

HOMUNCULUS

A LARP by Anna Kreider about death, technology, and saying goodbye

BEFORE PLAYING

Homunculus is a game that will deal with themes of death and loss. While it is not physically demanding, it can include light touch of the arms and shoulders. Be sure to advise players up front of these facts. It is also recommended that safety tools such as **Cut, Brake, and The Door Is Always Open** be used. (If you are unfamiliar with these tools, see: <https://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Category:Safety>)

In order to play, you will need the following:

- 4-6 players, including the facilitator
- A small quiet space with a table
- Approximately 1.5 – 2 hours
- Nametags and markers
- Printed character cards

When you have all of these things and are ready to play, the facilitator will read the next three sections aloud.

IT WASN'T SUPPOSED TO END LIKE THIS

The Deceased was always larger than life, with a big personality and even bigger heart. Everything that they did, they did whole-heartedly, throwing themselves at life with a zeal that others found simultaneously admirable and tiring. You always assumed that they would live forever, but it seems the universe has a cruel sense of humor.

It was a week ago when you got the call about the accident. You still can't quite believe they're gone.

THE WORLD OF HOMUNCULUS

Homunculus happens in a world not all that distant from our own, in a hypothetical near future where humans still drive cars, but artificial intelligence and machine learning are well out of their infancy. The world of Homunculus also has the technology to make realistic looking and feeling human bodies, cloned bodies into which AI can be installed. This technology is still largely experimental.

One of the leading companies in the field of biotech and AI, Nexen Labs, has just launched a pilot program aimed at people grieving a sudden tragic loss. The Nexen program scrapes data from computers, media, and social media to compile an AI that acts as a digital duplicate of the Deceased, which is then implanted into a human-seeming clone. The pilot is in the first stages of commercial testing and is not yet widely known. It is also prohibitively expensive.

PLAYING THE GAME

One player must play the Deceased, who will then become the Homunculus. The rest of the players will play Connections. Of the Connections, someone *must* play the Sibling and the Childhood Friend. (Required characters are signified with a star on their character cards.) The remaining characters are optional.

The game will happen over the course of three scenes.

Scene 1 will take no longer than 15 minutes, and will occur at the Deceased's wake. This scene will effectively serve as character creation. **Scene 2** will be a brief interlude, in which time passes.

Scene 3 will comprise the bulk of the game, during which one connection introduces the Homunculus to the other Connections. This scene will end after all Connections have decided whether they think the Homunculus should continue to exist. **The Homunculus does not have a say in this decision.** This scene will last 75 minutes, or until all of the Connections feel they have reached a decision that they are committed to and are unwilling to change. After this scene, there will be a brief narration of resolution, at which point the game is over.

To start the game, everyone must select a character. When selecting characters, take a minute or two to think about your character, who they are, and your relationship to the Deceased. When you feel ready, fill out a name tag to signal that you are ready to proceed.

SCENE 1: THE WAKE

The first scene occurs as the Deceased's wake is winding down. Most of the well-wishers have come and gone, and the Connections have found themselves sitting in a small group, reminiscing about the Deceased.

One by one, Connections will take turns telling a story that highlights their relationship with the Deceased. The story should be one about a memorable incident that happened that is particularly emblematic of that Connection's relationship with the deceased. It should also make a definitive statement about what sort of person the Deceased was. (When telling stories, make sure to always paint the Deceased in a sympathetic light. The game will break down if the Deceased is unsympathetic and unlikeable.) These stories may involve one or two other Connections if desired, but they should not be the focus of the story.

The Deceased will be present during this scene as a ghost. They may not speak, nor may anyone see them. They can signal their reaction to these stories through gesture, expression, and use of personal space. They may also make their presence felt through lightly touching the hands, arms, or shoulders, although the Connection would never be superstitious enough to acknowledge that presence out loud, of course.

Once every Connection has had a chance to tell a story, it is time to wrap up the scene. The hours for the wake have come to an end and it is time to move on.

SCENE 2: INTERLUDE

The second scene will happen as a brief montage narrated by the Connections. Each Connection will spend no more than a minute narrating how they react to their grief over the Deceased and how they either deal or don't deal with that grief. The Deceased will not add any narration to this scene. After this scene, the Deceased will assume the role of the Homunculus.

SCENE 3: THE DECISION

The third scene happens a month after the wake at the house of the Sibling. The Sibling has invited the other Connections to their house, saying that there is an important matter to discuss regarding the Deceased, but will not answer further questions. The other Connections have all gathered at the Sibling's house, not knowing why they are there.

The scene begins when the Sibling brings in the Homunculus and introduces them to the Connections. The Sibling will need to explain who the Homunculus is, how it works, and how it came to be in their possession. After that, it is up to the Connections to decide what is to be done with the Homunculus – should it continue to exist or should it be destroyed.

When each Connection is committed to their decision, or after 75 minutes, the scene will end and everyone will vote for or against the continued existence of the Homunculus. (**Again, the Homunculus does not get a vote.**) The vote will be a simple thumbs up or thumbs down.

If all Connections vote thumbs up, the Homunculus remains intact. If the votes are mixed, the Connections who voted thumbs down have all social media content pertaining to them removed from the Homunculus' memory. They become invisible to the Homunculus, and the Homunculus becomes less human. If all Connections vote thumbs down, the Homunculus is destroyed.

The game will conclude with an ending “montage”; each Connection will narrate a brief moment of their character at some point in the future either interacting with the Homunculus or moving on with their life after rejecting it. The Homunculus will end the game by narrating a moment depicting the Homunculus' ultimate fate. When this is done, the game is over.

Important Author's Note:

Homunculus is meant to be a game about the questions that arise from teaching technology to imitate humans, and how this gets messy when we consider how much of our lives we live online. The role of the Homunculus is meant to evoke discomfort in order to provoke active examination of these questions. However, it's important that the game not devolve into making fun of neuroatypical people.

DEBRIEF

Debriefs are important, especially when dealing with heavy subject matter. If players feel the need to consciously step out of the roles they inhabited, have them remove their nametags and tear them up. If people need a minute before talking, give everyone a brief break to use the washroom and get some water.

When starting the conversation, lay down the following ground rules:

1. Everyone will get 2 minutes to talk about their feelings or experiences during the game.
2. The goal of a debrief is for players to acknowledge difficult feelings and get support if needed. Players will not use their time to contradict or deny the experiences or feelings of another player.
3. Any talk of the game's design will be deferred until the end of the debrief.

Once everyone has had time to share their feelings, you may move on to unstructured conversation if desired – although the facilitator should ensure that no one gets talked over and that quieter players have an equal opportunity to contribute.

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THE DECEASED/THE HOMUNCULUS

When you are the **Deceased**, focus on the Connection that is speaking. Use nonverbal signals to signal your agreement or disagreement with their perception of the events they are describing. Use light touch to convey love and support. Keep track of how the Connections describe you.

As the **Homunculus**, be accurate to how the Connections described you in the first scene, but not totally. Strive for 90% accuracy, with the last 10% being unnervingly inhuman. Find opportunities to highlight your nature: refuse food or drinks, move in slightly unnatural ways, hold eye contact too long, etc.



THE SIBLING

Your parents died ten years ago, and since then you and the Deceased have been all alone. When the Deceased died, you thought the loneliness would overwhelm you. So when a friend told you about the Nexen Labs pilot program, you jumped at the opportunity. What else were you going to spend your inheritance on, after all?



THE CHILDHOOD FRIEND

You and the Deceased have been fast friends ever since the first day of school in second grade. You were there for them during some of the toughest periods of their life, including the death of their parents ten years ago. When they moved away to go to school, you still kept in touch, texting and messaging daily, and visiting each other when possible.

You were with the Deceased when they died. You were on your way back from a show when a truck crossed the center line. They say that the Deceased died instantly, but you can't escape the feeling that it was somehow your fault. If they hadn't been driving, they would still be alive.

THE COLLEGE FRIEND

You met the Deceased your first year of college when you became roommates. You lived together through all of college and for a couple of years after, until you got serious about your partner and moved in with them.

The two of you were closer than most roommates, however. Your parents all but adopted the Deceased when they learned the Deceased had been orphaned, and the last few years the Deceased and the Sibling had even been part of your family's Thanksgiving. You had always assumed your college life was only the start of a decades' long friendship. You still can't believe they're gone.

THE WORK FRIEND

You met the Deceased when you were both shortly out of college and started working for the same company. You've been working together for several years, and have developed the easy camaraderie of co-workers who like each other and get along well.

This past year, you'd started tentatively taking your friendship outside of work hours. Nothing romantic. Just drinks after work, seeing shows together, once even a memorable road trip to an out of town conference that you could have flown to, but you drove just to see the sights along the way.

The office feels so resoundingly empty without the Deceased. You've already started looking for other jobs.

THE MENTOR

You and the Deceased shared a passion for a particular craft. You gave them lessons as a youth, and became a mentor to them as they moved into adulthood. In recent years, that relationship had begun shifting into more of a relationship of equals, and you had even been talking about collaborating on a major project together as co-creators.

The Deceased's death left a hole in your life you hadn't expected; not many of your students touched you as deeply as the Deceased. Further, you have the beginnings of the project you had started together, but without the Deceased you have no idea how to bring it to fruition. You're afraid that without the Deceased's input, it wouldn't have the fresh perspective you had wanted, and you still haven't decided whether or not to continue with the project.