

The Modules: A Black Box Organizational LARP

An Introduction and Field Notes

Introduction By: Black Swan (Laura Lotti & Calum Bowden)

Field Notes By: Ellie Rennie (The Ethnographer) & Kola Heyward-Rotimi (The Historian)

Note: This is a preview of a larger writeup on The Modules that is awaiting publication.



Introduction

What are the varied affordances of and differences between the governance of software platforms, online communities, and local on the ground collectives? How do decision making processes adapt and mutate according to the task at hand? What strategies are best suited for managing meta coordination and complex decision-making contexts?

To begin to answer these questions, Black Swan devised a role-playing game called [The Modules](#), which was performed at Dweb Camp, 2022. The Modules creates a framework for designing and worlding organizational forms according to a set of modules inspired by Metagov's article on [Modular Politics](#), to examine varied approaches to onboarding, decision-making, communication, and ownership. *The Modules* revealed important insights into 'real-world' economics and organizational dynamics that we hope will inform the design and worlding of tools for coordination. Some of these insights include:

- organizations may manipulate their boundaries to gain advantage ,
- worldbuilding is a coordination challenge,
- pluralism will not bend to an externally imposed homogenous approach even if intended to produce unity,
- the devil is in the detail of governance mechanism design, and
- groups that minimize decision-making whilst building a shared identity or interest can easily attract members but are also easy to dismantle.

This text serves as an introduction to the game and our initial findings from the Dweb Camp iteration.

Setting the scene

The setting for the game was a fictional place called Fornica which is experiencing increased scarcity of the once abundant phi, an allegory for the ongoing California drought (inspired by the theme of Dweb Camp). We used fiction to abstract away from the here and now and to allow players to co-create the meaning of the different elements of the world and their organizations, and the particular form of the resources there.

Players learned about Fornica in a letter inviting orgs to help the administration learn about new approaches to dealing with the phi crisis:

The strip between the ocean and the mountains holds the largest torrent of phi in the Fornica region. It arises near the lower slopes in the north and runs hundreds miles south, draining the upper valley, bending through the city, and eventually, flowing into the ocean. Most phi falls in the north, while its biggest users are in the south. During the past century and a half, the townspeople of the north, the urbanites of the south and schemers of all kinds have worked together and against one another to create one of the most complex phi systems in the world. The abundance of phi made Fonica rich with life and opportunity, and has kept the region settled since the beginning of time. On the backbone of this abundance, the institutions of Fonica were built. Without phi, nothing could exist as it exists now.

We, the Administration of Fornica, having long studied the movement of phi to manage its flow and distribution, now find a shockingly low level. Phi has almost disappeared, after decades of unsustainable use. Everyone in Fornica has phi on the mind and questions what to do with the resources that remain. As liquidity dries up, traces of modules, mechanics and lore are emerging in the sand.

Unable to determine the path forward, we are calling upon orgs residing in Fornica to perform a speed run through varied strategies for re-distributing phi. You are invited to play the Game of the Modules, in which Local Org, Online Community, and Platform must work together or apart to monopolize or balance the phi that remains. In the recesses of the flow, disparate people gather around the Game of the Modules, divinating their world back into existence.

The Flow and The Orgs

The Modules is devised over two sessions. In a preparatory workshop, participants contribute their knowledge to co-design different organizations, and their characters and roles within them, based on archetypes pulled at random. Together the participants create a world and the social relationships within it from a starting framework that includes a short narrative introduction, descriptions of organization and roles. Placeholder archetypes provide loose parameters for worlding, to maximize the generative potential of the starting framework. The goal is to create the conditions for players to build an exquisite corpse and to contribute their own knowledge and creativity to the contours of the world. On top of this base layer, various games can be developed and played to speed-run and simulate social formations and resource distribution strategies.

The Platform

Has: **Data**
Needs: **Space, Affect**
Starting Resources: **3 Phi, 3 Data**



The Platform glowed in its freedom, openness and resourcefulness, when phi was flowing abundant. It was a key piece of invisible infrastructure that was holding together the fates of Fornica. Contributors eagerly forked and cloned it, participated in discussions, opened issues and submitted code. But Maintainers and Committers were burnt out. As phi dried up, in a desperate attempt to find liquidity, The Platform Committers made a radical decision to act against their established values. They did an ICO in an effort to raise development funds and are now at the whims of whales and token holders, with the results that Contributors are prevented from modifying the code of their beloved infrastructure because of the slowness of the governance process itself. What once held together the fates of Fornica in freedom and openness, is quickly being enclosed and sold to the highest bidder. But the work must go on. After finally taking a break, Maintainers and Committers are reanimating the repos and forum discussions that remain with renewed energy. Meanwhile Token holders keep advancing their own agenda, even though their goals remain unclear. With whispers of a fork in the air, there is optimism that their work can bring the return of phi's abundance.

The Online Community

Has: **Affect**
Needs: **Space, Data**
Starting Resources: **3 Phi, 3 Affect**



The Online Community operates in the shadowy corners of the internet, tucked away from the panoptical gaze of the Platform. It's a place of enthusiastic knowledge sharing and cheerful shitposting, even though its Members are overspun in the rat race to afford enough phi to survive. Mods keep the ship operating smoothly, structure member interactions and help to make sense of the endless outpour of information. If you blink you'll miss the next soon to be forgotten micro-trend. No money has ever been involved but the value generated in the multiple ever-forking threads was immense to them. They lack physical Space for encounters but the digital locality they inhabit is an ever expanding mini-verse to explore. As phi is running low, the Online Community has to refine its Purpose and redraw its social graph to understand its essence.

The Local Org

Has: Space
Needs: Affect, Data
Starting Resources: 3 Phi, 3 Space



The Local Org still resides in the hills where it's always been, even though its members have come and gone with the seasons. Things in that particular nook of town seem to get more and more expensive and the Neighbors richer and richer. Neighbors simply call these hills home, while Citizens have more influence in swaying public opinion their way. When phi was flowing, the Guardians used to maintain the Rule of Order. But the Space that the Local Org had then, and still has, could be used by anyone - abundance reigned! Now limited phi supplies have scattered decades of the Local Org's records and archive to the void, what used to be meticulously kept updated in big binders in their office. While Local Org has lost some of its memory of what it used to be and how it used to operate, it still has an abundance of Space and People Power. Now it has to figure out how to best accommodate the desires of Citizens and Neighbors and find enough phi to satisfy all.

At Dweb Camp, we played a game based loosely on Capture the Flag and Nomic, a game about changing the rules of play through different mechanisms. Each organization – called *orgs* in the language of the world – managed a balance of a fictional currency called *phi*. They were instructed by the Administration (Black Swan's facilitators) to create a sustainable strategy for their treasury, and to explore their own cultural economics by navigating the other players. At the midpoint of the game, the orgs had the opportunity to change the rules of play by submitting proposals and voting. We invited two researchers – The Ethnographer and The Historian – to enter the world to capture and narrate the unfolding experience from the perspectives of their characters, with no predetermined script to follow beyond what their archetypes implied. Here is a snippet from their speculative fiction write-up:

Excerpt from Field Notes

The Ethnographer Note #1: Arrival

Today we arrived in Fornica, a region of planet D. The environment is dry and the temperature still holds the coolness of the night before. Tall trees lift our gaze upwards. These giants cannot communicate their plight to other species or to us, yet folklore says that once the inhabitants of Fornica held such a connection, gathering intelligence from non-human lifeforms. We observe various shelters – some crude and temporary, others permanent infrastructures built from fallen trees.

We introduce ourselves to each other by our roles, he The Historian and I The Ethnographer. We have not met before now yet we must devise our own approach to the task at hand. Our mission is to observe whether the peoples of Fornica can survive through a time of crisis, and whether they will choose violence or cooperation in the process. The only instruction we are given is to live among the Fornicans and produce a document for the decentralized scientific agency, Metagov. As the three peoples of Fornica are located in different regions, we will not be able to experience all three at once, but we may move between them to the extent they allow us to do so.

Up until now the Fornicans have been living the same as the other inhabitants of planet D, in a situation characterized by abundant resources and a benign external authority, known as The Administration. Now this peaceful condition is under threat. The Historian and I reviewed the dispatch we were sent by The Administration prior to our arrival:

The strip between the ocean and the mountains holds the largest torrent of phi in the Fornica region. It arises near the lower slopes in the north and runs hundreds miles south, draining the upper valley, bending through the city, and eventually, flowing into the ocean. The abundance of phi made Fornica rich with life and opportunity, and has kept the region settled since the beginning of time. On the backbone of this abundance, the institutions of Fornica were built. Without phi, nothing could exist as it exists now.

The Administration of Fornica, having long studied the movement of phi to manage its flow and distribution, now reports a shockingly low level.

There are two Administrators of the Fornica region, both other-worlders from an interplanetary network called Black Swan. Like us, they have longer life spans than Fornica's peoples; an Administrator's term spans eons to the people of Fornica. Unable to determine the best path forward, The Administration is calling on those residing in Fornica to devise their own strategies for re-distributing phi.

The Fornicans accept Black Swan with a resignation infused with suspicion - their distrust kept in check only through powerlessness. The Fornicans know that The Administrators have the ability to see across long term horizons and that they may change the rules of Fornica in fundamental ways that may not serve the region's current inhabitants.

Yet as we enter this field site we see immediately that The Administrators, for all their power, do not influence the on-the-ground happenings or the spirit of Fornica. The Administrators seem bound by process. Notably, the dispatch tells us nothing of the people who live beyond the Fornica region on planet D. My intuition tells me that at least some Fornicans have social or relational ties that stretch beyond their boundaries. While the Fornicans remain subordinate to the Administration, their cultures, rebellions and creative productivity confound the Administrators. Fornicans, for all their shortcomings, are highly intelligent.

The Historian's Note #1

There is always a fear that walks beside me, a fear with a soul of variable strength. When that soul is at its weakest, it may sometimes allow me to forget the fear's presence. On our descent to Fornica, the soul has found its rhythm, and it becomes a sheen to the world. It is an echo of my frayed nerves. My research partner seems much more composed. She's a silent figure who goes solely by The Ethnographer. We don't have time or space to understand what might have brought the two of us here, to approach such daunting work on planet D--because by the time we've been introduced, our starship has descended to the surface in a cloud of fire, dust, and the all-encompassing roar of our engines.

The Ethnographer and I have gone separate ways for the most part. There is too much ground to cover in Fornica. This place is rapidly unveiling itself to me as a confusion of people trying to remember what they once were, and how they can handle the weight of that past while still constrained by their precious phi. One of the last moments I have with The Ethnographer is at the landing dock. She has made contact with a welcoming party from a defunct online organization, and they are eager to fold her into their ranks. I trust her to not fall for their cloying interest. But it doesn't make our parting any less unpredictable, unsure. I have a feeling that while she may not come to believe, she will at the very least be absorbed by these people's fever dreams, their white outfits, and the murmurs they swap among themselves like a river's unending gurgle. We have a final debrief before taking our own paths, and when she leaves, my fear takes her place.

As for where I find myself on this godforsaken planet? I have been drifting towards the remains of an online platform. My gradual focus on this organization is not due to any particular reason other than mere proximity--my landing site allowed me easier access to the platform's half-powered office spaces. Despite their calcified infrastructure, incapable of running at full capacity since the "ICO" debacle, the new leadership of this platform refuses to separate from the remains of the previous administration. The core tenets of their failed society ring through the new guard. They believe in the love for cultural capital that drove their forebears to the brink. To fetishize your past is to find pleasure in avoidable mistakes, and yet they don't find this to be of much concern.

In a boardroom graced with dying fluorescents, the core leadership has come to uplift each other in new myths. They hunger for a return to form. In an appeal to the lost utopias of their ancestors, each member has come to the table with a hunger to spread across the region. One of them is so bold as to claim that “there is no platform, there’s just people.” They might not have the matching uniforms like the fanatics that The Ethnographer is studying, but they are just as willing to live with delusions.

The Ethnographer Note #2: The formation of The Individual

After the gathering at which the Administrators informed the people of Fornica that phi is running out, I must choose one group to observe. I have no prior knowledge of those who dwell in Fornica so I travel to the closest group, who the Administrators refer to as Online. There were eight souls in this nation when I arrived. One was dressed in a white jumpsuit with beads, another had white sunglasses, yet otherwise they appeared no different to the peoples of the two nearby nations.

The Administrators have identified opportunities to overcome scarcity, yet these require a degree of effort and coordination that the Fornicans do not yet possess. The circumstances therefore dictate that this nation, like the other two, must decide how they will proceed – whether to form rules or remain lawless. Although the nation has no institutions of its own, it does possess three principles or beliefs that were handed down to them: The Individual, Freedom and Ownership. On learning of these principles, I assume the nation will develop as a market-based society. My readings on political histories suggest that societies with these principles will establish basic individual liberties to be protected over community or group rights. Proponents of this model argue that everyone would consent to basic liberties if society were organized from scratch – the very circumstance I am witnessing here at Fornica.

The Online nation, however, does not contemplate such a path. The Individual, in their new outlook, is a deity. The Individual is against borders, meaning that there is no other acceptable way of living – you are either one with The Individual or you are ‘confused’. When you become one with The Individual you become free. Ownership is also tied to The Individual, which means resources are owned by The Individual and distributed to its worshippers.

“What are the Individual’s pronouns?” someone asks. f

Another replies, “we/us” and they all agree (“eye, eye, eye, eye”).

During the formation of this messianic political system, some within the group are louder than others, but there is consensus on the direction forward. They become close through this process, absorbed in their task, determined to endure. The Individual has decided to prioritize their community bonds over complex institutional structures, which would require careful planning. Those who seem hesitant go along with it because choosing otherwise would result in social exclusion, if not outright banishment.

“You are joining The Individual”, the one wearing the white jumpsuit says to me. I assert that I am not, that I am here to observe. He replies that time will tell.

The Historian’s Note #2

We came to Fornica with a modest set of supplies and transport, meaning that long distance travel between the different civilizations in the valley requires foresight and more bravery than I would prefer. The difficulty of travel coupled with the rapid political development of the reborn ICO made it advantageous for me to stick around the dilapidated office blocks. If I were to take a trip from these halls, it would be for the briefest stretches of days, only long enough for me to gain a snapshot of development in other societies in relation to my own. I hesitate to craft a history that defines itself in the contrast of other lands, though I feel I am left with little choice. My adopted home has rebranded itself, going by the name of Borderless, and it is becoming my frame of reference for how people live on Planet D.

In their struggle to find stable footing, Borderless has tangled itself within layers of decision management policies and modular chains of command that I can barely keep track of. They work to refine these methods in such a fervor that it could be read as frustration with the very constraints they made. It points to boardroom tradition, a space that feigns negotiation through value sets spoken, written, and felt in the silences. Despite all of their internal restructuring, they can only approach the tenets from their old ICO attempt with a reverence I see as immature. They preach for a unity across the

valley—an exit from the restraints of traditional borders in favor of the utopian vision they yearn to bring to life. And yet, Borderless struggles to maintain acceptable living standards in its own society. Dreams are lovely since they don't run on phi, though that makes them next to worthless.

During one discussion around the meeting table, the lights sunk from an occasional flicker to complete death. The ensuing agitation from the board members provided a veil of anonymity for myself. I was permitted to stay in the corner while emotions rose under the spell of dark. A member who had been chugging through a speech on the proper form of sortition rose from her seat. She hovered above the table surface, hands planted against the prefab oak.

"We can't even speak properly to each other in these conditions. Don't lie to yourselves...To live like this is beyond shameful. Is phi truly the goal, or an outdated resource we use to keep the electricity on, despite there being much better alternatives? Do we need it?"

The bickering and recursive topics of debate came back in full force, though the board member's outburst was tapping into a reality so fundamental to Borderless's continued existence, that the question of degrowth from phi was the new main problem. It was uncontested as the issue to tackle, even if everyone had a conflicting approach to achieve it.

I attempted to speak with The Ethnographer on this through a local telecommunications device, though she seemed preoccupied. Whenever I spoke to her, The Individual's chants bled in. It was a surprise how quickly they made ritual from chaos. Their ways were incomprehensible, yet they followed an ebb and flow that was quick to lead you in trance. I worried about how this may affect The Ethnographer. I worried about how the memories of The Individual's chants kept me occupied till late at night, as I tried to ground them in rationality.

There was a third group that caught my attention. A murky coalition of transhumanists living beyond the exposed highways shared by Borderless and The Individual. I caught glimpses of their prayer to the local vegetation through video files scattered across some of Borderless's forgotten servers. I believe they go by the Root. With The Ethnographer caught in The Individual's machinations, and the difficulties I faced through travel, we were incapable of learning much about this small civilization during our first few weeks in Fornica. Their tech echoed some of the design legacies I noticed in The Individual's camps. Ornate, twined metal that twisted about their computers. A constant appeal to biological patterns—curves over angles. There was a story between the two societies that I had yet to uncover.