1984 - Introduction

1984 is a blackbox larp designed for Blackbox Cph VI (September 2016) by Jesper Heebøll Arbjørn, with beats composed by Michael Sonne Jørgensen. It is a blackbox larp for 10 players.

The larp is based on the novel Nineteen-Eighty-Four by George Orwell (1949) and through a series of eight scenes it will replicate the main plot in in the novel.

1984 is a non-verbal larp, and instead of speaking the players will communicate through drumming. Each player will have set of drumsticks and is allowed to drum on basically everything in the larp (they can even drum on each other if they agree to that during the workshop).

To accompany the drumming and lead the rhythm each scene will have a specific beat, which is composed specifically for this larp. Part of the runtime gamemastering of the larp will be to manage the beat tracks. The tracks set the mood of the larp as a cold industrial dystopia.

The story of the larp is already set, and will be controlled through the scenes of larp using lights and sound and a briefing before each scene. The purpose for the players is to portray the story as it evolves, and specifically to portray the thoughts and emotions of the main character, Winston.

Preparations before the larp

1984 is a rather complicated larp to run, and it is probably at least a two-person job; one person will manage the beats during play, and another will be gamemastering the scenes through a slide show that is prepared for the larp. Together you will also have to arrange the props before each scene.

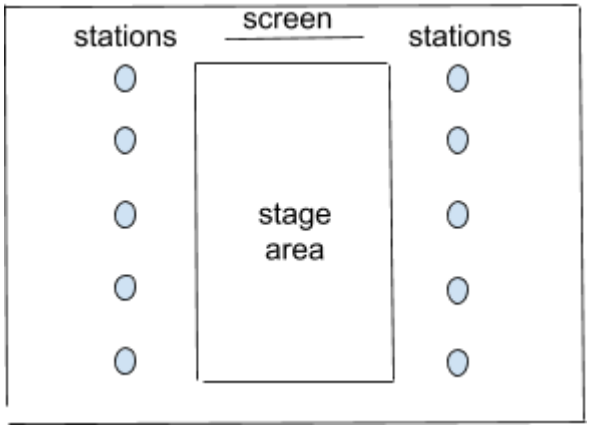
To be able to stage the larp you need a lot of equipment, and you need a blackbox. The larp is not exceptionally demanding when it comes to stage lights or the overall quality of the blackbox. It can be setup in a normal room with standard ceiling lights, as long as they can be turned on and off. The possibility of stage lights that can be dimmed up and down is a bonus, which adds a lot to the experience of the larp.

Essential equipment is a projector and a screen or wall to project on, a speaker system that can be turned rather loud, computers to run both the beat tracks and slide show for the projector, 10 hard wood or metal chairs and a long list of props for the players to drum on. Suggestions to props can be found in the description of the scenes. Remember to take away everything that the players should not drum on.

Also, you need 10 sets of drumsticks and, in order to be nice to your players, 10 sets of cheap ear plugs, as the drumming tends to get rather noisy.

Setting up the larp

Before players arrive to the blackbox, you should have arranged the lights, projector and screen, and setup the stations and stage area as show in this drawing:



The stage area should be lit as a room, which means that stage lights in each corner of the area casting light towards the centre of the area is a minimum. More lights will only increase the feeling of a room. Make sure that the screen is not lit by any of the lights.

The stations should be lit in a more theatrical fashion, top-down light would be cool, if possible, as it casts some very ominous shadows on a person standing in the light, which is very fitting for the feeling of a dehumanized totalitarian regime. If the light on the stations can be coloured an orange-red that would be beautiful.

The stations themselves are simply made from a row of chairs facing towards the stage area. Players are not meant to sit on them, rather the should stand behind them and drum on the back of the chairs.

The projector and screen should just be setup and ready. The first page of the slide show is made to be shown during workshop and before the larp actually starts.

In one playthrough of the larp the projector was positioned on a chair in front of the stage area, such that when players entered the stage area they would be hit by the projections. It was made out of necessity, but the players soon found out to position themselves in the stage area to make certain words and images hit their bodies rather than the screen. This created an extra layer in the larp, which was quite cool.

To run the larp you need a technician stand with a good view of the stage and stations. Setup computers for running slide show projections and beat tracks, and make a sound check of the sound system in advance. The beat tracks are very important to running the larp, so that part needs to be working flawlessly.

Finally set the props for the different scenes ready. It's a good idea to prepare ‘packages’ for the different scenes to be able make swift scenography changes during the intermezzo between the scenes.

Running the workshop
There is a separate document detailing the exercises in the workshop, it should give fairly detailed instructions of what to say and do during each exercise.

Runtime gamemastering
When the larp is running there will be three main gamemaster tasks; you have to observe the players in order to get a feel of where they are in their narratives, possibly also to pace them forward, you have to run the slide show, and you have to manage the beat tracks. In addition you have to change the scene props between the scenes.

Observing the players is essential for pacing and cutting the scenes and being on cue in the scenes that include a turning point - specifically the scenes Julia, Captured, and Torture. To give an idea of when to cut the scenes the approximate length of each scene is written in the document describing the scenes. Be aware though that some scenes flow more naturally than others, and some scenes take a long time to even start.

Your primary pacing tool is the slide show, which contains quotes from the novel and images from the movie 1984 and various theatrical plays and fan art. The slide show is primarily built to give instructions before each scene, but while the scenes are running the slide show gives inspirational content with quotes and images that fit to the specific scene. The slide show is designed such that each slide is displayed for approximately 30 seconds.

Some of the slides are, however, more than just inspirational. Specifically for the scenes that include a turning point there will be a slide that 'is' the turning point in the scene. For the scene Julia it is the slide with the words "I love you", in the scene Captured it is the first slide with the words "You are the dead", and in the scene Torture it is the slide with the words "Do it to Julia", which is also the last slide of that scene. For those scenes it is necessary to feel the flow of the play on order to turn to that slide exactly as the players reach that turning point in their narratives. And that is not easy.

In addition, if you are familiar with the story, some of the other quotes will probably also have some special meaning to you, and it would be nice to fit them to the action on the stage as well. All in all, to be able to work the slide show properly, it will be a really good idea to have studied it beforehand.

While running the slide show you also have to run the beat tracks. For most of the scenes there is just one track that will loop all the way to the end of the scene, while for other scenes - specifically the ones with a turning point - the tracks need to be changed mid-scene. It is explained in the description of the scenes when to change the tracks.

For the intermezzos between the scenes there is a short track, which is an alarm sound that is played at the start of each intermezzo to tell the players to stand ready at their stations. After the alarm the normal intermezzo track is looped until the black slide after the intermezzo slides is shown. At that point switch to the scene track and run the scene.

Finally while the intermezzo slides are showing there is time for changing the scene props at the stage area. There is only short time to changing, so be sure to have the props standing ready. Also be aware that scene 3, 5, and 8 use the same props, as well as scene 4 and 6, so it pays to have a good routine how to store those props for when they are used again.

And by the way, the first few slides before the first intermezzo is just an introduction to players ready and in the right mood. No sound should be played during those.