Childfree

A larp by Axiel Cazeneuve

Childfree is a larp about owning one's own body, about being empowered to make life-changing choices and pursue one's dreams and projects. It is a larp about choosing to get an abortion.

Practical

A political, pro-choice larp
7 players max. (inc. 1 volunteer facilitator)
No game master needed
4 hours
A chair, a dark room, a spotlight, and an alarm

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Note on the material

Reading and preparing should take approx. 30mn

The game is designed to be as simple as possible to run, as no game master is necessary to run it and one of the players acts as facilitator. When the participants are gathered to play, any of them can take hold of this material and proceed to read aloud for the others, until a facilitator is chosen during character distribution. However, some players may feel more secure if a person who doesn't play acts as facilitator: it is of course possible to arrange that. Moreover, this game isn't set in stone, and the participants are free to adapt it responsibly if they wish. If you do, please notify me *via* e-mail or through the feedback form: it might help me reflect on this game, and game design in general.

Running it only requires to read the content in the given order: however, **it is necessary that all players read the vision before taking part.** Everyone is free to opt out of the game at any moment. If one or two players are missing, the game can still be run: even though all characters contribute equally to the game, they are fluid and in the case one

character is missing, the players may appropriate the concept they represent and incorporate it into their own characters.

The informations written on the right of the pages are summaries of what is written below (large font) or contextual informations and suggestions (small font).

Vision

Voluntary abortion is not about trauma

Childfree was born from the disturbing ascertainment that even though larps about voluntary termination of pregnancy weren't generally designed in an anti-abortion perspective, by presenting abortion as part of the parenting process, not of the *contraceptive* process, and by emphasizing on the potential – and rare – trauma, they nurtured conservative views about abortion. **This larp is, thus, a political manifesto: it is radical in its premises, and hopes to carry across a critique of the social order.** Particularly, it aims at pointing out the ways in which the society appropriates the female body as an instrument to reproduce itself, denying the female-bodied persons mastery over their own bodies.

Pregnancy is not parenthood

One of those premises is the idea that the decision to abort must not be informed by which person the embryo might eventually become, but by the sole life of the person who is in a situation of unwanted pregnancy. Indeed, 1) there is strictly no way to know about that, 2) abortion has no effect on later fertility. Therefore, the potential futures of a potential child fully and exclusively belong in the deliberate pursuit of the parents' life projects: abortion doesn't impede these projects, but can on the contrary support them. There is no way to know which child might grow out of a given embryo; as a consequence, all embryos are logically equivalent –

unless, of course, the decision to abort or not is determined by some genetic particularity, which is not to be discussed here –, and if a person who aborted wants to have a child later, they still may (in most cases).

Pregnant people are not all women

On a side note, you probably noticed that I didn't talk about *women* here; indeed, if most people who resort to abortion are indeed women, not all persons with a functioning female reproductive system are women, and reciprocally, not all women have a functioning female reproductive system. Additionally, the number and gender of the potential parents won't be in question here: although abortion can of course be discussed among people who could eventually become parents, it is my belief that in the end, the decision belongs to the person whose body is directly involved in the pursuit or the interruption of pregnancy.

The Virgin and the Whore

Representations of abortion in Western countries are ruled by the triadic image of "the woman" as either a virgin, a mother – which is just the upgraded version of the virgin, as embodied by the Christian myth of the Virgin Mary –, or a whore. These representations only allow for abortion to be understood as one of two things: either the desperate gesture of the the Virgin - the woman-as-victim, the ingenuous, the poor, juvenile girl who was deceived or raped -, or the selfish resort of the Whore - the woman-as-criminal, the decadent, the pleasure-seeker to whom the life of others means nothing. Reality, of course, is nothing so naive: indeed, despite nearly 70% of European women using contraceptives, almost half of pregnancies in this area are unintended[1]. In France, the country where access to contraceptives is the easiest, three abortions out of four concern persons who used contraceptives[2]. In truth, no contraceptive method is

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[1] http://www.safeabortionwomensright.org/contraception-in-europe/
[2] https://www.nouvelobs.com/rue89/rue89-rue69/20100202.RUE4800/trois-ivg-sur-quatre-concernent-des-femmes-sous-contraception.html

100% efficient, making legal, medically performed voluntary terminations of pregnancy an absolute necessity to sustain equality between people and genders, and maintain agency over one's own body.

> Interrupting or continuing pregnancy is a free decision:
> An unwanted situation can be turned into an empowering
> and liberating experience

The explicit goal of this larp is to convey a guiltless, liberated vision of voluntary abortion, free of the social injunction that it is, and *has to be*, a traumatic action. On the contrary, I believe, as I have experienced it, that abortion – albeit unpleasant, in many different ways[3] – can be an empowering and eye-opening experience, that reveals the way individuals process norms regarding the moral aspects of parenthood and the reproduction of society. However, the pregnant character in this larp may choose *not* to abort – as forcing that option on them would be as absurd and oppressive as would pressuring them into continuing pregnancy –: but, regardless of their decision, I hope that they – and the players around them – will gain some perspective on the enforcement of norms on individuals.

Setting

The game was designed for seven players, including one facilitator chosen among them, who plays the pregnant one and is responsible for running the workshops and the game. A non-player facilitator can be added if the participants are more comfortable with it, but the material doesn't include one.

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[3] I have written, in French, an article which notably addresses why abortion can never be perceived by the persons who resort to it as a "convenient" contraceptive method, but is on the contrary the last resort for persons whose contraceptive methods have failed. Conservatives views that freely interrupting pregnancy is irresponsible and selfish show deep ignorance of what the persons have to through to get an abortion, even in a legal and medical system in which access to healthcare is relatively easy and free for all.

In the absence of a non-player facilitator, the players are collectively responsible for kicking out a player who doesn't act in a respectful manner, or threatens the well-being of others in any way. **Despite their role of facilitator, the pregnant one is still a player in their own right.** Responsibilities are handed to them in reason of their central importance in the game, which puts them in a different position: however, if they find, during the workshops, that they don't feel comfortable facilitating the game, another player may volunteer to take on that role. **Ultimately, all players are collectively responsible for running the game, and individually responsible for their own well-being and enjoyment.**

Ideally, the setting would consist of a dark stage or room, a vertical spotlight, and a chair at the center of this spotlight. A device on which an alarm can be set is also needed.

The game is expected to last four hours (about two hours of reading the material and doing workshops, an hour of game, and an hour of debriefing).

Safewords

"Brake" reduces intensity, "Cut" stops the game

The safewords for this game are "brake" and "cut". "Brake" can be used as a way to slow down the interaction or refuse one element which was just introduced: for example, if a character introduces a theme that another player feels uncomfortable about, they can announce "brake" and the proposed element is ignored. If a player says "cut", the game immediately stops, and the facilitator makes sure the player is okay. **Safewords are not the only ways to interrupt the game: being vocal and explicit about wanting to stop is encouraged.** The game may resume only if and when the player who interrupted the game feels ready. If they don't want to resume, all players proceed to debriefing, starting with the player who used the safeword. If the facilitator is the one who used the

safeword, **Law** takes their place and makes sure they're okay. **It is perfectly okay to use a safeword.**

The safewords are safety techniques and must only be used for off-game reasons, because the players feel uncomfortable: **it must not be used as a way to silence other characters.**

Practice the safewords by pairs: have one player gently bend the second player's fingers until it starts to hurt, leading them to use the safewords (*brake* to slow the bending, *cut* to interrupt it). Switch positions.

Introduction

Approx. 15-20 mn
Sharing views and experiences around pregnancy and
abortion as players

Before proceeding to character distribution, players introduce themselves briefly. Each in turn, they share their name, pronoun, and if they feel or need anything particular that the others should take into account (*for example: "I am stressed when I talk in front of other people, I need to be reassured and encouraged during the workshops" or "I have only played a few larps"*). It is also a good time to mention possible trigger warnings (*inc. possibile misgendering of the character, family situations, etc. Abuse won't be a part of the character's experience*). Then, one by one, they share their feelings about abortion. **Safewords can be used.**

If you have experienced abortion or pregnancy, either yourself or as a partner, feel free to share your experience if you want to: it could help giving depth and meaning to the game and inspiring players in the co-construction of the pregnant one.

No argument must take place, and every player should behave in a respectful, accepting way. It is forbidden to respond to what the other

players shared. It is possible to opt out of the game after this introduction (as it is at any point).

Character distribution

> *The pregnant one* also acts as facilitator
> Two character groups: *Society* and *Self*
> All roles are distributed on the spot

The characters are split into two groups, which revolve around *The pregnant one.* In fact, the game takes place in their head: the characters are an allegoric projection of what's happening in their mind. **The pregnant one is the character who will lead the workshops and distribute speech during the game**; they have the responsibility to provide play for everyone, while also trying to get the best of their experience. They are the one taking the decision (abortion or continuation of pregnancy) in the end.

Apart from *The pregnant one*, the characters belong in either *Society* or *Self*. *Society* embodies the norms, the social expectations and meaning of pregnancy and abortion, while *Self* embodies the identity of the pregnant one. They are not antagonist groups, but rather, represent the internal and external influences on the pregnant one: they can push them in one way or another, and change their mind as the game goes.

> No specialized knowledge is required to play

The three characters in *Society* are more stern, and require a greater ability for political and competitive discourse and giving the appearance of logic-grounded argumentation. You should play in that group if you like political talk and are able to defend worldviews you, as a player, disagree with without flinching. However, no specific knowledge is required, as the elements of the social structure will be elaborated by the

players through the workshops, as will the elements of the pregnant one's identity.

The three characters in *Self* are more sensitive, and necessitate a greater emotional intelligence and understanding of human psyche. You should play in that group if you like emotional play, doing lyrical speeches, and are able to convey feelings to the other players.

Before proceeding to the distribution, the following characters should be read through. A summary of the different characters will be made before they each are distributed.

The pregnant one

The pregnant one must be given a name and a gender. The gender can be the same, or different, as the player's. It can be any gender. The pregnant one's gender should be taken into account when creating the other characters, as *Society* surely has a gendered take on the situation. The rest of the pregnant one's identity is determined during the workshops through *Self*.

Society

Morals, *Law*, and *Maternity*

Morals: Morals designate the implicit or explicit code of conduct, based on the perception of right or wrong. It is a normative ethical system (several can exist in competition in the same space) ruling how people should behave. In most cases, morals derive from previously hegemonic religious beliefs. For example, catholicism traditionally condemns abortion, often assimilating it with murder, as they believe all human life

to be sacred from the day of conception[4]. In definitive, the legal system also bases on the arbitrary decision about when does a life start. Is it immoral to abort? Is an embryo (under 8 weeks of pregnancy) considered human? A fetus (over 8 weeks)? Should a person abort if they have the means to provide for a child's needs? Is a particular religion or religious background influential in this *Society*?

> If most western societies tolerate abortion, in many it has to be justified by something else than the absence of desire for becoming a parent. Indeed, people who resort to abortion are often socially pressured into giving excuses, such as the lack of stable economical and family situation, fragile health, etc. If these reasons may of course be true, it is notable that they should preferentially be given, even when the person who aborts didn't want kids in any case.

Law: The role of the law is to set up limits for abortion to happen, but also to remind the pregnant one of their rights and legal powers. It is both restrictive and enabling, and can enforce morals as much as it can counterbalance it. Are there restrictions to abort? Is it free? What is the duration limit for interrupting pregnancy? Are there some derogatory rules, for example in the case of a pregnancy following a rape [*triggerwarning; do **not** push such theme into the game without explicitly checking with the other players first, and **do not make it part of Self!**]*, or in the event of medical issues?

> In France and most European countries, the limit to get an abortion is 12 weeks (14 weeks of amenorrhea, i.e. after the last menstruation), while in Spain, it is 22 weeks (24 weeks of amenorrhea). In Finland, the limit is 18 weeks, with derogatory rules in case of serious problem. Those limits are arbitrary and depend on different criteria: after 12 weeks, roughly all organs are formed, while after 22 weeks, a premature baby may still live under intensive care[5].

Maternity: Maternity is the biological state of being a mother (or expecting). However, it is not a crude fact, but is entangled with societal norms and representations. What does it mean to be a mother? Is maternity only for women? Are women really women until they became

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[4] https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/resources/abortion/catholic-teaching/the-catholic-church-and-abortion
[5] https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/7247-fetal-development-stages-of-growth

mothers? Does motherhood exist outside of genetic bounds? Is everyone allowed to become a parent? There are many ways of imagining and formulating maternity and parenthood, and those notions are indexed on cultural representations of what it *means* to be a mother (*as most of these representations are exclusive of trans persons, it is difficult to use gender-neutral language here*)[6].

> In our societies, the dominant ideology has it that being a mother is a necessary aspect of womanhood, without which a woman is not truly complete. This vision also shows in the compulsory sterilization of trans men, as a man giving birth is still considered an abomination. Additionally, many countries, especially in South America, still perform coerced sterilizations and abortions targetted at indigenous women or persons with disabilities. The United States were the first country to undertake wide-scale eugenicist programs in the late XIXth century, sterilizing persons with disabilities and prisoners[7]. In the 70s, while voluntary abortion remained illegal on French soil, on the colonized island of La Réunion (a French department to this day) coerced abortions and sterilizations of Black women were illegally performed in public hospitals[8].

Self

> *Present*, *Dreams* and *Needs*

Present: The pregnant one is a grown-up person, with a life and feelings. What do they like? What are they doing with their life? How old are they? Who are the important people in their life? How did they become pregnant, and how long has the pregnancy lasted? How is the pregnancy affecting them? Etc. Build an identity for the character.

> If some people experience pregnancy with few secondary effects, most people, especially during the first weeks, experience symptoms such as nausea and bowel movements, a change in their breasts, backaches, frequent urination, mood swings, etc.[9]

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[6] https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275677783_Representations_of_Motherhood
[7] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Compulsory_sterilization
[8] https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2017/04/14/francoise-verges-les-feministes-blanches-n-ont-pas-integre-dans-leur-histoire-les-avortements-forces_1562909
[9] http://americanpregnancy.org/getting-pregnant/early-pregnancy-symptoms/

Dreams: The pregnancy came without notice: it isn't part of the projects the pregnant one had made. What do they aspire to? What did they plan to do, and how does the pregnancy come into that? Is there something they have been saving money for? A secret aspiration they didn't dare sharing even with their friends? What is their greatest fear? Build a future for the character.

Needs: The needs are not desires: they are compulsory drives and situations that the pregnant one must attend to in order to feel good, or simply okay. Everybody has needs: things that keep them going, selfcare strategies, people to lean on. What are the pregnant one's? What are the foundation stones of their lives, the elements that keep them afloat, those they lack? Do they have special needs, or things they really have to do? What do they do when they are sad, or in need of support?

During the game, the characters may introduce new elements, for example from the life of the pregnant one. These elements are automatically accepted by the other players (or rejected using a safeword).

Distribution

Estimated duration: 20mn

1) Start with the pregnant one
By default, the pregnant one runs the workshops, but their role can be distributed among the players
2) The other players choose between the two groups
3) Then, the characters are distributed among each group

The pregnant one is chosen first, then the six other players are split into two groups, and finally, the characters within each group are attributed. Character distribution can be done following the process presented here (eyes closed, to prevent self-censorship if one wants to play

a character another player is also interested in), or decided openly if all players feel comfortable with it.

Proceed starting from the pregnant one: **all players close their eyes, then raise a hand if they want to play the character.** When the players open their eyes, the persons who raised a hand (if there are several) come to arrangement openly. If nobody raised a hand, another round is taken. **The player who plays the pregnant one becomes the facilitator and is responsible for running the rest of the workshops and the game.** However, even though it is necessary that the pregnant one distributes speech during the game, their facilitating role can be distributed more equally among the players, as the workshops can be run simply by reading this document.

After the pregnant one is chosen, **the other players decide in which group they want to play** (**three in each**): *Society* corresponds to a more intellectual type of play, *Self* to a more emotional one.

Then, the facilitator reminds the players of the three characters, reading the summary below to make sure they can project ideas onto the characters. After they did so, they close their eyes again (group by group) and the facilitator calls each character one by one: the players raise a hand when they would like to play the character. It is possible to raise a hand twice. If several players want to play the same character, they arrange openly.

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Summary of the characters

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The three characters of *Society* are **Morals**, **Law**, and **Maternity**. **Morals** represents the different norms and ideologies surrounding abortion, reproduction and pregnancy; **Law** represents the legal system, and sets the frame in which abortion, but also that which opposes or supports it, can take part; **Maternity** represents all social expectations around parenthood and what it means to be a person with reproductive potency in society.

The three characters of *Self* are **Present**, **Dreams** and **Needs**. **Present** represents the current identity of the pregnant one, who they are, what do they do, how pregnancy is affecting them right now, etc. **Dreams** represents their projects, life goals, what they wanted to do or be before they became pregnant; **Needs** represents the things that they do to take care of themself, the people they love, but also the practicalities that they have to deal with.

After reading this summary, proceed to the distribution. When all players have a character, they can start with the workshops. The process should not take more than fifteen minutes in order to keep enough time for the rest of the game and preparation.

Workshops and techniques

Expected duration: 1,5h

Before the workshops, the player of the pregnant one decides of a name and a gender for their character. Gender is left open to be inclusive of everyone, but it is preferable to pick a gender you feel comfortable with or can easily portray as pregnant (for example, if you are a cisgendered man, it might be easier to portray a pregnant woman than a pregnant man).

Hot seat

Each character answers a series of questions from the other players, constituting the baseline for this character

The hot seat is a workshop in which each player individually answers, as character, questions asked by the other players. It serves in both giving the other players some knowledge of one's character and adding depth to it. Players are free to opt out of any question, if they feel uncomfortable answering or if it is irrelevant to their character. Even *Society* characters do not have to match any society's standards, but are free for the players

to elaborate: **it is not a game about the knowledge of pre-existing norms, but about understanding how norms in general apply.** The players are free to imagine any legal structure, religion, etc., be it close or far from existing standards. The game design is very open, and could even, if the players wish so, become science-fiction.

Starting with *Morals*, then following the character distribution (*Law*, *Maternity*, *Present*, *Dreams*, and *Needs*), **the players each introduce themselves by using their character's title, then answer three rounds of questions asked by the other players** (if time seems to be running out already, make it shorter). The answers given constitute a baseline that everybody can play upon, but all players are free to add any content to their character that feels consistent to it and to the informations previously shared.

After the hot seat, each person makes a brief summary of who/what their character is, so that other players can remember.

Calibration of physical contact

Even though the game is mostly discursive, some players may feel like touching the pregnant one (*e. g. Morals resting hands on their shoulders in a patronizing manner, Needs taking their hands to beg them, etc.*). The player indicates in which way they may or may not receive physical contact.

Speech distribution

The pregnant one is sitting in the spotlight, the others
stand in the shadows around them
Whoever wants to speak steps into the light
The pregnant one allows (invitation gesture) or refuses
(stop) speech right, or pause to invite others in (raised finger)
Interrupting the others can be done in the same way
The characters in the shadow are silent, but not
expressionless

During the game, the pregnant one is sitting in the middle of the spotlight, while the others are standing in the shadow around them. When a character wants to speak, they take a step into the circle of light. The pregnant one then **grants them speech right making an invitation gesture, or refuses them by raising a flat hand ("stop" gesture).**

One character may try to **interrupt the character who's speaking by stepping into the spotlight too.** The pregnant one can accept the interruption by making an invitation gesture, allowing them to talk, or refuse it by raising a flat palm in their direction. The character who has been denied speech steps back into the shadow. When the character who is speaking is done, they also step back into the shadow. It is possible for an interrupted character to ask to speak again, but it is the responsibility of the pregnant one to distribute speech equally.

The pregnant one can invite a character to speak even if they haven't asked to, by pointing at them and gesturing them towards the circle of light.

They may also do so while some other character is still speaking by **interrupting them with a raised finger**, gesturing someone else in, then inviting the first character to speak again after sending the invited character back in the shadows. A character does not have to respond to

the invitation if they don't want to talk. **Characters in the shadow can't speak, but they may express silent emotion using facial expressions, postures and gestures.** Silence can also be a powerful dramatic tool, and the players should not worry if it happens that no-one is willing to speak for a few minutes. Speech sequences can be argumentative or descriptive, long or short (from heartfelt pleads to parasitic thinking about tomorrow's appointment). They can also be non-verbal (such as lying on the floor thinking or humming), or using other ressources (it is possible for a character to play a piece of music on their phone if they wish to, for example).

Practice this technique for a few minutes by giving it a try using meaningless syllables instead of speech (*for example,* speech granted, "*babababaaba*" – interruption granted, "*dudududududu*"). This is also a way to let steam off before the start.

Monologues

In-game expression of the pregnant one

The pregnant one cannot answer directly to any of the characters. However, at any moment, they may raise a flat hand to interrupt whoever would be speaking, and stand up to pronounce a monologue. When they are done, they sit back on the chair, and the game resumes normally.

The game

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Set a 55mn countdown
Start: the pregnant one introduces themself, then sits
End: the pregnant one raises from their chair and
announces their decision

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Just before the game, the facilitator sets an alarm or countdown which will ring fifty-five minutes later. Indeed, the time is counted when one wants to get an abortion.

The game starts when the pregnant one introduces themself in a monologue. "*I am X, and I just found out I was pregnant*". They may keep it short, or take the longer route - for example by taking advantage of this moment to introduce the character as it was assembled through the *Self* characters in the hot seat. When they sit, the other players may ask for the permission to speak.

The game ends when the alarm rings, or when the pregnant one has enough. In both cases, they raise from their chair, announce the decision that they made in a final monologue, and step away from the spotlight.

The player of the pregnant one decides when all proceed to debriefing. They may take a few minutes of introspective silence beforehand, in which case the other players should remain silent too, and start reflecting about their experience. It is important to respect the other players' silence, even though you don't feel emotionally affected.

Debriefing

The facilitator reads the following questions, that each player answers individually, ending with the facilitator. Nobody should interrupt the others, or respond to what the others said. It is okay to share only approval by making a thumb-up or silent applaud sign. No negative sign is

allowed. It is always possible to opt out, but debriefing is highly recommended.

- What is your real name?
- How do you feel?
- Do you need something?

After every player answered these three questions, they may leave, or stay to talk about how this game may have affected their view or understanding of abortion. This time, it is possible to respond and bounce back on what the others said, with the facilitator's approval and as long as it remains respectful and proportionate.

If you played this game, please fill the feedback form or send an e-mail! For further discussion, don't hesitate to contact me, via e-mail or on Discord (Basha#9726). :)