

# Strong Community Ties



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## Printing & Practicalities

The scenario is for 4-5 participants, including a co-playing facilitator. It takes about 4 hours to play – less offline, more online. There is no age limit as such, but if children zone out when they hear the words 'financial crisis', they may be too young.

**Offline**, you need to have the player materials printed – at Fastaval, the relationship map will be provided in a large format. You can have the rest of the text in whatever format you find convenient. You will also need four small tokens (e.g. dice or coins) and a large one, and four sticky notes.

**Online**, you need a video meeting with text chat, and you need to be able to access a shared whiteboard or the like. It is best if everyone can work on the whiteboard, but if only the facilitator can, it is OK.

## Credits

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Text, illustration & layout are by yours truly.

# Preview

**Pitch:** Jakob is a young, Danish man who goes to war in Afghanistan in 2008. The players explore the life from which Jakob is a bit emotionally distant in order to understand his choices and their consequences.

**Keywords:** Storytelling Game, Exploration, Denmark at War

**Preview:** Jakob is a very promising young man – so everyone says. He is the protagonist, but mostly we approach him indirectly. We describe places he has made his mark on and left, and play with what his friends and family say and do when he is *not* around. They might be worrying more about the financial crisis of 2008 and thereabouts than they do about a distant war. Jakob goes to Afghanistan and returns to Denmark – this we know. But what it all MEANS is up to the players and their playful exploration.

*Strong Community Ties* is a storytelling game where you do aesthetically radical things with lukewarm everyday life. Sometimes you will be describing, sometimes you will be playing various characters. War trauma might or might not occur, but is not the focus of the game. Come for aesthetics, social criticism and slightly disquieted laughs. You may end up having lots of feelings, but not through characters.

**Player Type:** You want to play around with serious topics, and you want to take part in saying cool things in a game that makes it easy to be literary, curious and funny as a group. Beginner friendly but with room to unleash your storytelling skills. Knowledge of war and economics not required.

**GM Type:** You are a co-playing facilitator – basically a player who will also, well, facilitate the game for other players. You are observant enough to step back a bit when that is what is needed.

**Participants:** 3-4 plus 1 co-playing facilitator

**Runtime:** 4 hours

**Languages:** All materials in both English and Danish

**Age Restriction:** None

**Amount of Reading:** 1 page

**Physical vs Online:** Plays fine both ways

# Background

Welcome to *Strong Community Ties*. Thank you for facilitating the scenario for a play group (or if you are just here to read – welcome anyway).

## War, Financial Crisis and Masculinity

*Strong Community Ties* is about Danish middle-class milieus that produce soldiers willing to fight wars in distant countries. They might be able to have a military career, or experiences that are valuable in a civilian career, but it is not to satisfy material needs that they go.

Even though a large part of 21<sup>st</sup> century middle class Denmark has been quite enthusiastic about Denmark participating in war, going to war has not otherwise been of central importance. In the scenario, this is reflected by the financial crisis unfolding while Jakob is off to war, and it might be more important in the everyday life of Jakob's nearest and dearest.

My theory is that a part of the enthusiasm for war comes from the scarcity of relevant, convincing hero narratives in Denmark after the end of the Cold War. For many, financial success or individual 'everyday hero' identities are just not really enough in a time where gender roles, in particular male roles, are changing rapidly. This is not a theory that the game will force upon the players, but the players will have opportunity to play with some of the same puzzle pieces that led me to this conclusion.

It is not a goal of the game to condemn soldiers as individuals! We, the public on whose mandate they went to war, cannot disclaim responsibility. Also, the purpose of the scenario is insight rather than condemnation, no matter how awful an idea the invasion of Afghanistan was.

## Storytelling Play

The style of the game is exploratory storytelling play with elements of character play. Some scenes are pure description, with everyone taking turns making brief statements that build upon what others have said. Other scenes are hybrids, where two participants play characters while the two or three others supply description of the surroundings. To flow elegantly, the game requires a somewhat slow style, where everyone listens and makes room for each other.

## Structure and Exploration

Three acts and an interlude provide a firm framework, and much of the content is given, but what it all *means* in the end is up to how the group plays the game. In very concrete terms, at the start of each act the group gets a question that they must answer clearly in a decision scene at the end of the act. The question helps the players focus play in the middle part of the act. The question for the second act depends on the answer to the first act's question. Between the second and third acts there is an interlude where the group decides whether Jakob gets hurt or killed in Afghanistan, or if he makes it home unhurt. The result of this will obviously colour the third act quite a bit.

## Indirect Play

It is only at the beginning and end of the acts that Jakob even appears directly. The middle part of each act consists of scenes that play out between Jakob's friends and family in Denmark. We follow his mother Lene, his brother Frederik, his friend Michael and his girlfriend Yasmin. Each scene is between just two of these four. The scenes are cut using Jakob – when Jakob has been mentioned both in the dialogue and in the supplemental description, the scene is cut. This two-factor cutting mechanism ensures that Jakob is mentioned in all scenes, but they cannot be about him – when a scene really starts being about Jakob, it ends. The constraint ensures that play will focus on Jakob's milieu and background.

Except when act questions are being answered in decision scenes, scenes are *slices of life*, not fully rounded little dramas. They will often be cut long before the problem is 'resolved', because we are not interested in solving problems but in tasting relationships.

Also it is a rule of the game that description cannot touch directly upon the inner life of the characters. We can guess at what they think and feel based on what they say and do, and on the situations in which they find themselves, but regarding their motivations we have to approach indirectly – or take their own words for it. The players do not have individual ownership of the characters – each character will be played by different players at different times. This helps ensure that we focus on the relationships between them rather than on their inaccessible inner life.

At the end of the acts, as the act question is answered in a decision scene, everyone except the facilitator speaks for Jakob. Jakob says whatever ANYONE says, until a reasonably clear answer to the act question emerges. In this way, everyone has influence, but noone has control.

## The Scene Catalogue is a Funnel

In the first act there are some pretty solid scene seeds in a little catalogue which you as facilitator will be handling. In the second act, where you have more actual play to build upon, the scene seeds are rough sketches to start off of, and in the final act, where you have lots of material and are going strong, framing scenes that fit the chosen relationships is completely up to the group.

## Humour

This may all sound very serious, and I suppose it is, but under the hood, much of the engine is comedy-oriented. Many of the mechanics work to make it easy to contribute to the conversation in a witty way, and the way that the setup keeps returning to the same structures, people and relationships makes everything both safe and easy. The agenda of the game is elegant play with serious questions.

However, to some degree the interlude between the second and third acts will kick the legs out from under the amusement. The interlude is about the war, and Jakob's life and health are on the

line in a way where anyone can harm him, but noone can keep him safe. Furthermore, the interlude is set up so that the participants are not quite sure where the story is going or what they each can morally do in terms of the storytelling. It is (a bit) unsafe.

Though the game IS amusing, and though the lack of individual character ownership does not support bleed very well, it is quite possible that the players might end up feeling things that are not nice. Both about war and about emotionally unsatisfying relationships in middle class milieus.

## **Online Play**

The game works fine online, with the caveat that everything takes more time. The scenario text generally assumes that you are playing offline, but where online play deviates significantly from offline, there will be little sections that give guidelines for adapting to online play.

# **The Role of the Facilitator**

If you are a super experienced facilitator/GM, you can take this section a little lightly. Anyway, here are some thoughts about the purposes that you serve as facilitator.

## **Cheerleader**

Enthusiasm is infectious. Your perhaps most important function is to signal (perhaps subtly, but nonetheless) that this is going to be awesome – it is a self fulfilling prophecy. Also in a lot of situations, other participants will seek assurance from you, and generally you should give it to them. Either when they are about to say something, while they are saying it or immediately after, they will seek eye contact and look a bit questioning. Then you should return the eye contact and smile and nod just a little. It is magic.

## **Facilitator/Example**

You must generally be the person who knows what is going on, and who gets the group going, just like a normal GM. Once you are going, you are mostly a normal player – but if there is doubt about how to proceed, you should take the lead in solving the problem. Furthermore, as facilitating participant, you have an amazing way of showing the others how to do things: by doing them. Especially with the cutting mechanic, this is important.

## Special Functions

In the decision scenes you will have a special function, framing the situation and pushing the other participants to deliver an answer. Also, in the first two acts you will have sole responsibility for bringing the contents of the scene catalogue into play, and you cut the pure narration scenes.

## Rule Enforcement

There are some guidelines – a ban on directly describing the inner life of the characters, and in the interlude, a ban on approaching too closely in the description. You must enforce these rules, but softly. Like, "That is a fine contribution, but...".

## Safety

Though there is a stop phrase (see p 10), people who need to use it don't always get around to doing so. You are probably the person with the clearest idea of the moods and reactions of your fellow players. So be ready to be a backstop and do something if someone gets downright uncomfortable.

## Calibration

If the other participants throw themselves in one direction, it is up to you to challenge them by pulling a bit in the opposite direction to ensure that the game gets the nuance that it needs.

## The Conversation About War Trauma

This is a specific and important example of a calibration task. A quite large part of the public Danish conversation about the Afghanistan war has revolved around the individual, traumatizing experiences of Danish soldiers and their subsequent trouble fitting into Danish everyday life. A considerable minority of the deployed have indeed returned with PTSD in the baggage. War trauma is a fine subject, but it is not the primary subject of *Strong Community Ties*, which instead deals with the social and cultural background for Denmark's participation in the war.

Because war trauma has taken up so much space in the conversation, and the game gives so much scope for player input, it is very possible that players will draw upon it in their dialogue and description. As facilitator, you should not shut them down, but merely pluck other strings to show that the game can be about other things.

## Player

If you are four participants all in all, as the facilitator you are largely a full participant and should pull your weight as such (but be careful to not dominate the game). If there are five of you, you should hold back a bit. In particular, you should play fewer characters than the others. But you ARE a player – it is your right and obligation to add colour to the game, to have ideas and run with the ideas of others. Have fun!

# Dramatis Personae

These people make up the 'landscape' of the relationship map on page 29. Of course, Jakob also has some friends in active service, but we ignore those.

## The Protagonist:

**Jakob Flander.** Jakob is in his early twenties. He is going to Helmand, Afghanistan as a constable in the army (ie soldier) and when he has done a tour or two, he is probably going to study something in the neighbourhood of commerce & leadership. Everyone agrees that Jakob is a very promising young man, and very beautiful.

## Important Secondary Characters:

**Erik, Jakob's absent father.** He is a businessman and sends postcards, typically from places like Chile or Kuala Lumpur – he is practically never in Denmark. Mother & father were divorced when Jakob & Frederik were quite young.

**Karina, Jakob's ex.** Jakob and Karina were high school sweethearts. She came out as a lesbian about a year after they broke up. Jakob and Karina don't see each other that often but they are still friends, in an awkwardly honest sort of way.

## Player Characters (can be played by anyone):

**Lene, Jakob's mother.** Lene is in her late forties and middle management in a medium-sized, Danish bank. She is sporty, energetic and in charge. She is not letting on that she is feeling a bit down and has been for a long time. **An important word:** Appearances.

**Frederik, Jakob's older brother.** Frederik is a year older than Jakob and studies Literature. Frederik is grimly determined to make a personal, financial and social success of his somewhat unprofitable subject. He measures himself against Jakob in all things. Jakob is a bit ahead, but not hopelessly so. **An important word:** Competition.

**Michael, Jakob's best friend.** Jakob and Michael went to elementary school together and joined the army together. Michael dropped out of the army just as Jakob was getting serious – now Michael works as a fitness instructor (and ski bum in the winter). Michael is a charming, carefree slacker, and no one could accuse him of being promising. **An important word:** Pleasure.

**Yasmin, Jakob's girlfriend.** Has a Danish mother and an Egyptian father, and is a law student. She is ambitious and a hard worker, and parties almost as hard – she is rarely at rest. She generally has plans for everything. She and Jakob became a thing while he was a conscript.<sup>1</sup> She loves Jakob – he *might* be the one that she will have babies with. **An important word:** Will.

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<sup>1</sup> Denmark has the draft, but the conscription period is less than a year and to get sent to a foreign assignment like Afghanistan, you have to sign up for it.



## Starting Relationships Between Player Characters

**Lene – Frederik:** Parental purchase apartment<sup>2</sup> (with wiring and plumbing issues and a high loan-to-value ratio)

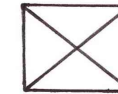
**Lene – Michael:** Michael is personal trainer to Lene

**Lene – Yasmin:** Business Law reading group (think club for lean-in type women)

**Frederik – Michael:** Football<sup>3</sup> fandom

**Frederik – Yasmin:** Music fandom – Amy Winehouse (Jakob can be bothered with rock, and with whatever to dance to at parties)

**Michael – Yasmin:** Run in some of the same places



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<sup>2</sup> When parents buy an apartment and rent it to their offspring at below market value. This is very much a thing in Denmark.

<sup>3</sup> That would be soccer to Americans.

# Detailed Runthrough

Understand the flow of the game by reading this; lean on the support sheets during play. General mechanics which will return are in boxes and placed where they first enter play. This makes the Getting Started and First Act sections quite meaty.

## Getting Started

At Fastaval, all groups for a time slot start together – if you play outside of a Fastaval context, obviously do the initial intro yourself, and switch the order of welcome and intro. Getting Started should take about 30 minutes, plus whatever time group sorting takes – 45 minutes online.

### Intro

Troels (or someone else, maybe you?) gives an intro to the themes, mood and methods of the game. Then you will be sorted into play groups and sent to rooms to play.

### Welcome!

Get seated and say hello to each other. If there are initial questions for the play style, you can talk about it, but generally things will be explained along the way.

**Online:** Sort out initial technical issues now.

### Mood

The game approaches serious subjects in a playful manner. Often, this will be funny, sometimes the seriousness will burn through.

### Storytelling Play

We create a story together, in which we explore some themes through the act structure. The characters are owned in common – they are only yours for the scene.

### Inner Life

It is a rule of the game that you cannot narrate inner life. Outward signs of inner life – fine; characters talking about their feelings – fine; players narrating what characters feel – no go.

### Safety

Introduce the mechanic, but please do not whip up an anxious mood while doing so! The mechanic is there for good measure, not because everything is about to get very dangerous.

#### **Mechanic: Stop the Game!**

If someone needs to stop play due to unpleasant content, you just say 'Stop the game!' Then, play stops, and you talk about what to do. In the end, the players are more important than the game! You may need a break, or to edit the contents a little. Or someone needs to leave the game, or the game should stop. All fine if necessary.

## Jakob and His Nearest & Dearest – Quote Exercise

Briefly introduce the characters of the game based on the Dramatis Personae (p 8) without touching upon the relationships between the player characters yet. While introducing each of the four player characters, write their name and relationship with Jakob on a sticky note. Then lay the Quote Exercise from Player Materials (p 28) out for the players to see, and say that now, they get to decide who said which of the four quotes. The task is to **decide**, not to guess! They can discuss the assignment, but fairly briefly. This demonstrates in practice that the players are active co-narrators within a firm framework.

**Online:** In advance, place the Quote Exercise on an online whiteboard, and obviously use electronic sticky notes.

## Jakob's Childhood Room

This is a round robin description exercise. Together, you must describe the room of Jakob at 11 years of age – let us say in 1996. You open the ball by stating that on a shelf in the bookcase there is a bone, which on closer examination turns out to be a sheep's jaw, bleached by sun and waves. Then let the players add their bits, and discover that in doing so, they are describing the personality of 11-years-old Jakob. Give support as needed, especially if someone makes the mistake of thinking too long about what to say. If no one else brings up signs of Jakob's absent father, mention on your third go that there is little board on the wall with postcards from distant countries. Stop the exercise when you like, after the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> round.

**Online:** Ask the players to put aside the whiteboard and focus on the video of the other players.

## Mechanic: Round Robin

In the act intros, the interlude and the epilogue, the group will be describing something together without in character roleplay. Here, you take turns describing, either literally around the table or in free order but with an understanding that everyone needs to be heard. You make BRIEF statements, 1-2 sentences that the next speakers build upon without contradicting what has already been said. It is better to say something obvious than to wring your brain for something amazingly original to say.

**Online,** you have no table to go around. If you want to speak 'around the table', you might arrange an alphabetical list of your first names that you use for structure. Free order can also work, but then it is typically a good idea to hold up hands to signal that you wish to speak, and it is very important that everyone is willing to make room for the others.

## Dialogue, Cutting

You will play a scene with framing, dialogue, description and cutting. Jakob is 13 years old, and not in the scene. Support as needed and answer questions if they come up. Now is the time to fumble and learn.

### **Frederik (older brother), 14 and Michael, 13:**

**Place:** Schoolyard, recess, autumn.

**Activity:** Frederik and Michael are playing football. None of them are very good at it – unlike Jakob, who has talent but is losing interest.

**Agenda:** Michael is just passing time, Frederik wants Michael to say that Frederik is a good football player.

Introduce the scene framing mechanic (this page) and the cutting mechanic (next page). The purpose of the scene is to taste the relationship and then cut the scene *before* it is fully played out.

Get two volunteers to play the characters (don't volunteer, facilitator). Give them name signs. The rest (including you) each give a short, descriptive statement to frame the scene. Then play.

After a couple of minutes at most, if no one else has mentioned Jakob, you should incorporate him into your description of the surroundings. E.g. mention his red bike over by the bike shed, or

## **Mechanic: Scene Framing**

An exploration scene needs two characters, a place, an activity and an agenda. The *characters* are the two whose relationship we examine in the scene. The *place* is where it happens, and for the description to be any good, the place needs to be concrete. The *activity* is what is happening just now, and the *agenda* is something that one or both characters want or are bothered by. Scenes get much, much better if someone has something at stake. The scenes will often be cut before they are 'complete' – the important thing is to taste the relationship, not whether people get what they want.

First, agree on who will play the two characters, and they get a table name sign each (cut them out of p 30). Say, and repeat as needed, that characters are not supposed to live with a single player. Character players speak for their characters, and can also describe them.

The two or three who are not playing characters supply description of characters and surroundings. To start the scene, each of the describers make a brief statement based on the agreed seed, and you are off.

Karina + Jakob written in yellow chalk on the red brick wall. Lay down the cutting token. Now the scene will stop whenever one of the dialogue players mentions Jakob. If they take too long, beg them to put the scene out of its misery.

Along the way, freely supplement each other. It is quite important that the dialogue does not get so tight and fast that it is impossible for the describers to add description without interrupting.

Remember to crack down (gently but firmly) on attempts to narrate innter life.

We will be getting to exploration with a goal in play, which starts now.

**Online:** It is extra important to make the pace slow, and for people to give each other room. You can signal with a raised hand that you have something to say. As cutting token, write CUT1 in the text chat.

### **Mechanic: Two Factor Cutting**

Exploration scenes are *cut* like this: When both the characters and the describers have mentioned Jakob, the scene ends. This is quite easy and intuitive for the character players, where sometimes it will demand a little creativity from the description players. It might be a picture of Jakob, or one of Jakob's things, or something that he used to do something with, or something that someone got from Jakob. If the cut has already been made in the dialogue, and if Jakob is in Denmark, he might actually enter the scene. When the first part of the cut is made, demonstratively place a token (such as a pen) on the relationship map to signal to everyone that now, the scene may stop at any time. If you are in doubt whether people meant something as a cut, you can ask. If people are technically talking around Jakob but get VERY close, you can declare it a cut so people do not rules lawyer their way into having whole conversations about Jakob.

**Online,** the relationship map is not on display during scenes, and there are no name signs. Start the scene by having the two character players state "I am [character]!", and then the describers give opening statements and you play the scene.

Write SCENE in the chat at the start of each scene, and instead of placing a token at the first part of the cut, wite CUT1. At the second part of the cut, say it out loud (like, "Aaand thanks!").

# First Act

About 40 minutes offline, 60 online.

**Intro for the players:** We are in the autumn of 2007. Jakob has decided and is preparing to go to Afghanistan as a Constable (soldier) in the Army in February. Financial crisis? Of course, some doomsayers are shouting about property market bubbles, but they have been doing that for years. Things are going incredibly well, and we can buy the whole world.

**Exploration Goal:** In the final scene of the first act, the Decision Scene, Jakob (the players) will be asked at a party by his ex Karina (the facilitator) why he is going, honestly – to fight for freedom and democracy, or to seek adventure and personal growth. He will be tipsy enough that his guard is mostly down, but not too drunk to be coherent, and Karina will not let him get away with a vague or ambiguous answer. Note that the answer to the act question is NOT what Jakob truly thinks, but what he says to Karina when pushed. We will be playing the act with this question in mind.

**Act Kickoff:** A round robin narration scene. It is a sunny autumn day, Jakob is on a run in the woods. He is pushing himself properly. Remember the ban on inner life! You cut when it seems appropriate – two to four rounds or so.

## Mechanic: Exploration With a Goal

At the beginning of each act, as the facilitator you tell the group what the act question is, and roughly under which circumstances it will be answered. In the Decision Scene at the end of the act, you frame the scene and then the other participants speak for Jakob to answer the question. This means that whatever one of the others says, Jakob says. In this manner, the group talks its way to an answer.

*Online*, it is obviously extra important that you take it easy and give each other space, if everyone speaking for Jakob is to work.



**Exploration Scenes:** Put the relationship map (p 29) on the table, or get it cleared, and draw everyone's attention to it. Explain that you will be playing four scenes out of the six possible, and they will each be based on one of the six relationships between Jakob's nearest & dearest. Quickly run through the starting content of the relationships, again working off the map.

Ask one of the players to choose a scene based on who they want to see – you have a scene catalogue with full scene seeds for the first act, but the players should not take the time to know all of it. When someone has made a choice, put one of the small tokens on the line of the relationship, then frame and play the scene. Then someone else picks a scene, and so on, until you have played four scenes. If you are four participants, you pick a scene too, but you should not be the first to pick in the first act.

There is a scene catalogue for the first act on pp 22-23 (with the aid sheets for the first act). Here is a first act example scene.

### **Lene – Yasmin, First Act:**

**Place:** Meeting in the Business Law reading group, fine old chambers.

**Activity:** Lene and Yasmin are cleaning up after a lecture. They discuss how to appear serious because someone turned up in a silly T-shirt and messy hair.

**Agenda:** Lene wants to be a good, sharp business mother figure. Yasmin seeks career advice from the experienced Lene, but is concerned about seriousness going overboard into career inhibiting blandness.

### **Mechanic: The Relationship Map**

In each act, after the kickoff and before the decision, you will play four out of six possible exploration scenes, with mixed dialogue and description. Put the relationship map (p 29) on the table (at Fastaval, it will be available in a large format). Have four tokens ready (such as coins or dice). When it is time to pick a scene, a player who has yet to do so must pick one of the six relationships. Put a coin on it. You can talk about what to play, but it should be fairly brief, and then you play the scene. **DO NOT** plan out the whole act, just the next scene.

***Online,*** you will display the relationship map on a shared whiteboard or the like. You should only look at it in between scenes, so as not to steal your attention away from the video meeting. For tokens, use electronic sticky notes. Ideally, everyone should be able to move tokens, but if the technicalities of it are a problem, it is OK if only the facilitator can – then, the other participants will have to direct your hand.

**Decision Scene:** You frame and cut the scene. The other players will speak for Jakob together – Jakob says whatever any of them say.

It is a party in January 2008, not long before Jakob leaves for Afghanistan. Jakob and Karina are in the kitchen, and they are tipsy but not drunk (yet). Karina has acquired a light blue undercut recently. You speak for Karina – ask the act question in a fairly sharp and clear manner. Why is Jakob going – is it MORE about adventure and personal growth, or about freedom and democracy?

Give the players some time to grapple with the question. If (perhaps driven by a single player?) they make a very strong choice immediately, challenge it, in a friendly but firm manner. Accept what they arrive at in the second wave if it is reasonably clear, and cut the scene.

**Online:** The advice to take your time, give each other space and signal a desire to speak with a raised hand when multiple people are in a conversation applies so much the more when 3-4 people are playing Jakob!

## Break

About 15 minutes.

## Second Act

About 40 minutes offline, 60 online.

**Intro for the Players:** We are in the spring and early summer of 2008. Jakob is at war in Afghanistan, and will be coming home in August. The financial crisis is unfolding – people (like Lene) who deal professionally with finances can see that things are getting very bad with the property market, the stock market and the financial sector in general. Most people, however, are used to thing going well and believe they will continue to do so.

**Exploration Goal:** In the final scene of the second act, one of the folks back home will put a question to Jakob during a video call. If he answered in the first act that he is motivated by freedom and democracy, he will be asked if being in Afghanistan is actually *cool* – is it a proper adventure? If he answered in the first act that he is motivated by adventure and personal growth, he will be asked if the Afghanistan mission is *working* – is it making a difference? You should tell the players openly that their question here points in the opposite direction than their first answer, and this is by design.

**Act Kickoff:** A round robin narration scene. Kastrup Airport (Copenhagen), February 2008. Jakob and a group of others are taking a civilian flight to Qatar, from where they will go to Afghanistan by military plane. You must narrate Jakob's farewell to the player characters – but from a little distance, your point of view is not close enough for you to hear what anyone is actually saying. Remember the ban on inner life!



**Exploration Scenes:** Again, clear the table so everyone can see the relationship map, and remove the scene tokens from the first act if they are still there. Once again, you will play four scenes out of the six possible, just like in the first act. There is also a scene catalogue for the second act, but the scenes are rough sketches that you are welcome to replace with ideas of your own. The scenes in the catalogue have characters, place and activity – it is up to you to come up with an agenda, ie something that at least one of the characters wants, even though the cutting means that we might not learn whether they get their way. The scene catalogue for the second act is on pp 24-25. Here is an example:

**Frederik – Yasmin, Second Act:**

**Place:** A moderately trendy bodega (pub).

**Activity:** They are there with separate groups.

**Agenda:** Up to the group.

Explore as you like – you do not owe it to anyone to distribute your attention more fairly than the constraints of the relationship map force you to do in any case.

**Decision Scene:** You frame and cut the scene. Together, the other players will speak for Jakob, so that Jakob says whatever any of them say.

It is a video call in July 2008, and there are two variants. You can creatively adjust who asks the question, as long as it is still the right question being asked.

**The answer was freedom & democracy:** Jakob and Michael have been talking, exchanging news and discussing common friends and acquaintances when Michael stops and asks Jakob if it is actually *cool* being there, if it is really something, or if it is mostly just boring? As in the first act, push back a little if Jakob is too vague, or if he picks an answer very quickly.

**The answer was adventure & personal growth:** Jakob and Yasmin have just had skype sex, and are still somewhat undressed and relaxed, when Yasmin looks thoughtful and asks Jakob if he believes that the mission is actually *working*, if it is going to result in freedom and democracy in the long run? As in the first act, push back a little if Jakob is too vague, or if he picks an answer very quickly.

**Online:** Just as for the first act. Also, you should consider if you need a break if you play online. If you do, break before the interlude rather than after – you need to enter the third act with the energy from the interlude.

# Interlude

About 15 minutes.

**Intro for the Players:** Here in the interlude, we find out how Jakob fares in Afghanistan. It is a round robin narration scene with a few special rules, and it will run a bit longer than the ones we have played thus far. The rules are:

- **Distance.** We see everything from far enough away that it is not possible to make out individuals or hear words. At most we can see if the tiny figures in the distance are wearing uniforms or not.
- **Flexible Time.** The scene progresses chronologically, but it is possible to fast forward so that it is suddenly night, and then suddenly day again. The events may well play out over a week or two.
- **Jakob's Health.** When someone has hinted that something has happened that might be bad for Jakob, they are allowed to say ***Jakob is wounded*** or ***Jakob is killed*** if they want to. If someone says it, it happens. You *can* kill Jakob even though he is already wounded. No agreements may be made about the outcome. And all outcomes are acceptable. Truly.

**Intro to the Helmand Province:** As previously mentioned, no one needs to know a lot about the war to play, so here are some facts and images for you to build upon. Helmand is the place in Afghanistan where Jakob is stationed. Read it out.

Dusty mountains, a wide valley. Along the bottom of the valley, 'The Green Zone' of gardens, fields and little villages, with lots of ditches, fences and trees. Outside the zone, a rapid transition to barren hills. The Danish camp is a fortress, situated outside the zone. Aside from rifles, the soldiers fight with drones, airstrikes and artillery support. Aside from rifles, the Taleban fight with roadside bombs. There is no clear divide between the Taleban and the local population.

**The Interlude:** You frame and cut the scene as usual, but you should set a timer (or glance at the clock as you go) for the scene to run for fully ten minutes. Do NOT tell the players how much time you have. You MUST continue for the full duration, even if Jakob is killed. Do not personally hurt Jakob – leave it to the other players.

The safety mechanic 'Stop the Game' is obviously in force, but you should not call special attention to it. It is fine if it sees use, BUT with one exception. It is NOT OK to use it to agree in advance that Jakob will be fine, or to retcon so that he is not killed after all. This will completely gut the final part of the game, so it is better to break off completely if someone needs it. Do keep an extra eye on whether anyone gets so uncomfortable that it makes sense to intervene. The interlude *is* supposed to combine aesthetic beauty with several levels of discomfort, but obviously within reason.

## Third Act

About 40 minutes offline, 60 online. The structure works whether Jakob is unhurt, wounded or dead.

**Intro for the Players:** We are in the autumn of 2008 and the financial crisis has hit with full force. The property market is in free fall and a lot of debt that was taken on under optimistic assumptions is now quite unpleasant for both lenders and borrowers. The future seems uncertain for a lot of people.

**Exploration Goal:** At the end of the act, one of the player characters will find a letter among some of Jakob's things and read it. It is a hand-written letter from Jakob to his father. Jakob wrote the letter before he left for Afghanistan, but never sent it. In the letter, Jakob writes about one time when he was seven and Erik and Erik's girlfriend took him on a trip to the woods. Jakob got separated and lost, and they only found him several hours later. The question is, does Jakob in the letter end up describing it as a good day or a bad day? Note that the question is not what seven-years-old Jakob actually felt at the time, but how adult Jakob describes it.

**Act Kickoff:** A round robin narration scene that you frame and cut. Jakob comes home and is received by his nearest and dearest, in whatever condition he is – it may be in the airport, a visit to the hospital, or Jakob's funeral for that matter. Jakob is there, and all four player characters. As observers we are deaf – we can see them, but we cannot hear what they say.

**Exploration Scenes:** Once again, clear the relationship map so everyone can see it and remove the scene tokens from the second act if they are still there. Again, you will play four scenes out of the six possible, just like in previous acts. You make up the scenes yourselves. They still need people (provided by the chosen relationship), place, activity and agenda.

**Decision Scene:** You frame and cut the scene. Together, the other players speak for Jakob – here, this means that whatever any of them says, Jakob wrote. State the question with crisp clarity – this time, the sharpness of the answer is entirely in the hands of the other players.

You choose which of the player characters finds the letter and reads it. Where are Jakob's things now? Who would it be interesting to see in the situation? You frame the scene by describing it, and you tell the others to start. Sometimes you can describe the reactions of the reader if you feel like it. If about 30 seconds pass without anyone saying anything, there is nothing more written in the letter. Then you cut by describing how the reader folds the letter again.

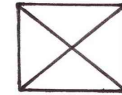
# Epilogue: Jakob's Room

About 10 minutes offline, maybe 15 online.

A round robin description scene. Start by briefly discussing what is Jakob's room now. Where does he live, or if he is dead, where was the last place in Denmark that he lived, and what has happened with the room since his death?

Once you know what the situation is, describe the room together.  
You cut.

Say thank you for the game (if you feel like it).



# Getting Started – Aid Sheet

## Intro & Welcome

**Mood** – playful approach to serious topics

**Storytelling Play** – group exploration in act structure, group ownership of characters

**Inner Life** is off limits

**Safety** – 'Stop the game!' (but it's not that dangerous)

## Jakob and His Nearest & Dearest

Intro to the Dramatis Personae based on p 8

Quote Exercise, p 28 and sticky notes

## Jakob's Childhood Room – round robin exercise

Jakob, 11 years old (1990's)

Mention the sheep's jaw in the first round, signs of father in third round (if not mentioned by a player)

## Dialogue, Cutting

2 play dialogue, the rest describe

Cutting: Jakob mentioned in dialogue AND description. Do cut BEFORE the scene is all played out.

Example scene, football<sup>4</sup> in the schoolyard, Jakob is 13

**Persons:** Frederik (14) and Michael (13)

**Place:** Schoolyard, recess, autumn (late 1990's)

**Activity:** Frederik and Michael are playing football. None of them are very good at it – unlike Jakob, who has talent but is losing interest.

**Agenda:** Michael is just passing time, Frederik wants Michael to say that Frederik is a good football player.

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<sup>4</sup> Still soccer to Americans.

# First Act – Aid Sheet

**Intro for the Players:** We are in the autumn of 2007. Jakob has decided and is preparing to go to Afghanistan as a Constable (soldier) in the Army in February. Financial crisis? Of course, some doomsayers are shouting about property market bubbles, but they have been doing that for years. Things are going incredibly well, and we can buy the whole world.

**Exploration Goal:** What will Jakob say that his primary motivation is – adventure & personal growth, or freedom & democracy? His ex Karina will ask at a party before he leaves.

**Act Kickoff:** Sunshine, woods, autumn, Jakob is running and pushing himself.

**Exploration Scenes:** Introduce the starting content of the relationships. Play 4 out of 6 possible.

**Decision Scene:** Karina asks at the party. She recently got a light blue undercut. Jakob and Karina are tipsy in the kitchen.

**Take a Break**

# Scene Catalogue

## Lene – Frederik, First Act:

**Place:** At home in Frederik's parental purchase apartment.

**Activity:** Tea for two. Frederik will soon be attending a prestigious Literature Studies conference in Stockholm, Sweden.

**Agenda:** Frederik is annoyed that his potted plants keep withering and dying, even the cactus. Lene has a headache and is grimly determined that this will be a positive interaction.

## Lene – Michael, First Act:

**Place:** Fitness Center

**Activity:** Lene shows up out of breath and 10 minutes late for a 1-1 training session with Michael because a meeting in the bank ran over time.

**Agenda:** Lene wants help handling light stress, and would like to feel not-old. Michael is very eager to charm his friend's mother.

## **Lene – Yasmin, First Act:**

**Place:** Meeting in the Business Law reading group, fine old chambers.

**Activity:** Lene and Yasmin are cleaning up after a lecture. They discuss how to appear serious because someone turned up in a silly T-shirt and messy hair.

**Agenda:** Lene wants to be a good, sharp business mother figure. Yasmin seeks career advice from the experienced Lene, but is concerned about seriousness going overboard into career inhibiting blandness.

## **Frederik – Michael, First Act:**

**Place:** Riding a train late in the evening, after a post-football party.

**Activity:** They are drunk, 5-6-beers level, and are semi-bragging to each other about times they almost got in a fight (but then didn't).

**Agenda:** Frederik wants Michael's admiration, Michael wants Frederik to laugh.

## **Frederik – Yasmin, First Act:**

**Place:** Frederik's apartment, evening.

**Activity:** Yasmin has managed to get her hands on an extra ticket for the Amy Winehouse concert in VEGA in a month, that Frederik didn't get a ticket for in time. Now, Frederik is serving a good dinner in return.

**Agenda:** Both are genuinely enthusiastic about the music. Frederik is also a bit worried about whether the dinner really settles the debt, Yasmin is firmly determined that this will not be awkward.

## **Michael – Yasmin, First Act:**

**Place:** Running in the park in the rain.

**Activity:** Light rain has turned into a heavy shower, and now Michael and Yasmin have taken cover under the same tree. Yasmin asks Michael about his plans for the future.

**Agenda:** Yasmin is positively interested in Michael's future (because he is her boyfriend's friend), Michael wants to convince Yasmin that he is OK with not having plans.

## Second Act – Aid Sheet

**Intro for the Players:** We are in the spring and early summer of 2008. Jakob is at war in Afghanistan, and will be coming home in August. The financial crisis is unfolding – people (like Lene) who deal professionally with finances can see that things are getting very bad with the property market, the stock market and the financial sector in general. Most people, however, are used to thing going well and believe they will continue to do so.

**Exploration Goal:** Question depends on the first act answer. One of the player characters asks Jakob during a video call.

**If freedom & democracy:** Is it *cool* being there?

**If adventure & personal growth:** Is the mission *working*?

**Act Kickoff:** Kastrup Airport, February 2008. Farewell, your point of view is not close enough to make out words.

**Exploration Scenes:** 4 out of 6 possible.

**Decision Scene:** July 2008, video call.

**Michael:** Is it *cool*, or just boring?

**Yasmin:** Is it *working*, or is is no good?

**Online –** Do you need another break?

## Scene Catalogue

**Lene – Frederik, Second Act:**

**Place:** A busy café.

**Activity:** Brunch.

**Agenda:** Up to the group.

**Lene – Michael, Second Act:**

**Place:** On the street, after a training session (which was the last of the day for Michael).

**Activity:** Walking down the street.

**Agenda:** Up to the group.

**Lene – Yasmin, Second Act:**

**Place:** Meeting in the Business Law reading group, fine old chambers.

**Activity:** A break during a lecture on bankruptcy law.

**Agenda:** Up to the group.



## **Frederik – Michael, Second Act:**

**Place:** A supermarket.

**Activity:** The checkout line is endless, there is no one to open another checkout.

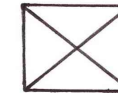
**Agenda:** Up to the group.

## **Frederik – Yasmin, Second Act:**

**Place:** A moderately trendy bodega (pub).

**Activity:** They are there with separate groups.

**Agenda:** Up to the group.



## **Michael – Yasmin, Second Act:**

**Place:** A run in the park on a sunny day.

**Activity:** They have just run past a bachelor (or bachelorette) party in pretty wild costumes.

**Agenda:** Up to the group.

# Interlude – Aid Sheet

**Intro for the Players:** Jakob in Afghanistan. Round robin with extra rules.

- **Distance.** We see everything from far enough away that it is not possible to make out individuals or hear words. At most we can see if the tiny figures in the distance are wearing uniforms or not.
- **Flexible Time.** The scene progresses chronologically, but it is possible to fast forward so that it is suddenly night, and then suddenly day again. The events may well play out over a week or two.
- **Jakob's Health.** When someone has hinted that something has happened that might be bad for Jakob, they are allowed to say *Jakob is wounded* or *Jakob is killed* if they want to. If someone says it, it happens. You *can* kill Jakob even though he is already wounded. No agreements may be made about the outcome. And all outcomes are acceptable. Truly.

**Intro to the Helmand Province:** Dusty mountains, a wide valley. Along the bottom of the valley, 'The Green Zone' of gardens, fields and little villages, with lots of ditches, fences and trees. Outside the zone, a rapid transition to barren hills. The Danish camp is a fortress, situated outside the zone. Aside from rifles, the soldiers fight with drones, airstrikes and artillery support. Aside from rifles, the Taleban fight with roadside bombs. There is no clear divide between the Taleban and the local population.

**The Interlude:** Set a timer for ten minutes (or just keep an eye on the time). Tell the players that this round robin will be longer than usual, but not how long. Then narrate.

Narrate for the full duration, even if Jakob is hurt!

Do not hurt Jakob yourself.

'Stop the game!' CANNOT be used to keep Jakob safe, but can absolutely be used in other ways.

Go directly to the third act if possible.

# Third Act – Aid Sheet

**Intro for the Players:** We are in the autumn of 2008 and the financial crisis has hit with full force. The property market is in free fall and a lot of debt that was taken on under optimistic assumptions is now quite unpleasant for both lenders and borrowers. The future seems uncertain for a lot of people.

**Exploration Goal:** A player character finds a letter that Jakob wrote but did not send to his father before leaving for Afghanistan. In the letter, Jakob talks about a trip to the woods with his father and the father's girlfriend at the time when Jakob was 7. Jakob was lost for several hours.

**The Question:** Does Jakob describe the trip to the woods as a good day or a bad day?

**Act Kickoff:** Jakob is welcomed back by the player characters (adapt to his condition after the interlude).

**Exploration Scenes:** 4 out of 6 possible.

There is no scene catalogue. Aside from the people from the relationship, a scene needs:

- **Place**
- **Activity**
- **Agenda**

**Decision Scene:** A player character finds the letter and reads it. Jakob wrote what the players say. After 30 seconds of silence, there are no more words in the letter.

## Epilogue: Jakob's Room

Where is Jakob's room now?

Round robin description.

Thank you for playing.

# Quote Exercise

Hey, I can see that it's a dilemma, and I can't tell you what you should end up doing. But first, don't do anything stupid just for the sake of doing something, OK?

Have you tried taking Vitamin D supplements? Otherwise you can end up feeling a little tired in winter without really knowing why.

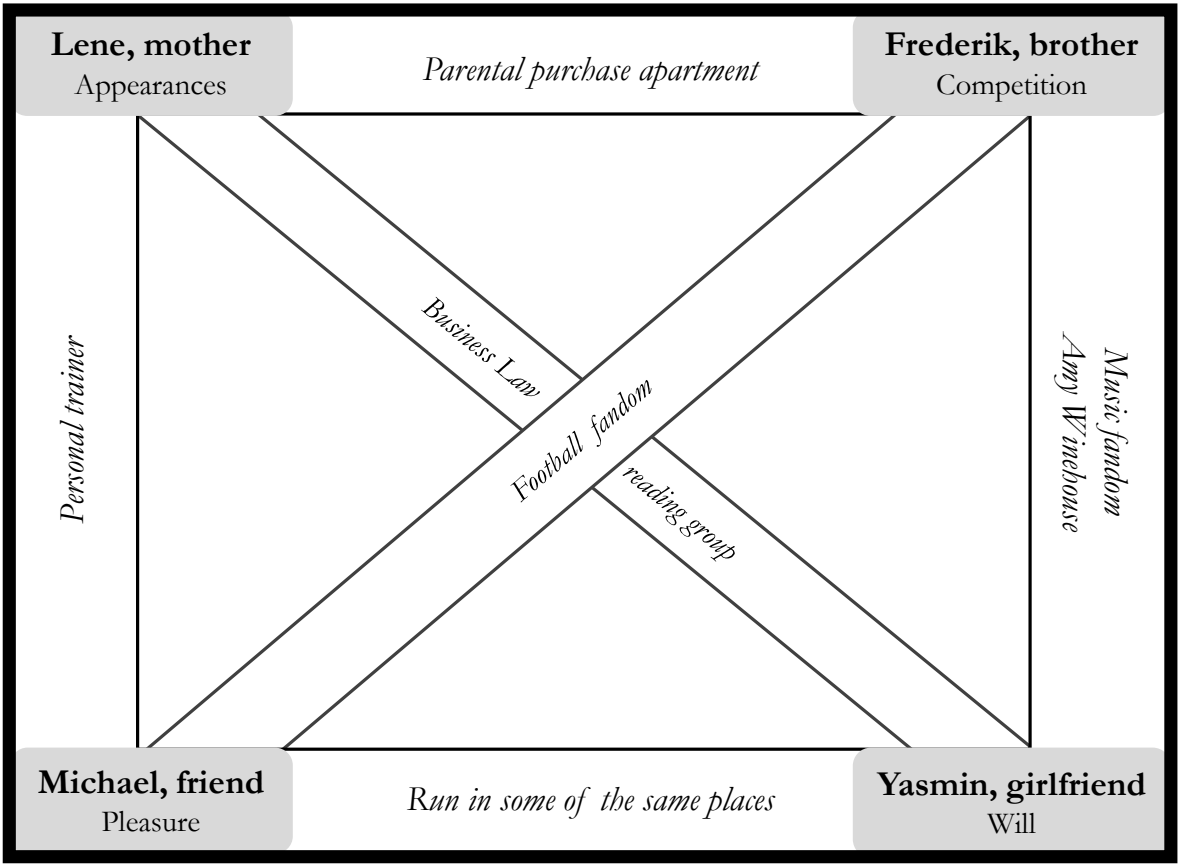
It sounds pretty cool! Are you GOING somewhere with it, or is it just for fun?

Well, you could look at it that way, but have you considered that you might be wrong, and that matters might be a damn bit more complex than your question?

**Erik**  
absent father

**Jakob  
Flander**

**Karina**  
ex



**Lene, Jakob's mother**

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**Lene, Jakob's mother**

**Frederik, Jakob's brother**

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**Frederik, Jakob's brother**

**Michael, Jakob's friend**

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**Michael, Jakob's friend**

**Yasmin, Jakob's girlfriend**

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**Yasmin, Jakob's girlfriend**

# Appendices

These are things which are interesting to the interested, but not strictly necessary for running the game.

## ***Jacob's Room and roleplayification***

*Strong Community Ties* is inspired by Virginia Woolf's novel *Jacob's Room* from 1922 about why a young man volunteers to serve in World War One, where he is killed. However, the war itself takes up only a few lines out of the about two hundred pages of the novel – the book is about why it made sense to Jacob based on his background and culture. The book is a rather provocative, literary experiment and approaches its protagonist very indirectly. We rarely delve deeply into the thoughts of Jacob Flanders, instead seeing him through people around him, and for instance through description of his room, without him even being present. *Strong Community Ties* moves the story from England at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to Denmark at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and replaces the form-experimenting novel with form-experimenting storytelling play. That I as a writer have been inspired by Woolf need not concern the players – the culture that produced Woolf's Jacob is a different one from that which produced our Danish Jakob, and the game is far from a 1:1 translation of the novel. Woolf expertise is not necessary to play or facilitate the game – read the novel because it is both excellent, thought-provoking and blessedly short.

## **Jakob's Various Facts**

This is my Jakob timeline that I have used to keep track of things. The details are not crucial, but I like them.

- Jakob was born in 1985, so he is 22 years old when he leaves for Afghanistan in early 2008.
- Jakob went to High School in 2001-2004 and Karina was his girlfriend for at least a couple of years.
- Jakob and Michael were conscripted in the infantry in 2005-2006. Michael stopped in the army when he was done with his conscription period.
- Jakob and Yasmin became a thing while Jakob was a conscript.
- Jakob did his Constable training in 2006-2007.
- Jakob is in Helmand, Afghanistan with ISAF (*International Security Assistance Force*) team 5 from February 14<sup>th</sup> to August 14<sup>th</sup> 2008.

And an extra, non-Jakob bonus fact:

- Amy Winehouse did a show at the Copenhagen venue VEGA on October 18<sup>th</sup> 2007. She was drunk on stage.

# Ludography

Here are some games that have been significant as inspiration and background for *Strong Community Ties*.

## Midlife Blues – A Werewolf’s Choice, 2021

By yours truly. The players must help the middle aged werewolf Hemnes choose whether to buy a sports car or a motorcycle. *Midlife Blues* was in some ways a feasibility study for *Strong Community Ties*. They have many mechanics in common, and the structure in *Midlife Blues* is the structure of one act of *Strong Community Ties*. Both are about Danish masculinity and family, despite the lack of werewolves in *Strong Community Ties*.

## Deranged, 2015

By Jeppe and Maria Bergmann Hamming. The players must help the dying composer Schumann order his memories. *Deranged* has had enormous influence on *Midlife Blues*, from which it has passed to *Strong Community Ties*. Both two factor cutting and exploratory play where players pick scenes descend quite directly from *Deranged*. Fabulous game. Once again, thank you.

## The Boiler, 2017

By Jackson Tegu. A daughter who lives in America visits her old father in Bulgaria, the boiler is broken. The mix of description and character play without character ownership has left strong traces in *Strong Community Ties*, as has the indirect and playful approach to serious topics. A most inspiring game!

## Distance, 2015

By Morten Jaeger. The scenario follows wives/girlfriends of three Danish soldiers in Afghanistan. *Distance* has set a standard for nuanced treatment of Danish soldiers in Afghanistan and their home front to which I have held *Strong Community Ties* to in many ways. Thank you.

