Experimental Findings

*Experimental Findings* is a larp for five players about discovery and responsibility, by Mo Holkar. It takes about three hours.

**Introduction**

Scattered across the desolate marshes are five experimental measuring stations, which were put in place ten years ago, around a former military test site. They were set up to measure changes in wildlife, etc, resulting from this activity. Now is the time to check them, and gather their results. A team of scientists progress around them, taking measurements; and a story unfolds.

**Running the larp**

You need exactly five players for Experimental Findings: but you (the person reading this) can either run it for them, or take one of the five roles yourself, as you prefer. It’s facilitation, rather than GMing.

**Practicalities**

*Experimental Findings* was written originally to be played in the coastal marshes of Orford, Suffolk, UK. But you can use any fairly bleak and deserted patch of landscape that you have handy. (Or even a bleak and deserted patch of townscape, or an abandoned building, if that’s what you have locally and you think your players will enjoy it.)

You should look at a map beforehand and plan out a route. The end should be fairly close to the beginning, and it should have five stopping-points across the way. Ideally these will be chosen by being easy things to notice when you’re coming up to them in real life. They should be about 10–15 minutes’ walk inbetween – how far this is will depend on terrain and on your players’ walking speed. So: ten minutes from the start to the first station, ten from the first station to the second, etc... and finally ten more from the fifth station to the end of the walk. *(See the example map on page 7.)*

As well as the walk itself, you need an indoor space to do the briefing and debrief. This needn’t be right near the start of the walk – you can have a transition phase inbetween, where players eg. walk to the edge of the village out of character, after the briefing, before starting the larp.

If you can get the players to wear something simulating biological protective gear, that would be great. (It shouldn’t cover their heads, though: they will need to be able to hear each other clearly.) It’s not necessary, though: just ordinary outdoor clothing is fine.
Preparation

Read out the Briefing (on page 9), and leave a copy out for the players to refer to, if they wish it.

If they ask, tell them that the larp is set in a non-specific present-day. There is no mobile phone signal out on the marshes. They do not have radio equipment or anything like that.

Talk about safety. The techniques that we recommend are: Cut, Lookdown, and The Door is Open.

Characters

Spread out the five characters and let the players choose one each. Invite them to write a name badge sticker, if you have blank ones with you. Tell them to let the others know when they’ve chosen a gender, and then give them a few minutes to think about the questions.

Calibration

Break this up by asking for them to make two rounds of calibration statements about Professor Sanchez. The way this works is: a player makes a statement that they would like to be true, in the larp reality, about Professor Sanchez. It might be a simple statement of fact (“Professor Sanchez was a cis woman”) or a loaded statement (“Professor Sanchez sometimes bullied junior staff members”) or a value judgement (“Professor Sanchez was generous to a fault”), or anything else really. But obviously it should be something meaningful aimed at generating play within the larp, not something trivial like preferring the colour blue. If the other players are all happy with this statement, then it is allowed to stand and becomes a fact. Otherwise, other players can suggest tweaks (“How about if there was just one junior staff member that she bullied, rather than it being a pattern?”) and thus negotiate with the proposing player, until they reach something that everyone’s happy with. Or the proposing player can scrap that idea and suggest something altogether different, if they don’t like the suggested changes.

Repeat this process around the circle; then go around again, in reverse order. You should now have ten statements, hopefully very varied, about Professor Sanchez, which represent the team’s common knowledge about them.

Now let them go back to finishing off their character questions.

Relationships

Each player should in turn suggest a connection between their character and one of the others.
This is done like so: Player A says “What [my character] needs from Character B is [something].” Player B responds “[My character] won’t give it, because [reason].” They then discuss and negotiate as required until both are happy.

The needs can be emotional or practical, major or petty. A mix is good. So for example it might be “What Sasha needs from Kim is respect, and a promotion.” “Kim won’t give it because [they] still resent Sasha’s affair with Professor Sanchez.” And again of course they should be things that will generate play during the larp itself.

Each character should be the initiator of, and the recipient of, exactly one such connection. This will leave the last people without much choice, so use ingenuity to come up with something. You can invent further supporting threads to make these connections work (eg. we two are siblings; my dept have recently been given a research grant by you; you used to be in the armed forces; etc) as required, as long as both parties are happy with them.

(This connection technique is hacked from Robin D Laws’s excellent tabletop RPG Hillfolk, published by Pelgrane Press. Check it out!)

**Explain about gathering results**

Talk the players through how gathering results is going to work (see below, page 5), so they have an idea of what’s to come, and so they can enact it smoothly when the time comes.

If they seem particularly unconfident, then you could run an example, as part of this preparatory phase: so they can see how it’s going to work.

**The end**

Once the team have walked to the endpoint, the larp finishes. You should then ask them to say (out of character) what their characters are going to announce about the findings, and about Professor Sanchez (if anything). Don’t let this drag on, or go into too much detail, or discussion about what’s realistic: it’s for story purposes.

Bear in mind that the measurements themselves say unequivocally that the ecological picture is just as the various models predicted: but they are at liberty to falsify the results, if they should wish to.

**Debrief**

You might not feel that you need a debrief after this larp: but if people would like to debrief, then that’s fine of course. The best method will probably be a simple round in which each player has a minute to talk uninterrupted about the thoughts and feelings that it has left them with.
Acknowledgements

Thanks to Will Osmond, David Owen, Karolina Soltys, and Laura Wood, for playing the first version of Experimental Findings. And to the Reactor Core in general, for being wonderful.
Gathering results

In an immersive version of this larp, you would set up five actual experimental measuring stations, and have the players take authentic readings from them. Which would be great! But if you can’t do that, then use this method, which is kind of allegorical.

We wanted, in this bit of design, to bring out the ritualistic nature of science – the attention that the scientific process pays to belief, and the role of scientists within that ideological framework. All the characters are professional scientists of one kind of another, and all this is second nature to them. Yet to outsiders, it probably seems bizarre, formal, and forbidding.

So: the five measurement stations are each represented by a different sensory experience. As they reach the station, the team must nominate one of the five characters to take the measurement. They must also nominate another character to note the results. These should be different each time, so that each character has exactly one turn at taking the measurement, and one turn at noting the results. This should all happen while still in play – don’t drop out of character to discuss whose turn it is.

The person taking the measurement should approach the measuring station, and then the person ‘noting the results’ should lead an improvised ritual. Here’s an example ritual:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The measuring player stands in the middle, with their eyes blindfolded. The note-taker stands in front of them, and disposes the other three players in a triangle around, with their arms extended towards each other.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Note-taker: “Scientific spirit of the south-east, spirit of deduction, I call on you! How do you find this scientist? Do they meet the test?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response from the player in that position: [something that hopefully indicates approbation.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note-taker: “Scientific spirit of the south-west, spirit of analysis, I call on you! How do you find this scientist? Do they meet the test?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Response]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note-taker: “Scientific spirit of the north, spirit of publication, I call on you! How do you find this scientist? Do they meet the test?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Response]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note-taker: “Scientific spirits! You have spoken. This scientist has been found worthy to receive the results.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(If you think your players might struggle with improvising rituals, then make sure that you get to be note-taker for the first station, and use this example. The others can then copy it for the subsequent stations.)

The note-taker then gives the measurer the results for this station.

The results are:

1. **sight** – a printed pattern of abstract scratches
   (see p7 for one that you can use)

2. **hearing** – a recording of chaotic noises
   (there’s an example that you can use at
   [https://www.dropbox.com/s/5rvkvfhth9n2m8/195429__thatjeffcarter__computer-noise.wav?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/s/5rvkvfhth9n2m8/195429__thatjeffcarter__computer-noise.wav?dl=0) it’s by user thatjeffcarter on freesound.org)

3. **smell** – a pad impregnated with something odorous

4. **touch** – an object with an interesting texture or textures

5. **taste** – a small piece of chocolate or similar

The measurer should ‘interpret’ these results back to the team, in terms of the ecological diversity, soil acid, nesting density, radioactive background, or whatever they prefer. The main thing to bear in mind is that the results are basically normal: what would have been expected from the standard ecological model.

Then, the note-taker should give the measurer the associated fragment of Professor Sanchez’s diary. You can either do this as a recording to be played out loud, or as a printed handout, as you prefer. In the latter case, the measurer should read it out loud. (It’s important that it should only be played/read once – not replayed/reread again and again. Otherwise the larp can get bogged down.) It won’t be clear why Professor Sanchez decided to leave these fragments of diary at each station: the characters will have to come up with their own explanation for that.

An important thing to note about these rituals and interpretations etc is that to the characters, they should seem perfectly normal: this is how they do science. Obviously. They shouldn’t remark upon the odd nature of the proceedings in any way. (They can and should discuss the findings, of course.)
This could be the handout for the Sight station

(Wikimedia Commons)
An example map

(Map © OpenStreetMap contributors)
Briefing

These desolate marshes have never been inhabited. For most of their existence, they were a peaceful damp wilderness, home only to wildlife.

Then war came, and the Ministry turned this land into a testing ground. Scientists and service personnel came here, to try out a range of experimental weaponry. The war ended, the nation survived, the marshes remained in the hands of the military – abandoned and neglected once more.

A new generation arose, more awake to the rhythms of the world. A question was asked: what had been the effects of the weapons tests on the local ecosystem? Had it yet returned to normal? Would it ever? A study was commissioned.

Professor Sanchez, a world-renowned scientist in the field of measuring ecological changes resulting from anthropogenic disruptions, visited the site and set up five measuring stations at different places around the marshes.

But Professor Sanchez then disappeared. That was ten years ago. It is now time to revisit the test site, and to gather the results. This is your task as a team.
Cameron

You are Cameron, the child of Professor Sanchez. You view them with a mix of reverence and disappointment at having been abandoned. You would like to emerge from their shadow, but somehow ended up working in the same field.

Answer this question to yourself, and then tell the others:

❖ What is your gender?

Answer these questions to yourself, but don’t tell the others:

❖ What is your opinion about the role of science and the scientist in society?

❖ How do you feel about your work?

❖ What do you feel is one’s duty towards telling the truth: is it absolute, or might it be contingent on circumstances?

❖ What is your current strongest emotional need?

You can write the answers down, if it’ll be helpful.

If you can’t think of the answer to a particular question just now, that’s fine, leave it to brew: it can come to you later on during play.
Kim

You are Kim, formerly the assistant of Professor Sanchez, who took over their research group after their disappearance. You burnish their legacy, but also would like to be recognized for your own work.

*Answer this question to yourself, and then tell the others:*

- What is your gender?

*Answer these questions to yourself, but don’t tell the others:*

- What is your opinion about the role of science and the scientist in society?

- How do you feel about your work?

- What do you feel is one’s duty towards telling the truth: is it absolute, or might it be contingent on circumstances?

- What is your current strongest emotional need?

You can write the answers down, if it’ll be helpful.

If you can’t think of the answer to a particular question just now, that’s fine, leave it to brew: it can come to you later on during play.
Dr Lomax

You are Dr Lomax, from the rival research group at the University of Edinburgh, and unconvinced about the work of Professor Sanchez. You would like to topple their image as a great, but don't want to appear mean-spirited. You are currently working on an article about their life and work, for a major journal.

Answer this question to yourself, and then tell the others:

- What is your gender?

Answer these questions to yourself, but don't tell the others:

- What is your opinion about the role of science and the scientist in society?

- How do you feel about your work?

- What do you feel is one’s duty towards telling the truth: is it absolute, or might it be contingent on circumstances?

- What is your current strongest emotional need?

You can write the answers down, if it’ll be helpful.

If you can’t think of the answer to a particular question just now, that’s fine, leave it to brew: it can come to you later on during play.
You are Sasha, formerly a junior working in the same research group as Professor Sanchez, and also their lover – secretly at the time, although it all came out after their disappearance. You want to know why they left you, but you don’t want your memories tarnished.

*Answer this question to yourself, and then tell the others:*

- What is your gender?

*Answer these questions to yourself, but don’t tell the others:*

- What is your opinion about the role of science and the scientist in society?

- How do you feel about your work?

- What do you feel is one’s duty towards telling the truth: is it absolute, or might it be contingent on circumstances?

- What is your current strongest emotional need?

You can write the answers down, if it’ll be helpful.

If you can’t think of the answer to a particular question just now, that’s fine, leave it to brew: it can come to you later on during play.
Captain Silva

You are Captain Silva, a Ministry scientist: responsible to the ultimate funders of Professor Sanchez's work. You want to get the experimental results, but for the Ministry not to be embarrassed... either by the results, or by whatever caused Professor Sanchez’s disappearance.

**Answer this question to yourself, and then tell the others:**

- What is your gender?

**Answer these questions to yourself, but don’t tell the others:**

- What is your opinion about the role of science and the scientist in society?

- How do you feel about your work?

- What do you feel is one’s duty towards telling the truth: is it absolute, or might it be contingent on circumstances?

- What is your current strongest emotional need?

You can write the answers down, if it’ll be helpful.

If you can’t think of the answer to a particular question just now, that’s fine, leave it to brew: it can come to you later on during play.
Diary Fragment 1

Feels good to be out here in the marshes, away from everything. Cry of a lonely curlew is my only company. Memories of when Cameron and I explored the dunes together... the sheer simple delight of discovery, each creature a fresh joy. What love there is in being a parent! I miss Cameron so.

Message from the Ministry... confirming funding for these measurement studies. What is their real agenda? If they are trying to cover up whatever went on out here in these marshes, I will have no part of it.

Cold out here, but the brandy warms me. I hope I have enough. Finding it hard to get through the day without it, these days. Kim doesn't help... all those questions. How about taking some responsibility for yourself, instead of always asking me for guidance? I won't be here forever. Hate to think what state the lab will be in by the time I get back.
Diary fragment 2

Wondering about how I will be remembered. Morbid, yes. But important! Will those fools from Edinburgh get to have their say? Always held a grudge, for some reason.

Hope Kim can exercise some control. Should really tell about my thing with Sasha... not good for morale, might suspect favouritism...

I cannot give up Sasha. Need the love. And need to be giving love. Should really say that... but don’t want to inflame hopes. Will lead to disappointment... sex is a duty for me now, rather than a pleasure.

What has happened to me? Is it the booze?

Fair exchange?
Diary fragment 3

This task is going on forever. Weather is foul. Brandy helps. Won't need it forever... think I have enough to last.

Ministry on my back again, but I can see their point. Valuable work, no-one else can do it properly. Hope I can get it finished in time.

Kim seems to be in top of things now. Safe hands? Will have to be.

Wish I could really talk to Cameron one last time. Something went wrong there... not sure what. My fault? Bad seed?

Hope what I have hasn't been inherited, anyway. Bad enough to have to die myself.

(There. said it now. Don't feel any different!)
Diary fragment 4

Whatever people want to say of me, after... that’s what they will say.

I’ve done my bit. Let Edinburgh fight over the bones, if they wish.

Science knows what science knows... that’s the beauty of it.

Best to not talk with Sasha again. Wouldn’t be fair. Give a chance for a new start without me.

(A lot of pain now. Feeling though that something... or Someone... is supporting me to reach the end. Never been religious, but... no atheists in foxholes, as they used to say.)

Cameron will have to stand on own feet... done all I can now.
Diary fragment 5

The last brick is in place. No-one can say I’ve not done my duty.

All five stations are in operation.

Weak now, but strong enough for what has to be done.

Some things are more important than individuals… science, faith, trust, love. Maybe more.

Tunnel vision makes everything look tinged by a black sun.

The curlew is still lonely. Perhaps prefers it that way.

After finishing this I will into the marsh, following that sad sacred cry.

And that will be the end of something, and the beginning of something else.