

Behind the Curtain: GM Guide

Behind the Curtain is a nontransparent Nordic larp for 5-10 players led by a game master (GM) playing an active NPC (the Madam). The GM keeps time, manages the conversation by removing players from the game space at their will, and provides additional information throughout the course of the game. The game lasts around five hours including workshops and preparation.

This document is for the GM's eyes only (you!) and should not be shared with/read by players before the game. Please read through this document in full prior to running this larp and ensure you have easy access to it during the larp for reference.

Practical

Props and Resources

Several documents have been prepared and are required for this game:

GM Guide (this document)	For the GM's eyes only All information and guidance required for preparing and running the game including location, casting, workshops, and gameplay
Player Guide	For GM and Players All information and guidance required for playing the game from a player perspective including setting, safety, costume, and public character information (pre-casting)
Character Sheets (11)	For GM and Players (see Casting below) Player sheets contain expanded, nontransparent information for each of the 10 characters including an overview, relationships, and what they want for the future; the Madam's sheet is less detailed
GM Cheat Sheet	For the GM's eyes only A useful reference for the GM to screen client cards for specific player triggers before the game and also keep track of character names, genders, etc. during the game
Cards	For GM and limited Players (see Clients below) Contains date information for all clients and questions for players to consider while off-game on a date, pre-formatted to print as standard playing cards (or view/display during the game)

We love the environment! Please avoid printing things unless you really need to.

To play this game, you will need to prepare the following:

- EITHER a deck of 52 playing cards and a device capable of sharing the **Client** cards from **Cards** OR printed versions of these
- EITHER the information from the **Your Date** card from **Cards** posted publicly OR several printed versions available in the off-game room
- EITHER a way of sharing **Character Sheets** with the cast players digitally OR printed copies of these
- EITHER a device capable of viewing this document in-game OR a printed copy of it
- A way of playing music and start and end music queued up
- A clock for the off-game room
- Tape and markers or name tags for everyone
- Optional: a printed copy of the **Player Guide**
- Optional setting props: coffee maker/kettle, snacks, nail polish, makeup, paperback novels, magazines, small gifts or tokens (jewelry, single flowers, perfume, NEW underwear, etc.) to be handed over to a companion if it fits with their client

Location

The game takes place in a single, shared space – a brothel's back room. You will also need direct access to an off-game room for players to wait when their characters are called out to meet with clients or to try to tempt in new ones. The off-game room should be darkened and players should remain quiet when waiting there unless calibration is required.

The in-game room is an in-between space. This room is not decorated like the rest of the brothel would be and contains anything and everything appropriate for a staff back room. Some suggestions:

- A large hotel room or suite that may have seen better days (the off-game room would be in an adjoining room with curtains drawn and lights out)
- A storage room with enough space for 10 people to sit or perch on boxes, stools, etc., and a coffee machine and microwave in the corner
- An un- or underfurnished room with a ring of folding chairs and some snacks on a table against the wall

Play muffled background music: something nondescript with thumping bass, not too loud (like it's bleeding in from front-of-house).

Make sure you as the Madam have somewhere comfortable to sit somewhat off to the side and with easy access to the off-game room. Settle yourself at a small table in front of a laptop "doing the books" or playing solitaire, yourself just passing the time until the next client appears.

Ensure that the off-game room also has plenty of places for the players to sit, as they will be waiting there for 5 minutes at a time. An adjoining room or hallway works well for this if you can ensure it will remain separate (use a door or curtain to physically separate the rooms). Provide a large clock so players can keep time of how long they've been out of game as well as **Your Date** cards or posted information (see **Cards**).

Casting

This game is for ideally 10 players but may be played with as few as 5. No matter how many players you have, ensure that your game includes *the Brown-noser* and either both *the Sweetheart* and *the Flamboyant* or neither one. For runs with less than 10 players, the following character constellations are recommended:

Companion	5 players	6 players	7 players	8 players	9 players
The Happy Hooker	x	x	x	x	x
The Brown-noser	x	x	x	x	x
The Miserable Wretch		x	x	x	x
The Practical	x			x	x
The Responsible			x		
The Apple Doesn't Fall Far				x	x
The Girlfriend	x				x
The Sweetheart		x	x	x	x
The Flamboyant		x	x	x	x
The Investor	x	x	x	x	x

Advance casting is not required, but ask all participants to read the **Player Guide** and choose 2 preferred characters before coming to the game. Simply cast per the player's preferences, then provide the printed **Character Sheet** or access to the virtual one before the pre-game workshop.

Although secrecy is not a major component of the game, this is a nontransparent larp and all characters have private thoughts that should come out during gameplay, so only share each character sheet with the player cast.

Damage Control

You have a responsibility to enable a safe and satisfying experience for everyone as much as possible, so if a player comes to you before the game to ask that a topic they aren't comfortable playing on doesn't come up in-game, you need to either

- Ensure that topic will not come up in-game: review the client cards (see **GM Cheat Sheet**) and **Character Sheets** to check that it does not/make changes as necessary and make a note to tell everyone (without sharing which player came to you!) that the topic is off-limits during the pre-game workshop (point 1d).

- If the topic may or definitely will come up in-game, be honest with them about what they can expect so they can make an informed decision about whether or not to participate. Accept that not every game is for every player (and vice-versa).

In all cases, remember that the player wanted to play enough to get to this point and so may be quite disappointed if it's not possible to avoid the topic. No matter what happens, be sure to thank them for being honest with you.

Gameplay

The game is preceded by pre-game workshops (ca. 1 hour) and followed by a post-game debrief (max 1 hour). The game itself flows freely over up to three hours culminating in the Madam's announcement about the future of the Gilded Lily and the players' reactions to it.

Pre-game Workshop

Have everyone assemble in the in-game room to set expectations and get into character. Go through the following points with the players (text highlighted red should simply be read aloud):

1. Explain the game mechanics, rules, and schedule – ca. 20 minutes
 - a. Behind the Curtain is a nontransparent Nordic larp for 5-10 players depicting companions (sex workers in a brothel) and led by a GM playing the Madam, an NPC. The GM keeps time, manages the conversation by removing players from the game space at their will, and provides additional information throughout the course of the game.

This is a larp with a lot of sensitive themes and we want to address them respectfully off-game so that we are able to freely play on them in-game. The pre-game workshop is quite long with a lot of reading aloud for the GM, so we will take breaks when we need to.

- b. Inform them of the schedule:
Pre-game workshops (ca. 1 hour)
The game runs (ca. 2-3 hours depending on number of players)
Post-game debrief (ca. 1 hour)

Damage Control

If your players trample your schedule into oblivion during the game, be flexible. If players seem to still have unexposed secrets or drama with each other towards the end of the game, announce that you'll tell them your decision in only x minutes so they have a reminder that the climax and end of the game is coming up. If play seems slow, you might draw more Client cards to mix things up or consider ending the game a little early. The format is intentionally flexible to allow players to drive the game.

- c. Read the **Setting** section in the **Player Guide**.
- d. Read the **Safety and Triggers** section in the **Player Guide**.
- e. The game commences with all players in the off-game room with the song Lady Marmalade by Patti LaBelle (alternatively: Roxanne by The Police). After the song is over, players will enter the in-game room one or two at a time (in no particular order) in character and start playing.

The game concludes with the song Private Dancer by Tina Turner (alternatively: Killer Queen by Queen); when the song begins, finish up your conversations and wait quietly until it is over.

OPTIONAL: There will also be low, muffled music playing during the game as well, but the commencement and closing songs will be played clearly.

- f. Show and explain the differences between the in- and off-game rooms in your location. The in-game room is an isolated break room in the back of the Gilded Lily. In the off-game room, players wait while characters are on “dates” with clients (in a private room with them and presumably having some kind of sex). The player will be prompted to decide what exactly happened during their date and, upon their return, will play on this (or not) as they choose. The off-game space is also where players will go if they need a break or to align off-game. Diegetically, the character is just getting some fresh air and maybe trying to attract some more business.

For much of the game, there will be multiple companions outside the game room at the same time; please do not speak to one another there except for safety reasons or to calibrate what happened on a mutual date.

- g. Throughout the game, the Madam will randomly select clients and choose who will participate in a date with them. Companions might threaten to refuse a date or fight with the Madam about seeing a particular client, but they can’t outright refuse to go (or the Madam will fire them, and everyone knows it). Of course, as a player, you can always opt out of a date by using the safeword “red stop”; it is recommended but not required that you then go out front to get some air. In this case, be sure to check on the player while they are off-game to align and see if they need additional support.

Dates may be for a single companion or for two or more; for a single client, a couple, or a group like a bachelor party. There are many different combinations and some clients have kinks or preferences you can use to play on after your return. Some will be forceful or intimidating. Some may be quite generous or kind. You decide how much you want to play on these topics after your return.

When assigning a date, the Madam will provide the companion(s) with information about the client(s) and the companion(s) will move to the off-game room to workshop what happened with the help of questions prompting you to think about how your date went. An agreement among all companions as to what happened during the date is required for duo or group dates (those with multiple companions). After about 5 minutes or when you feel ready, return to the in-game room in character.

If you want more drama, the Madam is here for you! Ask me to join you briefly out front to align on drama and we'll discuss off-game what you're looking for. This is perfect if a date goes bad and you call the bodyguard or a client has complained about you or recognized you (or you've recognized them) from your normal life.

Client cards contain three sections:

- "Client" is how the client first appears to the Madam and may include information on appearance or the request made
- "Companion" is the client's preference, as interpreted by the Madam
- "Date" is additional information for the companion only on what happened behind closed doors

Choose a couple of Client cards at random and share them with the players so they know what to expect.

h. Answer any open questions before proceeding.

2. Character introductions – ca. 20 minutes

Characters have been explicitly developed based on different stereotypes of sex workers in the western world. Once you get your sheet read it over, talk to me if you have questions or want to make changes, and think up a name, pronouns and gender, and sexuality for your character. There will be time later to align with each other.

If you have less than 10 players: your character sheets will include references to stereotypes that are not in the game; these are colleagues who aren't working this shift and you can talk and gossip about them freely in-game.

Cast players per their preferences and provide **Character Sheets**. When ready, everyone should introduce their characters over three quick rounds:

- a. Write your character's name and pronouns on a name tag and wear it throughout the game. Please introduce yourself with your character stereotype (e.g. the Happy Hooker) and state the name, pronouns and gender, and sexuality you've chosen for them. Start with yourself as the Madam. Note these in the **GM Cheat Sheet**, you will need this information for some dates.

- b. Repeat your character's name and share
 - How they got to the Gilded Lily (public information only)
 - Something that everyone knows about you
 - What opinion your character openly expresses about the Madam's retirement (this may not be what your character actually thinks about it)
 - c. Repeat your character's name and briefly share about a time they experienced shame or prejudice as a result of their job and how it made them feel. This is something you, the player, invent. Examples: microaggressions from a partner, being disowned by a parent or dumped by a friend, a doctor not taking you seriously, a stranger calling you a slut as you walk home from work.
3. Getting into character – 20 minutes
 - a. Find the person playing your character's closest **positive** relationship in the game. In pairs, discuss for up to 5 minutes what that relationship looks like and what your boundaries are (e.g. physical contact, any off-limit topics, or a direction you don't want your relationship to go).
 - b. Find the person playing your character's closest **negative** relationship in the game. In pairs, discuss for up to 5 minutes what that relationship looks like and what your boundaries are (e.g. physical contact, any off-limit topics, or a direction you don't want your relationship to go).
 - c. Last chance for questions before a final exercise and the game begins.
 - d. Read the following slowly, with at least a 30 second pause after each line:
Please find a seat, close your eyes, and explore the following in your own mind as your character.
 - How do you feel about your work? Are you proud, ashamed, or a bit of both?
 - Who outside of the Lily do you tell about your job? In how much detail?
 - Who in your personal life could seriously damage you if they knew about your job?
 - What information about your personal life could be fuel for a rival or bitter client at the Lily?
 - Are you more afraid of someone in your "real" life finding out about your work at the Lily, or about someone from the Lily (a client or colleague) finding out about your "real" life?
 - Please think about a particularly **positive** sexual experience you've had. How would you describe who you were with and what did you like about them?

- How did they feel to touch, how did they smell, what sounds did they make?
 - How did you feel afterwards?
 - Who did you tell about it, and what did you say?
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- Now think about a particularly **negative** sexual experience you've had. How would you describe who you were with and what made you feel uncomfortable or what did they do wrong or not at all?
 - How did they feel to touch, how did they smell, what sounds did they make?
 - How did you feel afterwards?
 - Who did you tell about it, and what did you say? Who did you never want to find out about it?

Now open your eyes and silently leave the in-game room. When the commencement song is over, re-enter in character: it is the start of your shift and you are just arriving at the Gilded Lily. Once all players have moved to the off-game room, play the commencement song to start the game.

In-game

The game commences with players entering the room after the commencement song has finished; leave them a few minutes to get adjusted before you start assigning clients. Although you'll be drawing Client cards throughout the game, choose the companions you send strategically to give all players the best drama.

If at any point throughout the game you notice that play does not seem to be flowing well or players do not seem to be having larp fun, change your client card strategy (drawing either more or fewer) or get involved as the Madam to ramp up drama. Depending on the kind of Madam you want to play (see **Character Sheets**), you can take the opportunity to berate, praise, or "accidentally" (passive-aggressively) hint at something. Keep the pressure on about what the Madam will do with the Lily by making comments about who the favorite is, praising a companion that their behavior is what makes a good Madam, or telling them they'll be lucky to be kept on after you sell to the highest bidder.

Damage Control

If a player drops out during the game, make an in-game excuse for their absence so that all characters know they are no longer available. You could say that the character wasn't feeling well and had to go home, they got fed up and quit, or they had an incident with a client and needed to take the rest of the shift off (or you fired them for it). Check in with the player later to see how they are and offer support if they are struggling with topics raised by the game.

If multiple players need to frequently step out of the game for safety reasons, consider either taking an off-game break and calibrating with all players or ending the game early. The safety and well-being of players is paramount!

Clients

The game revolves around the diegetic removal of players from the game space largely by assigning them to dates with clients. 52 clients have been prepared, each linked with a card from a standard deck of 52 playing cards (see **Cards**) for ease of random selection; before the game, ensure you have read through the list and replaced or removed any that are in conflict with player triggers. Clients are drawn at random and you as the Madam always have the ultimate say in who is assigned to the date (many clients have “preferred” companions or companion types, but you can always choose to assign someone else; the same is true if their preferred companion is already busy with another client). If you run out of cards, simply reshuffle and continue to draw at random.

Tip

Not all cards will be appropriate at all times, or the companion you want to give a client might be busy (or getting the lion’s share of dates). Skip clients that don’t feel right or put one or two to the side for later, as you please.

The Cards file is editable in case you need to make changes before or ad hoc during the game to make clients safe for your players and interesting for play. Don’t be shy about adapting them!

If using printed cards, simply give the assigned companion the card as they leave to the off-game room; ensure they bring it back afterwards in case you need to reshuffle the deck. If not using printed cards, let them read the information on the digital card as they leave to the off-game room.

Players should use the time off-game to decide if the date went well, if protection was used, if security had to be called, what generally happened during the date and – most importantly – how they felt afterwards. A series of questions for their reflection has been provided on a **Your Date** card in **Cards** and a few copies of this should be available in the off-game room. All information the players receive or invent themselves can be played on after they return to the game room as they choose. An agreement among all companions as to what happened during the date is required for duo or group dates (those with multiple companions).

In all cases, if a companion tells you in-game that they (or another companion) did not use protection, you can choose to make a scene out of it or not. Remind everyone of the importance of protection with a cautionary tale or publicly shout at, shame, and threaten to fire the offending companion depending on your Madam’s personality and how much they like the companion. Some great cautionary tales:

- The companion who got their brothel raided because they’d caused a syphilis outbreak. Everyone lost their jobs and several were arrested.
- The companion who’d gotten somebody pregnant and been forced to get a “reputable job” to make child support payments.
- The companion who’d gotten pregnant and suffered a complication during the abortion, resulting in infertility and chronic pain.

Tip

Keep the character dynamics balanced for each player by ensuring everyone gets about the same number of clients: four per character is a great number for the game.

Keep the individual character's game balanced by ensuring a variety of client types: break up several negative dates with a positive one or vice-versa and carefully choose client types based on what you overhear to enable a clear story thread for each character. A character talking about leaving the job to focus on their relationship might benefit from a date that spoils them rotten and leaves a big tip, for example, just as a character on their best behavior with the Madam might be tempted into drug use by the right client and spoil their reputation.

The Announcement

With approximately 20 minutes remaining in the game, stop drawing Client cards and wait for everyone in the off-game room to return before making your big announcement. Make a little speech about what it's been like to be the Madam and tell everyone what you've decided to do with the Lily. Base these on the Madam's personality and how the game has gone. You can:

- Sell the Lily to an outside party, someone who gives you the best price, like a former colleague at a previous brothel (best money but you don't care about your companions)
- Sell the Lily to a competitor, someone who will probably shut the place down or cheapen it in some way (good money, ensures your companions will probably keep their jobs)
- Sell the Lily to one or more companions of your choice who made the offer during the game (little money, ensures your companions will probably mostly keep their jobs)
- Give the Lily to a companion of your choice (no money, most generous option with serious potential fallout for that companion's enemies)

Make the announcement as simple or elaborate as you would like and as fits your Madam's archetype. Leave the in-game space and allow a few minutes for the companions to play on their reactions to your decision and then play the conclusion song. If they would like one, give everyone a short break before coming back for the debrief.

Post-game Debrief

After the game has concluded, have everyone assemble in the in-game room to debrief. Don't push for anyone's participation if they don't wish to share. Before starting the debrief, decide whether you would like to hear feedback from the game now or ask for it in a few days. Remember that you have also been involved in this game and might not be up for hearing feedback right now, and that is perfectly alright. As before, read the red highlighted text aloud.

This is a debrief to share highlights from your game and how you feel about the topics addressed; it is also intended to allow you to split from your character. Opting out of any point or the entire thing is ok to do at any time. Please allow everyone time to share and remember that all experiences are valid.

If you find yourself struggling with your emotions from the game or you want to talk more about what happened in the coming days, please reach out to me.

1. Please introduce yourself by name and preferred pronouns.
2. If you would like to, please share a brief epilogue. What did your character do after the game ended? What were their lives like? How did they remember their time at the Lily?
3. Did your character feel more like a person or a stereotype, and did that change throughout the game?
4. What was a highlight of your game?
5. IF YOU WANT FEEDBACK NOW: What worked well in the game? What could have gone better?
IF YOU DO NOT WANT FEEDBACK NOW: I want to hear your feedback about the game, but I want to be able to give it my full attention. I'll ask you to provide your thoughts about what worked, what didn't, and what could have gone better in a couple of days so that future runs can be even better.

Resources, Feedback, and Credits

Especially inspired by *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry* edited by Frédérique Delacoste and Priscilla Alexander and *The Valley of Amazement* by Amy Tan. Read these books.

Conceived and developed by Johanna Morgan for SIF Games. You can reach her at info@sifgames.com

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