



Still

Cats

Still Cats
a larp by Karolina Soltys

*inspired by Still Life
by Wendy Gorman, David Hertz and Heather Silsbee*

Introduction

This is a larp about pondering deep philosophical questions... or not. You could just think about the small red dot. After all, you're a cat. Well, you might also be a human, but then you'll be too busy herding cats in the name of capitalism to think about philosophy.

The larp supports two tones of play, one of which can be decided on before the game: a more lighthearted tone, where the cats seek answers to questions like "How to capture the little humans inside the TV?", and a more serious tone, where the cats discuss topics like illness, bereavement, bullying or trust issues (which somehow feel even sadder when seen from the perspective of innocent animals).

Still Cats is heavily inspired by Still Life, one of the winners of Golden Cobra 2014 – the rocks are replaced by very sleepy cats, which also changes the nature of the philosophical questions they're asking themselves and each other.

The larp is intended for 4-15 players and should take 1.5-2 hours, including a short workshop.

Setting

You are 1-3 humans and 3-12 cats at a photoshoot for an advertising campaign of a certain Product – it's something completely unrelated to cats, but the marketing department of the company decided that cats would be the perfect way to advertise it.

The photographer, the owner of the cats and the company representative are doing their best to herd the cats and keep them still long enough to line up the perfect shot. Luckily, it's the cats' naptime, so they're too busy ~~dozing~~ pondering deep philosophical thoughts to object much to being carried around.

This is actually the first time this new Product has ever been in the same space as a cat, and it turns out that there's some unexpected chemical interaction between it and cat pheromones, which means that prolonged contact with it will lead to subtle psychological effects on the humans. They will start questioning their life choices, become slightly more open to each other than they would normally be with strangers in a professional setting, and even briefly be able to understand and speak cat language!

Practicalities

The larp can be played outdoors or in a large room. The players can wear face masks; the ones playing cats can even consider drawing cat whiskers on disposable face masks.

You will need some objects to represent the Product. If you happen to have cat toys, scatter them around (any real cats present in the space are welcome to join the larp as well), but if not, some scrunched up paper balls and cardboard boxes will do. You can use e.g. popcorn to represent cat treats. You will also need masking tape or something else to create name badges.

Safety

The players are encouraged to say "off-game" if they want to make a request or calibrate anything, at any point during the larp. (E.g. "Off-game, I don't want to discuss bereavement. Let's change the subject of the conversation."). It is also fine to leave the larp at any point.

The larp involves some non-violent, non-sexual touch (carrying a cat from one place to another, chin scratches, lazily swiping your paw at another cat, etc.). The suggested baseline is anywhere outside of people's erogenous zones, but you can agree on a stricter boundary (e.g. only arms).

The setting is a photoshoot – you should decide if you'll actually be taking photos, and if so, agree on some kind of policy for sharing them (e.g. first share them privately, and only share them publicly with the consent of everyone visible).

Workshop

First, you should jointly decide on the intended tone of the larp – should it be silly and lighthearted, or more serious and philosophical? Briefly discuss if there are any topics you'd like to avoid, and agree on a baseline for physical touch and photo policy.

You should decide together what the Product is, perhaps incorporating some previous Golden Cobra ingredients, e.g.: contact lens solution, toy dinosaurs, Halloween eyeball candy, celebrity body pillows, fanny packs, chests of drawers, etc.

Everyone should decide if they want to play a cat or a human. Depending on the number of players, there should be:

- 4 players: 1 human (Photographer), 3 cats.
- 5 players: 2 humans (Photographer, Cat Parent), 3 cats.
- 6 players: 2 humans (Photographer, Cat Parent), 4 cats.
- 7-15 players: 3 humans (Photographer, Cat Parent, Company Representative), 4-12 cats.

If you have decided to play the lighthearted version, the players of the cats should choose one of the lighthearted questions each. For a serious game, they should choose from the serious questions instead. For a longer serious game, each cat player should select one serious and one lighthearted question.

They should also choose a name and appearance (colour and length of their coat, breed, any distinguishing traits), and write that name on a name tag (this will represent the name on their collar).

In the meantime, the players playing humans choose their characters, and decide which of the questions will be the defining one for them (only pick one, the other ones will become irrelevant). They should also pick names for their characters and create name badges.

Everyone should now stand in a circle and briefly introduce their character. The cats should then do 3 line-ups: status, how recently have you been adopted, who is the cat parent's most and least favourite.

Then, the cats should stand in a circle, and establish a simple relationship with the players on their left and on their right (e.g. "we often compete for the same patch of sunlight", or "we are siblings and like spending time together").

While this is happening, the humans should discuss their relationships. By default, they are strangers, but if you find it more interesting, you can make them siblings, exes, etc.

This is a good time for a bathroom break. The Cat Parent might also want to quickly discuss some relationships with the cats. When you're ready, set a timer for how long you want to play (1-2h) and spread around the room. The cats should sit or lie down.

Playing the larp

The gameplay is very similar to that of Still Life. Each character has a philosophical question they are trying to find an answer to, either through introspection or talking to other characters.

By default, the cats move only if humans move them – they're very sleepy! Feel free to occasionally get the zoomies and run around for 15 seconds, or pounce on a toy just as the photographer was about to take the perfect photo. However, the atmosphere should be predominantly sleepy and static – you mostly sit or lie in one place and talk to other cats nearby, or stay silent.

The humans can move around. In principle they're all co-operating to make this photoshoot successful – moving cats into aesthetically pleasing configurations to emphasise the most positive qualities of the Product. However, the weird atmosphere on the set (the Product reacting with cat pheromones...) makes them more likely to question their lives, open up to each other and have personal conversations.

The cats understand each other, and partially understand humans (in any way that is dramatically interesting). They can try to talk to humans, but the humans will most of the time interpret it as meowing. However, the weird atmosphere on the set will occasionally enable each human to understand feline speech for a few minutes. You can decide when it happens. Your character might freak out and want to hide this from the other humans, but they can also be open-minded about this new experience.

If you think that your character has found a satisfying answer to their question, you can stand up and say "I found an answer". The other players should fall silent and listen to you as you briefly explain what your question was and what conclusion you reached, after which you should sit down. If you want, you can then come up with another question your character would now be asking themselves, or just focus on helping other characters reach their answers.

Ending the larp

When the timer rings, everyone gets a chance to say a short epilogue for their character.

I would like to thank David Owen for proofreading. Cover image is public domain, taken from PxHere.

Appendix: Characters

Photographer

- You became a photographer to create world-changing art, not to shoot advertising campaigns. Have you compromised yourself for money? Will you ever be able to create true art?
- You're at the very start of your career and it's your first job. You really need to prove yourself. Are you good enough?
- You decided to quit photography starting tomorrow and move on to a completely different life. This is your last commission, and you want to make it memorable. Are you having second thoughts about your decision?
- You're always observing from behind a camera lens, sometimes admiring, sometimes judging, but never connecting. Are you even capable of connection?
- In your personal life, you're lonely. Do you want to adopt one of these cats? Do you want to befriend any of these humans?

Cat Parent

- Are you surrounding yourself with cats to mask your loneliness because you don't get along with humans? Can you form a connection with any of the other humans here?
- You're seriously dating someone who turned out to be very allergic to cats. Should you even be considering having a future with them?
- Your financial situation has deteriorated, and you're worried you'll need to give up some of your cats. Is there anything you can do?
- Do you have too many cats? Has it become problematic?
- You wish you could help so many more cats, but you know your limitations. How do you cope with it?

Company Representative

- You're the owner of this very small business, and this is your first product. Your livelihood depends on the success of this campaign. Will your dream come true?
- You hate this job, and are thinking about quitting. But what would you do next?
- Your workaholicism prevented you from forming important personal relationships. Can you change it now?
- This job is alright. Everything in your life is alright. Just alright. You sometimes feel bored and grey. Is there anything you could care about? Anything you could do to make it more exciting? But would it be worth the risk of losing what you currently have?
- In your personal life, you're lonely. Do you want to adopt one of these cats? Do you want to befriend any of these humans?

Cats: lighthearted questions:

- How to capture the little humans inside the TV?
- Where do humans disappear to when they leave through the front door?
- What REALLY is the small red dot, and can it be killed?
- Why can't humans understand cat language?
- Why do I feel so compelled to sit in boxes?
- How many belly rubs is one too many?
- How to open food cans without needing a human?
- How to achieve world dominance?
- What act of creative destruction should I perform next?
- What is the best way of manipulating humans?
- Who is that mysterious cat in the mirror?
- Where does my tail go when I chase it?

Cats: serious questions:

- Until recently, you lived in a different house with a kind older human, whom you dearly loved. But now you're here, in this new place with a strange new human and lots of other cats! What happened to your previous human? When will they come back for you?
- Other cats call you the "runt of the litter" and are sometimes mean to you, but so far you've been backing off from any conflict. How can you stand up for yourself?
- You recently got adopted from an overcrowded cat shelter, and left there a lot of friends and frenemies. Why were you the one to get chosen, and what will happen to the others?
- A cat you were good friends with got taken to the vet recently, and never came back. You really miss them. What happened to them, and when will they be back?
- Over the past few years, you've gotten frailer, your eyes grew dim and your reflexes aren't what they used to be. What is happening to you? Is it going to get worse?
- Your previous owner was abusive. Why is there such cruelty in the world? And can you trust this new human?
- You are a pedigree cat who led a pampered life and participated in cat fancy competitions. But you failed to win the main prize, and now you're here with all these other cats, eating much less fancy cat food, and nobody respects you the way you are used to. Why did you fall from grace?
- You used to be a feral cat, and you still remember that life in all its upsides and downsides. Do you miss it? Should you run away?
- You got taken to a vet recently, which was really scary and painful. You still have flashbacks of that experience, and lost all trust in your human. Can you ever trust them again?
- Before you came here, you lived in many different places, with many different families, never longer than a few months. You've learnt not to get too attached to anyone or anything. Is there something wrong with you that makes people give you away so quickly?
- A few months ago your human gave you some new treats (or catnip), and this experience completely changed you. You feel compelled to piteously beg for them whenever your human is near where they're stored, and you keep longing for them much more often than you'd like. Is this healthy? Can you get back to your old self, not obsessed with those treats?
- You remember a time when there was just your human and you, no other cats. You had your human's full attention, and didn't need to share your space with the others. Is there anything you can do to return to that blissful situation? Did you do anything wrong to lose your human's love?

Example cat names: Whiskers, Mittens, Misty, Skye, Hello, Kiko, Loki, Poppet, Chablis, Tuppence, Gravity, Spike, Chesterfield, Baba Ganoush III, Gooseberry, Supermeow, Duke Ginger, Princess Snow.