

Step by Step

A short scenario by Mikkel Bækgaard

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Presentation for the program

The cave is just a short walk outside of the village. The cave mouth is beautifully situated, surrounded by rolling hills and soft green grass. But the mouth itself look like an open wound and when you go inside, the sunlight and serene songs from thousands of grasshoppers follows you only a few yards - then everything goes dark and dead silent.

A group of young adults from the village have decided to enter the cave. They want to see what is hiding inside. They want to enter the darkness and the world of the unknown. Maybe they even want to enter the depths of their own minds.

And who knows if everybody will return.

There are many stories about what to expect inside the cave - but nobody knows for sure. Or at least nobody speaks about it. Rumour has it that at least one person never made it out again. Others, though, say it's just a fairytale.

Step by Step is a sort of modern dungeon-crawl horror story about entering the dark and unknown. Very little is defined from the beginning. During play we will get to know these young people, their village and the inside of the cave. You'll have to be ready to improvise a lot and co-create a story while you, step by step, move away from the light and into the terrifying darkness.

Don't expect classic dungeon-crawling, heroes, orcs, or fantasy dragons.

Step by Step won *The Explorer* award at last year's *Forum*, a Danish convention.

Tags: Dungeon horror, fantasy-like, impro game, narration game

Number of players: 3-4 player + 1 gamemaster

Play time: 1-2 hours

Player types: You like to improvise, tell stories, and toy with a new and quite different take on the classic dungeon. You love to elaborate on details and slowly build tension.

Game master type: As gamemaster your most important task is to build tension, slow the pace, and ask the players lots of relevant questions to help them improvise a thematic story.

Language: Can be played and gamemastered in either English or Danish.

About the author: Mikkel Bækgaard is mostly known for his dark socio-realistic games about Northern Jutland. But in this game he abandons the kitchen table to crawl into a dark dungeon instead. Here he presents his personal take on how to innovate a classic roleplaying genre.

Introduction to the game

Step by Step is a short freeform roleplaying game about 3-4 young people from a small village who enters a dark cave situated somewhere outside their village. During the game these young people move into the unknown while you and the players slowly get to know more about the village, the characters and their relationships to each other.

Only very little about the characters and the cave is determined when the game starts. Most details are made up during the game. And while the characters slowly walk into the terrifying darkness you and the players improvise a story about these youngsters, their relationships, and what they hope and fear to meet inside the cave. During play it never becomes clear what actually hides in the dark - the game ends before the characters ever meet anything inside the cave.

The game starts when the characters stand outside the cave ready to go in. Even here the air is filled with anxiety and uncertainty - but from the beginning it's an open question why the characters want to enter the cave. What do they hope and fear to find inside? These questions are answered during play, by the players' interaction with each other and their answers to the questions you'll be asking them as gamemaster.

The game doesn't have a big dramatic climax and a well defined ending. During play you and the players will create more and more tension - actually this game is all about building up unresolved tension. When that tension reaches maximum intensity you cut the scene and end the game. And therefore we will never know what actually happens with the characters inside the cave.

Step by Step is all about the character's fear of what hides inside the cave - and because this is being created during play it's not defined beforehand what they actually will meet in there. In fact, they will not meet anything particular in there: no monsters, magic, or treasures. It is the slow walk into the darkness itself and the fear of what is hiding behind the next corner that is the focus for this game.

How to play the game

Step by Step is a loosely structured game where most of the details in the game are up to you and what inputs the players will bring. Your task as a gamemaster is to describe the cave, feed the characters' fear and ask the players questions, forcing them to develop the characters and slowly letting us know more and more about them.

The players' task is to play their characters and improvise a story that derives its meaning from what transpires in the game. To begin with they have very little information to act on, but by answering your enquiring questions a story will evolve.

The cave is defined during play

The cave isn't well defined from the beginning of the game and you'll find no map of it. Later in this text you will get a couple of suggestions on what hides in there - but the specific

layout of the cave is not important. The journey into the darkness is most of all meant as a psychological journey where the players can react to whatever their characters encounter.

During play it is you as the gamemaster who is in charge of describing the cave for the players. It is you who will introduce new objects and events, eg. a door, a big room, or a staircase. And it is you who will describe smells, dripping water, maybe distant sounds of metal against rock - all in the effort of creating tension and subtle suggestions to what might hide deeper within the cave.

If the players want to introduce elements inside the cave they should do so. Use their input, make them a part of the game, and feel free to surprise them by twisting their suggestions.

Remember that the game needs a slow pace and every step into the darkness is supposed to be filled with tension and meaning. Maybe the characters only make their way through 3-4 rooms during the game - that's okay, because the game is supposed to be slow. Instead of quickening the pace, make every detail count.

You should thematically connect the cave to the story the players make up during play. For instance, if they describe the cave as an ancient burial ground they will of course find dusty skeletons in wall alcoves and similar things. And if the cave is described as a hideout for the villagers during past wars, the cave is characterized by that.

The players create their characters during play

The characters are only very loosely defined at the start. When the game is about to begin, each player is given a tiny character sheet with a headline and a motivation for wanting to enter the darkness. The motivation could be 'to return as a changed person' or 'finding a way to get away from the village'. What the exact interpretation of each motivation is will be up to each player to decide.

The characters' names, gender, look, profession etc. are also up to the players and will be defined during play.

Before the game starts it is important that you make clear that creating characters during actual play is what the game is about. The players are not to decide details about their characters before the game starts - they are not supposed to decide who and what their characters are before the game begins.

You ask questions that explores the characters and gives the story meaning

During the game you will continuously ask the players questions, prompting them to develop their characters and advance the story.

Ask questions that will make the players explain their actions or elaborate on the characters. Ask questions as a reaction to a player's action or to get a reaction from another player. And ask questions which will surprise the player and maybe insinuate certain things about the character that he or she hadn't thought of before.

An example of how to open the game in the first scene:

The characters stand outside the cave. We don't know anything about them yet. Start to ask questions about the characters: Who are you? What are you doing here? What do you look like? What is this place?

Note the answers and ask additional questions: Why do you want to find yourself? What keeps you from entering the darkness? Do you think you will get out alive?

Further into the cave a scene can play out like this:

Two of the characters have fallen down a chute and find themselves somewhere pitch black. You ask them: What do you think hides in the darkness right now? What are you afraid of? Is it true what they say back in the village about you being afraid of the dark? Why did your friend call you a coward a minute ago?

Ask questions that can be answered in many different ways giving the players room to shape the story the way they want. You can also ask very specific and suggestive questions as a way of leading the story in a certain way. Using the right questions can be a useful tool to shape the story in a subtle way. Be careful, though, not to overdo it. Don't take full control over the story. In the end it is the player's story.

Use the players' input and escalate conflict

During the game it is important that you use whatever input the players bring into play to shape the story and to escalate conflicts. Think fast and improvise as soon as something interesting happens. The game works best when it is the players' own actions and decisions that create the story and intensifies the drama.

An example of that happened during the playtest of this game:

One of the characters had broken down a worn out door. He had actually smashed through the door and had landed in a puddle of water on the other side. In the water was a brownish object the size of a small squash, which the character chose to pick up. It turned out to be a skull, and he turned around to display it to one of the other characters. The other was very surprised by this and was so shocked that he started running and stumbling down the corridor on the other side of the puddle. Suddenly he fell down a hole in which there apparently used to be a ladder but now only some old rotten pieces of wood. Now the character found himself at the bottom of a hole with no way of getting up again. The other characters tried to climb down to him using the old wooden steps but without any luck - and soon they all fell down in in the darkness below. Now all the characters were trapped in the darkness, thanks to one playful character's foolish attempt to scare the others.

Flow of the game

This game is divided into four chapters and an epilogue. Later in this text you will find more details about each chapter.

Part 1 - Introduction and the first steps: The characters stand outside the cave. They are anxious about what might be hiding in there. We'll get the first vague descriptions of them while they take the first steps away from the light.

Part 2 - Further into the darkness: Daylight is gone and silence overtakes while the characters meet the first obstacle inside the cave. We also learn more about the village and the characters' backstories. There are insinuations of conflicts.

Part 3 - A turning point: The first obstacle is solved when something unexpected happens. The darkness gets even darker and the stakes turn dangerous. Maybe it is not possible to get out the same way as the characters entered. Maybe someone gets hurt. Conflicts are established and maybe we get to know the characters' true intentions about going into the cave - and are all these intentions noble?

Part 4 - At the heart of darkness: The characters have now gone far into the darkness. They are scarred, something went wrong and the air is thick with conflict and death. The fear of what could be coming next is palpable. During this chapter we'll get very close to the characters' thoughts and feelings. What is all this actually about? Before everything explodes in a dramatic climax, you cut the scene.

Epilogue - What is said about those who went into the cave?: We'll never find out what actually happened in the dark. The scene ends before that. Instead you ask the players if they think everyone got out alive. They decide what is said back in village about those youngsters who went into the cave that day.

What to expect inside the cave?

The cave outside the village is a strange place and only a few people have ever dared to enter it. The entrance lies as an open wound in the middle of an idyllic landscape surrounded by rolling hills.

The first part of the cave is natural, but further in there are signs of human construction. The natural cave turns into carved out corridors. Deeper in there are perhaps stalactites, burial chambers, and ramshackled doors.

Here are a couple of suggestions for what to expect in the cave:

- The light disappears - the sunlight doesn't reach far into the cave, leaving nothing but darkness if you haven't brought torches, lanterns or candles.
- Stalactites dripping with water, and perhaps some red liquid that looks like and tastes like blood.
- An old wooden door that seem to be hard to open even though it looks worn out. The hinges are rusted and perhaps the door is locked from the inside. There are cobwebs and maybe even spiders. Something crawls. Is anyone scared of things like that?
- A petrified man - or is it a statue? It is a kneeling man dressed in a cloak staring anxiously at something, maybe towards a door.
- Suddenly a skull comes into view. Maybe from a puddle, an alcove or a small shelf carved out in the stone wall.
- An old burial chamber filled with bone fragments, moth-eaten cloth and rusty pieces of armor.

- A wooden ladder leading down in the darkness, breaks down under almost no weight. Maybe a chute which is impossible to get back up. Gravel, dust and small rocks fall down on people who have fallen down into the darkness.
- A rusty sword lies on the ground, casually left behind by someone. Maybe someone cuts himself on it. Maybe there is clotted blood on it - or perhaps fresh blood.
- The light suddenly dies out and won't be lit again. Due to some breeze, magic, or something else?
- Water and moisture. Water is dripping and suddenly there is water running. The floor is slippery, there is some sort of algae - maybe even fluorescent.
- Smell of mold, even of death. It is a sweet and simultaneously a bit sour smell, like a rotting moldy lemon.
- Suddenly you experience an almost burning thirst. You need water right now.

Before the game starts

There is no need for a lot of warm up exercises or preparations to play *Step by Step*. Tell the players a bit about the game's concept: that most of the story and meaning is created by them during play and that you will ask them a lot of questions.

Tell a bit about the village and the cave.

Do a short warmup scene where you let the players describe a small part of the village. Ask clarifying questions and let the village come a bit to life.

Hand out the character sheets to the players. Give them a moment to consider how they will play the game.

Part 1 - Introduction and the first steps

Outside the cave

The characters stand by the entrance to the cave. The sun is shining, there are butterflies and small insects swarming, there are flowers and fresh green grass. The village is situated nearby. The characters have to go into the cave.

Let the players describe their characters in short statements. Let them say one thing each about one of the other characters.

Ask what they expect to find inside the cave.

You can also ask if there is something keeping them from just going in. What do they think awaits them inside?

Are you sure you will return? Just one of you or several of you? Do you think we will ever find out why?

First steps

The characters start to walk into the cave, slowly, step by step. Make sure to set a slow pace and elaborate the details. Focus on the disappearing light as they enter while silence and darkness takes over.

Ask more questions about the characters: Why do they want to go into the cave? Did they all agree about it? Who got the idea for doing so? Was it a result of a drunken night at the bar? A bet? A search for something? Was it a result of foolish playfulness or of someone being persuaded into it against his or her will?

More about the village

Make the players tell you more about the village. What do people say about the characters walking into the cave? Does people know about it? Or did the characters sneak out to the cave without telling anyone?

Also ask about what troubles the village? Does it have anything to do with the cave?

Ask about why it is exactly these youngsters from the village who wants to enter the cave? Has the cave recently been reopened? Are the characters at some sort of transition point in their life? Is it about some sort of rite of passage? What is the perception in the village about all this?

Part 2 - Further into the darkness

The light is all gone

Now the characters are totally surrounded by darkness - no daylight gets in this deep. Did they bring any light sources with them? Do they manage to light it? Are there any problems?

How does it feel here in the darkness? Is it black and moist? What does it sound like down here? What does it smell like? Does it reminds anyone about anything? Are the characters scared? Or are they laughing it off, or trying to?

The first obstacle

The characters meet their first obstacle in the cave. It could be an old rotten wooden door, a scary statue, or a hole in the middle of the corridor that needs to be passed.

What does the obstacle say about the cave? Who - for instance - made the door? Is it locked from the inside?

Establish conflicts

While the characters encounter the first obstacle it is time to establish some of the conflicts between the characters. Use the actual situation and the obstacle. Ask about troubles in the village. Did everyone agree on going in here?

What is usually said in the village about each of the characters? Is there something they need to prove down here? To the village in general, and to the other characters?

Part 3 - A turning point

Something unexpected happens

When the first obstacle is bypassed something unexpected happens. Possibly it has something to do with how the characters got past the obstacle. Maybe someone falls into a hole, maybe something collapses, or maybe a moment of rashness has a severe consequence. Maybe it is triggered by a conflict between the characters.

How do the characters react to the situation? Maybe one of them is hurt? How do they handle the situation? Do they help each other or does it all lead to more conflict? Is it someone's fault? Did someone do something on purpose?

Is it possible to go on or get out?

What will the characters do now? Are they trapped? Is it possible for them to get out? Are they forced to look for an alternative way out?

Ask questions relating to the situation, and ask about emotions and the characters' past. What do they feel right now? Are they hiding something from each other? Something left unspoken? Does all this come down to unspoken conflicts and emotions somehow?

Is someone hiding something?

Is someone hiding anything? Dig into the deeper, honest reasons for the characters to be here. Ask all of them questions, cross-examine them, force conflicts to escalate by continuing to ask questions.

Have some of the characters actually been here before? Is this actually the first time they've been in the cave? What happened last time?

What happened on the last night in the village? Did that have anything to do with former visits in the cave?

Part 4 - At the heart of darkness

The characters are close to the heart of darkness and the game is closing in on what it is all actually about. Conflicts are intense and everything can explode in a second.

Focus on the conflicts and use elements from the cave to point them out. Build up intensity in the game while you are approaching the climax - but before you get to the climax the scene ends. Cut it before it explodes.

We have to continue

Besides conflicts, blocked exits and perhaps wounds, the youngsters have to go deeper in. There is no way back. They have to go on.

Ask about why they must continue. What is it that is so important? Allow the players to hesitate but force them to eventually answer.

Another obstacle

Here, close to very heart of darkness, the characters meet another obstacle. This one is worse and more frightening than the first one. Maybe it is saying something about the village's past, or of the characters'. It is pretty sure to be something that shouldn't meet the light of day.

Escalate and keep escalating. Intensify the tension between the characters. Drag on and focus on the characters' fear. Wait almost until it is all about to explode.

Cut the scene with heavy conflicts hanging unsolved in the air.

Epilogue - What is said about those who went into the cave?

Keep silent for a minute. Let tension hang in the air. Then start to ask about what people might say happened in the cave - not about what actually happened.

Did everyone get out alive? What did the survivors tell about their descent into the dark?

What is said in the village about those youngsters who went into the cave that day? Do people actually talk about it?

End the game with a lot of unanswered questions.

Character sheets

Cut these tiny character descriptions so each player gets a headline and a motivation.

The optimistic one

Wants to return as a new person.

The cautious one

Wants to find a way to protect either him- or herself, or others.

The restless one

Wants to find a way to get away from the village.

The indifferent one

Wants to find a way to get away from him- or herself.