



Baby Steps

*By Tobias Wrigstad, Vi åker jeep
Ropecon 2006*

Note that you must have read and understood “Thorbiörn’s challenge” of which this scenario is a part, or perhaps an answer to. Otherwise, this text wont make much sense.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of *Baby steps* is very simple. The game is played as a therapy session with a psychologist, played by a game master, and the three player characters, Anna, Erik and Jan present. The latter three are “owned”, meaning they are only played by one player each. All other characters are potentially shared and can be played by any other player. The game master should avoid playing roles that are not some incarnation of the Psychologist.

The game requires total transparency, that is absence of secrets between the players. Other scenarios in the “Thorbiörn’s challenge” suite that does not reveal everything to the players etc., should probably be played before this.

The game is a therapy session played in real time. What is played are the conversations,

stories of important parts of the night of the accident and other events that are important to the characters. In addition to that, we will also play monologues and parenthetical comments to the game, to put focus on the distance between what we say and what we really think. The important techniques for this is sitting and standing play, monologues and insides and outsides and are described below. Please explain these as best you can to your players and possibly also have a short exercise before the game if they are new to this style of playing.

The game is meant to last for one hour, pretty much on the dot. This makes it a short story (Novelle) in Danish terminology. Set a timer for one hour, preferably one with a audible ticking. When it rings, the session is over. The Psychologist bids farewell and the game ends with a very short glimpse of the future.

SUBJECT

The scenario is about why it is so hard to tell the truth about what we really think of feel, about forgiving—how hard it really is to be angry and how hard it is to stop, and last, how satisfying it can be to roll around like a pig in the mud of your own misfortune.

For this scenario, I don't think it is a bad idea to discuss the subject matter with the players beforehand as it will serve as a good "common focus" and thus keep the game aimed at a single point. If the players' interpretations of what the game is about are somewhat consistent, it will be easier to cooperate and reach agreements.

GAME TECHNIQUES

Below, the three important techniques for the game are described—sitting and standing play, monologues and insides and outsides.

Sitting and standing play

Sitting and standing were player stances first used in *No Sign of Alex* (Tobias Wrigstad, Jan Salomonsson 2001) to allow the game to take place on several simultaneous levels.

In *Baby steps*, the following four game-levels exist: reality, that is the characters in a big couch with the Psychologist, lies, memories and the inner play. A player sitting down is sitting in the couch in the game's reality. A player standing up is inside a memory—a retelling of an event. A player that stands up alone is doing a monologue (see below).

Sitting and standing play makes it easy to spot what level a player is currently at. This makes it easy for the game to keep running at several levels simultaneously, without mixing them up and risk Erik mistakenly busting through the door in a private memory of Anna and Jan's.

If a sitting player addresses a standing player, for example says "No, I think you're not telling the truth!" the standing player could immediately sit down, continuing the retelling of the scene in the game's reality. When the differences are settled, the scene may be restarted or continued with possible modifications. One can also imagine the sitting person being invited up into the scene—with or without discussion, or the players swapping place and the previously sitting player acting out her view of the scene. Let the fact that the game actually takes place at the psychologist's with characters that have

a hard time looking each other in the eyes affect the way people are interrupted and how retellings etc. are played.

Note that any possible character can figure in a standing scene. A scene about why Anna wants to kill Jan's dog can be a scene with Jan and the two kids being happy in a Barbie-like world that every once in a while is torn to pieces when reluctant kids are dragged to the obnoxious Anna.

Sitting and standing play has a tendency of appearing difficult in a textual description, but being very easy to grasp when used in practice. Pretty soon, one sees that the technique is simple and flexible, but it is still not a bad idea to play an exercise scene or two with completely different characters for 5–10 minutes before you get going with the actual game. Even though I think we must be concerned about keeping the flow of the game and speak out of character as little as possible, I don't think one should hesitate to start a scene by saying "Now I want a scene with the kids in the back seat of Anna's car, looking back at Jan's house and crying their hearts out screaming 'Dad! Dad!'"

Monologues

Monologues is a technique for showing the inner thoughts of a character. A player may give a monologue which is the thoughts and feelings of a character—not something that actually takes place in the game's reality.

A classic example: Two characters in a car, one player suddenly stands up, remains silent for a second or two, a clear signal to the other that something is happening, and then begins.

"I don't want to kiss her. I really don't. I really didn't want to take her out in the first place. But I promised her father I'd do it. If I'd known she'd keep yapping about her ugly dog the entire time, I would have called in sick. Nice tits, though. I'd have to give her that."

The player then sits down, at which time the other player continues talking about her dog for a little while before giving a monologue herself. She remains sitting, but stops moving and lowers her voice a bit. This should be enough of a signal now.

"God how I hate this. I really do. I really didn't want to go on a date with him in the first place, but I promised dad. We've run

out of things to say five times already and he doesn't say anything. He just sits and stares. That stresses the hell out of me. If he could just stop looking like he was undressing me..."

A monologue might be a stream of consciousness, a story told to an imaginary audience, speaking one's thoughts out loud etc. This allows dissemination of a lot of personal (or otherwise) information to players (as opposed to characters) that would be awkward or strange to play out in character, or without resorting to meta discussion but enhances the game by according to the principle of transparency (absence of secrets).

Insides and Outsides

Insides are for playing parenthetical comments to the game in form of a difference between a characters true thought or feelings (the inside) and the way it acts in the game's reality (the outside). If Anna and Erik go through the events of that night and talk about having intercourse you could easily imagine (warning, tacky example) an inside of Jan's where he is stabbing Erik with a knife, while in the game's reality, Jan is silent and still in the couch. You could as easily imagine a scene where Jan for-

gives Anna and Erik but immediately shows an inside that shows how he still hates them.

Insides is a kind of played monologue. The insides can simply be included in the game as an extension to sitting and standing play. A play that stands up alone (signalling monologue or inside), can start interacting with the other players. For extra clarity, you could start each inside with the player speaking the name of its characters (which never happened in freeform as you don't use third person in that way). As soon as the inside is played out, the players move back to the couch and the scene in the game's reality continues.

The concept of insides and outsides was stolen from a Danish book on group therapy by Kristianshavsguppen from the early 70s.

THE CHARACTERS

The players will take the roles of Anna, Erik and Jan. These characters are the same as the ones described in Thorbiörn's challenge with one major modification: *Jan and Lennart are the same person*. It matters not how much it deviates from previous or coming games. The reading of Jan and Lennart as two sides of the

same character is pretty straightforward and is possible even more interesting if it clashes with previous games.

Jan and Lennart being the same person also means that Anna has killed her own daughter, and that Anna and Jan still have a child together.

The game takes place about six months after the night of the accident. In these six months, Erik has moved in with Anna, perhaps fused together by feelings of guilt. Anna's and Jan's remaining child does not know that Anna was the driver of the vehicle, and Anna and Jan have agreed never to tell her about it. Also, Erik does not know that Anna purposely hit what turned out to be Ella.

The character texts are identical. The players are all in on all information about the story of the car accident, but the character you are playing will heavily influence how you read the text. Additionally, the text is purposely written so that it is sometimes slightly unclear if a text belongs to Erik, Anna or both. Exactly how much the characters know is up to the players, except for what is explicitly stated in their texts.

ABOUT THE THERAPY

The therapy session is the second session in a long future succession. The therapy have several goals: to help Jan forgive Anna and Erik and to help Anna and Erik forgive themselves. As Anna and Jan have shared custody of the remaining child, it is important that they are able to talk and get on with each other. Anna and Erik also have quite a baggage that they need to deal with if their relationship is going to work out. I would guess that their relationship only worked as a secret, forbidden fling and probably does neither of them any good under the current circumstances. But I'm not the Psychologist. You are. In any case, the game is not really meant to be about Erik and Anna, but again, you and you players are the ones who call the shots.

Note that the goals above are the goals of the extended therapy, not of this single session. Today, we will only take a small step.

THE GAME BEGINS

The game starts with the Psychologist opening the door for Anna, Erik and Jan and ask them to seat themselves in his sofa. Anna is

preferably placed in the middle, as she is the person both linking Erik and Jan together in this mess, but also keeping them apart. Maybe they would like some water before you start, or maybe they have some initial questions. Let the sessions start gradually so that there is no single point in time where you can say, here endeth the foreplay and the session begins.

PLAYING THE PSYCHOLOGIST

An important aspect of the Psychologist is that she is unable to give any answers to what the characters should do, think or feel. The Psychologist is unable to take sides and finds it hard to give straight answers to questions. If Jan were to ask, “What did you eat this morning?”, the Psychologist would probably answer “Why do you ask that?” or, “Yes, what do people eat in the morning?”, or “The usual, I guess”. With counter questions or vague non-answers.

The Psychologist is the catalyst of the game—not its engine. Her goal is to get the characters to address relevant topics and events in their session, not to micro-manage the conversations or be too much in control. The Psychologist is an authoritative figure: the characters are all

in need of her help, regardless of whether they understand it or not.

To the end of the game, the Psychologist character should blend with the role of the game master. The Psychologist can well ask Anna to explain how she felt when she understood that she had run over Ella by use of an allegory because she understands that some pain cannot be expressed in words. Make sure everyone is involved in the game, and that no one is a quiet spectator. It doesn’t matter if the players don’t understand whether you are acting as the Psychologist or the game master—if someone asks, just dismiss the question by the wave of your hand.

Take utmost care not to reduce the game to three conversations with the Psychologist. You should only be talking when it is necessary which should be as few times as possible.

ICE BREAKERS

The next page shows a number of possible ice breakers and topics for conversation formulated as four questions to each character. Keywords below include perspective, how do you feel about, etc. You absolutely don’t need to use these, but I put them here as an aid.

Erik, do you think it is reasonable to ask for Jan's forgiveness, regardless of the Ella incident?

Erik, can't you go through the entire chain of events that night from your perspective?

Anna, could you tell us a bit about why you dislike Jan so much that you wanted to run over his dog?

Anna, what should to say to Ella if she could hear you right now?

Jan, how do you think Pia would react if you told her the true story about what took place that night?

Jan, how do you feel about letting Pia stay with Anna and Erik on the weekends?

Erik, what do you feel about your relationship to Anna, now?

Erik, how did you and Jan become such good friends that you was asked to be godfather for their second child? And how did that feel?

Anna, can you tell us what went through your mind when you understood that it was Ella you had hit with the car?

Anna and Jan, can you tell us the story about how you became a couple, about how it was to decide to have kids and what attracted you to each other?

Jan, tell us a bit about why you and Anna got a divorce!

Jan, do you think it is possible for you to ever forgive Anna and Erik and move on? Would it not feel good to be able to do that?

Above, I refer to Anna and Jan's child as Pia. Elsewhere I have avoided giving it name and gender. This should be decided by Jan and Anna, they gave it its name in the first place.

THE TIMER

The game is supposed to last for one hour. Time is an important factor in keeping the therapy session short and not too healing. It is quite all right if the players feel frustrated by not having the time to talk about everything, to address every issue, etc.—just as the characters are frustrated by taking baby steps every other week.

A good way to make the players frustrated is to make the passing of time noticeable, for example by having an audible timer with a constant ticking sound. For the good of the game, it is preferred that the players should know approximately how much time has been spent. For example, the game master could announce the passing of another ten minutes. Toilet breaks etc. must be made in real time. The timer won't be stopped.

An alternative way of playing the game is pausing the timer every time the game leaves the therapy session and goes off into a monologue, standing play, etc. The game will be much longer, and the real time should perhaps be cut down to just 30 minutes, again to avoid the session to become too healing. This of course

varies with what players you have. A positive aspect (possibly) of pausing the timer is that it encourages as much playing as possible in standing play, monologues and insides, which is where much of the good stuff is.

ENDING THE GAME

When the timer rings, the time is up. Any active scenes or parentheses should end and the Psychologist closes the session. Other patients are waiting and it is not possible to extend the time, regardless of what events take place. If it is really necessary, the characters are allowed to stay on in the same room for 15 minutes before a secretary forces them to leave. The Psychologist leaves the room as soon as the time is up and the session is closed.

When the session is closed, every character will talk about where she thinks she will be one year from now. When this is over, signal that you are doing an inside, and become the Psychologist—you are abandoning the game master role with its powers and possibilities and answers to every possible question in the game. Now, let Jan's player tell us where Anna will really be in one year from now. Anna's player does the same about Erik and Erik's player

about Jan. Be careful to talk to the character in the first case and the player in the second. When Erik's player is finished, the game is finished. If the players ask what really happens in the future, reply that you are a mere psychologist, and cannot possibly know such things.

POSSIBLE VARIANTS OF THE GAME

One possible variant of the game is to play three police interrogations with the three characters. Two players, playing policemen,

will interrogate the third, playing Anna or Jan or Erik. This might lead to a form-wise very similar game, but with different tone and different interactions. The game will most certainly be about finding different versions of the same events. You can play what Anna tells the policemen, then how she experienced it, and last what really happened.



V I Å K E R J E E P

Tobias Wrigstad