

The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie

A dinner-party larp, written for Grenselandet 2020, by Mo Holkar.

Introduction

A group of friends and lovers attempt to eat dinner together, but are repeatedly interrupted. Can they retain their personalities and their faultless manners, in the face of a succession of increasingly surreal and disturbing disruptions? Can the bourgeoisie preserve its discreet charm, as familiar world order crumbles into chaos?

The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie is a larp inspired by the 1972 film, directed by Luis Buñuel, of the same name. It's intended to be a short and fun experience, suitable for use as an icebreaker type of activity.

It consists of about 30 minutes of preparation, and then about 90 minutes of larping. It's intended for 4–8 participants. One of the participants can facilitate: or you can have a separate facilitator, if you prefer.

What do you need to run this larp?

Ideally, a table, with chairs, and empty plates, knives and forks, candlesticks, wine and water glasses, and a jug of water.

All of these are pretty much optional, though. You can run it just with a bunch of chairs arranged around an imaginary table, or even sitting on the ground.

A bell to mark time can be useful, too.

The setting

Pass this around the group, each in turn reading out a box.

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The setting is an unnamed European country, in the 1970s. There is political instability: a repressive and incompetent government, and an active protest movement. Occasional acts of terrorism lead to security crackdowns. There is the suspicion that the neighbouring country is involved in fomenting unrest.

These characters are members of the haute bourgeoisie – wealthy, comfortable, well-connected, complacent. They are not nobles, with a weight of tradition and duty on their shoulders. Nor are they workers, struggling to earn a living. They have enough money to do more or less what they want, whether an important job or a delightful one. They know that whatever political or social crisis may occur, it is unlikely to touch them significantly – unless things go completely to pieces.

The bourgeoisie prize respectability and politeness. The established social order is supported by correct behaviour. Passions are modest; grudges are downplayed; quirks are indulged, rather than commented upon. At least, that is how it should be... Over the course of this larp, the bourgeois code of conduct may start to break down.

This larp is intended to become increasingly surreal as it progresses. Bizarre, dreamlike, and inexplicable events will intrude into the story: ‘reality’ may warp and shift. It’s up to you how your characters will respond to this: will they maintain a calm demeanour, will they become exaggerated versions of themselves, will they crack up? The only rule is that they shouldn’t identify breaks in reality, or implausible events, as being such: within the narrative, everything that happens should be treated as natural, even though it may still be very disturbing.

Character creation

First of all, participants choose **Profession** cards. You should use only those cards that are marked with a number less than or equal to the number of participants. (So, with four participants, just use the cards numbered ‘4’; with five participants, use the cards numbered ‘4’ and ‘5’; etc.) You should have one more card than there are participants.

Spread the cards out on the table, and each participant should choose one: this defines the character that they will play.

Each participant should choose a name and gender for their character. Characters can have any European-style name – they are of that class where people move readily between countries. (If names give you trouble, you can come back to that a bit later: but definitely choose gender now.) They should write name and pronouns on a label, and stick it on themselves.

Once this is done, go around the circle, with each participant introducing their character to the others: name, profession, and a few words of description.

Then, choose **Relationship status** cards. Spread out all nine of them, and each participant should choose one. Some of them require that another character is involved in the status: that should be by mutual agreement. You can also mutually agree to involve other characters in the other statuses, eg. perhaps one of the ‘string of dalliances’ was with another character. Having some inter-character connections of this type is good.

Next, choose **Thing that gives you pride** cards – again, from all nine of them. You should feel free to bring this out in play as you wish.

Then, **Thing that lets you down socially**: all nine of them. You can play upon this as much or as little as you prefer.

Finally, **Your guilty secret**: all nine, again. This will probably only come out in play if you wish it to – none of the others will know about it – but even if not, it might still nag at you subconsciously.

The X-card

See [the web page](#) for details of this card and how to use it.

The scenes

There will be four scenes, each 15 minutes long, each representing an attempted dinner party on four successive days.

Each of the four dinners is hosted by a different character. By default, they are the characters whose cards are marked A to D: they host in alphabetical order. If one of A to D is not being used, then the fourth scene will be hosted by the character whose card is marked E.

The format of each meal scene is similar. The host is at the table. The other guests arrive as they wish, and take seats (in different positions to where they have previously sat, to reflect that this is actually a different room and a different table). Before the scene starts, the facilitator reads the **Dinner intro** briefing for it.

Three minutes before the end of the scene, the facilitator rings the bell – play is suspended briefly while they read the explanation of why food will not be coming. There is a different **Dinner disruption** for each scene. Play then resumes, with the characters reacting to this. (The announcement is brief, and the participants should improvise details around it freely as required.) At the end of the scene, the facilitator rings the bell again, and everyone leaves the table.

The interludes

Between scenes there are five-minute interludes, during which time moves on: the next scene will be set in the following evening.

To find out what happened during the intervening night and day, each character draws a card from the appropriate **Interlude** deck. If it doesn't make sense for their character, they may put it back and draw another (or exchange with another player), but they're encouraged to try and make it work – this larp is intended to be a surreal experience. They don't discuss the cards out-of-character: they are for things that can be talked about during the scene that follows.

Each player also draws a **Topic** card: these are optional things to talk about if you are at a loose end. Each topic persists into subsequent scenes: so eg. you can carry on talking about your first topic in later scenes if you wish, developing and enriching it.

Both the **Interlude** and **Topic** cards should be drawn quickly, without too much thought or consideration: and their content can be developed and elaborated as wished. The idea is to create impressions, which don't have to make sense or to fit in with everything else.

Debrief

Once the final scene has finished, the participants may wish to discuss their experience, and to share thoughts and feelings with each other. A good way to do this is to first allow each person in turn to (if they wish) talk for a minute or so without being interrupted or questioned, so they can express themselves freely. Then you can move on to a more general conversation.

What is this larp about?

That's up to the participants to decide. Maybe, nothing. Maybe, some high themes, like: The preservation of social values in the face of disruption and chaos. Blindness to, and awareness of, external forces. The strengths and limitations of mutual support. Or maybe: The hollowness of bourgeois life. The power of the surreal to enlighten through the medium of entertainment.

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Profession

<p>Bishop You are a respected church leader, with a high media profile. <i>Goal: to exercise moral leadership and keep everyone virtuous.</i></p> <p>5</p>	<p>Diplomat You are a senior representative of the neighbouring country, with whom relations are sometimes troubled. <i>Goal: to preserve peace and to gain respect for your nation.</i></p> <p>4</p>	<p>Professor (choose a subject) You are the star mind of a prestigious university department. <i>Goal: to stun everyone with your unanswerable brilliance.</i></p> <p>4</p>
<p>Poet People pay money to read your works! Your thoughts are powerful as well as beautiful. <i>Goal: to influence your friends' hearts and/or minds to a worthy cause.</i></p> <p>7</p>	<p>Doctor (choose a speciality) People's lives are in your hands. You also do a good deal of private consultancy for your friends. <i>Goal: to have your friends depend on you for their comfort.</i></p> <p>4</p>	<p>Landowner You have huge tracts of land, dedicated to farming, forestry, vineyards, etc... <i>Goal: to secure the future of your estates.</i></p> <p>8</p>
<p>Actor Famed for your interpretative talent, you strut the stage like a god. <i>Goal: to undertake character studies of your friends, for future acting use.</i></p> <p>4</p>	<p>Entrepreneur (choose an industry) You make and sell a wide range of goods that are sought-after by all discerning folk. <i>Goal: to strike business deals, but without your friends thinking that you might be a bit too commercially-minded.</i></p> <p>4</p>	<p>Decadent You are a regular feature of the city's glamorous and sordid nightlife, despite having no obvious source of income. <i>Goal: to offend (some of) your friends with your anecdotes and behaviour, while still remaining popular with them.</i></p> <p>6</p>

Relationship status at the start of the larp

Long-term single, and content to be so.	Recently become single, and miserable about it.	Recently together with someone who is not present, and sickeningly happy about it.
Married to the person who draws the other one of these cards.	Married to the person who draws the other one of these cards.	Married to someone not present, but having a secret affair with someone who is present. (<i>Agree this with them.</i>)
In a complex relationship involving several people. (<i>Invent the details freely.</i>)	With a history of many dalliances (serial and parallel) that you haven't allowed to become serious.	Your wonderful spouse died a while ago, but you're now wondering about trying again.

Thing that gives you pride

Your illustrious ancestry.	Your elite education.	Your useful connections.
Your collection of precious art/craft objects (<i>choose what</i>).	Your well-preserved physical beauty/attractiveness.	Your impeccable taste.
Your popularity with the ordinary people of the country.	An unusual and difficult, but basically useless, skill that you have developed (<i>choose what</i>).	Your sporting prowess (<i>choose which sport: can include things like hunting, piloting aircraft, etc</i>).

Thing that sometimes lets you down socially

	<p>You drink too much, and often turn up drunk to events.</p>	<p>You tell bad jokes, without an effective social filter.</p>	<p>You often mishear what people have said.</p>
	<p>You are constantly distracted by 'the next thing'.</p>	<p>You can't hold back from making a move on someone, if you desire them.</p>	<p>You try to bring every conversation back to your own area of expertise.</p>
	<p>You have very poor taste, in some important area of aesthetics (<i>choose what</i>).</p>	<p>You often misunderstand friendliness as flirtation.</p>	<p>You are greedy for money, and seize opportunities to gain some of it.</p>

Your guilty secret

You once committed quite a serious crime (<i>choose what</i>).	You have been unfaithful (or, someone else here has been unfaithful with you).	You have links with the rebel movement in this country.
You are not really who you say you are, but an impostor who took that person's identity at a young age.	You are massively insecure about your social status, which you feel you don't really deserve.	You actively detest at least one of this group of friends (<i>choose who</i>).
You have a profound misunderstanding of some well-known fact of nature (eg. you think the sun goes round the earth).	You are sexually incapable (<i>only take this card if you are generally believed to be sexually active</i>).	You have a seriously illegal habit (<i>choose what</i>).

Dinner intros

A

A meal at the town house of the Doctor, to celebrate old friendships. This is the first time for some months that some of the friends will have seen each other.

B

The Entrepreneur is launching a new product, and invites the friends to share in the excitement. The dinner takes place at the production facility.

C

It is the Actor's birthday, and no doubt the friends have prepared a suitable gift. This meal takes place backstage at the city's grand old theatre.

D

At the embassy, the Diplomat hosts a gathering of the friends. The ostensible purpose is to cement friendship between the two countries.

E

The Professor invites the friends to dine at their delightful country abode. It will be like a gathering of gods and muses.

Dinner disruptions

A

A former patient of the Doctor's has turned up at the house, complaining about malpractice. They are making so much noise, the police will have to be called. The Doctor feels it's best if the friends leave, so that this little awkwardness can be dealt with tidily.

B

Before the food arrives, a delegation of workers appears, announcing a strike: they say that their working conditions are intolerable. The Entrepreneur refuses to see them, using harsh language: until their leader reveals themselves to be the Entrepreneur's long-lost child. The group decide to leave, to spare their friend further embarrassment.

C

The friends are awaiting their dinner, when one wall of the room rolls up into the ceiling – it was just a curtain. They realize that they are actually on the theatre's main stage – and there is an audience sitting, solemnly watching them. The Actor is as surprised as everyone else. When it becomes apparent that none of the group know their lines, the audience start booing, and the friends leave hastily.

D

There has been an unfortunate incident of terrorism, in which the Diplomat's country is implicated. Troops have mobilized, and two armoured cars have drawn up outside the embassy, with soldiers briskly unrolling barbed wire. The friends must quickly leave, before they get trapped here under siege. *[If this is the last scene, add: "They exchange a few last words with each other, before departing."]*

E

There is an astonishingly powerful sudden storm, thunder crashes all around, and the Professor's house is struck by lightning. It catches fire at once. The friends flee the wreckage. Once outside, it becomes apparent that the storm is localized only over the house: the neighbouring fields and buildings are still in sunshine. They exchange a few last words with each other, before departing.

Interlude 1

Your hair turned white overnight, but you have dyed it back to its original colour.	You found a white cross chalked on your front door, when you got home this afternoon.	At the station, you were caught up in a group of nuns singing hymns. It was a wonderfully transcendent experience.
All of the petals fell off your prized roses.	You played a recording of your favourite music, but it sounded somehow wrong: cacophonous.	A family member told you a dark and disturbing secret about your childhood.
You went to watch a sporting occasion, but the players were on strike and the crowd had to entertain themselves.	You saw an unusually large seagull, outside your window. It glared at you, and flew away.	You lost a tortoiseshell pen that you had been given by a former lover who is now dead.

Interlude 2

<p>You were caught up in a terrorist incident: a bomb went off at the museum, while you were visiting. You were secretly thrilled.</p>	<p>You wanted to eat a nice glossy apple, but as you cut into it, you found that inside it was full of rot and maggots.</p>	<p>You received an anonymous letter this morning – it contained what looked like an old-fashioned treasure map, of an unknown island.</p>
<p>Everyone that you've seen today has been accompanied by a coloured aura. You are starting to guess what the different colours might signify.</p>	<p>You are sure that all the doors in your house are hung the opposite way round today to how they were yesterday.</p>	<p>Today you have been filled with a crushing sense of ennui and pointlessness. Maybe the company of your friends will snap you out of it.</p>
<p>You have been inexplicably struck blind in one eye.</p>	<p>This morning you found an army uniform in your wardrobe. It fits you perfectly. You have never been in the army.</p>	<p>Earlier today you passed by a mirror, and are convinced that you were not reflected in it.</p>

Interlude 3

<p>Earlier today you received a phone call that just consisted of a baby crying in the far distance.</p>	<p>You suddenly remembered today that one of your legs is artificial. You'd forgotten having had it replaced.</p>	<p>You are convinced that your fingers smell strongly of cheese.</p>
<p>On the way here you were pulled over and questioned by police, in a surprisingly hostile manner. What do they suspect?</p>	<p>Last night, a bat snatched your hat from your head, and carried it away to a high tower. You feel you will never get it back.</p>	<p>You have been 'awakened' as a sleeper agent for the rebels. Tomorrow you will have to carry out an assassination, or else betray your cause.</p>
<p>This morning, you cracked an egg for breakfast, and a live lizard scuttled out of it.</p>	<p>You have an unfamiliar tune running round and round inside your head. You've tried to get it down on paper, but it's been impossible.</p>	<p>You've decided to get a hole drilled into the top of your skull, to let the demons out.</p>

Topic 1

<p>What's on your mind: you smelt a scent that reminded you of your mother.</p>	<p>What's on your mind: your car keeps on breaking down.</p>	<p>What's on your mind: you have to take a plane soon, and are nervous of flying.</p>
<p>What's on your mind: you haven't managed to eat today, and are desperately hungry.</p>	<p>What's on your mind: your sleep was disturbed by pigeons, or maybe rats, scratching in the roof.</p>	<p>What's on your mind: you can't remember the name for [a common household thing].</p>
<p>What's on your mind: you've been reading about Communism.</p>	<p>What's on your mind: a beautiful musical performance has really stuck with you.</p>	<p>What's on your mind: a close relative of yours is in financial trouble, and wants your help.</p>

Topic 2

<p>In your dream last night: a flower-seller gave you a rose for free, but you lost it.</p>	<p>In your dream last night: you were serving dinner to your friends, naked.</p>	<p>In your dream last night: you were in Hell, and the demons all wore the faces of people you knew.</p>
<p>In your dream last night: you were trying to catch a flight, but as you ran through the terminal, your suitcase kept bursting open and shedding embarrassing objects.</p>	<p>In your dream last night: you lived alone in a dark cave. Outside, there were noises: but you feared going to see what was causing them.</p>	<p>In your dream last night: you were in a train crash. You were the only person to walk away, miraculously unharmed.</p>
<p>In your dream last night: giant insects were living as people, ruling the world. You were the only person who knew.</p>	<p>In your dream last night: a pure white light surrounded you, and you were borne aloft in an ocean of bliss. It was very disappointing to wake up.</p>	<p>In your dream last night: you were given a pet monkey, and you didn't know how to look after it. It died.</p>

Topic 3

<p>What you want to say, but won't quite be able to: you are in love with someone at the table (<i>choose who</i>).</p>	<p>What you want to say, but won't quite be able to: you despise someone at the table (<i>choose who</i>).</p>	<p>What you want to say, but won't quite be able to: you detest the government, and sympathize with the rebels.</p>
<p>What you want to say, but won't quite be able to: you are not really the person who your friends believe you to be.</p>	<p>What you want to say, but won't quite be able to: earlier today, you killed someone. Maybe it was an accident, maybe not.</p>	<p>What you want to say, but won't quite be able to: you've developed a new and unusual religious faith.</p>
<p>What you want to say, but won't quite be able to: you are terminally ill (<i>choose what with, and how long you might have to live</i>).</p>	<p>What you want to say, but won't quite be able to: you plan to emigrate to a neighbouring country.</p>	<p>What you want to say, but won't quite be able to: you don't want to eat, because you'll throw it straight back up.</p>

The X-Card

X