

In your hands

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Photo by Alessandro Savalli

“People get used to anything. The less you think about your oppression, the more your tolerance for it grows. After a while, people just think oppression is the normal state of things. But to become free, you have to be acutely aware of being a slave.”

Assata Shakur

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Introduction

This is a game about losing control over ones own body, about powerlessness, oppression, injustice, and the bittersweet yearning for freedom.

Expressions like “My hands are tied”, “Bite your tongue” or “I’m up to my neck in this”, indicate just how much we link many experiences to our physical body. “Your body is a temple”, says the bible, and perhaps we should treat it as such. The question is what happens to us as human beings, when the control of our own bodies is taken over by an external authority – when our country forces us to go to war, we are put in prison, or forced to carry children to an husband we did not choose? What happens when our body is no longer in our hands?



Photo by Rafael Peñaloza

The scenario in short:

- 4 players and a game master
- There are two role types in this scenario: Characters and “Servants of Oppression” (SoO). The players will take turns in these roles.
- SoOs are the physical manifestation of the shame, fear, resignation, feelings of pressure or powerlessness that can happen to us in a situation where we’ve lost our freedom to choose.
- How it’s played: Two players take the roles of the characters, while the other two players hold back, carry, push, pull or put pressure on the bodies of the characters in such a way that the emotional experience and expressions are strengthened by the physical sensations created.
- The scenario is played in three acts; *Farewell my friend*, *Letters from the battlefield* and *Reunion*.
- Narrative structure: The two characters are best friends. They are both, in separate ways, going into a life situation where they will lose their freedom.

About the scenario

Here comes a short overview of the steps in running the game. As a game master it is your role to facilitate this process. The whole process will take around 2 hours.

1. Starting circle - 10 min

Give all the players a chance to say their names and if they have any physical injuries the other players need to be aware of. As GM you should then brief them about the game. The game structure is completely transparent, so there is no reason to not say something about how it's played and what the players can expect. Be sure to answer all their questions.

2. Working on the two characters – 5 minutes

The players should start by teaming up two and two and keep this team for the whole scenario. In their pairs they should spend around 5 minutes working on their character. See chapter *The characters* for more information about this.

3. Warming up – 40 minutes

This is a scenario where the body plays an important role. We don't always feel safe to touch or hold a strangers body. It is therefore important to do some simple physical exercises, in order for the players to get comfortable in this new situation, before the scenario starts. You will find these under the chapter *Warm up*.

4. The scenario – 40 minutes

The scenario is three acts long, with the middle act divided into 4 short sections. For more details see the chapter *The Game*.

5. Ending – 10 min

Round up by gathering together in a circle. Let everyone share something about his or her experience.

If you have any feedback about the game, please write me at: karin@ozma.se. I'm hoping to hear about your experience!

The characters

There are only two characters in this game, and what we know about them are the following things:

- They are best friends
- They are both around 16 – 19 years old.
- They are, in separate ways, about to go into a life situation in which they will lose their freedom and they have so far keep this a secret to each other.

(Be aware that in this scenario sickness doesn't count as something that takes away freedom, since the focus is on playing out oppression by external authorities).



Photo by Zavarykin Sergey

Pick a situation

Start by letting the players pair up. On page 8 you will find a number of possible situations that the characters could be facing (you can add more!). Cut this page into small notes and let the two pairs pick one each randomly. Be sure they keep the result a secret! But if any of the pairs are unhappy with what they got, they can either pick another one, or make something up by themselves. But be sure that the two pairs have two separate situations to work with.

Answer some questions

Next step is for the pairs to decide the following things for each character (see questions 1-4). The first two answers should then be shared between the two pairs, but make sure they keep the last two answers a secret!

1. **Name?**
2. **Hopes and dreams?**

3. Why is this happening right now?
4. What feelings does the character have for the best friend (love, envy, sexual attraction, etc.)?

Inspiration

If you want you can read these two poems to the players to give them some inspiration (and take note of all the references to the body).

“The friend” ***by Marge Piercy***

We sat across the table.
he said, cut off your hands.
they are always poking at things.
they might touch me.
I said yes.

Food grew cold on the table.
he said, burn your body.
it is not clean and smells like sex.
it rubs my mind sore.
I said yes.

I love you, I said.
That’s very nice, he said
I like to be loved,
that makes me happy.
Have you cut off your hands yet?

“Prayer of a Soldier in France” ***by Joyce Kilmer***

My shoulders ache beneath my pack
(Lie easier, Cross, upon His back).

I march with feet that burn and smart
(Tread, Holy Feet, upon my heart).

Men shout at me who may not speak
(They scourged Thy back and smote Thy
cheek).

I may not lift a hand to clear
My eyes of salty drops that sear.
(Then shall my fickle soul forget
Thy agony of Bloody Sweat?)

My rifle hand is stiff and numb
(From Thy pierced palm red rivers come).

Lord, Thou didst suffer more for me
Than all the hosts of land and sea.

So let me render back again
This millionth of Thy gift. Amen.

Examples of situations

Cut these out and let the pairs choose one each.

Arranged marriage
Being sent to war
Being put in prison
Having to work in a coal mine
Becoming a prostitute
Becoming an “office slave”
Becoming a monk or a nun
Becoming a refugee
Becoming a housewife
Being put in an insane asylum
Having to work in a factory
Becoming a symbolic leader (with no power, only obligations)
Being put in a boarding school

The game

Acts

1. Farewell my friend

This is the beginning of the game. The two characters are young and full of life. They meet in their secret place - a hiding place they have used since they were little kids playing together. They both know they might never see each other again, and they each carry a secret that they long to reveal to their friend. The secret is the reason why they will be separated. Until now they have both been afraid of telling each other the truth. Now is the time to do it, but there is fear, shame and guilt to stop it from happening. The act will end when at least one of the characters has revealed his or her secret. The act starts by the two characters sitting facing each other and one of them says: "I'm so glad we could meet today".

Play time: 10 min.

2. Letters from the battle field

This act consists of a written correspondence between the two characters. Four letters will be played out, and the act is therefore divided into four sections. A letter is played out through a monologue where the active player can move around the room to illustrate what he or she was feeling when writing the letter. The receiver of the letter is also supposed to be active during a monologue, but only as a silent ear that listens – a symbol of the memory of that person. The player playing this role should follow the active player doing the monologue, but without touching or using words. The other two players are both SoOs working on the player doing the monologue.

Before beginning the act the players should be instructed to often mention parts of their body in the monologues, like: "My heart still feels light when I think of you", "I can hardly breathe when..." or "My whole body shakes with anger".

The act is over when all four letters have been played out.

Play time: 12 min (3 min per monologue).

3. Reunion

In this last act the two characters meet again. Three years have passed since they last met. For a little while they have both managed to escape what ever it is they are running from. But what will happen now? Will they find each other broken, unable to break free from their situation? Or is there still hope? In this act the players decide if the characters are able to take control over their situation. This is done by resisting or refusing to yield to the touch of the SoOs. But it's perfectly fine to "play to lose", meaning to play a broken character who is losing his or her grip over the body, resulting in a complete surrender to the SoOs. The act is over when the GM feels it's time to cut. The act starts with the two characters standing facing each other and one of them says: "Look at you!".

Play time: 10 min.

Instructions on how to play

The role of the Servant of Oppression (SoO) is to intensify the physicality of the game. The manner in which to do this should differ slightly between the three acts.

Act 1:

In the first act both characters can move around freely. They are in control of their own bodies. The SoO should use touch in a subtle way to mark the feelings of the characters. Both characters will feel held back and tense by shame, fear, nervousness, or guilt in this act, which is something for the SoOs to play on, but the SoOs should make sure that they don't disturb the flow of play too much at this point. To give further material for the SoOs to use, the GM can intervene at any point to ask a player for a short monologue about how he or she is experiencing the body. This is done by the GM putting a hand on the shoulder of one of the characters and simply saying the word: "Body".

Examples for the SoOs to do:

- Give gentle pressure on head, shoulders, arms, chest or back
- Give gentle pressure to the solar plexus and stomach
- Making the player out of balance by pushing them gently
- Putting a hand gently over the mouth, eyes or ears for a short time only
- Pulling an arm or a leg gently.
- Gentle poking or pinching to disturb the characters

Act 2:

In this act the SoOs are free to do more drastic things to the player's body in order to illustrate the pressure the characters under, and to enhance the feelings being portrayed. The player can of course fight back at times, but will not win during this act. In this act two players will be the SoOs working on the character doing the monologue. This gives more possibilities!

Examples for the SoOs to do:

- Giving more heavy pressure to different body parts
- Making the player unable to speak or to see for up to 20 seconds
- Lifting and carrying the player around
- Restraining the player's movement by locking the arms, legs or head to a position or to the floor
- Piggybacking the player to make him or her feel like carrying a burden

Act 3:

In this act a stronger fight might occur between the SoOs and the players. This is good, but make sure not to over do it. The focus should still be on the play between the characters. But the SoOs should definitely challenge the players in some way during this act. If a player chooses to keep resisting strongly, after a while the SoO should surrender and let the player go free. It's okay for the characters to help each other breaking free (or not if that's how you choose to play it).

Examples for the SoOs to do:

- Pushing the player towards a part of the room
- Dragging the player to the floor

Warm up

1. Shake it loose – 20 sec

All players should stand up and start shaking their bodies, gently at first and then gradually more vigorously. Open your mouths let the jaw drop, breath and make sounds while exhaling and shaking.

2. Back rub – 5 min

The players should pair up to give each other a simple back rub or massage. One person stands relaxed with closed eyes while the other starts putting gentle pressure with both hands to the head, shoulders, back, arms, hands, legs and feet. A bit of squeezing is ok and rubbing when it feels needed. It's important that the whole backside is included from head to feet. To end make a few long swipes of the back, lightly and swiftly, from the top of the head towards the ground. Then shift roles.

3. Follow me – 5 min

Pair up. One player should move around the room with closed eyes; twist and turn, roll on the floor, and so on, while the other player just follows as close as possible, touching him/her as little as possible but making sure he/she is safe. Change roles.

4. Examples of touch level 1 – 5 min

Pair up. In the pairs one person should stand still and just relax. The other person should do the following things:

- Apply gentle pressure to the head
- Apply gentle pressure to the shoulders
- Apply gentle pressure to the arms
- Apply gentle pressure to the chest and back
- Apply gentle pressure to the stomach and lower back

During the exercise the receiving player can comment and give feedback at any time. Change roles and do the same.

Then move on to:

- Putting a hand gently over the mouth, eyes or ears for a short time only
- Holding back an arm or a leg gently while the other player tries to move it
- Apply gentle pressure to the solar plexus (stand behind and use both hands on solar plexus and press the body against you)
- Gentle poking or pinching
- Making the player out of balance by pushing them gently

Change roles again and in the end give each other feedback on how this felt.

5. Examples of touch level 2 – 5 min

Take a quick walk around the room, breath, shake loose and then make new pairs. After each of the following exercises give each other feedback on how it felt:

- Giving more heavy pressure to different body parts
- Lifting and carrying the player around

- Restraining the player's movement by locking the arms, legs or head to a position or to the floor
- Piggybacking the player to make him or her feel like carrying a burden

Change roles.

6. Examples of touch level 3 – 5 min

Take a quick walk around the room, breath, shake loose and then make new pairs. After each of the following exercises give each other feedback on how it felt:

- One player should push or drag the other player towards a part of the room while he/she tries to resist it
- One player should push or drag the other player down to the floor while he/she tries to resist it
- One player should hold the other player in a firm grip while he/she tries to break free

Players can experiment with how much resistance or force they give in these exercises. Screaming is okay, in fact be sure the players try it! Change roles after each exercise.

7. Using “Brake” - 3 min

If the physical challenges in this game get too much for a player they are encourage to use the safety word: *Brake*. If a player says Brake at any point in the game, it's a signal to the other players and especially the SoO not to stop playing, but to ease up on the physical touch and give some space. In pairs players should try this out together. One player should give some quite heavy weight by pulling or pressing the other players body, and it's up to the other player to say Brake at one point. Change roles a few times.

8. Emotional body – 5 min

Pair up. Now it's one person's role to start talking about the body while describing a strong emotion. Choose the emotion (passion, depression, anger, love, fear, fatigue etc.) and start talking. The partner should pick up on the body parts named and try to emphasise these by using touch. Try at least two different emotions. After a few minutes switch roles and then end the exercise by giving each other feedback.

9. Ending – 3 min

End the warm up by letting everyone for one last time shake and jump around the room for a few minutes. Encourage them to make funny sounds! The very last thing they do should be to close their eyes and take three long breaths together.

NOW IT'S TIME FOR PLAY!