

The Pleasure Machine

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*Behold the gates of mercy
in arbitrary space
And none of us deserving
the cruelty or the grace*

Leonard Cohen - Come Healing

Participants: 4-16 players + 1 game master
Genre: philosophical drama
Time to play: 3 - 4 hours
Version: 1.0

Introduction

Unfortunately there is a minor problem with the pleasure pods, and a severe snowstorm is preventing the technicians from traveling to the facility. As soon as the weather clears up, your pleasure pod experience will continue. We apologize for the inconvenience.

The Pleasure Machine is a game about a group of people being stranded in the waiting room of a pleasure pod center. For one reason or another they have all decided to leave their normal life behind to be interred in a pleasure pod for a duration of five years. For some it's their first trip, for others this is just a stop on the way to the next one.

The Pleasure Machine is a philosophical drama exploring the meaning of life, and the necessity of human connection.

How to read this script

This document is primarily intended for anyone who wishes to run the pleasure machine. To play the game you don't need to go over this material.

If you are running the game, we suggest that you familiarize yourself with the larp-script in its entirety prior to running the game.

Some sections in this script are written in *italics*, these are intended to be read aloud to the players. You don't have to read it out verbatim, but the text is there to help you guide the players through those parts of the game.

The script is divided into the following main sections:

- Props and preparations prior to game - what to bring and how to set up
- Preparations with the players - workshops
- The game structure - structure and act content
- Debrief - suggestions on rounds
- General tips to game masters

Props and preparations prior to the game

Before the game starts, you, the game master, needs to read this text, and make sure you have access to the props listed below when the game starts.

To play the Pleasure machine you will need:

- A deck of Tarot cards
- Background music. We recommend Music for Airports by Brian Eno¹.
- The end game song, Perfect Day with Lou Reed²
- Coloured spotlights
- 1 blanket per pair of players, or tape to tape squares
- Gentle alarm on a mobile device
- A timer or clock to time the scenes
- Material for name tags
- Fika³

The Pleasure Machine can be played in any venue which can fit the number of players you are hosting.

Prepare the game area

Before the game or after the workshops:

- Put out a table and some chairs for the communal scenes
- Put out blankets, or tape up squares for the pair scenes
Set up the coloured light(s) and sound, preferably in such a way that you can control them without disturbing the play area
- Fika can be served during the play

¹Here is a link to the album on Spotify.

https://open.spotify.com/album/063f8Ej8rLVTz9KkjQKEMa?si=IjczUODvR_GetiHL7gbTtg

² <https://open.spotify.com/track/4TOMIo1oSd4ZAX4aZ5TS85?si=1162529ac20a4e0a>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coffee_culture#Sweden

Time Requirements

The following is an approximate outline of how the game is played. The purpose of this is that you as a game master should get an overview of the act structure and the different parts of the game. Details about each part will follow in later sections.

Preparations (~ 1.5 h)

The game (2 h)

Debrief (15 min)

Preparations

This section will describe how the participants will prepare their characters, relationships, and the scenes that will form the basis for the game.

General introduction (10 min)

Background of the game:

- *The Pleasure Machine* is a chamber larp set in a world much like ours, but where relatively recently a machine was invented that allows you to be completely immersed in a simulation of your own choosing. These machines have come to be called pleasure machines or pleasure pods by the general public. Due to the way the machine operates in order for it to be reasonably cost efficient, stays in the simulation tend to be long, typically around five years.

The game follows a group of strangers who are stuck in the waiting room of a pleasure pod center. All of the characters have signed up for living the next five years of their lives inside a simulation of their choosing. However, due to a technical issue the pleasure pods simulations are interrupted, and they will just have to wait for a little bit while they get fixed. Unfortunately a severe snowstorm is hindering the technicians from getting to the center. The game is set during the three days of waiting for the technicians to show up.

This game explores what it is that gives life meaning and necessity (or lack thereof) of human connection

The game is played mainly in pairs, where you will get to explore why your characters have sought out the pleasure machines, and if they will be able to form a connection strong enough to keep them from entering back into it.

- With the exception of the existence of the pleasure machines the game world resembles our own.
- Any questions?

How the game is played:

- Before the game there is a workshop where you will get to create your characters and work together with your partner (with one trio, if you have an uneven number of players).
- The game is played in three acts, with a short prologue and an epilogue.

Each act is set twenty four hours apart, i.e. the game takes place over three consecutive days. Each act is roughly 30 minutes long. After each act the game master will give instructions. After the epilogue the finale song is played.

- During play there will be some gentle background music playing.
- At the end of each act a gentle alarm will play (demonstrate this to the players) to indicate when there are roughly 3 minutes left of the scene. Then when the music stops the act is over.
- The game area is divided into two parts:
 - Around the table you are encouraged to interact with anyone in that area.
 - On the blankets/squares, you are only to interact in pairs. These are not necessarily blankets on the floor in-game, but they represent some private corner you've found at the center. When the ceiling lights are lit, we invite you to play with everyone around the table, and when the coloured lights are lit, we invite you to go to the blankets and play there in pairs.
- There are rules for each act.
 - Act 1: The characters may not look each other in the eyes, nor touch each other.
 - Act 2: The characters must look each other in the eyes, at least once, but may not touch each other.
 - Act 3: The characters must both look each other in the eyes and touch each other, at least once.

General instructions:

- Tell the players about the schedule (see time requirements).
- This game uses "OFF" as a safety mechanic. If at any time someone feels that the game is heading in a direction that they are uncomfortable with, they will say "OFF" or "OFF-game." This will pause the game and the participants should discuss what has happened and how to proceed. The same mechanic is used should something happen that the players need to know about outside of the game, e.g. if someone has gotten physically hurt.
- Open up for questions.

Warm-up (20 min)

Human knot

Ask the players to stand in a circle and close their eyes. Tell them to stretch out their hands in-front of them, walk slowly forward until they reach other hands and grab hold of two hands. Ask them to open their eyes and try best they can to untangle the knot into a circle again.

Open your eyes exercises⁴

Tell the players: “Now I will read you a number of questions. You may answer yes on as many as you want, even if they are contradictory.”

Open your eyes if...

- you want to explore more positive/feel-good themes in your character in play
- you want to explore darker themes in your character in play
- you want to explore the theme of human connection through a lens of friendship
- you want to explore the theme of human connection through a lens of romance

Divide in pairs

Tell the players to please divide in pairs, and that you will help out if needed.

Tell them: “Take a few minutes to calibrate in your pairs with the questions above as starting points. If you feel like you are not on the same track, let us know and we will try to help you switch partners.”

Trust walk

In the newly formed pairs: One player closes their eyes, the other leads them around the room. Ask them to switch within the pair after some time.

⁴ From <https://workshophandbook.wordpress.com/2013/04/25/open-your-eyes/>

Create characters (15 min)

The players will create the characters they will play together. This is done in four phases.

Phase 1: The pleasure machine experience (5 min)

Draw three tarot cards. Pick one. Players think about what their characters experience in the pleasure machine. Also, think of how long you spent in the machine.

Phase 2: Relationships (5 min)

Draw three tarot cards. Pick one. Players think about relationships or communities they've been a part of during their lives. It could be a single person, a family or a group of friends. Think about whether this is someone or something they have left behind to come here. If not, where are they now? And why are you no longer in contact?

Phase 3: Identity (5 min)

Draw three tarot cards. Pick one. The player is instructed to think about who their character is. Did they have a job? What were they like as a kid? What are some experiences that lead them to this point?

Phase 4: Names (5 min)

Ask the players to select a name, and pronoun for their character and make a name-tag for them.

Present the characters to each other (15 min)

In pairs, present the characters to each other. The characters don't know each other, and the main purpose of this exercise is for you to verbalize your character to someone else. Ask each other questions about the characters. You may also talk about possible points of connection between your characters that you want to explore during the game.

Time for questions and a break (15 min)

Leave some time here for the players to ask questions, go to the bathroom, etc. Hopefully this will be quicker than 15 minutes. You can also use this time as a buffer should any of the other sections have taken longer than anticipated.

The game

The game is, as has already been mentioned, played in a prologue, three acts, followed by an epilogue. Below follows a description of how you as a game master can guide the players through the acts.

Prologue

Play the background music (we suggest Music for Airports by Brian Eno). Ask the players to either lay down on the floor, or stand-up, then close their eyes. Read the following text:

Think of your session in the pleasure pod. Was it your first? If so, why did you want to enter it? If this is not your first session in the pleasure pod, why did you want to enter the first time, and are you still here for the same reason?

Imagine yourself inside the pleasure pod. What is it like? What can you see? What can you hear? What do you smell and touch?

Who is there with you? What are you doing?

Give them a moment to think about the questions, and then start the first act.

Act 1 (Day 1)

Ask the players to gather in the communal area.

Instruct them that during this act they should avoid making eye contact and touching one another.

Remind the players: The game area is divided into two parts. Around the table you are encouraged to interact with anyone in that area. On the blankets, you are only to interact in pairs. When the ceiling lights are lit, you are invited to play around the table, and when the coloured lights are lit, you are invited to go to the blankets and play there in pairs. A gentle alarm will sound, signaling there are about three minutes left of this act.

Explain that they are in the waiting room of the pleasure pod center after just having been told that the machines have closed down after a minor technical problem, and that they will be able to return as soon as they have been fixed. Unfortunately due to the bad weather it might take a while for the technician to

show up on site.

Scene structure:

- 10 min communal scene
- 10 min scene in pairs
- 10 min communal scene

Act 2 (Day 2)

Ask the players to gather in the pair areas.

Act introduction: Ask the players to sit opposite to each other in their pairs. Give them the following instructions:

We now want you to look at the other person and notice all the unique and wonderful things about this person. The shape of their ears, the way the hair sticks up, or doesn't, the color of the skin just above the neck, their hands, and on and on.

Run this exercise for roughly 2 minutes.

Instruct the players that during this act you must make eye contact with each other, but should avoid touching.

Explain that roughly twenty-four hours have passed. It has not been super convenient to stay at the center, but the staff have done their best to make you comfortable. The bad weather persists.

Scene structure:

- 10 min pair scene
- 10 min communal scene
- 10 min pair scene

Act 3 (Day 3)

Ask the players to gather in the communal area.

Act introduction: Pair up as before. Instruct them to do the following:

Please, sit back to back, close your eyes and feel the other person's body against yours. Notice the way they breathe, is it faster or slower than

your breath? How does it feel? Are they warm? Solid, or just a brush of touch?

Run this exercise for roughly 2 minutes.

During this act you should make eye contact with each other, and you should touch each other at least once. We will use lights and sound as before signaling the change of scene and end of act.

Explain that this is the third day since the machines broke down. The weather has improved, and the technician should arrive any minute. Once they have fixed the problem the machines should be up and running again shortly.

Scene structure:

- 10 min communal scene
- 20 min pair scene

Epilogue (15 min)

Shared future (10 min)

Instruct the players to remain on their blankets and sit side by side and close their eyes and stay silent. Tell them that they will get to do a short monologue about what their future might look like.

Read the following:

What would your life look like if you both chose to leave the pleasure machine? Would you want to stay in contact with each other ? How would that be?

Let them reflect on this, about a minute or two.

Ask them to open their eyes and, one at a time, do a short monologue describing their own vision of that shared future.

Decide if you want to enter the machine or not (5 min)

Instruct the players to stand in a circle. Ask them to close their eyes.

Read the following text and instructions aloud:

One year has passed since the day the pleasure machines broke. Did

you enter back into the machine or did you leave?

All of you, whether you entered the machine or not. Imagine where you are right now. What is it like? What can you see? What can you hear? What can you smell and touch?

Who is there with you? What are you doing?

Is it meaningful to you?

Tell them you will be playing the end song, and during the song they should, when they are ready, open their eyes and walk over to one end of the room if they chose to stay in the machine and the other if they choose to leave. Ask them to stay silent until the music ends. Tell them the game is over when the music ends.

Play “Such a perfect day” - Lou Reed.

Debrief

When the game is over it can be a good idea to ask the players to return to their blankets/squares and talk about their experience. Give them a few minutes to do this.

Then gather all the players, and do some rounds in the group. We suggest the following topics:

- How are you feeling right now?
- How did you experience the game?
- If you want to, share one memorable thing from the game with the rest of the group?

Now, you can let folks stay around and talk freely amongst themselves if they wish. But at this point the game is finished.

General tips to game masters

This game is primarily designed for an even number of players but is possible to run with an odd number of players as well, having one trio. Note that in this case, some exercises might need more time, e.g. the trust walk during the workshop and the time to look at the other players before act 2. Depending on

the players, you might need to remind a trio to make sure to include all three players in their story arch.

Inspiration and acknowledgments

This game has been inspired by a thought experiment put forward by Robert Nozick in 1974⁵.

The authors want to thank their beta players who took time to let us try out the scenario and (hopefully) improve it.

Finally we would like to thank Sara Engström and Jon Back for their support, and feedback in the work on this manuscript.

⁵ More reading on this topic on this topic is available both on wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Experience_machine as well as in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy <https://iep.utm.edu/experience-machine/>