



Lives Births Deaths

Lives. Births. Deaths.

Monday evening. Dark december. Raining. December doesn't come with snow anymore. I close up my work-place, I'm the only one left. It is dark (did I tell you already?), but not just here, or outside, but when I summarise.

Lives. Births. Deaths. A rhythm.

Death is a constant companion. An old colleague, an old client. Some celebrity has died on the news. Grandpa died this spring and Grandma the year before. Holding those thoughts at bay is the key. Keeping them separate. From everyday life. From life in general.

Deaths. Lives. Births.

Two former colleagues, let's call them both Anna, everyone's called Anna, both became mothers recently. I had a shorter relationship with one of them. She means a lot to me, but her daughter is not my daughter. I don't have kids. I'm free.

Lives. Births. Deaths.

Life is a constant struggle to meet your mortgage obligations at the same time as you are helping your parents with Windows, and in the middle of it all your expected to find time for "living."

Lives, Births, Deaths is about "life". From a kind of dramaturgic perspective, life is the ultimate story — inherently conflicted (mortgages/Windows/living), but it is also impossible to see this when you are in the middle of it. And maybe it is a little bit too all over the place. So as a story, life generally sucks. At least from a first-person perspective.

Lives, Births, Deaths is in its own way a continuation or extension of Doubt, which was a game about relationships. We want to keep using similar models for collaborative storytelling, and experiment with other ways of creating a story than having a very narrow theme.

The game is also a feeble attempt at cross-breeding Jeepform with The Sims — an attempt at everyday drama and kitchen sink realism with minimalist methods and outsourcing the creative process on the players. We are setting up a few entry parameters and the basic premises. But other than that, the players are calling the shots on this one.

We expect about 1 hour of preparation, and 2-5 hours of playing time, totally depending on the group and the "story" they are going for.



Lives Births Deaths

Text & idea

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About

Jeepform, 1-2 GM's, 4-6 players, 4-6 hours of playing

The series of tubes

jeepen.org/games/livesbirthsdeaths



The Setting

The story happens in the homes of our characters, at their work places and in a small village/holiday camp on an island in the Swedish archipelago. The characters live and work at different places, but in the summer, they practically live on top of each other in small cottages, some of which sit on the lake side. They say hello, have grill parties, and goes swimming on the same beaches.

The central work-place of our story is probably InTech, a small IT-company with about 50 employees where many of our characters work. But it does not have to be like that. Maybe the most important work-place ends up being Fia's church.

On the island, your narrative, Engström, also lives. But more about that later.

The Characters

In brief, the characters are Patrik, who is a police officer, dreams of garden parties and "wants to `do' something". Gabriella, who's career at InTech is going well, but wonders if there is more to life. Martin, who has a hard time staying in a relationship and is stuck at InTech and in a life that he doesn't want. Kajsa, who has problems with her mother, but still finds time for Martin. Tobias, who is having a hard time diving his attention between his daughter Sara, his girl friend Emma and his work at InTech that he has difficulties not thinking about. Sara, whose mother died in cancer 4 years ago, and who is trying to deal with Emma, puberty and school at the same time. Martin's dad, Gunnar, who shares a summer cabin with Martin's mother Marianne and her husband, but who would want to sell his share and "start over somewhere". Fia, who is struggling with the fact that there might not be a priest job at the end of the theology tunnel as she isn't speaking to God right now.

right now. Emma, who keeps finding pictures of Laila everywhere in the apartment, leading to trouble concentrating on finishing that thesis. Martin's step dad, Farzad, who recently started working 50% and likes to go fishing and philosophize. Martin's mother, who doesn't really get that she isn't 20 anymore. The shopkeeper, who's had his shop spray painted by the fucking nazi's for the umpteenth time, and doesn't want to be here anymore. Tobias's grandmother who is waiting to die after 20 years of pain, but still manages to set an example for everyone else. Mårten, who moved stateside for unclear reasons but never got further than 100 miles from home. And Linda, who is about to run away from home.

These are real people. And the only characters that we will use. And that is that.

I read what we wrote together on her old locker with fridge poetry:

pompous midnight might give
decadent
premier
megahugfeast at times
stay and mingle social intoxicate
whoops! what an exquisite orgie

sniffe as you like always
but one at most
that might live reason
number your to to

On her own, she's written:

him him
was style me me me
sprinkle dry sms

Or maybe it is some other colleague that's moved the magnets around after she quit. She gave me a copy of of her poetry collection (bounced from a publisher), it was very abstract and minimalist. I didn't really like it. But what do I know about poetry?

Zero. (February)

Taking responsibility for young people. They are fragile. What makes an adult an adult? When does it happen, and why?

One. (March)

Now it starts for real. Life. From now on everything will be different. I will be able to take responsibility for my own life and my fellow men and women. I will be strong and not buy candy on my way home from work. I will take what comes with a shoulder shrug. After all, there isn't really any legitimate reason not to look positively on the events in your life. This is so going to ROCK!

I think that when I meet her, my stomach is going to let me know. We will SEE each other. It will feel very natural.

If I leave her apartment now, will the cats have everything they need? Did I leave the toilet seat up. Did I forget to turn off the stove or the coffee maker? Is a tap dripping. Did any of the cats get caught in the door when I closed it behind me? Did any of them manage to escape while I left? Or did I happen to trap one of them in the freezer after leaving the door open. That will kill it. And the food will be uneatable. Did I put the key in the wrong pidgeon hole?

Two. (April)

But being single is freedom. And not getting close with people is also nice. Not letting people into the innermost temple that I only want to share with someone that never lets go of my hand. Nice to keep that secret a while longer. You will never ever know.

We go to therapy (relationship). We sit opposite each other in an empty room in Old Town. I start with "Something that I like about you is..." She repeats what I said, and does the same for me. I repeat her words. "A good result for me would be..." and she repeats it and says a thing for me to repeat. "Something I want to bring with me is..." I end it. She repeats and rolls back one of her own.

Three. (May)

She is living with someone. I pretend not to care, she speaks as if that relation is fucked anyway.

Macros & Micros

Every character consists of a short text, a capsule describing of the character's relation to other characters, a *macro* and a *micro*.

The purpose of the macro is to give some kind of focus to the game. A character's macro is in some sense it's defining trait, but also something possibly slated for change as the game progresses. Although it might now. It is up to the players to decide.

<i>Tobias:</i>	<i>his identity as head of the family</i>
<i>Emma:</i>	<i>her identity as a mother, and living in Laila's shadow</i>
<i>Sara:</i>	<i>her relation to her parents</i>
<i>Mårten:</i>	<i>how others view me, and how I view others</i>
<i>Kajsa:</i>	<i>her relation to Martin</i>
<i>Martin:</i>	<i>his relation to his parents</i>
<i>Patrik:</i>	<i>his belief that all are equal in the eyes of the law</i>
<i>Linda:</i>	<i>her relation to her parents</i>
<i>Moa:</i>	<i>adapting your dreams to reality</i>
<i>Gabriella:</i>	<i>the sacrifices you make for your career</i>
<i>Dad:</i>	<i>his homosexual identity</i>
<i>Mum:</i>	<i>who you are and who you want to be</i>
<i>Step dad:</i>	<i>his relation to his parents</i>
<i>Grandma:</i>	<i>crappy health</i>
<i>Fia:</i>	<i>her relation to God</i>
<i>Shopkeeper:</i>	<i>integration</i>

Four of the characters have the relation to their parents as their macro. For Sara, this can be teenage revolution or accepting Emma as part of her family. For Martin, his relation to his father's new identity as a homosexual, or taking care of his parents in a way he is not used to. For Linda, it can be about finding out that her crappy situation is her parents' fault, not hers. Or finding her way back into their arms. Maybe they aren't so bad after all? For Martin's step dad, it can be the fact that his parents are dying in a far away country where he has no possibility of helping them, or even visiting them. Or just shaking himself free from their view on his Swedish life, etc.

Micros

Statistically speaking, in a highschool class of about 30 people, two people will become alcoholics, two will become criminals, one go to prison, eight have cancer and four of these die an early death as a consequence. One person will be diagnosed with alzheimers and another badly wounded in a car accident. 20 will go on to study at the university and out of those, 13 finally get an exam. Three will leave Sweden for other countries. Devil only knows how many of the 30 that will be happy. This game has 16 characters.

To get the players to talk about the characters without reducing it to some boring presentation session that noone will ever remember anyway (as everyone is waiting for their turn to speak), we give the players a task of distributing 11 micros to the 16 characters. This will require that they talk about the characters and superficially understand them, which is our goal. The details, that you may change however you like, are:

- Recently had a big success (with something)
- Is starting to get really good at internet poker (is reeling in the "big bucks")
- Is madly in love — feels great! (in whom, is it mutual?)
- Unfinished bad business with other character (what?)
- Trouble at work (what?)
- Feels locked in in life — wants to do something else but cannot
- Drinks too much
- Things that s/he is a diabetic, but doesn't dare to go to the doctor
- Some economic troubles
- Trouble getting out of bed in the morning
- Ashamed over gray and white hairs (that may be stress- or age-related)

Life

To facilitate smoother game play, we have made a crude model of life, which the game will revolve around. The model has three aspects: work, family and vacation. Work-related stuff is e.g., career, colleagues, etc. Family-stuff is about the extended family, i.e., partners, children, parents, in-laws & close friends. Vacation is the break in ordinary life when you are forced to lead another one before the everyday life crushes you with all its whats and whatnots.

Three years is a very long time I suppose that a lot of things can happen in three years (no &, in that sentence). I am attracted to her, I want to sleep with her, she is probably a huge slut, or at least it felt like that when we had sex on planning day, or we were going to but were interrupted by our colleagues hard to move when you're being watched (one , there).

"Grandma dies. It must have been May, but I'm not 100% sure. I liked her a lot. I miss her already."

Four. (June)

If I feel like this now, what will it be like when we decide to get children?

Four minutes after 12 the iPhone alarm rings, I quickly starts searching though all my pockets.

Five. (July)

She wants to move to Stockholm. Everyone wants to move to Stockholm, that's where it happens. Everyone lives here (already). If I told you I have known people in Lund and people in Umeå that want to live there. There is nothing about having a place of your own (regardless of whether you OWN it) and getting married and have kids before 28 that beats this. That just feels so grown-up, in a way. (No, I don't get me either.) And there are the dreams as well. I get kinda silly here. Regrediation. Start recalling old memories from my childhood. Can't be that far back really?

Anna showed me her pussy, my God I must have been nine and she was seven. Innocent, yet forbidden, but there was a shimmer in her loins and I cannot get that picture out of my head. Of course you don't want to grow up then!

Two things. That life always goes on. And that is doesn't always. Life moves on. If you break up with the love of your life, you move across the globe, have kids, ride into the sunset, there is always a new tomorrow with new musts and decisions. Before it all ends in an instant. The end that's not a break but, you know, fucking it, totally over, finito. LOL. Everything ends in a single uninterrupted Grand Pause (and that's it, isn't it — life's verses overlap, there isn't even a sensible way of partitioning them, and how will my memoires look without chapters???). You can get crazy for less. Even mad.

Six. (August)
"Give me something to sing about.
[All the women go: ahhh ahhh
ahhh ahhh]

I need something to sing about.
[All the women go: ahhh ahhh
ahhh ahhh]"

The game switches between being out work, family and vacation. Vacation scenes take place in the summer camp (which is inhabitably all year round) while family and work scenes can take place wherever. The idea is that Martin's and Tobias's families are in the center, but it does not have to be that way.

Setting up the game

Before the game starts the players should each do a mindmap. The will start with the word "life" and associate freely until they have about 10-15 words on their papers. When the players have done this, they are to pick two things from the mindmap that they are interested in bringing into the game and write them down in a large hand on two cards that you will give them. The cards are fairly small to force them to boil it down to the essence. Tell them that they need not choose one positive and one negative thing.

All this should happen individually without the players collaborating or looking at each others' cards. The purpose of this is to give everyone an equal chance of influencing the story, but also get their minds going before the game.

You will make three cards according to the same premises. You don't need to do a mindmap if you don't want to, but it has its merits. Collect the players' mindmaps and use them for your own support later in the game.

Now, we place the cards in three rows of four cards, like this:

Work	Setbacks	Love	Sorrow	Sex
Homes	Kids	Death	Ferrari	Sickness
Vacation	Accident	Hangover	Kids	Love

The cars are placed randomly by you pointing at the next player to place a card in any order you see fit. The players have no say. You may place your three cards at any time.

There are additional rules here:

- § There must be at least one birth and one death on these cards. You may need to insert additional cards to make this happen.
- § You may not move cards around, other than to insert a birth or death card.
- § The players may not change their minds.

One reason why we do things individually and randomly is that that's life. As soon as the players start to collaborate, they will start to create a story — and we want to delay that.

Every fow of four cards is a specification for a story — one for work, one for family, and one for vacation, in that order. With your cards, we have a total of 15 cards. Each card corresponds to a scene in the game. Your cards in bold, it can look like this:

Work	Setback	Love	Sorrow	Sex	Get fired
Homes	Kids	Death	Ferrari	Break up	Sickness
Vacation	Marriage	Accident	Hangover	Kids	Love

When the cards are placed, briefly discuss a strategy for every other column of scenes and decide what they should be about. Note that that doesn't necessarily implies deciding what happens our outcomes. In our example, you would discuss the gray cards above. The reason for discussing them is to (finally) create ideas about a story in the players. Talk about *potentials* ("ah, but then 'sorrow' can be about ... since ... etc.") and put the ideas on the playing field.

You are not to talk about all the scenes — that's too many, plus we want some to be more "open" for consequences, or for throwing something unexpected or moving in an entirely new direction. Of these nine scenes, at least three should be about each circumference (see below). These circumferences are intended to be ice breakers.

Choosing. Let's say you are hitting it off with a colleague and talk about it with this other girl you are doing (in the summers only), who is getting a boyfriend in Stockholm. You tell this second girl that the first one stood you up. The very next day, your summer fling sends you this farwell sms saying it is complex. No shit Sherlock.

Seven. (September)

Poker is the new squash. It is better, and you don't have to more around

so much. The worst thing about squash is that you always end up being in each other's way. Strange there are no rules to govern these things, like forcing you to shoot the ball to the opponent's side. You know, I could, like, fire the ball way way off to my direction, forcing my opponent to run past me. He could trip and hit me on the head, it could end up a very nasty accident. Poker could make you rich if you know what you are doing. I'm a catious general that always pull out when someone goes all-in. I call it "cash management".

You tend to remember old relations. It was fun back then, it obviously meant the world to you right then, which is just natural. After, it is easy to see why it didn't work and of course it is easy to laugh at it then. When time's healed the wounds and all that.

Eight. (October)

He passes away without me noticing it. My dad sends me an email to tell me that my grandpa has died.

Come autumn, I am all cold inside. As if the emptiness has caught up with me somehow. I don't know what to write. It is all so empty.

Nine. (November)

(What do you want me to do with this?)

I'm on my way to work. It feels pretty shitty, to be perfectly honest. Is this how life is supposed to be? Just go on and on and on? What will happen to me if I die? Is that it? And how do I know I'm doing the right thing? Maybe I missed the whole point? Or I'm doing the wrong thing, right from the start. Did I miss a turn back there? And are things starting to become too late to change, due to my getting old or something. Will I have kids, and with whom? Or who, I mean wouldn't it be nice to have a couple of kids with different people, mixing the gene pool a bit? A nice shared house (by the sea).

Ten. (December)

I get an sms. "It is not you, it is me. I just want to meet someone I don't know, it doesn't have to be complicated, you know why, hugs!"

Ice breakers: Two Circumferential Stories

We have two circumferential stories intended as foundation for creating scenes about the "real stories". This is especially important early in the game before the players have mastered the characters and can drive the stories themselves.

Circumference One: Lost Dog

Sara's dog, Pricken, has gone missing. Tobias, Emma and Sara will have to go look for the dog, which is a good opportunity to introduce other characters like Patrik and Fia, or why not call Martin, Kajsa and all the friends and form a search party. The dog went missing in their back yard, so it is likely that someone took him. But don't say that so Sara hears it.

Naturally, Engström has the god. Noone knows how it got there, and we will not reveal it. But he's got it and he is convinced the family just upped and left the dog behind when leaving their cabin (maybe that IS what happened!?) which is why he hasn't called Tobias about the dog. People like Tobias, Sara and Emma shouldn't be allowed to have dogs in the first place.

Circumference Two: Efficiency Analysis at InTech

InTech isn't doing too well, and to battle that management has employed a competence consultant. This person is never in the game, but this gives something to focus on at InTech. They who are doing great have nothing to fear — maybe they even think it is positive — but for others it can be very stressful to be monitored and evaluated. People walk around the corridors wondering when it is their time to be called to a "conversation" with the consultant. Having their productivity assessed. And the value they bring to the company. This work-related stress naturally rubs off on the scenes in the homes.

Controlling the Game

One way of affecting the game is by having player goals — tasks the PLAYERS (not the characters) are to perform in the game. A player's goals might well clash with those of her character — that's perfectly fine.

The players' goals are to be kept secret. The reason for this is because we hope that

this will cause misunderstandings (or cognitive dissonance if you will) between the players with respect to what they are after. Of the players knew what goals were in play, they could help each other or knowingly plot against each other. As we know how much time you generally have to prepare as a con GM, we bundle six goals with the game, but please make your own according to your own mind, if you have the time.

Take the chance to reveal something about yourself that no-one knows (maybe everyone got this card!)

Life is a tragedy — let that shine through

Life is about procreation — make sure Linda and Sara's stories are told

Life is a miracle — don't lose sight of that

Life is not a story — it does not have to "make sense"

Life most certainly isn't a freak accident — there is a bigger purpose

The Role of the Game Master's

You are the narrative. Without you, this ain't going to turn into a story. We need someone a bit abstracted away to see the connections, see the events for what they truly are and knows how to tell this to the players who are too close to see the details. Cancer is only a tragedy if it is not your own lump you can't help constantly touching. If that's the case, then try to f*cking put it in perspective. Stories are only stories from afar.

Engström has the dog. Although his house is entwined by blossoming hedges and a crappy white fence that looks like an old boxer's front teeth, it is as if he could see the whole world through his binoculars. He is a little bit like the old cowboy in Big Lebowski. But by his kitchen table with coffee, rather than at the bar with Sioux City sarsaparilla. Same dark voice, though.

The idea is that the scenes will be connected through your monolog. Not to move the events forward, but to summarise them, put them in perspective and possibly hint to possible future developments. You do this as Engström, who is old enough to have seen it all, but who probably lacks any experience of his own.

Feel free to reveal that he has the dog early on, and why he hasn't returned it. Maybe he puts in ads in the local paper looking for a new owner for it. And so on.

Eleven. (Januari)

Blowjob. Boy it can be good.

Business lunch. Or, well, everyone brings their own and we eat it together. All the colleagues. We eat our own separately prepared meals together. What if you could have a bring-your-own-food kinda party with all your business buddies, if you had something you could call business buddies that is. "See you tuesday noon, bring something and I'll do the same." Crisps for lunch. In Sweden that's preposterous.

Enström and all that

There is a little village in a beautiful part of the Swedish archipelago, about an hour's drive from town if you round down and have a liberal attitude towards speed restrictions. Then 20 minutes on a small ferry and suddenly you are there, on the north side.

Close by the ferry landing, there is a small camping with a small grocery store. The shoopkeeper is an immigrant from somewhere. The shop really isn't cheap, but it has an OK selection, and supporting the local business is important. After all, it is nice not to have to take the ferry every time you wanted a carton of milk and a couple of strawberries. The camping is pretty full in July, and that is the month that brings in all the bucks. On the other side of the camping is a couple of fields and some forest-y bits. Except for the village, there may be ten permanent residences. The rest is just cottages. There is a tiny stretch of asphalt somewhere, but the rest is dirt road.

Posten, the Swedish US Mail, has promised to deliver mail to all mail boxes in the Stockholm area every day, so every day, a car comes from the mainland to distribute the postcards and whatnots that is sent in the mail. The mailboxes are collected in little nests to make it easy to deliver. If the car would be late, the ferry is obliged to wait for it.

Engström's cabin is right where you want to put it. You can easily access the camping, the shop, and the ferry landing from there. Easy enough to do it in clogs on a sunny summer day. Or ride the bike. You hardly get on it before you're there. Three mailboxes are located down the road. They are yours.

Venus & Mars & all that crap

She comes by my work-place. I try not to involve myself in her being there, just press on as usual. She approaches me, says "Don't I get a hug?" I hug her. We are in each others' arms a while longer, a little extra bit closer. It feels nice. She sticks

Maybe he follows the stock market to keep tabs on his in neighborly spirit bought InTech stock, and how the market is in general. Engström is painting his cabin, throwing balls and sticks to the dog, contemplates life. He mends the fence. Goes by in his old Volvo with two-by-fours strapped to the roof. Talks to the dog about what is going on. And pretend as if the dog is rolling back smart responses.

And finally, you are the one to point to the cards and say in what column the next scene is taking place — at work or with the family or on vacation. Point to a player to take the initiative for the next scene. Let the players discuss a little if necessary, but less it better. Life is one of those things that happens regardless of how you plan it. So if they plan too much, you'll have to play God. Or chance.

End Game

When the 15 original scenes are played, the game enters the end game phase. Each player takes a card from the list and places it last in the column where you want to have your your "ending scene". It could look like this (gray cards are the replaced ones):

In this example, the work-aspect is a little longer, and that is totally OK. We do this to make it possible to connect the events to give a sense of closure, but in reality — much will be left hanging. And that is how we want it. If you want to emphasise this, you can even skip playing the last card — just to drive the point home — right before it is meant to be played.

Work

Setbacks

Sorrow

Sex

Get fired

Hangover

Death

Homes

Kids

Ferrari

Sickness

Break up

Accident

Vacation

Marriage

Kids

Love

Love

around (longer than necessary). I want to say "decide what it is you want, and I'll be here". But I don't. I Just think it. Then she is gone. And I just press on.

Techniques

The game uses character ownership and character pools. Each player will pick a character that is that player's "base character" — a character that no one else will

play. The remaining ten characters are placed in a character pool and can be played by anyone at any time. The same player doesn't need to play the same pool character always.

It is hard to really decide on a set of techniques for a game whose content is largely undecided before it is played. Form controls content — that's at least our belief — so we feel that we should leave form very much up to you and the players. For the premier of this game, we had an article in the con magazine "15 recipes from the jeep pantry", and relied on at least the GM reading this before the game. For the English release, we bundle this text with the game in a separate, less fancy, leaflet. If pressed for time, you should present these to the players and make a collaborative choice as to what to include and what not to.

But hey! We do want to push for these ones: playing subtle — as it is about everyday drama. Mapping the room to the game's reality — because there are many places that you may want to jump between in an agile fashion. Not everyone on the scene at the same time — watching is playing (and gives time to prepare for the next scene). Make sure everyone is on the same track — the game can be about so many things that if you don't talk about it beforehand, it will be all over the place making no one happy. Collaboration is everything. And role-playing is not about laughing.

West Lafayette & Stockholm Martin Brodén och Tobias Wrigstad, 2008

He thinks about it constantly. Has made up his mind, but doesn't dare say it. Because it'll make her sad. But also because when you say it (out loud), it really is true. Becomes real. "I'm accepting the job in the US. You're coming with me, right?" He knows she ain't gonna move, but this way, she is to blame also for what's gonna happen. I mean, the responsibility of sticking together is a shared one — right?

Birth(s)

He is taping her with a camcorder. He turns it on, zooms in on her face. Say it, Carina, he calls to his girlfriend. When the mother-in-law is visiting, his accent is somehow thicker. "You are becoming a grandmother", Carina says, slowly, but the woman doesn't make a sound. Dead quiet, as if she didn't get it. Or knows how to react. Then she starts to cry, first soft and silent, then loud and hard. Tears dripping down her old cheeks. Micke adjusts the camcorder, making sure he doesn't miss a single one of them. This will be another one of those family movies with a worse shaking camera than Lars Von Trier. "Did we surprise you now?", he says. It sounds like he is talking through a tin can in the crappy mic. "Did we surprise you now?", he repeats as she just keeps crying through Carina's attempts at comforting her.

One day, that child is going to clean out after its parents & throw that old video tape in a dumpster. ■

Feedback: tobias@jeepen.org & martin@jeepen.org. Feedback is greatly appreciated!

