

# CRASH COURSE

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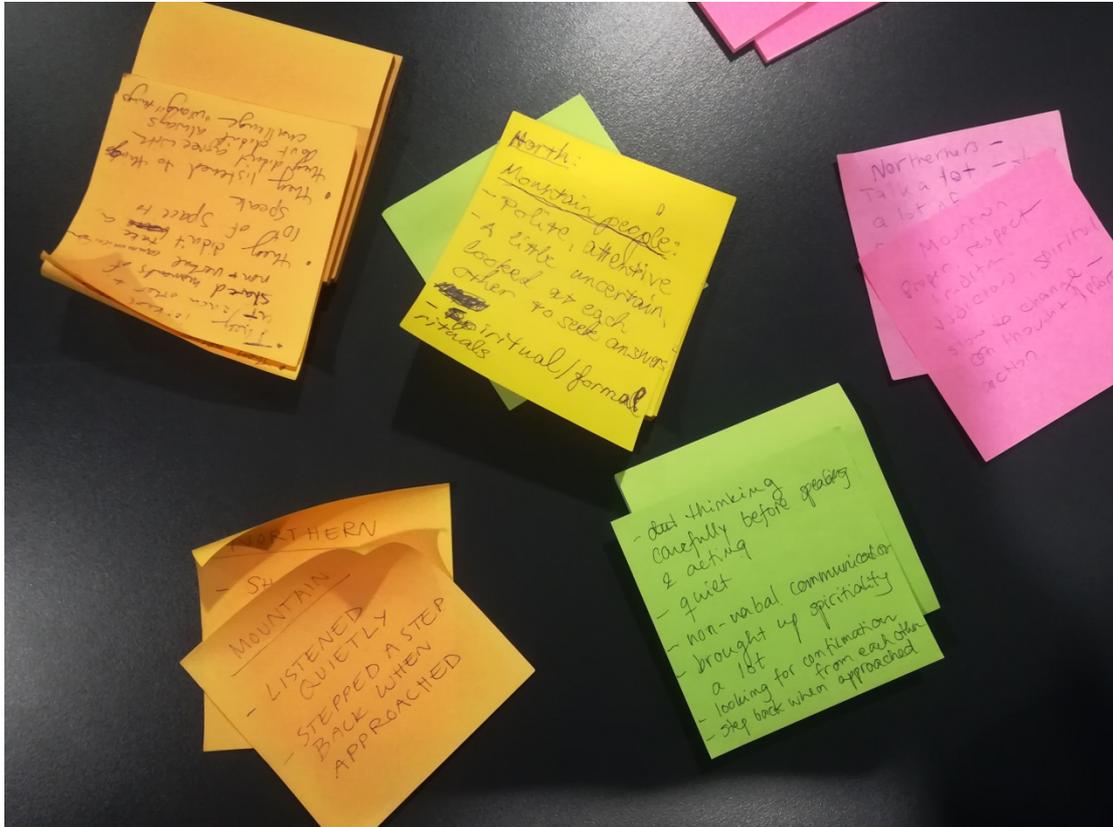


Photo: Katri Lassila

*Playing time:* 4-5 hours

*Number of players:* 6-8 (half English speaking North Americans, the other half Nordic)

*Playing style:* Collaborative, create an interesting experience for each other.

*Game master style:* Observe the players from aside to determine when a scene has run its course, direct if needed.

*Materials:* Name tags, post-it notes, pens, sheets of paper, character printouts, something small and easy to share to eat (e.g. chocolate, biscuits, fruit). It is good to have a projector for a PowerPoint presentation (alternatively, blackboard, whiteboard or flapboard).

## INTRODUCTION

Crash Course is a larp/freeform scenario that explores cultural differences between Nordic people and English-speaking North Americans through an allegory. It is set in an old time rural environment and portrays people from two villages on different sides of a river. It is designed for four Nordic and four North

American players. The Nordic players portray people from the Northern side of the river, and the Americans portray people from the Southern side. The culture of the Northerners is in some respects similar to English-speaking North American cultures, and the culture of the Southerners bears some resemblance to the Nordic cultures. However, the cultures are not meant to be one-to-one representations, and some of their features are designed to create conflict and drama. None of the two cultures have a notion of gender, and people are referred to by the pronoun “they” or “it”, depending on the culture. The larp has some sexual/romantic content, but sexual encounters will only happen between the scenes.

There are game mechanics that restrict interaction and create cultural differences. Moreover, some language restrictions are posed on Southerners (for example, they use a repeat word plural: “*many cat-cat*” instead of “*many cats*”). The motivation is to create cognitive workload around language so that the native English speakers will have to constantly think about what they are saying. This creates a simulation of speaking in a foreign language and levels out the differences in English skills between native and non-native speakers.

You can play the larp in a seminar room or a similar space. There are three scenes that follow a predetermined story arc. However, the key decisions are left to the players. The main conflict is a cultural misunderstanding about sex: for Northerners (characters of Nordic players), it is a very casual thing, and for Southerners (characters of Americans) it is the beginning of a lifelong union. In the larp, two young people, *Maple* from the North and *Summer* from the South, end up having sex. Summer reads a lot of meaning into it. For Maple, it is just a casual thing. The conflict escalates, and in the end, Summer’s friend Wind tries to kill Maple. The two groups of people then have to figure out together how to deal with the situation although their ideas of justice are completely different.

Below, there is a walkthrough of running the larp. It contains three parts: workshop, larp, and debrief. After the walkthrough, you will find the characters: four Northerners and four Southerners (Mountain People). You can use 4-5 hours for the larp (including workshop and debrief). My suggestion is one hour for the workshop, two hours (or a little more) for larp and half an hour for the debrief. However, you will need to read your players and adjust based on their needs.

## **WALKTHROUGH**

### **Workshop**

#### *1. Welcome & basics*

Welcome the players. Have them sit in a circle and take turns to introduce themselves. Ask each one of them to tell about a situation where they have experienced cultural differences. It can be cultural differences between Nordic

and North American people or cultural differences in some other context. Start the round with an experience of yours.

After introductions, briefly explain basic things about the game:

- Explain scene structure and that you may need to cut scenes;
- The basic storyline is predetermined but the players decide the details;
- Some characters have fates (instructions that they *must* follow);
- The focus is on culture, and since the larp is short, there is no time for world-building. Focus on cultural differences and on the situation here & now. The larp happens at an “old time” rural setting; there are houses and taverns but no cars or electricity. There are no high fantasy elements (e.g. no spellcasting).
- There are two villages in the larp. The characters are not the only people living in the villages, but they are the only people in the larp. Try to ignore this and play around it.
- The in-game cultures don't have a notion of gender. The pronouns *they* (Northerners) / *it* (Mountain People) are used to refer to people.
- The larp has sexual content but it always happens between scenes.
- In-game cultures are not one-to-one representations of North American/Nordic cultures, and some features are there just to create conflict and drama.

## 2. Setting

Describe the setting to the players:

*There are two villages separated by a river. On the north side, there are plains and farmlands, and a road that goes to a city. The Northerners have a wealthy agriculture. On the south side, the village spreads up the mountainside. Its inhabitants grow medicinal herbs and produce wines. Until now, crossing the river has been a taboo, and people have been convinced that anybody who does it would be cursed. However, now a small group from the North have build a boat, crossed the river and arrived to the South side where the Mountain People live.*

After this, describe the cultures (use PowerPoint or write bullet points on a board):

- *The Northerners (characters for Nordic players) talk about their feelings all the time. It is considered rude not to tell others how you feel. They touch each other a lot.*
- *The Mountain People (characters for American players) are not expected to talk unless they have something substantial to say, and they restrain their emotions. Silence is golden. Messages are often taken literally. Touching other people usually has sexual undertones and is interpreted as a sign of sexual interest.*

- *Northerners use the pronoun “they” to refer to people, Mountain People use “it”. Northerners use “it” only for people with a very low social status. In their eyes, using “it” for people often sounds rude.*
- *The Northerners believe in clear hierarchies and leadership: one person is the leader who makes the decisions. They assume the Mountain People operate on the same basis. The whole Northern village has one village leader.*
- *The Mountain People don’t have formal hierarchies, instead they discuss until they reach a consensus on what to do.*
- *The Northerners are relaxed about sex. For them it is a casual part of social interaction.*
- *To Mountain People, having sex communicates that you want to make a lifelong commitment to that person.*
- *The Northern idea of justice is “eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth”. The Northerners often use execution and torture as punishment.*
- *The Mountain People don’t have a set way of treating people who break the community rules. Instead, each individual case is discussed with the whole community. So far, there have been no serious incidents of violence in the Mountain Village (at least that anyone can remember). Occasionally, there have been drunken fights, but so far everything have been settled by talking.*

Now you can give the players the story outline:

*The Northerners arrive to the mountain village. Some Mountain People are happy about it, some aren’t. Two young people, Maple of the Northerners and Summer of the Mountain people will end up having sex. Summer will read a lot of meaning into it, but it will be just a casual friendship thing for Maple. However, Wind of the Mountain people has been in love with Summer for a long time. Eventually Wind will try to kill Maple, and the two groups of people have to figure out together how to deal with it.*

### 3. The Rules

Explain the rules of interaction (below). Use PowerPoint or write them on a board. Mention that the rules will be visible on the board/PowerPoint during the game and that it is not a big deal if you accidentally break one of the rules. Tell the players of the Northerners that the language rules are there to create cognitive workload, and remind them that non-native speakers often have to consciously think about language when speaking English.

After explaining the rules, separate the two groups (Northerners / Mountain People), and give them 10-15 minutes to talk with their group *following the rules*. They will do this as *players*, off-game. The point of the exercise is just to get used into a new way of conversing, and thus it is best to first do it without an extra level of thinking about the characters. Suggest a conversation starter to the players; they can e.g. talk about their expectations for the larp. However, you should tell them they can also talk about other things if they like.

- *In the larp, you only touch other players on the arms/shoulders area.*
- *Northerners do not stop talking before somebody interrupts (remember interrupting is not rude in their context!)*
- *Mountain People never interrupt others but wait for their turn to talk.*
- *Mountain People are only allowed to use the English third person singular (“I goes, you goes, they goes...”) and two tenses: past (“I went”) and present (“I go”). Other tenses (“I will go”, “I have gone”, etc) are NOT allowed. Instead of usual plural, Mountain People use a repeat-word plural (“cat-cat” instead of “cats”).*
- *Since Mountain People don’t usually express emotions verbally, the players have a mechanic for simulating subtle non-verbal communication. Each Mountain People player has a sheet of paper to use for expressing emotions: they can e.g. crush it, fold it, or tear it. Mountain People can use this mechanic to read each other’s emotions in-game. Northerners don’t understand this communication, but their players can use it as meta information.*

#### 4. Characters

The Nordic players should play the Northerners and North Americans should play the Mountain People. If you have only six players, you can omit the characters *Cloud* (Mountain People) and *Aspen* (Northerners). It may be possible to play the game with only five characters (*Birch* and *Maple* of the Northerners; *Mist*, *Summer* and *Wind* of Mountain People) but not with fewer.

Some of the characters have specific agendas written in them for specific scenes. Depending on your players and their play style, you can decide to leave the agendas out (just cut them with a pair of scissors). Without the agendas, the larp is subtler, there is more room for player interpretations, and the players have more agency. On the other hand, the agendas help to structure play and give players hints on what to do. If you are not familiar with your players, it is probably safest to keep the agendas. The more experienced the players are, the less they generally need the agendas.

Before handing out the prints of the written characters (you’ll find them at the end of this document), explain that in each character group, there are two generations, the young and the old (two characters each). There are master/apprentice relations between the older and younger characters, and these relations should be built on affection and/or expectations, a bit like parent/child relations in the real world.

You can either assign the characters randomly (but give the players the chance to switch characters!) or let the players read all the characters and choose which ones they want to play.

After handing out the characters, give the players a couple of minutes to read their character and think about it. Then, separate the two groups and give them 10-15 minutes to do the following (tell the players they can freely tell character secrets to other players, and that they should distinguish between what the player knows and what the character knows):

1. A round where everybody introduces their character;
2. A round where everybody develops a relationship with each of the other characters in the group (this will not take too long since there are at most four characters in each group).

After this exercise, introduce the players of Summer and Wind to each other.

## **Larp**

The larp consists of three scenes. Before starting each scene, you should tell the players what the scene is about (read the scene description), what the mood will be, how much time they will have to play it, and how the scene ends. During playtime, you should observe the players, try to read them, and cut the scene when the end goals are reached (and/or if it seems the scene has run its course and there is nothing more to play). If it seems that the players won't get to the end goal of the scene within the given timeframe, you will have to direct them to speed up (I didn't need to do this when running the larp).

### *SCENE I: Welcoming Ceremony*

*Duration:* 20-30 min

*Description:* The Northerners have just climbed up to the mountain village. They are meeting a group of local people. People meet and introduce themselves to each other. This is the first time they get acquainted with each other's cultures. Some of the Mountain People are suspicious of the newcomers, others are enthusiastic to meet them. After the initial introductions, a customary welcoming ceremony is held. The characters sit in a circle on the floor, with every other person a Northerner, every other a Mountain Person. They will pass food from one person to another (this is where you use the snacks you have brought). Remember that Northerners like to touch each other but Mountain People interpret touch as sexual.

*Mood:* Everybody is cautious and in their best behaviour. People want to learn about each other's cultures, and they try to overcome differences. They don't show negative feelings openly.

*Ending:* The scene ends when the last piece of food has been eaten.

*Other instructions:* Tell the players that there will be a culture calibration workshop after the first scene, and that in the workshop, they can still change things about the cultures.

### *Culture Calibration*

After this scene, do the following culture calibration exercise. Give the players pens and post-it notes and a couple of minutes to describe the behaviour of the Mountain People and the Northerners on the notes. Instruct them to use a different colour of note for each one of the cultures. At this point, they should *describe* the behaviour as accurately as possible, not *interpret* it (e.g. they should write "group X did not say thank you when given presents", not "group X was

rude”). They should not judge the behaviour (e.g. whether it was in line of the game’s vision or not), just list things that they observed.

After a couple of minutes of writing the notes, divide the players into groups of 3-4 people, and see that both groups contain an equal number of Mountain People (American) and Northerner (Nordic) players. Give them 5-10 minutes to discuss what they have written on the notes and to make a summary of what they wrote for each culture. Then ask one of the groups to go through their list of attributes for Mountain People, and ask if the other group has anything to add. Write the listed attributes down as bullet points either on the board or a separate paper. If some of them are interpretations (some players will almost certainly write those), either omit them or rephrase them as descriptions. If you observed some behaviour that was not in line with the larp’s vision but the players missed it, you can add it to the list.

Now go through the list and make the players give either a thumbs up or thumbs down depending on whether they think the behaviour is in line with the vision of the larp. They will probably be unanimous about most things, but the exercise will still help them establish what the cultures are like and give them confidence on how to play them. If there is disagreement, have them discuss briefly.

(You can read more about culture calibration e.g. from Martin Nielsen’s article *Culture Calibration in Pre-larp Workshops* at [nordiclarp.org](http://nordiclarp.org):

<https://nordiclarp.org/2014/04/23/culture-calibration-in-pre-larp-workshops/> )

## *SCENE II: Village Meeting*

*Duration:* 45-60 min

*Description:* After the first meeting, Summer and Maple had sex. Summer interprets this as the beginning of a lifelong commitment and is in love with Maple. For Maple, however, it was just a casual thing.

Many people from both cultures have dreamed of The Curse. It is clear from the dreams that to avoid The Curse, two of the Northerners have to stay permanently in the Mountain Village, and two Mountain People have to go to the North side of the river to stay there. Everybody agrees that this has to be done, now it is time to discuss who it will be (it should be player characters). The characters will probably have preferences of being in the same place with somebody close to them. The Northerners will probably think the leaders decide who goes, while the Mountain People will wish to discuss the matter with everybody until consensus is reached.

*Mood:* The cultural differences start causing more and more tension.

*Beginning:* people have gathered around in anticipation for a meeting. Before they officially start the meeting, there will be some more relaxed time when they discuss this stuff with each other to find out where each person stands on this.

*Scene ends after* the cultural conflict about Summer and Maple has escalated and a decision about who will go and who will stay is reached.

*Other instructions:* Tell the players you will ring a bell (or make some other sound effect) when they have 15 minutes of playtime left.

### *SCENE III: Crisis Management*

*Duration: 30-45 min*

*Description:* Before this scene started, Summer told Wind what happened with Maple. Wind got angry and tried to kill Maple. Now the characters will have to decide how to handle the situation. The Northerners and the Mountain People will have very different ideas on how to deal with it. The Mountain people will want to discuss the issue with the whole community, and the Northerners will want to mete “eye for an eye, tooth for tooth” type of justice.

*Mood:* The cultural conflict escalates and reaches its climax.

*Beginning:* Wind has just tried to kill Maple by hitting them with a pot. Maple is lying on the ground and Wind is preparing to hit them again when Mist walks into the scene and interrupts the action. Soon everybody else is there as well.

*Instructions:* In this scene, Mountain People can interrupt the Northerners if they are in great emotional distress.

*OPTIONAL:* The scene ends when either somebody dies or leaves the Mountain Village. You can use this scene goal to create structure, or you can leave the ending open. If your timeframe is strict, it may be a good idea to use the end goal.

### **Debrief**

Gather the players in a circle. Make them take turns to very briefly describe their experience (e.g. in one sentence or two). After this, take turns answering the question “*Did anything feel difficult during the larp? What felt most difficult?*”

After everybody has answered the question, do another version of the culture calibration exercise. However, this time, write how you *perceived* Northerners / Mountain People (you describe both the group you were playing and the other group). Try to steer the discussion into cultural differences and how the players feel about them in the real world. Don’t push your own views, but ask opinions from players. Look for people who seem like they have something to say but hold back. Alternatively, you can skip the culture calibration exercise, but try to keep the focus of discussion on cultural differences.

## CHARACTERS

### Northerners

*Birch*, the merchant

It was your idea to build the boat and travel to the Southern side of the river. You are the leader of the group of four Northerners. You frown at superstition, and you think the curse is nonsense. You tend to look down on Mountain People, who you believe are a superstitious lot, but you hope to profit from them by establishing trade relations between the villages. You could sell farm produce and get wine and medicines. You are assertive and a little self-centered. You believe that you are a good leader, but in reality, you can be indecisive.

*Maple* is your apprentice.

*Agenda for scenes I and II:* Try to find out who is the leader of the Mountain People (you are convinced they have a leader) and deal directly with them.

*Agenda for scene III:* It is not safe here if they just let the killer go without punishment!

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*Aspen*, the explorer

You are interested in the mountain people, their pottery and their medicines, and you would like to purchase some. In the hierarchy of *Birch's* expedition, you are second to them, and you are glad to have a chance to get to know the mountain people. You tend to idealize the mountain people but will rarely listen to their opinions. You secretly despise Birch and think that you are a better leader. This makes you often disagree with Birch, and you hope to be able to talk the Mountain People on your side, against Birch. You are secretly afraid of the curse.

*Agenda for scene I:* Try to find out as much as possible about the Mountain People and their customs. Try to see if some of them could be on your side against Birch.

*Agenda for scene II:* Try to use the Mountain People to bypass Birch as a leader.

*Agenda for scene III:* It is not safe here if they'll just let the killer go without punishment!

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*Maple, the merchant's apprentice*

You are young and impulsive, and enthusiastic to get into the Mountain Village. You wish to learn to know the people there and make new friends. You want to know everything about their customs but tend to misunderstand things and can be clueless and accidentally make faux pas. You are also looking for romantic and sensual adventures on the Southern shore.

*Fate:* Between the two first scenes, you will have sex with *Summer* of the Mountain people. It is going to be a casual thing, and you are going to forget about it afterwards.

*Agenda for Scene I:* You have set your eyes on Summer. Flirt with them. This is where the affair between Maple and Summer starts.

*Agenda for Scene II:* The affair with Summer was just a casual thing for you, and your interest in them is starting to fade. This should build into conflict.

*Agenda for Scene III:* Wind just tried to kill you. Demand justice. You want Wind dead.

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*Oak, the outcast*

On a gambling spree, you lost all your money and ended up in debt. As a punishment, you were sent to the Northern shore on *Birch's* boat. You are afraid of the curse, but at the same time, you are hoping to stay in the Mountain Village and find a new life there. You have heard the Mountain People have potent medicines, and you would like to become an apprentice to their healer. You also think you have some artistic talents, and you wonder how to best make use of them. The other Northerners look down on you, and in the Northern village you are often referred to by the derogative pronoun "it".

*Agenda for Scene I:* You would like to find the healer of the Mountain People and try to get in good terms with them, maybe to later become their apprentice. You would also like to find a way to fulfill your artistic ambitions. You guess pottery requires some artistic talent so maybe the potter could help?

*Agenda for Scene II:* You would very much like to stay in the Mountain village.

*Agenda for Scene III:* You think justice should be properly meted out after Wind tried to kill Maple, but at the same time you are worried about the curse. You guess two Northerners still have to stay on the South side of the river and two Mountain People go to the North side.

## Mountain People

*Mist*, the healer

You are elderly and respected in the community. You know the secrets of herbs and how to cure the sick. Before the boat arrived to the Southern bank of the river, you saw it in a dream. In your dreams, the Northerners brought death, destruction and murder to the mountains. You are worried.

*Cloud*, the potter, is a close friend of yours. *Summer* is your apprentice. You have noticed *Cloud's* apprentice *Wind* is in love with *Summer*, and you think they should form a union for life.

*Agenda for Scene II:* You want to do your best to avoid the curse but you would like to keep *Summer* close.

*Agenda for Scene III:* You think *Maple* is the one who is to blame for everything, not *Wind*. After all, *Maple* violated *Summer's* trust.

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*Summer*, the healer's apprentice

You are young and curious. You have often climbed high on the mountain to look at the village on the other shore and dreamed about going there. You want to know what kind of people live there, you want to learn to know them. *Wind* is a close friend of yours. *Fate:* You will fall in love with the Northerner *Maple*.

*Agenda for Scene I:* You are attracted to *Maple*. You will cautiously flirt with it. This is where the affair between *Maple* and *Summer* starts.

*Agenda for Scene II:* You are in love with *Maple*, and you think you two are committed for life. Either you want to go to the Northern side of the river or you want *Maple* to stay with you. Eventually this should build into a conflict when you realize it doesn't think it is committed to you after all.

*Agenda for Scene III:* You are disappointed with *Maple* and don't trust it anymore.

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*Cloud*, the potter

You have been sometimes watching the Northern village from the mountains. You hope good relations between the villages could be established, so you could sell your pottery to the Northerners. You tend to see the best in people, and even though the Northerners' ways are different from yours, you believe them to have a good heart, like everybody else.

*Mist*, the medicine person is a close friend of yours. *Wind* is your apprentice. You have noticed *Wind* is in love with *Mist's* apprentice *Summer*, and you think they should form a union for life.

*Scene I*: You are curious about the newcomers and want to learn to know them. Maybe try to find out if they are interested in your pots?

*Scene III*: It was the Northerners who caused the conflict. They didn't pay attention to your customs and *Maple* violated *Summer's* trust. This should be solved peacefully, without harming anybody. You are gradually growing more and more disappointed of the Northerners.

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*Wind*, the potter's apprentice

You know the river should not be crossed, and you are afraid a curse will befall both villages. At the same time, you are curious about the strangers. You are calm by nature, but if you feel that you or someone you care about has been wronged, you will never forget it. You don't anger easily, but if you do, your emotions will run very strong. You are secretly in love with your close friend *Summer*, and you hope to build a lifelong union with it.

*Fate*: before the last scene, you will try to kill the Northerner *Maple*.

*Agenda for Scene III*: You do not regret trying to kill *Maple*, and you still want it dead.