

Midlife Blues – A Werewolf's Choice



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A warm, humorous, short storytelling game about the middle-aged werewolf Hemnes. The players must help him choose whether to handle his crisis by buying a sports car or by buying a motorcycle.

Participants: 3-4 players plus a co-playing facilitator

Time: 1½ hours

Languages: English and Danish

Age limit: 13+

Amount of reading: 1-5 pages (you yourself choose how much)

Practicalities, online

You need a video meeting service. When playing, you should use gallery view in order to see each others' faces, and to see when someone wants to speak. Two screens are preferable for all participants, but one will do. Send a file with the scene catalogue to the players. (Cut it out of the PDF yourself or ask the writer.) Emphasize the slow pace – lag makes not hurrying *really* important.

Practicalities, offline

Print four extra copies of the pages with the scene catalogue, 11-18, so that all participants may have a catalogue each and need not fight over a single copy. If the plague is still ravaging the land, clean surfaces, keep your distance, air the room etcetera.

Credits

The Writer Collective 'Working Title' for help with idea development, Mads Brynnum for sparring, Lotte Melchior Larsen for proofreading and Mo Holkar for English language help. For playtesting: Anne, Lotte, Lærke, Marie-Luise, Nicolaj, Nis, Dennis, Ingrid, Kenneth and Terese.

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Welcome to the life of Hemnes

Midlife Blues – A Werewolf's Choice is a comic short game about the midlife crises of middle class men. The game centres around Hemnes, who also happens to be a werewolf.¹ The players explore his moderately crisis-ridden, middle-aged life through a number of scenes before they help him make the choice alluded to in the title. The choice is between whether he should handle his midlife crisis by buying a motorcycle, or by buying a sports car. Finally they narrate how happy and satisfied Hemnes is with the choice they have helped him make.

Play and style

This is a short yet slow game that utilizes a mix of narration/description and in-character play, and which has a co-playing facilitator rather than a game master. In the first and final scenes, the players narrate round-robin style. In the middle part of the game, they take turns picking scenes from a scene catalogue. All of the middle scenes are structured around a secondary character who plays some important part in the life of the werewolf Hemnes.² Hemnes is played by the scene picker, the central secondary character is played by a volunteer, and the rest contribute

¹ It is actually not a coincidence at all, but we'll get back to that.

² Werewolves have special werewolf names, and these have a considerable overlap with IKEA products. I have heard that pointing this out to werewolves can be unhealthy.

description and are in charge of cutting. In the last but one scene, where the choice is made, the facilitator plays a vampire customer representative while the rest all play Hemnes at the same time.

The players explore Hemnes' life by picking and playing four out of five possible middle scenes. The order, the scene left out and the interpretations are all important for the version of Hemnes' life that we get to see.

The humour is warm and charmingly absurd rather than horribly cringeworthy – this is *Modern Family*³ with werewolves rather than *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. Early in the game, the humour runs on off-beat combinations of stereotypes, and in the course of play, the cutting mechanic takes over some of the load, as it also functions as a running gag that only gets funnier with repetition.

The life of Hemnes

Hemnes is in the process of going *legit*, turning his rural werewolf pack from an old fashioned gang into a modern, well run family business. The werewolf pack of the rival Söderhamn are old school shady werewolves – precisely the kind of disorder that Hemnes is striving to escape as alpha male. Hemnes has a lot of kids with his mate Vittsjö, and

³ Originally I said *Frasier*, but young people informed me that only old people know *Frasier*.

they take up a lot of space. Age is beginning to weigh on him, both in the form of a middle aged body and him having an ever harder time understanding young people, but he is not yet so old that he cannot feel the blood pounding in his veins, in excitement as well as in panic. He is far from a failure, yet his life isn't quite what he dreamt it would be.

Sports cars and motorcycles

On the surface there is some want vs need comedy going on with Hemnes and his choice of vehicle – he *should* be coming to terms with his mortality, and instead he is worrying about getting a sports car or a motorcycle. It is not *quite* irrelevant though, as the vehicles represent two different masculine ideals to strive for, and the scenes of the game serve to help Hemnes figure out what kind of man he wishes he were.

Werewolves

Werewolves are fun! Urban Fantasy is fun! Taking a genre whose style is so much about the sexy, strong and youthful, and twisting it with pot bellies and dentist's appointments, is fun. Also, it is useful to have the obviously laughable stereotypes of the game be about other things than the ridiculousness of middle-aged men, as this makes it easier to treat masculinity in crisis with more love than contempt. And this is a loving game.

Urban Fantasy

Stories with supernatural elements set in modern times. The supernatural elements are typically things like vampires, werewolves, witches and faeries. For the ordinary people in the stories, the supernatural elements are often unknown and confusing, but for the audience, they are typically quite recognizable – we are introduced to a vampire, and then we basically understand what we're dealing with. There may be twists (e.g. vampires that glitter in sunlight rather than bursting into flames), but the model is familiar. This is unlike actual, old folklore, where things quickly get very strange and confusing when you dig into the concrete stories.

Examples: Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Twilight, True Blood, Being Human

The role of the facilitator

The facilitator is a player who knows a bit more than the other players about what is going on – because the facilitator has read this text. If you are reading this, there is a good chance that the facilitator is you. Basically you are here because pure run-from-the-page games are demanding and fragile. Here is a summary of your role in bullet points.

- **Player** – aside from what else you are, you are a real, live player of the game.
- **Guide** – guiding the group through the start of play, the warmup and the scenes is your job.
- **Example** – you are playing along, and the other players will naturally look to you to learn what to do.
- **Backstop** – if doubt & hesitation about procedure come up in play, you help the game along.
- **Cheerleader** – it improves the game enormously if you smile, nod when someone gets something right and laugh when someone says something funny.
- **Bank customer representative** – you have a key role to play in the moment of decision.

Four or five participants?

In principle, your role as facilitator is the same whether there are four or five participants (i.e. you and three or four others), but in practice, there are some things you should prioritize a bit differently. If there are five of you in all, you must take part but be careful not to take up too much space. You shouldn't pick/set a scene in the middle part,⁴ and you should consider only volunteering to play a secondary character if there are no enthusiastic volunteers for a scene. If there are four of you in total, however, you should (without dominating play!) take up your full fourth of the space as a player in the middle scenes – though you shouldn't be the first to pick a scene. If there are four of you, it is a good idea to push the other players to cut aggressively, and also point it out between or even during the scenes if necessary.

Setting scenes

You introduce the first scene, the decision scene and the final scene, but the other players can pick and introduce the middle scenes – in fact, they must pick one each. One of the other players picks a scene from the scene list (which is on all pages of the scene catalogue, and each player has a catalogue), reads the text and introduces the scene. If a

⁴ *Stelton*, the decision scene, is your moment of glory!

player does not want to introduce (e.g. because they are unsure or dyslexic, but they need not explain themselves), you can offer to do it, or they can ask you to do it.

No game master!

It would probably not be difficult for you to take control of the game, and then the other participants would be sitting there waiting for you to be funny, and to tell them about Hemnes' life. This is not how the game is intended to be. Based on the scenario, you should be funny together, and you should be exploring Hemnes' life.



Exploration

In order to be qualified to help Hemnes make a good choice, you must explore his life together. It is quite important that everyone is aware that exploration is a player duty, and that it means a lot how you interpret both Hemnes and the secondary characters. The scenario will take off in earnest if you are playfully curious together. This is also the reason why everyone gets a scene catalogue with the full text of the scenes, not just you – so that it is clear that everyone has responsibility for being full partners in picking, introducing and playing the scenes. This is also the reason why you must discard a scene – the last participant to pick a middle scene must have something to choose from.⁵

Description and in-character play

The first and final scenes are pure description, in which you will take turns making short contributions of a sentence or two, round robin style. The decision scene is also special. In the middle scenes the rule is that the scene picker speaks for Hemnes, and a volunteer speaks for the scene's central secondary character, while the other participants contribute description. Here, you don't speak in a fixed order – you speak as you wish and it makes sense. This works best if the

⁵ Plus it affords replayability. Please just let me fantasize about having written a scenario that people might want to play more than once...

tempo of the scenes is not too fast. If the players start speaking over each other, or if it is not possible to contribute description without interrupting, you should address the problem.

Cutting

The players do the cutting. You are one of the players, and right here, your facilitator function of being an example is important. Cutting takes two players, one to set it up and one to execute it, and must be done by the players not playing characters in a scene. The first player narrates how one of Hemnes' and Vitsjö's many cubs enters the scene, but without doing or saying more. This signals for everyone that the scene may end at any time, but it does not *have* to be instantaneous. The cut itself occurs the moment another narrating player asks some childish question through the child – we never get the answer.

The scenes are little frozen frames of Hemnes' life, not full dramatic compositions with clear curves and conclusions. It is quite OK that you move on even though there is unfinished drama in the scene. In fact, it is good if you cut a bit aggressively.

Bad wolf science

A good deal of our pop cultural ideas about werewolves – alpha males at the top of a violent hierarchy of domination – stem from obsolete science about real wolves. The concept "alpha male" was originally formulated by Rudolph Schenkel in 1947 on the basis of studies of wolves in captivity, and later it was popularized by L. D. Mech in his 1970 book, "The Wolf". Mech himself repudiated the concepts alpha, beta, omega etc. for description of wolves in 1999 with the explanation that wolves only act like this in captivity in far too little space, i.e. under highly unnatural conditions. In the wild, a wolf pack typically consists of a breeding pair and their cubs from the last couple of years. So, the general theory of wolf hierarchies (which is so tragically and stubbornly popular as an illustration of human hierarchies) is based on the wolf version of gangs in a badly run prison...

Start of play & warmup

Welcome the other participants to *Midlife Blues – A Werewolf's Choice*. Give them scene catalogues, but tell them that they need not read them yet (the scene list helps get an overview of Hemnes' life).

Hemnes' life. Give an outline based on what you know.

Expectations – what the scenario is and isn't.

- **Urban Fantasy** – we are in standard, pop cultural Urban Fantasy. Werewolves are neither poor, horribly cursed people like in (some) folktales nor militant eco-fascists like in White Wolf's version.
- **Short game** – but there is no need to hurry that much. Taking your time is fine both in and between the scenes.
- **A werewolf's choice** – the game has an object of play. We must help Hemnes choose whether he wants to buy a sports car or a motorcycle. To help him make a good choice, we explore his life.
- **Storytelling game with elements of character play** – we play the central character, Hemnes, together.
- **Co-playing facilitator** – not a game master.

- **Humour** does not require you to work ULTRA HARD at being funny. It will be as amusing as it needs to be – trust the game and your fellow players, and just say the obvious things.
- **A friendly game** – this is a fundamentally nice game, much more about loving understanding than about contempt for fools. Actually, if you find yourself waiting during the game, just think kindly thoughts about Hemnes while you wait.

Questions?

Give the other participants a chance to ask questions.

Warmup

First a couple of simple exercises to get your verbally warmed up, teach techniques and get a feel for the themes of the game. First a couple of exercises in round robin description. One says a sentence or two about the subject, then the next one says a sentence or two, and so on around the table or video call. Don't take too long thinking about something super cool to say, the obvious thing is good.

If you play online, 'around the table' can be done by listing the players' names alphabetically, starting in some arbitrary spot then following it to the end and moving to the top,

going from there to where you started. If the order slips a little, it is fine as long as everyone gets to speak.

Describe a sports car. Be purely positive and make it about how cool it is – completely without irony. Go around once, so everyone gets to speak (twice if they're on fire).

Describe a motorcycle. Again, be purely positive. Go around once.

Describe how a man with a sports car is awesome. What kind of man would you like to be if you have a sports car? Be purely positive, go around once.

Describe how a man with a motorcycle is cool. What kind of man would you like to be if you have a motorcycle? Be purely positive, go around once.

Two-factor cutting, by the participants *not* playing a character in the scene, using children asking questions. You narrate a scene, and then the others must cut at some point by one of them introducing one of Hemnes' cubs, and *someone else* having the child ask a childish question – we never hear the answer. The two don't have to be directly consecutive. Cutting should not wait for the scene to be done, only for us to have seen and tasted the moment. Aggressive cutting is good – you should take special care to point this out if there are four of you playing.

Facilitator, narrate how Hemnes is ordering around a bunch of other werewolves from the pack as they are moving boxes from a dented van to a scratched van (this is what Hemnes and the pack are driving at the moment). Nudge the others and say that now might be an OK time to cut if noone jumps to it after a reasonable while.

Play the game!

Before the scene is a page with facilitator's notes for the decision scene, *Stelton*. You should have read the notes in advance, but I think you can manage during the game itself with just the scene catalogue.

First, play the first scene (obviously). Then play four of the next five scenes, in free order determined by someone picking a scene from the list on the right hand side of the scene you are at now. Noone is to pick more than one scene. When you have played four out of the five middle scenes, move on to the decision scene, and then of course to the final scene.

Facilitator notes for the decision scene

The most important things are in the scene catalogue proper, where the players will see them as well. These are just facilitator specific notes for the decision scene, *Stelton*.



Here, the decision is made! All the other participants play Hemnes simultaneously, with him saying whatever any of them say. In this way they negotiate with each other about what choice he will make, but subtly. You must aid and support this process as Stelton, the vampire femme fatale bank customer representative. Ham it up and overact pretty hard. If you see an opening for wordplay that alludes to blood or sex, go for it! Have sensually expressive hands.

Start by saying that Hemnes can borrow the money for whatever he chooses – he shouldn't worry too much about the money, he should just make the best choice. And the best choice is not just about driving characteristics, but about the sort of man he is, and the sort of man he wants to be. Money and practical details are not *really* important – hopes and dreams are.

Then help Hemnes come to a decision. If a player goes for dominance for one option hard and early, challenge them (softly and nicely) and make sure the other players have their say. They will probably consider both options, and then a consensus will form. If no consensus forms organically and they get stuck, help them, but preferably without advocating one vehicle or the other.

Cut once Hemnes has made his choice, and go on to the final scene.

First scene: Hemnes (alpha male)

Technique: Narrated scene, *round-robin* description.

Narrate for at least two rounds, and as long as it is fun. There are no speaking roles. The facilitator introduces.

Scene: Hemnes, the middle aged werewolf male, is sitting at his table in his home office. On the table are two open motor catalogues. Hemnes is restless and dissatisfied, and indecisively looks through the catalogues.

Cutting: In two steps. First, one player narrates how one of Hemnes' and Vittsjö's young cubs curiously pokes their head into the scene. The scene continues. Another player asks a childish question through the child – this cuts the scene (we never get the answer).

Cut when we have *seen* the situation and *played* with it, cut BEFORE it ends or we run out of things to say.

Scene list

First scene, Hemnes (alpha male)

Vittsjö (Hemnes' mate)

Billy (the young, strong male)

Kallax (the young, smart female)

Pax (curious cub)

Söderhamn (the leader of the rival pack)

Decision scene, **Stelton** (bloodsucking customer rep)

Final scene, **Hemnes** (alpha male)

Werewolf names for your convenience: Brimnes, Hauga, Tornviken

Vittsjö (Hemnes' mate)

Technique: The scene picker and one volunteer play *in character*. The rest contribute *description* as needed.

The scene picker speaks for Hemnes. The volunteer speaks for Vittsjö. The scene picker can introduce the scene or ask the facilitator to do it.

Scene: Vittsjö has had an amazing idea that she wants to share with Hemnes – she is proud and excited. If the pack start wearing spandex clothes around full moon, they can save a fortune on clothes not getting shredded when they turn into musclebound, savage beasts.

Vittsjö is Hemnes' mate. When she and Hemnes first caught each others' scent, they knew at once that they would be mates for life. Epic love in the intoxicating rays of the full moon. That was 25 years and a lot of cubs ago.

Cutting: Other players, in two steps via childish questions. Cut when we have *seen* the situation and *played* with it, cut BEFORE it ends or we run out of things to say.

Scene list

First scene, **Hemnes** (alpha male)

Vittsjö (Hemnes' mate)

Billy (the young, strong male)

Kallax (the young, smart female)

Pax (curious cub)

Söderhamn (the leader of the rival pack)

Decision scene, **Stelton** (bloodsucking customer rep)

Final scene, **Hemnes** (alpha male)

Werewolf names for your convenience: Brimnes, Hauga, Tornviken

Billy (the young, strong male)

Technique: The scene picker and one volunteer play *in character*. The rest contribute *description* as needed.

The scene picker speaks for Hemnes. The volunteer speaks for Billy. The scene picker can introduce the scene or ask the facilitator to do it.

Scene: Hemnes hopes to have his oldest son Billy succeed him as leader one day. Billy is gay, and that's OK – Hemnes is not prejudiced. But sexually, Billy identifies as a 'bear', and Hemnes doesn't understand how that can make sense for a werewolf. Billy is leaving for a bear party tonight, and Hemnes wants to have The Talk.

Billy is a strong, calm teddy bear of a man with a full beard and a lumberjack shirt. He is gay and belongs to the gay subculture 'bears', whose ideal is very masculine, but in a huggable, lumberjacky way. Billy respects Hemnes and patiently explains. Again.

Cutting: Other players, in two steps via childish questions. Cut when we have *seen* the situation and *played* with it, cut BEFORE it ends or we run out of things to say.

Scene list

First scene, **Hemnes** (alpha male)

Vittsjö (Hemnes' mate)

Billy (the young, strong male)

Kallax (the young, smart female)

Pax (curious cub)

Söderhamn (the leader of the rival pack)

Decision scene, **Stelton** (bloodsucking customer rep)

Final scene, **Hemnes** (alpha male)

Werewolf names for your convenience: Brimnes, Hauga, Tornviken

Kallax (the young, smart female)

Technique: The scene picker and one volunteer play *in character*. The rest contribute *description* as needed.

The scene picker speaks for Hemnes. The volunteer speaks for Kallax. The scene picker can introduce the scene or ask the facilitator to do it.

Scene: Hemnes is sending Kallax on an important delivery mission for the pack. Kallax is pretty smart, and Hemnes wants to be a good role model for her. She is in heat and her scent is so amazing that Hemnes has difficulty concentrating.

Kallax is 20 years old and rocks her leather jacket and her tight jeans. She is ambitious and wants to make lots of money for the pack. Kallax sees Hemnes as a father figure, not at all a romantic figure.

Cutting: Other players, in two steps via childish questions. Cut when we have *seen* the situation and *played* with it, cut BEFORE it ends or we run out of things to say.

Scene list

First scene, **Hemnes** (alpha male)

Vittsjö (Hemnes' mate)

Billy (the young, strong male)

Kallax (*the young, smart female*)

Pax (curious cub)

Söderhamn (the leader of the rival pack)

Decision scene, **Stelton** (bloodsucking customer rep)

Final scene, **Hemnes** (alpha male)

Werewolf names for your convenience: Brimnes, Hauga, Tornviken

Pax (curious cub)

Technique: The scene picker and one volunteer play *in character*. The rest contribute *description* as needed.

The scene picker speaks for Hemnes. The volunteer speaks for Pax. The scene picker can introduce the scene or ask the facilitator to do it.

Scene: Hemnes is standing under a large tree. High in the tree, Pax is sitting on a branch and will not or cannot come down – which is the case is unclear. Pax loudly insists on being a cat. Hemnes has to take Pax for a dentist's appointment, and doesn't feel like shouting OR climbing.

Pax is a curious werewolf cub with a lot of energy and a lot of imagination. Sometimes so much imagination that it is hard for the grownups to keep up.

Cutting: Other players, in two steps via childish questions. Cut when we have *seen* the situation and *played* with it, cut BEFORE it ends or we run out of things to say.

Scene list

First scene, **Hemnes** (alpha male)

Vittsjö (Hemnes' mate)

Billy (the young, strong male)

Kallax (the young, smart female)

Pax (*curious cub*)

Söderhamn (the leader of the rival pack)

Decision scene, **Stelton** (bloodsucking customer rep)

Final scene, **Hemnes** (alpha male)

Werewolf names for your convenience: Brimnes, Hauga, Tornviken

Söderhamn (the rival)

Technique: The scene picker and one volunteer play *in character*. The rest contribute *description* as needed.

The scene picker speaks for Hemnes. The volunteer speaks for Söderhamn. The scene picker can introduce the scene or ask the facilitator to do it.

Scene: Hemnes and Söderhamn run into each other in the parking lot in front of the hardware store. There are witnesses in the distance, so now is not the time to fight (again). On the other hand, now is a great time to threaten and insult each other a lot. Who is a real alpha, and who is really just a blustering, conceited beta?

Söderhamn is the alpha male of his own, rival werewolf pack, and like Hemnes he is middle-aged, with hard, hairy muscles and a solid pot belly. Where Hemnes has tried to modernize and go legit, Söderhamn is an old-school, rural werewolf.

Cutting: Other players, in two steps via childish questions. Cut when we have *seen* the situation and *played* with it, cut BEFORE it ends or we run out of things to say.

Scene list

First scene, **Hemnes** (alpha male)

Vittsjö (Hemnes' mate)

Billy (the young, strong male)

Kallax (the young, smart female)

Pax (curious cub)

Söderhamn (*the leader of the rival pack*)

Decision scene, **Stelton** (bloodsucking customer rep)

Final scene, **Hemnes** (alpha male)

Werewolf names for your convenience: Brimnes, Hauga, Tornviken

The decision: Stelton (banker)

Purpose of the scene: *Hemnes must choose between sports car and motorcycle. Before you start, take a moment to reflect on the scenes from the life of Hemnes that you have explored.*

Technique: Pure *in character play*. The facilitator speaks for Stelton. All other players speak for Hemnes – when they say something, Hemnes says it. The order is free, just don't speak over each other.

The facilitator introduces the scene.

Scene: We find ourselves in a subterranean bank vault of black marble and stainless steel, lit by dozens of candles. The furniture is dark mahogany and burgundy velvet.

Across a grand table, Hemnes is facing his customer representative, the vampire Stelton. They are discussing the purchase of a vehicle.

Stelton is a gothic beauty in a black silk pant suit. She does her best to help him make the choice that will make him the happiest.

Cutting: The facilitator cuts the scene when Hemnes has made a decision. When that happens, Stelton lays out a razor sharp fountain pen and asks him to bare his wrist...

Scene list

First scene, **Hemnes** (alpha male)

Vittsjö (Hemnes' mate)

Billy (the young, strong male)

Kallax (the young, smart female)

Pax (curious cub)

Söderhamn (the leader of the rival pack)

*Decision scene, **Stelton** (bloodsucking customer rep)*

Final scene, **Hemnes** (alpha male)

Werewolf names for your convenience: Brimnes, Hauga, Tornviken

Final scene: Hemnes (alpha male)

Technique: Narrated scene, *round-robin* description.

Narrate for at least two rounds, and as long as it is fun. There are no speaking roles. The facilitator introduces.

Scene: A quiet country road in the sunshine. Hemnes comes hurtling along with his chosen vehicle. Everything is good here – this is a happy scene.

Cutting: The facilitator cuts the scene by thanking the other participants for playing the scenario.

