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L'Esprit de Lascaux: Exploring group camaraderie in the paleolithic through game design

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Recommended Citation

L'Esprit de Lascaux
A Tabletop Game by Logan Lemieux

Intro

In playing this game, we ask you to put yourself into a different state of mind. Separate yourself from modern life. Nomadic societies operated in different ways, both subtly and obviously, that can be difficult to grasp at first. Perhaps the most important is how we perceive justice. In modernity, we tend to identify the causes of all events as external factors; blaming others for our problems. This was more than likely not the case in premodernity. Much more blame was placed on the self. Nietzsche's master and slave morality provides a way to view this framework.

In modernity, we perceive ourselves all as masters of our world. We are all the center of our own universe. In contrast, premodern humans were slaves, as Nietzsche puts it. However, this is not a bad thing; it means that they prioritized the community over the self. They used sympathy to become stronger as a group. This game asks you to embrace this mentality, realizing a life where you serve a community larger than yourself.

Don't feel bad if this doesn't come easily; after all, this is antithetical to our modern viewpoint. However, if your group can glean some insight into how these people thought, and how that might change the decisions they would make in dangerous scenarios, the game has succeeded in its goals.

Making Characters

It is highly encouraged to make characters with your group in order to establish some base connections between them. These characters have likely known each other for their whole lives. Even if some come from surrounding communities, they were probably aware of each other and interconnected in many ways. Your characters should be someone you can relate to; not necessarily your persona, but similar enough that the character is not an obstacle to roleplaying.

Humans in this time period were, biologically and anthropologically speaking, modern. From a psychological perspective, though it's difficult to imagine a world without all of the creature comforts of our life, humans were the same as today. People would still stress about social interactions and laugh at jokes. Because of this, it's encouraged to start your character with their weaknesses; whether that's as small as a stutter or as big as a missing limb. This makes your character relatable to the audience and gives them a sense of humanity.

Flow of Game

The game is played in sessions passing in real time, like most tabletop games. Players each take control of one character in a nomadic group. They work together to overcome problems faced in the group. Some inspiration for these are presented in **Example Scenario Ideas.** If players are familiar with traditional TTRPGs, it may be helpful for one player to assume the role of a leader guiding the story; however, this is not required to receive the full experience. Story should come from communication with players and role play.

Whereas in a traditional tabletop game players would roll a skill check to overcome a challenge, players in this game use a deck of cards. Most cards feature basic human abilities: argumentative forms, ideals, useful knowledge, etc. In the conversations that these games simulate, hammering home the exact same points over and over is ineffective, as in real life. Thus, much like how spells work in traditional tabletop games, cards in *Lascaux* only can be used a certain amount of times within a scenario. Each player has 6 cards in their class deck, as well as 5 cards from the base deck. See **Classes** and **Base Cards** respectively. Whenever a player wishes to do something that would constitute a challenge for someone unskilled, they must play a card in order to accomplish that.

Classes

The game features three distinct classes representing specialists within the group. It's important to note that everyone would have at least some basic understanding of these three fields! There is plenty of overlap, and the knowledge that each possesses would be shared, reflected on, and improved over time. However, these strata represent critically important disciplines. None of these people are able to perform "magic" in the sense of the supernatural; however, through clever craft, these people could perform feats that appeared as such.

The **Abstractionist** uses human ideas to their advantage. She typically occupies the role of storyteller or preservationist. Through language and thought, she creates art, theory, and wisdom. The Abstractionist starts with the following cards in her deck:
- Ethos (x2) - An appeal to the authority of a person. Ethos also represents the customary culture of a place, as well as the fundamental values of a person. Making someone feel like they are being given a choice, or that they will be more

powerful somehow with an action they take, is a common way that Ethos is presented.

- Pathos (x2) - An appeal to emotion; eliciting feelings in the audience. This is most often achieved through metaphor or anecdote. A hook into a story is only effective if it creates a connection to the audience.
- Logos (x2) - An appeal to logic, reason, or rationality. Facts and logic function somewhat differently in premodernity. When something cannot be easily researched, its effectiveness as a Logos argument is lessened. Trust in each other when presenting facts is therefore very important--think of the boy who cried wolf.

The **Naturalist** is especially knowledgeable about the natural world. She understands the cycles of flora and fauna and their relations, as well as practical uses thereof. Often, the naturalist finds herself in the role of a healer. In addition to this, she also understands geology and the uses of various minerals.

- Rot (x2) - Time and tide wait for no man. Rot is the decay that feeds on everything natural, only stopping briefly for our lives before we return to the soil. The knowledge that the little time we have is crucial keeps us sane.
- Growth (x2) - Even in the harshest of environs, plants still find ways to present themselves. Growth represents strength and self-improvement.
- Feed (x2) - to kill another being in order to sustain oneself is brutal; however, it is inevitable that not all will make it. The same is true of ideas; many get absorbed into others in order to feed the exchange of human thought.

The **Newtonian** is a natural scientist who capitalizes on the laws of the universe. With the ability to create simple machines, the Newtonian can engineer her way out of many situations. She is also well-versed in astronomy, meteorology, physics, and alchemy, and is able to use these to create many simple tricks. The Newtonian starts with the following cards in her deck:

- Clay (x1) - Malleable, clay can be reshaped to the Newtonian's desire. It represents flexibility in a situation. Clay is also an invaluable tool for reinforcing any structures, and this property of becoming firm after flexibility is important as well.
- Flint (x1) - Much like clay, flint can be knapped to any shape. But, it is not flexible; it instead has to be broken with skilled hands in order to create something. Human ingenuity at its finest needs some small sacrifice.
- Salt (x1) - Universally necessary for all herbivores, salt fuels life. It also can be used to prevent rot and preserve food. It represents memory, knowledge, and value. The Romans paid soldiers in salt, which is where we get the word salary.

● Machina (x3) - Archimedes described 6 simple machines with which great force could be exerted by humans. The absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence--paleolithic humans plausibly could have used these. Inclined planes, levers, wheels, pulleys, screws, and wedges can be used to move things that would seem impossible.

Base Cards

In addition to the class cards that each player has, there is also a base deck of cards shared by all players.

● Camaraderie - the connection felt between the members of the group and, by extension, the tribe. Camaraderie also represents the sense of belonging felt to the community.

● Musculature - the physical strength that someone possesses. Most humans were very fit, but fighting your way out of a situation is rarely a good idea when everyone knows everyone else.

● Instinct - the first thing your mind thinks of when faced with danger. Acting fast can be the difference between life and death. Instinct can also represent our semi-conscious stress response to situations.

● Creativity - life serves to create art, and everyone accomplishes this in their own unique way. In many ways, creativity is the most important thing for survival; it is both the basis on which our systems are built as well as the lens through which we create ideas.

● Anima - humans have dozens of different names for the supernatural entities that inhabit our world, and the connection to them is of utmost importance to those peoples. Upsetting them could be the cause of storms or worse, and pleasing them would result in bounty. No two groups believed in the same set of spirits, and these beliefs likely changed over time, but they were always important.

Earned Cards

Players also earn cards as time progresses based on situations they learn from. This is the closest thing the game has to "leveling up." Players shouldn't expect to earn these more than roughly once a session; they should be the result of conversations or character growth. Think of a character learning a lesson in an episode of a TV show--that's what these cards should feel like. Some examples are shown below, but feel free to create your own to serve the game and your characters!

● Kairos - An appeal to opportune time; saying to strike while the iron is hot. Context is key. Very little matters if it's done at the wrong time. Kairos is what made Alexander the Great great.

- Hubris - To have awareness of one's place in the world is essential. No one person can take on the world alone, and no one person is better than another as a whole.
- Regret - To regret one's actions is to question one's morality and is the first step to making it right. Someone who feels no regret is, quite literally, a psychopath.
- Flexibility - Beyond the literal definition of being able to move one's body more ably, flexibility of the mind allows one to shape one's ideas more ably. This makes one better able to work with others to create a mutual understanding.
- Patience - Overcoming annoyances is an exercise in respecting the world; to be impatient is to be disrespectful. Even those that someone dislikes the most deserve their basic respect.

Example Scenarios

Where most TTRPGs have one player make a general story for the rest of the group, *Lascaux* focuses itself on communal storytelling. This can be a rough transition for some, as this is rarely how we tell stories in the modern age! It may be easier for one player to have a more focused leader role, with a loose outline of a story, and allow the players to assume characters when they wish. You're free to play with these rules as you want to better suit your group.

Here are some recommended scenarios to think about when playing this game, that might constitute a normal-length gaming session:
- Trading with another group
    - What's your past relationship with them? Have you met them before?
    - Do they have much to offer? Are they in need of charity, or in a position to give?
- Death of an elder
    - Forgotten stories and knowledge?
    - Did they ever have children? How are they dealing with the grief?
    - How will they be honored?
- Marriage proposition from another tribe
    - What's your past relationship with them? Have you met them before?
- Great beast wanders near
    - Are the spoils from the hunt needed?
    - How would it be honored?
- Gathering of tribes for a yearly celebration
    - What will you contribute?
    - What relationships need to be made or maintained?

Additionally, some longer term scenarios are suggested below for players looking for a campaign-length adventure:

- Drought (or other natural disaster)
    - How best to balance resources?
    - How to please the anima?
- Prophecy
    - What does the prophecy say? Is it a boon? A warning?
    - How to please the anima?
- Neighboring tribe suddenly disappears without warning
    - What happened?
    - How is your group, who likely knew most of their members, dealing with the grief?
    - Who else might know anything about this?
- Discovery of an ancient site
    - What does this mean?
    - Does any of the art at the site have modern meaning to your group?
    -

Afterword

My original vision for this game was influenced by a YouTube video discussing the strange sense of connection one feels at the Lascaux caves. Seeing art from people long gone has a profound impact on a person, and I wanted to create a game based on this feeling. However, games as a cultural implement have some major problems that intrinsically go against this goal. For one, games are often violent. Though there are games that focus on peaceful endeavors, like *Cascadia* (2021) or *Wingspan* (2019), the majority of games feature some element of combat. Many games include player-vs-player (PvP) systems, even if that just comes down to scoring, as in *Cascadia*. I was insistent that I wanted my game to be cooperative. The obvious choice was a tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG). Though traditional TTRPGs have a strong combat focus, they are designed to be inherently cooperative. Indeed, for many people, the fun of the game lies with roleplay rather than combat. So, the focus shifted towards making a cooperative TTRPG without any PvP aspects.

This brought about an entirely different set of problems, as TTRPGs are notoriously complicated. To someone unfamiliar with the genre, being presented with a set of seven different dice is daunting, let alone a character sheet with dozens of numbers. The easy part was taking a typical character sheet and removing most of this. I have no beef with numbers, I just felt that arbitrary rolls would be inappropriate in a game like this. This experience was meant to mainly be roleplay; rolls were mainly used to prove worth in combat. The idea that one person can be quantifiably smarter, wiser, or more charismatic than another was also problematic. This was concerning; how would I make a TTRPG without making a TTRPG? This contradictory vision haunted the project throughout. Eventually, the answer came in the form of cards. The controversial *Dungeons and Dragons Fourth Edition* (2007) featured spell cards, which were a novel way of presenting abilities whereby all of a player's magic might be contained in a deck of cards. Spell cards in *Fourth Edition* were very poorly received, but I thought that they might be applicable to a game like this with less rigid planning. So, I set to work making some spells for *Lascaux*.

Traditional TTRPG spells tend to be great feats--*Fourth* gives its characters the spells Fireball and Chain Lightning by level 5. Thus, the word "spells" here is used loosely. The decision regarding whether or not characters in the game should be magical at all was under question, given that I wanted a semi-realistic game, let alone whether they should be able to conjure lightning. My decision came down to the fact that, in pre-modernity, people around the globe were animists, believing that all things have spirits. Pleasing them was of the utmost import. People who were more in touch with these anima were

seen as truly magical; these are our shamans, witches, and ritualists. All of these people would have had a great understanding of natural science to be able to predict these events, whether that be focused on astronomy, meteorology, or others. Thus, I decided to give players feats that to someone uneducated might appear as magic. This, I felt, struck a fair balance between realism and the "cool factor," while avoiding giving a young character the ability to summon lightning.

To create "magic," then, I started thinking about what the most interesting and most powerful tools humans had created from the natural world. Some of these potential powers were obvious, like flint's ability to create sparks or clay's ability to be shaped into anything in the mind of the artist. Others were more difficult, made so by my position in modernity--many people today are unable to partake in amateur astronomy due to light pollution, but the stars would have been a beautiful sight every night to ancient peoples. Moreover, tracking the positions of the stars would have been magical knowledge to these peoples. Throughout history, many spiritual people saw research of these patterns as proof of greater forces, and this was just as true to ancient peoples as it was to Galileo and many scientists today. This realization was significant progress for me in overcoming a mental block. With the creation of character abilities and a couple productive brainstorming sessions, it was time to create classes.

Video games tend to have three types of classes: healers, DPS (damage per second, like soldiers, archers, or mages), and tanks (people able to take many hits in combat, like heavily armored paladins). RPGs tend to use this split more loosely, with classes typically spanning multiple roles. My main issue was worry about splitting important core knowledge from people. Was it right to make one class an anima expert when anima were core to decision making? How about art, music, or storytelling? Eventually, I came to the realization that human division of labor and knowledge was normal, and it was okay to split some of these things up. These were average people, just like you and I are today, perhaps knowledgeable in one or two fields but likely uninterested or incompetent in many others.

I had visions for three characters, including a healer type specializing in nature, a storyteller who is especially good at talking, and a martial character who uses their body especially well. The latter was a mainstay among games that I included on a whim, but later caused me grief. What good was someone who used their body when they weren't going to use it to brawl? Most humans were likely extremely physically fit compared to today anyway. In a brainstorming session, then, I thought--why not just have them use "physical" powers, not in the traditional sense used in games, but in the sense of the

natural science? Thus, I ended up with the Abstractionist, a storyteller who uses human logic, the Naturalist, a biologist who is especially knowledgeable about flora and fauna, and the Newtonian, a natural scientist/engineer who uses knowledge about natural phenomena and simple machina to influence the world. Simple machines, as described by Archimedes, have never been explicitly proven to exist in tribal societies; but the absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence. Using a level or wheel is also something that I have both never seen done in a game before and something that I feel is similarly magical to knowledge of flora and fauna (though, as an engineer, I'm biased).

Finally, it was time to write out all these into my final product. I had to compile all of my notes from 2 quarters of meetings and musings. I tried my best to avoid racist depictions of tribal life; Gilgamesh, our earliest recorded character, came up multiple times as an example of early human morality, but much more had to be synthesized from accounts of tribes from the past few hundred years as well as psychological observation from modern humans. Overall, my biggest challenge was defining what I actually wanted, more so than creating it. I started with a lot of conflicting ideas for a game, like wanting a TTRPG that followed very few of the genre staples and making characters with powers that weren't actually magical. This contradictory vision was my main obstacle in this project, but it and the project as a whole taught me multiple important things. For one, make your goals clear as you go along! I mostly worked on this project two or three hours at a time with one hour meetings every week. Hindsight is 20/20, but I do believe that if I had written out what I actually wanted from the get go, I would have been better able to tackle the challenges as they came up. This brings me to my next point, though, which is that it's really more about the journey than the destination. This project brought me to a lot of areas of philosophy, history, and science that I would not normally have ventured into, and it was honestly quite fun. Lastly is simply to trust yourself. Though my vision was confused, I worked with it and molded it until it was a truly worthwhile representation of my original plan. This only happened because of my advisor and the friends I talked to who helped me through it, but it was still very important for me to stand my ground on certain problems I had with this project throughout. Thanks to everyone who helped me work out the kinks by talking through this project, it's been wonderful and I appreciate you all.

Cheers,

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