

# Hold Someone Liable

A Live Action Role-Playing Scenario in the Jeepform Tradition

By Florian Berger



Playtested Beta  
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Theme	control, economics, strike, extortion
Players	3 to 6
Game Masters	1 to 2
Duration	1h to 3h

Typeset with ~~TeX~~ using the Adobe Helvetica and Bitstream Charter typefaces. Layout and design were heavily inspired by the 2006 annual report of the DEPFA BANK plc, who deserve no better than to be ripped off themselves.

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“ There may be plenty of good reasons to be angry at your boss these days. But few express that frustration quite like the French. Over the past several weeks factory workers facing pay cuts and layoffs at some of the world’s biggest companies have barricaded executives and human-resources directors in their offices and held them captive for as many as 36 hours at a time. At the Sony France factory in southwest France, angry employees reportedly blocked the plant door with branches and tree trunks and held the bosses overnight until adjourning to a police station for further negotiation. In another so-called bossnapping, four dozen employees of a Caterpillar plant in Grenoble held four executives for 24 hours, allegedly confiscated their cell phones and made threatening calls to their families.

The tactics are working. The penalty for holding your boss hostage is five years in jail, but authorities have yet to prosecute a case. Most companies haven’t even pressed charges against the perpetrators. In fact, the companies targeted have yielded new concessions like larger severance packages. Popular sentiment is behind the bossnappers, too. In one poll, 55 percent of those surveyed said “social action that is radical, even violent like factory or road blockades, even sequestering executives or bosses,” is “justified.” Almost two thirds said these methods shouldn’t be punished because “they are often the only means employees have of being heard. ”

Newsweek Magazine, May 4, 2009



## What This Game Is About

“Hold Someone Liable” is about losing control over an integral part of one’s life, and the following desperate desire to identify, blame and put pressure on a supposedly responsible entity. It is about what makes us look for a scapegoat, and the functions it fulfills once it is found.

This is also a political larp, encouraging thoughts about economy, globalisation and responsibility—and how far people, how far *you* may go when your life plan is under threat.

## How To Use This Document

This is a transparent game, which means that there are no secrets or twists that need to be hidden from the players for the sake of not spoiling the experience.

It is recommended that the Game Master reads this text first, refreshing knowledge on jeepform games at <http://jeepen.org/> if so required. After that, he can hand it out to the players or resort to an oral introduction. In the latter case all details given in this text should be laid out before the players.



## Outline

One player takes on the role of the **manager** of a subsidiary of a large international company, while the others become **employees** of various ranks. The central event of the game is the **arrest** of the boss in his office enforced by the employees who fear for their jobs and try to extort new negotiations or better terms from the management.

The game is divided into **scenes**. The arrest scene is repeated several times with varying motivations, reactions and levels of intensity. These repetitions alternate with scenes that provide a **context** for the arrest: situations at work, at home, that tell about the work atmosphere, recent confrontations and the fear of unemployment in a global crisis.

The boss is finally released in the very last scene.

Apart from the boss being locked up and released at the end there is no inherent storyline to this game. A story may or may not emerge; however the focus is on exploring the characters, their motivations and their actions.

## Characters

The following character descriptions are deliberately **archetypical**. Perceived blanks should be filled in as the players see fit. Note that a character may be played by more than one player; see page 10 for details.

### **The Boss**

The leader of this country's subsidiary of a nameless global company. One of the faces we have seen so often in the news recently when there was talk about necessary cuts and layoffs. The boss is a person who once successfully applied for one of the job advertisements that demand:

- ✓ *A Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree*
- ✓ *10–15 years experience in a top management position*
- ✓ *Exceptional communication and interpersonal skills*
- ✓ *Good command of the English language, both verbal and written*
- ✓ *Strong ability to lead and supervise people, and give direct, clear instructions for job assignments, as well as evaluate the impact decisions will have on future plans and relationships*

Recently it has been the duty of the boss to declare and coordinate some serious changes in the subsidiary, including the suspension of as much as half of the employees, as a reaction to the ongoing crisis. It is important to note that the local subsidiary is actually profitable and doing well; but the company has invested abroad, and in the course of the global crisis has made great losings with these projects. Now they try to compensate for this with local steep cuts.

While he fully supports the actions to be taken it must be underlined that he is rather their executor than their initiator. There is a higher instance who steers the company's course—not the least the faceless shareholders.

This game is not about the boss, and he is not the chief character. He primarily serves as the opponent of the arresters; a personification of the forces that threaten their jobs.

### **The Worker**

The worker is also known from TV. He is interviewed when the reporter wants the voice of the man in the street. An assembly line worker, a medium-skilled craftsman. When he was in training, he believed he could work in this job until retirement, and has done so until the news came. He knows enough about the current crisis to realize that there will be no work somewhere else for him if he loses his job. He has a wife and two kids. He has a house. And a loan to pay.

### The Foreman

His personal circumstances are much like the ones of the worker. However he has a better qualification, and he has some authority amongst his co-workers. He also has a good deal of experience in deputizing for them.

### The Unionist

He has a less personal and a more political view on the redundancies and the reactions of the staff. He is experienced in tough negotiations as well as in organizing strikes, and able to see the overall picture. While in principle working for the good of the employees, he keeps an eye on the union's need to gain public attention and to stand its ground.



## Preparation

To play “Hold Someone Liable” one will need:

- x A room of an appropriate size, equipped with a desk and some chairs. A meeting room or an office in a commercial building might intensify the experience.
- x Two charged cell phones and a good reception.
- x A prop to identify the boss (a neck tie should do).

The players will have a more satisfying experience if they are familiar with the subject. The Game Master can compile some news articles, images and web videos for them, and ask them to search for real cases on their own some weeks or days before the game. The topic can be discussed beforehand—face to face, via mail or web discussion board. While it may seem extra work at first, it will pay off as it deepens the gameplay.

To strive for a certain type of game the Game Master can also decide beforehand how many players shall impersonate the boss and whether scenes should build upon each other or not (see below for details).



## Course Of The Game

### Warm Up

Before the actual larp it is advisable to do some exercises and rituals to get to know each other, reduce inhibitions and prepare eye or body contact. Listing warm-ups (also called “icebreakers”) is beyond the scope of this text, but the author recommends the exercises [Greetings](#)<sup>1</sup>, [Exaggeration Circle](#)<sup>2</sup>, [Group Order](#)<sup>3</sup> and [Blind Line Up](#)<sup>4</sup> (in order) from the [Improv Encyclopedia website](#). If you do not like these, try to use other exercises that fit the mood of the game. If unsure, fellow Game Masters may have advice.

### Briefing

This step is already part of the actual game: a [meta play](#), a discussion and possibly negotiation of what is going to happen. To brief the players the Game Master should basically go through this text, introducing the concept of [jeepform style](#) before if needed.

The group should discuss if it wants to strive for a literal or an allegoric notion of the play. This might not influence the action too much, but has a strong impact on the interpretation of the events, and also on the content of the contextual scenes.

After the briefing the following things should be known (details are given below):

- ✗ The real-world background
- ✗ The theme, concept and possible allegories
- ✗ The scenes and their framing
- ✗ The number of players impersonating the boss

<sup>1</sup><http://improvcyclopedia.org/games/Greetings.html>

<sup>2</sup>[http://improvcyclopedia.org/games/Exaggeration\\_Circle.html](http://improvcyclopedia.org/games/Exaggeration_Circle.html)

<sup>3</sup>[http://improvcyclopedia.org/games/Group\\_Order.html](http://improvcyclopedia.org/games/Group_Order.html)

<sup>4</sup>[http://improvcyclopedia.org/games/Blind\\_Line\\_Up.html](http://improvcyclopedia.org/games/Blind_Line_Up.html)

- x The absence of a predetermined story apart from the scene structure
- x Whether scenes should be related and meant to form a coherent whole or not
- x How to deal with the cellphones
- x The jeepform techniques to be used and how to apply them
- x The level of physical and emotional intensity that everyone is comfortable with

### Characters

Each player chooses one non-boss character, either worker, foreman or unionist. For the sake of balancing it is advisable to have at least one of each in the game. The player should then refine the character as much as needed to be able to play comfortably: adding a name, background story, traits. It has proven useful to work out a family background, especially the name of the wife / husband and the number of children as well as their names.

Whether character refinement happens individually or collaborative is up to the players, but the details should be disclosed to the other players in the process.

There is no need to establish character relationships at this point; it is much more interesting to find out about these (i.e. to make these up) during the actual play.

While each player owns his character and will play him throughout the game, the role of the boss can be approached in several ways:

- The boss will consecutively be portrayed by all players. This is the preferred way of playing the game, since it helps to decouple the role and function of the boss from an actual person.
- At most two players appointed beforehand will play the boss, taking turns. This allows for a little more continuity.

- Only *one* player takes the role of the boss throughout the game. This sacrifices a lot of flexibility since it will naturally lead to a continuous approach to the arrest scene. However, it might be more accessible to the players and also provide a unified experience which is rather unlikely to emerge with several boss players.

Each boss player should take some time to think about his approach to this role. In case of more than one player the traits of each boss can be made up during the game in comparison with the other players, or the several reactions of the boss towards his arrest can be preassigned.

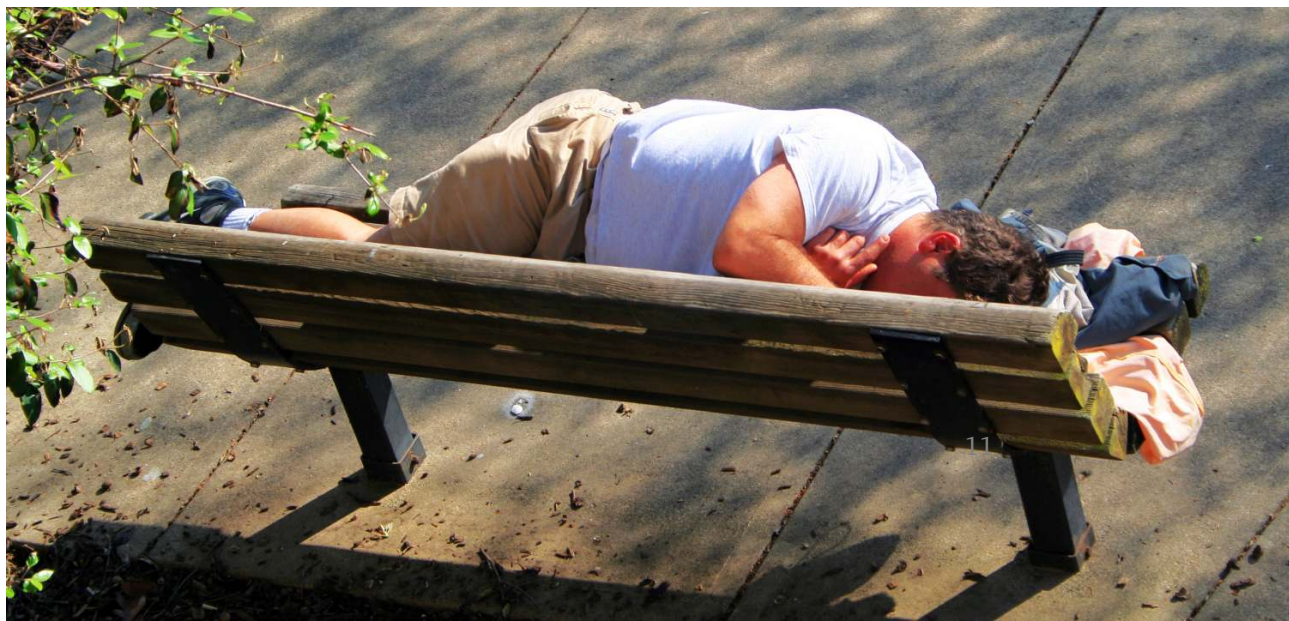
### Framing Scenes

Since there is not necessarily a logical progression in the series of scenes and the key scene is repeated a couple of times, there is the need to clearly mark when a scene starts or stops.

In the case of the arrest scenes this is done using the cell phones. In each of the scenes, one of the non-boss characters uses a phone to keep in touch with the outside world such as press, union representatives or negotiators. A ring of his cell phone, triggered by the Game Master using the other cell phone, marks the beginning and the end of the scene.

The player with the phone is encouraged to incorporate the call into his playing, i.e. each phone ring is an actual in-game call rather than just a start-stop-signal. Upon the second (closing) ring, each player except for the one carrying the phone must stop talking. The player then answers the phone in character; after he is finished talking, the scene is over.

The contextual scenes are not framed using the phones. Instead, a longer consensual period of silence marks beginning and end here.



### Jeepforming

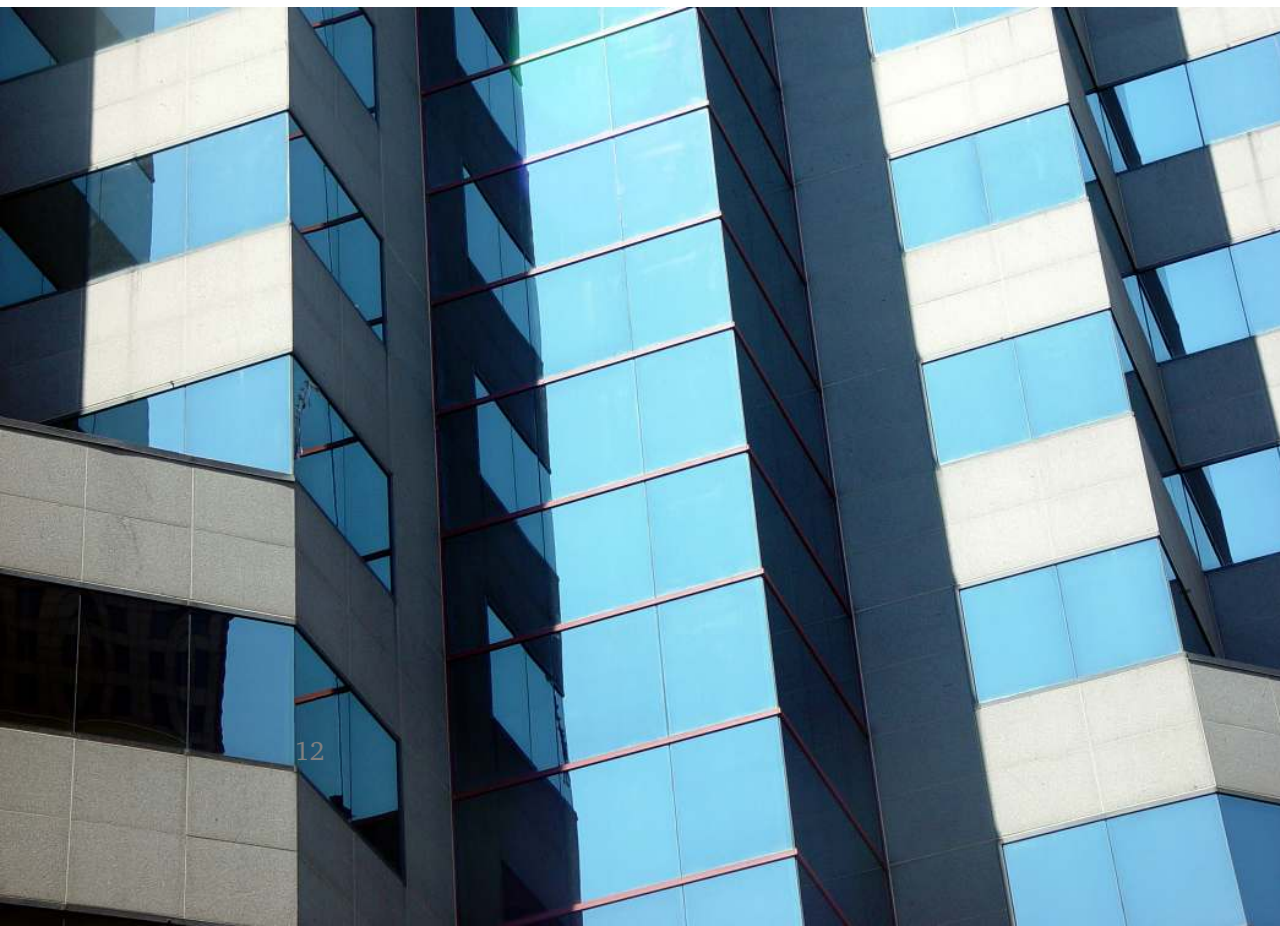
For an extensive list of Jeepform paradigms and devices please see <http://jeepen.org/dict/>. Here are some techniques that should be used in this game.

Player freedom means giving the players the power to create: to implicitly invent backgrounds, events, relationships as the game runs. However they must do so in a responsible manner, keeping in mind where the scene and the overall play is going.

Symbolic props mean that e.g. a pen can stand for a flower, a knife, a key, or just a pen. It should be attributed in an unambiguous way.

Telegraphing is the expression of inventions and attributions to other players without resorting to meta communication. For example, instead of saying “OK, this is a flower now” out of character, the player should say “Here, I plucked it for you. I hope you like roses.” Telegraphing demands a high level of attention and openness from the other players.

The Jeepform website recommends that *the inner thoughts and feelings of the characters should preferably be expressed in the play using appropriate techniques*. This can be done using monologues or insides and outsides. Again, see the website for details and examples. Their deployment basically requires a distinct identification to separate them from the in-game action. Use an unambiguous sign here that can clearly be identified by the players in all circumstances, like raising both arms or an item.



### Opening Scene

The opening scene is an arrest scene totally taken out of context. The place is the office of the boss. The scene has no introduction and no conclusion; it is a snapshot of the middle of the imprisonment.

Apparently the first commotion has subsided; everyone has found some activity to kill time. Everyone knows the current state will last for some more hours. There is not much talking.

A player for the boss has to be chosen before the beginning. The scene is framed by cell phone rings or acted out calls.

### Context–Arrest–Loop

All the following scenes provide a **context** for the opening scene. They alternate between scenes that tell about the employees and alternative arrest scenes.

Before each scene there is a short **meta consultation** about who is going to be in it and where and when it will take place. The scenes should reveal the feelings of the employees and their motivation to conduct the illegal arrest of the boss.

There are two possible ways to play the loop:

- **Incoherent Variations:** Here the scenes are not meant to relate to each other; instead, each one begins with different preconditions, and should highlight a certain aspect of the events. Together the scenes will create a kaleidoscope of the bossnapping and the employees' personal situations, but no inherent storyline.
- **Coherent Fragments:** In this case the scenes played are considered fragments of an overall story. This is both more accessible and satisfying for players that prefer to think an play in story lines. The Game Master should establish a dramatic progress of the scenes, starting out with shallow scenes and working towards turning points and climaxes for the characters.

The Game Master or the group must decide before playing which way they are going to play.

The context scenes can feature one of the employees as the protagonist, in which case the other players can take other roles such as wife or husband, relatives, friends, job office clerk or the like. Except when explicitly included the context scenes should not feature the boss, and its player(s) should play their non-boss character. Ideas for such scenes:

- An office party, taking place several months before any layoff plans were known. This is the recommended first context scene, since it provides a canvas for getting into character in a non-critical scene and also gives the players a chance to learn their characters' names.
- Daily routine in the company, telling about relations and climate
- Office scenes with the boss, showing his attitude
- Telling how each of the intruders learns about the layoff plans or his own dismissal, probably utilizing news from radio or TV
- Friends and family confronting the employees with questions about how to carry on now
- A strategic unionist or political party meeting where the unionist character takes part, showing the expectations he is subjected to

Each of these scenes is contrasted by another arrest scene. The purpose of these is to explore the various behaviour patterns and levels of intensity that this confrontation offers. Preferably a different player impersonates the boss at each arrest scene. Possibilities are:

- A negotiation with the boss that gets out of hand and leads to the arrest
- Several combinations of reactions of boss and staff: insecure, balanced, controlled, annoyed, authoritative, aggressive

- Situations after various arrest times: some minutes, one hour, ten hours, a day. Preferably a reference event should be given along with the time, for example the results of a public survey concerning the arrest, or unbending reactions from the board of directors

Every arrest scene is framed by cell phone calls. None of them save the very last one must incorporate the release of the boss.

### Closing Scene

The closing scene depicts the release. Its beginning is again marked by a phone ring. The release is the result of a second phone call. After this call all involved parties leave the office. In front of the building they are interviewed by a reporter played by the Game Master, which enables each character to give a final statement. The play ends when the last character has been interviewed.

### Deroling

The play is followed by another meta discussion to get out of character, reflect about the events and talk about anything that might come up.



## Game Mastering Advice

✗ Make sure you have some time to prepare the room and get a feeling for it. Walk around, try to find places or angles that work for the given story. Observe if there is enough room for physical action.

✗ The warm up is important, do not skip it (the only excuse would be if the group has just played together). A good warm up creates a group feeling and makes the players less afraid to act out. It could also carefully prepare the players for physical contact (if so desired).

✗ It is your task to start and stop the arrest scenes by calling the player with the cell phone. In the case of a bad reception, just let a melody ring from your own phone to signal the beginning and the end.

It is up to you and the player whether you just want to let the phone ring unanswered or whether you want to act out a short conversation.

How long you let the arrest scenes roll is entirely up to you. Just try to get a feeling for it.

Other contextual scenes are started upon agreement and ended by a consensual period of silence.

✗ During a scene you should preferably interfere as little as possible. Try to avoid meta interventions like stopping and restarting or discussions about conflicts or player inventions.

There are two jeepform techniques you might want to use:

Bird-in-ear means talking as the voice in the head of a character. *“He is not listening. We have locked him up for hours now and he is still not listening. Hell, I am going nuts...”* The player should use this as an input to drive his playing. Do not whisper; the other players are meant to hear what you are saying.

Fast forward means calling for a time jump: *“One hour later!”* This may be useful for arrest scenes.

In a non-boss context scene you can impersonate a radio of TV and read out news concerning the economic crisis and layoffs. Such texts are easily found on the WWW.

Apart from these, you can act as a silent extra to make the players

feel that there are more persons in the scene: bystanders, workmates, cronies in a pub etc.

Switch your own cell phone to silent during the game so accident calls do not interrupt the game. Arrange with the player using the other cell phone what to do when someone calls out of game. Preferably the call is in some way incorporated into the play.

✗ The scenes are followed by short meta discussions on what to play next. Your task here is to *keep them short and focussed*.

Players tend to forget things in the course of the game, so little reminders might be helpful: Point out that they can invent facts and backgrounds. If the player of the boss changes, remind him of the traits of the boss and give him a moment to get into character. Also if appropriate you might state before each arrest scene that this is not the continuation of the last scene but an entirely different and unrelated approach.

✗ Then number of context-arrest-loops is again up to you. Try to work towards a spotlight scene for each non-boss character. Also the arrest scene should be approached in various ways as hinted at above. Be open-minded: some groups may require a lot of guidance, some may easily come up with their own ideas.

✗ Larp may evoke strong emotions, and in-character experiences may bleed into real life. Thus, even after a short larp the *derolling* is important. Make sure players disassociate from their character mindsets and acknowledge the others are no longer what they used to play. For example, make them sit in a circle and each say *"My name is . . . , and I played . . . "*. Take enough time to discuss anything the players might bring up. Also point out the political or allegoric aspects of the play to allow for conclusions to be drawn.

✗ Finally, in case something goes wrong an advice from the Jeepform website:

*A game that stinks should be ended quickly, and then discussed.*

Enjoy playing.

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