

WHEN OUR DESTINIES MEET

A BLACK BOX ROLE-PLAYING SYSTEM

When Our Destinies Meet

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Version 1.1

First played as *När våra Öden möts* on *Prolog 2009*.



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DESCRIPTION

A party. A predestined meeting. A web of interlacing stories. We gather our inspiration from the director, playwright, and theater theorist Bertolt Brecht: his acting theory of *Verfremdung* and *Haltung*; his aesthetics, which were made widely known through the films *Dogville* and *Manderlay* by Lars von Trier; and his concern with social problems, morality and relationships.

When Our Destinies Meet requires 2 hours of preparation and 2 hours of black box larping, which uses theatre techniques and shifting perspective as the player, director, narrator, and audience. Using a model where larps are created by the participants in workshop before play, you should be ready to hash out some relationships and plots. The only story components and preparation we have as we enter the game are as follows: a party, social roles and, one or more destined meetings. We decide these three factors together during the workshop. First, we spend approximately 2 hours to create the drama, the game, and the relationships; then, we play for approximately 2 hours with a 30 min debrief. That is the total structure of the game and its preparations. A game to go. Out of the box larping.

SETTING UP THE GAME

Participants

4 - 15 (20 if you really push it)

Set

The general idea is to only have as little scenography and as few distractions as possible. The aim is to have only a few basic items to be able to create rooms.

We suggest the following:

- 10-15 chairs and 2-4 smaller tables, wooden boxes, or blocks
- Masking tape for the walls of the in-game rooms on the floor of the playing space
- White board, flip pad, or big paper for writing is also preferable if at all possible

Venue

A big empty room, preferably a black box theater with the possibility of theater lighting. The space must allow for taping on the floor.

Props and costume

The use of props and costumes is optional and not necessary. Perhaps a few real things like glasses and water for drinking can enhance the game, but mimed props and imaginary costumes are also fine.

BERTOLT BRECHT

Bertolt Brecht was a socialist playwright, director, and theater theoretician from Germany who helped shape modern day theater. His theories and practical aesthetics have been hugely influential. Many of the techniques we use in modern day Jeepform and meta-larping were used by him on the stage over 50 years ago. One of his ideological successors was the Argentinian director Augusto Boal, who evolved the epic theater of Brecht into the Theater of the Oppressed. Boal also developed techniques like forum theater and invisible theater that produced an even greater impact on participatory drama forms such as larping. Here are a few concepts developed by these gentlemen that we will adopt for *When Our Destinies Meet*.

VERFREMDUNG

Verfremdung is sometimes translated as “alienation effect,” where the audience is supposed to feel alienated from the story. Perhaps a better translation would be “estrangement.” Estrangement is the key to epic theater. Brecht wanted the audience to think about what they see, not just emotionally “go along for the ride.” He encouraged audiences to intellectually and critically engage and to examine the action from the outside. To accomplish this feat, he asked the actors to play more like storytellers, rather than immersing themselves into the character, he encouraged taking breaks and making comments about the story and remaining visible on stage even when not in character. Brecht also placed the drama in an alien setting, a “strange” place or time, so that people could not identify with the story; instead, Brecht wanted audience members to examine social structures, power relationships, and to ethically evaluate how we treat each other. The parable or metaphor shines new light on a situation that might be too close to home to be clear. Boal takes this strategy a step further when he asks the audience to become Spectators, not just spectators; he invites them in to take part in the drama, to say how things should go, and to use the stage to show how a social situation can be improved.

We ask the player to participate as a member of an ensemble, but also to take a break from the play and examine the story as an audience member. We ask the player to break character and comment on the play, tell narratives, hold monologues, or simply watch one another. We ask the player to interrupt their immersion into the character and story and start looking at what is happening and how it happens.

SOCIAL ROLES

One of the things Brecht found interesting is our social position as opposed to our individuality; several of his characters are named after a function they fill rather than by their social name: water-boy, recruiting officer, etc. We behave differently depending on what social role we play in a particular situation; I don't behave the same way when performing the role of a teacher, a lover, or a son. We can see this distinction in the opening scene of *Galileo Galileo*, where Galileo has a series of scenes with different people and behaves distinctly depending on his relationship to them. We exist in relationships with each other, not as isolated archetypal psychological entities. However, we do not all react the same way in a particular situation. We all have our individual histories and genes that make up who we are. The way we hold ourselves physically and socially towards other people is called *Haltung* by Brecht, perhaps most easily translated as “holding pattern.” Therefore, *When Our Destinies Meet* uses a network of relationships grounded in a set of social roles that the players randomly pick before the game.

Roles

The Parent

The Sibling

The Child

The Neighbour

The Employee

The Boss

The Child-in-Law

The Friend

The Teenager

The Romantic Partner

The Ex-Partner

The Blind Date

The Party Crasher

The Co-worker

Cut out the roles as individual strips and put them in a hat (or something similar). Let the players, one by one, draw a role and then put the strips back into the hat for the next player to draw.

CREATE THE DRAMA

Now, we arrive at the actual building of the Drama. There are two different factors we use to build the drama:

- Given circumstances
- Relationships

The given circumstances are the aspects we agree to play: when, where, who, etc. All players should agree upon these aspects in the ensemble. When you start answering the questions of the given circumstances, you end up having to create the relationships simultaneously. Therefore, these two factors are closely connected and are done together. Some of the given circumstances are individual for the characters and are intended for each player to privately consider for their own character. Our given circumstances center upon a party, which players could, of course, altered into another setting. You may want to ask yourselves the following questions when considering the circumstances.

Given Circumstances

Who throws the party?

What kind of party is it?

What are the relationships between the characters?

Where is it?

What time?

What rooms are there?

Where do the characters come from?

Where are they going?

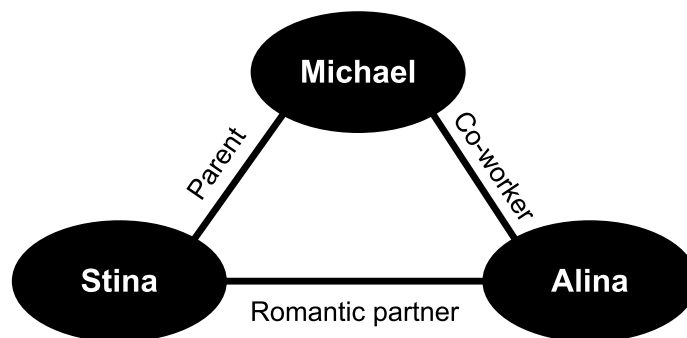
What is their Haltung, or “holding pattern?”

Relationships are based on the social roles the players pulled from the hat. You connect all the characters by establishing and elaborating upon the nature of the relationships.

Stina pulls Parent, Michael pulls Co-worker, and Alina pulls Romantic Partner.

We decide that Stina is Michael's parent. This does not necessarily mean they are co-workers though they could be if you like, but only that Stina is the mother of Michael. The group then decides that Michael is the co-worker of Alina and Alina is the romantic partner of Stina. Now, the Ensemble starts to fill out the details. Stina and Alina could, for instance, have met 3 weeks earlier and Michael does not know that they have started a relationship. Perhaps the ensemble thinks it will be boring to play a coming out story, so they decide instead that Michael grew up with Stina and Alina as his mums. Michael just started working in the family business and, if he plays his cards right, he will become a full partner.

For a while, the ensemble considers playing a communist society where they worked together at the steelworks, since that was the only workplace in town, but they rule that setting out, preferring the family business story. They also decide that Stina is holding a party for Michael to celebrate his recent employment at the business.



Write down the relationships as a mind-map on a white-board or big paper with lines in between the factors to make them more clear. Group people physically in the room in order to demonstrate which characters are socially connected. Beware of making the most obvious connections; they are usually a bit boring. Also, make sure everyone has at least two connections or an interesting reason to attend the party so that they do not feel left out of the drama. If you are not especially interested in soap operas, avoid making the connections and relationships too involved.

Relationships & the cultures that we play

Anything is possible in this game. The story may take place in a world where no men exist. This background may not need any explanation; the world simply is that way. You would not mention men or question this premise, for instance, by discussing how reproduction works. Any combinations, societal structures, and stories you find interesting are possible in this game.

DRAMATURGY

The structure of the game gives a dramatic curve of intensity that can be altered in a few ways. For *When Our Destinies Meet*, we have chosen a three act structure and a dramatic ploy we call Fated Conflicts. The Fated Conflicts are the last thing you fix before we start playing the game. Fated Conflicts are not scripted; the players simply know that a fated meeting will occur based on one of five predestined conflicts. The players will then detail these meetings and how they will occur in game. To decide the Fates, everyone thinks of a number between zero and the number of players. Those that think of the same number will have a destined meeting during the game. They get to draw the theme of the conflict from this list:

Fated Conflicts

Romantic love

Hate

Money

Friendship

Work

During the game, the director will break the game twice in order to summarize and announce the beginning of the next act. For each act, the drama should intensify and by the end of the third act, the fated conflicts should have reached their conclusion.

PLAYING STYLE VS. ACTING STYLE

The playing style is not the same as the acting style. The acting style pertains to the kind of genre and the way the players flesh out their character concepts, as explained further down. Playing style is how the player enacts the game, what the goal of the game is, and how it is structured. For *When Our Destinies Meet*, we use a play style that is based in telling the narrative, not in immersing into the character or winning the game. We use a few methods to support the telling of the narrative: integrating a director, allowing the players the possibility to be a spectator or a player/audience; the set and props being symbolic and the focus on relationships as well as social positions.

PLAYING WITH A DIRECTOR & DRAMACHANICS

The role of the Facilitator or director is to help the drama to progress, to pick up on the dynamics unfolding in the different stories in order to highlight them for the whole ensemble, and to help deepen the different storylines. The director is not visible to the characters; a player should ignore a director in-game as if s/he was not there. For this game we use what are commonly called meta-techniques, but we call them by the more appropriate expression Dramatic game mechanics, or Dramachanics for short. In practice, the director can use Dramachanics to manipulate the game in two ways:

- Breaking and directing
- Shadowing

Breaking and directing

During play, the director can break up the current scene and direct the action and attention. Breaking is performed by the director stopping the current scene in order to direct by saying the command "Cut." If the players hear the command shouted, they stop playing and turn their attention to the director. Once the game has stopped, the director asks for something specific to advance the story. Please see the list of suggested strategies in the Director's Toolbox below.

Once a certain scene or action is played out, the director says, "Thank you" and continues the story. Normally, the director then begins the scene from where it was left before the cut and says, "Please continue." The director could also change the scene and set it a bit later in time.

Director's toolbox

Flashback

A scene that shows past events on the time line. The director can set this scene in the current location or another. Change the set appropriately and play out the scene.

Flashforward

A scene that shows a possible future. The director can set this scene in the current location or another.

Monologue

A break in the action where we get to hear the inner monologue of a character. This monologue is heard by the players, but not the other characters.

Focus scenes

A break in the action of everyone else to focus on one scene. The director can implement the focus scene in two ways: through a continuation of where the play was at the break or by requesting a retake on an exchange that just happened, verbally or nonverbally.

Scene change

A new scene to move the story along. Get to the drama! The director should use the scene change sparingly, as it only differs slightly from the Time Jump and most of the present action should take place at the party.

Dream scene

Dream sequences or imaginary scenes are possible as they play out in the heads of a character.

Time Jump

Jump forward in the time line. The director uses the time jump mainly with each act change, where we set up a moderately new situation to create more forward momentum in the drama.

Narrative voice over

The player or director adds a narrative, either spoken over the action or as filler between scenes.

Player's thought

The thoughts and ideas of the players about the scene and play, exposed in order to shine light on the moral predicaments, the power structures, and the social situation.

The director sees an intense discussion between Alina and Stina. The director says, “Cut – everybody now freeze their play and focus on Alina and Stina.” The players then listen in to a bit of their conversation until the director says, “Thank you – Please continue.”

The director says, “Cut. I want a monologue from Michael.” The player portraying Michael then reveals what the character is currently thinking; “I really wish I could tell Stina the truth. (...)” After the monologue finishes, the director says, “Thank you” and uses a scene change by saying, “It's getting later in the evening. You have just finished your dinner and you end up at the balcony watching over the city, seeing the fireworks from the New Years Eve celebration over the skyline.”

Shadowing

Shadowing means that the director gets involved in the scene without breaking the play by giving physical or verbal instructions, notches, or leads to a player mid-game. The director can always walk up to a player and listen, but should be ignored as much as possible. The director may wear neutral clothes in colors such as black or grey, though such choices are not necessary.

The director gives instructions to the players, either physically or verbally. Verbally, the director may provide instructions for the players to pick up a storyline, to perform a particular action, or to reflect upon something. Physically, the director may, for instance, press the player's body, push/pull them, or hold them. The player decides what these actions means for them and how they want to react.

Outside contact

Another way to add input into the game is to use outside contact. Phones can ring, computer chats can be simulated, and letters can be sent, etc. The Facilitator or a player who is not currently in game/at the party can perform the other participant in the outside contact.

BEING A SPECTATOR OR A PLAYER/AUDIENCE

Part of the game is that you can, at any time, step out of your character to watch the game and see how the different stories develop. This action can be performed by any player, although it should not disturb the game for others, unless personal limits or borders have been breached, whereby you are allowed to stop the play immediately. Generally speaking, a player not involved in the current scene should avoid stepping inside the taped playing area, as this action might confuse the other players.

SET AND SYMBOLIC USE AND MIME FOR PROPS

Brecht wanted to only use the set pieces that you really needed. If a piece of roof was needed, then he would add a piece of roof without the rest of the house. He could paint the house walls on the floor to indicate where things were, just like in the films *Dogville* and *Manderlay* by Lars von Trier. The set of the game is made up of tape on the floor symbolizing the walls of the story's location. A few chairs and tables can be used for everything from sofas to fences, bars to toilets, etc.

GENRE AND ACTING STYLE

If you like, you can decide what genre or acting style you like in your game or you can let it evolve out of what the players do. Will the game be comical, dramatic, tragic or melodramatic? Is it set in a Western, a Sitcom, a gangster, or a sci-fi genre? These are several considerations you can decide beforehand if you like.

GAME END & DEBRIEF

After the three acts are over, the director/facilitator thanks the players for participating. We suggest that you at least facilitate a small debriefing round after the game. Form a circle with all players, preferably sitting and let everyone answer one or two questions about their experience in order. Questions could be:

- Was there something I would have liked to be different or changed?
- What did I like about the game?

During the round, everyone gets to talk without interruption. If someone wants to pass, let them pass. If you are running short on time, the facilitator needs to ask the players to be brief.

HACK THE GAME

When Our Destinies Meet is an open source, live role-playing system.

You are allowed to change whatever you want.

Here are a few examples of how you can hack it.

1. Change the roles so that they fit the kind of story you want. You can offer an exact number of specific roles and the players take one each. You can take out and add roles that you think will make a more interesting story for you.
2. Don't use the fated conflicts or have a different set of fates. Fates can sometimes get in the way of more interesting relationships and drama.
3. Don't use a director/facilitator. Let everyone make breaks and propose different scenes. Player-driven breaks can be done with a director too, though excessive breaks make the narrative difficult to follow.
4. Set genre and play style/acting style before the game rather than letting these aspects emerge. This can hamper or help different groups depending on how they are composed.
5. Skip the party. Use another event that gathers the players to a particular place. A trip on a vehicle of choice, a meeting, a departure and/or an arrival.
6. Use a different dramatic structure. *When Our Destinies Meet* is built with three acts, but is changeable if you want a different story with other goals. Maybe you don't want a conclusion; perhaps you need to divide the drama into four or five acts to get a different escalation.

This scenario is intended as more a system and a methodology of how to create games than a game in itself. Go wild and use it in any way you like.

CREDITS

We thank all that have gone before us and created the techniques we used here. We have not created anything new that has not already been used in theater and larp for years.

Here are a few who have introduced us to our given techniques that we would like to thank in particular:

Moa Rönnåsen, Jeepen, Anna-Karin Linder, Bertold Brecht, Augusto Boal.

For proofreading and layout help we would like to thank:

Sarah Lynne Bowman, Gabriel Widing and Oliver Nøglebæk.

If you would like to know more about the techniques used in this game, you can refer to the following resources:

Vi åker Jeep / We go by Jeep - Game design collective - <http://jeepen.org/>

The Theatre of the Oppressed, Augusto Boal

Games for Actors and Non-Actors, Augusto Boal

Brecht on Theater, Bertolt Brecht

Several good articles in the Knutepunkt/Knutpunkt/Knudepunkt/Solmukohta books that can found online here:

<http://nordiclarpwiki.org/wiki/Knutepunkt-books>

If you are keen on finding more short larps, check the Chamber Games website

<http://chambergames.wordpress.com/>

When Our Destinies Meet

<http://whenourdestiniesmeet.wordpress.com/>

Morgan Jarl

<http://interaktivproduktion.se>

Petter Karlsson

<http://petterkarlsson.se>

APPENDIX 1: CHEAT-SHEET

Order of running the game

1. Describe the game and its mechanics to players
2. Facilitate icebreakers, for example: Theater machine, Social machine, What are you doing? Good icebreaker exercises could be found online or in the book *Playing the Learning Game*.
3. Pull roles
4. Establish given circumstances and relationships
5. Tape the floor
6. Pull the fates
7. Run the game
8. Facilitate the debriefing round

Given Circumstances

Who throws the party?

What kind of party is it?

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What rooms are there?

Where do the characters come from?

Where are they going?

What is their Haltung, or “holding pattern?”

Directors toolbox

Flashback

Flashforward

Monologue

Focus scenes

Scene Change

Dream scene

Time Jump

Narrative voice over

Player's thought

Shadowing

Outside contact

APPENDIX 2: CUT OUTS

Roles:

THE PARENT

THE SIBLING

THE CHILD

THE NEIGHBOUR

THE EMPLOYEE

THE BOSS

THE CHILD-IN-LAW

THE FRIEND

THE TEENAGER

THE ROMANTIC PARTNER

THE EX-PARTNER

THE BLIND DATE

THE PARTY CRASHER

THE CO-WORKER

Fated Conflicts:

ROMANTIC LOVE

HATE

MONEY

FRIENDSHIP

WORK