

# The Operations Behind the Road Trip Experience

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## *Introduction*

In 2017 I was the business operations lead for the Roadtrip “rock band” larp that traveled across the United States, and never before have I dealt with such unique operations related complications in my life. The Roadtrip Experience was a joint project between the Imagine Nation Collective and Dziobak Larp Studios. In this pervasive larp / freeform experience the participants travelled from Chicago, Illinois to Santa Monica, California down the historic highway Route 66. The experience lasted for 7 days and six nights total. The participants took on the personas of a touring rock band and its entourage for the duration of the trip. The story of the event included four band members, one relative, a drug dealer, spiritual guide, life coach, a conservative Christian who got on the wrong van, a video team, and a team of others made up a believable if far-fetched group. The larp also made use of “non-agency characters” and heavy steering woven into the experience.

## *Genesis*

The project originally was genesis as a 1960’s Woodstock Tour larp concept created by Mikolaj Wicher, Jeff Moxley and myself. As the idea developed the group of three discussed the initial concept with Claus Raasted and the initial idea began to morph and change into a modern homage to rock and roll and Americana. Before the teams parted ways in Poland, the initial concept for the event was solidified and we each returned to our respective teams to start design work and schedule a number of international meetings. The Imagine Nation Collective began the design and development while the Dziobak larp studios team began working on character development and media.

With the event concept solidified and the teams dedicated to working on the project, each individual leg of the development design crews went to work. Jeff Moxley, as both the branch operations manager for Dystopia Rising larp Network as well as the front man on a number of bands and independent music projects began to work with Jessie Elsinger, an independent band booking manager from Connecticut, to begin virtually scouting potential tour date locations for the Roadtrip experience.

Within a month, the web page was created for the event, initial videos were developed, content copy was produced, and documentation was created for the experience. We followed best practices of transparency, open communication, and open engagement regarding this experience due to the fact that we were unaware of anyone who had created anything of this scope, scale, or nature before. Fortunately for us we found that the public was just as excited for this experience as we were, and within a few weeks we were funded.

#### *Creating the Band and its Tour*

As funding came in the initial design and research that we had done needed to be translated to bookings, reservations, and confirmations. This leg of the development brought up the first unique situation we had to address regarding our Roadtrip operations planning: getting real clubs and bars to agree to let our fictional band of larpers perform at their venues. While our European counterparts encouraged that we should just “say it’s a larp” we here in the United States had a long standing negative history dealing with a culture of outsider distrust for the hobby. Booking sites as a larp would require us explaining the hobby to each venue booker, would increase the perception of chance they were taking (which is saying a lot about perspective in the US since the standard reliability that clubs deal with is musicians), and would potentially endanger the experience. Without wanting to explain the nuances of the situation each time we talked to a potential venue the decision was made to invest heavily into our social media presence for our fictional band, The Runaway Sound. While it was true that the individuals brought together for the “Runaway Sound” were for all extensive purposes a newly formed band, our existing social media connections and trans-media experience was able to generate hundreds of followers and Facebook “likes” for the “Runaway Sound” on social media before their first public performance. People saw that we liked a new band, saw the participants in the band, and responded by feeding the Facebook page with a startup positive social media presence. As the participants were working with the event staff to develop the experience, the media and

creations team were farming music and event videos from music projects that some of the participants had been a part of in the past and creating an online narrative. The same way that new bands often refer to prior music projects to build a following for new projects, we were generating interest in a newly formed band by utilizing our existing social media presence and fan base. By the time that we were looking to book events The Runaway Sound had over 300 followers, a few video clips, audio samples, and even mockup album covers. In truth, the line between “a fake band” and “a real band” became very blurred as the participants came together in person and online to practice their intended set list.

With a few months left until the event our combined marketing and media teams continued to work the promotion of the event to gain a few more participants for the Roadtrip experience. The majority of the “fictional” band was organized by Jeff Moxley to choose their setlist and practice before the event. When possible, members of the Runaway Sound would get together in person to have practice sessions in person. When physical face to face interactions were not possible due to distance and time, participants would do the best they could to practice together online or by themselves. As the band practiced, the teams assisted the participants in choosing the narrative that they wanted for their experience and build new “stage personas” that would take the place of traditional larp characters. As the shared narrative was finalized Jamie Snetsinger took care of last minute character development needs for the participants and communication of potential issues and solutions came from each branch of the event management team.

With us having our story design, route, and gigs booked for the event experience the next step was to confirm the booking of the hotels for the event, to haggle prices for group rates, and to book the transportation that would carry us for the entire duration of the experience. Our videographer team was being flown into the area to not only record the event for future prosperity, but also to participate in the experience as the bands videographer and documentation team. The Runaway Sound had a video and audio team to record the live events, to document the experience on the road, and to eventually shoot a music video. In the last days, our event staff settled out (with a few participants falling in and a few falling out as needed), and surprisingly the organization of the event was relatively smooth.

*Behind the Curtain*

What made the event operations, the organization, and the development of this experience work out the way it did was all of the moving parts unseen by the participants. To the event participants it appeared that less than half a dozen individuals worked together to create (and manage this experience). However, for every person that was an up-front and present persona that directly engaged the participants there were one or two people supporting the experience that never made it to the tour busses. Our character writer Jamie was on call to assist if there were any narrative changes that needed to be handled on the fly. Our booking assistant Jesse was on call in the instance that venue had a complication or if we needed to adjust our booking schedule. The entire Imagine Nation team that wasn't actively at the event were on call to assist with any issues that might have happened on the road. Seeing how few "faces" organized this event, others might be tempted to organize a similar event with a limited staff. However, given the potential for this experience to "go off the rails" even our veteran team (with decades of experience) needed nine in-house team members working on the project, three outside consultants (band bookers, media moguls, and professionals from the music industry), and roughly a few hundred manpower hours put into the project.

As the event operations organizer, I was able to have the individual pieces of this experience handled by professionals in each respective field, with very little concern that the individual components of the development would fall through. Zero volunteers were used for this experience, and the entire event from initial concept to completion was organized, written, and implemented by professionals in the field. Each staff member for this event has had over a decade of experience professionally running events, events media, and publication development. The only hurdle was that this project included two separate companies with different procedures, expectations, and practices coming together to work for the first time. Seeing this as the largest potential hurdle, the majority of my job involved organizing the individual team members to be able to work well together, to design functional budgets for each branch of operation to prevent overspending, to review and manage booking and rental contracts for the event, licensing music rights for our commercials, and to keep our in-house expectations high but realistic. While the ticket price for a Roadtrip experience was higher than the average US weekend long larp, the operations cost of the experience was also much higher than most living game experiences. With the costs of multiple van rentals, six nights of hotels, food, and material costs we felt the need to provide a life altering experience

unlike any other larp experience in the world without implying more than we were fundamentally able to afford to provide. Expectations were already high for this experience event, in part due to the teams that were working on the experience together and the unique nature of the narrative, so we needed to be sure that what we promised the participants was as accurate as possible to what we provided.

### *Lessons Learned*

There were a number of opportunities for improvement that we saw from on the road that we will take advantage of for future runs of the Roadtrip experience. There were also a number of small mistakes that we made that can easily be addressed for future runs of the experience as well to make the experience better for the participants and the operational teams.

The first oversight for the project was the scope of how many live events a new band could play on a week-long tour. Our event designer and booking team treated the experience as you would treat a real traveling band and booked five performances over a seven-night stretch. While this schedule is doable for most road-grizzled veterans of the music industry, we did not completely consider the fact that the participants would come with more of a “I’m on vacation” mindset than a “I’m looking to make it big right now” mentality. For many of us who were organizing the event, we commonly spend months at a time on the road working conventions and events without stopping. It is not uncommon for us to be doing development work on two new projects while on the road overseeing the operation of a project that is running live. Our perspective of what is “pushing it” on the road was much different than what our participants had as their desired effort level. With the difference in purpose from the participants we ended up changing our gig schedule from five booked shows to three performances. This allowed much more time for the travel experience of the event, and allowed much more time for side adventures.

The second mistake in event planning was an oversight in budgeting that will be easily addressed for future events. Our budget for the event included lodging and food for all of the participants. While it seems like a no brainer that you need to include costs for the staff food and lodging as well, with our history of running one location events where we do not manage meals for the participants, I failed to factor in the cost of hotels and food for the staff. With three operations team members and two videographers wracking up as many expenses as our participants, we needed to expand our budget to include

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covering the expenses for ourselves. In hindsight, an obvious oversight and one that is easily corrected in the future.

One of the biggest successes of the event blossomed from something we feared might be an issue. In not planning each detail of each day during the experience, and purposely allowing for more time for in the field improvisation we were able to change plans on the fly as needed. During this experience, we originally planned on doing five booked shows, to have the band travel and stay true to the rock star experience, and to create a completely immersed living experience for our participants. We were very successful in doing this, but where we had some degree of limited forethought is in the following truth: Rock stars and larpers often both abhor schedules and keeping to itineraries.

This ended up being adjusted while the larp was ongoing, and became one of the strong points of the experience. Changing the flow of the event and the bookings based on the overall desire and direction of the participants lead to some amazing (unplanned) adventures. The participants got to shoot a rock video at the Cadillac Ranch. The entire team spent part of a day partying in Uranus, Missouri (which was exactly as kitschy as it should have been) filming a music video and shooting guns. I planned a side trip to Meow Wolf in Santa Fe, New Mexico which turned out to be exactly as close to a religious experience as I had hoped. In the day leading up to the larp, our film crew came to us with a request to detour to Las Vegas so they could be married by Elvis which our participants in turn all but demanded happen. This became an adjustment we were thrilled to make to both make our participants happy, and to be a part of an amazing life experience for two great people. This went so far that we cancelled two of our planned gigs, literally took a right turn in Albuquerque New Mexico, and ending up in Vegas where they were married by an Elvis impersonator at the Little White Chapel. For real.

As we often joke, no larp plan survives first contact with the players. The ability and willingness to adapt made the experience more potent than we could have hoped for. Traveling with a large group of larpers for hundreds of miles is going to lead to dozens of unplanned side adventures, so you should plan the extra time to allow these things to happen. Events will cost more than you anticipate, in ways you cannot expect, and you must set aside a larger budget than you anticipate you will need.

*Was it a Larp, or a Tour?*

In closing there was a unique consideration that came from the Roadtrip larp that borders more on philosophical debate than operational design. Was Roadtrip a larp, or was it a tour? In the experience design we developed personas for the participants to embody, but the most earnest and rawest experiences from the road came when the real person completely bled into the persona they were portraying. The “fictional band” actually performed on stage for audiences, shot a music video, and really traveled down route 66 on tour. We had a professional media team, were interviewed by bloggers and radio personalities, and actually lived the life on the road. All of the issues that we handled as larp experience were issues that are commonplace in the music industry. Getting instruments, lodging, food, gigs, and hotels for the band. Working with music companies to get rights to use songs, dealing with complications at live venues, and dealing with inter-band drama (be it fabricated for the purposes of story or naturally occurring from the road) are all details that a band manager deals with for real bands. With all of the organization, development, and design work that went into creating the larp experience to be as realistic as possible we had to stop and ask “when did it just become reality?”

The philosophical question of “when does it stop being pretend” provides us with the strongest development tool for the creation of events. If as designers we want to create experiences that are realistic, engaging, and powerful as event organizers we need to approach the experience from the same direction that real world event organizers would approach it. When we approach our Roadtrip larp design, we need to approach the development of the experience as close as we could to the same way that a real-world band manager would. In realistic development and design we should take advantage of the years of knowledge, experience, and trial and error experiences for event developers that came before us. This resource of experience and knowledge relating to people who work in the music industry relating to booking and band management is far more extensive than what exists in larp development archives, and as a business event manager, provides infinitely more insight in regards to successful event management. While there were hurdles that we needed to overcome due to the living experience nature of the Roadtrip larp, the vast majority of the potential difficulties we could have run into on the road were preemptively avoided by researching and following in the steps of professional tour managers. While larp documentation may help you manage the bleed, transparency, and expectations of participants we found that learning tour management help us much more

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when wrangling tour participants who decided to run naked through a cut corn field, or dealing with club owners pulling a bait and switch once we arrived at the venue.