

ØSTERGAARD

WRIGSTAD

# PREVIOUS OCCUPANTS



# PREVIOUS OCCUPANTS, ABOUT

Designed and written by Frederik Berg Østergaard and Tobias Wrigstad, Vi åker jeep. Layout by Frederik Berg Østergaard. Photos by Özgür Donmaz @ istockphoto.com.

# OUR PLAYTESTERS, TO WHOM WE ARE VERY THANKFUL

**1st playtest** (at GenCon 2009): James Brown (BF), Emily Care Boss (GF), Paula Dempsey (H), Danielle Lewon (W).

**2nd playtest** (at AlmuddenCon 2009): Anna-Karin Linder (W), Petter Karlsson (H), Fredrik von Post (BF), Anna Westerling (GF).

**3rd playtest** (at AlmuddenCon 2009): Emma Hansdotter (W), Daniel Krauklis (BF), Kristoffer Lindh (H), Miriam Lundqvist (GF).

**4th playtest** (at JulCon 2009, no GM): Martin Brodén (W), Petter Karlsson (BF), Joel Östlund (H), Tobias Wrigstad (GF)

**5th playtest** (at Dreamation 2010): Courtney Hopen (GF), Daniel Eison (BF), Julia Bond Ellingboe (W), Terry Hope Romero (H).

# GAME QUICK FACTS

**Participants:** 1 gamemaster and 4 players, preferably 2 men and 2 women, but it does not really matter.

**Duration:** 1–3 hours, all-inclusive

This edition March 2010



# INTRODUCTION

Previous occupants is a metaphorical scenario about coping with change in people. At face value, it is a ghost story about jealousy, trust and desire in two acts. It takes place in somewhere in the US in a relatively modern day setting, with two parallel stories set in two different times. At some point in the story the two merge, as the past invades the present.

The strongest theme in the game is how history repeats itself. To drive this point home, we apply several techniques from the jeepform toolbox: we model possession through swapping players for a single character; we advance the story through cuts between two stories played in parallel; and we use separate, mirrored playing spaces with some shared objects to reify the ramifications of the past in the present.

The game furthermore uses four rules to control the players' actions. These are introduced in the text.

# BACKGROUND

The idea to Previous Occupants came up during a 10-day roleplaying marathon in the summer of 2009 starting with Frederik and Tobias demoing jeepform in Bratislava, Slovakia, and ending up at GenCon, in the US. We had talked several times about creating a new proof-of-concept jeepform game that would better fit a roleplaying American public, content-wise, than the run-of-the-mill jeepform game. After throwing many ideas around, we eventually came up with the classic ghost story, closed-room drama that is previous occupants, and started rummaging through the toolbox to come up with interesting ways of playing it.

The result is an extremely tight game design, which is applicable to telling other stories as well, that allows for use of many interesting techniques and cuts, without damaging the flow of the game.



# SETTING UP THE GAME

The four players are divided into two **COUPLES**, one for each parallel story. In the past, we have a **HUSBAND** and **WIFE**, and in the present, a **BOYFRIEND** and **GIRLFRIEND**. We sometimes write the **OLD COUPLE** for the husband and wife and the **YOUNG COUPLE** for the boyfriend and girlfriend.

Briefly discuss limits, especially for physical play, and agree on a safe word if that feels applicable.

The physical playing space is divided into two equally sized areas arranged as mirror images of the same **MOTEL ROOM**. This is where the entire game will take place. Designate one the present, and one the past. Try to arrange the spaces to face each other as much as possible. Place a table adjacent to a wall and in the middle, so that half is in the past and half in the present. This is the **PROPS TABLE**.

The scenario contains a number of props that should be placed on the prop table. In play-tests, we have used: a knife, a gun, some rope, rat poison, a phone wire and a pair of very effective strangling hands. Last, place a hotel desk bell on the prop table easily reachable by both players and gamemaster. If you have nothing to represent one of more such items, you can simply make a note that says “knife” or “rat poison”, or use the canonical ball-point pen or paper cup. The prop table is meant to be inspiring rather than enabling, and players are free to bring whatever props they need into the game at any point in time.

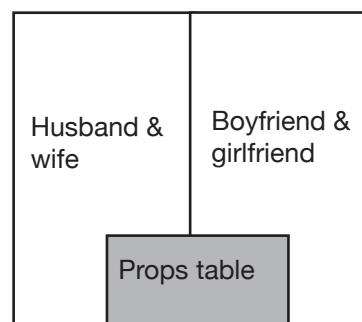
## Characters

Old couple

Young couple

Third couple that is 2 weeks away from having their first baby

## Figure of playing space



# GAME STRUCTURE

The couples play their stories in parallel in their respective playing spaces. The old couple's story takes place in the past and the young couple's in the present. Only one story is active at a time and focus shifts are triggered by ringing the bell placed on the prop table. Anyone can ring the bell at any time, but the gamemaster is the only one with a **RESPONSIBILITY** to do so to control the phasing. Note that a player in play can ring the bell to shift focus away from his time line.

When one story loses focus their play is frozen and the players become audience for the other one. When it regains focus, it does not need to continue exactly where it was frozen. Rather, the focus shift should be used to fast-forward over events that would otherwise progress too slowly, or are hard to play, like the sex scene.

The old couple's story is a classic story of a murder conducted in a jealous rage. The husband and wife take a motel room for an evening while driving home from somewhere.

The young couple's story is that of a Christian couple about to get engaged to be married. They are driving to a special place, where the boyfriend is going to propose. On their way there, they stay for one night in the motel room, but years later.

The first act explores the worlds of the two couples and their relationships and leads up to a turning point where the husband kills the wife. This is the end of Act One.

The premise of the second act is cemented by the first: the ghost of the husband is possessing the boyfriend and is looking to kill girlfriend. The ghost of the wife on the other hand is possessing the girlfriend and is looking to protect her host by killing the boyfriend possessed by her husband. Similar to tag-team wrestling, the players take turn controlling the same characters; when the husband's player plays the boyfriend, it is the ghost of the husband possessing him. When the boyfriend's player plays the boyfriend, the ghost is no longer in control. The same goes for the wife and girlfriend as well. Notably, the husband may not possess the girlfriend and the wife may not possess the boyfriend.

To change who plays a character, we suggest using a very clear signal, such as double-tapping the shoulder of the other player. Having a clear signal helps early on in the game but as the players get immersed in the game, the need for a clear signal generally diminishes. Note that a player "tag himself out" of active play in this way just as he can tag himself in.





# FIRST ACT

## §1

You may not  
leave the hotel  
room. Ever.

The first half of the game has the following two stories, played out in parallel.

The act starts with the old couple coming through the door of the motel room, rining the bell as they enter. It soon becomes obvious that their marriage is not going all that well. The husband is convinced that the wife is cheating on him and she finds it impossible to prove him wrong.

The theme of the old couple is **BUILDING THE RAGE**, whereas the theme of the young couple is **BUILDING THE PASSION**. Building the rage ends with a double homicide and building the passion ends with intercourse. These end scenes are played simultaneously and we cut back and forth between them to give a feeling of concurrent events. The discussion at the end of the game further discusses the contents of the stories of act one and how to instruct the players.

Building the rage happens through a number of steps, constantly escalation the tension and anger. Eventually, the story culminates with the husband killing the wife using one of the props from the prop table.

In the first and fourth playtest, the husband killed the wife by choking her. In the second and third, the wife was first tied up and subsequently knifed to death. In the first playtest, the husband's suicide happened through shooting himself and in the second, third and fourth, the husband slit his wrists. Working his way from killing the wife to killing himself generally took a couple of minutes of single play.

About five minutes into the game, the young couple checks into the motel room, ringing the bell. Remember, this freezes the old couple.

In the young couple story, the girlfriend knows that the boyfriend is going to propose to her as she has accidentally seen the ring. Not to ruin the moment, she is pretending not to know. Nevertheless, she has decided that tonight is the night when she is finally going to have sex with him—she's sure God won't mind. Their conversation is very sweet and passionate: dreams about the future, about leaving colleague, about finding a decent job, house, and family; baby names; cleaning out their respective closets; and wallow in the history of how they met, hooked up, and had their first kiss.

At one point, as the boyfriend goes to freshen up, the girlfriend sneaks a peak at the ring again, from his jacket pocket. When he emerges from the bathroom, she is already in the bed and tells him that this time she is not going to stop him.

The sex scene can be awkward, as this is a big thing for both of them. To avoid playing dry humping, the players should be instructed to be very close, take it slow, ask if this feels right, and use one of the cuts made by the gamemaster during the concurrent climaxes to fast-forward through the sex by saying "it is supposed to feel like this afterwards?" once their scene regains focus. The fall asleep in each other's arms.

At this point the old couple has just died. The husband now wakes up, and goes to take the place of the boyfriend on the bed. The wife and boyfriend walk "off-stage."

This is the end of the first act and the beginning of the second act. It is a good idea not to have a break at this point not to waste all the intensity from the murder. The second act begins by the boyfriend—now possessed by the husband—wakes up.

# SECOND ACT

The ghosts of the past possessing the couple of the present leads to a tug of war which builds up to a climax controlled by the players themselves. The idea for the second act is to build tension as the players take turns moving in and out of roles, coming closer to repeating the past and creating their own dramatic structure. This part of the game is completely open for the players to create. Will the wife revenge her murder by killing the boyfriend? And how will the girlfriend react to what she has done once she regains control of herself?

**§2** The ghosts' control over their hosts increase as the act progresses, as does the hosts' awareness of what is happening.

There are three different outcomes: History repeats itself—one character kills the other, and in some way, for example after possession stops, kills herself in panic, rage or self-hate; one character kills the other, and then leaves the motel room, or both characters leave the motel room.

**§3** The players control who possesses who by gently tapping the shoulder of another player to switch place. A ghost may only possess a character of the same gender. Note that you are allowed to tap yourself out of a scene. If something happens in the scene that you have a hard time incorporating into your character, perhaps because you are the possessed boyfriend, or perhaps you are not, swapping with your other player is a good way out.

The players are completely free to control the pacing of the second half of the game and are empowered by the swapping techniques to cleanly back out of a dangerous situation. For example, when the possessed man is holding a knife to stab the woman, the original player can simply tap his shoulder and, confused about his own actions, quickly hide the knife just before the woman turns around.

In the first playtest, we saw a beautiful scene where the young couple players were embracing, sobbing and proclaiming that they did not want to kill each other. The second after, both the ghost players tapped themselves into the game.

**§4** A ghost not possessing or a player whose character is possessed is still in play and may whisper to other players. "It is only me", "stop it!", physically prevent a player from moving in a certain direction, push her around or hand the other player something from the props table.





If both characters survived, then the circle is broken, and the room is set free. If so, the game ends here. If one of them dies, history has repeated itself, and the game continues.

As the gamemaster overtly resets the props table by gathering weapons and putting them back in their place, he checks in the players of the old couple into the motel room (use whichever physical scene you want), as a third set of characters, and essentially restarts act two from the top. If both characters in the young couple died, both the boyfriend and girlfriend players are ghosts. If only one of them died, he or she is the only ghost. Play with the new couple and new ghosts for a few minutes, until the new ghost or ghosts start to influence the new occupants. Then wait for a good point to end the game.

## SECRETS

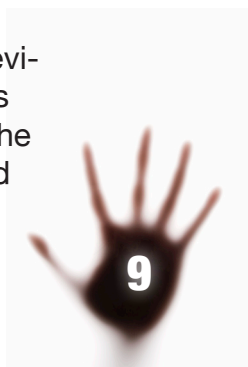
It is possible to play the game without disclosing to the players that some of them will become ghosts and invade the other's play. While some may regard keeping this a secret as a good thing, our design premiers flow—explaining the possession mechanism can be tricky and might cause a long break in the game which loses some of the energy from the murder scene. Thus, we feel that all instructions should be given before the game starts, but as a gamemaster it is your call. One thing that can be kept secret is that the husband takes the place of the boyfriend already from the start of the act.

## BUILDING THE RAGE

Building the rage is relatively simple—it is pure escalating conflict. Its biggest difficulty is to not go through it too quickly, but allow the rage to be built up slowly. Rather than screaming at each other from the start, have the players create tension and only after a short while acknowledging it. Insinuations and suspicion are key, like “can I look after my car keys in your purse” etc. Make the conflict happen in steps, like the husband first coming clean about his suspicions, and then let the woman fire back about all his faults. Maybe the husband hits her and she declares that their marriage is over then and there, which prompts the killing to make her stay. Maybe she starts teasing him with how good her lover is (real or imaginary) which makes him blow a gasket. Game-master input here is generally only needed to speed things along when players do things too quickly.

## BUILDING THE PASSION

Building the passion is difficult in relation to building the rage. Since there is no real conflict, playtesters were tempted to speed things up and quickly cut to the actual proposal, which is fine, although it is not meant to happen in the motel room. To help the players along, give them topics to talk about. DREAMS about the future, like how they would like to live, children, names of future children, marriage, and work. Talking about the PAST, like the boyfriend's previous relation to her cousin, reliving how they fell in love, their first kiss, and his first fondling of her breasts. Scenes in the PRESENT could be the arrival to the room, girlfriend making boyfriend's lunch, taking sneak peaks at the ring, and the awkward sex scene.



# BREAKING RULE ONE

Notably, not having history repeat itself requires breaking Rule I. This happened during our first playtest, and is perfectly fine. In our experience, the players respect rules as long as they make sense. The gamemaster should of course open up for breaking the rules if necessary, but not talk about it excessively.

# PACING AND CUTTING

Players concerned about the timing and pacing of the first act can be helped by the gamemaster ringing the bell thrice when he wants the players to start wrapping things up. This could happen after for example one hour, but it is probably better to align the pacing with what is happening in the game and e.g., force the young couple to move forward to the sex scene as the gamemaster senses that the old couple is about to start their double murder scene.

Remind the players that they are allowed to advance the story in-between the cuts, and maybe even test-run it with players that are nervous or uncertain. Also remind them that they are allowed both to ring the bell to gain focus as well as to give it away. Obviously, good placement of the bell in the playing space is key to make this happen.

Cutting back and forth between the parallel times is a delicate task that requires a sense of rhythm. Players with a larping tradition are more likely to dislike aggressive cutting, whereas freeform-savvy players are likely to pick up on aggressive cutting and increase the tension of the scenes.

# PROPS ON THE PROPS TABLE

The props table should hold a number of items that can be used by the players to kill each other. Naturally, they should be tied to the setting in which the stories play out. If it is unreasonable for a pistol to appear in the motel room, it does not belong on the props table.

Suggested props for the prop table are for example: a knife, rope, rat poison, a blunt object, a bottle, a gun. Except for these weapons, we suggest also placing a bible on the props table with some well-chosen bookmarks (fidelity, change, ghosts, sex), and one, max two other items to inspire the players' creativity.

If act two is restarted with a third couple, the gamemaster should immediately reset the props table in a very overt manner.



# CHECK-LIST FOR RUNNING PREVIOUS OCCUPANTS

Divide the playing space into two separate, mirror-images of the motel room with a table as the only furniture existing in both rooms. Make sure the table does not obstruct the view, even if players are on the floor.

Divide the four players into two couples, one married couple and a younger christian couple that is about to be engaged to be married.

Go through the story of the game, what is supposed to happen for the two couples in act one, and how it culminates. Explain the prop table and the bell, and make sure to note that anyone can ring the bell at any time.

Talk about the playing sex and violence and what the players are OK with. Tell them that if they wish to fast-forward through the sex scene, they can simply use the phrase “is it supposed to feel like this afterwards?” after a focus shift.

Instruct the husband to take the boyfriend’s place after act one, and the wife and boyfriend to leave the stage.

Describe the techniques for playing possession and what a player can do when he is not possessing a character. Especially note that it is OK to swap yourself out of play, as that is one technique that is easy to forget.

During act one, provide some help for the young couple to play their somewhat more difficult and conflict-less scenes. Make the boyfriend doubt that the girlfriend will accept his proposal, make them argue about baby names, etc. If necessary, use the bird-in-ear technique to whisper thoughts into the heads of the characters, or have them give monologues about their fear of rejection, dreams of the future, fear to have sex, etc.

To end act one, simply ring the bell several times over. Then instruct the husband to take the place of the boyfriend, let the players breathe for 30 seconds, and then start act two by telling them how the boyfriend wakes up.

Act two regularly does not need much gamemaster input. Some players may need help with pacing and sometimes you may need to resolve a confusing character swapping. Mostly, you can concentrate on e.g., playing music, and give input bird-in-ear style. Sometimes, you may have to force the players by handing them an item from the props table.

If you are a player, deciding when act two has ended can be a bit subtle unless both characters die or decide to escape. Thus, as a gamemaster, you will make this call and end the game or check in the third couple if applicable. This part is meant to come as a surprise to the players, but since they are now experts in playing this game, it is not a problem for them to handle.



Take possession over a character  
by tapping the shoulder of its player.  
The player may tap out of character.

Control over a host increases over  
time—as does the hosts' awareness  
of what is happening.

Non-possessing players are in play:  
whisper, scream, move objects, push  
other players.

You may not leave  
the hotel room.

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