



Leviathan

Played at Blackbox Copenhagen 2023

Played at Ropecon 2023

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Photo by Rebecca Alkjaer

Required to run:

7-15 players and 1 facilitator

Speakers and a playlist of stormy, watery sounds

The ability to dim and turn off the lights

Two tent-like structures that more or less fit all players (I have loved using thin plastic sheets and mosquito nets)

Sheets of paper

Sticky notes and a pen

A single use rain poncho per player, tape, zip ties

Good to have:

A black box theatre space, atmospheric lights

A spotlight and the ability to slowly change its color

A gong or bell for the players to call 'meetings' during play

A larp about living with unpredictable weather



This larp is about a people who inhabit the back of a gigantic beast that is cruising through an immense ocean. As it moves it dips and surfaces to a rhythm that nobody has yet been able to predict, causing the people great anxiety. When the beast dives deeper the tide rises and the people's land shrinks; but when it surfaces again the land is exposed and irrigated, encrusted with minerals and vegetation that the people can live on. The retreating tide also reveals surprises, new opportunities, omens, and possible threats.

Some people are happy with this arrangement. They are content to live with uncertainty. They trust the beast to take care of them. Other people may disagree. In this larp each player plays an individual character who has a certain relationship to the beast. Over the course of the larp this relationship will be tested. Strange things will happen. Things that are frightening, and difficult to explain. And at the very end, you will have to make an important decision, either alone or together.

A centering exercise

(to be read aloud with some oceany music)



Lie down on your back. Eyes closed. Let's start by doing some deep belly breaths. Inhale, exhale. Inhale, exhale. Fill your belly with air. And breathe out again. Continue breathing at your own pace. Imagine the roof falling away revealing the sky above. It's dark and the stars are shining very brightly. Now imagine the floor falling away. Your back is resting on the bare earth. Put your hands down and feel the crust of the earth. Feel your own weight and the impression you leave in the dirt. Feel the heat radiating from the core of the earth, very, very gently warming the palms of your hands. Now imagine the Earth flying through space. It's flying very fast across the vast expanse of the universe. You are just a speck on the surface. Feel the gravitational forces pressing you into the dirt as the planet is hurtling through space. Now imagine the stars starting to wheel around you as the Earth spins along its axis. The spinning motion is drawing bright concentric circles in the sky. Spinning and spinning, a centrifugal power is starting to pull you loose from the Earth. Feel your body become unstuck. With your eyes still closed, you may sit up. You may now open your eyes.



Generating world

Dawn is breaking. You find yourself on a beach. Away from the land there are some rickety shelters constructed out of driftwood and plastic sheets. Beyond the make-shift village, at the highest point of elevation is a massive, bottomless crater through which the air seems to move periodically.

Start naming things that you can find in coastal areas, especially things you might come across by beachcombing: animals, plants, objects, litter, phenomena etc. Write them down on sticky notes. Find as many as you can in 10 minutes.

sea urchin,

and jetsam, coin,

jellyfish,

sail, shell,

message in a bottle, necklace, shark egg, bucket, coin, sea

glass, barnacle, bones, bottle cap, crab... Kelp, dune, shell, pearl,

sidepool, starfish, coral, seagull, hook, netting, litter, whelk, clam

cockle, ambergris, albatross, auk, puffin, sea urchin, driftwood,

anemone, limpet, plastiglomerate, flotsam and jetsam, carcass,

cloud, jellyfish, worm, lego, breeze, sail, grit, message in a bottle

necklace, shark egg, oil spill, bucket, coin, sea glass, barnacle, bone



Character creation

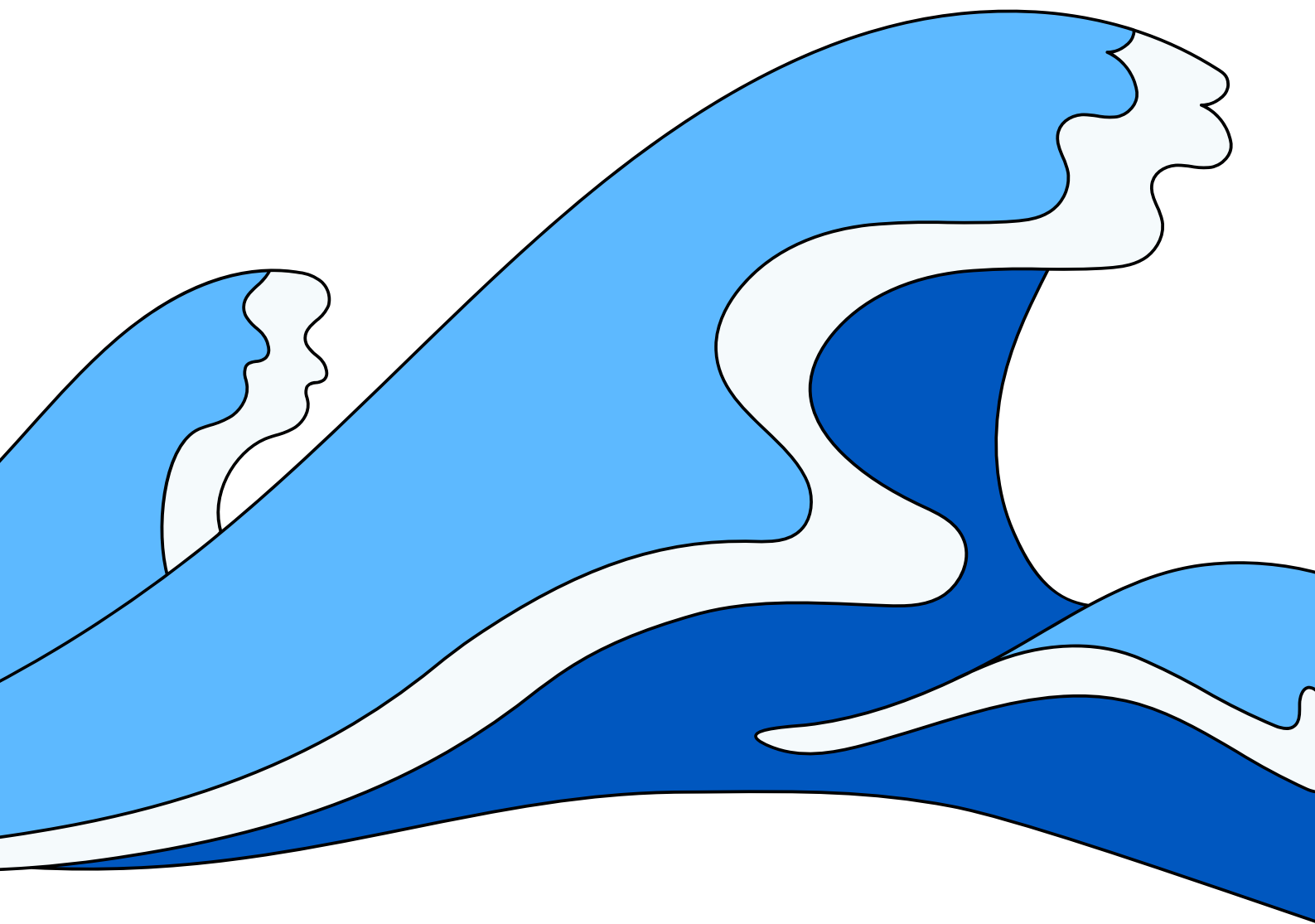
From this list of words, you will now choose your character's name. Use the sticky note as a temporary name tag. The notes that are left over can be washed ashore during play, to the facilitator's discretion.

Next up, the group has to be divided into elders (max. six) and younglings. The young ask questions and the elders try to answer them. These questions can be very banal, or they can be very profound. Where does the sun go in the night? What is under the ocean? Why is the sky blue? Why do we do this and not that? The role of the younglings is to question the habits and practices of the people. The role of the elders is to provide answers and to keep the traditions alive.

Both groups are briefed separately. They have 20-30 minutes. Split the party!

Workshop for the elders

Elders are mature adults (35+). Line up in order of age. Get a sense of the spread. Use the set of prompts and questions on the next page to quickly draft an origin story and a set of customs for your people. You will be expected to explain things to the younglings, who will have many, many questions. It is your responsibility as elders to induct them into the traditions of the people.



Once you have the rough outlines of an origin story, draw a relationship (below). Read it, but keep the information to yourself. This is your private relationship to the beast.

You think you are able to guide the beast. It listens to you and only you.

You think the beast resents you and one day will decide to drown you all.

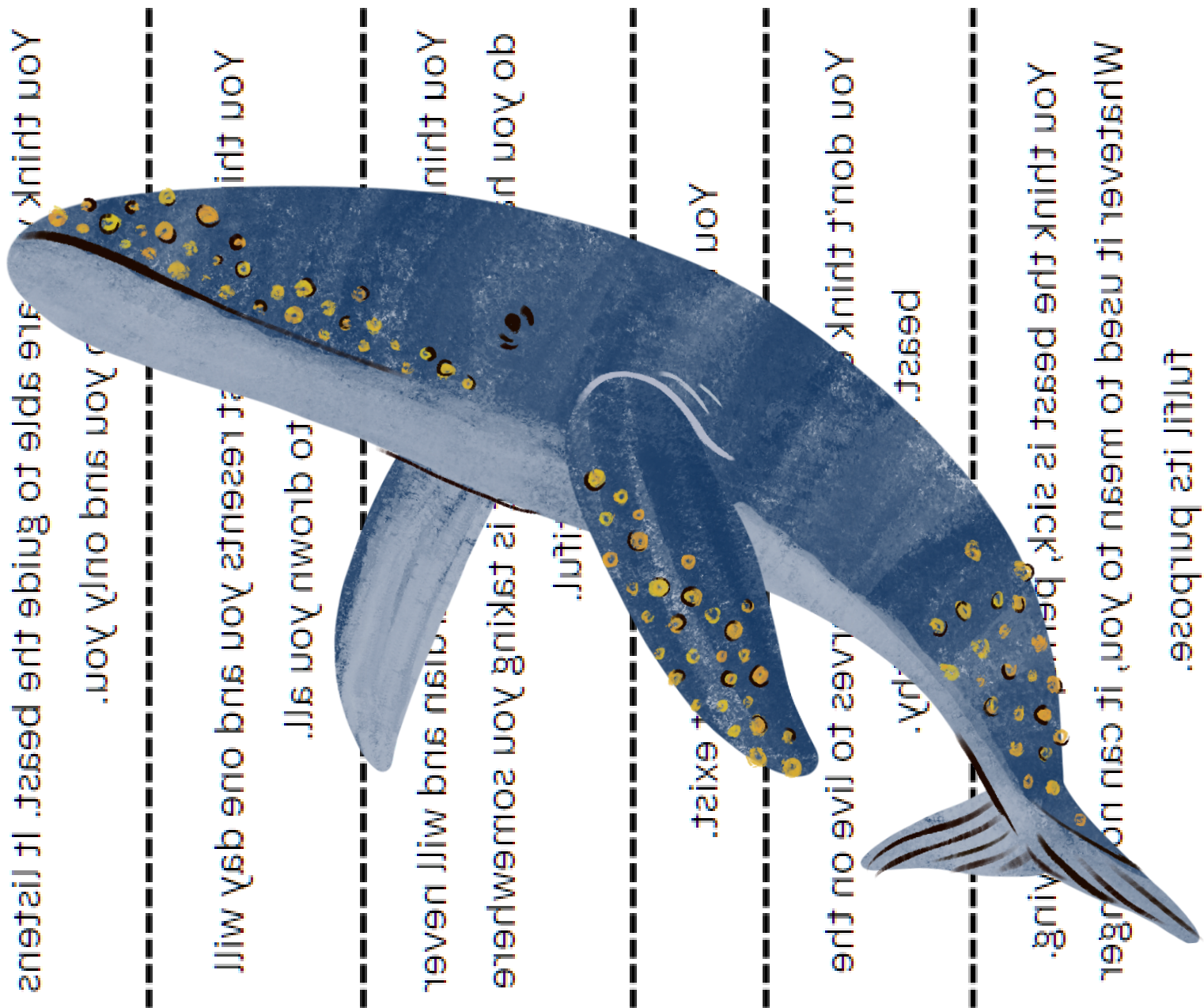
You think the beast is your guardian and will never do you harm. You think it is taking you somewhere beautiful.

You think the beast does not exist.

You don't think everyone deserves to live on the beast. Only the worthy.

You think the beast is sick, perhaps even dying. Whatever it used to mean to you, it can no longer fulfill its purpose.

Over the course of play you may make this relationship as obvious or as covert as you like. During play, you are also allowed to change your mind but since these are deeply felt beliefs, it will take something really special or shocking to persuade you to think otherwise.



You think you are able to guide the peast. It listens

to you and only you.

You think the peast resents you and one day will

grow up to crown you all.

You think the peast is taking you somewhere

and will never

exist.

You don't think the peast

exists. You think the peast is sick, bent, or

useless.

Whatever it used to mean to you, it can no longer

fulfill its purpose.

fulfill its purpose.

How did you get here?

We came from the sky
We washed up on the shore
We crawled from the hole at the center of the village
We hatched from barnacles that grew on the skin of the beast

What is under the sea?

The souls of the dead
Monsters
A drowned city
A people who have technology and medicine we can only dream of

Who was the first of your people?

A mother or father
An orphan
A leader or explorer
An exile or prisoner
A beast

What is important to the people?

The truth, transparency
Protecting the younglings
Shiny things
Keeping the beast happy

The elders have to work together. Decide which of you takes up what specific title, and discuss what kinds of responsibilities each role entails.

The leader—wants to protect their people and secure their legacy.

The archivist—wants to record and remember.

The timekeeper—wants to understand and predict, especially the weather.

The seer—is chosen to read the signs and communicate with the beast.

The Treasurer—keeps a count of what the people possess.

The Healer—safeguards the health of the people, and the beast.

Do you have any other customs or sayings, for instance:

What is the phrase / hand sign you use to greet each other?

What is the phrase / hand sign you use to celebrate?

What is the phrase / hand sign you use to ward off evil?

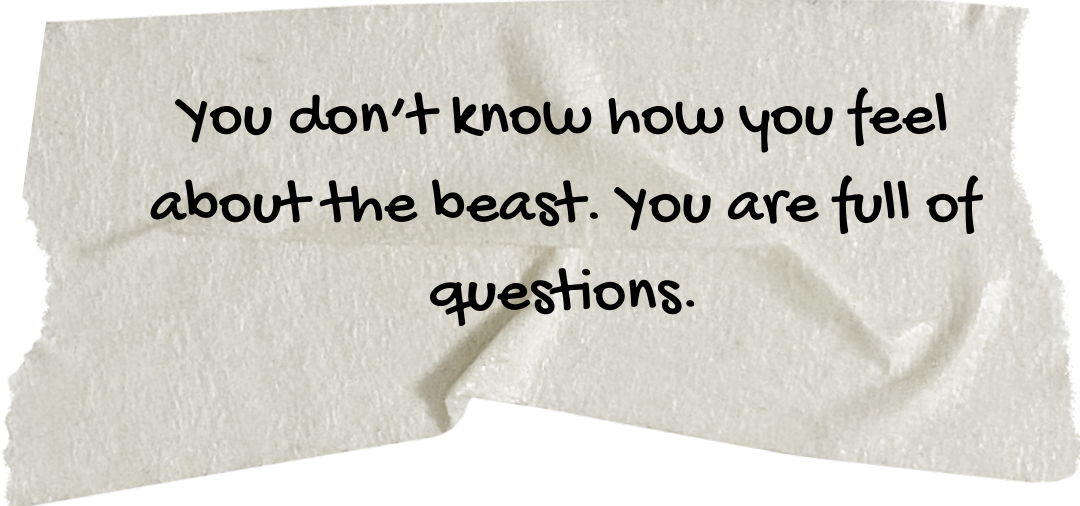
What is the coming-of-age ritual a youngling must experience before being considered an elder? This is important to figure out because one of the younglings will actually experience the ritual.

Workshop for the younglings

The younglings are between the ages of 10-25. Line up in order of age. Get a sense of the spread. Note who is the eldest. The younglings are raised by the whole community. The duties of caring, protecting, and raising you are shared by all elders. You are son or daughter to all of them.

As young people, you have an acute and sophisticated sense of fashion. While the elders get on with their task, yours is to create costumes from single use rain ponchos, zip ties, and tape. Create one for yourself, as well as one per elder.

The younglings all have the same relationship to the beast, although over the course of play this relationship may change. You may change your mind in response to what the elders tell you. Or you may end up deciding among yourselves a whole new way of understanding the relationship between the people and the beast. At the start, however, you are a blank slate.



You don't know how you feel
about the beast. You are full of
questions.





Apprenticing

Time to bring both groups together again. The elders now introduce themselves (and their roles) to the younglings and vice versa. Take note of who is youngest and eldest in both groups. Then the younglings choose an elder to apprentice to, learning their craft. In return, the younglings help dress the elder in their appropriate garb. Take 5-10 minutes to do so.

Weathering the storm

All that is left is to practice the gameplay loop. Over the course of play there will be periods of fair weather, and stormy intervals that bring the tide right up to the people's doorstep. These fluctuations correspond to the behavior of the beast. When the storm hits, dim and turn off the light, while playing the sound of rain and thunder. During the storm, which may last anywhere between 2 to 7 minutes, everybody has to hide in the shelters, or they will be washed away. Practice this a couple of times to get a speedy response.

While the storm passes, the facilitator prepares and litters the floor with 'tidal treasures.' These are balled up pieces of paper with events that trigger once picked up by the players. When the storm passes, the lights are turned on again and the audio is adjusted.



Play

The Festival of Remembrance

The larp has a 'soft start.' For the first scene of the game, the facilitator joins the action, playing the oldest person in the village. She calls everyone to sit in a circle to participate in the festival of remembrance. She welcomes the younglings and the elders, and leads the people in a ritual exchange of questions and answers. The following text is meant to inspire and illustrate. It is not a script that has to be followed word for word.

'Today is a special day. A day on which we remember who we are, and where we find ourselves. This is the festival of remembrance. Remind me, what is this ground we sit on?'

'Forgive me, my memory is not what it was. How did our people get here?'

'Ah yes, I knew these things once, before my memory started failing me. But some of us are hearing these stories for the first time. Perhaps the younglings have more questions they seek answers for?'

Continue asking questions and encouraging the younglings to do the same. When the time is right, get up, announce that you will retreat to the shelter. Instead, move to a corner where you have access to paper, the lights, and the speakers. You are off game from now on. Initiate the first storm and prepare tidal treasures.

Tidal treasures

(those in bold are key storybeats, and need to be introduced in given order)

- A corpse surfaces in the tidal zone. Who or what is it?
- You find a beautiful shell. It whispers when you hold it up to your ear.
- You discover a boat that somebody has been building in secret.
- You have suffered a terrible nightmare that felt like a warning.
- **A rotting smell has started to emanate from the pit.**
- You get stung by a beached jellyfish.
- The eldest of the younglings has come of age.
- **A strange rumbling can be heard, and felt, down the pit. The bad smell persists.**
- The ancestors have reached out to someone. How? What did the ancestors have to say?
- One of the canvas tents has been damaged in the storm. Get rid of it.
- **Whale song (play this as a track instead of the rain and thunder).**
- **(Use immediately after the whale sounds) land bridge appears, allowing for people and animals to migrate between islands and continent.**
- **The land bridge has disappeared.**

* feel free to add events and treasures on the fly, and remember to draw from the leftover sticky notes *

The end

The larp also has a 'soft conclusion.' Because the players have been warned that at they end they will have to make an important decision (alone or together), the introduction of the land bridge will spark the final act. Based on previous runs, one, some, or all of the players will likely decide to cross the land bridge. As facilitator, motion them, subtly, to confer with you, off game. Those who make the crossing might want to write a letter, which will be delivered by bottle after the next (and final) storm. If the players respond more unpredictably, improvise!

The land bridge will only be there temporarily. It shows up immediately after the whale song, and disappears after the next storm. Grant those who remain (if any) a moment to deal with the situation. Then play the storm again. This time, when you faze out the storm, keep the lights off. This marks the end of play.

Thank the players. Give everybody a minute (bathroom break). And then bring everybody together again for a **debrief.**





Laura op de Beke