures and the sandbox during the game and that our talented participants can do the ironing out for us.



“If only it won’t rain...”

by Jakob Givskud

So, you are sitting here, the evening before the great hell of executing the larp starts, a couple of job applications behind and half a dozen real-life things you have to take care off before you say goodbye to the rest of the world for a week tommorrow morning.

And suddenly, two jesters tell you to write a text about your expectations to the larp before it all begins... right now, my hopes are something along the lines of “if only it won’t rain to much,” “if only some of the others brought some entertainment, so we won’t be too bored,” “I hope the telegraph will work,” and “I hope the madress isn’t too nasty.” But I do not think those are the kind of expectations I am supposed to write about.

Alright, let me try to formulate something. This will fall into two categories; what I think is most exciting about the larp, and what I expect to gain from the project personally. I cannot stop thinking, though, that my expectations, hopes and fearful inklings have changed a lot, so had I been asked two weeks ago, this text would probably look a lot different.

How do you help a nation incapable of helping itself? Can you invade a country without selfish motives? How does it feel to lose a war you did not start yourself? How do you stand on the subject of cultural invasion? These might be abstract questions, but they might be able to paint a picture of the conflicts and dilemmas that real people and soldiers experience on their own body in the war in Iraq, and other armed conflicts in the newer history of the West.

I honestly have no idea if Den Hvide Krig will be able to do these dilemmas justice, but I think the role-playing media is one of the few media that can contain the insane complexity inherent in this conflict, and I hope our players can tell us a bit more about that after the larp.

With regards to my own motivations, Den Hvide Krig has been a fantastic chance to organize a larp. I have been away from the scene a couple of years and I am missing some hands-on experience. So it is incredible to be able to join an experienced group of organizers made up by amazing people. I am pretty damned thankful for that and it gives me the courage to start thinking of future projects.

I am the kind of person that can ramble on forever, but at present the thoughts will not get much deeper than this.

Let us see what happens on the other side.



My first larp as a parent

by Jesper Kristiansen

Initially my motivation to make Den Hvide Krig was just to organize a larp with the rest of the organizer-team. Most of us talk a whole lot about larp, and often help each other out, but it has been quite some time since we did something together, and some of us never has. So it seemed like the obvious next step.

The story about the military occupation and the resistance against the occupying forces has been one of two important elements for me. The other is the challenge to make the “perfect” set-up for that story. By perfect I mean a set-up that contains all the necessary elements, and nothing else. The art of limiting the complexity of the set-up, without losing the “soul” of the fictional world was a great motivation.

I’m writing this text in the bus on my way from the location (to be more precise, in the bus between Køge and Slagelse) and the game is just about to start. Not being part of most of the game is the one big challenge. For me personally, the rest of the organizers will do just fine! But at the same time, the distance is something that I value a lot in this project.

That we work united towards our mutual goal, a larp that gives the players the best possible means to reflect on a certain set of issues, means that all our “darlings” either have a well-earned place in the larp, or has been killed earlier in the process. So, because of our mutual understanding of what this is supposed to be and do, there is nothing for me to fight for as an individual during the realization of the larp. Anyway, that is how I feel right now.

Den Hvide Krig is my first larp since I became a parent this January, which means that I have been really unreliable (only as an organiser, I hope) during the planning of the larp. I knew this beforehand, of course, but still. As now, when I’m leaving the game to go home and take care of my son, until the game ends Saturday and I will come back to enjoy the ending and clean up the camps.

If a control-freak like me can handle that without losing my sanity worrying about the game, it will be a great personal step. And if I can emerge on the other side of the larp as someone you would like to organize a game with (again?) I will be very thankful. So, we keep our fingers crossed, and hope for the best.



It Called for Immediate Discussion

by Jonas Trier-Knudsen

Are noodles edible in a larp context, or should we roll with lentils? Should the soldiers be players at all? How many rules for cultural clash can we realistically fit into one game experience? Should the Tarse have quarterstaves? Can we accept turbans? Will the lobster pot helmet ruin the game? Do we need rules for sex in a very physical culture?

Save for the initial idea about an occupied people, we have discussed and debated what feels like every mechanical bolt and joint of Den Hvide Krig. Elements have slowly changed and now I must admit to fearing the great compromise.

Will our erosive working of even the pettiest details leave our game smoothed far beyond any aesthetic edginess? Or will it give our participants a feeling of a thoroughly designed game?

For instance, our discussion of rules for physical contact ended up with us having almost none at all. No *ars amandi*. No next-gen system for intimacy, violence or any other thing that would logically be at the core of this game. Just some simple rules and guidelines.

The great agreement was that all mechanics should be 'intuitive', easy to use and not really demanding any meta-reflections from the participants. We told the Pashura that they touch a lot and the Tarse that they consider it impolite and aggressive to be in physical contact.

This almost schematic duality ended up infusing almost every aspect of the game: If the Tarse does A, you can be pretty sure the Pashura will do B. In retrospect I cannot tell if that is the result of clever game design or endless discussions about how to touch one another. Working a lot with mechanics, I am extremely anxious to see how it plays out.

If things play out the way I hope, this constant reworking of the setting and mechanics will play out to the game's advantage. Will it relieve the players of the fear of breaking the rules of game, or have we created two cultures with no real restrictions and defining features at all? What calms me in the anxious hours before the game are my memories from the first workshop. I was to realize that players, as we all know, but seem to forget when we design, have an uncanny ability to turn a larpright's sketches into something very playable. I was immensely impressed and relieved by how they handled the, to some extent, contra-intuitive culture of the collectivist Pashura.

Will the players – as on that first workshop – turn our sketches into something that makes perfect sense? I truly believe and hope so. But one thing is certain. It is out of our hands.



An old dream realized

by Søren Lyng Ebbenhøj

The original idea for the game materialized during my deployment in the Basra region of southern Iraq in 2004-2005. Back then, it was about simulating the mission and tasks, but as the years went by, the idea faded as other projects emerged. As I heard the album *The Resistance* by Muse, I started toying around with an idea for a game on armed resistance. The two ideas eventually merged, and I started to wonder what I actually wanted to do with a game about Iraq.

At this point, an organizing group had been formed, and it appeared to us that there is a largely untold tale from our international theatres of war and conflict: The personal stories and the daily conflicts between coalition forces and the local population are drowned out by the cacophony of reports on battles and acts of terror in daily news.

We have a whole generation of young people in Denmark who have never experienced anything else than living in a nation at war. They are in high school now. Think about that for a moment... In my opinion, the general absence of debate on this, and secondly the quality of the meagre debate, is quite disheartening. The debate on the Iraq war has been a mainly ideological debate about the invasion and as such, the pragmatic debate on how to rebuild Iraq after the initial war – how to clean up our mess, so to speak – has never really taken hold in the public.

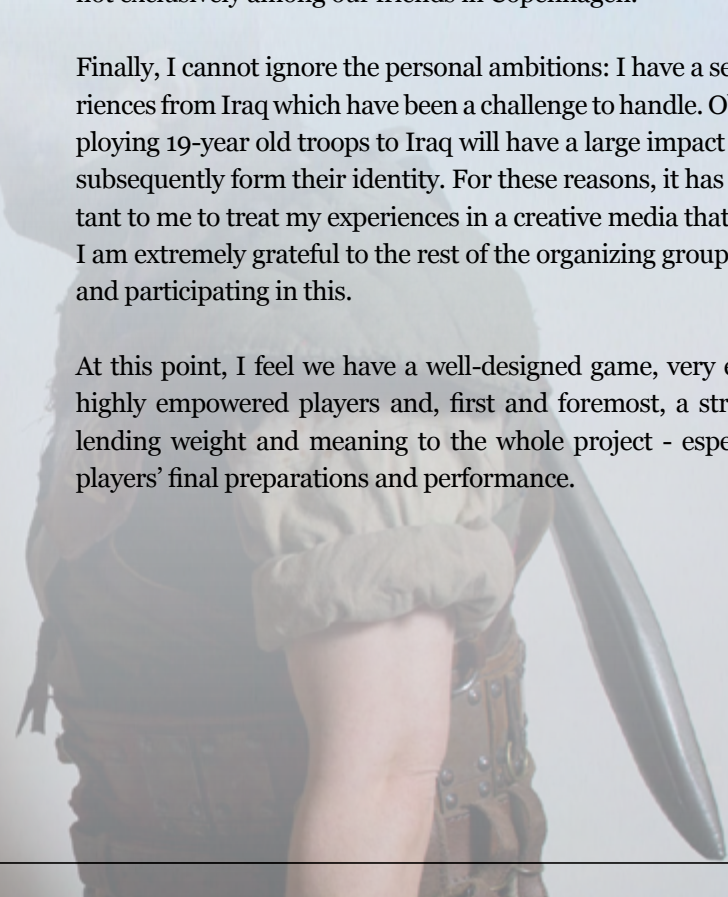
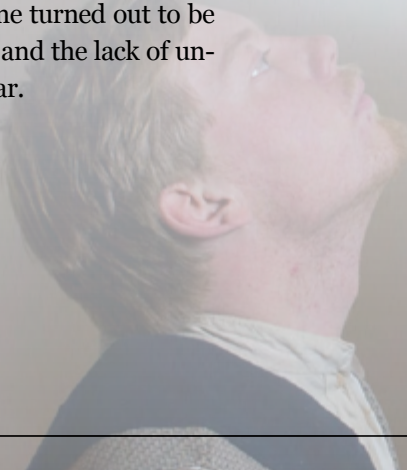
Further, the public lacks general knowledge of what is actually going on in the theatres, and people seem to lack understanding of the extremely complex situations in which we place our troops and the local populations. Thus, the two main themes of the game turned out to be the untold story of the difficult cultural encounters and the lack of understanding of what is going on in the theatres of war.

Not telling people what to think about these themes has been quite important to us, and we have tried to create a neutral contribution to the debate. We encourage the players to get out of the ideological trenches for a moment and partake in the game with an open mind. Whether they man the trenches again after the game is up to them, and for us, it is not a criterion of success to change anyone's mind, only to encourage them to take a stand and give them the knowledge and insight to do so.

Apart from the political ambitions with the game, it has been important to me to target a broad audience, to try and counteract the isolation of the elite from the rest of the community. We have tried to do this by creating the game in the form of a medieval summer larp (the prevailing form of one-off games in Denmark), keep the price level with the higher end of this genre, and to actively recruit among campaign players and not exclusively among our friends in Copenhagen.

Finally, I cannot ignore the personal ambitions: I have a series of experiences from Iraq which have been a challenge to handle. Obviously, deploying 19-year old troops to Iraq will have a large impact on how they subsequently form their identity. For these reasons, it has been important to me to treat my experiences in a creative media that I know, and I am extremely grateful to the rest of the organizing group for allowing and participating in this.

At this point, I feel we have a well-designed game, very engaged and highly empowered players and, first and foremost, a strong concept lending weight and meaning to the whole project - especially to the players' final preparations and performance.



Political, but not preachy

by Troels Barkholt-Spangsbo

There is always only one valid motivation for organizing anything voluntarily. You want to do something better, something different or something new. That is why we make mistakes. But that is also why we sometimes push the boundaries or the culture of how and why we do things.

I organize larps because I want to do something better, and because it is fun and I get to hang out with awesome and talented people I have known for half my life. The last few times I have organized anything my ambitions focused on the complexity and/or scale of the production and the logistics. Not so this time. Den Hvide Krig is not a terribly ambitious event logistics-wise. In many ways it is a throwback to the summer-fantasy-larp-tradition that many larpers around my age grew up with. Instead my ambition is set on two things that are slightly different but in many ways connected.

The political larp

Den Hvide Krig is supposed to be a larp with a meaning beyond pure entertainment or escapism. It is supposed to be political. Not preaching. But a meaningful exposition of the power structures, the systematic violations, enforcement of alienating norms and alienation in general that composes an occupation and civilizing of another people or culture, despite whatever noble goals the occupational force might have.

There might not be any doubt that the medical regime or the social security system is more fair for the citizens of Denmark, than whatever system was in place before we invaded Iraq, but one cannot invade an occupy another country without perpetrating varied assaults on a lot of the values, such as personal autonomy, we hold dear in Denmark. Guess which end of the political spectrum I belong to.

But, however preachy I may be, my preaching would make for a lousy game or story. This is why Den Hvide Krig aims to simulate the situation of an occupation, and let the players expose and explore that situation together with the other players. Instead of trying to enforce the organizers' opinions upon the players (even if we could agree among ourselves what our collective opinion was, which I know we can't), I hope they will explore the occupation – and hopefully the social complexity will let them experience situations that will lead them to question their own preconceived opinions. Hopefully there will not be any kind of solution to the conflicts between occupier and occupied during the game – at least we have told the players that there should not be. Which brings me to my next point.

The framing of themes and subjects

The time we have saved by not doing a big or overly complex production has been spent instead on working with framing the game. By framing I mean how we have told the players what the game is about. We told them during their workshops. We have written it to them. It was written on the game's website. We will tell them right before the game starts. Again during the morning meetings each morning of the game. And we will ask them to tell each other when the game ends.

The game is no clever metaphor and there will not appear a comprehensive and profound storyline orchestrated by the organizers during the game. There will be a lot of events initiated by us, but planned and performed by the players themselves – and a single actor instructed by us. And even that one actor will be more akin to a talking prop than a supporting actor insofar as his main point is to be an object, that the players will have to decide what to do with. So to summarize. I want the players to experience firsthand – not the occupation of Iraq – but an occupation. And I want them to do so – not because I tell or show them that that is what is happening. But by letting them tell each other, that that is what they are doing.



Chapter 2

Player Experiences



But what could I do?

by Astrid Sigaard Andersen (Pashura Player)

Pre game

As I was very busy before the larp started, I did not have the possibility to participate in any workshops, but luckily I had enough time to stop by a meeting of the Pashura shortly before the larp. Therefore, I only had superficial knowledge of the culture and the game.

Because of this, among other things, I decided to design a very conflict-free character. I ended up playing an old lady in a well-functioning and set-in-its-ways relationship with another just as old lady. Our characters' main traits were the wisdom of old ladies and exaggerated stories. In this fashion, it was al-right if there was something we could not remember or did not know.

With a role which potentially was inactive and really boring to play I was understandably a bit nervous concerning what I would experience at the larp. Therefore, I would like to underline how well-functioning a culture we ended up experiencing.

That the organizers had been brave enough to hand over part of the construction of the Pashura culture to the players, during workshops, contributed a wealth of small nuances which resulted in a complete and believable culture, which is a concept I rarely meet in larps. This meant that I, during two days of role-playing, did not at any time feel that I did not belong in the game, or did not have anything to do.

Even though my own personal game experience was constructed solely around other people's conflicts, I had some of the strongest role-playing experiences I have ever had, and a feeling of not really being able to leave the culture and the family when the game was over.

Helpless

I am sitting on the mattresses surrounding the table of the Thura shepherds, my family. I have picked up the yarn which fell to the ground during the riot, and I am attempting to continue my work with it. I can feel my family. They are mingling with the other families, looking on in silence while the Tarse search home after home, or when they attempt diplomacy, attempt to explain to the others that if they simply allow the Tarse to see that we have no weapon or tools, they will leave.

Suddenly a silence settles over the camp. The Tarse have reached Isa's table. I cannot see them, but when I hear a Tarse soldier, who with patience in his voice tells them to stand up and leave the table, I can clearly visualize how they are sitting around the table, hands connected, hugging, with faces of stone, stubborn. Like the rocks of chalk themselves.

The silence is unbearable, thick like honey, it settles over everything. The Tarse soldier makes it clear that he will count to three, and if they do not move, he will use violence.

I should stand up and do something, like I have always done. Help, council, anything to stop the world from falling apart. But I do nothing, I do not move a muscle while the soldier counts down. It feels like an eternity passes. A hollow "bump!" breaks the silence. The sound of a club which hits a person. Screams and shouting fill the world and tears run down my cheeks.

But what could I do?



Admitting Defeat

by Rasmus Teilmann (Tarse Player)

Likely my favourite scene or experience during Den Hvide Krig, was a really deep and striking moment between me and one other players (a Pashura). I played a young naïve Tarse administration trooper and he was an old polite and curious tribesman.

I had through most of the game moved closer and closer to the admittance that what we did was wrong and we were only hurting the locals, and being overly brutal to them (not me but the other soldiers) but we had one tribe we were having a lot of positive relations with, the Thura herders (he was one of these).

At some point we discovered that there was a partisan in the Pashura village and we then moved down to search for him and capture him, with my unit, the administration troops. Of course they denied knowledge of him as a partisan and started shouting that he was a guest and that he had done nothing wrong once we found him. Three to four of the others and I held the locals back as he was being pulled behind our line for interrogation.

The interrogators started roughing him up to make him talk, making all the Pashura shout even more and start pressing towards the line, shouting louder and louder: “are you not ashamed?”, “who do you think you are helping?” “he’s a guest! A guest!” and stuff like that. After a long day listening to the same things, it sort of just hit a wall inside me of: “this is necessary”. I felt bad, and it was horrible to watch as the sympathetic soldier I was.

However, it did not really touch my inner core or change anything, at least not until I caught his eyes. This tired, broken, old man, standing there, completely silent in all this noise and buzzing about, not showing any feelings, just looking straight at me, a look of defeat and shame. Then it hit me, straight in the heart, this enormous shame and sadness.

I still get a tear to my eye as I write it down. It was horrid. With one look I realized what we had done and what my comrades had become, what had happened to these people, people we were supposed to help. It took all my self-control not to throw off my uniform and hug him and tell him that we could make it work, even though it would be a lie. I looked back at him, almost crying, and in that moment we were both stripped of all masks, prejudice, and feeling, everything went silent in my head.

His look told me what no hard word or angry face could tell me “It will never be the same, we can never go back” just in that silent moment we agreed that it was lost, there was no helping anyone and there was no co-operating with the soldiers for them. We lost, both of us had lost. There was nothing left but broken and shattered feelings.

It was a very deep and very emotional moment for both of us.

I felt like everything we had fought for and tried so hard for was in vain. No words were needed, no shouting, touching or anything that these people had held so dear earlier. Two very different people knew with one hard and deep look: Nothing will ever be the same. We could only pick up the shattered remains of what were my ideals and their traditions.

We admitted defeat.

This changed the whole direction of the game for me, it was an amazing moment and incredible to see eye to eye with this man. A feeling I will never forget.



Flowers at her feet

by Kaya Toft Thejls (Pashura Player)

One of the big feelings for me at this larp was the feeling of being let down. I played a Pashura from the Thura family: the family most interested in, and open to, the Tarse. I played a quite young girl, just reaching the age of marriage. Ansa, one of the other young Pashura from my family had a crush on a Tarse soldier, and of course, as her little sister, I stuck my nose into it as much as I could, delivering flowers from one to the other, making arrangements for them to meet and stuff like that.

Furthermore, we invited the soldier and one of her colleagues to dinner one of the evenings, and had them participate in the old Pashura traditions and little games. This gave me a relation to the Tarse, and I grew pretty fond of her. In the following I will share two experiences, the ones involving this Tarse soldier, that affected me the most.

Flowers at her feet

I have been on the Chalk Steppes, gathering flowers and maybe looking a little bit on the Tarse camp. On my way back towards the Pashura camp, a Tarse check-point blocking of the road appears. At first I hold back a little, wary of what is going on. But then I recognize Sostrate, Ansa's crush, and I decide that I can proceed without fear. It appears that Sostrate is the one in command and I smile at her and am about to continue to the camp, when suddenly she tells her men to body-search me.

I do not understand, does she expect me to bring anything illegal? I am hurt, and cannot stop looking her in the eyes as one of her soldiers examine my stuff. Just as I think it is over, the soldier proclaims, "we have to check the flowers too", and then, all but gently, he crushes my flowers in search for, well I do not even know what for.

At that point I cannot hold back anymore. "What are you doing?!" I ask him, "Sostrate, why are you doing this?" I yell to her, hurt and beyond understanding. She does not answer me, just meets my eyes for a second.

The flowers ended their journey from the steppes in front of her feet.

Later, it is time to receive our relief aid rations from the soldiers. I do not feel like seeing Sostrate again after the episode with the flowers, but the whole family is going, and so must I. I see her almost at once. She coordinates the work, walking from soldier to soldier, giving instructions to them, and to the Pashura too. They make us stand close in a marked triangle, huddled like goats.

Picks us out one at a time, and let us pass the barricades. I cannot stop staring at the soldiers, and especially her. Why are they doing this to us? Why can't they just go home, or at least be kind and friendly, as I thought Sostrate was in the beginning?

Eventually it is my turn. Most of my family had already passed, and returned to the camp. I walk to the table where two female soldiers are checking papers and writing stuff, and hand them the passport I have been given. One of them asks me my name, and when I answer she seems content. As I am to proceed, the other one stops me, "I see you haven't got your vaccine yet, please walk over there", and points me in the opposite direction. No. I had just started to relax, thought that I had avoided the bite of the mechanical snake that they forced upon us.

I am terrified, my pulse is ringing in my ears, and I just want to run and hide. Anywhere, in the camp or in my beloved Chalk Steppes, but I cannot. There are soldiers everywhere around me, and my nearest family is still standing in the triangle.



Hesitating, I walk in the pointed direction, every second looking for a way to escape. A woman and a man stand in a little enclosure in a corner of the enclosure. Under different circumstances I might have found her kind-looking, but the instruments at her feet makes me shiver. The man asks for my passport, and hands it over to the woman, whom I recognize as one of the medical troops.

She nods when examining my passport, and then grabs one of the instruments, filled with a dark blue fluid. She asks for my arm, to stretch it out and let her bite me with her mechanical snake. I do not want to, and I tell her so. I try to back off, to get back to my family, but all of a sudden the male soldier is by my side, grabbing my wrist. "It will only hurt a little bit." He tells me. "Soon it will be over." He assures me. Once again, with fright and tears in my voice I yell at them that I want them to let me be, and I try to escape his grasp.

Then suddenly Sostrate is behind me. She tells the man to let go of me, and that she will handle this.

A little hope starts growing in my chest as she holds me tight, in a way you would never expect of a Tarse. The hug is comforting, and for a second I am sure that she will save me, that she will command them to leave me be, and let me return to the camp. But then, from her tight grip around me, she takes a strong hold of my arm and stretches it out, in direction of the female soldier.

My whole world crumbles.

I scream loudly and hysterically, and fight the best I can to get away from the strong arms holding me. Arms that I, just a moment ago, thought friendly and safe. Tears streaming down my face, the soldiers stop and stare at us. Taral of my family turns against us, shouting at the soldiers as Sostrate forcefully steadies my arm.

The female soldier takes my wrist in her hand, the mechanical snake in the other, and bites me. I cry and shiver and run directly into Taral's arms as soon as they let go of me. I think I hear Sostrate say something behind me, but I am not sure.

I am sad, hysterical and incredible angry. I want to send them all home, now! I want them to go away. They brutally separate us, says we cannot walk through together, cannot get our rations if we do not co-operate. They make Taral let go of me, and lead her through. As I stand, tears running down my face, in the middle of the enclosure, a soldier, the very same one who crushed my flowers earlier, grabs my arm and drags me through the barricades, still crying uncontrollable.

As I reach my family the crying simply will not stop, I feel violated and shamed, and most of all I feel let down. A strong feeling of anger is growing inside me, and as soon as I can control myself again, I get up. I grab a little flower on the way to the enclosure, and walk up to Sostrate as I reach it. I give her the flower and tell her what I think: she should give it to another Tarse.

Because she does not deserve my sister Ansa.



Shattered Dreams

By Anders Lyng Ebbenhøj (Pashura Player)

The warm summer breeze cools down the tent as I sit down with Miro of the Isa family. He tells me a story from the time of the Riarks. His stern voice and the concerned look on his face demands my full attention. I listen to him. I listen and learn. When he finishes the story, I thank him for it, as we always do when elders share their knowledge with us. I feel his concern for our family, the Thura shepherds. He believes that the Tarse are tearing our culture apart, and that we, by welcoming them to our home and greeting them with open arms, are making things worse.

I tell him the story of how Thura, our Riark, adapted to her changing surroundings, and saved her village from the famine. I tell him of my hopes and dreams for the future of my family. I tell him how friendly and kind the two Tarse soldiers that dined with us last have been to us. I try to convince him, that they want to do us no harm. I am convinced myself. One of them likes Ansa, and Ansa likes her back. The Tarse, Sostrate was her name, was even willing to partake in our dinner ritual of sharing the bread for her sake.

She listens when Ukka tells her stories of past times in our land. I feel Sostrate is beginning to understand, even change herself. It is my dream that someday soon the Tarse will start a relationship with Ansa and become part of our family. Is it not the greatest virtue of our culture to share? Would it then not be a phenomenal gesture to share with those, who have nothing, those willing to abandon their ideals and take on a new way of life, the way of the Pashura?

I feel that Miro listens. I feel I might be able to persuade him, that it is not so bad after all. I feel my hope for the future growing stronger, and leave the old man with renewed energy and feeling of optimism and happiness.

It is the night of the rite of passage. Our family has carried on the ancient tradition of bringing the Pashura into a new year. As always, it is a night of happiness and hope. We have had plenty of food and wine, and all have danced around the fire as usual. We are back in the camp now. The chatter of the happy Pashura fills the tent.

All of a sudden, the mood changes. Someone is yelling about Tarse soldiers at the edge of the camp. I ignore it. I do not want my evening spoiled by the Tarse. A group of Pashura goes to greet them, and before long I hear raised voices arguing over something can not quite make out what is. The arguing grows stronger. Someone is yelling now. I hear familiar voices among the Pashura. The wine has made my head heavy, but I sense that something is awry.



They laughed at my pain

by Micheal G Nielsen (Tarse Player)

I leave the party to find out what is going on. Just outside the main tent, a group of masked, Tarse soldiers is holding back a group of Pashura, using their long sticks to push around my family and neighbors. A feeling of discomfort is growing inside me as I approach my family members. They tell me the Tarse are looking for weapons and tools that have apparently been used for sabotage. The confrontation grows increasingly physical, and out of nowhere, a tall Tarse soldier pulls a club from his belt and strikes down old Ukko.

As I see his fragile old body falling to the ground, I rush to protect him. The tall soldier strikes again. This time he hits me across the back. I lose my balance and fall to my knees next to Ukko. The discomfort turns to a mixture of fear, anger and sadness. I look up into the cold dead eyes of my assailant. They show no emotion. Behind him a woman's voice raises over the crowd. I recognize it, and the face it comes from. The only Tarse, not wearing a mask. I know her. Trust her. Maybe even love her. It is Sostrate, who merely hours earlier sat at our table and shared our bread.

My emotions take over, and I collapse, holding Ukko's trembling body in my hands. As I feel tears pouring down my cheeks, all my hopes and dreams are shattered. All is lost.

One of the most important situations I experienced during the larp, was an encounter with some purple Pashura near the telegraph station. In idle chatter with a local woman I mentioned some personal information about myself. Most of the information, I knew, would cause some kind of cultural conflict. That was why I relinquished it so freely.

I also mentioned that my wife had been killed. I thought I would get at least some sympathy from that, but the opposite happened. The local woman went back to her friends who were standing within earshot. There she told them of our culture while they laughed at it. When she said: "and his wife is dead", they also laughed.

I don't think they, as players, did it on purpose. And I did not think it was part of the Pashura culture (I asked others afterwards). So, naturally it was the purple ones who were evil and not all of the Pashura. In an ordinary game I would have confronted one of the evil purples alone, in public or secrecy, and given them a thorough beating or talking to. I considered my character's goals and the theme of the larp and imagined that a Danish soldier wouldn't act that way.

So instead of making it dramatic and fun I made it believable.



The young man who ploughed his own field

By Jost L. Hansen (Pashura Player)

A tale about a role play that might as well have been written as an awesome screenplay

This tale from Den Hvide Krig could well have happened at any other larp, but when you experience scenes that, without planning, work as scenes someone had written in advance, it deserves to be told. In order to see the consistency of the tale, the following is a little background story for my character and the group I played in.

I played the character Jari, a young man from the peasant family Isa. Jari was secretly in love with the Tarse soldier Iola and was generally very positive towards the Tarse unlike the rest of his family. He was torn between his feelings for the family and for his Tarse friend. During most of the game, he probably favoured the Tarse friend the most, but really wanted to be with both his family and his friend.

In the Isa family there was a tradition of telling stories that would serve as moral guidance, and since Jari was constantly drawn to the Tarse, there was one story that was told again and again: The story about the young man who ploughed his own field. In brief, it was the story about this young man young man would plough his own field, rather than being with the family, as he believed he could do it better himself. Isa, the Riark of the family, continued to ask the young man to come home to his family and plough all the fields together, but he refused. Only when the storm flooded the young man's land and nearly drowned him, he would follow Isa home to his family, where they together had dug dikes to protect against the flooding.

The tale goes like this, and none of this was planned in advance: As I am walking with some friends along the path following the telegraph line, we meet a couple of Tarse soldiers. After polite greetings, they proceed to explain how the passports, we were issued yesterday are supposed to work. They tell us that we have to use them whenever we queue up for distribution of emergency rations. Another Pashura: Juri and I eventually get into a conversation about how the Tarse prepare their food, and how we would very much like to see how it happens. I would like to, because then I would have an excuse to see my Tarse friend. Juri's motivations however, I do not know.

In the end, we are invited to come by the Tarse camp later.

After a long day of constantly ending up in situations where someone tells me the story of the young man who ploughed his own field, a soldier come into our camp and asks for Juri, inviting him into the Tarse camp to see how the food is prepared. As I hear this, I see my chance to meet Iola. We come up to the camp and I catch eye contact with Iola, but she is in the process of cleaning equipment, and has clearly no time. I follow Juri and the Tarse into the camp and up to their kitchen. Totally uninterested in the kitchen, I turn around and sees Iola has gone out of the camp, signalling for me to follow. I rush out of the camp and we go for a walk and talk about everything. We climb up a fairly high cliff and sit down on the other side to a natural fence that surrounds the top of the cliff.

Here we sit and talk for a while, when I hear my name being called (in the real world, I have quite bad hearing, so it's kind of a wonder I even hear it). I say to Iola that I had better go since I'm called for. I go to the hole in the fence and see Juri far down calling for me. Halfway down the slope, I discover most of my family at the end of the cliff and calling for me. Behind me, to my family's dismay, Iola's shape appears on the top of the cliff, while I go down to my family. When I reach my family, there is a great relief that I finally stopped ploughing my own field and came home. Completely baffled I answer "Well, I've been here the whole time."

The fact that I did not stop ploughing my own field until later is another story... It is, amongst other things, when a dramatic construction and completion of scenes happens like it did in this tale without planning in advance that I think role-playing is a sublime way of telling stories. The fact that I was in the centre of this tale, only makes the experience that much stronger for me. I am deeply grateful to my co-players who made this experience possible for me. Thank you.



The Trials of Hekate

by Nadia Schyberg Petersen (Tarse Player)

I played the young, Tarse soldier Hekate, soldier in the engineering unit. We had divided our group into two smaller teams, alpha and beta, and I played a sergeant for the beta group. My character Hekate came from one of the old provinces in the Tarse Federation, and had grown up during the Tarse Peace. Therefore, she was a strong believer in the Tarse ideals concerning personal freedom and the rights of the individual, and she would like to spread these ideals to populations not as fortunate as her. Her belief in personal freedom also resulted in her opinion that the Pashura had a right to practice their culture and religion, even if she did not understand it herself.

My character made it natural that I was the one who contacted the Pashura, when our group had to contact them. I experienced first hand the conflicts between the two cultures. On the one hand, my character as a Tarse, who was there with the best intentions to help the local population, and on the other side the local population who was afraid of losing their cultural identity.

During the game I experienced a row of scenes, which I felt captivated the essence of the conflict between the two cultures, and which put my character in the dilemma between that which was her duty as a Tarse soldier and her understanding of right and wrong.

The first evening the administration troops had to make sure that all Pashura received a passport, so they could get the necessary relief aid the next day. In the beginning we did so on a voluntary basis, but when many of them refused to get a passport we had to do so with force. The Tarse made a road-block at a natural choke point in the landscape, while the Pashura was at a ritual at their holy ground, so that the Pashura had to go through us to get from the ritual grounds to their camp. At this point it had become dark, and the adrenaline began to pump when the sound of merry Pashura got closer.

I clearly recall a sense that this would go very wrong, but I stood there along with the other Tarse like a silent wall, our scarfs in front of our faces. One thing which took me by surprise was how easy misunderstandings arose when situations became agitated. I formed the first front against the Pashura with people from my own group (the engineers) and some of the medical troops. Our task was to hold back the locals and let them in one for one – first those with passports, and next those who needed a passport made.

The locals were, naturally, not too happy with being stopped from returning home, and I believe there was also an issue with some younger Pashura which had held their ritual, or party, in their own camp, and the adults wanted to get back to them. People pushed and shoved, and the Tarse had to fight to get people in one at a time, which was difficult as the Pashura did not like to be separated from their family. Tension is rising and people are shouting.

Suddenly I was pushed in the chest by a young adult Pashura. I have yet to draw my club as I have not felt threatened until this point, but the young man keeps pushing me in the chest, and I shout repeatedly that he should stop pushing me. Louder and louder I shout, and I am very close to drawing my club when I realise he is not pushing me. Rather, in the traditional Pashura fashion, he is trying to place his hands on my chest while speaking to me.

This was a Pashura tradition when they were trying to show that they had heard and understood what another person was saying. It took me completely by surprise how easy it was to mistake what people were saying and doing in a stressful situation, and how close I myself was to practising violence even in a situation where it clearly was not necessary.



The following day some relief aid had to be distributed and as engineering troops we had to make sure that this proceeded in an orderly fashion. Sadly, the distribution happened at the same time as the Pashura lunch, and so very few of them came to gather the relief aid. We also wanted to avoid that the situation escalated like the evening before, so it was important for us to get the locals to co-operate. At one point the corporal of the administration troops is sent in to get the Pashura out to the distribution spot.

He goes into the great common tent with to private soldier. The rest of us could not see what was happening, but riled voices sounded from the tent and out of fear that the situation would escalate further, I was sent to retake control of the situation. I hurried into the tent, where I find the corporal by the green shepherd-family. He is holding on to one of the family members, and is trying to get the others to go to the distribution.

It is clear to me that the family is in the middle of lunch, and that it is important for them to dine together, so I break off the corporal and explains that relief aid will be distributed, but of course they are free to wait until they have finished eating. The Pashura are extremely grateful and I am almost pull down when they grab hold of my arms and legs to show their gratitude. This scene was crucial to my experience of the larp as it was my first possibility for me to show that I was friendly to the Pashura, and it caused them to gain confidence in me as a Tarse. Later in the evening I was also invited to dinner at the green shepherd's family with the sergeant of the administration troops.

The next day I arrived at the Pashura camp to find someone interested in being trained in the telegraph. I strongly expected walking to the green shepherd's family, after I had put my weapons aside and removed my scarf.

Sadly there were not many members of the family present, but I talked to those that were there. One of them was interested in the telegraph. In the mean time it becomes clear to me that something is going on on the outside of the tent, at the purple peasant family's place. They were not exactly friendly to the Tarse soldiers.

The Pashura I am talking to explains that of their elders have been hit in the head the evening before by a Tarse soldier during some rioting, and he has become sick. He asks if I can attempt to help, which I would, of course, love to, and so I go to the purple family's area of tents. I am greeted by the Pashura from the blue and purple family which tell me to leave – they do not want me here. Behind them the green shepherds come out of the tents carrying the sick elder. When they see me, they stretch out their hands towards me and ask me to help their family member, all the while the other families attempt to get me to leave.

It was an extremely strong scene to stand among such a large crowd of people, where some wanted me to stay away while others begged for my help. I ended up carrying the sick elder to the Tarse camp, where medical troops could help him, while the entire green shepherd family followed me.

A very touching scene played out at the entrance to the Tarse camp, when we could not allow the entire family to get in, as they would get in the way of the medical troops and prevent their work. It also took me by surprised that I at this point was very fearful that the elder would die from his wounds – both because I had come to care for the Pashura in the green family and because I feared for what his death would mean for their view on the Tarse.

Luckily he was saved, and reunited with his family.



We are Pashura

by Niels Jensen (Pashura Player)



The young woman, a daughter from the line of Vesi, lies prone in the dust, her face distorted equally by pain, misery, and humiliation. Yet her voice also betrays denouncing anger. “Why do you do this to us? Why do you punish us like this? We have done nothing to deserve this!”

And bitter is the knowledge that she is right; neither the young woman nor any of the others condemned this day deserve this. To lie stretched out in the dust under the blistering sun; to wear the black cloth of shame or to be humiliated in front of their family in this way.

But even more bitter is the truth that the anger in her eyes is not directed at the Tarse, but towards us – the elders. We, who remember the traditions. We, who are supposed to guide and support the young. But we have forgotten ourselves. In this very moment we, the elders, have forgotten ourselves.

We have given in to the Tarse soldiers, who came to our home and demanded of us that we, Pashura, should ourselves punish those that they, the Tarse, found to be guilty.

And I weep from the shame of this thing that we have done – this thing that the Tarse make us do to our own. I give in to the shame and I fall to my knees in front of the condemned, I hold their arms, and beg them to forgive us.

We are Pashura. We do not punish.
But we are forgetting ourselves...

* * *

Sack after sack of lentils is being poured. Filling the bowl set out on the trestle table to present to all the food for the harvest feast. But the lentils are not the fruit of our harvest. Our own fields, from which we used to share bountiful harvests ever generously, are left barren by the war. The lentils are from Tarse fields, brought here by one of our own. Against the wishes of the the family. And it is our family, the line of Isa, which now gives that which is not ours to give. That which we do not wish to give.

We stand close together holding each others' hands and keep our heads as high as we can while one of our own acts against the will of the family, bringing misfortune to himself as he empties sack after sack of Tarse lentils into the bowl.

And it is the line of Thura, the shepherds that mock us. They laugh and snigger. They yell leeringly because it is the food of the Tarse that we have come to give away in our name.

And I do not understand. Why do they laugh at us? Why do they scorn us in our misery? This was never the way of our people.

We are Pashura. We share and we receive with an open heart. So was our way until the Tarse came...

* * *

The Tarse have been here. They have brought weapons and violence into our home. They have taken our guest and they have shot him. And everything is falling apart...

The Tarse are here no longer, but their discord echoes still. Friend has turned against friend. Young against elder. Partners against each other. Line against line. The village is awash with anger and hatred. Had the Tarse pulled us out into the streets and shot us one by one they would not have inflicted as deep a wound as they have by planting strife and division between our own.

And here we sit – two old people – and watch as our world falls apart. She is of the line of Thura and I am of the line of Isa and our friendship goes far back. As do the friendship between our families. But here we sit while our children spew hatred and poison amongst each other. A young woman of the line of Thura is with us.

She has forgotten herself. Forgotten what it means to be Pashura. She has betrayed us all. She has shared truth with the Tarse and told them what our guest, and others in the village, have done to make the Tarse leave. She has endangered us all. Through the canvas of the tent we hear ever clearly how the line of Isa, my family, speak of her that she is no longer Pashura. That she must go away and stay with the Tarse.



The cleaning of our home

By Jesper Heebøll Arbjørn (Pashura Player)

A young woman of the line of Isa enters now. She has also forgotten herself. Forgotten what it means to be Pashura. She has brought destruction to the Tarse. She has not shared truth with her own family, but has kept it behind sealed lips. She has endangered us all. Here she comes to return those gifts that the line of Isa has been given from the line of Thura. She comes to break the bonds that we had woven between our families.

Yet, as one, both of us elders reach out and each we pull one of the youths to us. She, the young woman of my family and I the young woman from hers. It is a blur who then says what, but to this day I recall it as if we spoke with one tongue: “You are my daughter. Whatever you have done, I will forgive you. You are my daughter. We are Pashura. We are family.”

We are Pashura. We are family.
But for how long...?



The Tarse soldiers had us standing outside our home while it was being ransacked for illegal arms. They did not find any, as we had tried to tell them they would not. In their search they had completely destroyed our home and some of the soldiers even took food from our house.

Once they stepped outside we tried to tell them they could not simply throw us out, destroy our home and take our food like that. Tempers were hot and they got defensive. Old Miro tried to explain to their captain, but the captain drew his stick and hit him. That only made the situation worse, and while I got Miro away to lie down in our home a lot of other things happened outside.

Meanwhile the shepherds had started cleaning up our home, but we weren't happy about things they had done earlier. Someone started yelling that Thura's people were stealing from us and I remember saying myself how they were like the Tarse – only fixing things after they had already broken them. The shepherds took offense and left.

Yet one of them remained and stubbornly kept on cleaning our home, though we told him to go. Other shepherds came to stop him, once or twice. The third time even his bonded wife came to stop him. But he kept on cleaning and through clenched teeth he said the words: “For Pashura the greatest gift is to give, so I am giving. For I have not lost my Pashura ways.”

At that moment I knew that he was right and we were wrong. I turned to him and said: “On behalf of my family I thank you for your gift. Now go to your home, your family needs you.”



I do not shout

by Tina Heebøll Arbjørn (Pashura Player)

I am staring into his eyes. He is staring into mine. I am angry and appalled. He is angry and cold. I am Pashura. He is Tarse.

They have taken my partner. The lovely older man I have been partners with since before any of them were even born. I know he hasn't done anything, I know he won't do anything and I know he doesn't know anything, but they have still taken him.

I walk forward towards him. He takes the same steps backwards. We are locked in movement, I am moving forward towards their camp, towards my partner, he is moving backward to his camp, to prevent me from entering. I ask, "Why have you taken him?" No answer. I ask again. Still no answer.

We are a small group from different families. We are different ages present, both young, adult and me as the older one. It shows how loved the man they have taken is. My partner. They are only two soldiers. Someone behind me is yelling.

He shouts, "No further", and puts his staff into my chest. A line is drawn in the chalk. "Stay behind the line", he shouts. I do not shout. I do not speak. I stare into his eyes. He has no right to draw a line on the road where my old legs have walked since before his mother even thought of him. The road where my ancestors and the Riarks all have walked before we even heard of the Tarse Federation.

The sun is baking. The dust is stirred up from people moving around on this side of the line. My people. It is hot. Some sit down in the shades of others to avoid the sun. Luckily someone brought water from the well. It is nice and cool as the flask passes around between us.



He is sweating. None of us are moving. I am not shouting. He is not answering. He seems uncomfortable in the sun. We are both staying on our own side of the line, staring at each other. He must be human with all that sweat. I ask if he would like some water.

One of the adults holds out the flask and steps forward towards the soldiers to give them some water. They shout and push us all back stating that we cannot cross the line. Everyone shouts but me.

They cannot be human. They do not want water in the baking sun. We quiet down and I calmly ask again if they do not want any water. He shouts back at me. I ask in a calm voice if he feels human, pushing people because they offer him water. He shouts back at me. I stay calm and state that the water is from the same well as they get their water. He shouts back at me. I calmly ask how his family would feel if they knew he used violence against people who were trying to give him water in the baking sun. He stops shouting.

Another group of soldiers appear behind them. They are an entire unit. They relieve the two soldiers who quickly return to their camp. The new ones are informed of the line. Our side falls silent. They outnumber us.

A new pair of eyes stare into mine. They are not angry, but still cold. I stare back at the new eyes. Still angry and appalled. He is their sergeant. I am our elder. I see each of them. He does not see us. He does not care.

They order us back to the village. They don't care why we are standing there in the sun, on the road, behind the line.

I quietly state that the eyes before said that I could stand right here on this side of the line. I would never respect a line in the chalk drawn by any Tarse, but they have someone I want. My partner. So I tell him calmly that I have respected the line so far and that I will keep respecting it. He insists I go back to the village. I slowly tell the new eyes that I am waiting for my partner whom they took without saying why.

They know nothing of it. My side is shouting again. The others cannot believe that the new soldiers know nothing of the elderly man they are holding in their camp. It is who we are waiting for and we are not leaving without him. Their side stand ready.

Why can't I stay? How can they change what is allowed from one second to the next? I find his eyes again. They are getting irritated. So am I. Why don't they make sense? We talk about things. They just make decisions. He says it is his words that matter now, not the first eyes'.

We are not leaving. We are missing someone they took. Our side is going to stay right by this line. Their side forms a human line.

I tell him quietly that we are not leaving without my partner. I miss him and I am scared for his well-being. He states that it is none of his concern. His eyes intensify. He warns me that they will not ask again. We must return to our village. I stand firm. I am ready.

Some of them draw their staffs. Some of us spread out. Two human lines opposite each other. They still outnumber us.





I calmly tell him that we are waiting for my partner. He pushes me back, hard. I almost stumble to the ground. He walks towards me.

We are all pushed back towards our village. Some shout, some are pushed to the ground. They keep moving forward. There is no line. It is just us and them. They have weapons.

My voice stays calm but I am not. I am appalled and outraged that one human could treat another like that. I stare firmly into his eyes. I ask how they can do this to us. He shoves me hard again. I ask calmly if he considers himself human. He shoves me back. I ask in my calm voice if he is proud of himself for doing this. He pushes me back with one hand. I stay calm and ask if his own parents would be proud of him. He pushes me lightly. I calmly ask if his own partner would be proud of him. He stops pushing me. I quietly ask if his own children would be proud of him. He steps backwards. He sees me.

He does care.

I am Pashura. He is Tarse.



Chapter 3

Player Analysis



Gender and Pan-sexuality

by Nynne Søs Rasmussen (Pashura Player)

Rarely have I participated in a larp where the biological sex of the player meant as little as it did at Den Hvide Krig. It was extremely refreshing to experience, as a female role-player, who often struggles with fixed and stereotypical views on gender roles at larps. In my view, this success is rooted in some well-made, thought-through decisions on game design from the organizers.

Concerning gender equality it had a positive effect that the world and the two cultures, Pashura and Tarse, was crafted from the bottom up. This effectively removes the more or less conscious possibility that the players will draw on classic perceptions of genders in the game, with reference to a well-known fiction or historical even.

Add to this that the costumes were gender neutral. Both men and women could, for example, choose to wear dresses or pants if they were Pashura, and the Tarse conversely had gender neutral uniforms. This allowed everyone to move without being obstructed by obscure rules on costumes, like, for example, having to walk around in an evening gown in the middle of a forest.

The gender neutral costumes helped in establishing a zone where the biological sex of the players was erased. Gender can, in general, be considered on the most important categories when we attempt to divide and understand the world; it is usually one of the first things we notice when we meet someone new, but at Den Hvide Krig, step by step, I stopped noticing a person's biological sex.

Instead, the big separating factor became whether I was talking to a Tarse or a Pashura, as well as the person's age – while I barely registered the person's sex. For the Pashura, there was no segregation in terms of work between the sexes.

Everybody helped everybody with daily tasks and it was refreshing to be allowed to carry heavy things at a larp, without someone feeling the need to exercise gallantry and offer a hand.

The most brilliant design decision, however, was, in my view, the all-permeating pan-sexuality (meaning that everyone was attracted towards persons of all gender identities and biological sexes). It would have been such a simple design decision to make one of the cultures patriarchal and the other matriarchal, or to only have allowed homosexuality to exist in one of the cultures. It could, no doubt, have spawned cultural conflicts and would have been the easy way out.

The fact that there homosexual relationships existed in both cultures and that the point of conflict was monogamy vs. polygamy made the game much more interesting and assisted in dispelling gender differences, because all players potentially could be attracted to everyone and that no gender acted as an object of sexual attraction. Thus, the larp also avoided that sexual assault from the soldiers was something that could be role-played.

Den Hvide Krig is, to me, a prime example on the fact that we can design larps with complete gender equality – larps where everyone can play what they want, how they want, without being limited by their biological sex.



The Human Touch

by Anders Lyng Ebbehøj (Pashura Player)

...or why the Pashura culture actually worked.

For Den Hvide Krig, two new cultures were designed, created and acted out. One of these was the nomadic, desert-tribe inspired people of the Pashura. A culture in which the community meant everything and the main virtue was giving and sharing. A culture in which one's personal space was minimal and touching people was polite and showed respect and trust, as well as love and fondness. The Pashura were passionate in all that they did, never kept secrets and had a forgiving and loving nature. There was no religion as such, but the elders of the different tribes honoured the forefathers (Riarks) and the traditions through rituals and storytelling.

The main outline for the Pashura culture came from the organizers of the larp, and this was further developed by the players through workshops, meetings with the team organizers, and using an internet forum. As such there was no centralized control over the development of the culture, and this is one of the reasons I find it quite interesting, as well as fascinating, that the culture worked as well as it did, and it really did. It is the most well-functioning fictive culture I have ever been fortunate enough to be part of acting out. In my opinion there are many reasons why this was the case, the most important of which are mentioned below.

The virtue of giving, and the importance of sharing

This eliminated all the usual problems concerning in-game logistics, such as cooking, getting water from the well, etc. Whenever one noticed one's family's water jugs were empty, one would simply go to the well and fill them, as in all other larps, but since it was so important to share with the community, one would also do this for the other families. Having 70 Pashura in one, relatively small, camp, that all wanted to share, strongly limited the number of times each person would have to collect water.



The playful nature of the Pashura

We had decided, that the Pashura should be an outwardly, positive and playful people. This was expressed in many ways, through the rituals, many of which involved music and/or dancing, as well as through everyday tasks such as cooking, turning into ten man seances with five cooks and five Pashura singing and dancing around the kitchen. Combined with the strong feeling of community, this made many of the otherwise dull tasks fun activities, which created meaningful play as well.



Forgive and forget

Seeing as the Pashura were designed to be extremely passionate, one might fear that many of the conflicts would escalate out of hand, and would thus create strong negative feelings between the different families. However, the forgiving nature of the Pashura very much helped to ease this out. Prior to the game, we as players had decided, that conflicts should be resolved at once, and that no grudges were to be held. This meant that a conflict could easily escalate very quickly, but the participants could move on and meet as friends later in the game, and thus we avoided the constant nagging feeling of distrust and anger amongst the players that I have experienced in many larp as a result of holding grudges.



The human touch

Along with the “forgive and forget” this was, to me, the most important factor in the success of the Pashura, as a larp culture. Having human contact as a means of communication was brilliant! Simply the fact that touching your fellow Pashura whilst talking with them worked very well, and the level of intimacy this created among the players was amazing. What amazes me is that this worked so well between all the families.

I had expected it to be challenging to be physically close with my own family all the time, but after only a few hours of play, I found it natural to hold hands with other Pashura, when walking together. As I see it, the feeling of intimacy I experienced with the other players was what made it possible to play such strong scenes, as many players have reported they experienced. As this was one of the very obvious ways in which the Pashura culture was different to the Tarse, it also became an extremely effective tool in our interaction with them. I saw it as a possibility for them to vary their expression towards us. Whenever the Tarse tried to be friendly they would accept our constant physical contact and vice versa.

What I have previously written gives credit to some clever game designs facilitated by the organizers, and perfected by the players, but I think the Pashura players and the way they handled the culture in-game deserve a lot of credit as well. As I have written this text, and reflected over why the culture worked so well, and now listed different reasons, I am left with the feeling that game design does not explain it all. I have a feeling that in some way, the hive mind of the players in some way synchronized the expression of the culture without any of the players being aware of this. This amazes me, and I feel somewhat grateful and humble to have been part of this.



Morning Meetings

By Jesper Heebøll Arbjørn (Pashura Player)

For me Den Hvide Krig, was one of the best role-playing experiences in the last couple of years. Yet, when I am out to play such a game I cannot help but take a step back once in a while and put on my organizer's goggles and analyse what I see. It is simply who and what I have become when I larp, following years of larp organizing and a long education in scientific analysis.

The thing that strikes me as essential for the game balance during Den Hvide Krig was the morning meetings. As a tool in larp organizing, morning meetings are relatively short coordination meetings where everyone in the game goes out of character to coordinate and adjust the level of conflict and intrigues, coordinates scenes in the game, solve disputes, and talk about how the game is progressing. That sort of thing. Traditionally the mornings during a larp is the period with the most downtime, so it makes sense to place these meetings in the morning hours. Thus, they have come to be known as morning meetings.



In Den Hvide Krig, it was decreed that players would wake up every morning out of character, people would go to breakfast near the organizers' bunker and the morning meeting would be held directly after that. The larp was put on hold until after the morning meeting, where it would start up again with a series of planned start-up scenes around the game area.

The main function of the morning meetings at Den Hvide Krig was to check the balance between the Tarse and Pashura parties; the balance in violence, intrigue, and physical and mental pressure. The Tarse had the monopoly of physical violence, which could potentially lead to a whole range of unwanted situations – including the peasants' rebellion and the situation where the Tarse could not keep up the level of pressure.

The morning meetings were included in the larp design to prevent those pitfalls and to adjust the balance in relation to an escalating story arc, and they did so, excellently.

So the main function of the morning meetings was carried through, and my guess is they did so simply by being there. When it comes to the organizing of the meetings the analysis gets a lot more blurry. The way the meetings was planned, we started with a short session of public announcements by the organizers, then we split up into each of the small families (for the Pashura) and units (for the Tarse) to discuss the game, then each side (Pashura and Tarse) would meet up, and finally everyone would meet up for a grand meeting. All of this within an hour.

In the overall perspective this plan makes sense, but it has a problem. Because the organizers were quite unspecific about what we supposed to achieve during the individual parts of the morning meeting (or indeed during the meeting as a whole), most of the meeting was just talk.



Only when we got to the final part of the meeting did people resolve to take decisions, in a crowd of more than 70 people.

Naturally, the decision-making was left to the ones that yelled the highest and would only involve the bigger issues of the larp, while smaller issues were left untouched. On top of this, the meeting was hurried, because we were short on time and because a lot of players were already more focused on deciding start-up scenes for after the morning meeting.

A little intermezzo about start-up scenes

I have witnessed before, and I saw it again during Den Hvide Krig, how people have a tendency to throw their best ideas and plans for the afternoon towards the start-up scenes. That is very beneficial as it gets you starting on a high, but at the same time it exhausts one of your ideas for later in the game, so you might find yourself with nothing to do later during the day. And if everyone spends their prime scenes for the start-up, then you will have a lot of interesting scenes going on at the same time, and everyone is only attentive to their own. Thus a lot of the scenes will be wasted. Instead I find it better to just cook up some everyday scenes and then use the energy that comes from the fact that it is a start-up scene to make it good.

End of intermezzo, now back to the morning meetings

The morning meetings were not useless, not at all, but they could have been so much more productive. It is a pity to think of how much more the game could have gained if the morning meetings had been more productive. But still: this is not a critique of Den Hvide Krig only. To put it into perspective morning meetings are still a relatively new thing in Danish larps. They have been employed in a few summer larps in the last couple of years (I used them in my one of mine in 2009), and while they are recognized as a powerful tool among the organizers that have tried them, they are still not very widely known among players.

The strength in the morning meetings is coordination, and coordination is a key to a good larp. Yet, to my knowledge, no one has cracked the code to the full potential of the morning meetings, and it did not happen at Den Hvide Krig either.

So, future organizers, I end with this challenge for you.



The Overbearing Voice

by Maja Toft Løvbakke (Tarse Player)

I do not think I have ever reflected this much about my opinions towards the message and approach of a larp before the game even started. Partially because I did not want to be untouchable in my own prejudice about the Iraq war, politically and about the soldiers and locals, and partially because I have never really had strong opinions about it, because I have known too little about the subject.

The whole problem about whether you touched each other or not during communication made the relationships really awkward between me as a Tarse soldier and them as Pashura, as I can only imagine it must be in a likely culture clash.

I played with two of my close friends who had developed their characters to be really condescending and unpleasant towards the Pashura. They spoke and treated them like animals in the end. Even though I thought I should be in on it in-game, I was too repelled and surprised by how quickly the jargon had turned so mean that I simply couldn't.



I had a really bad taste in the mouth about it off-game and ended up being really angry with my friends both their characters in the game and the players outside of the game about small, stupid things. Only later, I realised this was because their actions in the game had affected me off-game as well. This is the first time I have experienced that a game have affected me this much off-game, and also reflected on my in-game character.

My strongest scene was when I, shameful about how the Tarse kept offending themselves and the Pashura with their behaviour, finally stopped one of my fellow soldiers in beating up a Pashura to make her confess - and especially the consequences of it.

The arguments, the officer breaking it up, the other soldiers condescending looks because I had stopped a confession, the talking behind my back, and them believing I was the one who had broken down. It was so powerful how quickly I was no longer part of the group because I had protested about the way we did things.

They only saw the purpose, and did not care about the methods any more. And in the end they removed my military police title and gave it to the man who had just broken every code which my character was supposed to enforce. And it all was done by my good friend and officer, whose back I had always covered.

By a single compassionate act I had broken my credibility, the others' trust in me and every friendship I had. No wonder no one speaks against their fellow soldiers normally. The group pressure is outrageous because you feel like you only have only got each other, which makes trust essential.

The Book of The White War

It quickly became a habit to talk to the Pashura like children. And they were like children compared to the new technologies and terms we the Tarse introduced and expected them to quickly adopt. But it was embarrassing that it was a habit in every situation. When they resisted procedure, they were untaught children who had to learn how things were done. When they cried because we forced them, they were stubborn children setting their foot down because things weren't done the way they wanted. When they cried because they were scared, they were children who had to learn that the world is not always pleasant. When they yelled and screamed at us, they were badly mannered children who had to be lectured or beaten into place. I became so tired of my own "overbearing voice."

Though there was a lot of time where we did not do an assignment, that had to be executed at a certain time, I never felt any down-time, like I usually do. There was so much to do, that the only times I really relaxed, was when I actively decided to go off-game or late nights when we were playing cards and drinking port. Apart from the assignments the organizers had asked us to do, there was always some kind of conflict between the soldiers or different group of soldiers.

There were always social patrols we as the administration troopers could conduct, and there was always some Pashura causing trouble or wanting to get in contact with us. And there was always an excuse to come rambling into the Pashura tent making a search or arrest of one of the groups. And if we ever felt we had run out of stuff to do during the day before, there was always the morning meetings to make sure we could contact people off-game and arrange for the game to continue. I would say that though the organizers only introduced one real happening that would affect everyone - a wounded partisan seeking refuge in the Pashura camp - they did a really good job making sure everybody had some interesting play, whether it was planned ahead or just happened in the clashes.



Rethinking Cultural Habits

by Charles Bo Nielsen (Pashura Player)

The subject that intrigued me the most about Den Hvide Krig was the idea of playing an in many ways different culture, compared to my own western one. It's been an experiment to try to live as a culture with no concept of lying or civic punishment and also polygamy as a main way of marriage.

In larping in general we try to bend the ways of culture and living for the sake of playing something different from our everyday lives, but usually not nearly as heavily as we did at Den Hvide Krig. The idea of not just polygamy, but also the restraint from lying and doing punishment and also having an urge for touching people you were communicating with was very complex.

The cultural differences at Den Hvide Krig was even more obvious when the game was about two cultures clashing. One the Tarse, a bit similar to our own Danish culture and norms. The other culture, the one I was participating as, was the Pashura, which was quite exotic to say the least. The idea was to emulate, as accurately as possible with the available tools, the cultural clash that the Danish soldiers sent to the Middle East would encounter.

Due to the fact that the culture of the Tarse was much more like our own, the challenge and experience of building up a believable culture was not a big part of the game for the Tarse. This was much more interesting as a Pashura, where just doing a greeting or eating dinner was a fascinating experience. The "fanatic," or most traditional Pashura group, did not have a concept of "taking that which is not yours" at all, so getting food was only possible if given to them by another player.

This way of playing required a huge amount of trust and fellow responsibility to work. This requirement of trust held with it a great pay-off when it worked, and a sure downfall if failing.



For example, at Den Hvide Krig, the weather was hot and sunny every day, so making sure to give your fellow players water was of grave importance. To have a safety mechanism that would not break with the culture or fiction, we made an agreement that when a player was giving water or food to another player, one should return the favour and give back the same thing, this way you could get what you wanted as a player, by offering for example water to your fellow player. This way if one is at the dinner table, and no one gives you the cheese, even though you have a craving for cheese, you do not need to just take the cheese for yourself, but can instead offer the cheese to someone else, signalling that you would like someone to offer you cheese.

A lot of the cultural build-up was done by the players themselves, in meetings and workshops before the actual game. This way the players took ownership of the culture they playing. The organizers made the marriage culture of the Pashura polygamy, but the interpretation and realization of this lifestyle was mostly up to the players to decide, which was very important, since it is a great taboo in our civilization.

Thus, having a lot of freedom within the box of polygamy was important. Not having it set to be in the exact same way as real-world societies with polygamy and cultures seen in our world helped conform the culture to be more easily realised. This is also one of the big strengths of fantasy settings in larp, having the possibility to get inspired by existing cultures or beliefs but not being forced to re-enact them.

The restraints on lying was also very interesting. Since we were acting out a fictional story, everything we say is in some way a lie. Also, in many larps it is normal to lie more than you would do in real life, because the consequences of telling a lie is a lot different in a game than it is in real life.

But the fact that the players playing the Tarse culture knew in the meta-game that the Pashura had to tell the truth, gave possibilities for a lot of both interesting but also hilarious scenes and stories. It was a serious challenge to actually stick to the fact that you had to tell the truth. Unlike all the American courtroom series you have seen in your life, where you know that the sentence “Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so swear you god?” often comes before a trail of lies.

Although this has been a short article and a lot more thoughts will come with time, the big conclusion for me from “Den Hvide Krig” is quite simply, that exploring cultural diversity and cultural clashes, is a very fascinating and in the least amusing goal for a larp. It is in the search and exploration of cultural boundaries and diversity, that we can gain a bigger comprehension, that would ultimately make us more tolerant to different cultures and individuals. Thus in my opinion making us better human beings.



Dissecting the larp

by Anders Lyng Ebbenhøj (Pashura Player)

Preface

I had some of my very best role-playing experiences during Den Hvide Krig. That is one of the many reasons this game deserves a proper evaluation. I played Reiko of Thura's family, the only family of shepherds among the Pashura. As a family we were friendly to the Tarse, and we had experienced a rise in power after the war. My character was in a relationship with three other characters: Tia, Eja and Kari.

Pre Game

Workshops

The workshop worked really well for me. It forced us to start thinking about the larp quite early in the process, a few months before the game, which was a very good thing. We also decided our names, organized our rituals and a got few other things sorted. The form of the workshop was fine, and having an organizer there to manage it was great. If having both a Tarse and a Pashura team there was intentional, it was an excellent decision. Organizing the workshop so early gave us some organizational problems, but it worked out fine, so it ended up being no big deal.

Information

Through the entire process, I felt well-informed, and I was always free to ask any questions – questions that was also answered very quickly! I might be influenced by having one of the organizers as a room-mate, my brother, but I think the level of information has been well-balanced. The website was decent – a bit more text than I usually prefer, but seeing as two new cultures were designed, it might have been for the better.

The costume guide for the Pashura was seemingly hard to figure out, at least it feels like I had spent a lot of time discussing it with other players. I myself had no problems, but again: organizer room-mate. That might be worth a thought or two.

During the Game

Logistics and Practical Issues

I experienced no logistic problems worth mentioning, slept well and had plenty of delicious food. The breakfast was a bit bland, and the bread, including what we had for lunch, was very white, but these are definitely minor issues. I liked that there was enough juice, so that one didn't have to make do with half a glass each morning. The number of toilets was fine.

Morning Meetings

I'm a huge fan! I loved that the organizers took control, though as mentioned by others, the discussions held in plenum didn't work all that well. The semi-collective coordination of opening scenes was really good, because it gave us the possibility of having scenes with people outside our families in the game. The possibility to match one's expectations to those of other players, and erase any doubts about the game was also incredibly important to me, and the morning meetings let me do it in an organized fashion, thus saving me from having ten off-game talks through the day. I loved that!



Rituals/Events

In my opinion, most of the rituals worked really well. I'm especially grateful that the Friday night transition ritual was received so well. The planned events that the Tarse had also worked great - to me as a Pashura, they seemed planned. The rituals gave us something to look forward to during the day, and they worked well as topics of discussion and small talk, just like rituals we know from our own everyday life.

The organizers described the feel they wanted for the rituals as that of Christmas, which was an effective way of guiding us in the right direction. Furthermore, a couple of the rituals took a bit of in-game preparation, which gave us something meaningful to do in the otherwise so dreaded down-time – every larp's worst enemy if you ask me. The planned events of the Tarse, i.e. vaccination and the handing out of food, also worked really well for me. They ended up being the epitome of something unusual happening in our everyday life, and seeing as they forced all the Pashura to react to them, they also put the main conflict of the game in focus.

The Clash of Cultures, and the Players Behind it

As previously mentioned, I had some extremely powerful scenes with players in my own family and other Pashura, as well as with some Tarse soldiers. As I see it, this was made possible by several things.

Most players seemed very well prepared, a lot of very skilled players and storytellers participated in the game, and the two cultures were cleverly designed to give us many easily playable conflicts. Each time the Tarse came to our camp, it forced us as Pashura to re-evaluate our feelings towards them and their actions. Quite often, this re-evaluation ignited a conflict with our neighbours or family members, and thus we had ample possibility to act out pre-arranged and newly emerging conflicts.



The palpable differences between the Tarse and the Pashura – different personal spaces, individual vs. the community, etc. – created obvious topics of debate. Thus, the conflicts were easily accessible, which in my opinion was excellent. I often find myself having a hard time getting out of a conflict in a meaningful way, especially if it has escalated and may be on the verge of a violent solution.

However, at Den Hvide Krig I think two things made issue all but non-existent; when in a conflict with the Tarse, there was never any doubt about who had the upper hand, and if a Pashura continued to refuse to back down, weapons would be drawn and the confrontation would end. Among the Pashura we had agreed to be quite extreme in our show of emotions, but also to be a forgiving people who would not hold grudges.

In addition to this, one of the farmer families came up with the elegant gesture of putting one's own hand on the heart of your "opponent", as to say "I have heard your argument, but I cannot see this discussion going any further, let us make peace and move on". These things combined made it possible for me to escalate conflicts, to the point where people spat and shouted "Tarse" at each other, but still managed to move the game along in a meaningful way. Brilliant!



The Book of The White War

The Main Theme/Being Occupied

When I signed up for Den Hvide Krig and chose to play a Pashura, I hoped and expected to feel just a touch of the conflict of being occupied, on my own body. Even though I was somewhat prepared, I was surprised how much it affected me at some times during the game.

My personal story was dominated by a huge doubt concerning how to handle the Tarse and their motives and intentions, and I experienced a number of times how I was let down by Tarse I had come to trust, and feelings of confusion and despair caused by the way they treated my family and me, especially their lack of understanding for our culture.

On the other hand, I also experienced Tarse soldiers who went that extra mile to try and create trust and understanding between the two cultures, and both extremes played a huge part in my overall experience.

During the game I did not give it much thought, but the feeling of never really knowing when the Tarse would be back, and whether my next encounter with them would be one of joy and understanding, or end up in violence, might have been what brought me closest to my goal – the feeling of silent despair I imagine is what dominates an occupied people.

Finally, I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to the organizers for the amazing playground they gave us, and to all the players for being so awesome to play with!



The Art of the Experience Space

by Florian Berger (Pashura Player)

Den Hvide Krig was a very successful larp. While not all players felt equally touched by it, I have yet to meet a single participant who was actually dissatisfied by the game.

This may come as a surprise considering that the organizers omitted a lot of the controlling features that are not uncommon in a successful larp of that scale: an overarching story, a pre-scripted set of key events, and run-time game mastering interventions. Instead, the absence of any directing entity was almost palpable. The organizers literally left the players on their own. The message was clear: If you do not make it happen, no one will.

The reason why Den Hvide Krig succeeded was that the authors managed to create something that I refer to as an experience space. By this I mean both a place and a situation that allowed for constant and rich encounters. As an experience space, the larp had two kinds of qualities: spatial ones and interpersonal ones. First and foremost, an experience space is an actual physical space that you can move around in at will. Den Hvide Krig took place in an abandoned chalk quarry. There were two camps, several significant sites, and winding walkways connecting them, partly across or around some hills here and there. The playing area was clearly framed by some steep slopes, and there was an dedicated off-game area at the quarry entrance.





But inside these borders, players could rove, stroll, run, march as they pleased, without ever running into game masters preparing something, or off-game players. But simply providing a large playground does not do the trick. Instead, the whole place was filled with meaningful sites. There were the two camps, a ritual site, the telegraph station, a water source, and the garden of love and memory, distributed across the place.

Moving between these had a diegetic purpose – you would not just wander around looking for interaction. In addition, several neutral places – as crossroads, a group of trees, an uphill slope visible from the natives' camp – out of a sudden became meaningful when the occupying force set up control or food distribution posts there. One of the most memorable of these temporary sites was a street blockade with passport control at night-time, at a bottleneck road between the ritual site and the natives' camp. It allowed for a very effective and intimidating crowd control of people passing.

The organizers obviously paid very close attention to lines of sight. The ritual site was visible from the occupiers' camp; the telegraph station was visible from the natives' camp; the natives' main tent provided lots of angles to witness ongoing gameplay from the inside and outside; people walking the roads were visible from afar from pretty much everywhere; and vice versa.

In consequence, you as player had a chance to watch and participate in a lot of parallel actions, and take notice of a great number of developments going on around you. That is, if you were not locked into a certain place, as might occasionally have been the case with the occupying soldiers at their camp.

The technique of providing meaningful places to visit for the natives, sites to patrol or establish posts at for the soldiers, and the pre-game encouragement of interaction between the two people made the players actually populate all of these places. Action would seldom centre around a single site; instead people were in constant motion and spread across the whole playing area, while most of the time being in view of each other.

A side effect of this was that the two people provided a visual background for each other. For the natives, as the game progressed, there would constantly be groups of soldiers patrolling and establishing posts around the camp, creating a growing feeling of being at siege and watched; for the occupants, there would always be a group of natives in sight or approaching, shouting and reaching their hands to grab them.

But that is only half of the quality of an experience space. The second half is creating a social space of possible encounters and interactions.



For starters, it does not hurt to have a fair number of players. Den Hvide Krig had around 70, which is a nice number of people for a three-day larp. You do not feel lost in the crowd, but even on the third day you may encounter characters you have not played with yet.

To encourage meaningful interaction amongst each of the two people, the organisers utilised straightforward dramatic conflict. They divided each faction into groups – families on the one side, and military units on the other side – with conflicting tasks and views, or a hierarchy that was bound to cause dissatisfaction. Very naturally hidden conflicts and open arguments emerged over the course of the game.

With one people occupying the lands of the other, there was a clear source of conflict for the two, but the organisers did not rely on that single concept. Instead, they provided each faction with a schedule of tasks or rituals that were likely – but not enforced – to clash when carried out. Another technique was the training of conflict scenes in pre-game workshops. It gave players an idea what could be done in the game, and made them go for these encounters.

The consequence of this game design – a good number of players, intra- and inter-faction foundations for conflict – was a game situation where you could approach any player at any time and have a meaningful diegetic interaction, without too many meta-game considerations, if any at all. It felt so natural in game, but looking back it becomes apparent how carefully this space has been crafted.

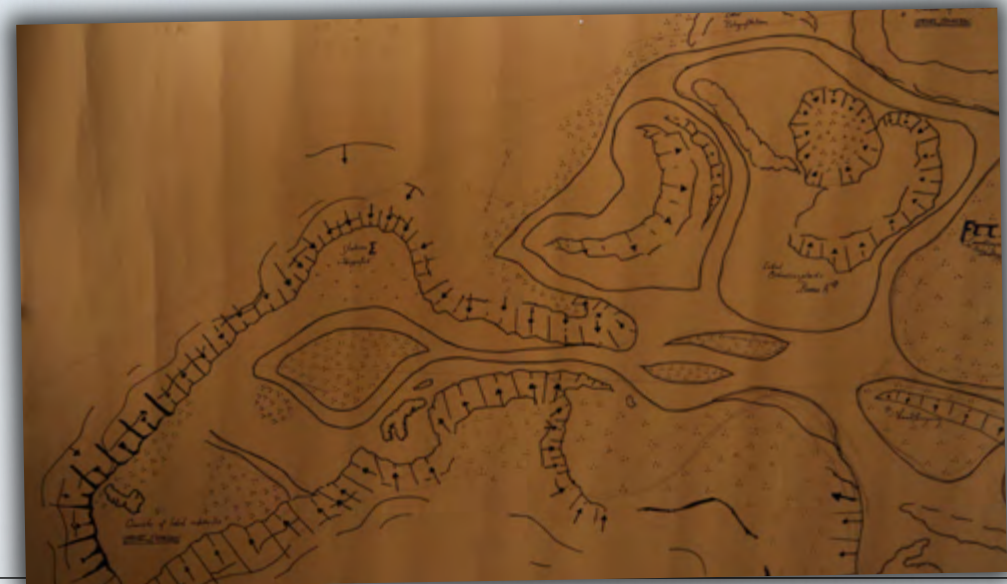
So how did this experience space unfold? You can read about this in detail in the player reports in this book. Here it must be said that it takes dedicated players, willing to contribute a lot, to make these concepts and ideas come to life.

And Den Hvide Krig had a very fine selection of them, all willing to give one hundred percent of themselves all of the time. The players made it happen.

I would describe the gameplay in a successful experience space as dynamic, emergent, and self-directed. Dynamic, as small causes could lead to great and surprising effects; emergent, as relations and missions evolved without prior arrangements; and self-directed, as there was no one telling you what to do and where to go, so you could follow your character's decisions and development.

Den Hvide Krig at times had a simulation-like quality: it felt like an admission to a setting re-created from an existing culture, rather than a fictional and allegoric one. At the same time, it was a condensed experience. It made people think about how a human being feels when subjected to some of the situations we had in game not for some minutes or hours, but months and years.

An experience space is the opposite of a story-based, scripted, game master-heavy larp. The space did not attempt to teach us anything, but rather to raise our awareness; and by doing so, it offered us the chance to learn from what happened there.



Thoughts on Den Hvide Krig

by Kåre Murmann Kjær (Tarse Player)

The following text contains excerpts from a much longer evaluation, that deals with many different aspects of the larp. It has been translated from Danish by our editorial helpers Søren and Anders.

Preface

I played Kleitos. Tarse – which is to say, a part of the occupying force – and sergeant in one of the engineer groups. Kleitos was the type who was used to (personal) success, and who would attempt to avoid situations in which he did not seem capable. He felt the mission as a whole was something he could overcome, primarily because of his great faith to his own abilities and those of his soldier comrades. Nothing is impossible!

The Cultural Conflict

Overall, I think the cultural conflict went much better than I had feared. I had thought it would be almost impossible to strike a balance on the correct level of conflict, but it worked surprisingly well. A large part of this was, no doubt, the cause of the fact that the organisers held their focus here and this carried fruit. Good job!

There were times where the locals acted a bit too much like stupid children, or where we were too strict in our approach, but I think it was necessary to make a caricature of the conflict in this way, to ensure that it came out clearly. Where it worked best – became most problematic, awkward and uncomfortable for me, was when we felt threatened, in terms of our mission, our person, our pride, and so on. To avoid this, we used force to suppress the threat – there, there you felt like the bad guy, even though you had the best intentions.

However, I did miss the armed terrorist. It was as though we were equipped for a war-zone, but there was no danger. It has been compared to being an Iraq-soldier in Kosovo, and I think this way of looking at it is pretty precise. Had there been a single armed terrorist who could stab a Tarse or just the belief that this was a risk, I think we would have been more careful and therefore we would have been forced into demonstrating more force, and being more strict in general, which would have created more conflict. The rest of the larp was a bit too peaceful.

I think it would have been gainful if they conflict had been escalated earlier. In fact, it was not before the last day we really had a reason to believe that there were locals who were in direct opposition to us, which gave us a foundation for using more hardcore means towards the locals. I believe the conflict would have been harsher, which might have been an advantage, had this foundation been there earlier. All in all, however, I think the cultural conflict was exceptionally well done. It shows how much you can achieve if you focus your manpower.



Gear and visual expression

I loved the entire visual expression at the larp. The locals were cool, their camp was cool and their culture made sense. The culture of the Tarse seemed a bit more artificial – though that was handled in-game – and the visual expression was fantastic! I very much hope that someone makes something with a similar visual expression, as

I was deeply in love with it.

Location also should also have a few notes attached to it in this regard. For this larp, it was perfect – nothing less. The organizers clearly had a lot of thoughts on how to use it optimally, and using certain areas for certain functions and their placement in relation to each other made the location more than the sum of its parts. Nice!

Finally, name tags should also be mentioned. Names are always a problem in larps and a personal annoyance to me is that people choose mysterious names and they do not choose them before the final moment, so no one learns them in time. Name tags are fantastic here, and this is something I know we intend to use in the Ninth Stirland for Krigslive IX (Warlarp IX) and beyond, because it worked really well.



Political message?

The organizers had framed themselves a bit on the fact that they had mixed opinions on the war in Iraq (and similar conflicts). That they did not have a certain message they wanted to send, but simply attempted to simulate the situation so one could make up one's own mind.

When the larp ended it occurred to me that this was not what I felt. I felt that, as a Tarse, it was nearly impossible to actually be helpful.

And I have difficulty understanding why.

- Is it because my own opinion on the war in Iraq colours my experience? (since I am placed in the "both for and against" camp I doubt it, but it is not impossible)

- Is it the "typical" view among the players on this issue which drew the game in this direction? Or perhaps even the locals (which basically constituted the people who could give us the possibility to seem helpful or not?)

- Was it actually because the "needs" of my playgroup to play conflicts created so many conflicts that they silenced the good stories? Were we so focused on telling the story of the conflict that we forgot to make room for the sunshine?

- Or was it the game design of the organizers which – consciously or unconsciously – drew the game to this place?

I honestly do not know. I would, however, really like to hear some opinions on this.

Conclusion

Overall, I had an extremely good experience. This was in part because of the people I played with – both the other people from Aalborg, but also the other participants. It was also because of an exciting, thought-through and serious presentation of a larp.

I am not happy with all design decisions surrounding workshops (both before and during the larp) and the ending is better left forgotten from my point of view, but these are small things compared to the overall experience. The conflicts were awesome, there was plenty to do, people were enthusiastic and dedicated to the game. I have difficulty saying anything other than Den Hvide Krig simply was, overall, well-made on the practical side of things, and a good role-playing experience – and that leaves little else to be desired.

In terms of the political aspect I do not think Den Hvide Krig has changed my opinion. Before the larp I thought the war in Iraq was a complex concept which has a story that can hardly be told in terms of black and white, and this fact has simply been reinforced by the larp. I do not see this as a problem, however: it was not the political aspects of the larp I found fascinating, but that I got to try role-playing an occupation – and this worked surprisingly well.

Den Hvide Krig was one of the best experiences I have had as a role-player. Thanks must be given to my fellow players, helpers, sponsors and not least the organizers.



Playing on the Edge

by Florian Berger (Pashura Player)

“It is a Danish larp, but we will find a way to integrate you.” That was the promise of the organisers when I signed up for the game. I am German, and my Danish, indeed, is very basic; just enough to order a kanelnegl – for foreigners: a cinnamon pastry – at the bakery. But I was doing a Ph.D. term abroad in Copenhagen and wanted to take the opportunity to play in my first larger scale Nordic larp during that time.

Pre-Game

The invaluable pre-game workshops foreshadowed some of the difficulties I was about to face. People agreed to do them partly in English, but the character and relationship building was done in Danish, with an organizer translating what was going on, for me. This experience framed my expectations and my idea of what I was in for; and I felt that I had to integrate the alienating elements into my personal game to get something out of it instead of being frustrated.

The organizers came up with the idea that me and another German player – who did not live in Denmark at the time and would only join in for the game – would play refugees, seeking shelter in the camp of the natives. In the diegesis, we would be part of the same people and have the same traditions and customs, but come from a different part of the country, “where they speak differently”.

The general idea was that Danish, German and English all exist in the fiction, with English as a general fall-back language. Each player could choose what level of English his or her character would speak and understand.

Building the Character

While the refugee idea was brilliant and allowed for a very seamless integration, I still needed a motivation. Why would this character flee? What had happened? I decided to push the envelope for an already difficult set-up and play a character with a considerable edge: a war traumatized refugee, who witnessed the killing of his family by a group of soldiers. To stay within the frame of the fiction where the occupants would arrive with good intentions, I pictured them as a single unit crossing the line in an act of revenge for an ambush.

I deliberately wanted to bring the grief and the horror of collateral damage and transgressive soldiers into the game; both to give my peers the possibility to view the occupants as actual aggressors, and to make the soldiers react on actions that they had not actually taken. To create the psychological state of my character, I read about post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and also drew from conversations with a psychologist who is working with PTSD patients.

I attempted a method acting approach to get into character: I tried to create a set of graphic visual memories that would keep coming back to me at unexpected times, and that would make me fear the very shape of an occupant soldier.

In Game

To my surprise and (deliberate) discomfort, this memory build-up worked almost too well. For example, when I first entered the dressed large family tent, I was very uneasy when I looked at the tent of the red family: the colour contrast of red pillows and ribbons and the white tent fabric was too close to the images that I had imagined. It even took a while for me before I could talk to them.

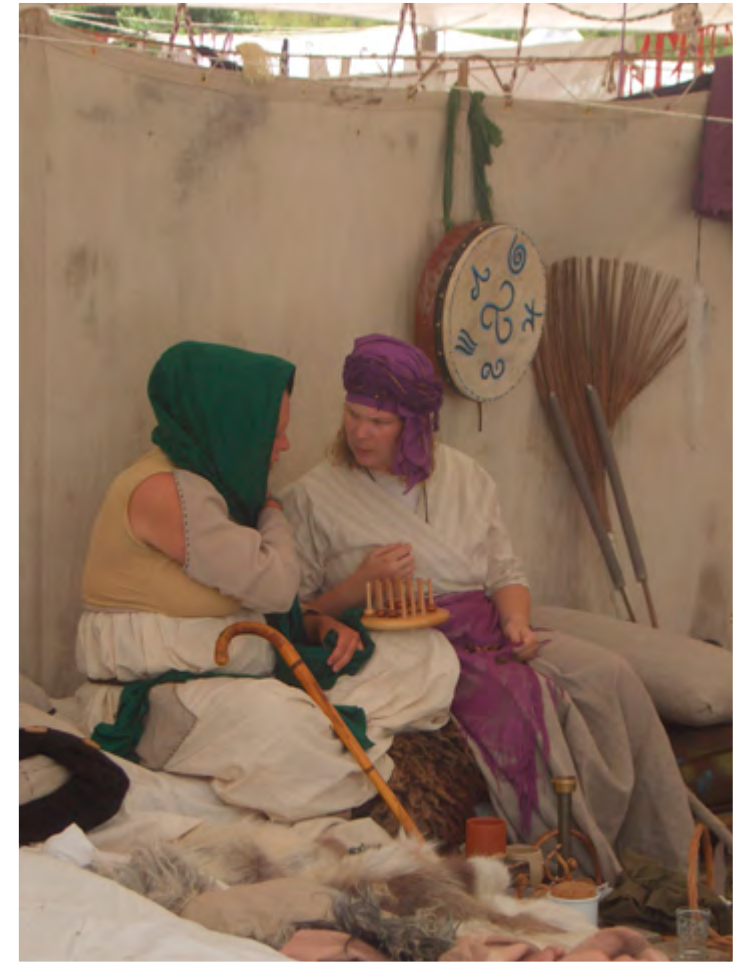
Over the first day, we would have little contact with the soldiers, playing a non-compliant native family; only seeing them from afar at first helped me to develop a fear of them. I, as a character but also as a player, made no attempts to differentiate between the several different units of soldiers; to me they were all alike and all threatening. When they later approached the main tent and finally entered at will for searches, my preparation led to such great anxiety that I did not have to pretend any more at that point. It was astounding how quickly this took effect.

The handling of languages in game turned out to be diverse. Danish being spoken all around me made me feel like an outsider. There was not much faking involved in playing a refugee, it was very close to how such a situation would actually feel like, I suspect.

Some players would switch to English automatically; some upon request; and some players decided not to speak English to me at all. Unexpectedly, the latter playing experiences turned out to be the strongest. Without a convenient language layer, we resorted to bits and pieces of Danish and German we would remember, respectively (with some players actually digging out their school German), and to gestures. From time to time, these conversations would end in misunderstandings, compensated by the physical closeness of the native people.

To ensure that everyone was carrying a passport, the occupying force set up a road block and passport inspection at the road from the ritual place to the natives' camp on the first night of the game. This was the first larger scale confrontational scene of the game. Some natives had been issued a passport during the day and could pass without delay. Some carried a passport, but were upset about the soldiers blocking their way in their very own country. The family that I was with had refused passports.

The protocol said that for these people, passports should be issued on site; however, some of us had to be beaten into compliance. I stayed with two elders who refused to cooperate until the very last minute. The language barrier made this scene extremely intimidating; as a character, I did not understand the procedure, and, also as a player, I did not understand the orders.



Being shouted at by armed soldiers, in dark and confusing surroundings, with people dragged from my grip, screaming and crying, and all the time in a foreign language was a really scary experience. This given situation was resolved in a most unexpected manner: soldiers dragged a table to where we stood motionless, and issued passports to us with minimal compliance on our part. After that, we were allowed to pass. From our point of view the whole thing genuinely felt like a completely pointless procedure.

The morning after I came to the limits of my method acting approach at the off-game breakfast, where most players showed up in costume. I did not want to talk to the players of the occupants. I did not even want to be at the same table with them; I wished they had breakfast at their own camp at first. Them hugging players of the native folk and talking and joking was really irritating.



Again, I was stunned how quickly aversion had built up, based only on faked memories and associations. After a while I realized how important the common breakfast was: it grounded emotions, it provided a necessary meta layer and a feeling of “we are not actual enemies, we’re in this together.” This was reinforced by the morning workshops. Later that day, in character, I found my fellow German player entangled in a game with the green family, involving a soldier, with joy and laughter. I objected to this altogether as a betrayal of our deceased families, which led to a loud and emotional argument between the two of us, in German, right outside the main tent in view of two families. As it was custom, they approached and touched us to show empathy. This was a nice occasion to turn tables on the language barrier, and a very intense moment.

Over time conflicts with the occupants increased both in frequency and intensity. To me, when soldiers searched tents, dragged out individuals for interrogation, and finally shot a suspected partisan, they re-enacted my character’s memories that I had pictured every morning to the letter, leaving me desperate, helpless and crying. The temporary peace I had found in the family fell into pieces, and all the evil that I had tried to forget about came back to life. The final day of the game was dominated by a feeling of powerlessness. I witnessed strong family members growing numb and desperate. We clung to our customs and rituals, but in the end, even these would not provide a shelter any more.

It was on this last day that I changed my mind about the occupants a bit. To me, they had been this strong-willed, organized, self-confident, transgressive and partly brutal force all along; and only on the final day I caught them insecure, having arguments amongst themselves and showing signs of disagreement. In the final hours of the game, this made them more human to me, and I came to pity them.



The Book of The White War

Post-Game

Like a lot of the Pashura players, I already missed the close physical contact as soon as the game was over. The following days found me much more emotional than usual. Strong moments of the game kept coming back to me as literal flashbacks, to the point where I occasionally had to step out of real life situations to come to terms with scenes I had witnessed and been through.

A lot of players that I talked to agreed that even now we would not dare say that we knew what it is like to live in an actual post-war situation. That would do injustice to everyone who has to go through this in real life. Yet we felt that we came at least a bit closer to having an idea of what feelings and conflicts arise in such circumstances. There was a feeling that sometimes there is no solution, no good way out, no matter how good the intentions on both sides are.

One player said to me that when she prepared for the game, she had not at all thought about actually fearing the occupants; but the interaction with my character changed her mind in game, and she developed a sense of them being actually dangerous, in spite of their mission to help. I was happy about this feedback.

Apart from having a great game for oneself, adding to the experience of others by character design choices is one of the rewarding things one can get out of a larp.



There are always flaws

by Thomas Aagaard (Tarse Player)

Disclaimer

I had a fantastic larp and in my view Den Hvide Krig was a very well planned and executed larp. But Casper and Claus, the editors of this book, asked me specifically to provide some of the criticism I had of the larp. This is why I focus on what I did not like. Not because I think it was a bad larp. And since I played a Tarse soldier I have no idea what the Pashura experience was like.

About me

I have been playing and organizing larps for about 12 years. This summer I was involved in making the 320-player culture-based conflict larp "Khypris - År 1" (Khypris – Year 1) and earlier I made Krigslive I and V (Warlarp I and V).

During this time I also served for about two and a half years in the Danish army, as a combat engineer. But I have not served in Iraq or Afghanistan. At Den Hvide Krig I played a private in the Engineer platoon.

Pre larp workshop

Our workshop was held in Aalborg, with one player travelling from Copenhagen and one from Århus.

I am not a fan of workshops and if you do require your players to attend a workshop, it better be damned good and worth the time they spend on it. Not that our workshop was bad, but if we had just met without any organizers and they had mailed us the power-point presentation that was used, the program and some questions, then we could have gotten the same work done in half the time and then maybe use the rest of the day for more practical planning.



Thursday at the larp

Everybody had to be at location at noon on Thursday, so we decided to go after work on Wednesday. This way we did not have to leave home at five o'clock in the morning. Not all players arrived in time and there were practical things in camp that we did not get done until after the larp started. Sometime late afternoon we were finally ready to get into costumes and start the official program. 33% of this program was very good, 33% a waste of time and the rest was the "welcome", practical stuff and similar that you get at most larps.

The good stuff

- Talking with the locals in small groups. It was nice to get an idea about the other players expectations.
- Trying out some "riot control" with the locals. It was both nice to actually try it out before a "real" situation and it helped set the level of physical contact and intensity for similar situations during the larp.
- Trying our "searching" of the locals. It was a very good idea. Both so we did not behave like we had no idea about what we were doing and some rules were agreed on, like: do not hide stuff in your underwear and the soldiers should not "look" there.

The bad stuff

- We spend a lot of time going through much of the same stuff that we did on the workshop. This was a waste of time. Going through it all was a good idea, but there was no need to do it both at the workshop and again at the larp itself.
- Dancing. OK, It was properly only ten minutes we used on dancing, but it is time I would rather have spent talking to the other Tarse soldiers.

Morning meetings

Each morning at eight o'clock the organizers woke us and we had the morning meal off-game with the other players. This was a fantastic idea and worked very well. This way you could chat with the locals that you had a conflict last evening and it gave everyone a change to discuss if everyone was having fun and if there were problems that should be talked about.

But using one hour on eating and then two more on talking, with all the players together or separated into the two cultures, was time I would rather have spent on role-playing. Instead we spent the time talking about role-playing.

Problems could easily have been solved during the hour used on eating. And if that was not enough the players that had a problem could have solved it afterwards in private. But this way I had to wait and listen to 5 other players coordinating their starting scene; something that was in no way relevant for me to know and off-game information that I had to remember that my role did not know.

To make it worse the morning meeting actually helped escalate an off-game problem we had internally in the Tarse camp. The evening before when we (the engineers) were alone in camp, we talked about the fact that we used more time on providing security for the others, than actually doing the engineering jobs we had planned. Some of it was of course fun, but around half of the guard duty was basically standing in the hot sun doing nothing.

At any other larp we would have talked with some of the players we knew in the other groups or used the military command system and our sergeant would have talked with the other sergeants and solved it without making a big discussion out of it.



But since we had the morning meeting we decided that to wait until the morning meeting. But talking about a problem with 20 people adds confusion and misunderstanding by the use of Danish, Swedish and English and we ended up with a discussion way too big to solve anything and this could have been handled a lot better.

The morning meetings were also used to talk about starting screens. Personally I find the whole idea about planning a “scene” strange. I am a role-player, not an actor. If I am the leader of a group I have no problem with making an off-game agreement with the leader of another group, to make sure our players get to do something together.

But then we do it for them. The moment we plan a scene it loses the authenticity and intensity and then it loses the appeal for me. I can accept that when the plan is made so other players get the “real” experience. But why you would make it so that three players plan everything in advance for a “scene” only they will play is simply beyond me.



The Tarse army and military role-playing

Internally in the Tarse camp I think some things could have worked better with more planning and proper discussion about expectations. This was something that was not done and this was made worse by the fact that we really did not have time to talk with each other before the larp.

At the after-party I talked with Anna who played the sergeant of the medics. She had originally planned to be very lax and not focus much on proper military bearing and stuff like using rank and saluting. But when she saw how “non-military” and “lax” the engineers were she changed that and became focused on the military stuff.

She also mentioned that for much of the larp she was actually not sure if we role-played our characters that way or if we as players simply did not know how to do it properly. But at some point she noticed that when an order was given we did work effectively and as a group so she decided we were role-playing it.

I should properly add that half us have served in the army for a year or more and all of us have played professional soldiers many times, at Krigslive (Warlarp). So it was a clear decision since the engineers in the Danish army are pretty lax about it all.

This was not a big problem, but it would have been a good idea if the three units had been able to talk about this before the larp. That would have solved some of the minor issues and there might have been fewer cases where you thought “we are they doing that?”

When I first read that the organizers wanted administration, medics and engineers I thought it was a very good idea not to have any combat troops.



But now I believe that we should have been combat troops and not engineers. We ended up doing a lot of safety for the others and the only time we had any positive contact with the locals was when a few of us tried to play rundbold (Danish version of baseball).

If we had been combat troops from the start, we could have planned better to make sure that we had fun standing guard. If we had a checkpoint somewhere central where the locals had to pass all the time it would have showed the occupation much more clearly. When doing searches and looking at passports would become boring for both us and the locals, we could have changed to walking patrols in the area. This would have given us more contact with the locals and it would have been more intrusive to their daily life supporting the feeling of being under occupation.

Military role-play

Back when I made Krigslive I in 2006, Søren Ebbenhøj (an organizer of Den Hvide Krig) wrote a short text about role-playing military forces. One of the main points was that one typical characteristic of military systems, is the fact that they have a standard for everything. Before the larp we all learned how to fall in for parade and how to salute. And it was mentioned that we each morning should have a morning parade where we would be told the plans for the day.

At every larp where I played a soldier we have done this. It is very “military” and it is a good way to start the day, so everyone is up and know that now we are playing. But each morning we were “ordered” by the organizers to go directly to our “starting screen” after the morning meeting. Agreeing that we would do a search soon after we start the game is OK, but we should have been allowed to have our standards. It would have helped make our military role-playing feel more real.

Length of the larp

Generally I think 48 hours is a good length for a larp. Longer than that and the players starts to get tired. But this time I think the larp had been better if we had another day.

We simply had too many things we did not get to do.

We did not play rundbold properly. A few of the engineers did play a bit with 3-4 locals but I would have liked a match against some of the other Tarse and a proper match against some locals would have been nice. Every time you talk with a “veteran” that had the chance to play football with locals, he will tell you that it was a great experience. Kosovo, Iraq or Afghanistan – it does not matter. Sport and playing is universal and it is a very good way to have a positive contact with another culture. It would have been nice if we had gotten the chance to do it properly.

We never got any “fun” out of our capture of the rebel on Saturday. As some of the other engineers pointed out: The hours we used on the morning meetings and talking about role-playing: if we had used them on playing we might have had the time for the things we did not get to do.

Was this Iraq, Kosovo or 19th Century European colonization in Africa? The larp was about Iraq so naturally we looked at the gear a Danish soldier in Iraq used and we basically tried to be ready for a tour in Afghanistan. The Danish army was not involved in the invasion of Iraq but got there after the “real” war was over. So we looked to Afghanistan for inspiration on how troops who fight on a daily basis look like. But at no point in the larp where there any threat to the soldiers.



We knew off-game that there were no weapons in play beside what we had. Every time we did anything that might provoke a conflict, we had one or two privates standing back with their rifles ready in case one of the locals drew a weapon. Since we from off-game knowledge knew that there were no weapons we could have ignored this, but that would seriously have compromised the realism of all our confrontations with the locals. This larp was not about rebellion or locals blowing themselves up, but a few foam daggers would have given the locals the choice, and it would have helped keep us on our guard. As it was, it was hard not to let your guard down around the locals. Much of the time we had to invent reasons why we were wearing our “fragmentation vests” all the time and always had our rifles with us.

We were ready for Afghanistan, but we went to Kosovo.

Or maybe we went to Africa in the late 19th century during the European colonial wars. I was under the impression that the locals were able to read, write and do maths and their culture was supposed to be very different from ours but not much more primitive. However, a number of times I experienced locals that did not understand simple numbers or knew what a rifle was or that it was dangerous.

Conclusion

I mention the use of time a lot. Since we only had about 48 hours I generally think we used too much time on talking about role-playing... and too little on actually role-playing. The time we did use to talk could have been used on more important topics.

All in all, however, I had a fantastic larp and I was confirmed in my impression that this sort of work is very difficult. Our soldiers deserve a lot of credit for the work they do and they deserve our support and our respect, even if you do not agree with the political decision behind what they are doing. Den Hvide Krig also confirmed to me that larps about cultural conflict can work very well and I believe that it helps us be more reflective, more tolerant and basically be better people.

I hope the organizers can find a way to make this into a shorter larp and that every Danish high-school class get to play it and hopefully they will get a small idea about how easily a small cultural misunderstanding can become a huge conflict. Perhaps learn a bit about what the positive and negative effects of our policy are.

Troels, Jesper, Jonas, Carsten, Jakob and Søren, thank you very much for this experience.

- Thomas Aagaard, September 9th, 2012



Chapter 4

Post-Larp Thoughts
of the Organizers



Post larp musings

by Carsten Brorson Prag

First off: I was proved wrong, sort of, and my fear was put to rest. The participants were not paralysed by the wishes and commandments of the organisers and it is my impression that the game got off to a good start.

The participants simply played through any uncertainty. So it turned out that our very specific requirements for interaction and our need to validate initiative did not cripple the experience. I have, however, been told that the concern for the organiser's vision was a concern during play. I have no specific examples. I understand it, the vision, more as a general feeling that ideas were weighed against before they were executed. Initiative was hindered by that fear to some degree. However, the design choice succeeded as far as keeping things that would break the experience from happening.

It is not unnatural that this was at the expense of some creativity and impulsiveness and my personal belief is that we made the right choice in being so meticulous in imprinting what we thought would work. I am not sure if we should have been a bit more relaxed when it came to approving the ideas of the participants. Not that we actually said "no" very many times and especially during the game. I just still cannot shake the feeling that we went a bit overboard.

I do not have the answer on this and if anybody does, it is the participants, not the organisers. I would like to take the time and space to thank our team coordinators. This should not be seen as devaluation of the rest of our participants, not by a long shot, but I believe the role the team coordinators filled deserve special mentioning and praise. The project relied heavily on creation and creativity in the hands of our participants. This was an active choice as we strongly believe that this is the most effective way, some may say it is a short cut, to participant agency.

Participating in a ritual or scene you have created yourself or you have been instructed in by one of your fellow participants is so much more meaningful than a similar situation directed by the organizers. I strongly believe that one of the reasons that we ended up on the successful is the feeling of co-ownership the participants ended up having. This would in no way have been possible without our hard-working and extremely dedicated team coordinators.

They were our link to the rest of the participant troupe and the instigators of creation. All the things that made up the different teams, and the individuals made up by the players, brought life to the cultures. Quite a few have been named elsewhere in this work. All the intra-team coordination and that we actually ended up with 70 participants ready for action could not have been achieved without the team coordinators.



Food design

And now to something completely different: food design. More specifically: dinner design. This was one of the areas close to my heart. We wanted food to be more than a nuisance that had to be done with so you could get back to the game. The intent was to make the food an actual object of conflicts and other interactions could revolve around. This ended up being done in three different ways. The first was distribution of food. The Tarse were charged with distributing some food for the Pashura. This was done as relief aid rations.

The Tarse were told that not distributing the rations was not an option which was designed to create clashes when some of the Pashura refused taking the rations. There were some problems here as the rations ended up being handed out just when the Pashura ate lunch making it a bit harder for the Pashura to imagine being short on food. For the Tarse the food was as simple as humanly possible. You just had to boil some water and empty the contents of a few bags into the boiling water, stir for a bit and “viola!”.

The idea was that it should be so fast to prepare that it did not take any time away from the action. This worked less than optimal since it took too long to get the water boiling. The food did, however, have a look and feel perfectly fit for soldiers stranded in a desolate place.

It was basically instant-mash with beef jerky. It was designed to be uninspired and bland giving the Tarse a reason for seeking out the Pashura to spice up their food giving the participants one more reason to interact. This worked to some extent but could have been better as the Tarse did not use this opportunity before the second evening and thus ended up having a very bland meal the first evening. Thirdly, the Pashura dinner was designed to fit into the way status was derived from donating to the community.

At a fixed time everybody had to donate what they could to the community in front of the rest of the community. I have heard that this gave rise to some great scenes where the goat herders could cement their new high status. Furthermore the food took a long time to prepare as well as cook so it was present during the whole day and people had to pitch in and help. It was however not hard to do and there was as such room to do other things the same time.

Also the cooking area was placed very centrally for all to see and participate in. Apparently cooking ended up being quite the social gathering with improvised dancing and singing.

This was far beyond my hopes and dreams and we are very happy that it ended up being such an integral part of the life as a Pashura.



It did not rain!

by Jakob Givskud

For a game set in a desert, the fickle Danish weather was surprisingly well-suited, although it was a bit too much for some of the poor Tarse players. There is nothing much to say about it really, it is just one of those random things where you go “yes!” OK, getting on with it.

In the first part of this contribution, I would like to talk a bit about a design-darling of mine and then briefly put forward a few reflections on the way we talk about our larps. Finally I will end with a personal remark.

Overall the game went very well and that has made us both happy and relieved. Particularly the Pashura culture came out very strong and successful from a role-playing perspective. The credit for this, of course, mostly belongs with the players since the culture is developed by them (or so we want them to believe). In hindsight, I regret that we did not spend more time on developing a Tarse culture.

We were focused on the experiences the Tarse got from interacting with, or crashing into, the Pashura culture and that worked, but there was some internal uncertainty that could have been avoided with better preparation. It is a small thing, considering how well things went, but worth the while to remember. We thought we only had to create one culture, but we should have created two.

When we started the design process we had a group of Tarse soldiers and a group of Pashura locals. How to make this set-up interesting? How to make it nuanced and complicated and interesting to play? We could think of many powerful scenes for the soldiers to play out, but how to make it interesting to play a Pashura?

The solution we found was to make conflicts at several levels and let them tie into each other. We had the personal level of conflict, for example dilemmas about marriage, the social level of conflict between the families and the cultural, or epic, level of conflict between Tarse and Pashura. I believe all three levels should be present and accessible to make a larp really good, and they should be interconnected in order to make the experience coherent. In some hierarchical games, for instance, the cultural/epic level of conflict is only accessible to generals and group conflict level is only available to captains, leaving little room for contribution for the privates.

In Den Hvide Krig all levels were accessible to everyone, in the Pashura culture at least. Still, the focus of the game was shifted towards the cultural level of conflict and with less focus on the personal level. I think this gave a quite communal feel, since focus was on the cultural conflict and everybody could participate in this.



If we look at the “narrative curve” for the cultural conflict we had an introduction the first day, a slow build-up the second day and a strong escalation the third day. There the game ended with a very strong animosity and division between the two people. Personally, the curve I was aiming for was different. Not better, just different. The “curve” I was expecting was one of introduction, then escalation and then chaotic diffusion as the cultural conflict seeped down into the personal and group levels.

Perhaps this expectation was naïve. In any case, the slow build-up on the second day was at least partly caused by technical difficulties with the telegraph, and that made the players eager for conflict escalation the third day. This opened up for the social conflict level to rise on the second day and fall again on the third as the cultural conflict took over.

This analysis of the different levels of conflict could be expanded a lot, and perhaps I will do this one day since I think it is broadly applicable, but unfortunately I do not have the room here. I hope you will forgive my somewhat home-brewed vocabulary.

What was the Den Hvide Krig about? “The war in Iraq” is the easy answer, but more specifically? I find this difficult to answer. Sure, it is concerns cultural conflicts and the dilemma that arises when you are sent out to do good, but remain estranged to the people you try to help and at the same time hold a far superior position compared to. But this is seen from the Tarse point of view and most of the players where Pashura, so perhaps the game was about being occupied. Probably though, some players would disagree with that description of their experience. I am mentioning this because I remember being a participant in another game a few years back and the way the organizers talked about the game afterwards was very interesting, but not very close to what I had experienced.

I have mused a bit on the defining power organizers have on what a game is about or what the interesting aspect of a game is. I mean, it is a sort of history-making, but often a very biased one. No doubt, this game have a special significance for Søren and it is from his experiences the story springs, but throughout its course it has become something more. Therefore, if you want to hear about the vision and motivation for the game, read this chapter or ask us, but if you want to know what the game really was about, I think you should go to the players.

Finally, I would like to ask the world: What does it mean that a larp is political? What if we had made the same game, but made no mention of the war in Iraq? Would it still be political? Or, if a game can be said to be political, why is this important (for the game that is, not for the funding-application)? I do not have any answers for this, but I think the question deserves a bit of debate.

I would like to conclude with a personal thanks to Søren and the rest of the organizing group. This was my first (real) larp as an organizer and an important part of my motivation has been to try myself out in this role. I will not say the ride has been smooth, things never goes smooth, but it has been well-organized, the result was awesome and it has been a great success in terms of experience and confidence, since I am already working on the next project. In short, I salute you guys.



A Military Occupation Theme Park

by Jesper Kristiansen

In this entry I will try to present some of our thoughts on the designing and realization of the Tarse, the Pashura and the occupation of the Chalk Steppes. Some time after the game, while describing the set-design, I used the metaphor “theme park” to describe the thoughts behind Den Hvide Krig, to position it differently compared to the typical terms used to describe larps: “sandbox” and “rail-road.” Afterwards it occurred to me how fitting that metaphor actually is.

Our goal has all the way been to create the best possible foundation for the players to experience the central theme: the military occupation. As a mindset and as an actual physical place. This, of course, also had a great impact on the way the fictional cultures and setting were made and handed over to the players. The goal was to really “bring them” to the Chalk Steppes, and into the minds of the people involved in the occupation.

Writing Culture

A classic anthropological question is whether it is at all possible to fairly represent a culture that is not your own. Moreover, how does the way you describe the culture affect the impression it makes on others? And is the culture itself affected by your way of portraying it? For Den Hvide Krig we had to create a number of cultures as a starting point for the conflicts in the larp.

The challenge was to shape a set of cultures that could be used to create the analogy we wanted, while still describing the Iraqi people in a fair and multifaceted way. We ended up concluding that it could not be done, at least not by us. Instead we opted for a culture that seemed strange and alien to us, as Western Europeans, and were very explicit about that part on the homepage and in the media.

The Tarse Federation, on the other hand, was quite simple to design, as we needed something that was as similar to Western Europeans as we possibly could, while still keeping it a fictional culture. In this way we could keep the analogy strong, but it meant that we went from “Western Europeans occupying Iraq” to “Western Europeans occupying a people with a set of cultural practices and a mindset, they, the occupiers, did not quite understand.” I firmly believe that this was the right way to do it, and it seems like it did not reduce the experience of the Pashura players, as one could have feared.





So, the Pashura culture needed to be visibly different from western European culture, and after a lot of tries from different angles (death to the cyclical caste-structure that was our first try!), we went for the simple guideline: “that which is opposite of the Tarse, that is Pashura.” However, we still needed the Pashura culture to be believable, as the players should not only portray it the culture, but needed to actually feel it, if the military occupation were to have any meaning to them. For that to happen, we did three things. First of all we let the players have a great deal of influence in the creation of the culture, and secondly we warned them, and ourselves, not to make it a one-sided affair, where all cultural traits were equally important and perceived as “the truth.”

A wise man, my professor, once said that when Western Europeans describe another culture and religion, we use the term “they believe so and so,” and by that we actually mean “they suffer from the misconception that so and so is true.” Very few Danish people actually believe in a direct causal relation between dragging a pine-tree into the living room at midwinter and the coming of spring, and so it was important for us that the Pashura were not portrayed as someone blindly “believing” in all the myths around their own culture. That would not make it a very believable culture, and would certainly make it difficult to “feel.” The third thing was to use the central theme as a guideline, every time we had to make a choice. Always do it in a way that relates to the central theme. Always.

From what I have heard this was well received by the players, who took our wishes to heart, and made the cultures something they could relate to, something valuable and worth fighting for. The transfer of ownership from us to the participants was, admittedly, a bit chaotic and uneven, but that straightened out once the players had the chance to meet up and agree on the final details.

A Journey to a Faraway Place

However, the Pashura and the Tarse soldiers and the Chalk Steppes could not just be something going on inside people's heads. We needed a physical simulation of the place and the peoples, and so we went about designing the set and costumes. We had to make something that was distinctly different from anything the players were accustomed to, in order to get the feeling of "a different land, where they do things differently."

We wanted the different sites at the gaming area to hold meaning to the characters, in order to accentuate the type of play going on there and last but not least, we wanted as much of the setting as possible done by Thursday morning, where most of the players arrived. In that way we hope to give them an inspiring welcome to this weird place they were going to inhabit over the next few days, instead of toiling to make it and not having time to enjoy it. Of course, someone has to do the toiling, and I am deeply thankful to the players and helpers arriving early to help us erect the tents and build the setting.

Very early in the process we had an eye on Boesdal Chalk Quarry, and even though we looked at a couple of other places, I am very happy that we went with our first idea. The idea of the Pashura camp, with the large Agora tent from Roskilde Festival, and Tortuga tents as the families' sleeping tents also originates from the beginning of the project. From there on, it was all about underlining the experiences that we wanted the players to have. Make sure that the right places would be seen from certain points, such as the telegraph station lying on the top of a hill, in clear view from the Pashura camp, to remind everyone of the situation at hand. Also, we put a lot of thoughts into how the camps should be decorated.



For instances, the main tent of the Pashura camp should be very hard to navigate and get a clear overview of for the Tarse, to make house-and-area searches a difficult and stressful affair. We did not use as much time as I would have liked on the Tarse camp. I have not heard any comments on that part after the game, but I still regret that point. There were all sorts of good reasons and explanations on why it was so, of course, but even so, we could have better.

Last of all were the costumes, which took a lot of time to reach an agreement about among the organizers. I am very pleased the way they ended up, and even more pleased that the players looked so fabulous in them. Again, the analogy between the Tarse occupying forces and modern western military equipment was obvious. The point, of course, was to try to empower the players with the authority of modern military. Since all the players were familiar with that look, they should all, more or less, get the same association.

Reading the evaluations after the larp, it seems that we made a lot of right choices in regards to the setting and the fiction. Most of the player comments on the setting and culture expresses that it supported their experience, which I guess is the goal of a strong foundation. So "hooray!" for the theme park and many thanks to you who participated and brought Den Hvide Krig to life.



The Unsolvable Equation

by Jonas Trier-Knudsen

The simplistic mechanics of Den Hvide Krig

It was sometime after midnight at the after party. A participant approached me and during our chat he asked how we managed to balance the game. To him it seemed meticulously designed and thoroughly tested. Flattered as I was and filled with post-game rationalizations, I said that we had worked without play-testing. Instead we “based the fiction on a simple unsolvable equation and made the entire larp about said equation.”

My answer is of course overly simplified. A major part of the game’s success was the result of a long process and a ton of player driven initiatives. However, my sentence does hold some truth. For me, Den Hvide Krig underlined that the quality of a game is not necessarily proportional to the complexity of its design.

Few Variables

In the first chapter of present book, I wrote that the mechanics had ended being quite simple. This was the result of a long series of iterations where we almost managed to un-design the game. The final edition of the mechanics-document could, to some extent, look like a first draft. It included six points, and here I will highlight some of them. My aim to explain which parts of the mechanics contributed to making the game good. The main point in the design was that, on a meta-level, every bit of the game should be about the central conflict. Internal tensions between e.g. Pashura families and Tarse units were fine, but all conflicts should be tied into the occupation.

If, say, two families insisted on having a conflict about a stolen goat, we encouraged that the scarcity in goats was a direct result of the war. We were clear in our instructions about this to the participants, but did not make any in- or off-game rules to support it.

Rules

This abstinence from actual rules became a central part of the mechanic design, with few exceptions. One of these was that physical confrontations were won by the Tarse. Always. With that said, it was against the mission goals of the Tarse to physically hurt the Pashura, which turned all fights into a two-way defeat. I believe that this approach supported our intention of making the game intuitive to play. An “always” rule is from a game-design perspective about as simple as they come. It required little to no meta-thoughts to follow. The Pashura had a total of five rules for life, three of which were fictional guidelines, designed to mirror the Pashura culture by underlining family ties and collectivity. As the first were ‘followed’ by all of the Pashura, the last two were social markers for conservative characters.

They consisted of a white mark e.g. in the forehead and a prohibition against eating chocolate which in contrast were designed to be very visual and thus easily recognized in public. The aim was to give conservative characters an easy way to signal their standpoint and thus spawning conflict between them and the reformist members of the families. The chocolate was the treat distributed from the Tarse to collaborators, which did start some conflict among the Pashura, but especially the white marks managed to carry our intention into the game.



Contrasting cultures

The second to last bolt in the mechanic design was the use of personal space as a central mechanic. As many of the player reports have underlined, the constant touching between the Pashura played a major role in the players' experience. The way we implemented it was however anything but complicated.

As I wrote in the first chapter, we ended up discarding both systems and formalized rules. We communicated the concept that physical contact was natural for the Pashura and impolite for the Tarse, and rehearsed it at the pre-game workshops and immediately before the larp. In this manner almost every meeting between the cultures would demand one of the parts to break their own cultural norms, which would per default turn interaction between the cultures into a conflict.

This forced conflict also worked on a larger scale. During the game, the Tarse had to implement a number of structural changes to the Pashura society: forced vaccination programs, issuing of individual passports and the construction of communicative infrastructure in the form of a telegraph station.

The pitches that the Tarse worked from were all designed to be in direct contrast to the Pashura way of life, so that there was no way for the soldiers to complete their mission without either breaking their military code or the locals' culture. A fruitful example is the distribution of food, which I know Carsten elaborates on elsewhere. In short, meals played a central role in Pashura society. By letting the Tarse distribute individual rations to a collectivist people, we made an easy point for – yet again – forcing conflict between the two cultures.

One Thing to Rule Them All

It is quite clear now is that the mechanical elements ended up all being formed by a single concept: The binary contrast between the two cultures, without airtight rules of interaction. This simple approach is what spawned my initial fear of having designed a game without focus. Luckily, the players proved me dead wrong.

As far as I read the player reports, this easy-to-understand approach to mechanics also made them easy-to-play, leaving a lot of room for interpretation within the player groups while keeping them constantly focused on the central theme of occupation and conflict.

In our constant rework of the mechanics we apparently managed to discard those elements that were not related to the central theme. This proved an even better idea that anticipated. A very positive side to working this way is that the simple theme easily gives direction to player-driven creativity during the game. The pre-game workshop-wave and focus on player-created content that the larp community has worked with over the last six or seven years, has made us highly aware of how crucial creative ownership is in the process of preparing a larp.

For me, however, Den Hvide Krig demonstrated the power of combining a mono-focal game, setting and mechanics with guidelines for the players. As no plans rarely survive the first contact with the enemy, most ideas for a larp are adjusted during the first hours in the game. I was extremely impressed by how the players managed to stay on target and flesh out the game at the same time. The key to telling a story without stripping the players of their freedom, lies somewhere in this cross section between simplistic design and dedicated players. For us it was all about basing the game on an unsolvable equation between to cultures – and playing out a story about trying to solve it.

Mission Accomplished

by Søren Lyng Ebbenhøj

We did it! ...or, at least most of it.

Today it has been two weeks since we returned from the location, and it is time to wrap up, and look back at the game. I must say, I am pretty proud and very satisfied with what we achieved with the game, and judging from the evaluations on our forum, some of which you will find excerpts from in this book, our players are pretty happy too. I am not sure that we changed an awful lot of peoples' minds about the war in Iraq, but we did change a few. I am pretty sure we had somewhere around 70 people stop and think for a couple of days. And with three television appearances, two of them national, I think it is safe to say we got the message out there. All in all, I think the mission was successful.

To accomplish such a goal, especially in a summer larp like setting, I think we did two things right: We kept focus in the design process, and we told the players in an open and honest fashion, what it was all about.

Keeping focus was the hardest. Throughout the design and organizing process we continuously compared everything to the main themes, and everything that did not fit in was removed. It was a brutal process, but also one that gradually (as people's personal "darlings" were mercifully killed) changed into a well-guided design process favouring simple, strong elements.

In this way only those parts of the cultures that would produce conflict in the game were defined. Only game mechanics that would produce conflicting or interesting cultural encounters were introduced, and even the process for character creation at the workshops was based on the emerging characters' thoughts about the occupation. Also, we strongly encouraged the players only to prepare conflicts and stories revolving about the central themes.

The second thing we did was that we kept telling the players: The political aims and our thoughts on it are on the website, we kept telling it at the workshops, it was in the player e-mails and just before the game we even did a three-hour workshop rehearsing violence and oppression and also asked the players to discuss their expectations in the light of the conflicting cultural encounter.

All of this simply worked: It convinced the players that the central thesis of the game was true, which I firmly believe it is: That Danish soldiers came to Iraq with ambitions of doing good, and that it was extremely difficult. And it made the different parts of the game relate to that central point.

At least from the player feedback so far, it seems everyone's stories are connected tightly to the occupation. This last part should be obvious, but after seeing countless examples from other games, my own included, of carefully prepared conflicts and characters fading to nothing in the face of an external threat, I was impressed with how well the conflicts and stories were maintained even when it all became rough.



Design

One of the challenges in creating Den Hvide Krig was to somehow translate the situation in Iraq (or rather the part of it that we wanted to portray) into game mechanics. Usually we create games from a general feel, a pre-set culture or something similar, and extrapolate from there. The process of translation however, was challenging and immensely fun. One example is the basic decision of excluding violent resistance from the game, and representing abuse and violence from the soldiers by structural abuse in the form of forced vaccination, individualisation of the collectivist locals, and so on.

Another is the direct adaptation of the very different perception of personal space that I experienced first-hand in Iraq: The Iraqis that I encountered had preciously small personal spaces, and they would hold our hands and stroke our arms when we talked to them. Also, when they were happy, they were very happy and loud, and when they were angry, they were very angry.

Putting an amplified version of this feature into the game, and designing the soldiers to be the exact opposites turned out to be one of our best choices of mechanics, resulting in a simple, dynamic and physical representation of community on the part of the Pashura, and creating players really needing a hug after the game in case of the soldiers.

Of course this also made the cultural encounters even more frustrating.

Empowerment and inclusion

All good games owe a lot to empowered players. And this game was no exception. For the game to work as well as it seems it did, we do owe a lot to our players, who really took it in. But enabling them to do so took some work on everyone's part.

Organizing the players into teams, as it is commonplace at Danish summer larps, had the distinct purpose of taking advantage of teamwork and synergies in the player preparation phase. With the costumes not being overly complicated, at least for the locals, the individual teams spent a lot of time developing their culture and their contributions to the harvest festival which was central to the game. And this paid off.

Some of the most important cultural norms were developed during this phase, while the team leaders liaised with us, ensuring that we would always know what the players were planning. This brought us the colour-coded headgear distinguishing generations for the locals, and it brought us the norm that the locals must never lie, adding a whole new level to the emerging undercover resistance movement. One regret in this regard however, is that knowledge-sharing between the teams could have been better, which became evident during the game.



Also, we took care in stressing that the players had to form the game themselves. In this way, our focus was at empowering and enabling the players to be able to plan and play the game, instead of telling them exactly what to do and run the game for them.

At the end of one of the workshops for a team of soldiers for example, they took turns to present their, still rather thin, characters with personalities, views on the conflict and their planned story arcs. It struck me that I recognized all six stories and could put names to every single one. Names of my former comrades from Iraq.

Another example is a story I heard the other day of how the extremely strong, collectivist Pashura society went from unity and relative peace with the Tarse soldiers, over mistrust and emerging resistance to all-out conflict amongst themselves as the resistance built up. This story is frighteningly close to the actual development of the civil war in Iraq, and it emerged largely unguided over just two days in the game.

These examples tell me two things: First, we managed to form a thematic common ground and transparent, political standing for the game by translating and communicating a series of real-world elements from Iraq, and we created an open-minded and permissive environment for the players to develop the game within some quite tight but clear thematic limitations. Secondly, we successfully built empowerment and confidence with our extremely motivated and skilled players (this also goes for the less experienced ones), enabling them to form their own stories and experiences.

The most frightening experience in the entire process for me was meeting the players at the workshops and starting the transfer of responsibility, as well as finalizing that process in the hours before the game.

I always find this process difficult, but maybe especially so this time since the story was somehow mine before the whole project started. On the other hand, the most blissful experience was seeing the players, happy, well-prepared and motivated, pick up the responsibility, lifting the game out of our hands and carrying it that last part of the way. Doing an incredibly good job at it by the way.

The story is now theirs, and I thank them for taking it in.



Some kind of success

by Troels Barkholt-Spangsbo

It's now more than a week since we left the location (hopefully) for good. The first evaluations from the players have started appearing on our website and in our mailboxes. They are mostly positive. Some of them even very positive. I am proud and happy. I am also not tired anymore. Not that it was the most exhausting event I have organized, but we did not get more than five hours of sleep any of the nights I was at the location (which, due to obligations at home and at work, was Thursday to Monday). Both because we had to pack the supplies the Tarse should distribute to the Pashura the day after – but also because we had a great time.

Sometime around Friday afternoon we succeeded in catching up with our tasks. We had one part of the game, the telegraph, which kept on being an issue throughout the event, and we had to prepare to serve food in the morning. But from Friday afternoon we stopped having any major leftover tasks. That resulted in the strange experience of being able to drink a few beers Friday evening and going down to the beach Saturday and taking an hour-long swim together with a few of my co-organizers. I have not tried that while running a game ever before. It was nice though.

Some part of that experience can be attributed to the rather low logistical requirements of the design of the game, but it was also a result of the amount of experience accumulated between the organizers. Which was friggin' awesome. Of course we made a lot of mistakes, but it was a nice feeling to run the game while feeling that we had a lot of experience with that.

I had two main focal points before the game. The political aspects and the framing of the theme and subject of the game. As always the players did not have the same experiences during the game. Some of the players had intense experiences of powerlessness or the futility of the exercising of power.

Others did not. I have not, however, heard anybody comment that the occupation was not the driving force of the game. I am not sure that any of our players experienced anything that changed or challenged their already held opinions. That may have been a bold expectation on my part. But many of them got some strong experiences based on the asymmetrical power structure of the occupation. Hopefully they have been able to get some firsthand experiences that they can use in shaping, clarifying their own opinions or making them more nuanced.

Concerning the framing. At some point before the game I began using a catchphrase, which I am not sure makes perfect sense, but bear with me: “The message is the word.” The point was that the simplest kind of framing of the themes of the game was to actually make sure that the themes and the subject was the same. The game was not about the breaking of families set during an occupation. It was about an occupation. And by extension about the effects of the occupation on, for instance, the tight-knit families of the Pashura.

I have played and organized many larps where the setting, a medieval village for instance, is a backdrop for the story, which is really about the power struggles between different families in the village. Making the setting the nodal point for the story and the play is a wonderful shortcut to a simpler and more focused game.

In many ways this game led to quite a few catchphrases. “360 is dead” was another one. 360 refers to the idea that one should strive towards a 360 degrees illusion, or perfect illusion. So everything in the setting has to be in-game and ‘authentic’ and what have you. The perfect illusion has not been achieved many times, if at all. But the paradigm – that it should be something you strive for – is and has been really dominant.



But organizing Den Hvide Krig we struggled a lot with it, because there was no way we could achieve it, or even get close to it without much more work, than we could find the time to do. Right after the game was over, some of the players commented on a detail of the Pashura dress-code.

The Pashura was divided into young, adult and old people. One of the teams got the idea to symbolize the age of the characters by their headgear. The young were bareheaded. The adults had nuances of white headgear and the old had headgear in their families' colours. That was brilliant because it made it so much easier to recognize how old the character in front of you was. This was, of course, important, because even though the players of the game had a decent average age, none of them were 60 years old.

There was no need for other players to analyze body language or to try and spot if the other player had coloured their beard white. I apologize for the banality of my epiphany, but scenography and costumes do not get better because they become more 'authentic' or 'seamless'. They become better, when they make it easier for the players to play the game and recognize important traits of the characters.

I must admit, I am at a bit of a loss concerning how I shall conclude this text. It is so easy to write something which seems just a little bit too arrogant when evaluating a game that you organized. But it went well. The players are happy. The organizers are happy. Nobody died (even though we had a small incident with rain, a stove and some impressive sparks. Sorry, Carsten). So that is kind of a success right?



Thank you for reading.
Thank you for caring.

- Wars are fought in the shadow of victory