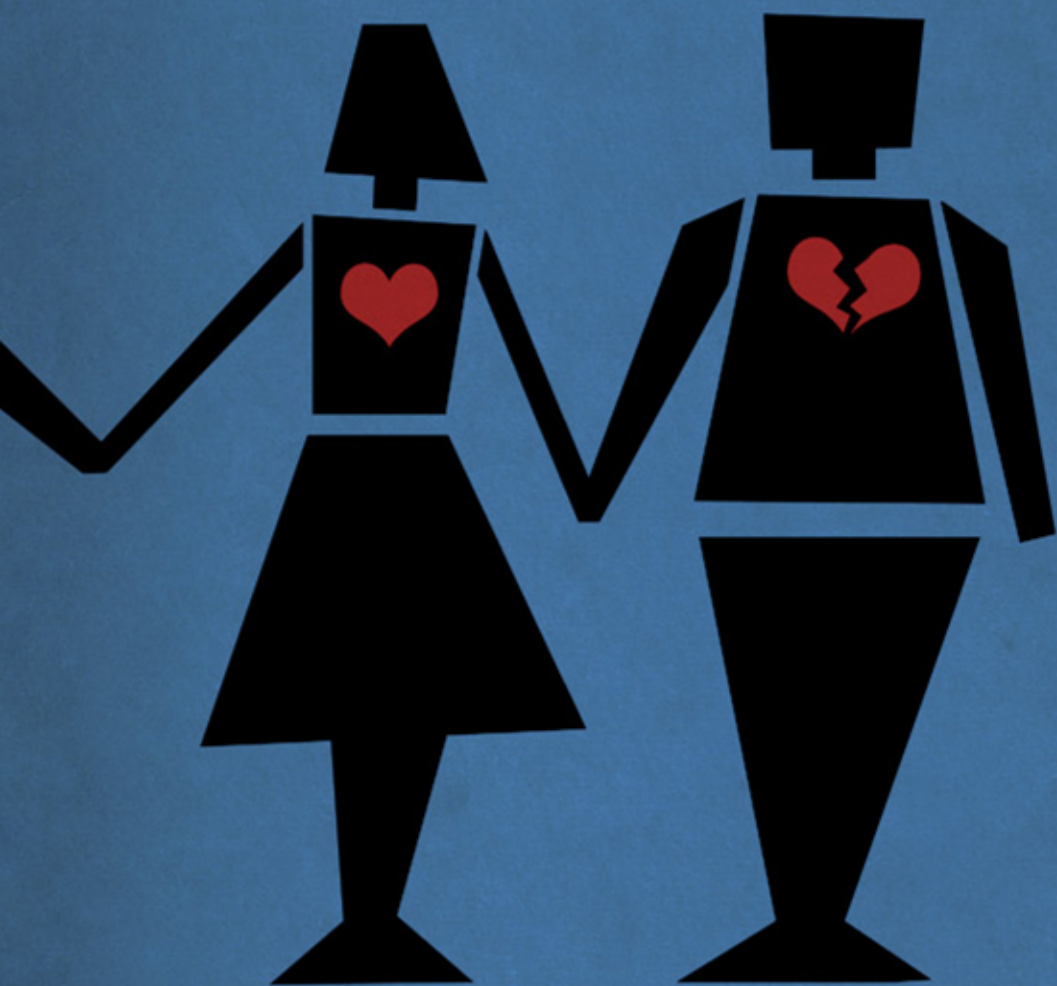


THE
FIASCO
COMPANION



MORNINGSTAR & SEGEDY

FOREWORD BY WIL WHEATON

Osbourne Cox: And you're my wife's lover?

Ted Treffon: No.

Osbourne Cox: Then what are you doing here? I know you. You're the guy from the gym.

Ted Treffon: I'm not here representing HardBodies.

Osbourne Cox: Oh, yes. I know very well what you represent. You represent the idiocy of today.

Ted Treffon: No, I don't represent that either.

Osbourne Cox: Yeah. You're the guy at the gym when I asked about that moronic woman.

Ted Treffon: She's not a moron.

Osbourne Cox: You're in league with that moronic woman. You are part of a league of morons.

Ted Treffon: No. No.

Osbourne Cox: Oh, yes. You see, you're one of the morons I've been fighting my whole life. My whole fucking life. But guess what—today, I win.

(gun shot)

—Burn After Reading

THE FIASCO COMPANION

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BOILERPLATE

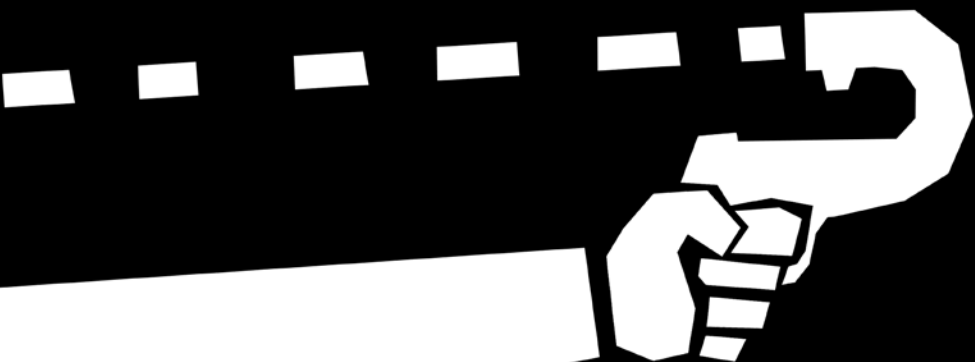
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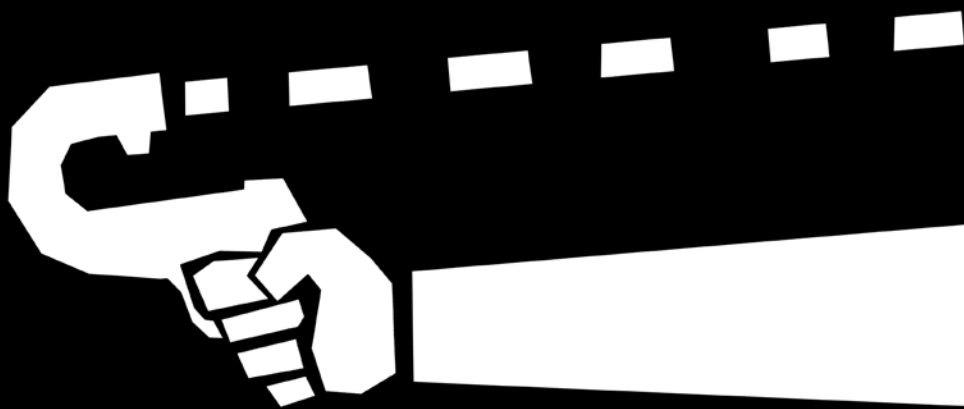


A WORD OF WARNING

This isn't a game—it's a book of commentary about a game. You need to have read, and ideally played, *Fiasco* for some of this to make sense. Some parts can be generalized, but a copy of *Fiasco* is an incredibly wise investment in your future happiness.

THANKS

...to David Artman, Joe Beason, Chris Bennett, Dave Cleaver, Jesse Coombs, Colin Creitz, Jim Crocker, Steve Dempsey, Pete Figtree, Cheyenne Grimes, MJ Harnish, Will Hindmarch, David Humphreys, Andrew Kenrick, Daniel Krashin, Anna Kreider, Leo Lalande, E. Tage Larsen, Sage LaTorra, Jay Loomis, Todd Love, Dan Luxenberg, Ryan Macklin, Marc Majcher, Franck Michaux, Marshall Miller, Brian Minter, Mike Montesa, Clinton R. Nixon, Mario Perez, Nathan Regener, Phil Sbzine, Scott Slomiany, Paul Tevis, Gregor Vuga, Nick Wedig, Charlton Wilbur, Autumn Winters, and Jenn Wong.



SNITCHES

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Wil Wheaton, wilwheaton.typepad.com

KNUCKLEHEADS

These old *Fiasco* hands didn't trust us to tell it like it is. You'll see their valuable thoughts and opinions inserted throughout the text.

Chris "Jenkins" Bennett, David "I'm with the Senator" Berg, Kate "Ghost Scorpion" Bullock, Ewen "Lazybones Magic Circus" Cluney, Colin "Bathtub full of sick" Creitz, Pete "This looked good on paper" Douglas, Stephen "Dr. Hook" Granade, Ryan Fucking Macklin, Marc "We're here to help you" Majcher, Marshall "Pengu" Miller, Brian "I need a special doctor" Minter, Paul "Greaseman" Tevis, Remi "Horse murderer" Treuer, Graham "One Eye" Walmsley, Nick "The boat is still on fire" Wedig, and Charlton "Is that a hawk?" Wilbur.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Foreword</i>	8
<i>Introductions</i>	10
PART ONE: BEEHIVE TETHERBALL	11
How to Play Fiasco Like a Frickin' Champ	12
Rookie Mistakes	36
Bending the Rules	41
PART TWO: HERDING LEOPARDS	47
Facilitating Fiasco	48
Internet Play	57
PART THREE: 144 WAYS TO HURT A DUDE	63
Guidelines for Creating Playsets	64
Pro Tips for Playsets	74
PART FOUR: SPIKING THE PUNCH	79
Creative Hacking	80
A Terrible Tilt	83
An Awful Aftermath	85
WORKED EXAMPLES	87
A Softer Tilt	89
A Softer Aftermath	90
PLAYSETS	92
Fiasco High	95
Regina's Wedding	105
Vegas	115
Mission to Mercury	125
PART FIVE: FEEDING THE WOOD CHIPPER	135
Playing With Students	136
Fiasco as a Virtual Writers Room	144
Fiasco for Performers	152
Wheaton's Big Six	163
<i>Index</i>	164

FOREWORD

When I was 12 years old, I was introduced to RPGs via the original *D&D Red Box*, which began its rules with these words: “This is a game that is fun. It helps you to imagine.” While the 38-year-old version of me thinks it’s pretty presumptuous to declare absolutely that a game is fun before a single polyhedral die has been cast, a much younger and less cynical version of me was excited by the promise. Something we can both agree on, though, is that it did help us to imagine, which as it turns out was a lot of fun, and makes 38-year-old me reconsider just how pedantic and cynical he can be.

I was a nerdy, awkward kid who was uncomfortable in his own skin. Being able to imagine myself in a world where I was a—if not *the*—hero was a tremendous gift, and I spent as much time as I could creating characters and dungeons, and blasting imagined fireballs at everything the *Monster Manual* could put in my way.

As I got a little older, though, something changed. I’m still not sure if it was me or if it was D&D (probably a little bit of both), but that game I loved seemed to become less about imagining and more about solving complex equations and arguing with other players about the result. It was, of course, possible to wrestle focus from the system to the story, but it wasn’t easy in those days of min/maxing and the birth of the archetypal Munchkin player.

Because you’re holding a *Fiasco* book in your hands (or reading it on your newfangled electronic demon machine), I’m going to assume that you’re more interested in telling a collaborative story than arguing about complex mathematical tables or moving expensive minis on a lushly illustrated map. You want to play a game that’s fun, that helps you to imagine. Good choice. You’re my kind of people.

I do my most satisfying imagining when I prepare and run a game. I love to build a world, invent adversaries for the players, and then spring moral dilemmas on them to encourage role-playing. I love getting into the heads of my villains (I once spent three weeks writing a backstory for the villain in a one-shot, because he had a lot of things to tell me) to figure out who they are, so they can be the hero of their own story. I live for the opportunity to call back a memorable NPC to surprise the players, and I especially love those moments where a player has become so connected to and invested in their character, the outcome of a die roll means much more than success or failure... it means life or death.

These moments come up over and over again in *Fiasco*, for everyone, because we're not just playing the game, we're all working together to run it. *Fiasco* is unique among RPGs because it encourages us to actively reach for that moment we all dread in most games, that moment when something truly awful is going to happen, with possibly dire results for our characters. It further demands that we give in to the worst in our nature, whatever the consequences. *Fiasco* makes it feel good to be bad, and the worse things get, the more memorable the experience is.

With *Fiasco*, you have one of the best—if not the best—systems for collaborative storytelling since someone looked at a pyramid and thought, “Gee, that would make a pretty neat die.” In fact, in the 3d6 years I've been playing RPGs, nothing else has come close.

Fiasco is a game that is fun; it helps you to imagine. I hope you have fun while everything goes wrong.

WIL WHEATON

Los Angeles, CA

March 25, 2011

INTRODUCTIONS

One of the primary goals of *Fiasco* was to make it a game people would love to mess with. Over a simple, reliable core, we overlaid bits that cry out for rules tweaks, weird new ways to frame stories, and a set of assumptions that are in no way definitive. The key, in our view, was to give every group of players the space and resources to make it their own. And you certainly did!

The thing I'm most excited to present to you in this book is not our work—it's the work of others. All the hot tips culled from countless *Fiasco* sessions, the deep wisdom of crazy people who have taken the game in unexpected directions, the passionate hacks of the passionate hackers. That's the good stuff.

I hope you enjoy it, and I hope you add it to the mix at your own table. Make sure to let us know how it goes.

JASON

Of all the games we've published so far, *Fiasco* is my favorite. I've played it many times, and every new Playset that comes out makes me want to play again. Based on the feedback we get, I get the impression that many of you feel the same way!

We've been very pleased with *Fiasco's* success, and while we continue to wait for the inevitable black die to drop, we're grateful for your love of the game. This companion is our way of saying thanks to all of you for playing the game, and helping us create a never-ending series of stories full of can't-look-away train wrecks and heartbreaking failures.

The following pages are full of ideas and advice to help you get the most out of *Fiasco*, from facilitating the game and improving your play to creating Playsets and hacking the rules to suit your tastes. We sincerely hope that it helps you create the mother of all clusterfucks in your next game!

STEVE



**PART
ONE**



**BEEHIVE
TETHERBALL**



HOW TO PLAY FIASCO LIKE A FRICKIN' CHAMP

There's a difference between a failure and a fiasco. A failure is merely the absence of success. Any fool can achieve failure. But a fiasco is a disaster of epic proportions. A fiasco is a folk tale told to others to make other people feel more alive because it didn't happen to them.

Drew Baylor, Elizabethtown

Learning to play *Fiasco* isn't very difficult; the rules are minimal and emulate great cinema by design, making the process of play feel almost intuitive. We all know what movies look like, how the camera-work and pacing of the scenes help to tell the story, and most *Fiasco* players unconsciously put that knowledge to use during a game. However, in the following section we'll put the spotlight on suggestions for dealing with common problems and a selection of excellent narrative tools that can really set your next game on fire.

DO NOT
MARRY
HER



LESSONS FROM IMPROV

It should come as no surprise to anyone who has played *Fiasco* that it has deep roots in improvisational performance. For that reason, many of the best tools for playing the game are borrowed from improv. Some of them will also look familiar to any experienced game-master.

Because *Fiasco* has no central GM, the best games happen when everyone at the table uses these tools and actively participates in every scene. The easiest way to make that happen at your table is to demonstrate these techniques yourself.

ROLLING WITH THE PUNCHES

Playing *Fiasco* is about as social an activity as you can engage in with your clothes on. You're speaking and listening carefully, you're making yourself vulnerable by spontaneously creating and opening yourself up for criticism, and you're doing all these things while navigating the ordinary mix of culture and hierarchy that comes with participating in any group. And you might be doing all this with strangers.

It demands a lot of trust.

You need to be confident that your table-mates are bringing the same enthusiasm, energy, and devilish creativity to the game that you are. Everyone wants to succeed, and shared fun is the metric of that success.

You also need to be confident in your own native genius. You know how to tell a story, you know how to work with others, you know how to take turns and follow rules, and you know what you like. That's more than enough!

So you trust your table, you're brimming with self-confidence, and you're primed and ready to have fun. The rest—trust me—is gravy. The following techniques build on that base of trust to help you get the most out of your game.

AGREEMENT AND GENEROSITY

If you trust the people you're playing with, you know that these brilliant players are going to introduce really juicy stuff to the game. Crazy, unexpected stuff that is absolutely going to throw you for a loop.

This is called generosity. You had ideas for your little dude, and even better ideas for their little dudes, but all that just changed—you've been given a gift. The wild ideas that have upset your own apple cart are the building blocks you get to use to make things even more fun. Pretty soon you'll be giving gifts of your own.

If you're confident in yourself, you know that you can roll with the punches with the best of them.

This is called agreement. That crazy, unexpected stuff? You're going to take that, build on it, and give as good as you get. "Yes," you'll say, "and..." Pretty soon people will be agreeing to your contributions, and a cycle of awesome develops.

ENDOWMENT

If generosity is about being grateful for the ideas that others create and using them in your own scenes, endowment is about giving back. Don't be shy about contributing ideas to other players during their scenes. You can quietly add detail and evocative color in the background, hopefully without stealing focus yourself, and players who are listening will use your interesting bits to breathe life into the scene. For example, maybe in a previous scene we faded to black on our erstwhile robber of veterinary clinics, Albert Lilley, getting beat up by the Russian gangster he's in debt to. Mike, who doesn't have a character in the scene, nonetheless jumps in with color:

STEVE: Albert Lilley walks into the vet clinic and goes straight through the double doors into the back.

MIKE: The receptionist doesn't even look up.

STEVE: And the veterinarian is standing there, right?

MIKE: Definitely. He's got a sedated Pekingese on a stainless steel table.

STEVE: Lilley pulls out a pistol. Shit just got real.

These details bring the scene to life, take some of the descriptive burden off of Steve, and offer new possibilities. All of a sudden there's a sedated Pekingese! This sort of scene-painting should always be welcome, but it can also be taken a step further—you can add meaningful content to scenes through an improvisational technique called endowment. Endowment is just what it sounds like—you endow a character with some trait, or object, or emotion in the service of the scene.

Here's that same scene again, with Joel adding some more hardcore endowment that changes Steve's character:

STEVE: Albert Lilley walks into the vet clinic and goes straight through the double doors into the back.

MIKE: The receptionist doesn't even look up.

STEVE: And the veterinarian is standing there, right?

MIKE: Definitely. He's got a sedated Pekingese on a stainless steel table.

JOEL: Oh! And Lilley's arm is in a home-made sling.

STEVE: Right! Ilya Lavrov totally broke his arm. He fumbles in the kangaroo pocket of his hoodie and pulls out a pistol with his left hand, which is clearly not his dominant hand, super awkwardly and in obvious pain. Shit just got real.

So by throwing in some detail not just about the environment but actually about Steve's character, Joel gives Steve something interesting to work with during the scene, which he immediately runs with. Steve could have rejected the broken arm idea, of course, if it rang false to him or he had a better idea.

You've got a great idea for what your character is going to do in the next scene and someone makes a choice or a move in their scene that makes your idea totally impossible. And, if you're playing generously, it's entirely possible that you encouraged them to go in that direction for the good of the story! So what do you do when your turn comes around? You roll with it, and let the new situation inspire the next thing that happens to your character. —Marc Majcher

REINCORPORATION

You can look at reincorporation as another word for listening. If you're engaged at the table and actively listening, things leap out at you. Turns of phrase. Weird images and patterns. Funny mannerisms and creepy objects. All the brilliant things your friends bring into the game are just dying to show up again—amplified, transformed, made meaningful and hilarious by the very fact that they're re-appearing.

The term reincorporation comes from comedic improvisation, where it's a deliberately honed skill. The art of the callback is honored, freighted with prestige and awe for those who use it well. And it translates effortlessly to gaming.

One of the best moments in my first game was with a parole officer, a mall ninja type. "Have you seen my new baton?" he kept asking people as he pulled it out and waved it around. Near the end, another character attacked him, grabbing the parole officer's baton and beating him with it while shouting, "Have you seen your new baton?" —Stephen Granade

As a general rule, try to reincorporate Elements that are already on the table before you introduce anything new. This is especially true for Objects and Locations, which should be focal points for your story. Look for things that are striking, regardless of their origin, and then look for ways to reintroduce those things into the game. Ideally, you'll want to bring them back in a way that recontextualizes them—your dad's precious muscle car, stolen by your girlfriend in Act One, returns in Act Two as a murder weapon (lukewarm), or an impromptu taxi for a third character about to give birth (hot), or the cube of scrap being sold by the junkyard back to your dad's recycling center (on fire with schadenfreude).

Continuity is king. The game's best moments, for me, often come from callbacks. Like with NPCs... if Edward plays the trucker's wife as being obsessed with daytime TV, and paying little attention to her husband, and then I play her as a homicidal maniac for no apparent reason, that's much less funny than if I play her true to form, even if she's a minor walk-on character, and revisit her daytime TV fixation. —Brian Minter

SETTING THE TONE

I seem to exist largely on heat, like a newborn spider. The orchids are an excuse for the heat. Do you like orchids?

Sternwood, The Big Sleep

Fiasco, like most wide-open GMless games, tends to run silly the first time you play. We usually refer to this as “gonzo” play, which is just shorthand for games that skew toward outrageously funny, or violent, or both. Telepathic penguins are gonzo. Shooting drug dealers inside a tornado is gonzo. It’s an easy and fun way to play and we love it. Playing full-on gonzo is like eating ice cream for dinner, and every once in a while that can really hit the spot.

However, *Fiasco* will easily accommodate a wider range of tones, depending on what you and your friends choose for the game. Whether you want sword fights in shopping malls or the quiet sadness of the one true love you let get away, it’s just a matter of setting the proper tone.

In many ways, gonzo play is the default mode for *Fiasco*. There are a variety of reasons why this is the case; gonzo play is a shortcut to the fun, making it an easy choice, especially if players are short on time or energy. It also creates interesting “sound bites” of play, making it easy to describe your game later. “And then we filled the house with garden gnomes and drove over it with a tank! It was awesome!”

Usually, one gonzo Element is enough. In *Fiasco* you have so few scenes, it’s better just to reincorporate the same crazy thing rather than have to constantly make up new ones. This reduces creative fatigue, keeps the game going full tilt, and fills out the craziness into something bigger and richer than it may have first appeared. How many different ways can your group use a psychic penguin? —Remi Treuer

Gonzo is safe. By design, many *Fiasco* Playsets reflect real life, and people can see themselves and their circumstances in them. By being silly or over-the-top, a little distance is created that insulates you from the fiction. If your comfort level with the material is low, and your trust in your fellow players is low (as it may be at a convention with strangers, for example), gonzo play is pretty comfortable.

Gonzo is an exploration and sometimes a competition. In a game without a central authority, when people push creatively they often get no resistance and so they just push harder. This is a natural testing of social boundaries, and it tends to be self-correcting.

In the best games, gonzo doesn't feel gonzo. Sure, you'll be driving across the desert, with the entire police department following you, heading for a cliff-edge as you check whether the diamonds are real or fake, when your phone rings from your long-lost daughter. But this all seems natural, given what happened before. How does this happen? Put it this way. In every *Fiasco* game, you build on each others' ideas. But in most games, you limit yourself, for dramatic realism. (What's in Jenny's gun cabinet? An old shotgun, of course.) In gonzo games, there are no limits. (What's in Jenny's gun cabinet? A rocket launcher. And it's pink, because that's her favourite colour.) —Graham Walmsley

If you specifically don't want your game to turn into a gonzo-fest, you can avoid it pretty easily. Be intentional and start your session with a conversation about tone—see what the mood is, and then ask people to choose Elements that will reinforce that. It isn't a guarantee, but it can help set the tone a lot.

This approach should be your default, particularly if you're playing with some of the weirder Playsets or the softer tables offered in this book (starting on page 88). Player choices will absolutely drive any session of *Fiasco*, so if you really, really want a gentle, funny game you need to make that clear. You and your friends can be judicious about what Elements you choose in the Setup and Tilt to support the tone you all want. Nothing replaces this conversation, followed by your individual judgment, in making the game do what you want it to.

That said, tone sometimes just happens—without really planning on it, you realize your session is incredibly melancholy, or subversively funny, or gritty and terrible. This can be satisfying and surprising as well, so don't feel the need to talk it out in advance unless you have something specific in mind.

EDITING

Take car. Go to Mum's. Kill Phil—sorry!—grab Liz, go to the Winchester, have a nice cold pint, and wait for all of this to blow over. How's that for a slice of fried gold?

Shaun, Shaun of the Dead

Editing—the art of interrupting, altering, and ending scenes at the perfect time—is a valuable skill to develop, particularly if you end up facilitating a lot. It goes hand in hand with endowment (see page 14), letting players shift the flow of the story and add new ideas where they make the most sense. Since everyone is participating all the time, anyone can edit any scene—and doing so is usually a real gift.

THE PERFECT MOMENT

Fiasco works best when scenes are short and direct. While every group has its own standards and rhythm, almost every scene has a natural ending point. Anticipating this and gracefully ending a scene is a huge gift to the participants. Often the most active participants in the scene are too involved to see this moment when it comes, so it falls to other players to say “and... scene!” Sometimes a cut can also be used to immediately Establish a new scene, effectively ending the current one without letting the energy drop.

THE SMASH CUT

The smash cut is an incredibly useful technique loosely adopted from filmmaking. At its most basic, you briefly interrupt a continuing scene, “cutting away” to some related scene that informs the action in the original scene. The cut-away is often a simple parallel scene, but it might be a flashback or even a flash-forward (see “Playing with Time,” page 22).

Here's an example of the smash cut in action:

We're playing the Vegas Playset and playing out a scene in which Kate's casino dealer is working a scam with Mike's character, Tilford:

KATE: I nod at you, picking up the gaffed deck of cards and dealing. Everything is going according to plan.

MIKE: Tilford is super nervous; he's sweating and fumbling his cards.

KATE: Of course he is, and I'm shooting daggers at him, just hating him right now.

JOEL: He's going to ruin it. He's going to ruin it.

KATE: No, he's going to pull himself together. Isn't he?

MIKE: Oh yeah. He's getting it together, and he's got the cards you dealt him ready to lay down, a royal flush. He puts in a ten thousand dollar chip and people start to get interested.

SHANE: Smash cut to the security booth, where one guy's munching on a Twizzler, watching while another rewinds a tape of Kate's deal.

JOEL: Nice.

MIKE: Tilford's oblivious—suddenly he's enjoying the attention. He puts in another ten grand.

KATE: That's totally not part of the plan...

You can do a smash cut that's as small as a personal reaction or as large as a parallel scene. It can add a lot of depth and excitement when interjected at the right moment. The key is to use the technique judiciously and avoid interrupting a scene's flow. And always, always keep your smash cut punchy. If it's a big deal, it probably deserves its own scene.

THE RETCON

A scene can be edited on the fly to change the facts on the ground. This is common in all role-playing games—the retcon or adjustment for color, tone, or continuity—and sometimes it’s seen as a sign of group failure. With *Fiasco* it’s just the opposite! If saying that the animal he hit with his F-150 was actually a turkey instead of a raccoon makes things more interesting, make it a turkey and move on.

You can also combine time-mashing retcons and other types of editing in interesting and dynamic ways. Smash cut to five minutes ago, five minutes from now, and then back to the present. Paint a single moment—but make it a moment that hasn’t happened yet (we suggest a wedding, arrest, and/or funeral). Do a smash cut to three days ago, and show your guy watching the drug deal go down. Nobody knew he was in the woods! Then bam, back to the scene, where this knowledge informs his confrontation with the lying dealer. The possibilities are endless.

Allowing people to “edit” scenes to create drama/problems is okay. The “What if I had been there in the background and overheard/recorded that” type of things. People don’t usually think of them at the time, but later it comes up and everyone agrees that it would’ve been possible and cool.
—Kate Bullock



PACING

I think I've underestimated you, Ned. You've started using your incompetence as a weapon.

Peter, Body Heat

Fiasco mechanically reinforces a very specific story arc, but within that framework there are absolutely no constraints on how the game is paced. You can play sessions that go from one scene to the next like clockwork, or you can play trippy sessions that time-jump all over the place. You can have scenes that run in every possible direction, involving every character, different locations, and multiple conflicts. Alternately, you might choose to set aside conflict and focus the spotlight on one particularly potent moment or image.

The message here is that variety is good, and if you're paying attention you can adapt your scenes to the energy in the room and the energy in the story. If things are frantic, slow it down. If things are lagging, punch it up.

“Sooner rather than later” is great *Fiasco* advice in general. Making a few serious early commitments empowers everyone at the table, especially when it comes to establishing the characters. Waiting around to see if your guy is a bad-ass or not means we may never find out. —Colin Creitz

Just make sure, however you pace your scenes, that they're about things that matter. Look at movies for good examples of scene framing; start your scene in the middle of something, creating questions that need to be answered, and then use flashbacks in other scenes to answer them. Nobody cares about how your guy gets to the veterinary clinic; we want to see him pointing a gun at the veterinarian.

PLAYING WITH TIME

The loose structure of individual scenes, combined with a cinematic feel, makes *Fiasco* a great game for trying out weird narrative tricks. Time is malleable, and messing with it can be very rewarding. You can use flashbacks to reveal new information and shed new light on mysterious events, and you can use flash-forwards to give the game guidance and a sense of purpose.

Of the two main time-mangling techniques, flashbacks are easier. Simply set your scenes when they'll have the most impact on future events. You can even set this up by deliberately referencing things that haven't appeared in play. For example, in a game using the *Fiasco High* Playset, imagine a scene in which the nerdy dude shows up at his love interest's house half an hour before her big date with his rival, ready for their trigonometry study session. As part of the scene, you could incorporate a short flashback that shows the girl, distracted during class, absent-mindedly agreeing to the study session.

A friend of mine really digs jumping around in the timeframe, so much so that this has become our default mode of play. But if you do that a lot, scenes get too constrained by the needs of continuity. "Well, we know that Frankie will be in the courtroom in an hour, hallucinating from snake venom, so I guess he has to run across some snakes in this scene." If you ignore continuity, you lose the power of the developing *Fiasco*, and you're just playing "Crazy Collection of Unrelated Wacky Scenes." —Brian Minter

It's also possible to chain flashbacks together, with each scene taking place before the one it follows. Maybe scene one has the characters waking up in prison, scene two is the barroom brawl, and scene three is their grand entrance to the bar, flush with cash and stupidity. This can be a hilarious narrative conceit if everyone is on board, and it's probably best for a single act or part of an act rather than a whole game (although the movie *Memento* seemed to manage a sustained version well). An interesting challenge is to frame your very first scene as your character's funeral. Play the rest of your scenes normally; use flashbacks to illuminate what happened, using Objects and Locations tied to your character. Playing the ghost haunting the memories of the other characters can give the game a very *Six Feet Under* feel and be great fun. However you apply them, flashbacks are pure gold.

Flash-forwards are a little trickier, but not much. Setting scenes in the future makes demands on everyone at the table, who not only have to follow your logic but work toward concrete events you're creating. With a really engaged table they're fantastic, and you can gleefully put characters in truly weird situations that your friends will scramble to make sense of. For example, in that same *Fiasco High* game, you could frame a scene in the future in which we see the twisted wreckage of your character's father's priceless Porsche—the game's only Object. Working toward that outcome will really drive the rest of the game.

The time-skip thing has worked great for my groups. Whenever we start to get stuck for more story, someone says, “I’ll initiate. Now it’s a couple of days later. You’re tied to the chair in the hotel room, I’ve got the shotgun, and she’s begging me to spare you. GO!” We play out that scene, and then spend a few scenes figuring out how it happened. That solves the biggest problem with GM-less games for us, that with so few constraints on your contribution, you go deer-in-the-headlights. —Colin Creitz

Don’t be afraid to try playing with time. You may find that you prefer sessions that begin at the end!

SAVORING THE MOMENT

Another way to use time is to slow it down and play a long, incredibly detailed scene. Have an extended and revelatory conversation. Cut away to parallel sub-scenes where we see what other characters are doing—and have that echo and inform the main scene. Interrupt with a smash cut that shines a new light on the action. Breathe some life into your setting as well as your characters.

Short, simple scenes that are just tone poems are wonderful. Try painting an actionless scene that’s rich in detail and illustrates some fundamental aspect of your character. A quiet description of a guy walking home after his date stole his dad’s car can be poignant and perfect. It doesn’t need dialogue for the guys at the table to decide if that is a positive or negative outcome; the outcome depends largely on your descriptive powers and the tone you set. You’ll typically be Establishing these, since the resolution is more or less implied. If someone chooses to Resolve, they want to make interesting decisions—so give them some. A subtler, more melancholy game will thrive on scenes like this.

We’re playing the Gangster London Playset and things have gone very poorly for David’s ambitious but deeply stupid British Airways flight attendant. It’s late in the game, David has an even spread of black and white dice, and his character’s been snitching to the ECD about the suitcases full of bootleg erectile dysfunction drugs she’s been smuggling in from Warsaw. In the last scene, the drug gang found out she’s betrayed them and, although she doesn’t know it, the

writing's on the wall for poor Mary. David decides to delay the obvious and humanize her a bit before the hammer falls.

KATE: Your scene.

DAVID: I'll Establish.

JOEL: This ought to be good.

DAVID: Mary's at her mother's flat in Lewisham, where she stays when she's in London. Her mother's out, taking a class.

KATE: Learning Italian.

MIKE: There's a vacation brochure on the table.

DAVID: And Mary's relaxed. She's brushing her hair and looking out the rain-spotted window at the evening traffic. There's a kettle on and her mom's cat is winding around her legs, which ache from the flight. Her carry-on is by the door and she's still in her BA uniform. That guy from the Economic Crime Directorate is popping round later to confirm a few details, and she's decided to completely rat out the gang and then ask him for a date. In her mind he'll accept, and the ECD will descend on Vladimir and his thugs and whisk them off to prison, and everything will turn out quite nicely. Maybe they'll get married and she'll quit flying.

KATE: Smash cut to Vladimir sitting patiently in traffic, the windshield wipers scraping. He's just crossed into Lewisham.

DAVID: Of course. She snaps out of her reverie as the kettle's whistle sounds, and she darts off to the kitchen, just missing the arrival of Vladimir outside the flat.

MIKE: She's such a nice person.

KATE: Yeah, she's a doll. What do you say guys, is that positive or negative for her?

JOEL: Well, the ultimate outcome is going to be pretty negative.

KATE: Could go either way, but it was a happy moment. She believes everything is going to be awesome.

JOEL: Good point. As a moment in time it's pretty positive. White die?

MIKE: White die.

(They pass him a white die. It's Act Two, so he keeps it.)

KATE: And if it's cool with you, I think I'll just segue directly into Vladimir's scene...



MAKING THE MOST OF CHARACTERS

This just isn't like him. Bob's like a rabbit, in and out and no nonsense. That goes for a lot more than a hospital pharmacy.

Diane, Drugstore Cowboy

Your characters are a bunch of tools, literally and probably figuratively as well. They're the monkey wrenches that you throw into the gears to create the wild stories you want to tell. If you learn to use both the primary characters and any secondary characters well, it makes for a great game every time.

Recurring NPCs are fun. Especially if you limit it to just a couple and they come into contact with all the characters, so that different players have to pick them up from scene to scene, building on how previous players have handled them.
—Brian Minter

HELL IS OTHER PEOPLE

It's not uncommon to have intense sessions where the only characters who even appear are the ones that were authored in the Setup. This is totally fine; but if you do find other characters entering the fiction, be prepared to play them as hard as you can. Each and every one of them should, in some way, be an antagonist. Use them to push other players and create tense situations. You might even end up playing these characters more strongly than your own, if you find that your guy's outside the orbit of the conflict at hand.

Every time you introduce a secondary character, give him a name and write it down on an index card. Put that card in the middle of the table so that other players will see and re-use the character in later scenes. Otherwise-extraneous characters can be blunt instruments to hammer a Relationship's Need.

The group is playing Transatlantic. Shane and Andy share both "Relationship: First Class and Steerage" and "Revenge: Because your family was destroyed by Capitalists." Of course

Shane's guy, up in First Class, is the Capitalist who runs the hideous stamping mill where the whole family was wiped out. Andy's character, the note-perfect bereft widow down in Steerage, is burning for revenge.

At the table, Will's only ambition regarding these two is to see what happens when they mix it up. His character, a degenerate coxswain, has yet to be pulled into the orbit of their Relationship; when the chance comes to Establish for Andy, Will offers to set up a scene. He introduces Laszlo Haffner, the handsome and sympathetic mill foreman. He is (of course) a widower who lost his own wife in a stamping accident, but he knows that Shane's evil plutocrat isn't at fault. In fact, were anything to happen to him, the mill would shut down and a thousand families would be forced onto the breadline. Perhaps if she were to come up to First Class, she could meet him and air her grievances. And that could be followed by a romantic promenade on the Lido deck...



So Laszlo Haffner is tightly tied to both ends of a Need on the table and is kicking the Relationship in the ribs. Any time either Shane or Andy has a scene, Mr. Haffner is a utility character available to complicate things.

HE WAS ALIVE WHEN I BURIED HIM

Getting your character killed is never a bad move in *Fiasco*. It isn't going to impact your participation or enjoyment of the game in any way. In *Fiasco*, we discuss this and recommend that you refrain from killing another player's character before the Tilt, but even this is just a suggestion. We had a very fun game recently that began—in Act One, scene one—with Steve Establishing that we were all at his character's funeral.

A dead character's player still gets to Establish or Resolve and still accumulates dice. Scenes should touch on the character and further a now-complicated agenda, but there's a huge amount of latitude concerning how to make this happen.

There's nothing wrong with using other characters to frame scenes about a dead character. Death is a big deal. It's going to impact every character in the game in some way, and exploring that makes the scene about the recently departed. Is the outcome positive or negative? That may depend on whether the characters break down in a tearful funeral home rapprochement or try to snort the ashes like cocaine.

As already mentioned, flashbacks are another obvious choice. Once your dude is dead, you can use flashbacks to add a thick coat of context to previous scene; this may well change their meaning completely.

We're playing Touring Rock Band. During the Setup, Shane gets to know his guy, a roadie for the black zen band known as Metaltation. He's the sad sack victim of a manipulative lead-guitar-playing guru.

In an early scene, we see the guru ordering the poor roadie to procure a mountain of drugs for him. We hand-wave off the actual procurement. Rock and roll! The controlled substances flow.

A little later on, Shane's hapless roadie is run over by a bus being driven by a circus bear (we assume you know not to ask). His tragic death silences him forever, and the guru breathes a sigh of relief, for his cringing minion knew too much. The bear is unscathed.

Toward the end of the game, Shane Establishes a scene for his dead roadie; he frames it up as a flashback to the “drug buy”—which is actually a coordinated effort by the DEA to orchestrate a massive, career-ending sting on the zen metal guru. This is just the inspiration the other players needed to lower the boom on the lead guitarist, and they gleefully take it and run with it, and everything goes to hell.

The final bit of game play that’s slightly different for a dead character is the Aftermath. In the end, the Aftermath is all about a dead character’s legacy and reputation. Is he remembered fondly? Is he vilified unfairly? Does he get what he wanted, even from beyond the grave? You’ll need to interpret the table results a little more figuratively, but generally they’ll still work fine.

Playing a dead guy is liberating. We encourage you to help your friends give it a try!



COMPETITION AND COOPERATION

If I get caught like that it's curtains anyway; I couldn't have brass cutting me favors in public. I'm just saying now so you don't come kicking in my homeroom door once trouble starts.

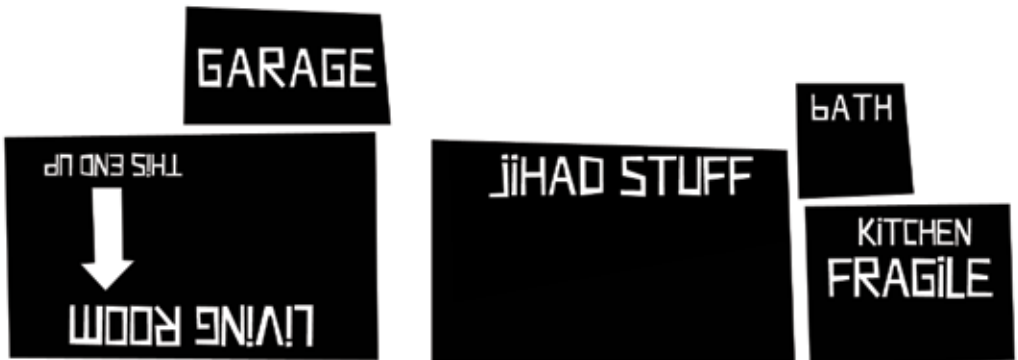
Brendan Frye, Brick

Fiasco is inherently a cooperative game; you're working with your friends to build a precarious house of cards so that you can then kick it apart together. It's also a one session game, meaning that when it's over, nothing matters except the story you get to tell to your unfortunate friends who didn't get to play.

The point is that everyone should be focused on the overall story and be making choices that best propel it towards its fiery end. While your characters might be climbing over each other to get to the big brass ring, you're not in competition with the other players.

Okay, so now that we've established that we're all friends, it's time to pull out the long knives.

Because the game is built on trust, you should feel free to push each other as hard as you can, challenging one another with the most bastardly situations you can dream up. The more you push, the better your story will be.



EYES ON THE PRIZE

You can't win, so don't try.

The dice—and your friends—have it in for your character. Approaching the game with the intention of overcoming every obstacle and watching your guy triumph is a recipe for a tedious *Fiasco* session, with equal parts crushing disappointment and boring, predictable play. Don't do it!

As we said before, your character is a hapless tool. Even if your guy is at the center of the clusterfuck and everything hinges on his goals and actions, he's just a piece of the overall story.

Even if we care about them, and we want them to succeed, if they fail spectacularly, we'll love them even more. So, in the safely disconnected environment of a story-telling game, we can get comfortable with making those big crazy moves, and realize that even if "my guy" crashes and burns, as long as he makes the story more awesome because of it, that's totally okay. —Marc Majcher

Of course you need to commit to your character. Love your character and aggressively pursue his idiotic and probably fruitless goals. In a lot of games this would be bad play at best, but *Fiasco* subverts that expectation.

To some degree this is about dice strategy. There are only so many black and white dice, after all, and every choice you make further defines how things will end. Playing for failure for your character can pave the road to success for another character. Alternately, pushing hard for your guy's dreams (at the expense of the other characters, of course) just sets him up for a heaping plate of just deserts during the Aftermath.

BLACK IS WHITE, UP IS DOWN

Making strategic choices for your character is a good start, but there are times when you really, really want a certain outcome in another player's scene. Often this isn't in your direct control, but you can still engineer the circumstances to get what you want. There's nothing sneaky about this, and building scenes that compel the guy who desperately needs a positive outcome to willingly choose a negative one is a delicate art that only makes the game better.

In *Fiasco*, after the Tilt, you know whether or not success or failure is good for your character in the long run. The game encourages you to push for your character to have the same fortune throughout. In the Vegas game at GenCon, for example, I had two black dice at the Tilt, so the “best” thing for my character was to keep losing. In our LA 1936 game, however, I ended up pulling a reverse. My burlesque dancer, Holly, had been dominant in her early scenes, especially against other player characters, like when she faced down Will’s nightclub owner. The game told me that I needed to play for white dice. But Will, sitting to my left, also needed them, and by the time it got to my third scene, there was only one left. Will had just done a great, possibly redemptive scene with his character, and I wanted him to win. So I decided to take a dive, and played my next scene to fail, leaving the white dice for him to take. I ended up with a fantastic bit of drama involving the revelation of my impossible love for Ryan’s corrupt liquor licensing commissioner, resulting in what Robin Laws would call a dramatic down arrow. And it worked. I felt great about it, and the rest of the people around the table clearly responded to it. What this game made me realize is that I love pulling these sorts of reversals, both because they make the character deeper and more complex and because they make the story more interesting. —Paul Tevis

In the *Fiasco* rules (on page 33, “Why Die Choice Matters”) it says “Figure out what you want—in the fiction or dice—and Establish a scene where you can make getting it interesting and attractive to your friends. If you want that white die in Act Two, you need to Establish a scene where they will absolutely want you to succeed—because if you let them Establish, they will surely make you want to fail! Likewise, if you are asked to create a scene for somebody to Resolve, think about what they might want and give them an impossible choice to make.” So how exactly do you do that?

Well, it’s complicated.

In Act One the dice will be unpredictably assigned to someone at the table, so this is really an Act Two issue. In Act Two the dice stick to the spotlight character, and the pool of possible successes and failures is running out fast. Which ones will you get to claim for your character? How can you create a scene that puts real tension on your friend in the spotlight, the choices they have to make, and the dice they take?

Here's an example:

It's Tales from Suburbia, and Joel is playing Vassili Lavrov, a "retired" enforcer for the Russian Mafiya. He has a wife and family, and a trouble-making gangster nephew, Ilya, who has managed to bring the attention of the current boss of the Organizatsiya to his attractive suburban doorstep. Joel has made it clear that Lavrov wants to be out of the game; in fact, there's a Need attached to his Relationship with his nephew—"To Get Away... from your shameful past." It's the middle of Act Two, and Joel has pile of white dice in front of him. The last thing Joel wants is a negative outcome, so naturally he chooses to Resolve.

And this is a golden opportunity for Joel's friends to craft a situation that Joel will want to go poorly. Scott is playing Monya, the crime boss, who's decided that Ilya is a rat that needs to be dealt with. After a brief discussion with the other players, Scott Establishes a scene for Lavrov.

SCOTT: First a short flashback, okay? Just to set the actual scene. We're inside the Poppleton Mall.

KEN: It's before store hours, when the old people walk for exercise.

SCOTT: Nice. Cages rolled down over storefronts. Everybody is in a track suit, there are blue-haired old ladies bustling by doing laps, Air Supply is playing.

JOEL: Great.

(Scott and Joel drop into character.)

SCOTT: So, there is talk.

JOEL: Always there is talk, Monya.

SCOTT: Reliable sources this time, Lavrov. I am told you want to leave the Organizatsiya.

JOEL: I'm an old man, Monya. I'm tired. I don't want to betray the thieves code, I just want a rest. I've earned it.

SCOTT: Fair enough, you old war-horse. I tell you what I will do. We'll make a deal. You do one last job for me and you will earn your rest. You have my word—do this for me and you can do what you will. You'll never hear from the Organizatsiya again.

JOEL: All right. What's the job?

SCOTT: What are you good at? I need a snitch killed, of course.

JOEL: I'll do it. But this is the last time—I have your word.

(Scott grins and breaks character.)

SCOTT: OK! Flashback ends. Now Lavrov is standing outside his nephew Ilya's apartment on Redbud Court, holding a .357 revolver. Go!

JOEL: You bastards.

(The scene begins.)

In this example you see a useful technique in play. The entire thing is aggressively framed, all in the service of getting Joel to the interesting decision. This could just as easily have been done by starting the scene with "Lavrov promised Monya he'd kill a snitch in return for escaping the *Organizatsiya* forever, and it turns out the snitch is his nephew. Go!" but using the flashback makes it less direct and more fun. This example relies on a more freewheeling social dynamic—Joel is willing to roll with his friends' ideas for Lavrov, and he's fine with the aggressive scene framing that puts him on his nephew's doorstep.

Even if that sort of man-handling by other players won't fly with your group, aggressive scene framing can be a useful tool for putting someone in a bad spot and working a bit of strategy into your *Fiasco*.

ROOKIE MISTAKES

It seems that life is just a long and terrible sadness and so we must hunger and chase after happiness and the smallest hope of reprieve until the end of our days.

Dum, Tears of the Black Tiger

The procedures for *Fiasco* are generally straight-forward and (we hope) clear. However, because much of the game rests on random dice rolls and the contributions of the players, there are a few places in the game where things can get awkward and you might get confused about how to proceed. This section is an attempt to address those troublesome moments head-on and give you a way out.

PLAYING BEFORE YOU PLAY

How much information should you hash out before play? Is it better to have Relationships locked down and a strong sense of story-in-motion before you begin, or is that playing before you play? Do you want discovery, or hot action right out of the gate? To a large degree, the answer depends on your play style.

It's easy to be energized by the Setup and want to iron out the complete situation, but spending a lot of time post-Setup pre-playing is generally something to avoid. When Chris Bennett sees it, his stock response is "That sounds really cool! Can't wait to see it in a scene!" which gets the point across in a gentle way. You may choose to be more blunt, but whatever approach works for you in moving toward actual scenes is just fine.

In five-player games, I've had a lot of success just figuring out what the Relationships are and leaving all the details to be worked out in play. In a three-player game, that's a recipe for a really slow start and possibly for an unsuccessful game—if you don't figure out what the incriminating photos are, and the Need and Location don't pick up the slack, then you're fumbling. —Charlton Wilbur

At our table we usually put a light gloss on everything—"That car is his baby, and you secretly covet it, right?"—without getting into excruciating detail. We'll find out why he covets it in play, but knowing that he covets it at all is a useful guidepost that drives the action. This is also a useful reality check—if no obvious and exciting motivations emerge, there's a problem with the Elements we chose in the Setup. We either need to think more creatively or go back and change something.

You can't be afraid to twist the knife. While having one player be a sort of straight man can help the game, you really need to be willing to get a little twisted. Even if the stuff you get from the Playset doesn't immediately suggest it (they can have Elements that are downright mundane, after all), you can't hold back, you have to let your characters be terrible people and generally screw things up in interesting ways.
—Ewen Cluney

RESOLVING "CONFLICTS"

To be absolutely clear, there is no conflict resolution in *Fiasco*—there are only outcomes. Scene resolution is explicitly, emphatically, not about conflict. The only decision to be made, either by yourself if you choose to Resolve or by your friends if you choose to Establish, is whether the scene's outcome is going to be positive or negative for your dude.

That said, have all the conflicts you want! Conflicts are fun and they're the meat of the game. But outcomes are the bones, and without the bones you've just got a pile of something unpleasant that's going to rot in the hot sun. This point of view is a departure from most role-playing games, and it's worth emphasizing with experienced gamers—people new to the hobby seem to get it right away. But regardless of your experience, it can sometimes get a little squirrely in play.

Our characters are going to have very strong impulses, and we're not going to make the best, most rational decisions regarding them. If you want sparks to fly, you need to make strong choices for your character, and go balls-out pursuing those choices. And if they're bad choices, all the better. Double down on what you want, and pursue it even harder.
—Marc Majcher



You can have a positive outcome and lose, lose, lose. You can have a negative outcome and stomp the opposition. Getting the thing you want by killing someone is generally a negative outcome—your dumb character is happier for the moment, but he just murdered someone, which is probably not going to go well for him. Related to this, once you know the general tenor of the scene's outcome, there can be any number of conflicts, moments, interactions, fights—whatever needs to happen to support the fiction in the scene. Sometimes (usually), a scene will be a scene, but sometimes it will stretch out a bit and breathe, include cut-aways to other characters, flashbacks, a couple of different interactions, and so forth. Find your own rhythm.

The precise definition of positive and negative varies widely, both from scene to scene and from group to group. Leaving this utterly ambiguous was a conscious design choice. The decisions you and your friends make will inform play and make the game do what you want—that's our hope, and it seems to work pretty well.



A CRUEL STRING OF SUCCESSES

Occasionally you'll have a game with an early string of success or failure that depletes all of one color from the available die pool. Since *Fiasco's* dice are binary, this shapes the game in a definitive way and lends an air of inevitability to the tenor of Act Two. Assuming you're using an even number of black and white dice, if the story starts with nothing but failure, it's going to be brighter after the Tilt. The distribution won't change, and you'll still have plenty of surprises in the Aftermath, but it can feel weird and you might think you're doing something wrong.

When you're the facilitator, keep an eye out for this. If you see a trend of success or failure developing, try to work against it by presenting scenes that make the opposite more attractive. This way you have a little uncertainty and choice as you near the Aftermath. Sometimes, though, a session resists such meddling and goes where it will, and that's fine—the bizarre narrative arc of complete triumph followed by complete and total disaster, or the reverse, is a time-honored one.

A minor variation on this theme is the Setup where you roll an absurd number of, say, threes. This narrows down the choices considerably, but that's not really a big deal—consider it an additional creative constraint. How will you make the Bell JetRanger helicopter work in your gritty tale of Las Vegas hobo shenanigans? We bet you can think of a dozen ways.

That said, if your initial toss doesn't look fun, toss it again.

WHEN THE AFTERMATH DOESN'T ADD UP

Have you ever played through a session of *Fiasco* to the Aftermath and then rolled your dice only to be baffled by the results? It can happen. The dice can be fickle, uncaring creatures. After all that time you spent creating a clear downward spiral for your character you end up rolling Black 11 and now you're stuck trying to figure out how everything took a turn for the better. Most of the time this sudden reversal adds a nice twist to the story, but occasionally it can really bring the narrative to a grinding halt while everyone tries to reconcile the results.

One impulse in this situation is just to retcon the results to fit with the story as it's developed so far. Another is to simply ignore the Aftermath and final montage, letting the story fade out with the end of Act Two.

When presented with this awkward moment, our suggestion is to simply play through it. Take the Aftermath results as written and play out at least two of the montage scenes, using them to paint the picture of outrageous fortune at work. If your character ended his final scene on top but wound up with Black 4, grab some hanging threads from the game and reincorporate them like puzzle pieces in your final scenes to reveal how no one escapes the fire. It may feel awkward at first, but with a little effort you can give your story a much more satisfying conclusion.

BENDING THE RULES

Now you know why I can never marry a normal woman. That's why I love you. You understand my sickness. You've been conditioned to people like me. You live in my world, and it will be an exciting world!

Grant, The Naked Kiss

So far we've been talking about more or less subtle ways to change your play to improve the game, while still mostly following the rules. The following ideas are about bending the rules for when you want play with a large group or just want to try some advanced maneuvers with the game.

DRIVING IN REVERSE

Fiasco's rules state that you Establish or Resolve scenes "just like you did in Act One" after the Tilt, meaning that you continue the clockwise rotation starting with same person who went first in Act One (the player from the smallest town).

There's no reason you can't change this up. Some people regularly reverse the direction, having the player who went last in Act One go first in Act Two and then continuing counter-clockwise. Not only does this often make good narrative sense, but it ensures that the final die in each Act is the responsibility of a different player and means that the person who had the first scene of the game will also have the last scene, which has a nice parity to it.

Veteran players may take this a step further and abandon the rotation entirely, opting instead to call for scenes when it feels right. Everyone still gets two per Act, but arranging them according to the emerging fiction rather than a rigid turn order does no harm at all. You just need to pay a little more attention to avoid overshooting the Tilt, and work together to make sure that scenes happen when they're supposed to. Chances are you already know whether this variant will work for your local crew.

THE BIG SWITCH

If you have more than five people at your game session, you may need to split into two groups (we talk further about this in “Two’s Company, Four’s a Fiasco” on page 49). There’s an easy and fun way to inject some extra excitement and involvement into a large group that’s splitting in two for parallel Fiasco sessions; it was first suggested by Cheyenne Grimes. Here’s how it works:

- * 6+ people show up to play *Fiasco*. (Fist pump) *Yessss*.
- * Folks split into two groups of 3-5 people.
- * Each group chooses a Playset and does the Setup as normal.

The whole group reconvenes and presents their work to one another, detailing the overall situation, Relationships, and perhaps characters.

Each group finally sits down to play—using the other group’s Playset and Setup, sorting out who plays who however they like.

This is fun because you’re handed a situation you had no part in creating, which is itself a wonderful creative constraint. The underlying structure of *Fiasco* means that this sort of jarring transition is well supported—everyone knows what to do and can dive right in.

Playing Big Switch style is especially fun with friends, because you can tailor your Setup to create a situation you know the “other team” will enjoy—or be horrified by.

Combine this with Crosstown Rivals (see below) for extra insanity.

CROSSTOWN RIVALS

Here’s another simple thing you can do to spice up a big group. Divide into two play groups and make the two simultaneous games reference each other.

Choose a shared Playset before breaking into groups. Then, as you build out the Setup, periodically check in with each other and grab Elements from the other table’s developing situation to inform the background of your own. Don’t get too concrete, but let little details cross over—have two characters at different tables be from the same family, note the important Locations and make sure you visit them, let rumors of the neighboring game percolate through your own.

If your table has a police chase through town, call over and let the other table know. This might be the creative contribution they need to have the jail unattended, or a store clerk distracted as the chase rolls by. Maybe they'll return the favor by having your suburban housewife awakened by gunshots at 3 AM...

It takes a deft hand, but when it works it's very satisfying.

MELANCHOLY FINNISH TAG TEAM

This variant was inspired by the movie *Paha Maa* and the Arthur Schnitzler play *La Ronde* and takes the Crosstown Rivals concept (see above) to its logical conclusion. It's best for experienced players with an eye toward the game's overall arc. People who approach *Fiasco* in a more writerly mode will love this. Here's what you do, assuming four players for clarity:

Player one has a scene, Establishing or Resolving as normal. He must include the character of player four. Others can appear when it makes sense, but whoever is Establishing is required to build player four's character in. Player one then has a second scene, his last in Act One, and must include the character of player two.

Player two does the same thing—two scenes in a row. He has a scene, Establishing or Resolving as normal. He must include the character of player one in the first and player three in the second.

Player three and four repeat, with the final scene before the Tilt including player one.

In Act Two, repeat this progression in reverse. Start with player four and end with player one.

What emerges is a series of mini-stories, all nested like the skins of an onion, ultimately framed by the outer-most story, that of player one. It takes some skill to make this work right, but when it does it's transcendent. For some reason this works best at the smaller, subtler end of the *Fiasco* spectrum, probably because it's more difficult to telegraph and build huge set-piece disasters.

THE MELANCHOLY FINNISH TAG TEAM

First Scene: Player One, with Player Four

Scene Two: Player One, with Player Two

Scene Three: Player Two, with Player One

Scene Four: Player Two, with Player Three

Scene Five: Player Three, with Player Two

Scene Six: Player Three, with Player Four

Scene Seven: Player Four, with Player Three

Last Scene in Act One: Player Four, with Player One

—Tilt—

First Scene in Act Two: Four, with One

Scene Ten: Four, with Three

Scene Eleven: Three, with Four

Scene Twelve: Three, with Two

Scene Thirteen: Two, with Three

Scene Fourteen: Two, with One

Scene Fifteen: One, with Two

Final Scene: One, with Four

—Aftermath—

A DISTURBING TREND

There's nothing stopping you from incorporating a little continuity over several *Fiasco* sessions. A story using one Playset can often dovetail nicely with another, tying them together. This can be very rewarding when done right, and it's hard to do wrong.

Any Playset can be re-used, incorporating details from a previous session. If the leopard escaped into 1913 Chinatown, let it still be on the loose, stalking the alleys of Mott and Pell streets when you play again. Surviving characters can re-appear, and events that previously transpired can prompt new mischief. Alternately, you can set your new session before the previous one, and show the build-up to that particular disaster.

Some Playsets have natural affinities. *Tales From Suburbia* can be meshed with any American contemporary Playset—*Main Street*, *Flyover*, even *Manna Hotel*. Bring in characters and events that took place one county (or one state) over. Have the only survivor relocate to Alaska for some peace and quiet—or get a job at McMurdo. If there's one particularly significant Object, bend the rules a little and port it over and bring it back to cause more trouble. It's common for one character to emerge as a sort of hapless protagonist—if this is the case, use the results of the Aftermath to propel that character on to new and more sordid adventures.

Perhaps the most satisfying and elegant way to bridge two Playsets is across time. Any historical Playset can be connected to one that occurs later, including the whole range of contemporary ones. You don't even need to play them in order!

There are many sets that work well in this fashion. We eagerly await the play report that links *Boomtown* and *Manna Hotel* across the generations. Knowing you'll be playing a wider arc going in, you can plant fun seeds that will only reach fruition in the next session.

**There I was—*Dallas 1963*. Ken Hite introduced us to his quiet assassin, Ray Fredosso. Ray was a consummate professional, dogged on all sides by passionate amateurs. His story did not end well, but he did get to shoot the President. Later on, I was playing *Los Angeles 1936* (I love *Fiasco*, what can I say). At one point in the evening I needed to introduce a representative of the crime boss Mickey Cohen, some punk kid messenger. Wheels turned. Criminal... punk kid in 1936... southwest... Ray Fredosso! So I, at least, got to enjoy the fall and rise of America's unknown assassin.
—Jason Morningstar**

A KICK IN THE JUNK

Fiasco's normally played as a one-shot, where characters are disposable and often disposed of. Between the Setup and the Aftermath there exists a frantic and often tragic tale that's its own reward in play. You can use it as a tool, though—a means to an end. *Fiasco* can kick-start a campaign that will use another game system entirely. Here's how:

Grab (or write!) a Playset that takes place in the world of your projected campaign. If you want to start a *Primetime Adventures* show about the London underworld, use *Gangster London*. If you're playing *Cyberpunk 2020*, make a *Cyberpunk 2020*-themed Playset. One nice thing about this approach is that the GM can't really plan anything ahead of time.

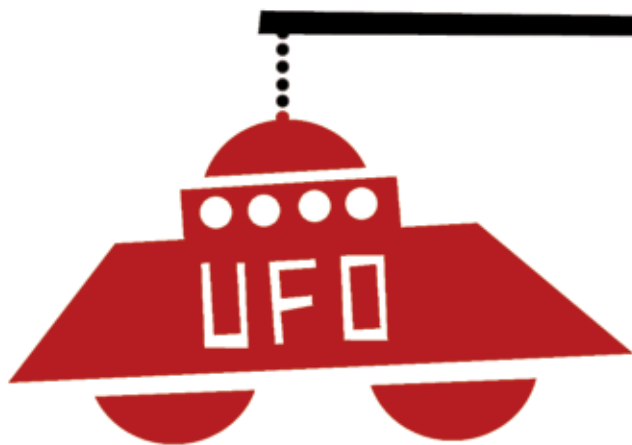
Play *Fiasco* normally. Don't think too hard about the other game to follow; just have fun and let things go predictably awry.

When you've finished, look back at the situation you've created and dissect it. Lay out your index cards and sketch out a relationship map. Look for characters—maybe people who were played, maybe prominent non-player characters—as well as locations, events, and motivating factors that resulted in whatever action occurred. Do this as a group; these are the foundations of your campaign.

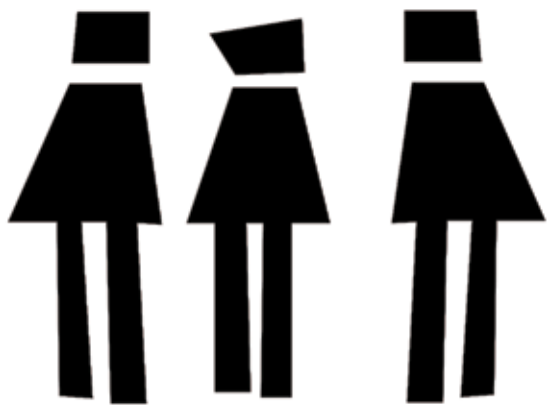
If obvious player characters emerge, let people grab them. Perhaps the same person they played in *Fiasco*, perhaps not. Others characters may be implied—someone sold the local crew a crate of automatic weapons, right? I want to play *that* guy. The nurse at the blood bank who got tagged in the shootout? I want to play *her*.

The rest is GM gravy, stuff you can use to build the campaign around. Something stupid and disastrous has already occurred, so begin the "real" game from that point of attack. Will the player characters be cleaning up the mess? Will they be out for revenge? Will the only connection to the *Fiasco* game be a particular crime boss, who ended up being the star of the session, and the bar he frequents? It's all fair game.

PART 2



HERDING LEOPARDS





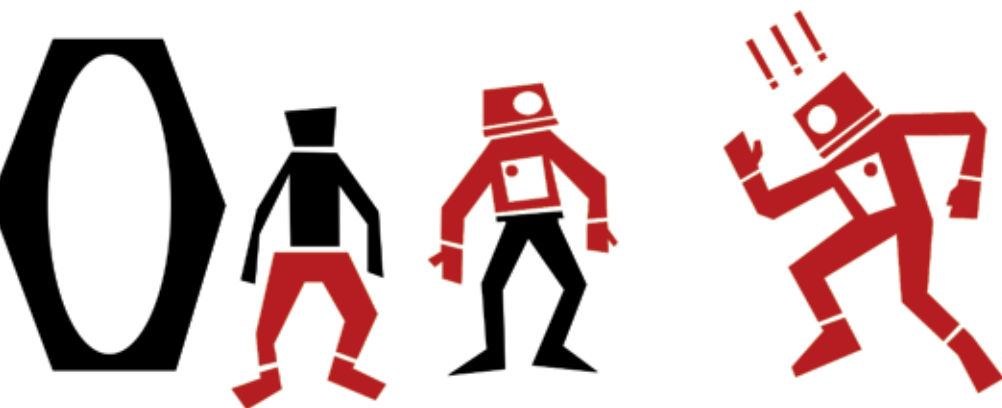
FACILITATING FIASCO

Jesus, but if you two are not the biggest pair of fuck-ups I've ever met in my entire life. How did you ever rob a bank? When you robbed banks, did you forget where your car was then too? No wonder you went to jail.

Melanie, Jackie Brown

Regardless of the fact that *Fiasco* has no GM (or perhaps because of it), the game benefits from having someone facilitate the group during play. This is true whether you're playing for the first time with new players, with strangers at a convention, or at home with your best gamer friends.

Often the facilitator is the person who's read the rules, or who had the crazy idea to play the game in the first place. Sometimes there's more than one person facilitating, especially if the group has played before. So what exactly do you do as a facilitator, and how can you do it better?



TWO'S COMPANY, FOUR'S A FIASCO

Oh, he's very popular, Ed. The sportos, the motorheads, geeks, sluts, bloods, wastoids, dweebies, dickheads—they all adore him. They think he's a righteous dude.

Grace, Ferris Bueller's Day Off

Fiasco is optimized for four players. Playing with three or five works fine, but it has a notable effect on the game.

For three players, you're only going to have twelve scenes, making the game short and intense—we've seen experienced players blaze through a session in an hour. You'll begin play with intimate connections to both other characters and you'll be hitting the ground sprinting.

In a three player game, you'll know what the game's about right from the start. You have Relationships, you have a Need; hammer them. There's neither room nor time for subtlety or subplots. If you're thinking that there's not enough meat on those bones for a satisfying session, we'd encourage you to give it a try—you might be pleasantly surprised.

One word of caution, however; in a three player game everyone has to be on-task, listening and contributing to the story from the first scene. *Fiasco* generally requires active participation, but there's room in a larger game for passive players to sit back and watch a bit. With only three people, a tired or hesitant player could make the whole game drag.

My strong preference is for three players. I actually like the fact that subplots are so costly to introduce in a 12-scene game, and that the end is always too close—I love the intensity, and the high narrative velocity, that that entails. I also like sessions under two hours, and I've only been able to do that with three at the table. — Colin Creitz

For five players, you have the opposite problem—twenty scenes, two players your guy doesn't even have a Relationship with at the start of play, probably two Needs, and the potential for a long grind. Strong facilitation is called for. Chances are that if you're reading this book, that role is going to fall to you. Keep scenes short, help your friends edit judiciously, and maintain momentum. Since you'll probably have at least two subplots based on Needs, always look for ways to tie them together and introduce characters into scenes. Every group is different, but experienced players can usually finish a five player game within three hours.

In a five player game, it's inevitable that the emerging story takes shape around a couple of characters. Everyone gets the same amount of spotlight time, but the unfolding disaster is really going to be about particular characters—this is an almost universal phenomena.

What to do if you have more than five or less than three? Don't play with two; the game simply isn't designed for it, and if it works it'll be despite the system. On the flip-side, some groups manage to have fun games with six or more, but we tend to think that's an exception. Our recommendation with six is to consider having one person act as a facilitator, helping keep things on track and maybe playing minor roles as they pop up. Even better—with six or more, split into two groups and play two games. The Big Switch and Crosstown Rivals, described in "Bending the Rules" (page 41), offer ways to keep large groups interconnected but functionally separate.

**I try to limit five player games to two subplots. More than that and it can get unwieldy and hard to follow. Players seem cool with it if you come out and tell them at the start.
—Chris Bennett**

GET YOUR SHIT TOGETHER

I just honestly don't know what I have in common with those people anymore... or with anyone, really. I mean, they'll all have husbands and wives and children and houses and dogs, and, you know, they'll have made themselves a part of something, and they can talk about what they do. And what am I going to say? "I killed the president of Paraguay with a fork. How have you been?" I just think it'll be depressing.

Martin Blank, Grosse Pointe Blank

Perhaps the simplest, dullest, most essential part of facilitation is just being prepared for the game. To start with, bring everything you'll need to play—a copy of the game, 20 dice in two colors, some markers and pencils, and a boatload of index cards.

It's really handy to have a print-out (or better yet, a laminated copy) of the *Fiasco* play mat (available online at www.bullypulpitgames.com/downloads/). You may also want a photocopy of the Tilt and Aftermath tables (double sided to reduce clutter). Just slide it under the play mat until you need it, then whip it out for consultation, then hide it again.

Bring half a dozen Playsets you personally enjoy or would like to try. Don't be afraid to exclude things that aren't really interesting to you, or that you've simply played too much of lately. Making any decision by consensus is time-consuming and dull, so having fewer things to choose from will get you playing that much sooner.

Let the other players choose the session's Playset based on your brief pitches. Keep this very focused and don't let anyone linger over the actual Playsets—don't even get them out of the folder until a decision's been made based on your descriptions. Again, there's absolutely nothing wrong with further limiting choice if you feel more comfortable offering, say, three options, or the ones in the book, or even just saying, "Welcome! We're going to play *Boomtown*. Someone roll those twenty dice."

Encourage players to pick a Playset they can all readily identify with—such as one that matches movies everyone has seen—to help establish a sense of the tone and visual background for the game. On the other hand, a lot of first-time players choose *The Ice*, for reasons that aren't entirely clear—it's certainly outside most people's direct experience, and there aren't many good cinematic examples. Perhaps it sounds exotic, and it's certainly a big, blank slate and people make it whatever they want.

Things'll go quicker if everyone can consult them at once, so either bring several copies of the Playset or print each Category (Needs, Relationships, Locations, and Objects) on its own page.

Keep in mind that some people may have very specific objections to certain Playsets. Many Playsets focus on settings that include racism, misogyny, or a host of other touchy subjects. If there are Elements someone's uncomfortable with, feel free to call those out and not allow them to be chosen in the Setup. But if it's the whole setting that's not going to work, you should just agree to pull that Playset out of the mix.



SETTING UP

Once you've decided on a Playset, briefly explain the game's flow—Setup, Act One, Tilt, Act Two, and Aftermath. The play mat's a great visual aid for walking through this. There's no need to get into specifics. After that, toss the dice onto the play mat and explain the rules for choosing Categories and Elements.

When playing with folks new to *Fiasco*, try choosing each type of Detail in turn, starting with Relationships, then moving on to Needs, Locations, and Objects. This helps guide the Setup and builds interest and enthusiasm. Keeping everyone focused on Relationships at first has two beneficial effects—first, it teaches them about how the dice map to setting Elements, and it prevents information overload. Once everyone understands how they're making selections, let them choose the remaining three categories as they like.

Needs require a bit of special attention. If you're playing with more than three people at the table, always have two Needs. That way everyone's attached to one in some way, and Needs really provide the initial momentum for a session. As a side note, Needs can be confusing for people during the Setup. More than one group has started choosing a Need for every character pair—don't do that.

As Relationships are established and details begin to come together, have everyone write their character's name on an index card. It's helpful to fold the character cards lengthwise to make table tents and have the players put the character's name on the front (and back, if necessary) so that everyone can see it. Like this:



Once the Setup's done, check in with everyone and make sure you're all on the same page. Are you playing *Blazing Saddles* or *Unforgiven*? Any issues with content to avoid or omit? Very rarely, someone will be unhappy with a choice driven by the limited available dice. If you'd rather have a great game than a rules-compliant one, try to be reasonably flexible.

TAKING THE LEAD

The rules state that the first scene goes to whichever player is from the smallest town. Assuming you're the facilitator because you're the only one who read the rules, feel free to ignore this! Instead, take the first scene for yourself to start things off with a bang. Make your first scene strong, memorable, and directly tied to a Need and to one or both of your Relationships.

The last time I played, after a lot of narratively logical but ultimately bland suggestions, I said to the group, "That wouldn't make a good Coen Brothers movie. What would make a good Coen Brothers movie?" The game improved dramatically from there. I think we added more violence and absurdism, and pumped up the powerful in our ambition.
—David Berg

Alternately, hand off the first scene to another eager player. You might choose to do this based on who becomes the last player in the rotation, because that's an important spot as well. In both the Setup and Act Two, that person has the wild die and can choose the final piece of the puzzle. Having a strong player in that spot can be helpful for tying things together neatly and ending each Act on a high note. Maybe that strong player is you.

My standard introduction is "I just brought the game along to facilitate because I love it. But if this game is going to be awesome, it's going to be because of you. This is a very player-driven game and we need everyone's great ideas to move the story forward. But don't keep anything hidden or try to plan things out. Just come up with great scenes and great characters and the rest will flow!" —Chris Bennett

However you choose to start, dive into Act One headfirst. Explain the difference between Establishing and Resolving, and what happens to the dice during the first Act. It's important to impart some understanding of what different die combinations mean—basically, make sure the players know that they don't want evenly-matched sets of dice in each color.

From here on out, just play, explaining each new thing (the Tilt, die handling in Act Two, the Aftermath) as it approaches. Piece of cake!

ARTS AND CRAFTS

You don't need to visually or physically represent much information in a session of *Fiasco*—three, four, or five Relationships; an equal number of other things; and a name for each character. In a four player game, that's 12 discrete bits of information, with two added at the Tilt. Index cards work great for this, and they have the added benefit of providing you with notes for writing up the session as actual play later. It's also a good idea to write the names of secondary characters, new locations, and other important stuff on index cards in big letters and put them in the middle of the table. This serves as a handy reminder for referencing them; it also helps players avoid creating new stuff when perfectly good stuff is already out there.

I'm a visual person, so I like to use individual cards to write down minor characters and locations that pop up in play. Throw them into the center of the table so anyone can grab them for a scene. If someone dies or the Chop Suey place burns down, just rip the card in half. That might incentivize someone to bring the two card halves together for a flashback scene! —Chris Bennett

There are lots of other ways to represent the game's necessary information, and some offer side benefits index cards can't touch. Seeing everything laid out in one spot can really help in understanding how all the pieces fit together. Posterboard or those huge sheets of paper used in offices for group projects and meetings work well for this. A roll of contractor's paper from your local hardware store has the look and feel of a brown paper bag, and it's easy to write all over. If you're using a large sheet of paper, you might want to tape it to the table for stability. Dispensing with index cards has the added bonus of providing a unified visual representation—a sort of relationship map that everyone can easily reference. Draw some arrows on there, take notes, whatever you need.

If you have access to a white board, using it to keep track of everyone and everything is a snap, and you eliminate all the waste completely.

CONVENTION PLAY

Relationships based on extreme circumstances never work out.

Annie, Speed 2: Cruise Control

Facilitating *Fiasco* at a convention or gathering is pretty easy—not only do you get to play along, the whole thing usually wraps with enough time left over for you to grab a sandwich. In general, follow all of the usual advice for facilitation, with these additional suggestions:

Time usually isn't an issue for *Fiasco* in convention slots, so you don't need to manage it as tightly as you might other games. At the start, spend a bit of time making sure the players know each other's names, and ask them about their experience with *Fiasco* and with gaming in general. Give them the elevator pitch for the game and then introduce them to the Playsets they'll choose from. At the Tilt, be sure to take the break. You've got plenty of time.

If you have players in your game who seem a little hesitant or unable to think quickly and improvise the story, feed them hooks in the story instead of overtly over the table. Frame a scene for them that pushes hard in a direction they clearly don't want; this gives them something easy to push against. Play a good villain for the characters to rally against. As facilitator, you may end up in the role of antagonist, and that's more than fine.

Likewise, if those hesitant players get really stuck and the game slows down, try to give them a little space—and encourage the other players to do the same. Offer suggestions, but without pressure. If necessary, skip to the next scene and come back to them afterward. Some people just think more methodically and need a moment.

The rules of *Fiasco* are dead simple, but if a question comes up, it's often better to plow on through rather than stop the game to make sure you're doing it right. As the player who knows the game rules, feel free to bend them as necessary to maximize the fun. If a scene grinds to a halt because folks aren't sure about a procedure, offer an easy way through and get back to the narration. It won't break the game, and there's nothing as dull as everyone watching someone flip through a rulebook.

INTERNET PLAY

I used to use this little gun when I was a prostitute.

Red, Pineapple Express

Like most role-playing games, *Fiasco* was designed with face-to-face play in mind. The collaborative nature of the game means that it works best with rapid, exciting exchanges of ideas, enthusiastic dialogue, and the joy of seeing your friends' faces when you describe just exactly what's in the trunk of that cop car. But not all of us have the luxury of playing face-to-face. Luckily, much of the face-to-face experience can be translated to Internet play without much loss of fun.

There's a big divide between the two primary modes of Internet play—synchronous (play by chat, play by Skype) and asynchronous (play by forum, play by email).

Using synchronous on-line tools makes all this pretty easy. A session of *Fiasco* played via Skype, for example, using a virtual whiteboard or other visual tools like Google Docs Draw presents no big challenges. It's also useful to have a virtual dice rolling application (many folks seem to like Graham's tool at www.catchyourhare.com/diceroller/) On-line services like Infrno make it even easier to set up and facilitate a session. You still lose some of the nonverbal cues, but not enough to really impede game play. Synchronous play does have issues, like learning to communicate in turn rather than all at once, but they're ultimately social issues.

One strength of online play is that you can take your time to do some fun research into the time/place of the session and inject that into the game to be more descriptive/flavorful. Wikipedia is perfect for brainstorming. —Marshall Miller

When ported to an asynchronous format, *Fiasco*—a very kinetic and fast-paced game—loses a little spontaneity and energy. To overcome this you'll need a few tools and the right attitude.

First of all, you need to be disciplined. For asynchronous games, sticking to three or four players is best. Your first act of discipline might be declining a fifth!

Understanding and noting differences between in character (IC, in Internet shorthand) and out of character (OOC) communication is really important, because you'll be operating on multiple OOC levels. There's character stuff, there's player stuff, and there's the ambiguous die handling and choice stuff that is neither fish nor fowl. Denoting these properly and accurately goes a long way toward a successful asynchronous game. Develop and use text-formatting conventions to your benefit. Within each "channel," always stick to the same voice and tense for clarity. The medium itself can be used to your advantage—for example, use message headers to indicate which scene it is, where it's taking place, and who's involved.

The following is a sample of five days of play-by-forum late in a three-person game using the fan-made *State Prison* Playset. The scene involves Willis, a PC played by "Tutunaku," talking to Pete, an inmate and bootlegger (an NPC being handled by "Sbszine"). They're talking in a fertilizer shed where Willis cooks the books for Ben Peltier, a crooked guard (and fellow PC). The players are all looking hard at the Tilt element "Something precious is on fire."

SBSZINE Wed 8:57 pm: "Mind if I stick around here and finish my drink? Maybe have another? I won't touch nuthin', I swear."

TUTUNAKU Wed 9:04 pm: "Not. At. All. Just keep an eye out for any of the hacks."

SBSZINE Wed 9:11 pm: Pete reaches drunkenly behind him for the weed-killer jar, then sets it down on the floor in front of him next to the almost-empty paint tin and the pack of cigarettes. "You're arright, Willis", he slurs, "See ya 'round."

TUTUNAKU Wed 9:18 pm: "I won't be long." He strides away toward the office. He stops by the realization that at any moment a guard could walk in. Or Ben. Or Jerry.

SBSZINE Wed 9:21 pm: [I am thinking of a white die at this juncture...]

TUTUNAKU Wed 9:42 pm: [works for me, sir.]

SBSZINE Wed 9:48 pm: [Dan, any thoughts?]

DRTACHYON Thu 7:14 pm: [Sorry, been sick as a dog. Sure, a white die works for me.] As if on cue, the door to the shed



swings open. "What are y'all doin' in heah?" asks Curtis Wilson, one of the few honest guards who works the farm.

TUTUNAKU Thu 7:19 pm: A hack. "Nothing Boss, cleaning up the numbers."

SBSZINE Thu 8:06 pm: [Tutunaku receives and keeps a white die.]

DRTACHYON Thu 8:07 pm: [Assigned Dice: SBSZINE 1 black, 2 white. DRTACHYON 1 white, 2 black. TUTUNAKU 1 black, 1 white + 1 new white. Remaining dice: 2 black, 1 white.]

SBSZINE Thu 8:44 pm: Pete carefully puts the lid back on the paint tin. "Just takin' a smoke break, boss."

TUTUNAKU Thu 8:49 pm: "If you're with Mr. Peltier, I'm sure you'll find everything in order."

DRTACHYON Fri 10:22 pm: "Well, why don't you all git yer asses back down to the yard. Break time is over, boys. C'mon now."

TUTUNAKU Fri 11:19 pm: "Look I got direct orders from Mr. Peltier. You're gonna hafta take it up with 'im."

DRTACHYON Sat 9:09 am: "Yeah? We'll see about that. If you're lyin' to me, I'll make damn sure that you spend a few days in solitary." With that, the guard left the shack muttering, ".....lazy trash...."

SBSZINE Sat 5:33 pm: Pete unscrews the lid from the weed-killer jar and picks up where he left off.

TUTUNAKU Sat 5:36 pm: Willis wanders over to Pete, hands in his pockets. "Pete you gotta take it easy with that. I need you to look after the office, so don't get too drunk. I know it's the 4th of July, but we don't need fireworks here." He laughs at his brilliant joke.

SBSZINE Sat 5:36 pm: "Don' worry abou' me..." slurs Pete, fumbling with the Zippo.

TUTUNAKU Sat 6:13 pm: He walks to the office and fetches the composition book out of the desk. He takes one last drink of his soda, looks around the office and smiles. He steps back to where Pete is getting smashed.

“Hey I got to go see the boss about something. Do me a solid? I got a full waste bin, could you toss what’s in it in the furnace? Appreciate it.”

SBSZINE Sat 7:01 pm: “Yah, sure.” Pete staggers over to the wastebasket with the Zippo and his jar of hooch. Booze sloshes into the basket and onto the surrounding floor as Pete passes out. The lit Zippo falls out of his hand and into the wastepaper.

TUTUNAKU Sat 7:05 pm: [I think that would be a good place to wrap the scene.]

SBSZINE Sun 4:52 pm: [OK, it’s Ben’s final scene, and I would like you guys to establish it and I shall resolve.]

TUTUNAKU Sun 4:57 pm: [Shall we have the fire in progress, or deal with the aftermath? RIP Pete.]

Without nonverbal and informal communication, a tone-setting conversation is even more important. Some of that OOC chatter may necessarily revolve around keeping the story arc moving in a satisfying direction that would, for face-to-face players, be implicit. Check in often and be clear about your motivations and goals.

Sequencing issues can arise. One simple rule of thumb can help—if you choose to Establish, it’s your responsibility to make the first post of the scene; if you choose to Resolve, someone else must make the first post.

Pay attention to pacing, and don’t move too quickly—you want everyone involved to have a chance to contribute, even after a die has been awarded. Resist the urge to press on without a slower player, or to overwrite or render their contributions meaningless. If it’s your spotlight scene, take responsibility for explicitly ending it with a clear “end scene” message. Be sure to clearly recap who has how many dice and of which color, how many dice remain in the pool, and who’s responsible for the next scene. If your game involves flashbacks or other trickiness, you may need to summarize.

Be organized about scene structure and die handling, which can easily get out of hand without some disciplined record keeping. It's essential to know who has how many dice and how many of each color remain in the pile. It's vital to count scenes—delegate this responsibility to one player. Using images or a virtual whiteboard tool like Google Docs Draw helps with tracking, ideally providing a visual summary of each scene and how the dice moved.

Establish, up front, how often posts should be made and what happens if you don't post. In our game the rule was that you have 3 days to make a post before the rest of the players can descend like harpies and write your post for you. I think that confusion over whose "turn" it is can be problematic. What's the old adage? "If you have to ask, it's probably your turn." A good facilitator can jump in and remind people when it's their turn to be the active player, and even email players if they are suspiciously silent. —Marshall Miller

How long will it take? After observing eight play-by-forum games, figure six weeks on the low end and ten to twelve weeks on the high end. If you're getting through two scenes per week you're doing well.

PART THREE

144 WAYS TO HURT A DUDE



GUIDELINES FOR CREATING PLAYSETS

Well, any human being will cast about in a moment of stress. No, the fact is, they're flooding this valley so they can hydroelectric up the whole durn state. Yes, sir, the South is gonna change.

Ulysses Everett McGill, O Brother Where Art Thou

One of our goals for *Fiasco* was to make it tempting and easy to create your own Playsets. The game was designed with this in mind. It appears to have worked because one of the most common reactions to reading or playing the game is “Oh, man! I’ve got an idea for the perfect Playset!” Online you can find many freely available, fan-made Playsets, covering a wide range of settings and styles. We hope you want to make your own Playsets, because we want to play them!

Making a Playset isn’t difficult, but there are definitely smart approaches that’ll help you best fit your ideas to the game. The following section includes a general breakdown of the essential elements of a Playset and how you can change them. It also includes advice and warnings gathered from Playset authors that’ll help keep you on the path and ensure that yours has the true *Fiasco* stink!

WHAT DO A PLAYSET'S GUTS LOOK LIKE?

Good Playsets can push the form in wildly different directions, but they’re all built on the same bones. Before we get into crafting a Playset, let’s take one apart.

A Playset consists of four meta-topics—traditionally Relationships, Needs, Locations, and Objects. Each of these is broken down into six lists of six items. This means the entire Playset has 144 individual items spread across various categories and sub-categories. 36 items per meta-topic is a wide enough assortment, and it happily corresponds to using six-sided dice.

Relationships and Needs form the core of the game—they enable the defining of characters and then set those characters in motion. You could easily play a session with only these two Elements, and removing them resolutely breaks the game.

Locations and Objects inject setting-specific color and define the parameters of that forward motion. They're often the most memorable part of any game of *Fiasco*, but they're not sacrosanct. Anything that easily breaks down into 36 unique and interesting choices and provides wonderful color could substitute for Objects or Locations. You could change Locations into Flashbacks or Events, for example. Objects could become People. It isn't set in stone, so experiment!

WHAT MAKES A GOOD SETTING?

A good setting for a Playset is, first and foremost, one that you're excited about. Is there a particular flavor of genre film that cries out for its own Playset? What about a time and place in history? A classic contemporary setting that's absolutely *Fiasco*-rific? A weird situation from which mayhem and disaster can unfold? Embrace it, love it, make it your own, and be prepared to abandon it.

That said, not every setting works as a Playset. Your epic historical set-piece will fall flat if there's no room for poor choices and trouble. So what sort of story makes for a good fiasco? Strong signs include an excess of failure and unexpected consequences, an ensemble cast of tightly-related characters, a gritty tone, and a healthy dose of cynicism. Look for inspirations that focus on stories and characters that usually get overlooked, the fools and criminals and their grand failures that play out in the shadows. If you're considering setting things in feudal Japan, for example, you'd do well to model your Playset on *The Hidden Fortress* more than, say, a lone hero story like *Yojimbo*.

You want something interesting, but not too interesting. Over-the-top Playsets can be just as fun as very serious, grounded sets like *Reconstruction*, but a balance is best. The pitch needs to be tasty enough to excite players with hints of built-in situational mayhem, but the setting needs to be built on more solid ground. If you're excited about a situation because it's impossible to imagine it not turning into a fiasco, it's probably too interesting. Without the potential for straight-up success and happiness, failure and misery get all the fun sucked out of them.

Also, while it may seem obvious, remember that not everyone will love your Playset idea. Some Playsets are edgier than others, but there's some uncomfortable stuff in all of them—and truthfully, there should be. Try to be conscious of how your setting ideas might be crossing lines and consider how you might balance things out by providing alternative choices for the players.

Once you have a great setting, you need a big enough space to tell a variety of stories based on the many potential combinations and permutations of your Relationships and Needs. This is essentially a question of the scope of your setting—is it an entire city full of characters and locations, or does it all take place in one small motel in a remote town? What unusual situations might be a part of the story in that setting? Once you answer these questions for your setting, it'll be much easier to choose the perfect Elements.

There are ways to cheat (see *Mission to Mercury*, page 125), but in general you want a situation that's comfortably open-ended without being amorphous. *The Ice* is claustrophobic, but every combination of Relationships and Needs will work in its tight little Antarctic world. *Boomtown* suggests a wider American West, but all the action circles back to the town. *Dallas 1963* gives players an entire city to work with, but it's tightly focused around the Kennedy assassination.

GETTING INSPIRED

Now that you have your initial setting idea, take a moment to think about other inspirations and influences that'll help you develop your Elements. Do a little research to find movies or shows that have the same feel. In general, it's better to have multiple sources to draw from, so that your final Playset can be played in a variety of ways.

These inspirations are important beyond Playset creation as well. As a cinematic game, *Fiasco* works best if the players can identify the setting through some shared movie experience. In your finished Playset, you'll include these in the description as examples of the kinds of stories the players might be able to tell. Not every inspiration needs to be a perfect fiasco; as long as they contribute to the color and help players communicate their ideas, they're fair game.

For example, the *Vegas* Playset (see page 115) draws inspiration from caper movies such as *3000 Miles to Graceland* and *Ocean's Eleven* as well as light-hearted films like *The Hangover*. Throw in *The Cooler* for mood and subtle bits of color from *Casino* and *Showgirls* and you have a Playset that covers a lot of ground.

Word choice really does matter. “To Get Laid” works as a Category of Needs in a Playset that’s evoking a modern sensibility, but it really jars in a Playset that’s channeling the rich grandeur of Renaissance Europe where “To Woo” or “To Seduce” would be a better fit. —Pete Douglas

SEEING WHAT STICKS

When you’re working from a really fun idea and some great inspirations, it isn’t hard to build a Playset. At its most abstract, you’re authoring 144 individual items, each of which forms both a potential narrative Element in any game and a component of a gestalt story that informs every game.

When you’re phrasing an Element, make like you’re a poet: use pithy, muscular language that makes the Element snap, crackle, and pop off the page. —Pete Douglas

Start by brainstorming a set of Elements of one type—Objects, for example. If you get ideas for other Element types, write them down to the side and keep going. Once you have a sizeable list, start grouping them into logical arrangements. Give each of those Categories an appropriate title, and then look at them as a collection—do the Categories make sense together? Do they have an aesthetic balance and do they strike the right tone for your setting? Once you feel pretty good about them, start filling in the holes with more Elements, using the Categories as a guide.

It’s important to remember that, while players will not use all of the Playset content in a single game, they will read all of it. This is your chance to really get at the heart of your concept. Don’t be afraid to throw a few WTF outliers in there. Someone may not choose it, but they will most likely mention it to everyone at the table. And hey, someone may just decide to choose a weaponized leopard for their game... —Chris Bennett

THERE IS NO "I" IN "RELATIONSHIP"

When a man is wrestling a leopard in the middle of a pond, he's in no position to run.

David Huxley, Bringing Up Baby

As a general rule, Relationships are the hardest Elements to write, and Objects the easiest. Relationships follow all the normal rules for good Elements, but they deserve a little extra attention. Relationships are all predicated on power and status. They can be binary or at parity, and they have to work seamlessly in both directions. It's not as confusing as it might sound. In *Tales From Suburbia*, we've got all the different types covered, so let's take a look at the possibilities:

"Relationship: Family: Parent and Child" is the most obvious binary Relationship possible—and therefore an excellent one! Power and status won't be equal, although pretending they are is a wonderful source of tension. Perhaps the parent is elderly and relies on the child. Perhaps it's a harried single mom and a sneering teen.

"Relationship: Work: Professional and Client" suggests an unequal distribution of power and status, but it's totally ambiguous as to which direction the power flows.

"Relationship: Romance: One-Time Fling" tells us little; however, it absolutely does not imply parity in power and status. As the defining factor between two characters, it's going to be a source of problems.

"Relationship: Community: Officials" strongly implies parity—a judge and a town attorney, two professional peers. It may not play out that way, but the implication is there.

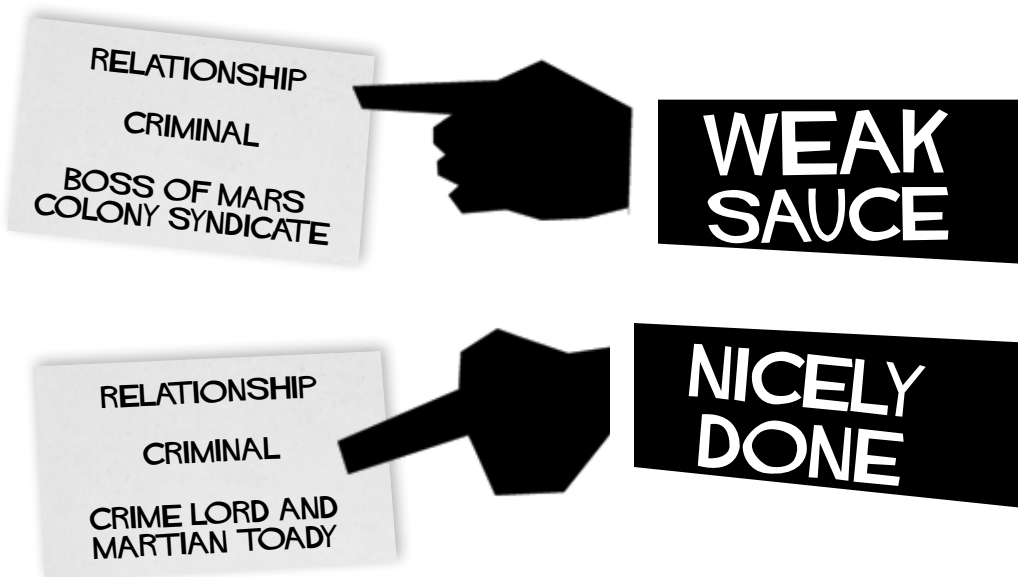
We're pretty confident that any potential Relationship will fall along this continuum.

Note that in the above example, "One-Time Fling" ties two characters together in an explicit action or event. This is great. "Officials" only loosely defines their actual duties—although it suggests high-class professionals, making them a bus driver and a garbage collector

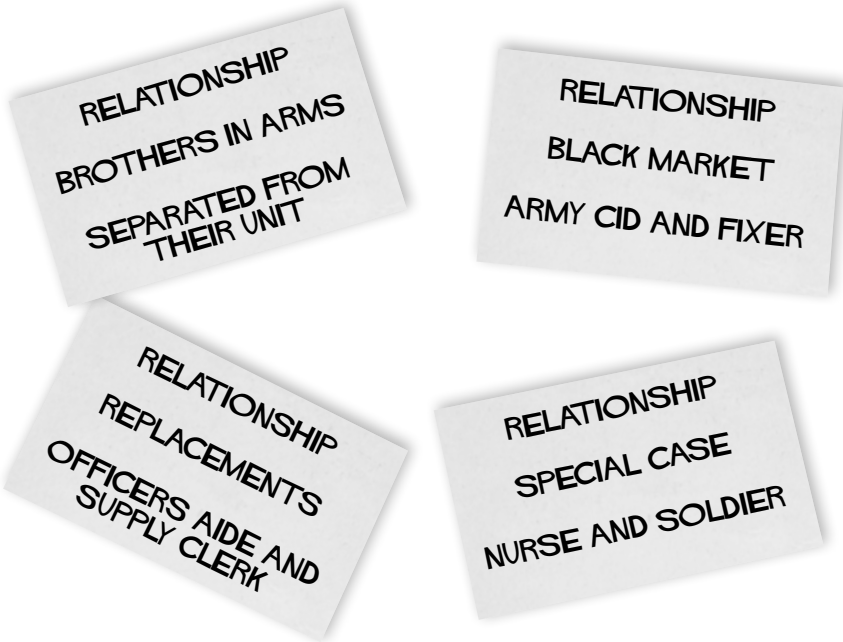
would work well and be fantastic. In contrast, “Parent and Child” is much more tightly constrained, and “Relationship: Crime: Embezzler and Company Accountant” is absurdly specific and practically writes its own story. Each of these appeals to a different sort of player, and including them all is just good form.

As I’ve discovered through many play-throughs, the initial Relationships don’t even really need to make sense, as long as they’re strong and present. You can just decide to commit to what you’ve got, and say, “we’ll figure it out as we go along,” and let yourself be surprised by what comes out of play. —Marc Majcher

Sometimes you’ll be tempted to include a Relationship that defines only one of the participants explicitly. This is understandable because we’re accustomed to thinking about characters and archetypes first in movies and games. Still, this isn’t a Relationship at all—it’s a role, which can really screw up the game. Don’t do this. Look closely at every Relationship in your list. Identifying those that are roles is the hard part—they’re easy to reconfigure as proper Relationships once you’ve spotted them.



Some Playsets rely on certain assumptions, and breaking these assumptions can lead to Relationships that can't possibly mesh. A good example of this is *Lucky Strike*, which has the default assumption that each player's character is an American soldier. Change that up by adding a nurse, and things go a little haywire:



So the nurse is probably a fixer, since it's unlikely she's moonlighting with CID. But is she also the officer's aide? Or the supply clerk? And that makes the CID investigator separated from his unit somehow... It begins to get weird, fast. Maybe your group loves to roll with that sort of thing, but it can be awkward.

While a little discretion when putting together a Playset may alleviate this sort of tangle, sometimes it's really great to include the oddball Relationships. In this case, consider doing what we did in *Lucky Strike*—sequester the ones that might break things into one list of six, and flag it with "use caution." That way everyone can work to make the oddball choice fit into the overall Setup by being a little more thoughtful about how they choose to connect to that Relationship.

RELATIONSHIP ADVICE FROM NERDS

Two questions I ask of each character:

- * What does he or she want?
- * Why can they not just have that?

And point to another character when answering these questions (either or both of them). If both answers exist outside of the Relationship dynamic you're making, that character is largely irrelevant. —Ryan Macklin

When brainstorming Relationships, consider baking status into the Relationship. Not every Relationship Element needs the pecking order of status, but it can help the *Fiasco* “cold start” pop a little easier if there's a status imbalance in the Relationship. —Pete Douglas

Relationships are always the most challenging for me to create, so I tend to lean pretty heavily on ones I've seen in other Playsets. It's tough to pick something that's interesting and not generic, but not so specific that you could have compatibility issues. But in the end, I find that the players can make just about anything work. You are the lesbian black sheep of the family, but also a top-flight lawyer looking to make a big score? That'll work. —Chris Bennett

HOW TO WRITE GOOD NEEDS

Make sure you wanna know what you wanna know.

Kara, Brick

Needs drive the game and it's essential to get them right. While Relationships define the characters, Needs set them in motion. The most important thing to remember about Needs is that you'll have one at the table—maybe two if you're playing with five people, but assume one. That Need has to drive everything until you get to the point where the characters gel and other conflicts emerge. Other motivations will probably arise in play, but in a worst case scenario, a single Need may have to carry the entire session. You see why we're stressing their importance?

Needs are a good place to work in aspects of your setting. "To get even with the Kennedy family" says a lot about which side of the sniper rifle you might be on. —Chris Bennett

Passive Needs are pure death. You have to be able to look at a Need and act on it in the very first scene. That's why the standard format is "Need: To Get X", with X being something active—to get even! To get laid! Even Need: To Get The Truth is active on a slightly esoteric level—someone wants answers and won't stop until they get them.

It's entirely possible to kill Needs dead on the individual Element level. Need: To Get Away: With Murder is fantastic. Need: To Get Away: From This Town is pretty weak. It'll require a lot of pointless work keeping someone in the town and preventing him from escaping, and in most cases none of that burden falls to the person who has the Need. And if he does end up driving away, he takes the session's momentum with him.

Make your Needs gripping, active, and full of potential conflict.

When writing Elements for Needs, be obvious and boring first, and colourful and awesome second. Folk throughout history have pretty much the same Needs as we do, so ground your Playset and make it accessible by having obvious Needs that folk can relate to right from the start. —Pete Douglas

HOW TO WRITE GOOD OBJECTS AND LOCATIONS

I'm in deep shit. Deep Shit, Arkansas.

Louise Sawyer, Thelma and Louise

Assuming you aren't getting weird and replacing these with custom lists like "Situations" and "People in the Neighborhood," standard, reliable Objects and Locations are the paint with which you color your setting.

There are many ways to go about this, which a cursory glance at the various authors' choices among the Playsets of the Month confirms. Mixing the everyday with the unique, the prosaic with the exotic, is always good. We also like to include some items of murderous specificity ("Object: Transportation: Mint 1967 Plymouth Barracuda notchback") and others that are very, very general ("Location: Residences: A cute clapboard house downtown").

When writing Locations, ask yourself a few key questions about how they might get used. Is it a good place to hide something interesting? Would it be a cinematic place to have an important conversation? Could someone have sex there? If you can answer yes to any of those questions, you've got a pretty solid Location.

Start with Locations and Objects. If you have a solid setting in your mind, these should be flowing off your pen. If not, go back and rethink your concept some more. The Locations also help to constrain your thinking a bit, which is a good thing. The "six areas, each with six Locations" is an effective device for building your little world. —Chris Bennett

Remember that the players browse all this stuff while they're choosing Elements, and it all enters their brains and breathes life into the setting. The two examples above are from *Last Frontier*, which has tons of cool local color—Taku Inlet, Pulaski tools, annotated USGS maps—as well as more general Elements that point toward a general sort of mayhem—drug stashes and hermit shacks that don't necessarily speak to Southeast Alaska but do speak to mayhem.

PRO TIPS FOR PLAYSETS

*I want you to picture a bullet inside your head right now.
Can you do that for me?*

Gay Perry, Kiss Kiss Bang Bang

KEEP IT BORING

Try to mix the prosaic with the extremely unusual, the general with the specific, in an effort to accommodate multiple play styles. Some people want inspiration, some people want freedom to create. Some people want gonzo craziness, some people want realism. You have enough space to offer variety, and you should. It's really important to be a little obvious and include some of the quite ordinary things that would exist in the setting. Don't devote a Playset to showing off your brilliant creativity.

If you want to really get an exhilarating pace out of your small game, you need to have a laser focus on doing the most obvious thing. —Colin Creitz

Remember that if you offer something crazy (“Object: Traumatic: 150 mile-per-hour category F-2 tornado”), people will invariably be drawn to it. Whether this is a good thing or a bad thing is a matter of taste, but it will definitely happen. If your impulse is to keep it low-key, consider leaving the tornadoes at home.

Sometimes the most inspiring Element is the most mundane. Too many zany Elements make play very silly and one-note and, frankly, not very fun. Seriously—when in doubt, tone it down. Jason's crowning achievement in Playset authoring is *Main Street's* medical claim processing office.

PUT CATEGORIES TO WORK

Categories are more than a just a handy grouping of six Elements. Matching Elements with unexpected Category titles can produce great results. Seeing something mundane like “Silk stockings” in the “Weapons” category creates a synthesis of ideas that surprises and inspires players. This works well for any of the top-level Categories.

TELL SOME STORIES

Try to include two or three “stories” that have Elements that turn up in multiple locations across all four lists. *Flyover* is a great example of this—there’s the Mexican thread, the airport thread, and the popular girl/family thread. In *Vegas* (see page 115), several Elements relate to “Big Jack” and “the Paradise Casino,” which easily suggests a specific type of story that could come out of play. Any of these Elements works by itself, but the players can also amplify and combine them, or completely ignore them.

Are your Objects all telling a story? They don’t all need to be super-detailed or obscure. Adding a few very simple and evocative Objects can really help focus someone’s game. Remember Ernest Hemingway’s famous six-word story: “For sale: baby shoes, never worn.” —Chris Bennett

Because the players have to at least browse all 144 Elements of your Playset, you can use them to communicate tone and situation, even if the Elements don’t get used. This is powerful. When you browse *Flyover*, you’re aware that there are lots of Mexican immigrants in town, even if you don’t use any Mexican-themed Elements.

Conversely, if someone chooses “Location: East Branch Road: Centro de la Justicia Social,” it might inspire another observant player to take “Relationship: Out and About: Centro de la Justicia Social volunteers” if that clicks for him—now you have a solid connection to one of the implied situations. Comb through any successful Playset and you’ll find the stories built into it. Depending on the author and the overall tone, some stories are more obvious than others. Regardless of how subtly you choose to work, if you handle them with a light touch, the results of embedding stories can be very rewarding.

A Playset is like an audience at an improv theatre that is bursting with strong suggestions. Unlike an improv audience though, the Playset has a single-minded, furious purpose to its suggestions that all pull in the same direction, that of firmly evoking the Score. —Pete Douglas

STEAL LIBERALLY, CRAFT THOUGHTFULLY

On stealing liberally: it's totally OK to steal from other Playsets. There are only so many different needs (and Needs) in the world. If you look closely at *Last Frontier*, you'll see that the Relationships and Needs were taken directly from *Main Street* (which is basically what a village in Southeast Alaska is) and given different color. If we can be so shameless, there's nothing stopping you!

Plus, seeing your own Playset Elements being re-used is a pretty high compliment.

Sex is always a powerful motivator, and a category of Need related to it is never out of place. It deserves a place in your Playset, but you can color sex and lust to suit. Even if you use the same individual Elements from "Need: Intimacy" and just rename it "Need: To Get Your Fuck On," the difference is huge.

On crafting thoughtfully: hold yourself to a high standard—at least as high as the people you're stealing from. If a Playset emerges from your head fully formed like a child of Zeus, you might want to let it sit for a while and approach it later with a critical eye. It probably isn't your best work. Question every Element and ask if it could be:

- * More evocative
- * More hilarious
- * More mundane
- * More terrible

When it can't be improved in any two of these categories, you've got something worth sharing.

Stand on the shoulders of *Fiasco* giants. Never start with a blank page. I like to take an existing Playset I admire and copy it into a Google Docs spreadsheet. That gives you a good framework to start from. Then you can copy over the cells, or use the column next to it to start adding in new content.
—Chris Bennett

GANG UP ON IT

Playset authoring can be a collaborative project. This is discussed briefly in *Fiasco* (see page 60 of the original rules), but people have seized upon the idea and made it far more effective and entertaining than we'd imagined it could be.

Perhaps the best way to approach collaborative Playset writing is with a stack of index cards. Chunking each category onto a discrete card means that you can spread them out and work on them individually, with every participant adding a bit to each Element. Of course a whiteboard or giant sheet of paper will work as well, and may suit your group better. We've also seen some great collaboration happen online in really active web forums threads and using Google docs. It's a lot of fun to watch a Playset write itself right before your eyes.

When you're brainstorming the Elements of a Category, you don't have to stop as soon as you have 6. If you're all in the groove and can keep going without missing a beat, throw down 8 or 12. You can come back later and cut away the ones that aren't making everyone go "yeah yeah yeah."
—Pete Douglas

Setting the premise is particularly important, since you're creating a unified vision through the Elements you choose to include. Sketch out the Score (the introductory pitch included with most Playsets) and name-check half a dozen films that would be good source material. Ideally, everyone's seen enough of these to achieve some consensus on tone and feel. As you're working, be sure to call out Elements that are particularly well suited for the Score. This sort of reinforcement helps keep everyone on track.

Keep all the advice in this chapter in mind—a group project may have a tendency to drift into silliness or over-the-top Elements, so don't forget to keep it boring. When someone lays down a particularly evocative Element, build on it and tell a story that intertwines multiple possible choices. Tell a couple of stories. And definitely, definitely reference and steal from previous Playsets.

When you're all drawing a blank for the last Elements in a Category, put it to one side and work on something else. You can return to the stalled Category later, and you'll probably have thought of those final Elements while you've been looking elsewhere. —Pete Douglas

PUBLISHING YOUR PLAYSET

I realized then that good guys never win. I want to be bad. I want to be a ruthless killer!

Sing, Kung-Fu Hustle

You have the emphatic blessing of Bully Pulpit Games to write and share your own Playsets. You don't need our permission! We ask that you run your Playsets by us so we can offer feedback, link to them from our site, and consider them as future Playsets of the Month, but none of that is required. Unless you're ripping off someone else's intellectual property, include a link to our site and proper attribution and we'll be your biggest fans.

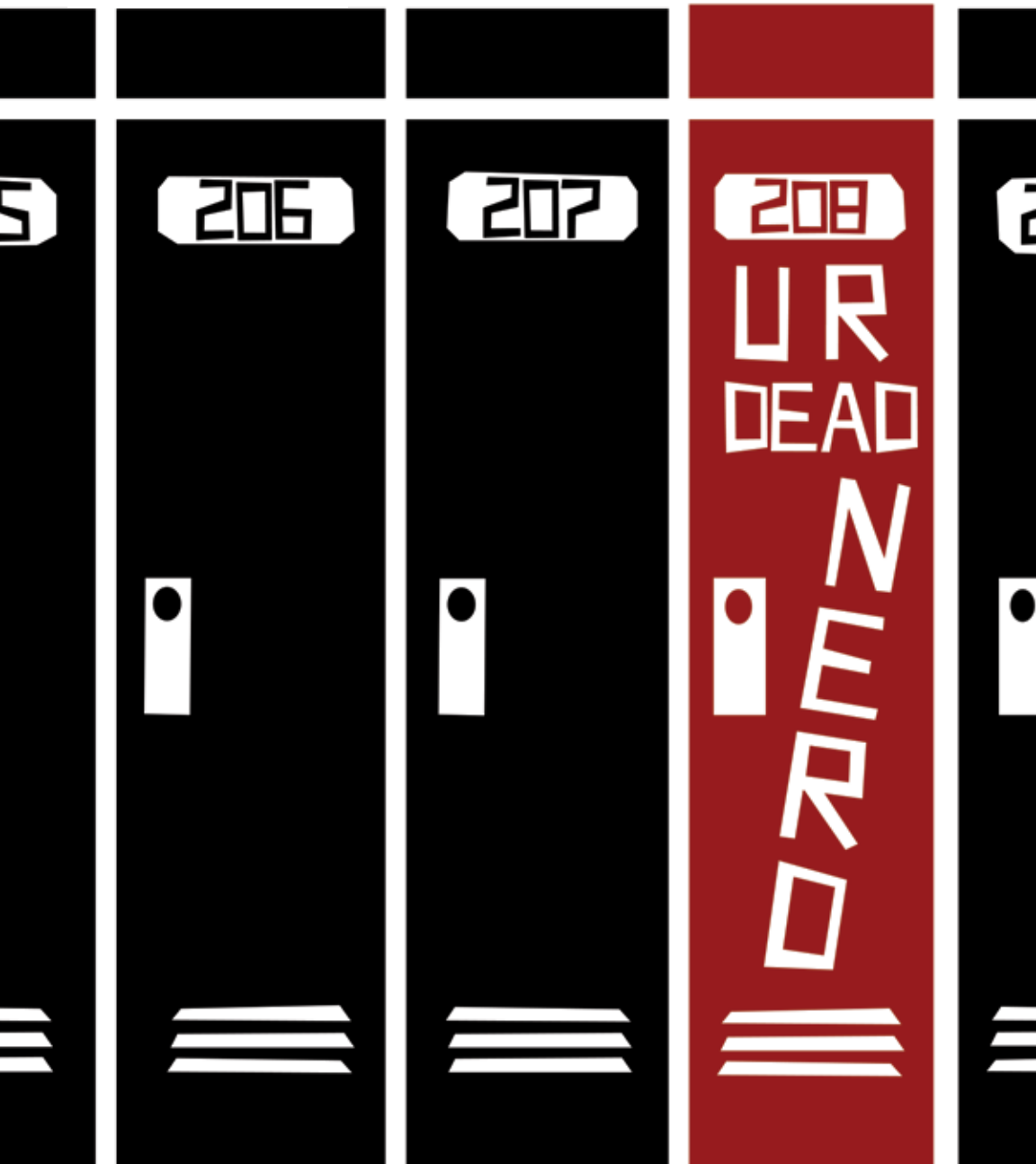
Your Playset doesn't have to be formatted like our official Playsets; in fact, if you happen to have design skills, we'd love to see what you come up with! If you do want to use our layout, just let us know and we'll be glad to share it.

It's worth noting that the official Playset style puts certain constraints on the Elements that impact the quality of the Playset. For example, we tend to avoid making any Element longer than sixty characters (to avoid line breaks). Similarly, we steer clear of using articles (especially indefinite articles) at the beginning of an Element. The fact that these rules force you to be clear and concise is our gift to you.

Less is also most definitely more when it comes to phrasing Elements. An Element that is one line long makes fairies happy. If any Element threatens to run over into two lines, break out the knives and gouge away at the fat that is unnecessary words. If you've still got a two line Element after that bloodbath, then shucks, the Element really is a two liner that's an exception to the rule. —Pete Douglas

For more information and assistance on publishing your own Playsets, drop us a line or take a look at the Playset section of our wiki (www.bullypulpitgames.com/wiki/).

4. SPIKING THE PUNCH





CREATIVE HACKING

Relax, would you? We have seventy dollars and a pair of girls underpants. We're safe as kittens.

The Geek, Sixteen Candles

Once you've mastered creating your own Playsets, you might be interested in changing the game further by hacking the rules or changing the Tilt and Aftermath tables. Maybe you want to drift the game completely from the standard "Coen Brothers" film theme to something else. We call this creating a theme package.

The Tilt and Aftermath tables are an important part of *Fiasco*,—maybe more important than you think. If Playsets are about setting and characters, the Tilt, Aftermath, and Resolution mechanics are about supporting the theme and genre of your story. In standard-issue *Fiasco*, the theme is about ambition and wretched failure, and this is reinforced by a balanced set of dice and deeply troublesome Elements injected in the middle and end points of the game. Change these things and you change the game.

In this chapter we walk through how the Tilt and Aftermath are constructed and provide worked examples of how you can change them to change the theme of the game. We also discuss some examples of ways to change the dice and scene resolution mechanics to add interesting twists to play.

RULES HACK: STUNT DICE

Sometimes the shit comes down so heavy I feel like I should wear a hat.

Ned, Body Heat

Here's a worked example of a technique that completely changes the tone of the game. Stunt dice break the straight-ahead black and white pattern that defines regular *Fiasco* play. It injects additional meaning to die choice and directs the game toward specific goals and activities. Dice not only indicate positive or negative outcomes, but also suggest specific attributes for the scenes in which they're invoked. Confused yet? Hold on.

Let's say you're in a four-player game. Assemble your sixteen dice (eight black and eight white) as usual. Each player then removes one. They can take out a black or white die, with the understanding that removing a black die is, on average, going to make the game a tiny bit happier and removing a white die is going to have the opposite effect. These dice are replaced with four red ones. The selection of a red die triggers a special effect. It's most fun if everyone at the table gets one red die over the course of the game.

The stock special effect for stunt dice is the confessional—you immediately initiate a confessional monologue for your character, as though you're writing a journal entry or speaking to a camera on a reality TV program. Confessionals, previously used to great effect in Jared Sorensen's excellent game *InSpectres*, have only two rules—they must reveal new information, and they must be short. Once the confessional is completed, the scene begins—hopefully informed by the revelations that have just been candidly shared.

Red dice are wild for scene resolution—they can be either positive or negative at the discretion of the person Resolving. This has the potential to skew your die spread a little for Tilt and Aftermath, but that's just part of your session's color and tone. When you receive a red die, keep track of what color it's supposed to be—you may end up with more than one. If you keep your character's colors in separate piles, that helps.

We're playing the Dragon Slayers Playset. The Lich King has trapped us deep in his dungeon, and Joel's guy, Gorlak, shares the fractious "Need: To Rule: An army of undead" with Mike's deeply stupid paladin, Lord Winterfall.

JOEL: OK, guys, Establish for me.

STEVE: Right. Gorlak's been all secretive about his connection to the Lich King. Time for a confessional?

MIKE: The time is now!

(Mike grabs a red die and smacks it down in front of Joel. Joel flexes his fingers evilly and smiles at us, in character as the weirdo necromancer Gorlak.)

JOEL: And so it was, my skeletal children, that I became trapped with a party of useless tools deep in the bowels of the Lich King's fastness. I wasn't worried—after all, this was all going according to plan. I knew about the secret door in the Room of Knives. I had studied my old master's maps, and I was coming for him—to take his throne and rule over your bleached and malignant bones, my soldiers.

STEVE: What a jerk.

JOEL: My only concern was the paladin—a formidable foe, if a dim-witted one. That's why I had taken the trouble to brew up the party's tea that morning—and why the stalwart knight's arm grows so very heavy...

You can also use stunt dice to play with time—if every red die requires a scene played as flashback (or, if you're feeling adventurous, flash-forward), that's going to warp the game in a cool way. This use of stunt dice is a nice way to introduce people to specific narrative techniques.

GOLDEN PANDA STYLE

This variant was first suggested by Jenn Wong. Instead of eight white and eight black dice, you've got six white, six black, two golden panda and two shadow panda dice. A panda die is a positive or negative scene outcome as usual, but when it's chosen, the player whose scene it is immediately initiates a stunt die special effect. For mythic China action, Jenn recommends that the die signal the appearance of an ancestor, or death, or reincarnation.

This variant differs from standard regular old stunt dice in that it requires two new die colors, which eliminates the wildness and potential confusion associated with a single third color. You always know how many dice of each sort you have, without having to recall whether that red die is actually supposed to be black or white.

A TERRIBLE TILT

Gambling? Who said anything about gambling? It's not gambling when you know you're gonna win. Counting cards is a foolproof system.

Alan Garner, The Hangover

The Tilt's primary purpose is injecting chaos into the developing situation. Even the most staid Act One gets upset by something that emerges from the Tilt. But it's useful in other ways as well.

Like the Setup, the Tilt is full of individual Elements that color the sort of story your session can possibly tell. The standard Tilt table borrows heavily from the sub-genre of film that the game is designed to emulate. Where the Setup provides specificity and local color, the Tilt provides genre reinforcement. One of the most popular Tilt Elements in *Fiasco* is "Failure: Something precious is on fire," maybe because it so perfectly encapsulates where most sessions end up going. But every item on the Tilt table says, "This is what a genuine fiasco looks like." At its best, the Tilt provides potent direction for players.

So what can you do with the Tilt?

You can change how you handle "authoring privilege." Ordinarily that privilege falls to two players who use a limited assortment of dice to choose two Tilt Elements. This works well for a few reasons—first, the procedure's already been demonstrated in the Setup, so it's pretty natural. Second, the die-handling mechanic for the Tilt teaches players what to do in the Aftermath, where it's more important to everyone. But it isn't cast in stone. Collectively deciding on two Tilt Elements works well and can sharpen the unfolding tale nicely. However, it also removes any sense of randomness or surprise, something Tilt Elements often provide. You're essentially trading one benefit for another.

Another option is rewriting the Tilt from the ground up. Since the Tilt is all about genre reinforcement, you can change what gets reinforced by changing the available options. Approach this task with caution—authoring good Tilt Elements is much more difficult than authoring regular Setup Elements. They must be much more wide-ranging and flexible. Unless you're writing a Tilt table exclusive to a specific

Playset—a practice we don't recommend—you need to be able to generalize the table for multiple settings. Consider that every Playset yet published has worked very well with the existing Tilt table and you'll see the magnitude of the challenge. Don't let that stop you, though!

There's a worked example of a different Tilt starting on page 88.



AN AWFUL AFTERMATH

The poor dope—he always wanted a pool. Well, in the end, he got himself a pool.

Joe Gillis, Sunset Boulevard

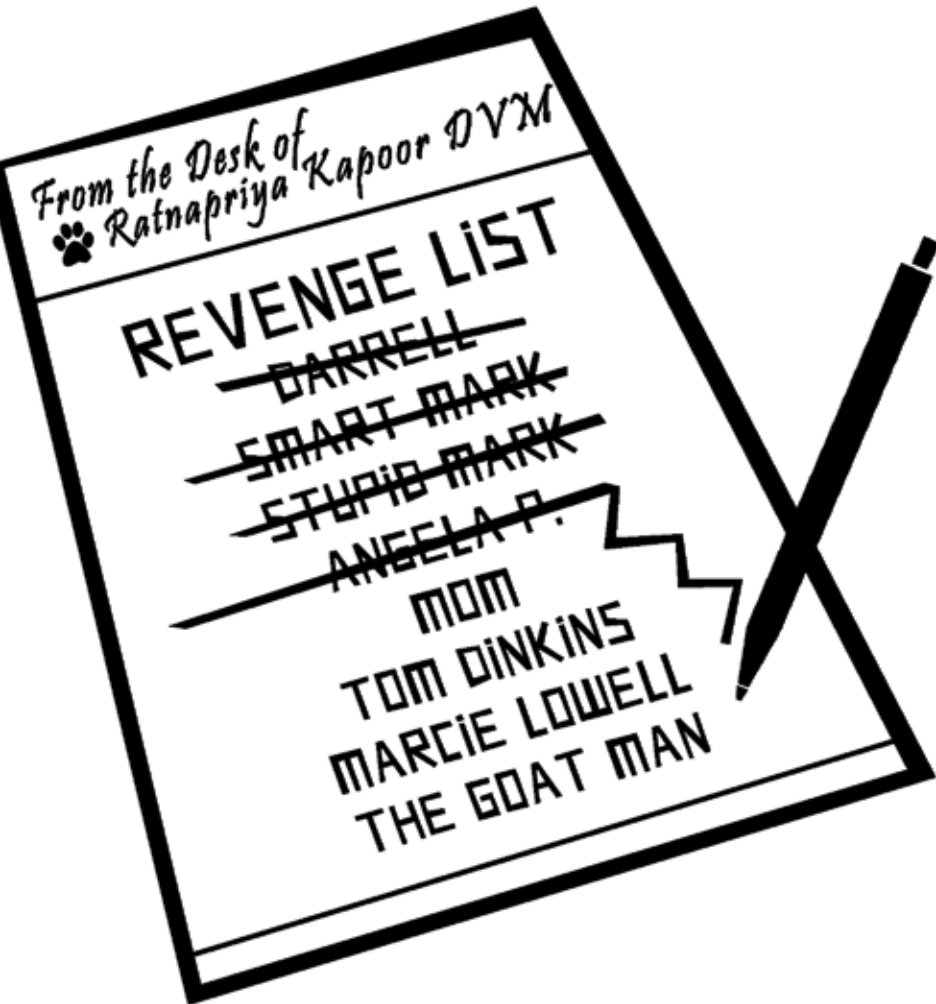
The Aftermath, perhaps predictably, also reinforces genre. Outcomes are graduated from utterly terrible (zero) to moderately wonderful (11+) along two axes. The farther you stray from zero on each axis, the better it gets; but it takes a truly heroic effort and some luck to reach the really happy endings. The math ensures that even if one player gets a remarkable result, others typically won't. That's by design, but it's something that can be tweaked. There are a number of adjustments, both small and large, that can change the Aftermath.

You can re-number it. Making happy endings easier or harder will completely transform the tenor of your Aftermath. If you change it up so that each step is a single number topping out at 9, things will go much, much better for the player characters. You can also go the other way, making it easier to get a poor outcome. We don't really recommend either of these as anything other than a thought exercise, since the "fun" range of options is inherently limited anyway, but it's something you can think about.

You can break it. The Aftermath redirects the endgame. *Fiasco* is designed to be concise, constrained, and quick; for that to work the end state needs to be in view at all times, and it needs to have a mechanism to accelerate the dénouement. Early play-tests had a third act, and it was incredibly tedious. Now the third act is told in vignettes that rarely extend beyond single sentences, and nobody misses it. It's possible to modify the game in either direction—you can relate each character's Aftermath as a single, monolithic fact and ignore the montage of forward-looking statements, or you can play out each scene in the montage instead of merely describing it. The single statement ending usually works well and can shave some time off your session if you're in a hurry. If you decide to play it out, let die color be your guide and be prepared for a longer, more detailed session.

And finally, as with the Tilt, you can rewrite it from the ground up. Reworking the Aftermath is probably harder than rewriting the Tilt. You need to figure out what each axis will be—the default set is all about physical failure in one direction and mental failure in the other. If those don't reflect your dominant themes, what will take their place? Once you've decided, you need to describe variations from worst to best, and each has to be distinctive. The gradations can get pretty subtle, and they need to be accompanied by colorful, evocative, generally applicable descriptions.

There's a worked Aftermath example starting on page 90.



WORKED EXAMPLES

We've included examples of alternative Tilt and Aftermath tables on the following pages. These are designed to completely change *Fiasco's* theme from "Joel and Ethan Coen" to "John Hughes"—they're gentler, more socially focused, and, while the characters may totally miss the prom, nobody's going to get handcuffed to a washing machine and doused in muriatic acid. Hopefully.

Your play group may have other ideas, so make sure you have a short conversation about tone and intent before you start. Actually trying for a violent, gritty game using the softer tables is going to be weird, but from experience we can tell you it's a good kind of weird. The reverse is also true, of course.

One nice thing about these "softer" tables is that they're completely interchangeable. Use them in conjunction with the *Fiasco High* Playset (page 95) and you get *Ten Things I Hate About You*. Play *Fiasco High* with the original, mean-spirited Tilt and Aftermath tables and you get *Brick*. Both will be very fun and similarly off the rails.

You don't even necessarily have to pick which Tilt and Aftermath to use until you get done with Act One. Maybe everyone discovers partway through that the mood is darker than they thought, or lighter than they thought. Or they decide that the first act was lighter than they want, and the harsher Tilts could push the game in a more entertaining direction (or vice versa). —Nick Wedig

THE SOFT

TILT

1 QUOTABLE

- ▣ "This ends tonight"
- ▣◦ "You're too late"
- ▣◦◦ "I'm just not that into you"
- ▣◦◦◦ "I swear to God I have no idea what happened"
- ▣◦◦◦◦ "I love you"
- ▣◦◦◦◦◦ "We can fix this"

2 VIOLENCE

- ▣ A spectacular wreck
- ▣◦ Ill-considered vengeance
- ▣◦◦ An old-fashioned ass-kicking
- ▣◦◦◦ Impotent rage
- ▣◦◦◦◦ The showdown
- ▣◦◦◦◦◦ Something important (perhaps metaphorical) is demolished

3 DECEPTION

- ▣ Misplaced trust
- ▣◦ Stabbed in the back—maybe literally
- ▣◦◦ The secret goes public
- ▣◦◦◦ A joke takes on a life of its own
- ▣◦◦◦◦ Framed, blamed, and shamed
- ▣◦◦◦◦◦ The mighty fall exceedingly hard

4 TRUTH

- ◻ An unwanted confession
- ◻◻ Dorky turns sexy
- ◻◻◻ A death in the family
- ◻◻◻◻ A lie becomes truth
- ◻◻◻◻◻ Truth becomes a lie
- ◻◻◻◻◻◻ The big reveal

5 FOLLY

- ◻ An unexpected proposal
- ◻◻ A simple mistake leads to complex pain
- ◻◻◻ A complex mistake leads to simple pain
- ◻◻◻◻ A single moment of miraculous luck
- ◻◻◻◻◻ Someone loses their nerve
- ◻◻◻◻◻◻ You can't afford to lose it, but you just did

6 SEX

- ◻ A magical moment in soft focus
- ◻◻ Somebody is pregnant
- ◻◻◻ True love is not nice
- ◻◻◻◻ Cue the hot stranger
- ◻◻◻◻◻ A surprising change of heart
- ◻◻◻◻◻◻ Chaos, indecency, and scandal

THE SOFT AFTERMATH

Zero: The worst thing in the universe. Yes, technically it might be worse to be pulled apart by farm machinery, but in terms of your reputation, relationships, hopes and dreams, physical and mental health, and all you hold sacred and dear, nothing could possibly be worse. That thing you just thought of? Not bad enough. Try again, and phone your most sadistic, conniving friend for advice. Or you can get pulled apart by farm machinery.

Black One: Mystical. The amount of failure this represents is a thing of legend, something that occurs once a decade maybe. Something discussed in hushed tones at gatherings. The best part is that *you* are to blame for all of it, every crumb of the fiery layer cake that is your self-destruction.

Black Two: Fucked. Whatever idiocy you got up to broke you—it scarred you, and I'm not talking about something a therapist can fix. And all around you are the broken pieces of the people and things you hold dear.

Black Three: Extremely awful. Whatever you care about is gone, that's for sure, and you're probably also missing a tooth.

Black Four: Sorry-ass. Your sad story is hardly worth commenting on. Plus you totally fail.

Black Five: Inspirational. As in "Isn't it inspirational how that poor child managed to claw her way out of that hideous rat-hole of a life and isn't she just a little *trooper*?"

Black Six: Mortifying. Someday the scandal will die down and everyone will forget your humiliation and defeat. Someday. Not today.

Black 7-8: Encouraging. Sure, you're no better off than you were, maybe things are actually worse, but there's hope—and that slender reed is something you can cling to.

Black 9-10: Sort of cool. Unexpected, sure, but in the end you're doing OK. Nothing too badly broken, maybe some interesting prospects, lessons learned and a good friend or two to keep you on the right track.

Black 11+: Mystical. There's a photo of you in the dictionary next to the entry for "lucky bastard." You have it all—success, an excellent reputation, love, friends, security, you name it. All that and probably a jet-ski, too.

Zero: The worst thing in the universe. Yes, technically it might be worse to be pulled apart by farm machinery, but in terms of your reputation, relationships, hopes and dreams, physical and mental health, and all you hold sacred and dear, nothing could possibly be worse. That thing you just thought of? Not bad enough. Try again, and phone your most sadistic, conniving friend for advice. Or you can get pulled apart by farm machinery.

White One: Astonishing. People didn't think it was even possible to be as reviled as you are, but you proved them wrong. You'll wear the world's contempt for the rest of your life. Are you in jail, protective custody, or a disguise? Probably. Is your life—and the lives of those you care most about—completely ruined? Definitely.

White Two: Degrading. You are the poster child for humiliation and disgrace. Nobody loves you; nobody even likes you. Your reputation, such as it is, precedes you, and you are a broken person. How could you do what you did?

White Three: Shameful. You are the toast of the town, if by toast you mean laughing stock and by town you mean entire fucking world.

White Four: Wretched. Sure, you fail, but everybody fails. You fail like a complete tool and it's pitiful.

White Five: Desperate. Still looking for an angle, still re-arranging the deck chairs, stuck in a holding pattern getting nowhere.

White Six: Sad. Woeful. Not cool. People don't like you—even you don't like you. You reached your peak and it wasn't all that lofty, was it?

White 7-8: Promising. To you, anyway—there's light at the end of the tunnel if you can just soldier on through the grind. You may be worse for the wear, but next time will be totally different.

White 9-10: Happy. Given the possibilities, things didn't turn out half bad. Your future isn't in flames, your dignity is intact, and maybe you learned something. It's all pretty cheerful, considering the alternative. Life's weird sometimes.

White 11+: Astonishing. You are transformed by luck, grace, and your own innate coolness. If there's romance afoot, you are sealing the deal. If there's something you wanted, you are totally going to get it!

PLAYSETS

Four playsets follow, and each earned a place in this book as an example of some of the techniques we've been discussing. All are intended to push the envelope; as a result they all require a little skill and finesse.

FIASCO HIGH

High School is often tragically billed as the best years of your life. Yet is there any other time in life so aptly summarized by “powerful ambition and poor impulse control”?

This playset is tailor-made for the softer package included in this book, but it works just as well when you play black-hearted hardball. Inspirations include films like *Ten Things I Hate About You*, *Brick*, *Sixteen Candles*, *The Breakfast Club*, and *Rushmore*.

The Stunt Dice rules work especially well for this playset, giving the teen angst an outlet in overly-dramatic confessional scenes.

Note that there are many potential student-teacher Relationships. If you choose these points, it leads play in a particular direction and requires care in establishing personal connections. Avoid them for a straight-up teen game.

REGINA'S WEDDING

Regina is finally tying the knot. She's found the right guy, and the wedding is going to be a real event. Two big families, scads of bridesmaids, a metric keglod of groomsmen, a catered reception, the whole frilly white nine yards. Of course, everyone has a past, and everyone has an agenda, and even the happiest occasion can become a social—and literal—battlefield...

Note that some choices in this Playset require finesse and cooperation, since in certain combinations you can end up with multiple Reginas, or weird juxtapositions of mothers-of-the-bride. If The Happy Couple category is chosen twice, Regina is engaged to two people. Some of these oddities might actually be really interesting and fun, but proceed with caution. This Playset also swaps out Locations for Moments, making it particularly well suited for playing with time.

Inspirations include films like *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Wedding Crashers*, *The Wedding Singer*, *Bridesmaids*, and any other movie with “Wedding” in the title.

VEGAS

Las Vegas is a glittering illusion in the desert, a house of cards built on dazzling lights, hope, and desperation. It's Disneyland with strippers and cheap drinks, full of hapless losers, wide-eyed tourists, and gangsters nostalgic for how it used to be.

In Sin City everything can change in the blink of an eye. Maybe you've got a score to settle, or an easy mark lined up, or you just think your luck will change this time. It might even be enough to win her back, or get you out of the life. But don't bet on it—in the end, no matter how special you think you are, the house always wins.

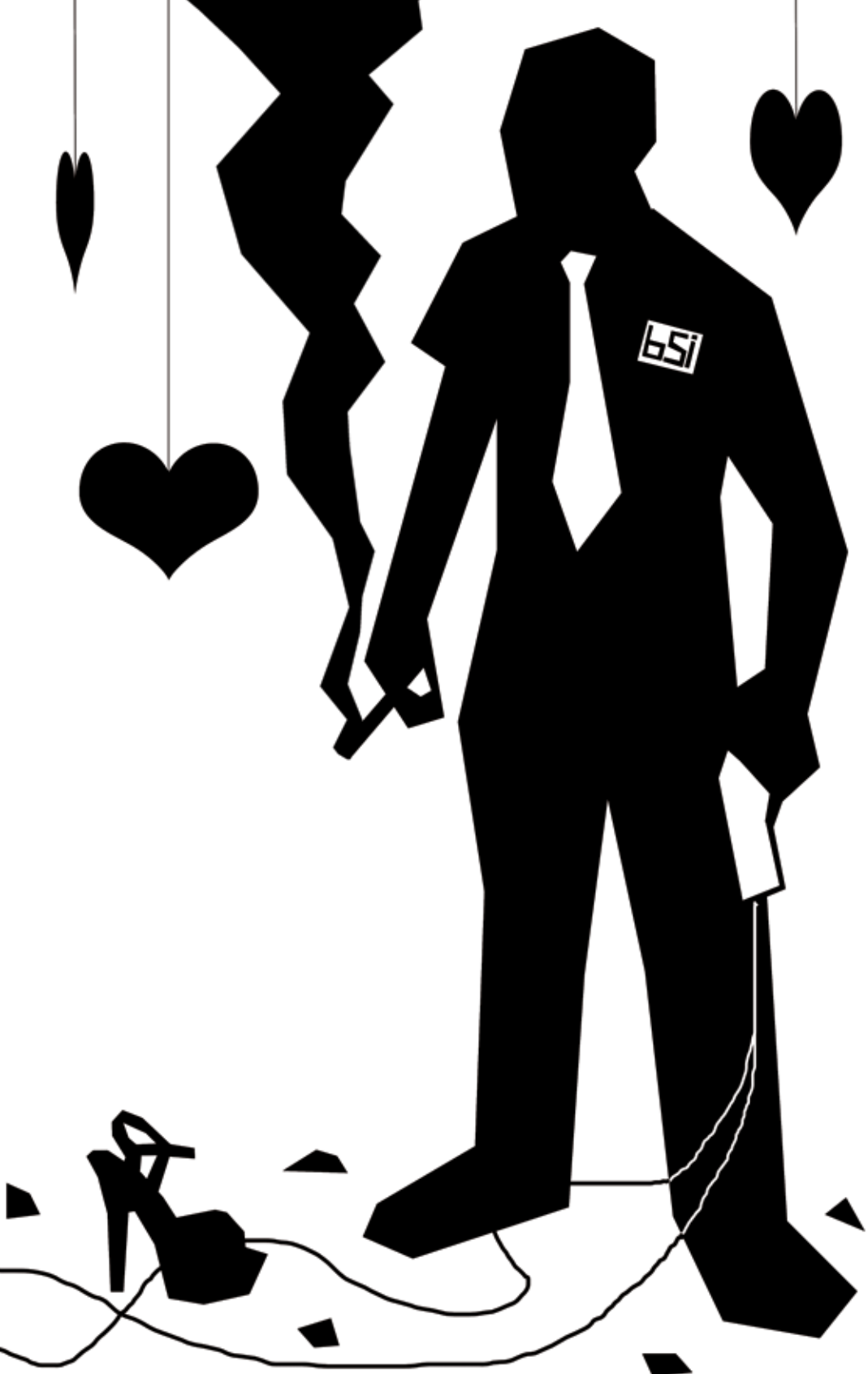
This Playset is a workhorse, designed to serve as a solid backdrop for a wide variety of play styles. It demonstrates many of the suggestions listed in Part Three, notably "Tell Some Stories" (page 75). Inspirations include *The Cooler*, *Ocean's Eleven (1960)*, and *3000 Miles to Graceland*. Use the soft tables if you want something more like *Swingers* or *The Hangover*.

MISSION TO MERCURY

This Playset is kind of hardcore—there's a lot of background! With a tooth-and-nail struggle for domination and exploitation of Mars by the major powers of the near future, the international mission to Mercury is a big public relations effort. Surplus lunar equipment—proven over twenty years of hard service—is heavily modified for the task. The overall mission is named *Shuguang* (Dawn Light). Inspirations include *Sunshine*, *Moon*, *Apollo 13*, and the many International Space Station walkthrough videos available online.

Although not essential for play, this Playset works best with the "technical data" bonus packet, a free supplement which includes pre-defined characters, roles, and an overview that should help get you in the mood and provide some nice jargon, technical information, and inspiration. You can find the packet online at www.bullypulpitgames.com/downloads.

The Stunt Dice rules work especially well with this Playset, with confessional scenes as video journal entries or desperate messages sent back to Earth. It's also worth noting that some of the Locations and Objects stray from the predictable—instead representing situations or events along the mission timeline. This is a claustrophobic and weird Playset for experienced *Fiasco* players!



FIASCO HIGH

“Senior Superlatives”

Sarah Shoenweiss
Graunch Slanney
Rebecca Smith
Beth Spearman



Pieta Szabo
Jennifer Tabuno
Michael Tabuno
Lady Tilford



Gail Trundler
Tonya Tucker
Svetlana Ustache
Charles Vadim



Robert Varley
Alex Waters
Sissy Weems
Lisa Willett



Debb Yancey
Ike Yeggman
Jed Yeggman
Brian Zimkis



RELATIONSHIPS...

1 CHAINED FOR LIFE

- ◻ Brother and sister, or brothers or sisters
- ◻ Cousins
- ◻ Identical twins
- ◻ You don't think you're related, but you totally are
- ◻ Teacher and student who are also parent and step-child
- ◻ Same faith, same culture, same immigrant parents, same problems

2 BFF'S

- ◻ Fast friends through thick and thin
- ◻ Frenemies
- ◻ Friends by Imperial mandate
- ◻ One-way friendship
- ◻ More than friends
- ◻ Secret friends

3 THE DEVIL AND ME

- ◻ Athletic rivals
- ◻ Villain and crusader
- ◻ Social rivals
- ◻ Bully and victim
- ◻ Academic rivals
- ◻ Authority figure and ne'er-do-well

4 SLAVES TO THE MAN

- ◻ At the Chicken Hut
- ◻◦ Co-chairs of the stupid prom committee
- ◻◦ Teacher and student leader
- ◻◻ Math Olympics after-school project team
- ◻◻ Detention
- ◻◻◻ Community service—required for one, résumé fluff for the other

5 TROUBLE

- ◻ Drug dealer and best customer
- ◻◦ Pair of creepy outcasts
- ◻◦ Angry nerds
- ◻◻ Christian zealot and soul in need of salvation
- ◻◻ Undercover cop and the one who knows
- ◻◻◻ Privileged plutocrats

6 SENIOR SUPERLATIVES

- ◻ Coolest kid in school and fawning minion
- ◻◦ Smartest kid in school and ambitious minion
- ◻◦ Strongest kid in school and cringing minion
- ◻◻ Meanest kid in school and sadistic minion
- ◻◻ Weirdest kid in school and weirder minion
- ◻◻◻ Richest kid in school and devious minion

...IN HIGH SCHOOL USA

NEEDS...

1 TO GET INTO

- ...the cool crowd
- ◻◻ ...the Assistant Principal's office
- ◻◻◻ ...Jenny Tabuno's world
- ◻◻◻◻ ...the spring musical
- ◻◻◻◻◻ ...college
- ◻◻◻◻◻◻ ...drugs

2 TO GET OUT OF

- ...detention
- ◻◻ ...a date to the prom
- ◻◻◻ ...Apple Valley After School Jesus Fellowship
- ◻◻◻◻ ...a promise
- ◻◻◻◻◻ ...a "surprise" drug test coming up
- ◻◻◻◻◻◻ ...your reputation

3 TO GET REVENGE

- ...on the popular kids
- ◻◻ ...on idiotic Mr. Curtis
- ◻◻◻ ...on that jerk Mike Tabuno
- ◻◻◻◻ ...in public, at the prom
- ◻◻◻◻◻ ...for your exciting new pregnancy
- ◻◻◻◻◻◻ ...by seducing a teacher

4 TO GET RESPECT

- ☐ ...through character assassination
- ☐ ...by coming out of the closet
- ☑ ...by standing up to the forces of darkness
- ☑☑ ...by showing up at prom with an astonishing date
- ☑☑☑ ...by getting a sweet ride
- ☑☑☑☑ ...by putting out

5 TO GET LOVE

- ☐ ...from the incomparable Mike Tabuno
- ☐ ...or sex, or whatever
- ☑ ...by embarrassing yourself
- ☑☑ ...by transforming into a new you
- ☑☑☑ ...on prom night
- ☑☑☑☑ ...from a teacher

6 TO GET AWAY

- ☐ ...with murder
- ☐ ...with the Big Lie
- ☑ ...with stealing Jenny Tabuno's diary
- ☑☑ ...from your stupid family
- ☑☑☑ ...with cheating on the SATs
- ☑☑☑☑ ...from the thugs you crossed

...IN HIGH SCHOOL USA

LOCATIONS...

1 NORTH END

- ◻ Theater lighting catwalk
- ◻ Student parking lot
- ◻ Gym, decorated for prom
- ◻ Locker room and shower
- ◻ Study hall
- ◻ On the roof

2 SOUTH END

- ◻ Inside the custom van in auto shop
- ◻ Remedial Education trailer
- ◻ Athletic field
- ◻ Yearbook office
- ◻ Mr. Curtis' idiotic classroom
- ◻ ESL classroom

3 TIGHT SQUEEZE

- ◻ Mike Tabuno's back pocket
- ◻ Crawlspace above metal shop
- ◻ Teacher's mail cubby
- ◻ Freshman locker on the north end
- ◻ Assistant Principal's dashboard
- ◻ Under the bleachers

4 AROUND TOWN

- ◻ Promise Hill Country Club
- ◻ Rich kid's mansion on the Promise Hill fairway
- ◻ Poor kid's trailer in Redbud Court
- ◻◻ Homewood branch library
- ◻◻ Chicken Hut
- ◻◻◻ Breedlove Correctional Facility

5 OUR SPECIAL PLACE

- ◻ www.applevalleywhispers.com
- ◻ The D&D basement
- ◻ The backseat of a car
- ◻◻ The bus, to and from away games
- ◻◻ Apple Valley skate park
- ◻◻◻ Poppleton Mall

6 THE HUB

- ◻ Assistant Principal's office
- ◻ The lobby where the cool kids hang out
- ◻ Cafeteria
- ◻◻ Teacher's lounge
- ◻◻ Designated smoking area
- ◻◻◻ School library

...IN HIGH SCHOOL USA

OBJECTS...

1 SCHOOL SPIRIT

- ◻ Mascot costume
- ◻ Tarnished 1938 football trophy
- ◻ School newspaper's explosive exposé
- ◻ King Boots Affair, the band hired for prom
- ◻ The only yearbook proof, on a crashed hard drive
- ◻ Letter jacket

2 DRAMATIC

- ◻ Love letter torn into tiny tear-stained pieces
- ◻ Gorilla suit
- ◻ Realistic toy revolver
- ◻ Stranger who is a dead ringer for somebody at your school
- ◻ The school's PA system
- ◻ Bill from the Intentional Parenthood Clinic

3 DANGEROUS

- ◻ Change purse stuffed with random, dusty pills
- ◻ Hand-written list of names
- ◻ Badly-made pipe bomb
- ◻ Some orange chemical in a plastic jug
- ◻ Loaded snub-nosed .38 revolver
- ◻ Battered Dodge Neon with a duct-taped plastic-covered window

4 ILLICIT

- ☐ Baggie of weed and some rolling papers
- ☐ Unfortunate cell phone video
- ☐ Exam answer key
- ☐ Stolen laptop full of credit card numbers
- ☐ Keg and a tap
- ☐ Username and password to the school's administrative database

5 AWESOME

- ☐ One of the seventeen 1981 Porsche 924 Carrera GTRs ever built
- ☐ Dirt on the Assistant Principal's son
- ☐ Pair of identical designer prom dresses
- ☐ Unopened official letter
- ☐ Daily bank deposit from Michelle's Tavern, cash in a canvas sack
- ☐ The winning ticket for G-96's Krazee Daze sweepstakes

6 ROMANTIC

- ☐ Pair of bus tickets and a phone number on a napkin
- ☐ Single red rose on a grave marker
- ☐ Box of condoms in a brown paper bag
- ☐ Engagement ring
- ☐ Jenny Tabuno's locked diary
- ☐ Somebody's phone, stuffed with scandal

...IN HIGH SCHOOL USA

A HIGH SCHOOL INSTA-SETUP

RELATIONSHIPS AT SCHOOL

For three players...

- * Chained for Life: Brother and sister, or brothers or sisters
- * The Devil and me: Bully and victim
- * BFFs: More than friends

For four players, add...

- * Trouble: Angry nerds

For five players, add...

- * Slaves to the Man: At the Chicken Hut

NEEDS AT SCHOOL

For three players...

- * To get love... or sex, or whatever

For four or five players add...

- * To get revenge... on that jerk Mike Tabuno

LOCATIONS AT SCHOOL

For three or four players...

- * South End: Yearbook office

For five players, add...

- * Tight Squeeze: Freshman locker on the north end

OBJECTS AT SCHOOL

For three, four, or five players...

- * Illicit: Unfortunate cell phone video

REGINA'S WEDDING



RELATIONSHIPS...

1 THE HAPPY COUPLE

- ◻ Regina and Bantam, college sweethearts
- ◻ Regina and George-Alan, her father's business partner's son
- ◻ Regina and Cardwell, relative of Theodosia Bligh, Baroness Clifton
- ◻ Regina and Linda
- ◻ Regina and Abdul Ali Al-Marwani
- ◻ Regina and television's Rico "The Manhunter" Sanchez

2 THE BRIDE'S SIDE

- ◻ Mother of the bride and wedding planner
- ◻ Two equally unstable relatives
- ◻ Oldest and youngest people in the hall
- ◻ Mother of the bride and her dealer
- ◻ Mother of the bride and the bride's biological mother
- ◻ Father of the bride and unexpected guest

3 THE GROOM'S SIDE

- ◻ Father of the groom and his weird wingman
- ◻ Father of the groom and the person with dirt on him
- ◻ Pair of freeloaders in it for the open bar
- ◻ Fattest and thinnest people in the hall
- ◻ Mother of the groom and ex-husband
- ◻ Old grifter and young grifter

4 THE INNER CIRCLE

- ◻ Regina and her best friend
- ◻ Groom and his worst enemy
- ◻ Groom and his long-suffering best man
- ◻ Television's Margaret Wakefield and her biggest fan
- ◻ Member of the bridal party and mysterious stranger
- ◻ Member of bridal party and the one determined to humiliate them

5 THE HELP

- ◻ Wedding photographer and the one who cannot be photographed
- ◻ Reception DJ and the one in love with him
- ◻ Officiant and outspoken fringe religion devotee
- ◻ Catering assistant and fellow stoner
- ◻ Cake decorator and casual hookup
- ◻ Make-up artist and member of the bridal party with issues

6 LOVE IS IN THE AIR

- ◻ The one who got away and the one who let it happen
- ◻ Secret lovers
- ◻ Dangerous, deeply conflicted feelings
- ◻ I love you, you love me, what's the problem?
- ◻ We loathe each other, so why do I want to jump your bones?
- ◻ Mutual liars for the sake of propriety

...AT REGINA'S WEDDING

NEEDS...

1 TO GET THE GIRL HITCHED

- ...so she can finally grow up
- ◻◻ ...to cement a business relationship
- ◻◻◻ ...so the will's legal conditions can be fulfilled
- ◻◻◻◻ ...so you can finally tell her the truth
- ◻◻◻◻◻ ...before anybody figures out exactly what's going on
- ◻◻◻◻◻◻ ...to somebody different

2 TO GET LAID

- ...by Regina
- ◻◻ ...and revel in the bittersweet schadenfreude
- ◻◻◻ ...by as many people as possible in 48 hours
- ◻◻◻◻ ...to rekindle long-dormant passion
- ◻◻◻◻◻ ...one last time
- ◻◻◻◻◻◻ ...by some drunk groomsman

3 TO GET OVER

- ...a messy breakup
- ◻◻ ...an addiction
- ◻◻◻ ...a terrible tragedy
- ◻◻◻◻ ...a nagging suspicion
- ◻◻◻◻◻ ...a virus
- ◻◻◻◻◻◻ ...nasty prejudice

4 TO GET EVEN

- ☐ ...with a tormentor
- ☐◦ ...with the very institution of marriage
- ☐◦◦ ...with your stupid parents
- ☐◦◦◦ ...with these shitty-tipping motherfuckers
- ☐◦◦◦◦ ...with the asshole who stole her away from you
- ☐◦◦◦◦◦ ...with the people who let you down

5 TO GET IT

- ☐ ...on tape
- ☐◦ ...up
- ☐◦◦ ...off your chest
- ☐◦◦◦ ...inside the cake
- ☐◦◦◦◦ ...back from the guy who took it
- ☐◦◦◦◦◦ ...out—of the church, of the dress, of your mind

6 TO GET AWAY

- ☐ ...with standing up Regina
- ☐◦ ...with murder
- ☐◦◦ ...with the wedding cash
- ☐◦◦◦ ...with scamming these pogues
- ☐◦◦◦◦ ...with cutting a few corners decorating
- ☐◦◦◦◦◦ ...with the most colossal prank in the history of mankind

...AT REGINA'S WEDDING

MOMENTS...

1 DUDE PARTY

- "That's one way to tip a stripper"
- "Does that guy have a gun in his waistband?"
- "I have to tell you something about Regina"
- ◡ "It's a...medical appliance"
- ◡ "Is he supposed to be here?"
- ⋮ "I love you, bro"

2 CHICK PARTY

- "He was a bastard to me, so good luck"
- "I'm taking this guy back to my room"
- "She swore revenge twenty years ago"
- ◡ "You have to promise me that this will be our secret"
- ◡ "Tell no one about this tattoo"
- ⋮ "I love you, Regina"

3 GATHERING OF THE CLANS

- "He's not breathing"
- "I can't even understand these people"
- "We need to talk about the money"
- ◡ "Jesus, look at you—what the fuck happened?"
- ◡ "Chris will be here, I promise"
- ⋮ "Why, bless your heart!"

4 THE REHEARSAL

- “They may take a few liberties but they were cheap”
- “This happens to him when he gets stressed”
- “I hope you like animals!”
- ◡ “Is that Klingon?”
- ◡ “There’s someone special waiting in your room”
- ◡ “Say it to my face, asshole!”

5 THE CEREMONY

- “I thought you had it”
- “We’re going to need help to get this thing off”
- “I’m crying because I need to confess something”
- ◡ “He’s on the roof and he won’t come down”
- ◡ “I am impossibly drunk”
- ◡ “I *will* speak now, and I *will not* forever hold my peace”

6 THE RECEPTION

- “The cash is gone”
- “It’s over, so let’s all tell the truth for once”
- “I don’t love you”
- ◡ “I’m dying”
- ◡ “That was the bravest thing I’ve ever seen”
- ◡ “Who are all these people? I didn’t invite the whole town!”

...**AT REGINA'S WEDDING**

OBJECTS...

1 OLD

- ◻ Crappy Lincoln Town Car
- ◻◻ Heirloom wedding ring with a tasteful stone
- ◻◻◻ Grandma
- ◻◻◻ Priceless bottle of Scotch
- ◻◻◻ Unsigned legal contract
- ◻◻◻ Birth certificate

2 NEW

- ◻ Wedding dress fit for a porn star
- ◻◻ Cake iced with the wrong names
- ◻◻◻ Fifty-five gallons of helicopter gearbox lubricant
- ◻◻◻ Photographer's brand new Nikon D3X, stuffed with pictures
- ◻◻◻ The groom's new favorite hat
- ◻◻◻ Tacky gold band with a giant fucking rock

3 BORROWED

- ◻ DJ's portable sound system
- ◻◻ Somebody else's date
- ◻◻◻ "Diet pills"
- ◻◻◻ Cheap tuxedo with frayed cuffs
- ◻◻◻ Vows printed off the Internet
- ◻◻◻ "Borrowed" steam tables and chafing dishes

4 BLUE

- ◻ Six horrible matching bridesmaid's dresses
- ◻ Thread from the hem of a Marlene Dietrich dress
- ◻ Badly hidden bruise
- ◻ Laotian *khay yiau ma* "Horse Urine Egg"
- ◻ 250 grams of premium blue flake cocaine
- ◻ Bridesmaid's new hair color

5 DANGEROUS

- ◻ Printouts from a social networking site
- ◻ Blank-firing replica assault rifle
- ◻ Arizona bark scorpion
- ◻ Badly corroded natural gas pipe
- ◻ Ninja claw gloves
- ◻ Street gang

6 STUPID

- ◻ Fast food bag holding a wedding ring
- ◻ The one thing that will win back true love
- ◻ Juggling torches
- ◻ Truth Keepers virginity pledge ring
- ◻ Ill-conceived YouTube stunt
- ◻ King Boots Affair, local garage band

...AT REGINA'S WEDDING

A HAPPY BRIDE'S INSTA-SETUP

RELATIONSHIPS AT REGINA'S WEDDING

For three players...

- * The Happy Couple: Regina and Abdul Ali Al-Marwani
- * The Inner Circle: TV's Margaret Wakefield and her biggest fan
- * Love Is In The Air: Dangerous, deeply conflicted feelings

For four players, add...

- * The Help: Cake decorator and casual hookup

For five players, add...

- * Groom's Side: Father of groom and the person with dirt on him

NEEDS AT REGINA'S WEDDING

For three players...

- * To get laid... to rekindle dormant passion

For four or five players, add...

- * To get even... with these shitty-tipping motherfuckers

MOMENTS AT REGINA'S WEDDING

For three or four players...

- * The Ceremony: "I *will* speak now, and I *will not* forever hold my peace"

For five players, add...

- * Gathering of the Clans: "Jesus, look at you—what the fuck happened?"

OBJECTS AT REGINA'S WEDDING

For three, four, or five players...

- * New: Cake iced with the wrong names

VEGAS



RELATIONSHIPS...

1 FAMILY

- Married or in-laws
- Parent and child
- Siblings / twins
- Local and out-of-town relative
- Feuding relatives
- Not quite family

2 WORK

- Co-workers
- Teacher and parent
- Supervisor and employee
- Entertainer and fan
- Fellow criminals
- Service employee (bartender, waitress, dealer) and regular

3 CRIME

- Prostitute and john or pimp
- Drug dealer and customer
- Law enforcement and suspect or informant
- Con artist and mark
- Former cellmates
- Hit man and target

4 FRIENDSHIP

- Born loser and best friend
- Military buddies
- ◐ Friendly rivals / competitors
- ◑ Friends of a friend
- ◒ Enemies of an enemy
- ◓ Neighbors

5 ROMANCE

- Just married
- Illicit love / indiscretion
- ◐ Unhealthy obsession
- ◑ One wild night
- ◒ Love at first sight
- ◓ Old flames

6 BUSINESS

- Lawyer and client
- Casino staff and guest
- ◐ Salesman and very important customer
- ◑ Government official and casino staff
- ◒ Partners
- ◓ Entertainer and agent or confidante

...IN VEGAS, BABY

NEEDS...

1 TO GET OUT

- ...of Vegas, before they find you
- ...of this life, before you've got nothing left
- ...of this shitty job
- ◐ ...of a relationship with a lover
- ◐ ...of a contract you can't honor
- ◑ ...of debt, before your marker comes due

2 TO GET EVEN

- ...with those cheating bastards
- ...with Big Jack at the Paradise Casino
- ...with a family member
- ◐ ...with a wealthy neighbor
- ◐ ...with a rival
- ◑ ...with your asshole boss

3 TO GET RICH

- ...by beating the house
- ...by robbing the Paradise Casino
- ...and buy your way out
- ◐ ...by pulling off one last, big score
- ◐ ...by rigging the numbers
- ◑ ...through a misplaced pile of cash

4 TO WIN

- ...using your perfect system
- ◻◻ ...respect, by showing your unique talent
- ◻◻◻ ...friends, by burning through a fortune
- ◻◻◻◻ ...respect, by honoring the old ways
- ◻◻◻◻◻ ...the crowd over by stealing the show
- ◻◻◻◻◻◻ ...by losing

5 TO FIND

- ...what they took from you
- ◻◻ ...a way out, even if it kills you
- ◻◻◻ ...the bad people who hurt her
- ◻◻◻◻ ...your wild side for once
- ◻◻◻◻◻ ...the one you truly love
- ◻◻◻◻◻◻ ...a new, better life

6 TO HAVE SEX

- ...one last time before the wedding
- ◻◻ ...to show you can have anyone you want
- ◻◻◻ ...to make them stay
- ◻◻◻◻ ...just to feel something for once
- ◻◻◻◻◻ ...to prove your love
- ◻◻◻◻◻◻ ...to change your rotten luck

...IN VEGAS, BABY

LOCATIONS...

1 THE STRIP

- ▣ Poolside at The Mirage
- McCarran International Airport
- VIP booth in the Stardust showroom
- The Forum Shops at Caesars Palace
- The Take A Chance wedding chapel
- The Eiffel Tower at Paris Las Vegas

2 DOWNTOWN

- ▣ Budget room in a shabby hotel
- The high roller room at The Golden Nugget
- Freemont Street Experience street mall
- Scheduled-for-demolition Lady Luck Casino
- Pawn shop
- Cocktail lounge

3 THE PARADISE CASINO AND RESORT

- ▣ Heavily-secured counting room
- Dealer tables (craps, roulette, blackjack)
- Backstage dressing room
- Penthouse suite
- Sound-proof, walk-in refrigerator
- Big Jack's office

4 AROUND VEGAS

- ◻ Retro-style diner
- ◻ Ross Brothers mortuary
- ◻ YESCO neon sign boneyard
- ◻ Day-care center
- ◻ The Sassy Cat strip club
- ◻ Private hangar at the North Las Vegas Airport

5 RESIDENCES

- ◻ Gated sub-division McMansion
- ◻ Trailer park
- ◻ Shitty room at the Lonely Street Motel
- ◻ Upscale mansion in Seven Hills
- ◻ Filthy car parked behind the Paradise
- ◻ Decayed suburban ranch house

6 A SHORT DRIVE

- ◻ Hoover Dam and Lake Mead
- ◻ Empty desert somewhere North of U.S. 95
- ◻ Red Rock Canyon
- ◻ Dusty, one-pump gas station
- ◻ A shallow grave
- ◻ Tikaboo Peak, overlooking Nellis Air Force Range and Groom Lake

...IN VEGAS, BABY

OBJECTS...

1 TROUBLE

- ☐ Body in a trunk
- ☐ Hip flask of whiskey with lipstick on the spout
- ☐ Business card with something scribbled on the back
- ☐ Big Jack's diamond-encrusted Rolex
- ☐ Newly-placed surveillance cameras
- ☐ Stash of MDMA tablets

2 TRANSPORTATION

- ☐ 1959 Cadillac convertible
- ☐ Helicopter
- ☐ Stolen Toyota Prius
- ☐ Stretch limousine
- ☐ Garbage truck
- ☐ 1969 Mercedes 280SL

3 VALUABLE

- ☐ Duffel bag full of marked bills
- ☐ Stack of high society poker chips
- ☐ Wedding ring
- ☐ Fat roll of cash held together with rubber bands
- ☐ Envelope full of cut diamonds
- ☐ A promise

4 SENTIMENTAL

- ☐ Marriage certificate
- ☐ Digital camera full of snapshots
- ☐ Old photos of someone with Frank Sinatra
- ☐ Intimate bit of clothing
- ☐ Sobriety medallion
- ☐ Child's drawing

5 STRICTLY PROFESSIONAL

- ☐ Sharp suit and a perfect tie
- ☐ Forged identity documents
- ☐ Set of out-of-date blueprints
- ☐ 11mm kernmantle rope, Jumar ascenders, and two harnesses
- ☐ Roll of 4mm Primasheet explosive, a timer, and a detonator
- ☐ Uniform (police, casino, airport, sanitation worker)

6 WEAPON

- ☐ Suitcase full of guns
- ☐ Electric guitar
- ☐ Roll of quarters
- ☐ Security guard's Beretta 92F pistol
- ☐ Police Taser
- ☐ MP-5 submachinegun

...IN VEGAS, BABY

A SIN CITY INSTA-SETUP

RELATIONSHIPS IN VEGAS

For three players...

- * Friendship: Born loser and best friend
- * Family: Not quite family
- * Romance: One wild night

For four players, add...

- * Business: Casino staff and guest

For five players, add...

- * Crime: former cellmates

NEEDS IN VEGAS

For three players...

- * To get out... of debt, before your marker comes due

For four or five players, add...

- * To find... what they took from you

LOCATIONS IN VEGAS

For three, four, or five players...

- * The Paradise Casino and Resort: Backstage dressing room

OBJECTS IN VEGAS

For three or four players...

- * Valuable: Duffel bag full of marked bills

For five players, add...

- * Trouble: Big Jack's diamond-encrusted Rolex

MISSION TO MERCURY



RELATIONSHIPS...

1 PROFESSIONAL

- Collaborators
- Professional rivals
- ◻ Clandestine collaborators on something big
- ◻ Specialist and technician
- ◻ Primary and backup
- ◻ Hard worker and layabout

2 UNPROFESSIONAL

- Personal rivals
- Daddy issues
- ◻ Irrational hatred
- ◻ Irrational affection
- ◻ Hero worship
- ◻ Leaders of rival factions

3 ROMANTIC

- Agonizing sexual tension
- Forbidden love
- ◻ Broken trust
- ◻ Dangerous obsession
- ◻ Ill-advised one time fling
- ◻ Unapologetic lovers

4 UGLY

- ☐ Racism
- ☐ Homophobia
- ☐ Sexism
- ☐ Religious intolerance
- ☐ Sexual jealousy
- ☐ Rageaholic

5 FRIENDLY

- ☐ Fast friends
- ☐ Irritating buddies
- ☐ Social adversaries
- ☐ Friends with benefits
- ☐ A pair of rebels
- ☐ Manipulator and dupe

6 SOULFUL

- ☐ Two-of-a-kind misanthropes
- ☐ Poet and muse
- ☐ Shared cultural identity
- ☐ Shared faith
- ☐ Shared terrible secret
- ☐ Shared sexual preference

...ON THE PLANET MERCURY

NEEDS...

1 TO GET OUT

- ☐ ...of a work detail that's killing you
- ☐. ...of a relationship that's turned weird
- ☐. ...of responsibility for an accident
- ☐. ...of intense scrutiny, so you can finish what you started
- ☐. ...of line, because it's time somebody stood up to her
- ☐. ...of the Habitat (Hab) module, which is driving you insane

2 TO GET EVEN WITH

- ☐ ...your bunk-mate
- ☐. ...a fucking scientist
- ☐. ...a stupid grunt
- ☐. ...your rival
- ☐. ...the Mission Commander
- ☐. ...Earth, by making an example of the expedition

3 TO GET OVER

- ☐ ...self injury
- ☐. ...psychotic delusions
- ☐. ...manic obsession
- ☐. ...panic attacks
- ☐. ...suicidal depression
- ☐. ...poisonous hatred

4 TO GET RESPECT

- ☐ ...from everybody on Mercury, by atoning for your tragic mistake
- ◻◻ ...from yourself, by punishing your persecutors
- ◻◻◻ ...from a friend, by rescuing them from ruin
- ◻◻◻◻ ...from an insubordinate screw-up
- ◻◻◻◻◻ ...from your lover, by proving your devotion
- ◻◻◻◻◻◻ ...from everybody on Mercury, by showing them who's boss

5 TO GET THE TRUTH

- ☐ ...about the accident
- ◻◻ ...about someone's criminal history
- ◻◻◻ ...about someone's infidelity
- ◻◻◻◻ ...about the real purpose of the expedition
- ◻◻◻◻◻ ...about the locked box in the storm shelter
- ◻◻◻◻◻◻ ...about the secret project

6 TO GET READY

- ☐ ...for praise and adulation at your discovery
- ◻◻ ...to confront your worst fear
- ◻◻◻ ...to kill him
- ◻◻◻◻ ...to take what you deserve
- ◻◻◻◻◻ ...to end the mission
- ◻◻◻◻◻◻ ...to make a baby

...ON THE PLANET MERCURY

LOCATIONS...

1 THE HUB

- ▣ Power substation
- ▣ Reserve airlock / storage
- ▣ Environmental Control and Life Support (ECLS) equipment closet
- ▣ Logistics module / expedition supply cache
- ▣ Comms module
- ▣ Storm shelter and some privacy

2 THE SPINDLES

- ▣ Spindle One: Hab-1 habitat module
- ▣ Spindle Two: Operations and teleoperations suite
- ▣ Spindle Three: Hab-2 habitat module
- ▣ Spindle Four: Science lab
- ▣ Spindle One: Hydroponic garden
- ▣ Primary suitlock and dustlock—surface excursion equipment is stored here

3 EARTH - FLASHBACK

- ▣ Technical training—Korolyov, Russia
- ▣ Bereavement leave—Durham, North Carolina, USA
- ▣ Vacation—Accra, Ghana
- ▣ Congressional hearing—Washington, DC, USA
- ▣ Final goodbyes—Kraznosnamensk, Russia
- ▣ Habitat training—Marble Point, Antarctica

4 EN ROUTE - FLASHBACK

- Launch from Earth
- ◻ "There's been a trajectory anomaly"
- ◻ ECLS / life support failure
- ◻ Explosion
- ◻ The big freakout in orbit
- ◻ Descent

5 CHAO MENG FU CRATER

- Cliffside physical plant, ISRU He³ module
- ◻ Hiding place at the Mercury spaceport
- ◻ The garage collapses
- ◻ Peaks of Eternal Light
- ◻ Hydrogen fuel depot
- ◻ Between light and darkness at the terminator

6 GREATER MERCURY

- Haystack outpost Hab
- ◻ Something strange, something wonderful
- ◻ Rockfall
- ◻ Caught in a solar flare
- ◻ Something terrible and ominous
- ◻ Haystack outpost lab

...ON THE PLANET MERCURY

OBJECTS...

1 VEHICLES

- ◻ MEV-1 (First Team's Mercury Excursion Vehicle; flashback)
- ◻◦ Teleoperated utility robot
- ◻◦ Mercury Mobile Laboratory (MML)
- ◻◻◻◻ Suborbital hopper
- ◻◻◻◻ MDE (Mercury Descent Element) craft
- ◻◻◻◻ MEV-2 (Science Team's Mercury Excursion Vehicle; flashback)

2 UNWELCOME

- ◻ Sculpture made out of garbage
- ◻◦ Bible
- ◻◦ Anonymous "hit list"
- ◻◻◻◻ Difficult new mission orders from Earth
- ◻◻◻◻ A pregnancy
- ◻◻◻◻ Missing tool

3 LOCAL

- ◻ Suggestively-shaped volcanic rock
- ◻◦ Something weirdly out of place
- ◻◦ Medicine wheel on the surface of Mercury
- ◻◻◻◻ Cairn pointing the way to a secret surface cache
- ◻◻◻◻ Secret itinerary for the next off-station trip
- ◻◻◻◻ Plastic container of tektites

4 SENTIMENTAL

- Cloth doll
- Special blanket
- ◻ Battered baseball cap
- ◻ Tattered photograph with a note on the back
- ◻ Fragile bean plant in a cardboard pot
- ◻ Wedding ring

5 CONTRABAND

- Syringe filled with cleaning chemicals
- Secure comms to a private patron
- ◻ Hand-made crossbow
- ◻ Datafile of Mission Commander's secure transmissions
- ◻ *Ayahuasca* vine in the hydroponic garden
- ◻ Terrorist group's flag

6 DANGEROUS

- Geological explosives
- Lucite shiv
- ◻ Override codes for the teleoperated utility robot
- ◻ Frayed electrical cable
- ◻ Hand-written love note
- ◻ Unattended ECLS H₂O conduit

...ON THE PLANET MERCURY

A PLANETARY HELLHOLE INSTA-SETUP

RELATIONSHIPS ON MERCURY

For three players...

- * Professional: Hard worker and layabout
- * Romantic: Agonizing sexual tension
- * Soulful: Shared terrible secret

For four players, add...

- * Ugly: Rageaholic

For five players, add...

- * Unprofessional: Hero worship

NEEDS ON MERCURY

For three players...

- * To get the truth... about the locked box in the storm shelter

For four or five players, add...

- * To get even with... a fucking scientist

LOCATIONS ON MERCURY

For three or four players...

- * Chao Meng-Fu crater: Hiding place at the Mercury spaceport

For five players, add...

- * Earth - Flashback: Final goodbyes—Kraznosnamensk, Russia

OBJECTS ON MERCURY

For three, four, or five players...

- * Dangerous: Override codes for the teleoperated utility robot

PART FIVE

FEEDING

THE

WOOD CHIPPER



So far we've been talking about ways to improve your skills and modify the game to make playing *Fiasco* more fun. Some folks, however, have been looking at ways to use the game for more than just an amusing diversion, and their experiences are fascinating. In this chapter we present a series of interviews we conducted with educators, performers, and writers on how they see *Fiasco* as a creative tool in accomplishing their goals. First up...

BETTER THAN RITALIN!

PLAYING WITH STUDENTS

What are the two house rules? Number One: No dating till you graduate. Number Two: No dating till you graduate.

Walter Stratford, Ten Things I Hate About You

From the beginning, *Fiasco* has always been a game for adults. It's themes, language, and inspirations are all clearly R-rated. Which is why it shouldn't have been any surprise that high school kids were eager to try it out. The resulting games were super interesting to us, and they're part of the inspiration for the "John Hughes" theme package presented in this book.

To find out more, Jason talked to Pete Figtree and MJ Harnish about playing *Fiasco* with high school students as an educational tool.

Pete Figtree is a teacher currently working in the uncharted wilds of northwestern Pennsylvania. He blogs about gaming in and out of the classroom at ruthlessdiastemagames.wordpress.com.

MJ Harnish is a psychologist and teaches at an international school in Germany. MJ has been running an after-school program teaching kids how to role-play for eight years and maintains a blog at rpg.brouhaha.us.

ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

JASON: Do you think role-playing in general, or *Fiasco* specifically, promotes particular learning styles?

PETE: Students that like to learn through aural means will really enjoy *Fiasco*. It's largely about listening, and my state standards have an entire section on speaking and listening.

JASON: What else?

PETE: Well, they require that teachers assign writing assignments in different genres. I consider story games great tools to craft stories, and it's possible to have students write down the story and then go back to proofread and edit. *Fiasco* would be great for pre-writing and drafting of student fiction. It would also be an interesting way to explore the shape of fiction when it succeeds or fails. *Fiasco* would be great for drama students and a way for public speaking students to think on their feet without stumbling around too much.

JASON: I hadn't thought about public speaking. Let's talk about structure—does *Fiasco* offer an educator different opportunities than more traditional role-playing games? Does the structure help?

PETE: In terms of *Fiasco* versus other role-playing games, it's simply a quicker bridge to creative writing than more tactical games.

MJ: It's been a very useful tool in my kit for getting kids to be more creative with our games rather than simply reacting to what I establish. The fact that they're an active part of creating the story is pretty magical in my experience because it's something they tend to get really excited about and that excitement is contagious—it draws other kids who are curious to find out how the story the students have been talking about came about.

SKILL BUILDING

JASON: You both mentioned social aspects of the activity—collaboration, listening, making creative contributions to a group. Care to elaborate?

PETE: Games like *Fiasco* assume a certain collaboration in story creation that challenges a student's ability to listen to others and to also throw his own creative hat in the ring without too much fear of rejection.

MJ: As an educator and psychologist I think this sort of experience helps build confidence and self-esteem. So I think games where players take an active role in the creative side of storytelling and encourage active listening, improvisation, cooperation, and narrative authority are really beneficial for younger players.

PETE: Besides the creative aspects of the game, I've seen students interact through storytelling when they wouldn't necessarily interact during the normal school day or routine. I've seen girls talk to boys that normally never get the chance, and I've seen boys get less shy around girls through gaming. I see socially awkward kids loosening up. It's great. *Fiasco* gives students fun, hilarious moments to explore relationships.

JASON: Do you see them incorporating the skills you're looking to develop?

MJ: Having run multiple games with the same core of players, I did see some development of the players over just a few games—they tended to become more independent and willing to take the story's reins. It's also been interesting since a couple of my "veterans" have started offering advice to others, repeating advice I gave them previously.

PETE: I also like the idea of having students analyze what makes a fiasco a fiasco and how the game achieves the purpose of creating one. Here's an essay prompt that would apply: How do the rules and mechanics of *Fiasco* help the players compose a fiasco? And you could extend this: Create a game that has rules that encourage the creation of a Shakespearean tragedy or a Swiftian satire. I'd also like to have students create Playsets and then play-test them to see what ensues. I think they'd love seeing their recipe for disaster come to life. Games give writers instant feedback.

MJ: You can actively teach role-playing and storytelling—I use Graham Walmsley's *Play Unsafe* like a text book with the group. I pick a piece of advice or principle and explain it briefly before we begin the session. I look for examples of where the session's advice applies or comes up and I make sure I draw everyone's attention to it. The goal is to teach them gradually about the principles of good storytelling. Keith Johnstone's *Improv for Storytelling* is also a good resource, although I think Graham's book is much more accessible and all that's really needed.

BOUNDARIES

JASON: You two have been using the game week after week with groups of teens, and I'm sure you've got a growing bag of tricks. I want to ask the big question, at least in my mind. So you're playing, you know, *Fiasco*. And in my experience it tends to go pretty dark, sometimes violent, sometimes into sex, drugs, all kinds of nonsense that your school board might not be too thrilled with. Is this a problem?

PETE: I find it's really important to determine what will be acceptable or not in a school setting. Will characters kiss? Will they do more?

JASON: Just setting some clear boundaries, gotcha.

MJ: Absolutely. We set up boundaries before the game starts and these are occasionally modified during Setup and play if something comes up. For example, I had one game in which a player wanted to narrate a scene in which she tricked her twin sister, played by another player, into trying heroin. We discussed this at the table (everyone was 16+) for a few moments, made sure everyone was okay with it and that it was a meaningful twist, and then moved forward. It turned out to be a really pivotal point in the story in the end.

PETE: I've found that *Fiasco* is a great time to teach lines and veils and what being explicit really means. I often mention how the old time blues singers that some of the music students listen to and enjoy were often very sexually suggestive without being explicit.

JASON: That's a good analogy.

PETE: It's a good learning opportunity to discuss addressing different audiences in different ways. Students seem to inevitably want to explore sexual orientation in the game, so the teacher must know his community and how he should deal with these issues in game. These are issues at the forefront of a recently post-pubescent kid's mind.

JASON: I can see how that would naturally become part of the conversation. I guess you just need to go with their impulses?

MJ: Don't be afraid to say "No" but don't squash the players' input—I do my best to incorporate suggestions as best as I can, but I'm not afraid to veto the goofy, offensive, or bizarre when it's going to derail the story.

JASON: What about the Playsets themselves? Do you need to tweak them?

MJ: The only issue has been the need for modifying the Playsets since many of them are a bit too risqué for the age group.

PETE: They definitely have to be sanitized or they're school inappropriate, but this certainly isn't too difficult to do. I can't imagine the R-rated versions of *Fiasco* sessions are any more fun than the PG or PG-13 versions. Kids have a blast narrating their disastrous stories.

FACILITATION

JASON: Any advice for moderation and facilitation in a classroom setting?

PETE: I find it helpful to do the Setup in an orderly fashion: Relationships first, Objects, Needs, and Locations next, and so on.

JASON: I do that with convention play, too, just to keep things clear. Do you do anything to aid the players in keeping things together? Is maintaining a coherent narrative ever a challenge?

MJ: Facilitate! Guide the story and help the players create meaningful narratives. This becomes less necessary as players gain experience, but early on it's critical in my experience because it helps create a session that's memorable and frustration free—nobody wants to spend 3 hours and not be able to make sense of what happened during it.

PETE: A teacher needs to understand that students are coming from a video game background for the most part. They usually know video games or very traditional board games, so an educator needs to approach students as newcomers. Rules need to be spelled out in a logical, step-by-step fashion. This is very easy to do with *Fiasco* because of the prescribed structure of the game.

MJ: Make the situation safe—I'm careful to create an environment where the players feel safe to play in character or offer suggestions. I let everyone offer up their suggestion or idea and make sure I moderate players who drown out others—everyone gets their turn.

JASON: So not just facilitation but moderation as well?

MJ: Right. During play I also often summarize bits of the action that's

happened (often after each scene) to help knit things together and remind players of what's happened before so that they have an easier time spotting opportunities to reincorporate elements or can spot the dangling threads that still need to be resolved.

JASON: That's good general practice for any group.

PETE: It's also important to emphasize that the goal is not winning but telling a good story. This is new territory for students when they think of games. Also, I explain what the dice will mean when the rolling begins, just to add a little strategy and competition to the game. Kids are used to these things in games.

MJ: I couldn't agree more.

JASON: Sort of a balance there, meeting and defying expectations. What about students who are shy or uncertain about participating?

MJ: Obviously my more outgoing and creative kids tend to do better than the ones who are really concrete in their thinking and who aren't used to actively listening to others and reincorporating elements into their own contributions. That's the reason why I do a lot of modeling and active facilitation when running the game with the younger players: I offer advice on how to make things work, give tips on bringing scenes to life, offer alternative suggestions, and pick up the narrative when a player gets stuck or has that "deer in the headlights" look.

JASON: So you take a more active role?

MJ: Having played *Fiasco* with both adults and teens, I found that with teens I had to bring a lot more of the situation to the table—the Setup ran exactly as written in the book except that I was much more of an active facilitator both before and during actual play, helping the players to make connections and "think outside the box" when it came to the game elements. Don't be afraid to be an active participant. You often need to model the type of play you're teaching; it's something that's highly effective with younger players and that makes GM-less games perfect. *Fiasco* is great because I just throw myself out there and show the players how to play larger-than-life characters and not be afraid to look stupid, either as a player or as a character.

JASON: It's funny, your advice maps really well to what I do at conventions, playing with people I've never met before.

STUDENT REACTIONS

JASON: My wife is a librarian and young adult specialist, and I love her stories about the crazy stuff her kids get up to.

PETE: The students bring drama to the table. They bring the gonzo. They are tailor made for a game like *Fiasco* where going gonzo is a fairly common occurrence. Drama is in the teenage blood as well as other intensified emotions common to those years.

JASON: And I guess *Fiasco* feeds into that pretty well.

MJ: I think the thing that took me by surprise was how much they liked it—as in the players have returned repeatedly and said, “How about we play *Fiasco* again?” I’ve never had that with another RPG; I’ve had them eager to get to our weekly game but never where they were asking for the game by name and were interested in seeing what new story they could come up with this week. I also was surprised that I had several new players show up wanting to try out the game simply based on the word of mouth advertising from the players—they told their friends about the story and the next thing I know I’ve got a new player wanting to join the game.

PETE: I know my kids, so I wasn’t too surprised in regard to fun. I knew that they would have a blast, but I have consistently realized that the best storytellers are not always the best “students.” My own ideas of who will be awesome are often smashed. I love that games can help us realize the hidden strengths in people.

MJ: The players are all excited and talking about the “story.” Most importantly, for me, they don’t regard the session’s events to be my creation but rather it’s “our story”—they take ownership and feel like it’s been a shared experience. That’s pretty cool because, while I like to be lauded for my GM skills, I actually prefer when the focus is on the shared story and events.

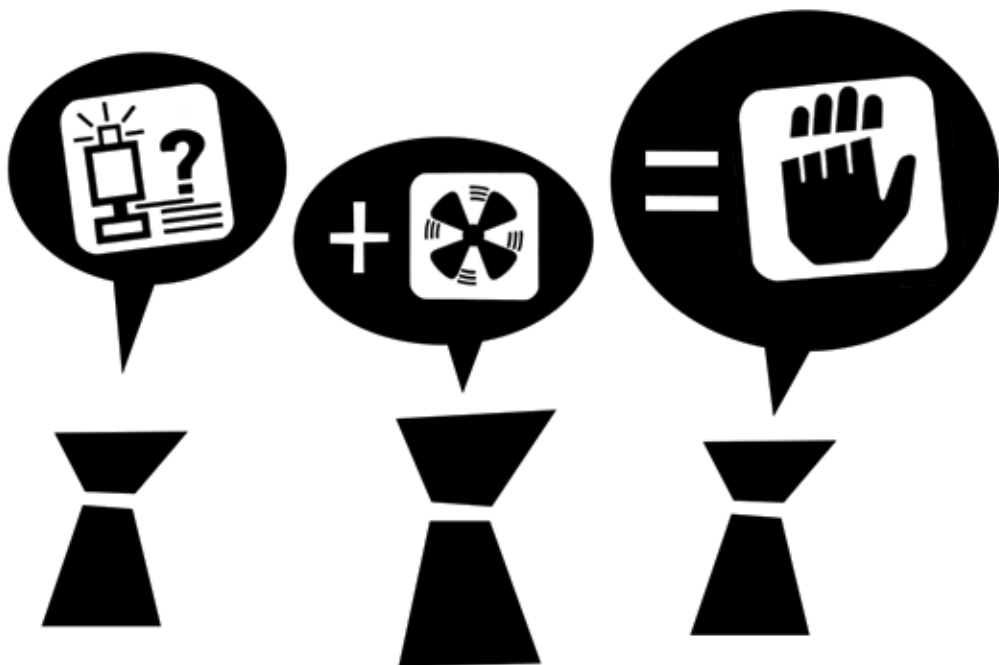
JASON: Do some Playsets work better than others?

MJ: The best experience we’ve had was with the *Fiasco High* Playset, probably because it was a genre and setting they were all very familiar with—the Western story worked, but many of them didn’t have a good grip on the tropes of the genre. *Touring Rock Band* worked very well but also contained some Elements which wouldn’t have been suitable for players under the age of sixteen.

JASON: I have to ask—did your students offer any commentary or criticism of the game or their experience with it?

PETE: Nothing too analytical was offered, but they certainly weren't shy about how fun it was. They wouldn't really have to say anything, though. Watching them laugh out loud and debate passionately for a couple hours is enough feedback for me. Believe me, students are pretty obvious when they're bored. They're never bored with *Fiasco*.

JASON: Thanks, you two! This has been really interesting, encouraging, and fun!



PLAGIARIZING YOURSELF!

FIASCO AS A VIRTUAL WRITERS ROOM

I knowed you was crazy when I saw you settin' there. I knowed exactly what was in store for me.

Carla Jean, No Country for Old Men

Fiasco is sometimes described as more of a creative writing exercise than a game. We like to think it's both, so we asked a bunch of writers about their experiences and opinions of *Fiasco* as a writing aid.

Nathan Russell is a writer who adapted *Fiasco* as a tool for developing his 2010 NaNoWriMo project. You can read more about how this worked at his site nathanrussell.net.

Will Hindmarch is a freelance writer and designer, and the author of the Playsets *London 1593*, and *All the Damn Time*. He is the bearded half of www.gameplaywright.net and you can usually find him hunched over his keyboard over at www.wordstudio.net.

John Rogers is a writer of comics, games, television, and film, and is the creator and executive producer of the *Leverage* TV series. You can read more from him at kfmonkey.blogspot.com.

BENEFICIAL FEATURES

JASON: What are the features of *Fiasco* that translate well to the writing process?

JOHN: It's the "Yes and..." aspect. In particular, in a TV writers' room (or at least, in mine) we wind up tossing back and forth pitches on what the characters might do, what weird situations might occur, how they react—it's not that far off a nine-hander *Fiasco* game with everyone collaboratively playing every character.

NATHAN: Sure, standard play can create interesting plots and character relationships, and the collaborative nature both eases the workload and creates some parameters for the writer to work within.

JASON: Does the highly structured nature of play help or hinder creative discovery?

JOHN: I think the structured play would be very helpful in scripted work. After all, most scripted entertainment works in a very tight structure, such as the TV act breaks. Even mainstream movies have an implicit structure you could easily adapt *Fiasco* to.

EMERGENT PROPERTIES

JASON: OK, do you guys think the emergent properties of *Fiasco* play offer any antidote to creative roadblocks?

NATHAN: The Setup is a great tool to spark plot and relationship ideas. For me, each time I went through the Setup, ideas leapt off the page, so I think that it's a useful way into a short or longer piece of writing.

JOHN: Although this is kind of remedial, it's worth restating: every scene needs conflict. As I repeat ad nauseam—I believe some of the writers put it on an index card to post on the wall—all drama boils down to "One: Who wants what? Two: Why can't they have it? And three: Why do I give a shit?" A lot of times in TV it's tempting to write a purely expository scene. *Fiasco* scenes are always built around opposing needs and conflict, which is a good way to game out scenes where you have to convey crucial information. It's worth noting that several semi-improvisational film-makers, such as Mike Leigh, have shot entire stories just by giving the actors *Fiasco*-like setups before each scene, then rolling the camera.

JASON: What about the disruptive nature of the Tilt?

NATHAN: The Tilt is an inspiring tool. My very first game of *Fiasco* hit the Tilt and had the characters doing such totally unexpected, outrageous, spiteful, but believable things, that I immediately went home and plotted a story based on it.

JASON: Do the emergent properties of play offer an antidote to writer's block?

NATHAN: Possibly. I could see using the Tilt to mix things up.

LONELY FUN

JASON: Is the idea of "lonely fun" useful for the solo writer? Could a game set up and played entirely in a writer's head be a useful exercise or a creative tool, or is the interaction and surprise of social play critical?

JOHN: I think in this case, the social aspect is crucial. It's one of the reasons writers' rooms evolved naturally in the industry.

JASON: Fair enough.

NATHAN: Solo play was a useful tool for me, though I primarily focused on the Setup for NaNoWriMo. It was really enjoyable seeing different plots reveal themselves.

JASON: So *Fiasco* is still useful if you lock yourself away in a lonely garret?

NATHAN: Well, to be fair I did find the Setup process less smooth when doing it by myself. I tried doing it three ways: First, just by choosing what I thought were interesting options, which was not very satisfying on the fun scale; then by rolling dice and picking options until all the dice were gone, which was OK; and finally rolling dice and forcing myself to choose opposite colors until all dice were exhausted. This was more random, it forced options, but it was satisfying.

JASON: How about you, Will?

WILL: *Fiasco* is certainly valuable as creative play for the solo writer, even if that writer is playing with the material as if it were a toy, rather

than explicitly playing the game as written. *Fiasco* suggests, inspires, provokes. It's a wonderful way to start a story. It provides material that can spark surprises in the writer's head—writing often involves surprising one's self—even if other players aren't around.

NATHAN: Yes, the surprise revelations of play are great, but not essential for writing, in my opinion. I got a similar element of surprise when I did the overlapping Setups. As the second group of Relationships were revealed I began to see connections, mirrors of and links to the original Setup.

WILL: Exercising the writer brain keeps you limber and helps you move from the storyteller's mind to the character's more quickly and easily. That movement back and forth, between the role-player's perspective and the writer's, is why *Fiasco* appeals to me so much.

RAPID PROTOTYPING

JASON: Could *Fiasco* be used to quickly generate story outlines?

NATHAN: It certainly worked for me for NaNoWriMo.

WILL: I think, yes, *Fiasco* could work as a kind of exploded outline or a go-to document for finding story ideas that mash up elements you've already brainstormed and categorized as thematically suitable to an ongoing series or story. Use the Playset architecture as a space in which to brainstorm.

JASON: I guess that architecture would largely be in place already if you were working with an existing property.

WILL: I'd love to see how a television writers' room might be inspired by a *Fiasco* Playset based on their show. Drop the writers into key characters, with new or familiar Needs and Objects in the mix, and see what sorts of scenes and stories unfold through play. I wonder if that play would result in something that resembled what we see on air. I'd be surprised if it didn't inspire new scenes or whole episodes. I'd be especially curious to know how writers used to working with structured scripts would react to handing off the story to the next player...or even leaving the Aftermath up to the dice.

JOHN: I think for a scene to scene basis within a story, it's more promising as a problem-solving tool rather than constructing a story

from the ground up. The Playsets, as currently designed, are a little more analogous to episodes than seasons.

JASON: That makes sense. You're telling a very tight story in a limited amount of time.

JOHN: It's probably effective for scene work. Not all writers have the performing bug, and it would be useful for a very particular kind of writer.

JASON: While we're on the topic, do you think this could be done iteratively—locking down a “series Playset/bible,” for example, and then following the Setup through to multiple potential stories?

JOHN: Maybe. The trick is that, for many shows, characters are actively collaborative against either one antagonist or a mystery. I can see some interesting ways the system could be tweaked to adjust for that.

HACKING FOR EFFECT

JASON: If you're going to dive in and use *Fiasco* as a tool for writing rather than a social entertainment, does anything need to change? Are there bits that need to be hacked to make it a more effective writer's tool?

WILL: The Playset model is a fine way of breaking ideas down into thematically relevant Categories (Relationships, Needs, etc.) and subsets (six Categories of Elements, each containing six Elements), which is valuable for brainstorming linked ideas that speak to the themes and motifs you're trying to tap or evoke. It's a simple testing ground for the viability of any area for long-term storytelling. Having trouble coming up with six Relationships under the Friendship Category? Then maybe your ongoing premise isn't about friendships, really. Maybe you can find a more apt Category of Relationship that evokes what your television series (or whatever it is that you're writing) is about—something specific and provocative, like Criminal Relationships or Exes.

JASON: That makes sense—those constraints are supposed to breed creativity.

WILL: Designing *Fiasco* Playset Elements is more art than science,

though. It's not just brainstorming nouns and adjectives. You want to create items that provoke questions, suggest focus, or imply needs, even if the characters in question don't get assigned a proper Need.

JASON: The Playsets are supposed to tell little stories by implication, because your players have to read all 144 Elements anyway.

WILL: Right. The Setup process for a game of *Fiasco*, then, tests each of the Elements against each other. I'd recommend setting up the same Playset a few times and seeing what Elements keep getting selected—which Relationships are compelling, which Locations are favorites among the participants, which Objects demand to be used—and think carefully about why and how those Elements beg to be deployed.

JASON: If you play a lot, you do see the same Elements being chosen over and over.

WILL: Then, think about how many different ways each Element can be used. If your group of writers—or you, working alone—keeps coming back to that katana on the page, think of all the ways that a katana can be used in stories. It can be a weapon, a treasure, a gift, a prize, evidence in a crime, and more. You might get a lot of use out of that one Element, the katana, even though it only appears once in your Playset document.

JASON: So those Elements get stretched to accommodate your fiction, right?

WILL: It all depends what your project is about, both literally and thematically. You might find out during Setup that your cop project is less about partnerships than it is about power dynamics between different ranks of officers, for example, if that's what keeps grabbing everyone's attention. Or, if the show really is meant to be about partnerships, it might help you discover that the Relationships need to all be partnerships, of one stripe or another, dysfunctional or not. It might remind you that the premise and central themes shouldn't be up for grabs as Elements to be brought up from story to story—they should be built into the foundational document and vital text of the project.

JASON: I like the idea that by drilling down into this constrained list of simple Elements you can find context and meaning for yourself.

WILL: In *Fiasco* terms, truly vital elements don't get portrayed as individual Relationships or Locations; they get baked into the premise. If it's about time travel, you make the whole set about time travel, not one part of it. If it's about gangster London, gangster shit had better permeate.

JASON: Word. What about the Tilt and Aftermath? Same deal?

WILL: They probably won't get used in quite the same way. While I dig the Tilt and Aftermath tables in *Fiasco* and have gone out of my way to write sets that don't call for specialized tables, specialized tables might be the order of the day for writing projects like television or plays or story collections. For those projects, you could write Tilt and Aftermath tables that refer directly to specific characters, Locations, and Objects, which you can't do in a typical *Fiasco* set.

JASON: That's a great idea.

WILL: Once again, this is to create a testing ground for the ideas. You're essentially just brainstorming a bunch of potential outcomes and then, dice be damned, settling on the ideas that speak most powerfully to the writers involved.

JASON: You'd end up surprising yourself, I imagine. Nathan, you hacked the game a little for NaNoWriMo, didn't you?

NATHAN: I did. I played around with the number of players—as many as eight—and also did overlapping Setups. I'd do a four or five player Setup, then begin another starting with one or two of the already established characters or Relationships; this helped scratch out ideas for subplots. While I haven't done it myself yet, I would have a great deal of fun creating a Setup, thinking through a few plot points, then rolling on the Tilt. This might be easier if actually playing through each step of the game, but I would more likely fudge it a bit and just roll dice for each character based on my opinion of how successful or conflicted they've been.

THE VALUE OF PLAY

JASON: OK, changing gears. What are the benefits of pure creative play to the writer?

NATHAN: The surprises. For me it reveals that characters can do stupid, crazy things for no good reason, but it still feels right for the story being told. I found this both playing *Fiasco* with friends, and when building plots by myself. It can also reveal the cool or entertaining stories in a particular setting that you may not have been aware of—being a fantasy and sci-fi fan I really couldn't see interesting stories existing in such a mundane setting as *Flyover*, but I'm happy to say I was wrong!

WILL: The benefit, for me, is exercise. Stretching the muscle that writes. *Fiasco* gets the blood flowing. It gives you situations that you might not concoct yourself and asks you to find entertainment in them. This is profoundly beneficial because great scenes arise out of characters in difficult situations—circumstances with no clear way out—and *Fiasco* not only creates such situations out of webs of characters, it asks you to understand and commiserate with those characters.

JASON: And then hammer them.

WILL: You need to both love and hate the characters you write. You need to put those characters into awful situations with no easy way out. Then you need to drop yourself into that character's point of view and struggle through the situation. You challenge the character at every turn, but you want to see her succeed.

JASON: Right—talking to Marc about improvisation, the same thing emerges—your little dude needs to love himself and desperately want to succeed, and you need to get behind that, even as you see the failure looming.

WILL: To keep the other players entertained, you must frame scenes with immediate discomfort, peril, jeopardy, or hilarious agony. To keep your character motivated and moving, you need to think your way out of those situations as best you can...or switch on your writer's brain, rather than your character's, and accept that the character may just be screwed. And sometimes the other players throw you a white die when you wanted a black one, and you've got to embrace and incorporate that.

JASON: Thanks, guys! This has been awesome.

LYING FOR MONEY!

FIASCO FOR PERFORMERS

You double-cross once—where's it all end? An interesting ethical question.

Johnny Caspar, Miller's Crossing

Fiasco lies at the exciting intersection of improvisation and creative writing. At its heart, *Fiasco* is a structured freeform game and requires its players to think quickly on their feet and collaborate well with the other players. We were interested to know how closely this related to traditional acting skills, and how *Fiasco* might be used as a tool for performers.

Marc Majcher is an improviser and game designer who cannot help getting his on-stage chocolate into his tabletop peanut butter. He has all kinds of recreational fun strewn about at www.gizmet.com.

Kristin Firth is an improviser who performs and teaches in Austin, Texas. She also loves playing games and going to gaming conventions. Find more about her at www.firth.ca.

REHEARSAL OUTSIDE REHEARSAL

JASON: So you guys are both performers. In what ways can you use *Fiasco* as a tool to support what you do on stage?

KRISTIN: If you're in a long-term troupe, bonding outside of rehearsal and shows is really important, and that can be anything from singing karaoke together to playing a board game to watching a movie. And if you could happen to make this entertaining thing together also work on some of your creative chops, that's like double the value!

JASON: Nice.

KRISTIN: I was in a troupe whose focus was on doing narrative shows. We cared about being close as a group, and about becoming better storytellers. We met weekly for a couple hour rehearsal, and we also went through a period where we did some extra-curricular stuff. One member got us to read an article, another wanted us to watch a particular movie, I wanted us to play an RPG.

JASON: You chose *Fiasco*, of course.

KRISTIN: Actually I chose *A Penny For My Thoughts*.

JASON: No!

KRISTIN: This was pre-*Fiasco*!

JASON: In that case, *A Penny For My Thoughts* is a fine game.

KRISTIN: We scheduled an evening to do it and I got everything ready. With last-minute notice one of our members couldn't show up and I wanted to save *Penny* but the other four of us were still gathered, so we played *Happy Birthday, Robot!* It ended up being a super-dramatic two-hour session. We ended up playing *HBR* again a couple months later, and *Penny* a couple months after that.

JASON: One of my friends who is an improviser said he couldn't get his fellow performers to sit still for two hours.

KRISTIN: Lazy! In my troupe I'm the only gamer of any sort, and we got through at least three games lasting multiple hours.

NOT BEING HILARIOUS

JASON: I think you two are doing a different sort of improvisation than I'm used to. Around here it's all about being hilarious, and the notion of plot is actively scorned.

MARC: Yeah, by way of disclaimer: my primary interest and experience with improv is on the narrative side of things. I came up through a Keith Johnstone-inspired school, and even when I'm playing in short-form shows, I tend to shy away from the wokka-wokka comedy that most people associate with improv; I try to hit the grounded reality and drama of the characters and situations as hard as I'm able to, and let the comedy come out of that. I've been fortunate enough to be involved in a few projects that were intended to be strictly dramatic from the start and, although they had funny moments for sure, managed to fulfill those intentions fantastically.

KRISTIN: I'm in the same community as Marc.

JASON: You guys are weird.

MARC: I'm pretty sure that I'm in the minority of improvisers, there. I love comedy, and most improvisers that I know or have talked to come from the "Chicago style" side of things. *Fiasco* can provide a lot of great foundation and reinforcement of things that I've learned from that school of improv, as well.

JASON: You're still talking about a tool for building skills and reflexes for performance.

MARC: This is probably all training wheels kind of stuff. Learning and reinforcing techniques through play is one of the great things that improv and role-playing share.

GAMING AS PREPARATION

JASON: What about using the games as straight-up prep?

KRISTIN: I've been involved in many genre shows here in Austin that involve a lot of outside preparation.

JASON: I mean, if you're doing an Emily Brontë themed show you'll read some Emily Brontë, right?

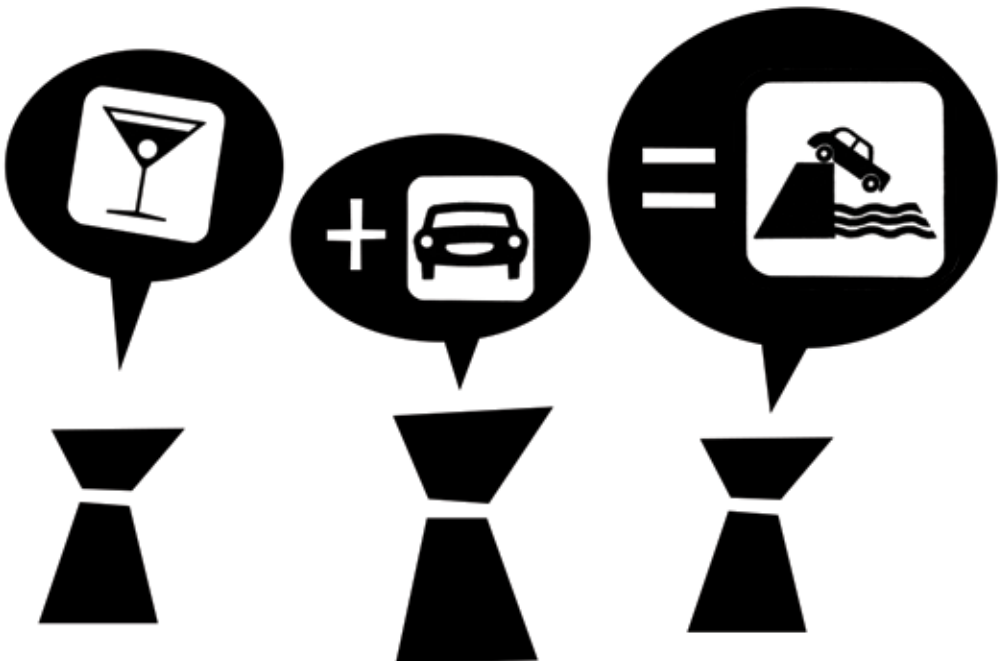
KRISTIN: Definitely. Reading novels, reading plays, watching movies, reading articles. When a director or troupe takes on a new genre to tackle for a narrative improv project they do a lot of research, and they try to figure out some tropes and themes and such to hit. Then they workshop stuff, improvise together based on some of the ideas that come out of the research, and see what works and sticks.

JASON: So you're exploring the material.

KRISTIN: Changing parts and trying again until some things are settled on.

JASON: Gaming seems like it would fit well. It's engaging and it can be iterative, and there's genre emulation.

KRISTIN: Genre RPGs can help a lot. Some of them will share research on things like character types, scene types, situations, themes, complications, plot structure, and so forth. That is a hugely helpful resource.



JASON: I never thought of that, but it makes sense. You have to put a lot of care into the universe, and that's all non-game-specific information a person can glean.

KRISTIN: And beyond just general research, creators of genre RPGs that are focused on telling a good story have also worked out a lot of the kinks of how to tell a good story in that genre. They've probably gone through play-testing of some ways that didn't quite work, and they've worked some things into the games specifically designed to help people pick them up and tell a good story.

JASON: Hopefully.

KRISTIN: Marc and I are about to do a noir show, and we talked to the director about possibly playing a game or two of *Fiasco* with the cast.

JASON: I hope you do!

ABOUT PLOT AND STRUCTURE

JASON: Please talk about plot some more. I'm skeptical that this even applies to, say, Chicago style improvisers like the guys I know.

KRISTIN: Just for clarification, different shows vary greatly in how much structure and planning there are. Some genre narrative improv is very heavily structured. Like they know in the second scene that there's going to be a love connection between two characters. Other stuff is much more loose; they just know they're playing in the world, maybe that "bad stuff" should happen to the protagonist throughout it.

MARC: Right. Games like *Fiasco*, or *My Life With Master*, *Shab al-Hiri Roach*, and so forth, they've got a definite arc to them. They've got a beginning, middle, and end, and you could argue that they've got a plot structure baked into the mechanics. And for people like me, who love story, this is great, both because it provides a nice framework to hang everything else on, and it provides an easy entry point for those who would like to tell stories, but might not necessarily have the experience or confidence to make them up from scratch.

JASON: Not everybody feels that way, though.

MARC: No, some folks don't give a rat's ass about story; they just want to be funny, get the laugh and get out, or, in gaming terms, kill monsters and take their stuff and level up and kill more monsters.

Which can totally be awesome, all around. But I still say there's story in there, even on a small scale. Every joke has a little story in it, just like every fight between your dungeon crawlers and the goblins has a through-line that you can follow, just like every wacky scene that ends in a dick joke has to have some kind of coherent plot—however minimal—in there, or it wouldn't be funny in the first place.

JASON: OK, I can see where you're coming from, but story in a two-minute dick joke? Come on.

MARC: Even on the basest level—in my experience, anyway—it's always to an improviser's advantage to become familiar and comfortable with story structure, whether they're interested in narrative long form or quick tag-out gag scenes, Harold or Comedysportz. Knowing what a great next beat of a story might be is a good thing, whether your story is two hours long, or thirty seconds.

JASON: Do you see tools for identifying and using story structure in *Fiasco*?

MARC: *Fiasco* specifically has bits in it that will help a non-plot-oriented improviser. I've heard teachers from both sides of the improv tracks talk about CROW—character, relationship, objectives, and where, or location.

JASON: That sounds suspiciously familiar.

MARC: These are elements that're usually pretty handy to either have in your mind as you walk out on the blank stage to initiate a scene, or to establish within the first couple of lines of a scene. Otherwise, if you don't know who the people are in the scene, how they know each other, what they want, and where they are, you're more than likely going to wind up watching a couple of white guys standing center stage, facing each other, pretending to hold glasses and talking about nothing until someone mercifully edits them off.

Many improvisers eschew this technique—folks from the Annoyance school, for example—but they usually replace it with some other approach to keep things from being boring! *Fiasco* players, of course, will immediately recognize these building blocks from the Setup phase of the game. You've got your wants, your wheres, and nobody gets away without having a strong Relationship to at least two other characters. And really, in my opinion, the Relationships between people in a scene are the most important parts, followed closely by their objectives or points of view.

JASON: As you've noted, the initial Relationships don't even need to make sense if they're strong enough. You just need to make good choices in the Setup and be fearless.

MARC: Right.

JASON: I know you've talked about letting go of the urge to succeed and win. That certainly applies to *Fiasco* as well as improvisation.

MARC: Learning to allow yourself to "lose" in a game will hopefully make it easier to do the same when you're playing characters like that on stage. I know too many people, otherwise fine improvisers, who just hate to lose, ever. Many of them are quick enough, or charming enough, or funny enough to cover for it, but if you're playing a heel that needs to be defeated, or a sympathetic hero that needs to get beaten down before they can rise back up again, and you're not willing to take your licks—let your character take their licks—for the good of the story, well, then you're doing a disservice to the scenes, and you're letting down your fellow performers.

JASON: You need to learn to love failure.

MARC: Failing is awesome! That's why we do this, right? The feeling that everything might explode at any time, but somehow we pull it off. And you know, if it all goes south despite everyone's best efforts, being extremely good natured and failing with a smile on your face is the finest way to go.

JASON: That's graceful and generous. It applies to plot, and action, and a character's arc, but also to your own notions of what's coming next, right?

MARC: Learning to let go of your own ideas, and realizing that you're just a single node in the chaotic dynamic that's spinning the story around you, that goes a long way. Relaxing and being okay with being out of control will absolutely serve an actor on the stage, whether you're improvising or not. Because one day, you'll be in the middle of a scripted show, and someone will skip a whole chunk of their dialogue, and you've got to drop your plans, drop your ego, and work with everyone to make it all make sense on the fly. And even if things aren't going wrong, just being hyper-aware of the other players on stage (or around the table), what they're experiencing in the moment, and allowing yourself to be affected by that, to be changed by it, that will allow you to react genuinely, and maybe come up with stuff that you'd never come up with plotting alone by yourself.

GAMING AND PERFORMANCE

JASON: Are there logical connections between gaming and performance?

KRISTIN: Gamers and improvisers. We both work on creating these stories together, out of nothing but our own imaginations. We both play off of and are inspired by the people we're playing with. We both build these temporary realities that are hard to explain to somebody who wasn't there. One is around a table and one is on a stage, one has an audience and one doesn't—most of the time. But it feels like there are far more similarities than differences.

JASON: So, can you imagine gaming out the stuff you might later perform?

KRISTIN: Basically, if there's a group of improvisers thinking of creating a run of XYZ-inspired shows, and there's already an XYZ-inspired RPG, I'd say without hesitation that they should get together and play that RPG, super early in their process of show development. And similarly, if an RPG-writer is friends with some improvisers who'd already done a show in that genre, then I'd just as quickly tell them to pick the improvisers' brains about what they had learned.

JASON: So that goes both ways.

KRISTIN: There's just so much cross-pollination there. I'm not sure if I'm really capturing it.

JASON: Given all this, do you approach *Fiasco* differently when playing with performers, or change it to more specifically meet the needs of actors or improvisers?

MARC: There's not a lot that I can think of that would necessarily improve it as a game for actors; it's pretty tight as it is—easy to explain and plays in a short enough time that if for some reason people don't get into it, it's only an hour or two gone, and you're out. And, at the very least, you have another experience to talk about together, hopefully you'll be able to learn or take away something from it. I've never tried this, but it might be interesting for some actors or improvisers to play it more "live," on their feet, even in a rehearsal stage or room kind of setting.

JASON: I would love to do that.

KRISTIN: I think playing games like *Fiasco*—and others that are focused on telling a good story—exercise your creative, narrative, and collaborative chops. Like if you're a wrestler, you don't only wrestle other people all the time for practice. You lift weights and work on your reflexes in different ways. If you want to tell a story with a troupe, finding different ways to work on the skills needed to do that is awesome.

MARC: Bringing gaming into the practice room would take away a lot of the slower plotting, the time to think and suggest things and find the "best" way to go about the story; but it would definitely be a fun exercise—very much like practicing for a circular character based show like a *Six Degrees* or a *La Ronde*. But allowing performers to walk around, get into their characters and Relationships more deeply, to use physicality to explore stuff, that could potentially be pretty powerful, I think. The Setup and dice mechanics might have to be simplified a little bit to make that flow better.

JASON: Oh man, in performance the audience could control the dice. Crowd-source the outcomes.

MARC: I'd love to give something like that a shot with people that I regularly play with on stage here.

PLAYING WITH PERFORMERS

JASON: Marc, you're a gaming evangelist. Talk a little about that.

MARC: If you're finding it hard to get performers to play games with you, there are two likely reasons. Well, three: we're extremely busy, and it's hard to find time to play between shows, rehearsals, and real life. And really, some people might feel like they get all of their play-time taken care of on stage, and that's totally fine. But there are those who just won't be interested because they think that everything is going into dungeons and fighting orcs and they're just not into that. Or they already play *World of Warcraft*, and get enough of it there. That one is easy—find out what kind of stories they do like, and steer them towards a game that lets them tell that kind of story. If you can't find one, ask around—I'd be shocked if there wasn't a game these days to satisfy almost anyone.

JASON: We're lucky there are so many cool games out there.

MARC: The other one stems from a similar prejudice; maybe they think that they're just too cool to play games. At that point, it's completely fair to point out that you just watched them play a barista who was a gorilla that threw poop at their customers last week, and really, playing in an improv show every Saturday night might not be the coolest thing in the world, either.

JASON: Zing!

MARC: Which isn't to say I don't love improv. I totally do.

JASON: Hopefully *Fiasco* is a good "gateway drug" and introduction to role-playing. That was definitely a design goal, anyway.

MARC: The first thing that really struck me about *Fiasco* is how rule-light the game is. After Setup and explaining how the dice work, I generally describe the rest of the game as improv, only sitting down.

JASON: Right.

MARC: But really, it's much simpler than that, because the pressure to think on your feet, to come up with something interesting on the fly, that's not there. So it's great for beginning improvisers or actors, because it's almost like training wheels for them. They get to experience what collaboratively creating characters and their stories feels like in more of a writers' room setting; it lets them explore different paths or talk about "what if this happened?" or "would it be cool if that was his sister?" or whatever, without the thing where, once you say it out loud on stage, it's part of the reality, for better or worse. So I think that's probably the most important thing for me, from a narrative improviser's perspective—letting people do basically what they'd be doing on stage, in a slower-paced, safer environment.

JASON: A slower pace, and your decisions aren't so momentous.

MARC: Of course, that slow pace isn't necessarily for everyone, and I've played games of *Fiasco* where everyone was feeling hot, and it just flew along. There's always going to be those rewind and figure stuff out moments, but if you're an improviser and you want to stretch those skills, you can almost treat a game of *Fiasco* like a run-through

in rehearsal, and power through as hard as the group feels like, just to kind of get a bead on where you're at with those skills. And if things start to crash and burn, you've always got that safety valve there, knowing that you can pause the action for a bit and pull back and sort out where you are and where things are going. However it's done, though, it's good exercise. In one of my troupes, we say that we're doing "wax on, wax off" running through drills like this. They may not always be the most fun—although, a game of *Fiasco* is almost always a guaranteed blast—but just going through the motions will build those mental reflexes that you'll be relying on later when you're at the end of the second act of an hour-long improvised Dickens story, and you need to know what the next plot beat should be, without getting in your head and over-thinking things.

JASON: Thanks, guys! Time to go set up that show...

WHEATON'S BIG SIX

I'm going to offer some advice on getting the most out of your fiascoes. I base these six simple suggestions on my experiences as an improv performer, writer, and life-long gamer:

- You don't win *Fiasco*, so let go of protecting your character. If it serves the story for your guy to blow his head off, make a memorable speech and jam the gun into his mouth.
- Say "Yes," then say, "And." This is an old improv rule that ensures everyone feels free and encouraged to offer suggestions for a story, secure in the knowledge that nobody will judge them or ignore it. If someone says "Here's a suitcase," you say "Yes, and inside the suitcase is the gun I'm going to jam into my mouth."
- We always start out with ideas of our own, but the truly great and memorable fiascoes always happen when we're willing to let our great idea go because someone else has an even greater idea. This rule holds hands with both of the above rules, by the way. It also carries a gun with a hair trigger.
- From time to time, a scene needs a third person to hop in and stir things up, drop off a mysterious envelope, or notice the briefcase that someone is trying very hard to keep out of view. Go ahead and be that guy, but remember that the scene isn't about you, so get in, do your thing, and get out.
- As much as possible, keep it simple. Trust me, it's going to get complicated all on its own, and it doesn't need a lot of help.
- When your *Fiasco* is over, make some notes about it. You'd be surprised how many times your play session builds the foundation for a great work of short fiction. Or, if you play *Fiasco* a lot, maybe you won't be surprised at all.

—Wil Wheaton

INDEX

A

Aftermath, Soft 87, 90–91

Aftermath Table *See* Hacking the Rules

Agreement 14

B

Bending the Rules

A Disturbing Trend 44

A Kick in the Junk 46

Big Switch 42, 50

Crosstown Rivals 42–43, 50

Driving in Reverse 41

Melancholy Finnish Tag Team 43–44

Bennett, Chris 36, 50, 54, 55, 67, 71, 72, 73, 75, 76

Berg, David 54

Bullock, Kate 21

C

Characters, Tips for Playing 27–30

Cluney, Ewen 37

Creitz, Colin 22, 24, 49, 74

D

Douglas, Pete 67, 71, 72, 75, 77, 78

E

Editing 19–21

Endowment *See* Improvisation Techniques

F

Facilitation

Balancing Success and Failure 39

Being Prepared 51–55

Convention Play 56

Facilitating Fiasco 48

Internet Play 57–62

Setting Up 53

Taking the Lead 54

Two's Company, Four's a Fiasco 49–50

Fiasco High *See* Playsets, New Companion

Figtree, Pete 136

Firth, Kristin 152

Flashback 19, 23, 30, 34–35, 82

Flash-forward 19, 82

G

Generosity 14

Golden Panda Style 82

Gonzo 17–18, 74, 142

Granade, Stephen 16

Grimes, Cheyenne 42

H

Hacking the Rules 80–86, 148

Aftermath Table 80, 85–87 *See also* Aftermath, Soft

Golden Panda Style 82

Stunt Dice 81–82

Tilt Table 80, 83–84, 87 *See also* Tilt, Soft

Worked Examples 87

Harnish, MJ 136

Hindmarch, Will 144

I

Improvisation 13, 154 *See also* Interviews (Fiasco for Performers)

Improvisation Techniques

Agreement 14

Endowment 14–15, 19

Generosity 14

Reincorporation 16

Trust 13

Interviews

Fiasco as a Virtual Writers Room 144

Fiasco for Performers 152

Playing With Students 136

M

Macklin, Ryan 71

Majcher, Marc 15, 32, 37, 69, 152

Miller, Marshall 57, 62

Minter, Brian 16, 23, 27

Mission to Mercury *See* Playsets, New Companion

P

Pacing 22–26

Playing Like a Champ 12

- Characters 27–30
- Editing 19
- Pacing 22–26
- Playing With Time 22
- Retcon 21, 40
- Smash Cut 19, 20, 21, 24
- Strategy 32–35
- Tone 17–18
- Playsets, Guidelines for Creating 64
 - Choosing a Setting 65
 - Locations 73
 - Needs 72
 - Objects 73
 - Pro Tips 74–77
 - Publishing 78
 - Relationships 68–71
- Playsets, New Companion 92–135
 - Fiasco High 23, 87, 92, 95–104, 142
 - Mission to Mercury 66, 93, 125–134
 - Regina’s Wedding 92
 - Vegas 20, 33, 40, 67, 75, 93, 115–124

R

- Regina’s Wedding *See* Playsets, New Companion
- Reincorporation 16
- Retcon *See* Playing Like a Champ
- Rogers, John 144

Russell, Nathan 144

S

Sedated Pekingese 14, 15

Smash Cut *See* Playing Like a Champ

Strategy 32–35

Students, Playing with *See* Interviews

Stunt Dice 81–82

T

Tevis, Paul 33

Tilt, Soft 87, 88–89

Tilt Table *See* Hacking the Rules

Tone 17–18

Treuer, Remi 17

Trust 13

V

Vegas *See* Playsets, New Companion

W

Walmsley, Graham 18, 57, 138

Wedig, Nick 87

Weed-killer jar 58

Wheaton, Wil

Foreword by 8–9

Wheaton's Big Six 163

Wilbur, Charlton 36

Wong, Jenn 82

Writers Room, Virtual *See* Interviews



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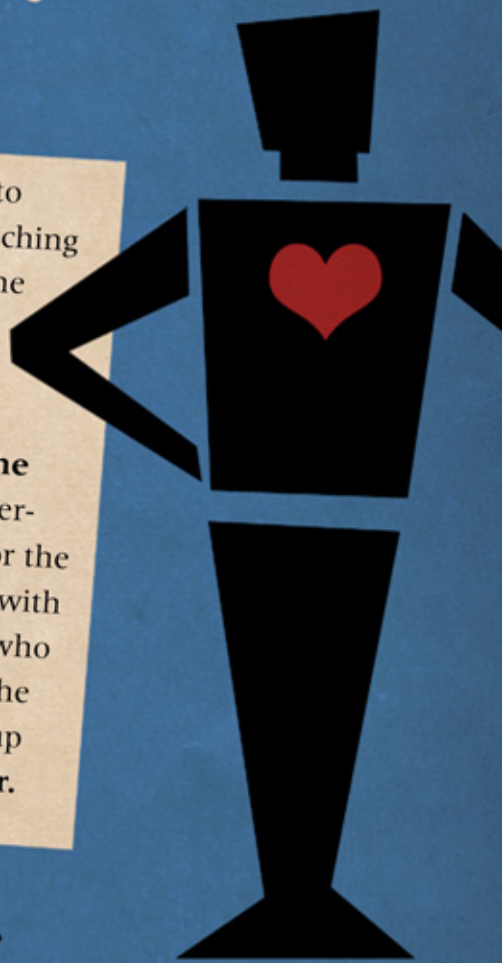
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