
THE LOSS

A SHORT FREEFORM GAME BY PETER FALLESEN
FASTAVAL 2013

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THANKS: SIMON STEEN HANSEN, KRISTIAN
BACH PETERSEN, KRISTOFFER APOLLO,
DANNY WILSON, ASBJØRN OLSEN, TROELS
KEN PEDERSEN, LIZZIE STARK, ANDERS
FROST BERTELSEN AND ANN KRISTINE
ERIKSEN

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INTRODUCTION

The Loss is a story about what happens when the world betrays you. When the life you were supposed to live is stolen before it even began. When you suddenly wake one morning and realize that you have lost the person you thought you should have been. It is a story about the things that inhabit the silent spaces between those who grieve.

The Loss centers on Morten and Lene, who have lost their child. They desperately try to get their lives together and overcome their grief. The game does not focus on what happened to their child and whose – if any one's – fault it was. Instead, focus is on the dimensions of loss that Morten and Lene both have suffered: The loss of child, the loss of the life they thought they would live together, and loss of the identities they both thought were theirs to keep.

The Loss is a short game that plays out through seven scenes. In four scenes we follow Morten and Lene's attempt to overcome their grief. In the remaining three scenes we get glimpses of Morten and Lene's life before tragedy intervened – the time even before the child was born, when everything still was bright and sunny. This is a tragic story with very few silver linings, where the scenes from the past serve to underline just how much Morten and Lene have lost. Yet, it might be possible for Morten and Lene to accept the loss they have suffered at the end of the game, thereby allowing them to move on with their lives. In a way *The Loss* is also a story about rising from the ashes of tragedy and accepting the grief.

THE LOSS AND THE ONE WHO IS NOT THERE ANYMORE

The game has four central roles: **Morten**, **Lene**, **The Loss**, and **The one who is not there anymore**.

The Loss is the manifestation of all the things that has changed between Morten and Lene following the death of their child. It is the telling silences across the dinner table, and the reproachful glances cast at each other in the bathroom mirror at bed time. The player who plays *The Loss* aims to emphasize how things between Morten and Lene no longer are what they used to be.

The one who is not there anymore is the remnant of the child who once was in Morten and Lene's life. It is the bits and pieces of hopes and dreams still hanging in the air between them – lingering memories of a life once lived, and of the way things used to be. The player who plays *The one who is not there anymore* aims to emphasize the personal consequences of Morten and Lene's loss, and remind them of the people that they both used to be.

The Loss highlights the thing that Morten and Lene have lost in their relationship with each other, whereas **The one who is not there anymore** highlights Morten and Lene's individual losses. *The Loss* is the painful and concrete in the present, while *The one who is not there anymore* are the bittersweet memories of the time when the child was still alive. This mean that *The Loss* is the villain of the story (to the extent that this game has a villain), whilst *The one who is not there anymore* is a more ambiguous character. This is also evident from the character descriptions.

YOUNGER MORTEN AND YOUNGER LENE

The two players who play *The Loss* and *The one who is not there anymore* will, besides playing the two meta-roles, also play **youngerMorten** and **youngerLene** in the three scenes that take place in the past, before the child was even born. These scenes serve to provide more emotional weight to the scenes in the present, by contrasting the present with the happiness of the past.

present**Morten** and present**Lene** is also part of the scenes in the past, but only as commentators and spectators.

THE FIVE STAGES OF GRIEF

The Loss bases the narrative on the theory of the five stages of grief. As author I have no opinion with regard to the theory's validity, I only use it as a dramatic structure.

The theory states that grief proceeds through five stages. The first stage is **denial**. Here you refuse to acknowledge that the event causing grief even has taken place.

The next stage is **anger**, where you feel that the event was unfair. This leads to aggression towards others who either are perceived as the perpetrator of the event or as a suitable surrogate.

Once it becomes clear that anger and blame do not have the desired effect, you enter the stage of **bargaining**, where you try to negotiate by giving something in return for cancelling out whatever happened – e.g. wishing yourself dead in place of the one you have lost.

Once you realize that this option is not viable you enter **depression**. Here you have realized that life is never going to be as it once was, and which this realization comes a loss of meaning. The grief takes away your joie de vivre and vigor.

The last stage is **acceptance**, where you face that fact that life must go on, that the world has changed, and that you have to change with it. This does not mean that the pain and sorrow go away – instead, you learn to live with them and make the experience part of who you are now.

It is these five stages that you and players have to bring Morten and Lene through. The game focuses on transitions between stages instead of playing out each stage.

THE SCENES

The game consists of seven scenes. In four of the scenes we follow Morten and Lene after their loss, and in the three other scenes we experience them in the past, before the child was born. The two sets of scenes are meant to contrast each other – sorrow in presence vs. the past's anticipatory joy. You can find the thorough scene guide on page 14.

Scene 1: From denial to anger – present.

Morten have been out shopping for dinner, while it is Lene's turn to do the cooking. He has once again bought food for three persons instead of two.

Scene 2: Conception – past.

Morten and Lene are lying in bed post-coitus. Lene has just become pregnant, though they of course do not know yet.

Scene 3: From anger to bargaining– present.

Morten and Lene are in IKEA looking at home office furniture. However, the soon-to-be office was once a nursery and their discussion is not really about furniture.

Scene 4: I'm pregnant – past.

Two blue lines appear on the pregnancy test while Morten and Lene watch.

Scene 5: From bargaining to depression – present.

There might be white table cloth and other people to do the dishes – but there is nothing to talk about.

Scene 6: Decorating the nursery – past.

Morten paints while Lene support the growing stomach and chooses the colors.

Scene 7: From depression to accept – present.

Barnaby solves another murder on the television screen. At the same time, Morten and Lene slowly find their voices and perhaps each other again.

GAME MECHANICS

There are two aspects of the game that are supported by game mechanics. First, the players are not allowed to talk about whom the child was or what happened to it. Second, the grief manifests itself physically, with the players providing each other with the physical experience.

WE DO NOT TALK ABOUT IT

Grief is always personal. It is an intangible concept that you cannot truly describe or name. Morten and Lene do not talk about what happened. In terms of game mechanics this means that the players are not allowed to describe (i) *who the child was*, (ii) *why the child is not there anymore*, and (iii) *who is really to blame for what has happened*. The rule is: **You do not talk about the child that was.**

YoungerMorten and youngerLene are free to talk about the child they are going to have in the scenes taking place in the past, and presentMorten and presentLene can comment on this. The players are however not allowed to define the child that actually was a part of Morten and Lene's life.

PHYSICAL PLAY

Physical contact between players is a central mechanic in *The Loss*. Both *The one who is not there anymore* and *The Loss* can put weight on Morten and Lene's shoulders, push them, pull them apart, and the like. The physical play puts emphasis on *The one who is not there anymore* and *The Loss*' narrative function: to underline the void between Morten and Lene, and to add leverage to the life that Morten and Lene do not live anymore. The guidelines for the mechanic can be found in the character descriptions for *The one who is not there anymore* and *The Loss*. It is important to prepare all players for the physical element of the game, so talk with them about it and make sure to use the warm up exercises.

The actual use of the physical play is very much in the players' hands, and they must use their own intuition in order to read each other. As **examples** of physical play, you can mention that *The Loss* can hang his or her body weight on Morten or Lene's shoulders when they feel grief, or push or softly jab at them when they fight

with each other. As an opposite, *The one who is not there anymore* can comfort someone by taking their hand, or try to make mom and dad stay together by clinging to the leg of the one who is about to leave the room.

The players should not be violent towards each other; instead they should apply moderate physical pressure (to borrow a euphemism for the perverse terminology of torture). As game master you can give them coaching prior to starting the game, but after the game starts it is up to the players to read each other and keep their own limits in mind.

THE CHARACTERS

There are four characters in *The Loss*: Morten, Lene, The Loss and The one who is not there anymore. They make up two sets.

ABOUT MORTEN AND LENE

Morten

Morten is a priest and **was** a very calm man. The loss has made him afraid of conflict to such an extent that even the thought of confrontation tends to sicken him. He has lost his faith in God and in himself. He used to handle tough situation in a calm manner – now he acts frantic and insecure.

Lene

Lene is the head of human resources in a large company, and **used to be** overflowing with joy and zest for life. Instead she is now angry and instrumental towards others. She has always been direct and goal-oriented, but she has lost her sense of humor, good spirits, and love of the small things in life. She used to brighten other people's lives, but now she only darkens her own.

MORTEN AND LENE AS COMMENTATORS

Morten and Lene partake as commentators in the three scenes that take place in the past. They are watching from the sideline, and can comment on what happens in the scene, but they cannot directly interact with their younger selves. Instead they can supply contrast to the “joy of what is to come” that younger Morten and younger Lene feel.

THE LOSS AND THE ONE WHO IS NOT THERE ANYMORE

The Loss

As one of the game's two meta-role, The Loss emphasizes the things that have changed between Morten and Lene. It is The Loss that comments, when there once more is pointy silence across the dinner table between Morten and Lene, and it is The Loss that hangs

heavy on Morten's shoulders when Lene wants to turn the nursery into an office. The Loss constitutes the emptiness that now exists between Morten and Lene.

The one who is not there anymore

The one who is not there anymore is the remnant of the child that used to be in Morten and Lene's lives. It is the reminder of the people Morten and Lene used to be. It is the soft sounds of crying when mom and dad are fighting, but also the little warm hand that creeps into yours when you are at your lowest. *The Loss* emphasizes the emptiness between Morten and Lene, while *The one who is not there anymore* is a more bittersweet role that both causes sadness but also brings back good memories.

YOUNGER MORTEN AND YOUNGER LENE

The Loss and *The one who is not there anymore* play youngerMorten and youngerLene in the three scenes in the past. The younger versions of Morten and Lene are, like the scenes in themselves, characterized by innocence and a zest for life. YoungerMorten and youngerLene is a contrast to the present lives of Morten and Lene.

CASTING

Morten

Give Morten to either the loudest player or the least experienced of the bunch, depending on your gut. You can use the character to either curb a player, who otherwise takes up too much room, or to include an insecure player through the interaction with Lene.

Lene

Lene can be given to most players, but avoid giving her to the loudest player, he or she might end up taking too much space. Consider a player who is quick in the reply but not loud.

The Loss

The Loss should preferably be given to a player who are use to be the game master. It is a role that needs a player with a good overview and flair in order to not disrupt the flow of the scenes. You should also seek to cast a person the other players feel comfortable

with, since *The Loss* is going to have a fair amount of physical contact with especially Morten and Lene.

The one who is not there anymore

Cast a player who seems hooked on playing low key and providing dramatically timed but understated lines at the right time. Preferably someone experienced, who is good at reading the scenes.

THE GAME MASTER'S ROLE

Your primary role as game master is to set and cut scenes. *The Loss* consists of seven sharply set scenes. Each has a clear opening line that starts the scene and sets the theme. It is your job to make sure that the players are properly briefed when entering a scene, because when the scene is running the players hold most of the defining power over the narrative. Therefore, your primary task once the scene starts flowing is to find the proper place to cut it.

TO CUT A SCENE

The Loss is a game where the players should arrive at their own interpretations of what has happened in Morten and Lene's lives. You should reflect this in the way you cut the scenes. There is no reason to let the scene go on until everything is played out. Try instead to cut "on the button" – i.e. at the point, where it is clear how the scene will end. It makes for a better and more dynamic game if you cut right after the apology than after everybody has hugged and we have seen that all is well.

WARM UP

Start by talking to the players about loss and grief, and explain the game's premise to them by describing how sorrow is personal and something you move through. Briefly run through the stages of grief and explain that the players are going to play out the transitions.

The game uses physical contact as part of the game mechanic. Hence, you need to make sure the players are physically comfortable with each other and know to respect each other's boundaries. This is also part of the warm up.

#1: Let the players greet each other and slowly become more comfortable with one another. First, ask them to shake hands like they are meeting for the first time. Second, make them greet each other with a warm handshake like they are old friends. Third, let them say hello to each other with a hug like they are the oldest of friends.

#2: The next part of the warm up aims to get the players on the same wave length, so they are able to read each other correctly doing the game. Ask the players to form a circle and count to 15 as a group. They are not allowed to coordinate before hand, they have to count out loud, and if two or more say the same number at the same time, they have to start over.

#3: The third and last part of the warm up addresses the players' associations with the theme of the game. Start by asking them to describe the most important person, pet, or object in their lives. They can decide for themselves whether they want to make something up or use something from their real lives. Ask how the person or object affects their everyday life, what they would like to do with their life, and how the object or person helps define who they are. Then ask how their life would look if they lost that person or object. What would change? What would stay the same?

SCENE CATALOGUE

1. FROM DENIAL TO ANGER

At home in Morten and Lene's open kitchen. The empty high chair stands in the corner.

Morten has once more bought ingredients enough for three people and Lene, who is in charge of the cooking today, has just realized it. *The one who is not there anymore* watches them while sitting on the kitchen table. *The Loss* is standing in the way in front of the refrigerator.

The scene starts when Lene looks into the shopping bag and sees three filets of fish, no two. "Have you bought food for three again?"

2. CONCEPTION

YoungerMorten and youngerLene lie naked and sweating in bed. Inside youngerLene's uterus has a single spermatozoa penetrated the egg; Lene is pregnant.

Morten and Lene stand at the end of the bed, observing.

The scenen starts with youngerLene saying: "I think that that hit the spot."

3. FROM ANGER TO BARGAINING

Buying home office furniture in IKEA. But this is not really about home office furniture.

Morten and Lene are disagreeing about the color of the office chair [Volmar]. *The Loss* is slowly rotating on a blue version of the chair. *The one who is not there* are jumping up and down in a sofa in the neighboring installation, trying to get attention. Between Morten and Lene is a white desk [Micke].

The scene start with Lene, who looks at Morten, and exclaims: "But what color do you like?"

4. I'M PREGNANT

At home. In the bathroom. YoungerLene is sitting with the white pregnancy test in her hand. She looks up at the youngerMorten. A smile blossoms on her face. Morten and Lene look on from the edge of the bathtub.

YoungerLene exclaims: "*It is blue.*"

5. FROM BARGAINING TO DEPRESSION

Candle light. White table cloth. Other people to do the dishes. Nothing to talk about.

Morten and Lene are dining out. A date. An attempt to return to life as it used to be. But they have nothing to talk about. They try again and again to reboot the conversation. *The Loss* and *The one who is not there anymore* are sitting eating desserts at the neighboring table.

Morten looks at Lene. The scene starts when he a bit too loud asks: "*Then what is it that you want from life?*"

6. DECORATING THE NURSERY

They are painting the soon-to-be nursery. YoungerMorten are in charge of the paintbrush while youngerLene supports her growing belly and watches him work. A forest green fleck of paint blossoms on her belly. YoungerMorten has paint on his nose.

Morten and Lene sit in corner and riffle through a box with unused toys.

YoungerLene looks at youngerMorten: "*What should we name him if it's a boy?*"

7. FROM DEPRESSION TO ACCEPTANCE

Saturday night. The dishes have been cleaned. Midsummer Murders on the television screen. Morten and Lene are sitting on the couch, *The one who is not there anymore* sitting between them. *The Loss* is watching from a lounge chair.

Barnaby has just been shown a new corpse onscreen. Morten and Lene's relationship are perhaps being revived in the living room.

The scene starts when Lene reaches across *The one who is not there anymore* and takes Morten's hand. She asks: "*Should we stay together?*"

THE END

DESCRIPTION

The printer wakes, and one by one, ejects the thesis pages. She stretches, stands up and walks behind him. He smiles, puts the vestment away, and follows her into the bedroom.

Seven years later, soft jazz streams from the stereo. The door to the nursery is closed. Morten and Lene try to ignore the empty high chair and eat their dinner in silence.

“The Loss” explores sorrow, what it means to lose oneself, and the losses that cut you in ways that words cannot describe. It also examines how to move through sorrow to the other side. The narrative permits the unsaid to remain unsaid, and plays out largely in the players’ heads, while the underlying physical game mechanics help the game to put real weight on the players’ shoulders, since sometimes emotional pain feels like a punch to the gut.

Duration: 2 hours

Number of players: 4

Genre: Domestic tragedy with a small light at the end of the tunnel

Type of players: You enjoy continuing the story in your head while gut-punched with emotion, and sometimes, playing abstract entities. The game mechanics entail some physical elements, but do so safely.

Type of game master: The game master is both director and redeemer. You will set and cut scenes, pace the players, and try to help Morten and Lene rise from the ashes of their loss like a phoenix.

About the author: Peter's view of the world is somewhat askew. He makes games that aim for a lasting impact on players. At the moment directors Pedro Almodóvar and Jim Jarmusch, and an array of young Danish female minimalistic authors inspire him.

MORTEN

Morten remembers the exact moment when God left him. He sat alone in the nursery. Lene was once again working late. The apartment was so quite. The silence slowly penetrated him. The calm core inside – the bedrock of his faith – vanished. Nothing was left, only emptiness.

Morten is a priest and was a very calm man. The loss has made him afraid of conflict to such an extent that even the thought of confrontation tends to sicken him. He has lost his faith in God and in himself. He used to handle tough situation in a calm manner – now he acts frantic and insecure. Passive aggressive exclamations have taken the place of the vigor that used to be there.

Where Lene has become a sharp projectile that cuts through surroundings and other people, Morten instead deflects his surroundings and leave little snide marks. He does not know why him and Lene are together anymore. But he knows that it is worse to be alone.

Morten has lost his calm, his confidence, and his faith.

MORTEN AS COMMENTATOR

To look upon the past physically hurts Morten. Pictures and memories tear his soul, but again and again they return to hunt him.

Morten and Lene stand outside the past and look in. They can comment, discuss and argue with each other, but they cannot change the past. They can only look upon it from the painful vantage point of the present.

Morten acts as commentator together with Lene in the **scenes from the past**. The past scenes emphasize what Morten and Lene have lost, while at the same time allowing them to relate to it.

Do: Comment, discuss, analyze, reflect, argue

Don't: Physically interfere or try to change what happens

LENE

Lene remembers when she lost her smile. Everybody was telling her to take some weeks of work. "Take the time you need." But the apartment felt empty and Morten was too quiet. So she went to work. Answered emails. Went to meetings. And in the middle of discussions about job cuts and training courses it happened – the smile disappeared.

Lene is the head of human resources in a large company, and used to be overflowing with joy and zest for life. Now she is angry and instrumental towards others. She has always been direct and goal-oriented, but she has lost her sense of humor, good spirits, and love of the small things in life. She used to brighten other people's lives, but now she only darkens her own.

Where Morten has retreated into himself, Lene has instead become hard. She cuts her way through other people in order to reach her goals. Others are pieces in a game, and can be stricken from the board if necessary. Except Morten. She does not know why they are still together. But she knows that even though they only exchange hard words now, it is still better than being alone.

Lene has lost her bright view of the world.

LENE AS COMMENTATOR

To look upon the past physically hurts Lene. Pictures and memories tear her soul, but again and again they return to hunt her.

Morten and Lene stand outside the past and look in. They can comment, discuss and argue with each other, but they cannot change the past. They can only look upon it from the painful vantage point of the present.

Lene acts as commentator together with Morten in the **scenes from the past**. The past scenes emphasize what Morten and Lene have lost, while at the same time allowing them to relate to it.

Do: Comment, discuss, analyze, reflect, argue

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THE ONE WHO IS NOT THERE ANYMORE

Mom and dad used to hug more. And they used to talk to each other when we had dinner. I especially liked spaghetti with meat sauce. But everything is different now and they can no longer see me. It hurts me to watch them act like this against each other. But I cannot leave them. Not yet. They will not let go.

The one who is not there anymore is the remnant of the child in Morten and Lene's life. It is the reminder of the people that Morten and Lene used to be. It is the soft sounds of crying when mom and dad are fighting, but also the little warm hand that creeps into yours when you are at your lowest. The one who is not there anymore is a bittersweet role that both causes sadness but also brings back good memories.

Morten and Lene can neither see you nor *The Loss*, but the both of you can talk to them and touch them. Use the physical contact to convey feelings and moods. For example by taking dad's hand when he is sad, or by clinging on to mum's leg when she tries to walk out during a fight. Weeping is also always an interesting dramatic device. You can also talk and argue with *The Loss*.

YOUNGER MORTEN

In the scenes from the past you play a younger version of Morten, from the time before sorrow infested Morten and Lene's life. Morten possessed a special form of calmness back then – a rock steady faith in God and other people. Morten and Lene were young, happy, and the world was at their feet.

The scenes from the past act as contrast to the life Morten and Lene live in the present, and as small breathing spaces in the tragic narrative. The scenes between younger Morten and younger Lene should be short and sweet.

THE LOSS

My presence hangs with an unfathomable weight between them. Their memories of all that they have lost force them deeper into the upholstered seats. I stand behind them, putting pressure on their shoulders. Every waking moment of their life I am there, behind them, reminding them of all that they have lost. Even in their dreams there is no rest from me.

The Loss emphasizes the things that have changed between Morten and Lene. It is The Loss that comments, when there once more is pointy silence across the dinner table between Morten and Lene, and it is The Loss that hangs heavy on Morten's shoulders when Lene wants to turn the nursery into an office. The Loss constitutes the emptiness that now exists between Morten and Lene.

Morten and Lene can neither see you nor *The one who is not there anymore*, but the both of you can talk to them and touch them. Use the physical contact to convey feelings and moods. For example, you can put weight on Morten's shoulders when he feels guilt, or you can push Lene when she and Morten fight. Soft punches and shouts are also always interesting dramatic devices. You can also talk and argue with *The one who is not there anymore*.

YOUNGER LENE

In the scenes from the past you play a younger version of Lene, back before sorrow infested Morten and Lene's life. Lene had a tremendous zest for life back then. She was goal-oriented, but always had time to lend a smile and a helping hand. Morten and Lene were young, happy, and with the world at their feet.

The scenes from the past acts a contrast to the life Morten and Lene live in the present, and as small breathing spaces in the tragic narrative. The scenes between younger Morten and younger Lene should be short and sweet.