

The Life of Mermaids



by Olga Rudak, Mira Suovanen, Jouni Karppinen, and Mo Holkar

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A chamber larp for 4–6 players and one facilitator. (Or one of the players can facilitate, at a pinch, if they're already familiar with the larp.)

Introduction

You can use this capsule summary to pitch the larp to the players beforehand,

You are a family that drowned recently in a boating accident at sea, and all of you turned into mer-people. Some of you may be uncertain of how you feel about it; some may be afraid; and others may be enjoying themselves. You are all still adjusting to this new situation: and at the end of the larp you will have the option of staying in this undersea world, or rejecting it and instead going to whatever afterlife you believe in.

About this larp

The Life of Mermaids was designed in draft at **Solmukohta 2016**, as part of a workshop on techniques for building relationships between characters. To conclude the workshop, arbitrary teams of participants were assigned the exercise of inventing a larp concept and discussing which relationship-building techniques would be appropriate for it. Our team (and actually all the other teams, too) ended up pretty much designing the whole larp; which you are now reading, although subsequent playtesting has developed it quite a bit.

Read-out text

In the script below, sections that are to be read out to the players are in boxes:

Like this.

You don't have to read them out word for word – do reword and substitute, and add detail where you think it's necessary, or shorten it if your players know all that stuff already.



(by user *Batwynn* on *deviantart.com*)

Structure

Facilities

Ideally this larp runs in a black-box room, where you have control over lighting and sound. You can decorate the space with wall-hangings and props to represent the undersea world, to add to the atmosphere.

It will still work fine if you don't have those facilities, though: an ordinary living-room or classroom with the space cleared, and a phone or something to play music and cast light from, will be enough.

Schedule

This is our suggested rough timing for the various sections of the larp:

- Introductory workshop – 120 minutes
(this is an upper limit: you should be able to work through it quicker than that)
- Drowning scene – 5 minutes
- The larp itself – 60 minutes
- Decision time – 5 minutes
- Deroling and debrief – 30 minutes

Workshop activities

Introduction

Introduce yourself, and say a sentence or two about what you're hoping for from experiencing this larp: and get the players to do likewise. If they don't know each other, give each of them a sticky label to write their name and their preferred pronouns on.

Explain to the players what's going to be happening.

Play is preceded by a workshop in which you will establish your relationship as a family, develop your individual characters, and decide the circumstances under which your boat sank.

Then the larp proper will be introduced by a scene where you play out, in an emblematic way, the events of your drowning. You will then begin playing the start of your life as merfolk.

New merfolk find themselves in an intermediate watery realm – pale flickering light still penetrates through, and the depths are purply-black beneath. Curious fish and other animals swim about. There are no other merfolk around here, apart from yourselves.

You all know (somehow) that after an hour of this state, the light above will narrow and brighten, and you will each have to make a choice: either to swim up towards the light, and thus become ordinary drowned humans, in whatever afterlife (or lack thereof) you believe awaits you; or else to commit to the life of mermaids.

Talk the players through the schedule, and say when you'll be taking breaks for refreshment etc.

Agree background

The players should agree among themselves: what period does this take place in? (Present-day is the default.) What sort of people are the family? (Relatively wealthy first-worlders is the default.) What sort of boat were they in? (A pleasure craft is the default.)

(We suggest that players play with the defaults for these choices for their first experience: but subsequently, looking at historical settings, or other kinds of families of boat-travellers, might be rewarding.)

They don't have to decide yet why or how the boat sank (or maybe they just all got swept overboard) – they just need to know that no-one on the boat survived, and that if there was any chance of rescue, it didn't arrive in time. They are all irrevocably drowned.

It's also worth at this point agreeing roughly how light/dark the players want the larp to be. It's good to have a mix of tone – some admiring of fish, some existential crisis – but

you don't want people to be undercutting each others' experiences by aiming for a completely different overall tone. Essentially the choice is between taking the situation seriously or taking it as light entertainment.

Safety

Explain to the players that, while this isn't an especially emotionally-intense larp, there will still be safewords that they can use if they find that it's going to places that make them feel uncomfortable. Stress that players mustn't feel guilty about using safewords, or feel that they might be spoiling people's fun: it's important that they all respect each others needs and comfort levels, and safewords are a part of that.

First is **Cut**: players can say Cut at any point, without explanation, and play will immediately stop. This might be because of physical injury, or something like a contact lens falling out; or it might be because a play interaction is more upsetting than the player wants to have to deal with; or any other reason. There's no need to explain why you've asked for a Cut (although you can if you want to, of course). After a Cut you can either have play resume when you're ready, or you can step out of the game and have it resume without you – as you prefer.

Next is **Brake** – this is used when a player wants to 'slow down' an interaction, without stopping it. A typical example is if their character is having an argument with another. Perhaps the other player is playing it too aggressively and intensely, and they want them to ease back. Or perhaps another player is 'swimming' around them more vigorously than they would like. Again, they don't have to explain why they want a Brake – just call for it, and it will be obeyed.

Finally **The Door is Open** – this means that players can leave the larp at any time, without the need for explanation. Either temporarily – perhaps to get some fresh air, regroup, recover from an intense passage of play – or permanently. (If it is to be permanent, it's good to inform the facilitator of that, so they know they don't need to expect you to come back in.)

Usually these safewords won't be needed: but if they are, that's fine, it's not any kind of failure of the larp or of the playing group. These things just sometimes happen.

Line-up

The players should take a few moments to think about the character that they want to play. Then ask them to line up across the room, with people whose characters are old at one end, those who are young at the other. This will (probably after they've shuffled around a bit) give a spread of characters from youngest to oldest in the family. Once the players are in line, give them time to decide who is who in the family (parents, children, etc), based on their position in the line. Give out badges on which the players should write their characters' forenames. If they want to also agree surnames, they can, but it's not essential.

It might be a purely nuclear family, or it could include step- and/or -in-law relatives – but it's important that all characters know each other very well. No-one can be a new arrival in the family.

Ask for further line-ups, across the room: how much attention do you feel that you get in the family? How happy/unhappy are you? Allow the players time between each one to see where each of them is standing in relation to the others: and to talk about it, if they want to.

Character prompts

Sit the players in a circle. Give each of them a copy of the sheet of **Character prompts**. Give them five minutes to think about the answers, while **the thinking music** plays. Ask them to introduce their characters, including the facts about them that the others would know. Encourage a short group discussion about the way that the family operates together. Discuss any important family members who aren't included among the characters.

Attitudes

Give each player black and white beads (or something similar) as follows:

If there are four players in total:	Give each of them two white and one black bead
Five players:	Two white and two black beads
Six players:	Three white and two black beads

Tell them to, in turn, choose one of their beads and place it in front of another player, while describing an attitude that their character has towards that player's character – a positive attitude if they've chosen to give a white bead, or a negative one if it's a black bead. The attitude might be "this is an important feeling that I hold about you," or "this is an important perception that I have about you".

If the recipient player doesn't agree with the attitude that has been expressed, they can negotiate it with the giving player, or refuse: in which case the giving player should think of something else.

Use a different sequence of players for each round of assigning beads: for example, clockwise, alphabetically, by seniority (of their character within the family), by level of happiness, etc – just to break things up, so it isn't always the same people going first.

Physicality

Play **the undersea music** and ask the players to walk around the room, moving in and out of each other as they pass, as their characters used to walk when they were human. They should think about their character's gait – their posture – which part of the body do they lead with? When they meet someone else, do they step aside, or expect the

other person to? Keep them moving in this way for a minute or two, until they seem comfortable with it.

Then ask them to imagine that they now have a tail, instead of legs – and they are moving in the water, using their arms to swim as well. Make it clear that they shouldn't be literal about it – not lying down flopping about like sealions – but instead giving the impression of a flexible, sinuous, responsive body moving through a supportive medium. It should be imagined, for this exercise, that they are familiar and comfortable with being merfolk – they aren't immediately reacting to the change. (They can explore that during the larp itself.) How does that feel, compared to moving as humans? Tell them to think about what feels better? – what feels worse?

Ask them to think about these questions, while they move:

- What emotions have they lost, moving from humans to merfolk?
- What sensations might they have gained?
- What was it like to be human: how did they feel about it at the time?
- How has their personality changed?
- Who might they have left behind on land?
- How do they feel about their mermaid future?

Keep them moving as mermaids for another minute or two, before stopping the music.

Conflict

Physical conflict shouldn't be necessary in this game. But if it does happen, it should be played out as in slow motion, with the victim deciding what they suffer. Tell the players this if you think they will benefit from hearing it.

Hot seat

(You can skip this if your players have already been communicating well with each other about their characters, while going through the process so far. But if they haven't, it's a good way of getting them to share the necessary details.)

Each player in turn occupies the 'hot seat' – a chair which is the focus of the other players. The other players ask them questions, addressed to their character, eg. "Why do you envy your brother? Do you fear the sea? What do you want to achieve in life?" The player in the hot seat has to answer quickly, without thinking too hard about the answer should be – it doesn't matter if they change their mind about some of the answers later. Each other player should ask the hot-seat player one question: if that goes fairly quickly, then let them each ask a second question.

Make it clear that the hot-seat player should answer honestly, with what their character actually thinks and feels – even if that's something that they would never normally reveal. This exercise is for internal purposes: the other players' characters will not 'know' the answers that are given.

Blame cards

Spread out between the players, so that everyone can see all of them, the set of **blame cards**, which state different flaws that might have led to the wreck of the boat. Each player should choose one card and give it to one of the other players, who has the choice whether to accept it or not: if they don't, choose a different card and give it to a different player. Everyone should end up with one card, which determines their role in causing the disaster.

- Some cards are very precise, like: you didn't tie the rope.
- Some are very abstract, like: you failed to delegate responsibilities.

Using the information on the selected blame cards, the players should decide together about their drowning: what were the circumstances? – what happened? – who did, or didn't do, what? Give them five minutes for this, and play **the thinking music** while they work on it.



(anonymous Russian folk artist, via Wikipedia Commons)

Drowning scene briefing

You've now established where some of the blame lies for your drowning – there may have been other things that went wrong too, of course, including accidents, Acts of God, and other blameworthy sins of omission or of commission.

At the start of the larp – which we have nearly reached – you're going to play out the scene of your drowning, as a group, to music. You're not going to play it in a literal and representational way – it should have an abstract and dreamlike quality about it, and a balletic feel. As though it was the last memory drifting through a drowning mind.

(Which it is.)

You shouldn't speak out loud, or make any other noises, during the scene – but you can mime speech in a silent-movie style. [**Demonstrate this.**]

And now the tricky bit... the scene has to last [**X minutes and Y seconds**], because that's the length of the song that will accompany it, which is: [**name the transition music, check they're all familiar with it; and if not, play it**].

So what you're going to do now is to compose the drowning scene, in discussion amongst yourselves. Feel free to practice elements or rehearse them, to see how it fits together. It should start with you all on the boat, just before the events of the drowning are precipitated: and it should end with you all drifting slowly down through the water, having breathed your last. What happens inbetween – who does what, the order in which you drown, what happens to the boat, and all that – is up to you.

After the song finishes, a different piece of music will start, and then you'll be in play as new merfolk – you will start to stir, realize you aren't dead, and come to terms with your environment and your situation. We'll talk a bit more about what that will involve once you've got your drowning scene sorted out.

[**Give them 10 minutes or so to design and, if they wish, rehearse the scene; during which you should play the thinking music.**]

Play prompts

Read this out:

So, during play as mermaids, here are some things you need to know:

- ≈ You can speak to each other as normal – you aren't sure how; maybe it's some sort of limited telepathy.
- ≈ You can move freely in three dimensions. For the sake of convenience we're representing that in two dimensions, with [**that end of the room**] being Down, and [**the other end of the room**] being Up. Up is where the light comes from.
- ≈ You can swim easily once you get used to it.

≈ The sea is comfortable and feels natural and safe. There are small fish, and other marine animals.

You might like to:

≈ Engage with the sea and its contents around you – invent details as required.

≈ Think, and talk, about what happened on your boat.

≈ Think, and talk, about how you feel about your family.

≈ Think, and talk, about your state as merfolk.

≈ Think about the things, and the people, that you've left behind in the world of the living.

≈ Think, and talk, about your future – individually, and as a family.

Add:

I'm not going to talk to you again before the end of the larp, so try and remember this! When you reach the end, [**the transition music**] will start playing, and the lighting will change.

At that point, before the music stops, you each have to decide whether you want to stay as merfolk, or if you want to instead be a departed human – potentially including whatever sort of afterlife you believe in. If you want to be a departed human rather than a mer-person, you should come to [**this end of the room**] and be by the light as the music finishes.

You can try and persuade each other to go, or not to go – but you may not use physical force or restraint to prevent each other from doing so.

And ask for any questions.

Break

Suggest that the players might like to take a five-minute break now, to refresh themselves, before play starts.

The larp

Starts with the players playing out their drowning scene, as planned. Deploy **the transition music**, sound effects, and light, fading to a mid-darkness.

When **the transition music** ends, play as mermaids starts, accompanied by appropriate background music which will last for the whole period of play. Drifting through the water, the characters discover their new bodies, and find each other. Somehow, they can talk as normal – perhaps it's a form of direct mental communication? – who knows.

Play proceeds for an hour while the characters come to terms with their new identities (or not), recriminate, forgive, divide, regroup, etc and so on.

Play **the undersea music** during the whole of this phase.

The end phase is signalled by a change in quality of the light – it starts to brighten and narrow, focusing on one end of the room. Play **the transition music** again.

Each character must decide whether to move to the light, or to remain in the sea. They cannot force each other to take one or the other option: they can only hope to persuade.

When **the transition music** finishes, play stops. Ask the players to close their eyes, and ask each character in turn for a brief internal monologue of their thoughts and feelings after having made their decision.

Closure

Read this out, adjusting it as necessary to reflect what your players decided their characters were going to do:

So the light gradually fades again, taking [characters who chose to die] with it. What the future holds for them – whether they may be reunited with those they have left behind, in some inconceivable future world – who can say.

And now [characters who chose to remain] must swim off into the dark depths to find their new kin – to live the life of mermaids.

Afterwards

De-roling

Read this out (or something similar) to the players:

Keep your eyes closed for now, and take three slow deep breaths. Feel the air filling your lungs, and feel it easing back out through your nose and mouth.

Feel the solid ground under your feet. You are back on land. You are no longer a mermaid – you are no longer your character – you are yourself again. Keep breathing gently, and move your hands and fingers. When you're ready, open your eyes.

Walk around the room for a few moments, moving as yourself, as you normally do. Acknowledge your fellow players by meeting their eyes as you pass them.

When you're ready, sit down in a circle, get yourself something to drink, use the bathroom – whatever will make you comfortable. We're going to talk a little about what's just happened.

A round

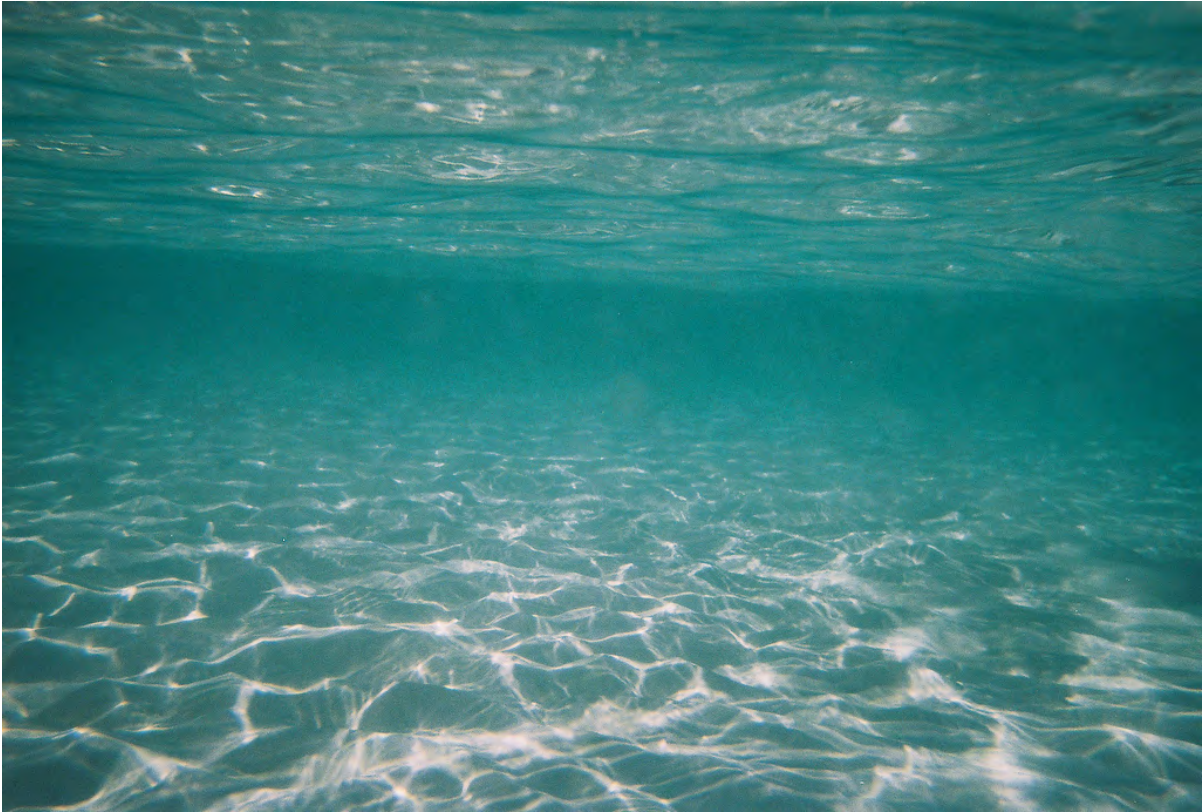
(Offer the players a five-minute break now, to refresh themselves, if they need to.)

Tell the players to sit down in a circle, once they've got drinks etc as instructed. Ask each one in turn to speak, for no more than a minute, about the way the larp experience has made them think and feel. Other players may nod, smile, etc, but shouldn't interrupt. If someone's not ready to speak, skip them and come back to them later in the round.

Once this round is complete, invite the players to ask questions of each other and of you, and to generally go into unstructured discussion.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to all our lovely playtesters! – especially Karolina Soltys for some very helpful feedback.



(from user Jari Salomaa on flickr.com)

Music

This larp uses three pieces of music, which are referred to in the text as:

- **the thinking music;**
- **the transition music;**
- **the undersea music.**

You can use whatever music you feel is appropriate, of course. Our only recommendation is that **the transition music** should be something all the players are fairly familiar with; so they'll recognize when it's coming towards its end, and will know to end the scene accordingly. Also, it should be somewhere around 3:30 to 4:00 minutes long.

What Mo uses is:

- **the thinking music** – Gavin Bryars, *The Sinking of the Titanic*;
- **the transition music** – Radiohead, 'No Surprises';
- **the undersea music** – Moby, *Underwater*.

Blame cards

<p>You didn't tie a rope securely.</p>	<p>You wouldn't delegate responsibility.</p>	<p>You were fighting with someone, and caused a hazard.</p>
<p>You didn't check the weather forecast.</p>	<p>You insisted you were right.</p>	<p>You were too ambitious in what you were trying to achieve.</p>
<p>You neglected an important maintenance task.</p>	<p>You wouldn't listen to alternative suggestions.</p>	<p>You caused an injury to one of the family.</p>
<p>You were too busy arguing to notice the sudden danger.</p>	<p>You lashed out in anger, and broke something.</p>	<p>You generally poisoned the mood, with your attitude.</p>

Character prompts

Here are some questions that you can answer to yourself, to help you develop your character a little. Go into as much or as little detail as you're comfortable with: and don't feel you have to answer all of them, if you think some aren't relevant, or you don't have answers just yet. Write the answers on this sheet, or keep them in your head, as you prefer.

All questions relate to how you are/think/feel before the events of the larp take place – when you are still alive and human.

- How do you feel about the sea?

- How would you describe your gender and sexuality to yourself? How do they tie in with the general perception of you? How do you feel about them?

- How do you feel about your situation in the family?

- How do you see your future unfolding, if you're optimistic about it? And if you're pessimistic?

- What did you think, when this boating trip was suggested? What did you say?

- Who is there, on land, that you'll miss while you're on the boat? Or if there isn't anyone: what will you miss?

- Is there anything secret about you, that the other characters don't know?