

ROBIN D. LAWS

HILLFOLK

A GAME OF IRON AGE DRAMA



Dramasystem



Pelgrane Press

HILLFOLK

A GAME OF IRON AGE DRAMA
USING THE DRAMASYSTEM ENGINE
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Cover Illustration: Scott Neil

Cartography: Ralf Schemmann

Graphic Design: Christian Knutsson

For Pelgrane Press: Beth K. Lewis, Cathriona Tobin

Publisher: Simon Rogers

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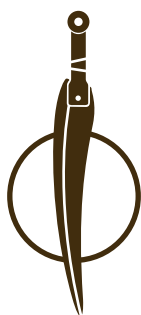
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RUN FOR THE HILLS

Hillfolk is the first game using the DramaSystem roleplaying rules engine. In a game of Hillfolk, players take the roles of Iron Age raiders struggling to protect and enrich their clan at a time of clashing empires.

In a DramaSystem game, players, aided by a Game Moderator (GM), collectively create a compelling, serial story of emotional need and conflict within a tightly-knit group of people.



WHAT YOU NEED

To play this game, you need:

- 5 - 8 participants
- one deck of playing cards
- a supply of poker chips or beads
- 1 red, 1 green, and 1 yellow token¹ per participant
- about a dozen tokens of a fourth color (I use blue)
- as many index cards (or spare playing cards or collectible game cards) as you have players
- writing utensils
- scrap paper
- time to weave an epic story
- One participant, the GM, may find it handy to have a smartphone or laptop on hand.



“The desperate people of these lands cry out for us to unify them.”

“When you say unify, you mean conquer.”

WHY THIS GAME EXISTS

Scenes in stories can be divided into two categories:

procedural and dramatic.

In a procedural scene, the characters confront and overcome external obstacles. They fight opponents,

conduct chases, investigate mysteries, explore unfamiliar environments, and so on. When they succeed by talking to others, it is by negotiating with characters who exert no particular emotional hold over them, over practical matters.

In a dramatic scene, the main characters confront internal obstacles, seeking emotional reward from people they care deeply about, for good or ill.

Historically, roleplaying games have concentrated on procedural action, giving short shrift to dramatic interplay. They’re based on adventure genres, which focus on the external over the internal.

When scenes that ought to be dramatic arise in the typical roleplaying game session, they tend to start strongly, but rapidly stall out. Players whose characters find themselves in conflict with one another typically dig in, refusing to relent. They do this because they don’t want their characters to lose, and because they believe that, by sticking to their guns, they’re doing what their characters would do in real life. Story momentum grinds to a halt as the exchange reaches an impasse.

In real life, though, when we enter into emotional disputes with people we care about, we sometimes relent and sometimes dig in. That’s because we need emotional reward² from the people in our lives.

Fictional dramatic scenes have long observed and replicated this pattern. DramaSystem observes and replicates those basic techniques. This is a game of drama that works the way fictional dramas do.

¹ You may find it easier to find tokens in standard poker chip colors. I use a set of nonstandard poker chips in the desired colors. The correspondence to the red-yellow-green traffic light pattern is much easier to remember than another color scheme, making it worth the extra trouble to locate chips in these colors. Beads may be easier to find than nonstandard poker chips, but are fiddly to pass from one participant to the next.

² Emotional reward is not always positive. You might seek someone’s reassurance or love, or set out to hurt or provoke them. In the latter case you might leave the encounter feeling bad—which is what, unconsciously or otherwise, you set out to achieve.

HAMLET'S HIT POINTS

Many of the narrative concepts underlying this game, such as the distinction between drama and procedural, are explored in greater detail in my book *Hamlet's Hit Points*, from Gameplaywright Press. It shows gamers (and other creators) how to analyze and construct works of fiction by breaking them down into their constituent elements, or beats. It analyzes three classic narratives: Hamlet, Casablanca, and the movie version of Dr. No. Although you don't need to know it to play or enjoy this game, the two books complement and enrich one another. *Hamlet's Hit Points* is the theory; *DramaSystem*, the practice.

"Will you still be here when I return?"
"No, because I'm coming with you."

SECONDARY FEATURES

From *DramaSystem's* main goal flow the following additional features:

Long-term story play: *DramaSystem* shares a common purpose with the story games school of roleplaying game design, which privileges the exploration of narrative over other design goals, such as strategic decision-making, tactical butt-kicking, or the simulation of imaginary environments. Story games typically focus on delivering a fun and challenging one-time story that wraps up in a single sitting. *DramaSystem* shines in long-term play, in which a group unfolds an improvised narrative over an extended period. Over time they come to relate to the characters as they would to the protagonists of their favorite ongoing television drama.

Easier to GeM: Unlike some rightly acclaimed story games, *DramaSystem* retains the role of Game Moderator, a participant apart from the rest, who guides action and pacing and provides necessary rules interpretations. In this it resembles more mainstream or traditional roleplaying games. However, its events are entirely created in the moment, sparing the GM the usual lengthy prep work required by those games.

Harder to GeM: Where GMs in traditional games enjoy nearly unlimited power to shape the narrative by determining the obstacles PCs face, *DramaSystem* rations their interventions. That

makes the effort of pushing the story in the direction you want more of a challenge, with game-like tactical elements. Working within the limitations becomes part of the fun. You can never predict the outcome of any episode, giving you a sense of surprise and suspense you don't get in games granting you virtual omnipotence.



BEHIND THE CURTAIN

The *DramaSystem* rules are extremely simple and thus easy to learn. What can be trickier is the mental shift to a new style of play. This shift may be great if you're used to traditional RPGs, or modest if you've already steeped yourself in the story game style. Sidebars styled like this one help you to make that leap. They show you what to expect in a Hillfolk game and explain certain of the choices made in its design.

Your previous play experience

may dictate the shape of your first few sessions. If you mostly know traditional RPGs, give yourself a little while to adjust to *DramaSystem's* approach. Initially resistant players often prove the most enthusiastic of all, after it clicks for them. Experienced GMs can get very satisfying results from otherwise novice groups. If you're already well-versed in narrative gaming, please bear with us as we lay out the basic concepts to those unfamiliar with them.

WHAT THIS BOOK CONTAINS

Creating Characters (p. 8) takes you through the process of building your central cast.

Episodes (p. 20) shows you how to get your story rolling.

Scenes (p. 22) comprises the heart of the game: it explains how participants construct dramatic and procedural scenes.

Notes on Play (p. 50) gives you the advice you need to make use of the rules.

The Land and Its People (p. 66) covers the Hillfolk setting, leaving open a variety of decisions for the group, as they tailor it to the story they want to build together.

Useful Appendices appear from p. 230.

"You've betrayed me."
"I haven't yet begun to betray you."

CREATING CHARACTERS

STEP BY STEP

*To create the protagonists who make up the key ensemble of *Hillfolk*, the group follows these steps, facilitated by the Game Moderator. When a step is not quite self-explanatory, a fuller description appears in a subsequent section.*

1. The Game Moderator briefly encapsulates the series setting and premise, as seen in “The Land and Its People” from p. 66.
2. The GM determines precedence (below).
3. First player in order proclaims his character’s name and role in the tribe. Names in Hillfolk are metonyms, recognizable words indicating status, personality, appearance, or other traits. For examples, see p. 75.
4. Second player proclaims her character’s name, role in the tribe, and relationship to the first character. Players notate relationships on their relationship maps.
5. Third player proclaims his character’s name, role in the tribe, and relationship to all other proclaimed characters.
6. According to precedence, remaining players repeat step five.
7. Repeat steps 10-12 for each remaining player in precedence.
8. Repeat steps 9-12 until all characters are named as objects of at least two other characters’ wants. Any unaddressed relationships are defined during play.)
9. Each player ranks his character’s action types, sorting them into Strong, Middling, and Weak.
10. Players apply “How I Do It” descriptors to their Strong action types.
11. Based on what they now know about their characters, especially their dramatic poles, players complete the statement, “My story is of a man/woman who...”
12. With a renewed order of precedence and an initial scene framing, play begins.

ORDER OF PRECEDENCE

From time to time, the GM determines precedence—an order in which the players act.

Before play begins, write your player’s names on index cards, one card per player. Whenever you need a precedence order, shuffle them and note the result.

For easier handling, write player names on spare playing cards with a marker. Salvage them from the incomplete deck of standard playing cards you probably have stashed in the back of a drawer somewhere. If you play collectible card games, raid your cache of otherwise useless common cards and write on a few of them.

You may prefer some other random ordering method. Do what works for you.

7. In the established order of precedence, players proclaim their desires.
8. In the same order, players define their characters’ dramatic poles.
9. GM chooses a new precedence order.
10. First player in the new precedence defines what his character wants from any other player’s character.
11. The player of the other character defines why they can’t get it.
12. Both players adjust the statement as needed to reflect the first character’s understanding of the situation.

How can I trust you?”

“Because I’m the only one who dares tell you the truth.”



ROLE IN THE BAND

The main cast of player characters (PCs) in Hillfolk are influential members of a raider band. It offers protection and patronage to a dispersed territory of farmers and herders. It attacks and steals from the farmers and herders of other territories. Together you probably comprise the leader of the band, and his or her inner circle. You are either related to one another by blood, or so close—for good and ill—that you might as well be.

Players are free to define their characters' roles in the clan however they choose. They decide whether leadership is formalized, with a clear leader and followers, or proceeds by consensus. Roleplayers normally avoid definite chains of command, but here you'll find that the emotional bonds of the drama system prevent a leader player from unduly dominating the story.

The decisions you make about your roles may or may not define the standards of your culture. When you meet neighbors and rivals, you decide whether they follow your leadership structure, or obey sharply divergent traditions.

Some characters might take formal roles, while others are defined by their blood relations to them.

Sample roles might include:

- › Chief
- › Elder
- › Adviser
- › Scout
- › Raid Commander
- › Priest
- › Oracle
- › Mother/Father/Brother/Sister/Son/Daughter to the Chief
- › ...or to any other important figure
- › Husband/Wife/Lover of the Chief
- › ...or to any other important figure
- › Healer
- › Talker
- › ambitious aspirant to the Chief's position

There are more roles here than PCs. You don't fill all of them. Instead, the assortment of roles you choose tells you what roles your clan values. You might decide later, as recurring characters are established, that some of the above positions are filled by recurring characters (important supporting characters directed not by a player but by the GM). They might be important but not as crucial to the storyline as the main cast. Or they might not be part of your band structure at all. You answer these questions yourselves, over time, using the collaborative process explained later in this rules set.

OUSTING THE RECURRING CHIEFTAIN

If the group decides that the band is singly and authoritatively commanded, but not by a player character, it becomes the GM's task to nudge the storyline so that one of the PCs eventually becomes the chief. The PCs are the main cast, the most important people in

your series. A recurring character can't be allowed to hog the spotlight, or make pivotal choices the protagonists ought to be making, for long. However, the build-up to a shift in leadership provides a rich source of dramatic tension.

DEFINING RELATIONSHIPS

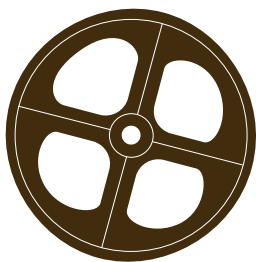
When you define your relationship to another PC, you establish a crucial fact about both characters. You can make it any kind of relationship, positive or negative, so long as it's an important one. Family relationships are the easiest to think of and may prove richest in play. Close friendships also work. By choosing a friendship, you're establishing that the relationship is strong enough to create a powerful emotional bond between the two of you. Bonds of romantic love, past or present, may be the strongest of all.

As in any strong drama, your most important relationships happen to be fraught with unresolved tension. These are the people your character looks to for emotional fulfillment. The struggle for this fulfillment drives your ongoing story.

Defining one relationship also determines others, based on what has already been decided.

"You don't love the real me."

"You are what I choose to make of you."



Adrian decides that his character, *Axehandle*, is the husband of *Bladesinger* (played by *Beata*.) Later, *Claude* specifies his character, *Crow*, is *Axehandle*'s brother. That makes *Crow* *Bladesinger*'s brother-in-law.

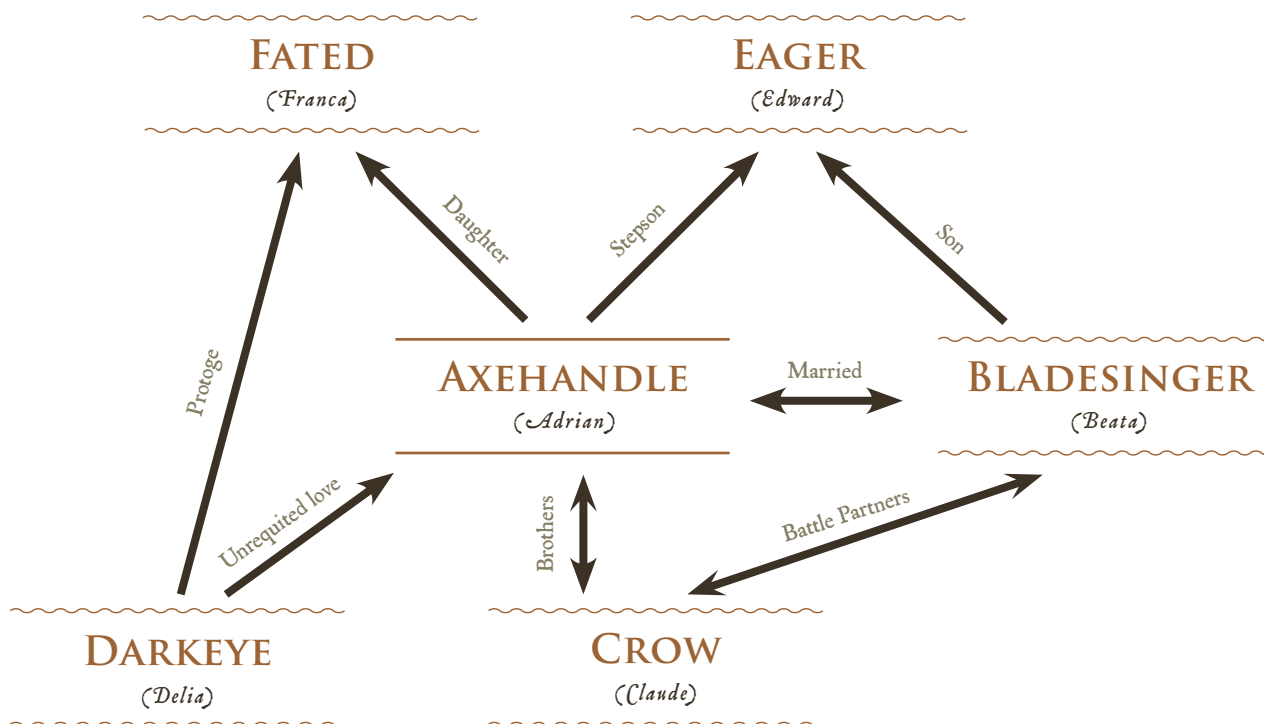
You can always tighten the web of connections between the characters by specifying multiple relationships to a given character.

Claude decides that *Bladesinger* is not only his sister-in-law, but his battle partner. They always fight together when they raid, and feel a sense of protectiveness toward one another that transcends their relationship by marriage.

Players may raise objections to relationship choices of other players that turn their PCs into people they don't want to play. When this occurs, the proposing player makes an alternate suggestion, negotiating with the other player until both are satisfied. If needed, the GM assists them in finding a choice that is interesting to the proposing player without imposing unduly on the other.

Delia says that *Axehandle* is the lover to her character, *Darkeye*. This rubs *Adrian* the wrong way. "That's not my guy," he says, going on to explain that he wants to play a noble man felled by ambition, not a sneaking betrayer. *Delia* modifies her idea to say that *Axehandle* is the object of *Darkeye*'s unshakeable infatuation. This preserves a version of her idea while still protecting *Adrian*'s conception of *Axehandle*. He agrees to the change, which *Delia* then enters on her character sheet.

Keep track of relationships as they are established during character creation with the Relationship Map page of your character sheet. Represent each character as a name with a box or circle around it. Place your character in the center of the sheet. Draw a line from your character to each other PC. Label the line with the nature of the relationship. As relationships between other PCs are established, connect them and label their connection lines as well.



"I have dreamt of this day all my life!"
 "Does it feel like you thought it would?"



YOUR DESIRE

A PC's desire is the broadly stated, strong motivation driving his actions during dramatic scenes. The desire moves him to pursue an inner, emotional goal, which can only be achieved by engaging with other members of the main cast, and, to a lesser degree, with recurring characters run by the GM. Your desire might be seen as your character's weakness: it makes him vulnerable to others, placing his happiness in their hands. Because this is a dramatic story, conflict with these central characters prevents him from easily or permanently satisfying his desire. Think of the desire as an emotional reward your character seeks from others.

The most powerful choices are generally the simplest:

- › approval
- › acceptance
- › forgiveness
- › respect
- › love
- › subservience
- › reassurance
- › power
- › to punish
- › to be punished

*"One day you will be my bride."
"Not if Father kills you first."*

You may be accustomed to thinking of character goals in practical terms, reachable by physical action or by participation in abstract activities. The pursuit of these procedural goals may take a key role in the story, but only insofar as it reflects an interior, emotional objective. It's okay to use a practical goal as a starting point, provided you delve past it into the deeper dramatic goal beneath. Achieving the practical goal gets you nowhere, until others around you grant you the emotional reward you hope it will pry from them.

"Axehandle wants to conquer the kingdom of the north," says Adrian, as he proposes his desire.

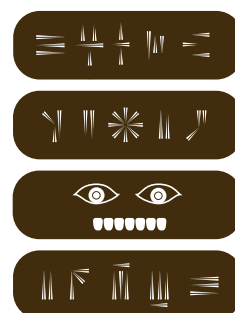
"That's a practical goal," replies the GM.

"Axehandle can certainly want to conquer the northern kingdom—that's a big enough story hook to drive a whole campaign. But we need to know the inner reason that drives him to do this. What emotional reward does he seek?"

"When Axehandle was little, they called him a weakling. His older brother was supposed to be chieftain. Only when he was killed by a lion did Axehandle win his father's grudging acceptance. He still remembers the taunts, the doubts. By conquering what his father failed to conquer, Axehandle will show them all."

"So your desire is to win respect?"

"In a way. Really I want to show them all. To prove them wrong about me."



FROM THE OUTWARD TO THE INWARD

As further examples, here are some other practical goals reconfigured into suitably emotional desires:

<i>Practical Goal</i>	<i>Emotional Desire</i>
Get Freedove to agree to marry me	Win love
Win Freedove's father's permission to marry her	Win respect
Find my father's killer	Quell my anger
Rediscover and translate ancient texts	Show everyone I'm special
Recover the lost eagle totem	Stop feeling ashamed
Help Axehandle conquer the northern kingdom	Earn forgiveness



YOUR DRAMATIC POLES

Driving any compelling dramatic character in any story form is an internal contradiction. The character is torn between two opposed dramatic poles. Each pole suggests a choice of identities for the character, each at war with the other. Events in the story pull the character from one pole to the next. Were your character's story to conclude, her final scenes would once and for all establish one of the identities as the dominant one.

With the help of your GM, make your poles as clear, and strongly opposed, as you can. That makes it easier for you and other participants to create entertaining scenes involving your character. They increase your chance of winning bennies (p. 47), granting you additional power in the narrative. These depend on other participant's perceptions of your character and her actions. Favor the emotional over the abstract, the simple over the complicated.

The dramatic poles of famous fictional characters might be expressed like this:

- › Rick Blaine: (Casablanca) selfishness or altruism?
- › Nora Helmer: (A Doll's House) subservience or selfhood?
- › Tony Soprano: (The Sopranos) family man or Family man?
- › Nate Fisher: (Six Feet Under) freedom or responsibility?
- › Frank Gallagher: (Shameless US) dissolution or dignity?
- › Walter White: (Breaking Bad) virtuous weakness or anti-social power?

Stop here if you prefer to come up with character concepts on your own.

In many cases, you can conceive your dramatic poles as your desire, on one hand, and, on the other, the character trait that makes you least likely to attain it.

If your desire is to gain the rightful chieftainship that was snatched away from you, your poles might be expressed as leadership vs. bitterness.

If you need further inspiration, example dramatic poles for your Hillfolk characters might include:

- › warrior or peacemaker?
- › king or tyrant?
- › member of the tribe or destroyer of the tribe?
- › earner of respect or a demander of respect?
- › safety or adventure?
- › loyalty or ambition?
- › visionary or madman?
- › upholder of tradition or upender of tradition?
- › spirituality or carnality?
- › wisdom or folly?

"Like you, my son, I once thought I knew it all."

"What happened?"

"You did."

Or borrow the dramatic poles of any established dramatic character, perhaps even those listed above. After transposing them into the Iron Age setting and bouncing them off the rest of the cast, your character will quickly develop into a unique creation, leaving your original inspiration behind.

Your dramatic poles may redefine themselves during play, as your character develops away from your original conception, or as you deliberately steer your character on a new course after exhausting the possibilities of the old. Change them at any time by announcing the change to the rest of the group. If you find yourself wanting to change them often, seek the GM's aid in arriving at a deeper choice that will last through changing circumstances and many sessions of play.

SESSIONS VS. EPISODES

A session is a single meeting of your game group, including bookkeeping, recaps, rewards, and everything you do around the table. The story you create together

during a single session, is the episode. Sometimes the distinction matters, but you can mostly use the terms interchangeably.

WHAT YOU WANT FROM OTHERS

Now bring your dramatic poles into specific focus by declaring what they lead you to seek from particular other PCs.

(Your character might find it easy to earn the desired emotional reward from other people around him—perhaps even other PCs. But we don't bother to note this on the character sheet, because there's no drama in it. This step is about finding the most acute sources of dramatic conflict between your character and the other key ensemble members.)

For example, you might seek:

- approval from your father
- love from your mother
- to punish your brother
- to be punished by the ex-lover you betrayed
- to achieve dominance over a rival warrior

“Can't you be happy for me?”

“Happiness is a dream for fools.”

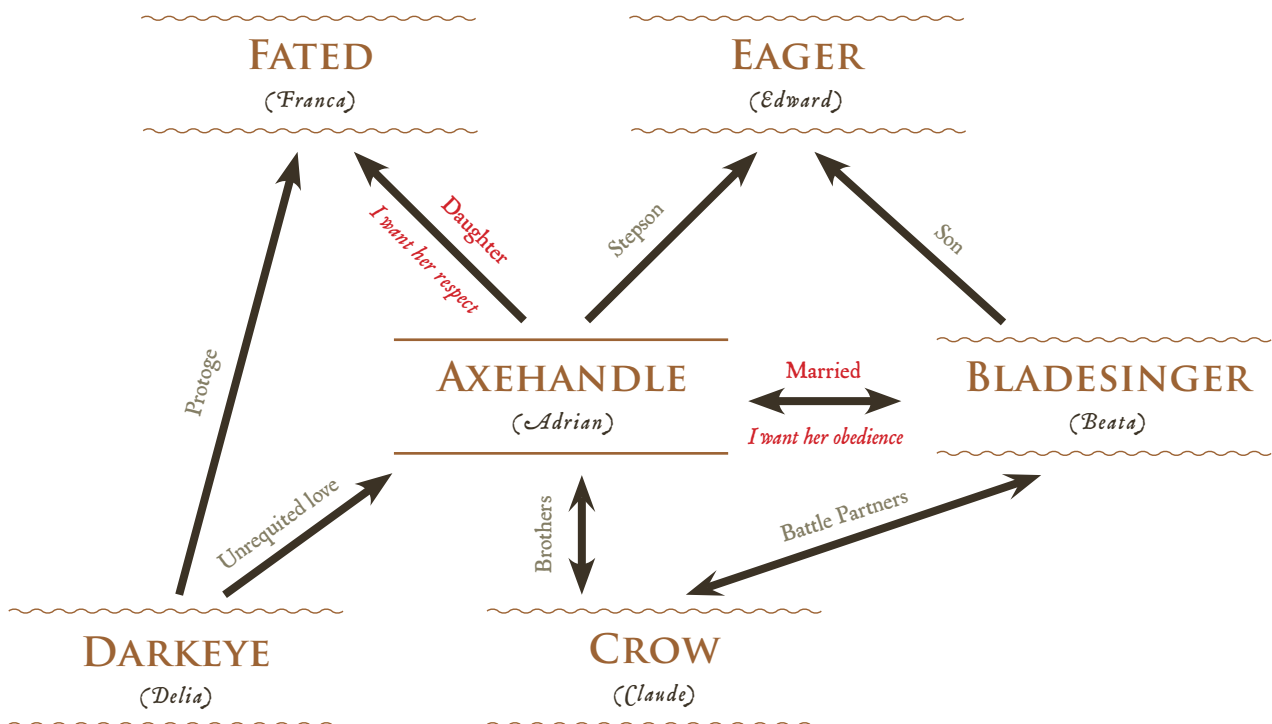
You then confer with the player of the other character to work out why it's hard for you to gain this emotional reward. The easiest way for the other

player to do this is to draw on her own character's desire and contradiction. This process fills in the troubled history you share with another cast member. The other player in each of the above examples might say:

- “I withhold approval because I want you to keep striving.”
- “I could never love you as I should have, because when you were born I was still in mourning for your brother.”
- “Who wants to be punished? I'll resist your madness, as anyone would.”
- “Even if you were to best me, which you never will, I'd rather be struck mute than admit it.”

The first and second PCs you name as your withholders of emotional reward are your *fraught relationships*. List these first in the People in My Life section of your character sheet. Also, mark your fraught relationships by circling or highlighting them on your relationship map. If you find it a useful memory aid, include a notation describing the emotional reward you seek.

The importance of your fraught relationships may fade during play, in favor of others. Still, the process of defining them will help flesh out your



character initially, which is very important. You may want your character sheet to reflect changes in your fraught relationships, or just keep track of them in your head.

More than two characters may wind up wanting something from yours.

ACTION TYPES

Although Hillfolk focuses primarily on dramatic scenes, you'll still occasionally want your characters to achieve practical goals in the external world. The game breaks practical actions down into seven broad types. In this stage of character generation, you designate two of them as your Strong types and two as Weak. The rest are Middling.

"You sneak into the corral and listen to what the northerners are plotting."

"What's in it for me?"

Here's what you can do with each of the *action types*:

- › *Enduring*: You resist physical ill effects of all sorts. Wins with this ability allow you to overcome, or at least reduce the impact of, exhaustion, injury, sleep deprivation, hunger, poisoning, thirst, heat stroke, and the like.
- › *Fighting*: You overcome others in physical combat, and avoid injury in other dangerous athletic situations.
- › *Knowing*: Your head buzzes with useful information.
- › *Making*: You build, craft, and repair physical objects.
- › *Moving*: Under difficult circumstances, you run, climb, jump, swim, and otherwise travel from place to place, over distances long and short.
- › *Talking*: When seeking practical advantage from negotiations and other verbal interactions (as opposed to dramatic conflicts, where you seek emotional reward), your skill at reading and playing to others' desires allows you to prevail.
- › *Sneaking*: You're good at skulking around, hiding items, concealing your activities, and moving in a manner that minimizes the chances of observation.

CUSTOM ACTION TYPES

You can create your own, narrower action type and make it one of your Strong types. Do this to make a clearer, more specific statement about your character. Strive for a one-word type name. Run it by the rest of the group to make sure everyone finds it readily understandable.

Examples might include:

- › horses
- › archery
- › religion
- › hunting
- › myths
- › Reedbeards

A custom type allows you to overlap several of the existing types, though only when the action directly relates to your specialty. Horses might allow you to talk about horses, ride horses, and sneak well while on a horse. A Reedbeards ability would allow you to talk to these particular foreigners, operate their strange chariots, and recount their odd myths.

When you take a custom action type, three of the standard action types are treated as Weak types.

HOW YOU DO IT

For each of your Strong action types, write a short phrase (or single word) describing your specialty within the type. In a situation where it fits to describe yourself as employing your distinctive talent, you gain an additional advantage. Use specific detail; don't just find a synonym for the broad category. Your GM may ask you to adjust an overly vague, broad, or dull description.

Descriptors distinguish main cast members from one another. If two players pick similar descriptors, negotiate to decide who keeps the current idea and who picks a new one.

Enduring: needs little sleep, doesn't eat much, heals quickly, resists disease

Fighting: sword, spear, unarmed fighting, martial riding, climbing, swinging from ropes

Knowing: tides, animals, ruins, weather, Tridents, enemy gods, farming, herding

Making: rugs, clothing, armor, weapons, wine, ale, dried meat, bridles, bowls, tools

Moving: speedy, graceful, powerful, finds best paths, unpredictable

Talking: flattery, intimidation, trickery, inspiration, gossip, bribery, joking, reassurance

Sneaking: silent creeping, hiding items, pickpocketing, impersonation, disguise

"I thought I knew you."

"In that moment, I did not know myself."



YOUR STORY

Given what you've now discovered about your character, complete the sentence: My story is of a man/woman who ...

The sentence should evoke your desire, and possibly your central relationships and contradiction. It serves as a reminder to keep you focused on the story you, taking into account the collaboration of other group members, have resolved to tell. If your sentence is more than 25 words long, your idea isn't simple enough. Adjust the introductory clause a little if it makes for a clearer, shorter sentence.

My story is of a man who would be king.

My story is of a woman who yearns for revenge.

My story is of a fighter with a man of peace hidden inside him.

My story is of a woman who sees no difference between what is good for her, and what is good for the people.



CHARACTER GENERATION AS PLAY

Expect character generation to take several hours. Don't be surprised if players start slipping into character and speaking in dialogue, especially when explaining why they're not prepared to grant desires.

During the design process I found myself wanting to shorten the process, a suggestion that provoked stout resistance from playtesters. That's when I realized that in Hillfolk, character

generation is play—the group is collaboratively creating, and discovering, a main cast and a world. They enjoy the chance to imagine and become comfortable with their characters before jumping into the drama.

Prolonged character generation only justifies itself if you're using the game in default mode, for extended play. See p. 63 for notes on single-session play.

EPISODES

Each session of Hillfolk presents an episode—a series of loosely connected scenes, during which the characters advance their emotional goals, perhaps also performing procedural tasks that grant them dramatic leverage in further dramatic scenes.

THEMES

Distinguishing each episode is a *theme* for participants to weave, loosely or obviously, into its events. The GM in particular looks for ways to bring the story back to the themes as the episode develops. A theme is a broad, simple, abstract concept evoking some aspect of the human condition. It might directly call out a desire or wanted emotional reward. Alternately, it might be a lateral idea, requiring the players to think in new ways to connect it to the ongoing saga.

“We must change, or die.”

“You would cast away the wisdom of generations, on a whim?”

INTRODUCING THEMES

The opening episode of your first Hillfolk series³ takes the theme of Hunger, introduced in an opening scene called by the GM.

At the end of the first session, the GM chooses the next precedence ranking. It sets out the order in which players choose the themes for the following episodes. The first player in the precedence order chooses the theme for the second episode, the second chooses for the third episode, and so on. Once everyone has had a chance to pick a theme, start over again, continuing in this order until the series comes to its conclusion.

SAMPLE THEMES

Ancestral Sins	Heartache	Progress
Betrayal	Heating Up	Rebirth
Blood Ties	Home	Reckonings
Buzzards Circle	Justice	Redemption
Cages	Knowing Too Much	Ritual
Change Is Hard	Lion’s Den	Secrets
Charity	Losing	Small Details
Choosing Sides	Losing Control	The Spear of Truth
Condemned to Freedom	Loyalty	Thresholds
Dying Well	Masks	Ties that Bind
False Smiles	The Morning After	Trust
Fear	New Beginnings	Two Wrongs Don’t Make a Right
Fear of the Unknown	Night Games	Unity
Forgiveness	Old Memories	Vengeance
Gold	Outsiders	What Price Victory?
Guilt	Predator and Prey	What’s in a Name?

³ You’ll probably want to change settings each time you run a DramaSystem series for the same group. But if you were to create a

new Hillfolk game from scratch for the same people, you’ll want to find a completely different opening theme. Affluence, perhaps?



SCENES

Each episode consists of a number of scenes:

- ▶ an *opener* that introduces the theme
- ▶ an indeterminate number of *development* scenes that riff on and refer to the theme in various ways
- ▶ a *closer* that somehow completes the theme—or ends organically, on a cliffhanger, conclusive line, or other exciting moment

CALLING SCENES

Each scene begins when the next player in the calling order (below) *calls* the scene, laying out the parameters under which it unfolds. These are:

Cast: names the main or recurring characters taking part in the scene. As a player, you must pay a drama token to call a scene your character does not appear in. (p. 26).

Setting: where the scene takes place (at least at its outset; a scene can shift in time and place as it unfolds)

~~~~~  
 “You must be wondering why I summoned you here.”

“I’m not puzzled in the least, Goldmane.”

*Time break (if any)*: by default, scenes are assumed to take place shortly after, or concurrently with, the previous scene. If you want to jump ahead in time, say so, and by how much. Time breaks are susceptible to challenge (see below.)

*Mode*: indicates whether this is a primarily *dramatic* scene, in which a PC or recurring character<sup>4</sup> pursues an emotional reward from a PC or recurring character, or a *procedural* scene<sup>5</sup>, in which one or more PCs (possibly aided by supporting characters) pursues an external, practical goal. Dramatic scenes are the default; when the group becomes comfortable with the structure, you’ll find yourselves just casting scenes without having to explicitly identify the

mode. Only much rarer procedural scenes need to be called out by name.

*Situation*: a brief description of what’s happening at the scene’s outset. As excitingly as possible, the caller describes the location, the activities of the characters involved, and the prevailing circumstances. The situation may be a simple meeting of characters to hash out an emotional conflict, or can introduce a *complication*: a new plot development affecting some or all of the main cast. The scene, dramatic or procedural, then unfolds from the complication. Example complications might include:

- ▶ someone has burned the granary!
- ▶ a prodigal has returned to the clan after a long absence
- ▶ your trade delegation has gone missing on the road to the Olive Clan lands
- ▶ rumors of a ghost haunting the creek are spreading like wildfire
- ▶ a scuffle breaks out between followers of the old tradition and those of the new
- ▶ a ferocious lion mauled one of your scouts
- ▶ a love triangle between recurring characters threatens village unity

Sometimes it’s smoother just to cut right to the dialogue and work out supporting details as they become relevant. Caller narration may be challenged if players object to what you describe them as doing, or if they feel that your complication assumes a plot advancement that ought to be played out instead. Other players cast in the scene may bounce off your description to describe what they’re doing or other details.

Often you’ll find it more natural to describe these elements in another order than the one given above.

<sup>4</sup> *Recurring character*: an important GM-controlled character, capable of meeting the emotional needs of one or more player characters. By casting an established minor character in a dramatic scene, you immediately promote him or her to recurring status. See p. 47.

<sup>5</sup> Sometimes called “a procedural”, for short.

## CALLING ORDER

Before the episode's first scene, the GM picks the next precedence order.

The player choosing the episode's theme always calls first. Then comes the player who actually appeared first, in your precedence order. The GM inserts herself into the order, replacing the player who chose the theme.

Scenes are then called according to this altered order.

*It is Beata's turn to choose the theme. She selects lust, and will call the first scene. As GM, you shuffle your precedence cards and, conveniently for the clarity of this example, draw the players' names in alphabetical sequence: Adrian, Beata, Claude, Delia, Edward, and Franca. You substitute yourself for Beata's appearance in the precedence order. The order in which participants will call scenes this week is: Beata, Adrian, you, Claude, Delia, Edward, and Franca.*

Once you reach the end of a calling order, it rolls over, continuing the already established precedence order.

*In the above order, after Franca's first scene concludes, Beata calls her second scene of the evening, then Adrian, then you, and so on.*

*"I can't believe they said that to each other."  
"That's nothing, compared to what Mindful said about you."*

## CHALLENGES

Players may request adjustments to called scene parameters by announcing a *challenge*. How they do this depends on the element they object to.

Except where otherwise indicated, challenges resolve through a vote. With a show of hands, all players side with the caller or the challenger. The GM votes to break ties. Should the scene seem satisfyingly in keeping with the narrative to date, she votes to uphold the call. When the call seems somehow punitive, unfair, or contrary to the spirit of collective creation, she votes to uphold the challenge.

Players may see that a scene might justifiably be challenged, but elect not to do it.

In most groups, callers adjust their choices as soon as someone raises an objection, without having to go to challenge. The threat of a challenge leads to resolution without it.

## *Ducking a Scene*

You may challenge your casting in a scene you do not want your character to take part in. Remember, however, that in drama, characters frequently take part in confrontations they'd sooner avoid. Hillfolk challenges the traditional roleplayer's credo of complete control over his character at all times. Be prepared to detach, and allow your character to be pulled by emotions and obligations beyond willful control—just as we so often are in real life.

The caller may then acquiesce to your objection, and call the scene without you, or may further describe the scene so that your character's desire and poles compel your participation.

You can duck this compulsion by spending a drama token, which goes to the caller.

After you successfully duck a scene with a cast of two, leaving nothing to play, the caller starts over, calling a new scene that does not include your character.

In practice, players rarely duck scenes. They're much more likely to try the following:

## *Crashing a Scene*

To insert your character into a scene the caller has not cast you in, and actively wants to keep you out of, spend a drama token (p. 26) or a bennie (p. 47). The caller receives the token or bennie.

It costs nothing to join a scene if the caller consents to your joining.

A caller may block your unwanted entrance into a scene by spending a bennie.

(This is not a challenge, per se, but mirrors the procedure for ducking a scene, making this the logical place to present this rule.)

You can attempt to crash a scene already in progress.

*"I didn't think we'd get out of that one alive."  
"When have I ever let you down?"*

## *Challenging a Time Jump*

Players may object to jumps in time that preclude them from taking actions they see their characters as wanting to take in the nearer term. Resolve a challenge to a time break with a vote.

You can always jump back in time to play flashback scenes. If you're reasonably sure your scene won't change the outcome of the one at hand, you needn't feel compelled to challenge it.





### Challenging a Plot Jump

Players may object to a situation on the grounds that it advances an ongoing plot element that would be more satisfying if played out in full. Alternately, they might feel that you're cutting into the middle of a brand new situation, and that it's unbelievable that their characters would not have intervened in it sooner.

If the caller loses the challenge, she must then revise her situation description to meet the objections of the challenging player, and the voters who supported him.

### Challenging For Novelty

Players may object to a situation on the grounds that it is an attempt to retry an earlier scene the caller's character lost.

If the scene seems too similar to the GM, she invites the caller to point to a change since the previous scene that puts the situation in a new light.

The best defense against this challenge is to point to an intervening scene that changed the situation. Prevailing in a dramatic scene with a third character may change the complexion of an emotional conflict enough to justify a second attempt.

If the player can't point to a changed situation, the GM resolves the challenge by requiring the caller to call an entirely different scene.

*In the first scene Delia calls in the current episode, her character Darkeye seeks Axehandle's forgiveness for letting her love for him come to the attention of his recalcitrant wife, Bladesinger. Axehandle's player, Adrian, decides that he will reject her petition (see "Dramatic Scenes" p. 26).*

*When her turn to call comes up, Delia says, "I go back and beg Axehandle for forgiveness again."*

*The telltale word again tips off the other players, who want to see this story thread develop in a more interesting way. Edward plays spoiler, pointing out that Delia's call is a repeat.*

*Delia instead elects to call a scene in which she goes to Bladesinger to assure her of Axehandle's steadfastness. Beata, Bladesinger's player, grants her petition, and reassures Darkeye in turn.*

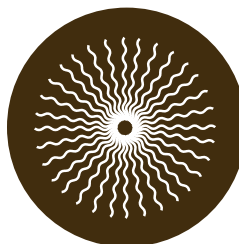
*With the situation now altered, Delia can now call as her third scene a repeat of the scene with Axehandle, arguing if challenged that the situation has changed since the previous go-round. This doesn't mean that Adrian is now obligated to grant her forgiveness—he might equally be enraged by Darkeye's approach to his wife—but it does let her try again.*

Like many of the grounds for challenge, this problem is more theoretical than actual. Players don't want to repeat themselves.

~~~~~  
"Get out of here."
"Who's going to make me?"

GOING TO PROCEDURAL

If a player describes his character successfully performing a difficult practical task, any participant, GM included, may demand that a procedural resolution (see p. 36) instead be performed to see if they successfully do it. Unlike other challenges, it takes only one objector to trigger a procedural resolution. The narrating player may avoid the procedural resolution by either withdrawing the description entirely, or adjusting it to satisfy the objector(s).



THE RIGHT TO DESCRIBE

Players with characters present in the current scene may at any point narrate details, including:

- physical circumstances ("I look up and see vultures circling overhead.")
- the behavior of walk-on characters ("The Tridents are getting restless.")
- their own characters' actions and what comes of them ("I pick up an axe and smash the idol.")

When someone objects to a bit of narration, they can either adjust what they're describing or let it go to challenge.

The GM also pitches in with narration from time to time (see p. 53).

DRAMATIC SCENES

In a dramatic scene, characters engage in verbal conflict over the granting or withholding of a desired emotional reward. The character seeking the reward is the petitioner. This role is more often than not taken by the scene's caller. The character deciding whether or not to extend it is the *granter*.

TOKENS

All participants, including the GM, collect and spend drama tokens throughout the course of an episode. Everyone starts each episode with zero tokens. A central pile, or kitty, contains an inexhaustible supply of tokens⁶. We recommend blue tokens to represent drama tokens, but any color other than red, yellow, or green will do.

Drama tokens left unspent at the end of a session contribute to a player's chance of winning bennies (p. 47), then revert to the kitty. They do not carry over to the next episode⁷.

Tokens do not represent or simulate anything in the fictional reality you're collectively depicting. Instead they bend events toward a satisfying literary rhythm, where characters sometimes prevail and are sometimes defeated in emotional confrontations. They overcome gamers' natural tendency to always dig in when challenged, forcing them to play their characters like real people, impelled by emotional need and obligation.

"I can't believe they said that to each other."

"That's nothing, compared to what Mindful said about you."

CALLING DRAMATIC SCENES

Call a dramatic scene by specifying:

- the cast
- the location
- how much time has passed since the previous scene, if any

The final ingredient for a dramatic scene is intent—what the petitioner wants, consciously or otherwise, from the granter.

If you are calling a scene in which your character acts as petitioner, as is the norm, simply go ahead and enter into the scene, without announcing your intent.

You don't have to make your character the petitioner, although it costs you a drama token if she isn't present at all. You can designate a recurring character, or another PC, as the petitioner. When doing this, suggest what it is that the petitioner wants. The participant playing the character may ask for an adjustment, or allow the character's intent to drift as the scene plays out and the granter responds.

Never call a dramatic scene between two recurring characters. No one wants to listen to the GM talk to herself, especially not the GM.

When the GM calls a dramatic scene, she may cast any participants in the scene, provided at least one of them is a player character. The GM chooses the petitioner and granter as her conception of the scene demands.

PLAYING AND RESOLVING DRAMATIC SCENES

Players portray their characters through dialogue until the petition is either granted, or it becomes apparent that it has been conclusively rebuffed, or the scene is losing tension and energy. This occurs when the players in the scene start to repeat themselves⁸, or players not taking part in the scene grow visibly bored or restless. Where necessary, the GM steps in to declare the scene concluded, by asking the petitioner if she thinks she got a significant concession.

If the answer is yes, the petition is considered granted, even if other players feel that the petitioner didn't get everything he or she wanted. Neither the caller nor the other players in general may gainsay the petitioner's player on this point.

If the answer is no, and the rest of the group agrees with the petitioner's assessment, the petition is considered to have been refused.

If the answer is no, but other participants feel that a significant shift in emotional power from

⁶ Not that you literally need an infinite supply. You'll never need more than a dozen or so in the course of any session.

⁷ *Exception:* if you spend most of your first session on character creation and play only a few scenes, carry their tokens over to session two. The token economy takes a few scenes to kick in.

⁸ As real people do in real arguments, which take place without benefit of the compression and editing techniques used in fiction.



CONCESSIONS AND EMOTIONAL POWER

A grant needn't give the petitioner everything he wanted in exactly the terms he wanted. Any major shift in emotional power from granter to petitioner counts as a grant. Sometimes you'll reach clear consensus on what constitutes a major shift; in a few cases you'll have to vote.

Even a force must respect the bounds of the granter's established character. You can't, and shouldn't expect to, turn an avowed enemy into a loyal friend in a single scene. Forced petitions represent the character giving in for the moment, not undergoing a life-changing epiphany. They certainly don't play like hypnosis or mind control. A force causes the subject to grudgingly act in a friendly, or friendlier than usual, manner in this particular instance.

Axehandle (Adrian) meets with the Slipper (played by you, as GM), a representative of the northern king. He barges into the scene demanding respect, even though the Slipper has never met him before and considers him an ignorant barbarian. Slipper goads and insults him throughout the interview. In the end, though (after Adrian pays two tokens to force a grant), he offers Axehandle a position in the king's command—while continuing to subtly mock him.

Adrian protests that he wanted more from the Slipper: he wanted true respect and a better practical offer. You

argue that the Slipper has already made a major concession: he now treats Axehandle as a useful ignorant barbarian instead of a useless one. To, on first meeting, embrace Axehandle as an equal would be completely outside this wily northerner's character.

Although Adrian continues to feel that he should have gotten more from his force, the other players agree with your argument, and pronounce the scene and force to have been fairly played.

If he wants Slipper to admire Axehandle as a peer, he'll have to keep working on him over the course of many episodes, until the shift from his initial attitude seems plausible in the storyline. One scene does not a turnaround make.

Often a granter will refuse, or modify downwards, the practical element of a petitioner's request while still making an emotional concession. This prevents players from earning tokens by making outrageous practical demands.

Steve, playing Crown, thinks he's going to collect an easy drama token by demanding that Paula's character kill her mother. "I can see why you're angry and crying out for vengeance," Paula says, in character as Peach Stealer. "What you seek will not heal you, but for the first time I see your wound." Never having acknowledged Crown's side of things before, Peach Stealer has made an emotional concession, even while disregarding Crown's specific, practical demand. She earns the token.

granter to petitioner occurred, the group, including GM, votes. The scene's caller gets an extra tie-breaking vote, where necessary.

Gaining Tokens

Every dramatic scene ends with an exchange of one or more drama tokens.

If the petition is willingly granted, the granter earns a drama token—from the petitioner if he has one, or from the kitty if not.

If the granter refuses, the petitioner gains the token—from the granter if she has one, or from the kitty if not.

*"It's against my better judgment, but I'll do it."
"You won't regret it."
"I already do."*

FORCING

If the player (or GM) playing the granter chooses not to relent, the petitioner may, by spending two drama tokens, force the granter to grant a significant emotional concession. This may still withhold some part of what the petitioner seeks, especially on the practical level, but must nonetheless represent a meaningful shift of emotional power from the granter to the petitioner.

At the end of the scene, the forced granter receives the two drama tokens from the petitioner, provided the force actually takes place.

The granter's player may block a force by spending three drama tokens. These are paid to the petitioner, at the end of the scene. The petitioner does not spend the 2 tokens that would have been spent on the force, for a net gain of 3.

After a force occurs or is canceled, the same characters may not, for the duration of the episode, be called into similar scenes intended to reverse the original result. Some significant new element, as judged by challenge voting if need be, must be added to make the scene a true new development, and not just another kick at the can.

Supporting or Blocking a Force

Players not directly involved in a scene may support an attempt to force, or cancel a force, by giving their drama tokens to the current petitioner or granter—provided their character is present in the scene.

They describe what they say or do to make the force more or less likely.

If you support a force which the granter then blocks, you get your tokens back.

“Now we’ve settled the matter of the spears, let’s talk about the grain.”

“Begone from my sight, impertinent one, or I’ll take back what I’ve already given.”

DRAMATIC SCENE EXAMPLE

It’s Delia’s turn to call. She has a drama token and could call a scene without her character in it. However, she knows what she wants Darkeye to do next and so calls a scene accordingly.

In an earlier scene (called by the GM), Darkeye discovered that people in the clan have begun to gossip about her poorly concealed affection for Axehandle. If she does not somehow address this potential scandal, it could lead to her being shunned by the others.

Darkeye will act as petitioner, so she simply thinks of her intent, keeping it to herself, and starts the scene: “I catch up with Bladesinger as she leaves the sparring grounds.”

Delia refers to a location already described in past episodes, so it requires no further explanation. She doesn’t specify a time, which by implication means that it takes place shortly after the previous scene. (In that scene, Fated confronted Axehandle for treating prisoners in a manner out of keeping with tribal tradition. It has no direct bearing on this scene.)

“Can I be at the sparring grounds?” asks Claude (playing Crow.)

“Sure, but I want a private talk with Bladesinger, so I’ll do my best to pull her away from prying eyes before we speak.”

“Fair enough,” says Claude. “Crow will know you pulled her aside, but for the moment at least will keep sparring, with Grasslander (a minor character, one of the clan’s young raiders.)

Darkeye’s intention, which Delia is not required to state, is to reassure Bladesinger.

DELIA: (as Darkeye, except where noted) Have you a moment to speak?

BEATA: (as Bladesinger, miming her sheathing her blade) I suppose.

DELIA: (pointing) Let’s go over there.

BEATA: Are these not words we can openly express, without fear of prying eyes?

DELIA: Please, Bladesinger. Humor me.

BEATA: Very well.

DELIA: (out of character) Okay, now we’re off in one of the natural craggy alcoves near the fortress⁹.

(as Darkeye) You spoke of prying eyes. I come to warn you of a troubling situation, and assure you that it is not of my making.

BEATA: Ah. The wagging tongues. I have heard them.

DELIA: You have?

BEATA: But perhaps I have not heard the same waggings as you.

“Ooh,” says Edward, “she’s really making Darkeye work for this.” This is out of character commentary, not a suggestion that Eager is present. A little of this is okay, if it keeps the other players engaged. As GM, you’re ready to jump in and urge him to silence if he steals too much focus.

DELIA: Some say I have eyes for your husband. I am here to say I have done nothing dishonorable, and to assure you that I never will.

BEATA: You don’t quite deny the gossip, then.

DELIA: What?

BEATA: You promise that you won’t act on your desires, and I believe you. But you do desire him.

DELIA: I... I...

BEATA: Do not fear, girl. I question your taste, not your honor.

DELIA: Um... thanks?

BEATA: I’ve more important concerns than making trouble for you.

DELIA: (shifting her body to suggest that Darkeye is easing away from her.) Uh, good then.

BEATA: (cupping hand over mouth as if calling after her.) If it were up to me, you could have him.

The scene clearly over, you, as GM, lead the outcome determination. “So, Delia, did Darkeye get what she wanted?”

“Hmm, that’s a tough one. On one hand, she did

⁹ The craggy alcoves have become a standard location for private talks.



assure me that she wouldn't make trouble."

"But on the other," suggests Beata, "I totally shut you out."

"Yes," says Delia. "That was a totally unreassuring reassurance. Well, if you go by who had the emotional power in the scene, she started out with it and never gave it up. I think Darkeye feels worse after the talk than she did going in. So no, I don't feel like Bladesinger granted."

"Do you agree?" you ask Beata.

"Absolutely. I was not conceding anything of importance to me."

Delia has no tokens. Beata has 1. Having refused a petition, she gives that token to Delia, and now has none.

"I thought you'd be against this."

"What's that saying about gift horses?"

SPECIAL CASES

This section presents rules for unusual situations that crop up in and around drama scenes.

(If you're reading this book for the first time, skip this bit for the moment, coming back to it when you have the overall rules framework well in hand.)

No Contest Scenes

When you act as granter, you may find, as a scene plays out, that your character has no reason to oppose a petitioner's request. If so, you can declare this a no-contest scene, bringing it to a quick conclusion. The caller may then call a new scene—hopefully one in which real conflict does occur. If at a loss for a replacement scene, the caller may choose to pass to the next caller in the established precedence order.

Two-Way Exchanges

At the end of a dramatic scene, the GM and participants might conclude that it was a two-way exchange, in which each character sought an emotional payoff, which either was or wasn't granted.

If both participants were denied or received emotional payoffs, each receives a drama token. If both players have a drama token already, this cancels out—you needn't actually trade tokens. If one or more have zero drama tokens, however, the missing token(s) come from the kitty.

If one petition was granted and the other denied, the denying player pays the granting player two tokens. If the denier has less than 2 tokens, the deficit is made up from the kitty.

Two-way exchanges may prove particularly common in scenes started with a soft open (p. 34).

As always, the test is whether characters received emotional concessions from their scene partners, not whether their specific practical demands were agreed to as posed.

Multiple Petitioners

Sometimes more than two characters will take part in one dramatic exchange—or several dramatic exchanges will overlap and interweave with one another. This might happen when:

- ▶ a player jumps into a dramatic scene
- ▶ a dramatic scene arises organically from a conference scene (p. 34).

Where possible, the GM avoids having recurring characters take major roles in these multi-layered dramatic scenes. Ideally, they act only in a supporting capacity, answering questions or offering opinions without seeking emotional rewards of their own. Sometimes the story demands that they take part as granters. The GM can almost always ensure that they don't act as petitioners.

After the various discussions come to a head and appear to resolve themselves, ask whether this was a dramatic scene at all. Do one or more players feel that their characters sought an emotional payoff?

If not, it was an expository scene setting up future events, probably of a procedural nature. No drama tokens are exchanged. Call the next scene.

If only one player answers in the affirmative, this is an ordinary drama scene with onlookers. Determine the distribution of tokens as usual. This is the most common case: even in a group scene, one character's petition usually dominates, to a degree that all participants instinctively acknowledge.

"A thousand thanks to you, Tall Walker."

"Don't thank me. Thank your daughter."

- If multiple players feel they sought emotional reward, the group, led by the GM, continue as follows.

The GM quizzes each participating player, in a newly drawn precedence order, asking:

- what they most wanted, emotionally, in the scene
- who they wanted it from
- and whether they got it

If they got what they wanted, the specified player granted their petition and earns a drama token—from the petitioning player if he or she has one, or from the kitty if not.

If they didn't get what they wanted, the specified player refused their petition. The petitioner earns a drama token—from the refuser of the grant if he or she has one, or from the kitty if not.

A group scene might easily come to one overall conclusion about a practical course of action, with various different emotional ramifications for those taking part.

In a group scene, the clan debates whether to ally with the northerners or hold out against them. Fated argues for alliance, while Axehandle supports resistance. Bladesinger and Eager side with the chieftain; Darkeye and Crow, with Fated. At the end of the exchange, the group tentatively decides to seek alliance, after Bladesinger reverses her position. By stunning coincidence, the precedence draw happens to again rank the players in alphabetical order by first name.

The players have drama tokens in the following numbers: Adrian 2, Beata 2, Claude 0, Delia 1, Edward 0, Franca 2.

Adrian: "I wanted all concerned to grant me the deference I am owed as leader."

You (as GM): "But if you had to decide who you most wanted deference from..."

Adrian: "Well, it was Fated who most strongly opposed me, and is the other major authority of our clan, so I'd say her."

You: "And did you get that deference?"

Adrian: "She opposed me and won. Even though she was respectful, Axehandle still feels undermined. She refused my petition."

Franca thinks about challenging this, but after a moment's reflection sees that Axehandle could credibly perceive the exchange in that way. She gives Adrian one of her drama tokens, dropping her total to 1 and raising his to 3.

Now it's Beata's turn to specify her petition, granter, and outcome. "Hmm, I went in wanting to demonstrate my loyalty to my husband, but in the end came around to my battle partner's point of view. So I guess that's two petitions, one of which I abandoned, making the second one more important. And Crow did accept my show of support gratefully. He granted my petition." She gives her remaining token to Claude, dropping her total to 0 and raising his to 1.

Claude says, "I wanted Axehandle to temper his fervor with wisdom. Since he eventually agreed to delay action, he did give me what I wanted." He gives his 1 drama token to Adrian, raising his total to 4.

Delia explains, "I argued against Bladesinger not because I care about war or peace, but to undercut her, to pay her back for her high-handed attitude toward me."

You: "And did you get what you wanted?"

Delia: "She snapped at me, losing her temper. And by switching sides, she pissed everyone off at one point or another. Darkeye is well satisfied by this turn of events." Delia gives her token to Beata, whose total is now 1.

Edward says, "I wanted to show Axehandle he could count on me. But he barely acknowledged my support for him. He shut me out, refusing my petition." Adrian hands him a token, dropping his total to 3 and bringing Edward up to 1.

Finally, Franca specifies: "I wanted Darkeye to step up and show leadership, so that I don't have to stake my prestige every time my son wants to do a stupid thing. Yet instead of carrying herself with the dignity authority demands, she sniped at her rival, Bladesinger. My desire was blocked."

Others in the group challenge this interpretation. Darkeye's spirited arguments did get Bladesinger to switch to Fated's desired position. The group puts it to a vote and decides that Darkeye did grant Fated a significant concession, even if she also served her own selfish purpose. Darkeye, instead of giving a token to Fated, receives one from her, dropping Fated to 1 token and raising her own total to 1 as well.



Petitioning for Practical Favors

Dialogue exchanges involving main cast or recurring characters are by default dramatic. Even if the granter seems to be asking for a practical favor, the subtext of the scene is always emotional. Depending on how self-aware the characters are, they may or may not realize this, but it's true all the same.

The scene counts as a grant if the promise to perform the favor feels like a significant concession to either the petitioner, or to the group at large. Whether the favor is later performed to the petitioner's satisfaction does not retroactively alter the outcome of the scene—but probably provokes a new scene in which the disappointed petitioner returns to the granter to express a grievance.

“If we raid together, both of us will profit.”

“Ah, you are capable of respect-when you want something.”

DRAMA WITH RECURRING CHARACTERS

The GM plays all recurring characters drawing on a single pool of drama tokens. Like any player, the GM must earn drama points by granting or by losing petitions.

ORGANIC CREATION AND BALANCED INPUT

Expect scenes to spontaneously head in directions unanticipated by the caller. These bursts of spontaneous group creation will often comprise the standout moments of your collective story. In allowing players this freedom, GMs should ensure that everyone gets an equal chance to push the story forward, especially when their turn to call comes around. In some gaming groups, a dominant

player grows accustomed to driving the narrative and seizing an undue share of spotlight time, whatever game they're playing. Often this is the most inventive player in the group. As such, he may try to hijack every scene, without even realizing he's doing it. The GM should subtly intervene to bring out the contributions of other participants, balancing the input of the bold and shy alike.

SOFT OPENS

You can start a scene without specifying a situation. Instead the characters cast in the scene simply start talking to one another, and the scene works organically toward a dramatic conflict. This is called a soft open.

It's up to you to make sure that the scene goes somewhere interesting after a minute or two of casting about, so make sure your character is in the scene.

The GM may guide the participants by asking them questions that help them crystallize the soft open into a true scene.

When the scene arising from a soft open winds to a natural close, it may be self-evident to all concerned who the petitioner and granter were, and whether the petition was granted or withheld. If not the GM questions the players involved, and if appropriate the wider group, to determine who gets a token out of it.

Soft opens tend to become rarer as players grasp dramatic scene construction. Players over-relying on them should give their characters internal conflicts and/or desires in conflict with the rest of the cast.

“Blunt Helmet has given us an hour to consider his proposal. Are we for it, or against?”

CONFERENCE SCENES

On occasion you'll want to call a particular type of soft open, the conference scene, in which all or most of the main characters discuss the issues currently before them. This might or might not resolve into a dramatic scene. It may instead simply work as an establishing scene, setting up subsequent dramatic and/or procedural scenes.

When drama breaks out in a conference scene, the GM follows the multiple petitioners rules to see who gets or gives drama tokens.

One or more supporting characters may also be present, pitching in opinions or answering questions. Try to avoid situations where multiple supporting characters take main focus, forcing the GM to talk to herself while the rest of you watch.

Calling a conference scene costs you a drama token only if your character is not present.

Conference scenes are most effective when used sparingly. On one hand, they help to focus the series and re-establish the cast's various agendas. On the other, they tend to go on for a good while without really moving the story forward.



DRAMA TOKEN QUICK REFERENCE

- ▶ All participants, including the GM, start each session without drama tokens.
- ▶ Under certain conditions, players may gain drama tokens from a limitless kitty.
- ▶ Drama tokens are given out as rewards for granting, or consolation prizes for being refused.
- ▶ If a petition is willingly granted, the granter gains a drama token from:
 - the petitioner, if he has one to give
 - or the kitty, if he doesn't.
- ▶ If a petition is refused, the petitioner gains a drama token from
 - the granter, if he has one to give
 - or the kitty, if he doesn't.
- ▶ To force an unwilling granter to make a significant concession to you, spend 2 drama tokens.
- ▶ To block a force, spend 3 drama tokens.
- ▶ As a player, you may spend 1 drama token to:
 - call a scene in which your character does not appear
 - duck a scene
 - crash a scene whose caller did not include you
 - prevent a player from crashing a scene you called
- ▶ At the end of a session, count up your unspent drama tokens; these contribute to your chance of winning a bennie.
- ▶ Unspent drama tokens do not carry over to the next session.



DRAMA VS. TALKING

Where any scene between a PC and either another PC or a recurring character is by definition dramatic, with emotional stakes at play, all dialogue interactions with minor characters are procedural, and resolved with the Talking ability. They can never grant meaningful dramatic concessions, because the PCs have no emotional investment in them. They can only grant—or refuse—practical favors. Drama tokens are never awarded or spent as the result of a Talking scene.

Expect Hillfolk players to periodically call speech-making scenes, in which their characters

petition the clan as a collective, hoping to sway it in a certain direction. Treat these as dramatic scenes, in which the crowd acts as granter. In this setting (and almost any other) people maintain a strong emotional stake in the actions of their community. The GM plays the crowd, perhaps with supporting interjections from other players, and pays or receives any drama tokens accruing from the exchange.

This distinction might seem tricky, but you won't have to wrestle with it often if at all.

Players rarely bother to call scenes involving minor characters.

PROCEDURAL SCENES

In procedural scenes, characters pursue practical, external goals. These may allow them to petition for emotional rewards in subsequent scenes, but at the moment of success or failure are matters of practical effort.

For example, you might:

- ▶ battle defenders of a neighboring territory with swords and spears, as you try to steal their cattle
- ▶ journey across an arid desert
- ▶ know where to find a prophet who leads a hermit's existence on the desert's other side
- ▶ make a magnificent staff, to replace his damaged walking stick
- ▶ convince him (a man you have no emotional hold over and seek only a practical benefit from) to reveal to you his latest vision
- ▶ avoid detection by scouts sent by the people you raided, skipping a confrontation in which you have nothing to gain

*"We will do what we always do when the people are restive."
"Not another hunting expedition!"*

PROCEDURAL RESOLUTION

This section shows you how to determine what happens when the main characters pursue a practical goal. It presents simple starter rules to resolve procedural actions. Use these when the group is new to the game. Experienced hands can later move on to the more versatile advanced resolution system (as seen in *Blood on the Snow: A DramaSystem Companion*). If no one ever expresses a desire for the additional choices it provides, stick with this version.

PROCEDURAL TOKENS

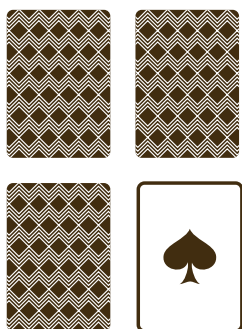
Each player, and the GM, starts the first session with three procedural tokens: one green, one yellow, and one red. When you spend a token, set it aside. The others remain unspent. When you've spent all three of them, they immediately refresh. All three of them return to your pile of unspent tokens, and become once again available for use.

Your pile of available tokens carries over to the next session. It does not refresh between sessions.

PLAYING CARDS

For procedural resolutions, you'll also require a deck of standard playing cards, from which the jokers are removed. The GM always shuffles the deck before launching into any new resolution.

A special deck of Hillfolk cards provides additional options but is not needed for play (see p. 62).



CALLING A PROCEDURAL SCENE

To establish a procedural scene, the caller describes the basic situation. While adding as much evocative narration as possible, she specifies:

- › the scene's location
- › which characters are present
- › what they're trying to achieve, and how

Most of the time, you'll ask players if they want their characters to take part, and frame the scene so that those who want to participate get to.

You may break this natural etiquette if you want to, either casting unwilling characters or keeping others out, requiring players to officially dodge or crash the scene.

To call a procedural scene your character is not in, spend a green token. (This requirement does not apply to the GM.)

Once you get the hang of this, procedural scene resolution becomes an exercise in free-flowing joint narration, as other players add details of what their characters are doing. They may add details of the environment and situation as needed. If the caller feels that these added details undermine the intent of the scene, she may adjust them to fit.

STEP ONE: THE GM SPENDS

FOR THE OPPOSITION

The GM secretly spends one of her available tokens, concealing it so that it can be revealed with a flourish at the conclusion of a scene: she might pull it from a purse, pocket, or move aside a piece of paper¹⁰.

The color of the token reflects the strength of the obstacle standing between the players and success, whatever that may be. The better the token you spend, the more powerful the force arrayed against them.

<i>Opposing Force</i>	<i>GM's Token</i>
Strong	Green
Middling	Yellow
Weak	Red

PROCEDURAL TOKEN QUICK REFERENCE

- › All participants start the first session with one green, one yellow, and one red token.
- › When you spend a token, set it aside. When you spend your last available token, they refresh—you get all three back again.
- › Unlike drama tokens, your currently available procedural tokens carry over from the end of one session to the beginning of the next.
- › The GM spends a procedural token to set the strength of the obstacles you face in a procedural scene.
- › In simple procedural resolution:
 - standard:
 - The GM spends a token to set the strength of the obstacle.
 - The player spends a token to determine how many cards he draws: green: 2, yellow: 1, red: 1, and the GM gets to knock out a card
 - player vs. player the player spends to determine maximum number of cards he can draw: green: 3, yellow: 2, red: 1.

¹⁰ If players can't trust you to spend your tokens honestly, you need to be playing something other than Hillfolk. Table hockey, maybe. Attentive players may occasionally know what you're spending,

because you have only one token left. This could lead to a little bit of system-gaming, but that's not a huge deal.

HOW TO ASSIGN DIFFICULTIES

When the GM has more than one available token, she decides how to place the Difficulty using the following criteria (in rough order of priority, from highest to lowest):

Creative Instinct: If you have an instinctive sense of how hard this should be without being able to articulate why, go with that.

Story Possibility: If you can see more possible story branches from a success than a failure, assign the most forgiving Difficulty available. If failure seems to offer more story possibilities, assign the least favorable Difficulty you can afford.

Emotional Rhythm: If the primary actor's most recent scenes (including dramatic ones) have resolved in the primary actor's favor, assign the most challenging Difficulty you can afford. If recent events have gone against him, assign the least challenging Difficulty available. Sometimes a player's mood runs contrary to an objective rendering

of his success or failure. Go with the subjective impression over your detached assessment of how well he's been faring lately.

Foreshadowing: If prior events have established a success as more likely than a failure, assign the most forgiving Difficulty available. If the reverse is true, assign the toughest Difficulty you can.

Literal logic: If success seems unlikely based on historical precedent, your knowledge of physics, the relative strengths of various weapons, or some other factor tangential to the construction of a compelling story, assign the hardest available Difficulty. If it seems likely based on those factors, assign the easiest available. Take the players' descriptions of their tactics into account. Spend high for ludicrous plans and low for brilliant ones.

KNOCKING OUT CARDS

When a player spends a red token, the GM always removes from play the best available match, prioritizing as follows:

1. cards with the same number
2. cards of the same suit
3. cards of the same color

If two or more cards are equally good matches, it doesn't matter which of them the GM chooses. She does so based on what seems easiest to narrate.

STEP TWO: THE TARGET CARD

After shuffling the deck, you cut it and draw a card, which you show to the group. This is the target card.

STEP THREE: PLAYERS SPEND AND DRAW

In turn, according to a freshly determined precedence order¹¹, each player may now spend a procedural token and draw a corresponding number of cards. To succeed, at least one of the players must, when all cards have been played, have a card that matches the target. Depending on the strength of the opposing force—which the players do not yet know—they may need to match only its color, or perhaps its suit, or even its number.

So if the target card is a king of clubs, they know that black cards are good, clubs are better, but kings of the other three suits are the best of all.

- ▶ A player spending a *green token* draws *two cards*.
- ▶ A player spending a *yellow token* draws *one card*.
- ▶ A player spending a *red token* draws one card—after which the GM removes from play a single card held by any player. If none of the cards on the table match the target's color, suit or value, the GM waits, instead knocking out the next card that does, as soon as a player draws it.

Players whose characters are present must spend a token and make the corresponding card draw.

Players whose characters are not present may alter the odds in the group's favor by spending a yellow or green token. If they have neither of these tokens to spend, they can't influence the outcome.



¹¹ On occasion, it makes sense for a particular character to initiate the action. If so, start with that character, then go to precedence order.

STEP FOUR: THE FINAL RESULT

When all of the players have acted or (if absent) passed on acting, the GM checks to see if any of their cards match the target card.

<i>Opposing Force</i>	<i>GM's Token</i>	<i>Match Needed</i>
Great	Green	Same value as target
Middling	Yellow	Same suit as target
Puny	Red	Same color as target

On a match, the characters prevail. Without one, they fail.

At this conclusive stage, a card matching the target's value always wins, no matter what token the GM spent.

STEP FIVE: PERSONAL CONSEQUENCES

Players who drew face cards (even if they were later knocked out by the GM) may take on a Personal Consequence which matters in a future scene.

If you drew the face card when playing a green token, introduce an advantage your character can benefit from in an upcoming scene.

If you drew the face card when playing a red token, introduce an additional obstacle your character must resolve in an upcoming scene.

Ignore face cards if you played a yellow token.

The GM may step in to adjust advantages that seem out of proportion with the stakes of the scene or otherwise break narrative plausibility. Likewise, if you create a problem for yourself that isn't serious enough or acts as an advantage in disguise, the GM helps you to find an appropriately genuine and entertaining problem.

NARRATING THE UPS AND DOWNS

While performing the rules actions described above, the GM and the players describe the smaller advances and setbacks the participants undergo on their way to victory or defeat.

Here's how it all fits together:

- ▶ The players kick off the scene by describing what their characters are trying to do.

FACE CARDS INCLUDE THE ACE

In DramaSystem, aces always count as face cards, along with the jack, queen, and king.

- ▶ The GM describes whatever it is they're trying to overcome. She may choose to accurately portray the strength of the opposing force, or set up the players for a surprise by making a tough obstacle seem initially easy, or a weak one strong.
- ▶ With each card drawn, the relevant player (encouraged as necessary by the GM) describes his character taking action. The extent of the match colors the description:

<i>Match</i>	<i>Describe the action as...</i>
Value	Seemingly decisive
Suit	Impressive
Color	Solid
None	Ineffectual

- ▶ When the GM knocks out a card, the player who spent the red token has suffered a reversal that erases a previous advantage. When learning the system, concentrate on getting the rules stuff right first. Fold in narration as you grow comfortable with it.

PROCEDURAL STEP-BY-STEP

1. The GM spends for the opposition
2. The GM draws the target card
3. Players spend and draw
4. The final result
5. Personal consequences



MULTIPLE RESOLUTIONS

Scenes never include more than one procedural resolution. Fold additional or side actions into the main narrative, or wait and call a new scene, making it a flashback where necessary.

PROCEDURAL RESOLUTIONS IN DRAMATIC SCENES

On occasion, a player may wish to have her character take on a practical goal during a scene called as a dramatic. Conversely, drama may spontaneously break out during a procedural scene. Allow scene modes to intermix as seems organic to the story. When everyone seems to be happy with the results, GMs, as arbiters of pacing, sit back and let this happen. When these shifts feel more like sidetracks than positive developments, the GM intervenes to refocus them back to their original intent. When deciding whether to intervene, gauge the reactions of all players, granting some extra weight to the scene's caller.

"Blunt Helmet has given us an hour to consider his proposal. Are we for it, or against?"

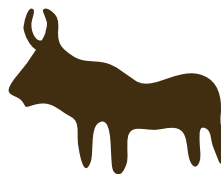
SUCCESS BY NARRATION

Often you can describe your character, in concert with others or alone, as undertaking successful practical action, without submitting yourself to the vagaries of procedural resolution. You can do this at the top of a scene, while setting the scene, or as it unfolds. You needn't be the caller to describe your character's practical successes.

If no participants object to your narration, what you describe becomes part of the narrative.

If any participant objects, you must play out a procedural to see if your pursuit of a practical goal succeeds. You aren't obligated to start a procedural when an objection is raised. Instead you can delay the attempt, or give up on it entirely. In the second case, your character probably sees that the action is more difficult than it at first appeared. In the first, you'll likely go on to bring other players in on your action—which is the best assurance of success under the simple procedural system.

When you call a procedural scene, and the GM doesn't see any good story reason for you to face resistance, she'll ask if anyone else objects to your



USE ONLY WHEN NEEDED

Dramatic scenes dominate DramaSystem play, even though they're simpler and thus briefer than the procedural rules. Most groups start out calling lots of procedural scenes, because that's what they're used to playing. They find them easier to conceptualize, at first. As they find their legs with the system, procedural sequences begin to fall away. After a while, a group may all but drop them, tending instead to accept jumps

ahead in time where procedural activities take place offstage, to a mutually agreed outcome. This is exactly the play pattern that is meant to emerge over time. That said, groups develop their own internal cultures. A group that continues to call and enjoy plenty of procedural scenes is also doing it right: they're having fun and building the story they collectively want to tell.

success. If not, you describe your action as having succeeded, and then call a reframed scene arising from that.

Adrian wants his character, Axehandle, to impress a rival chieftain, Many Words. He proposes a procedural scene in which Axehandle rescues Many Words' daughter from a sandstorm. You, as GM, see no story reason why he shouldn't be able to do this. Why not give him the win, and move on? You ask the other players if they have any objections. None of them do.

"How do you rescue her?" you prompt.

Adrian describes his daring plunge into the maw of the whirling storm, and his emergence with the girl in his arms.

"Now what scene do you call?"

"I take her to Many Words," he says.

Taking the part of Many Words, you start the dramatic scene, in which Axehandle is clearly petitioning him for a show of respect.

PROCEDURAL TIPS

The simple procedural system rewards you for persuading as many of your fellow players as possible to participate, and to spend their best tokens. This underlines the game's emphasis on the personal interactions of the main cast. Success in the practical realm follows one or more successful dramatic petitions.

This is where the dramatic and procedural token economies intersect—you spend drama tokens to get others to spend procedural

tokens on your behalf.

Actions undertaken alone face tough odds, even when you spend your best token. When you want your character to do something on his own, you're almost certainly better off trying for a Success through Narration, and hoping no one objects. If they do, you'll need allies.

For a system where ability ranks matter, graduate to the Advanced Procedural.

SIMPLE PROCEDURAL EXAMPLE

Axehandle (ADRIAN), Bladesinger (BEATA), Crow (CLAUDE) and Eager (EDWARD) will, in a scene called by Adrian, raid an encampment of northern soldiers.

Adrian sums up the plan, in character as Axehandle: "Eager and I will feint toward the corral, as if we're there to steal horses. Bladesinger, Crow, you'll wait till we've created our diversion, then go in to achieve the real objective—kidnapping the general, Blunt Helmet."

You, as GM, have already spent your green token, leaving you with a yellow and a red. Bladesinger has been on a roll lately, winning the approval of several granters in a row. According to the principle of emotional rhythm, it's time for the story to squeeze her a bit. You decide to make this as hard for her as you can afford, spending your yellow token. You hide it under a sheet of paper.

"Heavily armored guards patrol the camp. There are neither more than you feared, nor fewer than you hoped," you say, describing the opposition.

You draw a card from the deck. You get an ace of spades. You show it to the players. They know that black cards are good, spades are better, but the other aces are best of all.

To set the scene, you ask each player with a character present to describe what their character is doing.

The players in turn describe what their characters are doing.

"We skitter along the ridge toward the corral," Adrian says, "making ourselves noticeable, but not obviously so."

"My heart pounds nervously as I follow him," narrates Edward. "Since our harsh words back in the camp, I fear disappointing him further."

"Once I see the guards' heads turn toward the ridge, I descend on cat-like feet toward the general's yurt," says Beata.

"I follow," says Claude, "iron spear ready to pierce any who strike at my battle-sister."

Drawing for precedence you announce that, Beata goes first. She really wants to prevail, and spends a green token. This entitles her to draw two cards. She gets an 8 of clubs, and an 8 of spades. These are both potential matches, with the spades (color and suit) better than the clubs (color only). Bladesinger describes her successful action:

"The sound of my steps concealed by wind howling through the arroyo, I creep close to the general's tent."

Now it's Claude's turn to act. He has only a red token left, which entitles him to draw one card. He gets a 6 of spades—a suit match, and thus an encouraging result.

"I sweep in from another direction," Claude says, "Creating a diversion by shouting and whirling my sword."

However, because he spent a red token, you get to knock out a card. The two best cards in play are his 6 of spades and Beata's 8 of spades. As suit matches, they are both equal, and you could pick either one. It'll be easier to explain a setback for Crow arising from Claude's actions, so you pull the 6 from play.

"An enormous northern warrior rushes toward you, whirling a mammoth club that makes your sword look like a toothpick!" you narrate.

"Looks like I'll have to join Crow in this," says Adrian, who is next in the precedence order. "I launch myself at the giant warrior, keeping him from braining my clan-mate!" He has a green and a yellow token. With a suit match already in play, he decides to conserve his green token and only spend the yellow. That entitles him to a single draw—he gets a 7 of clubs. It's a good card, but only a color match. "Together, we are a match for him—though at two to one odds, that makes us seem none too valiant," Adrian describes.

Delia appears next in the precedence order. Her

character isn't there, but that doesn't stop her from participating as a player. She has a yellow and a red token. Delia can't spend the red on a procedural scene Darkeye isn't in, but could spend the yellow. However, she chooses not to—Darkeye argued against the raid and will gain prestige if it fails.

Only Eager can turn the tide now. Edward, last in the precedence order, spends a yellow token, entitling him to one card draw. He gets a 10 of clubs.

"In the chaos, I've come up from behind Blunt Helmet's tent," Edward narrates.

The players know that the draws have gone well for them. With both suit and color matches in play, they lose only if you spent a green token when determining the opposition.

You reveal the yellow token—they've won!

You cue Edward and Beata to describe how they capture Blunt Helmet.

"I spring up from behind him, disarming him."

"I place my spear at his throat, and tell him his men better not interfere."

In character as Blunt Helmet calling to his men, you say, "Stand down! I'll go with these savages, and sort this out!"

"We must settle this the honorable way."

"I agree. To first blood, or to the death?"

PLAYER VS. PLAYER

Two main cast characters can oppose each other in achieving a practical goal. For example:

- ▶ an arm-wrestling contest
- ▶ a punch-up
- ▶ one character tries to remove another forcibly from a scene; the other resists
- ▶ being the first to find the white ox

Each player announces the ability his character is using and what he is trying to achieve.

Before proceeding, check the two contesting characters' action types. If one primary is using a Strong ability and another a Weak ability, the Strong character automatically wins, no resolution system required.

Players may challenge stated goals on the grounds that they are implausible or move the story too far forward in a single action. In the event of a successful challenge, the GM suggests a modified goal that satisfies all concerned.

PROCEDURAL EXPECTATIONS

As it says in the name, DramaSystem favors dramatic scenes over procedural ones. The procedural system introduces narrative suspense, putting outcomes in doubt, without extending the suspense over a huge number of story beats—or

taking that much time. It does not aspire to the complicated tactics of a simulative roleplaying game, or the extended action of a movie set-piece. Its modest treatment of action matches what you tend to see on TV series, where budgets and pacing mandate briefer resolutions.

Otherwise, each player spends a procedural token. The outcome is then decided through a series of card draws. The maximum number of cards the player draws depends on the token spent: 3 for green, 2 for yellow, 1 for red.

A player using a Strong ability may draw an additional card if his opponent is using a Middling ability.

The GM decides which of the characters seems to have started the contest, whatever it may be.

That player draws the first card.

The other player draws the second.

The first player may then draw an additional card, if he has one left.

Then the second player may do the same.

This continues until both players have either run out of card draws, or choose not to draw any more.

The player with the highest card overcomes the other, achieving his goal.

To resolve ties between cards of the same value, use the suit order (from best to worst): spades, hearts, diamonds, clubs.

Players who at any time drew a face card and spent a green token introduce an advantage their characters can take advantage of in an upcoming scene.

Players who at any time drew a face card and spent a red token introduce an additional obstacle their characters must resolve in an upcoming scene.

 SOLO ACTIONS

The standard procedural rules make it easier to succeed by bringing other players into your action attempt. Where it makes sense for a player to act on his own without undue risk of failure, the GM may decide to instead use the Player vs. Player rules, acting as the opposing supporting character or impersonal obstacles. The GM spends a procedural

token, getting the usual 3 draws for green, 2 for yellow, and 1 for red. If the supporting character has been established as being especially formidable in the action type used to oppose the PC, the GM gains an additional redraw. If you can't remember offhand how formidable the supporting character is supposed to be, he isn't.

Narrating

The player drawing the first card describes what his character is doing to win the contest.

From then on, players describe their characters either taking a step toward victory (when they draw a card better than their opponent's) or suffering a setback (when they draw worse cards).

When all cards have been drawn, the player with the best card describes his character achieving the agreed-upon goal.

Assisting in Player vs. Player Contests

Player vs. player contests may involve more than two main characters.

The assisting player announces which contestant his character is trying to help, how he's doing that, and what ability he's using. Players can intervene at any time, and don't have to announce this at the top of a contest.

He spends a token, allowing the assisted character a number of redraws equivalent to the token spend: 3 for green, 2 for yellow, 1 for red. If he's using a Strong ability and everyone acting on the other side is using a Weak ability, he adds an additional draw to that number.

The assisting player draws those extra cards, as necessary, and narrates what his character is doing to bring victory for his chosen side.

Even in what seems like a disorganized rumble between two sets of main characters, it's always neatest to designate a primary contestant on each side. When it's not clear who this might be, the GM chooses. Usually this will be obvious—the first character to act on one side, and the first character acted upon on the other.

Consequences are handed out by the winning original contestant, regardless of whose token paid for the final card drawn.

Player vs. Player Example

Axehandle (Adrian) wants to kill a prisoner, the northern general Blunt Helmet. Eager (Edward) wants to deflect his blows, saving the man's life until other clan members can restrain Axehandle.

Adrian and Edward determine the stakes. They agree that Blunt Helmet dies if Adrian wins, and that Axehandle will be restrained from killing him if Edward wins. (As GM, you lack the green token you'd need to keep Blunt Helmet alive despite a win for Adrian. Not that you'd necessarily use it if you had it.)

Since Axehandle is trying to do something and Eager is trying to stop him, you rule that it makes sense for Axehandle to go first.

Axehandle really wants Blunt Helmet dead, and Adrian has a green token to spend, so he spends it. He can call for up to three draws in the course of the contest.

Edward has no green token to spend: the best he can do is a yellow. He'll be able to call for up to 2 draws.

They're using their Fighting, a Strong ability for Axehandle and a Middling one for Eager. Adrian gets to draw an extra card, bringing his total to four.

"I lunge for the general, ready to throttle him with my bare hands," exclaims Adrian. He draws a jack.

"I slide over the table to get between you," narrates Edward. He draws a 5.

"Ha! I am on him, pressing iron fingers on his throat!" exults Adrian. He stands pat on his jack.

Edward draws his second card, a 7—still not enough to beat Adrian's jack. He's out of draws, so if no one intervenes, the contest is over, and Blunt Helmet dies.

The only other character present is Darkeye (Delia.) "No one hates that general more than I," she says, as if giving her character's internal monologue, "but we don't need the northern army on our doorstep again." She spends a green token, entitling her to up to three draws. "I aid Eager, throwing a dart to knock the dagger from Axehandle's grasp." She draws her first card toward Edward's victory, and gets a king.

"I may have lost my dagger, but I haven't lost my grip," narrates Adrian. "I return to strangling him!" He draws a queen—an excellent card, but not good enough to counter Delia's king. "Unfortunately,



I can't get a grip, with both Eager and Darkeye restraining me..."

He has one draw left. "I try to throw Darkeye into Eager, clearing the way to throttle Blunt Helmet." He draws a king.

With two cards of the same value on the table, the suits now matter. Adrian has drawn a king of clubs; Delia, the king of diamonds. Consulting the suit order, you see that diamonds beat clubs. Delia retains her lead. She stands pat, declining to redraw.

No one is sure what to narrate, so you jump in: "You do throw her, but into Blunt Helmet."

"I palm him a dagger!" Delia exults.

"I lunge at him before he can raise it into striking position!" Adrian draws his last card: an eight of clubs. "But then I have to skitter back, because we have a standoff on our hands."

Again Delia stands pat on her superior card. Adrian has run out of draws, so the contest is resolved, in favor of Eager and Darkeye, who want Blunt Helmet alive.

Now you check to see if anyone gets a Personal Consequence. Edward spent a yellow token, and so doesn't qualify for any, for good or for ill.

Adrian and Delia both spent green tokens; each drew a face card in the course of the contest. So each earns a positive personal consequence.

"The Northerners will hear that I intervened to save their general, and will henceforth accord me the respect they don't normally pay to women," Delia narrates.

Adrian's task of thinking up a positive Personal Consequence is tougher, since he lost the contest and didn't get what he wanted. "Blunt Helmet must have enemies among the Northerners. Sometime soon, one of them will help me when I need it."

You then go on to play out a brief exchange in which Blunt Helmet, who knows he can't escape the village anyway, agrees to surrender the dagger. You treat this not as a scene in itself, but a capper to the procedural.

RESOLVING CONSEQUENCES

When a character earns or suffers a consequence during a procedural scene, GM and player each make a note of it. Consequences are typically too ephemeral to include on the character sheet.

Players should then attempt to work their consequences into an upcoming scene. If they don't, the GM will. You can invoke a consequence in more than one scene. Eventually some new consequence will arise, and the old one will fade into the background.

Eager's new tie to Blunt Helmet resolves as soon as it appears. But he might well draw on it in a subsequent dramatic scene he calls with Blunt Helmet, seeking another concession from him. The rule of novelty will prevent his player, Edward, from drawing on it again and again without interruption. Over time, the relationship with Blunt Helmet will likely resolve in a way that moves past the consequence—either solidifying, so that its origin is forgotten, or becoming strained once more.

"We must settle this the honorable way."

"I agree. To first blood, or to the death?"

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

Supporting characters are created and fleshed out during the game by any participant, and portrayed by the GM.

They break into two types: minor and recurring. This is mostly a bookkeeping distinction, sorting the tangential figures from those who will play an important ongoing role in the series.

The GM, or a player given bookkeeping responsibilities, should keep a list of characters appearing in the series, updating it as necessary. Separate them into the two categories, with special attention paid to the recurring characters.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Minor characters provide obstacles during procedural scenes. They do not tie into the desires of main cast members or satisfy their emotional needs.

Alternately, they may be mentioned in passing, without taking a central role in the scene. They're the equivalent of Shakespearean spear-carriers.

Many recurring characters start out as minor, then become more important when a PC develops an emotional need they can fulfill.

Introducing Minor Characters

Characters are introduced for the first time either by the caller, at the top of a scene, or by any participant, while a scene is already in progress.

When bringing in a new character, give him a name and a brief description, no more than two or three clauses long. The brief description indicates the minor character's role in the world or story, giving the GM enough of a starting point to portray him.

RECURRING CHARACTERS

A minor character is promoted to recurring status when a participant calls a dramatic scene in which he or she appears as grantor or petitioner.

Some characters start out as recurring, when their first appearance is a dramatic scene in which they are called upon to grant a PC's petition.

Players may establish relationships to recurring characters promoted by other players. Do this during any scene featuring both your character and the recurring character.

Recurring characters may act as petitioners, seeking grants from players, but never other recurring characters.

The GM keeps a single pool of drama tokens, used for all of the recurring characters. This pool is distinct from the kitty.

In scene seven, the GM plays the recurring character Shortmountain, spending two tokens to make a force. She is permitted to do this even though she earned the first token in scene three, playing Pearlaker, and the second in scene five, playing Ram.

"You dare say that here, in the ancestral hall?"

"What better place to say it?"

INTRODUCING LOCATIONS

Any participant can introduce a new location in which a scene can take place, or to which a scene in progress can logically shift. (For example, a scene that takes place during a journey might start on a road and end up in a swamp.) The caller, or any participant during a shift in location, provides an introductory description of the place, which other participants can then elaborate on. They can do this as the scene progresses, or in a later scene set in the same place.

Once you establish a few basic locations, you'll find the story often returning to them, like the regular sets in a TV show.

A participant who feels that an introduced location detail is out of bounds can challenge it on one of the following grounds:

- › Consistency: The description is anachronistic or otherwise unsuited to the established setting and genre.
- › Continuity: The description is inconsistent with what has already been established.
- › Tone: The description is somehow ridiculous.
- › Believability: The description defies common sense.

If the GM agrees that the detail fails one of the above tests, she allows a challenge, as per the standard rules on p. 23.

BENNIES

DramaSystem rewards the players who most consistently and entertainingly enact their dramatic poles.

GAINING BENNIES

At the end of each episode, each player in turn (in seating order) makes a brief statement, highlighting how he entertainingly brought out his character's dramatic poles over the course of the episode, in relation to the episode's theme.

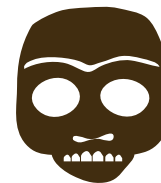
Any story with a theme inherently includes the opposite of that theme. A story about war is also about peace; a story about hunger is also about nourishment; and a story about love also threatens the possibility of lost love. Therefore, you can describe your character as either reinforcing or undermining the theme.

You might describe yourself moving from one pole to the other, or bringing both poles into your characterization at different points.

For example, in an episode with the theme of Power:

- › "I demonstrated my *warrior* side when I led the raid, and my *peacemaker* side when I argued to spare the prisoners. In both cases I demonstrated my personal power."
- › "This time I became less of a *leader* and more of a *tyrant*, when I demanded that Fated accept my power."
- › "I argued for *tradition* when Axehandle

- wanted to add to the temple, and against it when the women demanded greater respect. I maintained the power of male authority.”
- “As Axehandle became more of a tyrant, I shifted from *loyalty* to *ambition*, seeking to grab some power for myself before he locks it all down. And that scene where I struck a deal with Blunt Helmet was pretty awesome, you have to admit.”



When a player is unable to articulate a case, the GM makes it for him.

All participants then vote, ranking the other players in order, with #1 the best score, #2 second best and so on. The argument is just a reminder: voters base their rankings on how well the players brought out their dramatic poles in relation to the theme, not how skillfully they made their cases. Moving from one pole to another in the course of an episode is a good thing. Vote against players who, episode in and episode out, stress a particular pole and ignore the other. Players do not rank themselves. No one ranks the GM, who never gets bennies. The GM votes, too, ranking all of the players.

The GM then totals each player’s vote tally. The number of drama tokens a player has in hand is then subtracted from this number.

The two players with the lowest scores gain one bennie each¹².

For portable computer users, a simple spreadsheet speeds the tallying.

Tied Results

If two players are tied for the lowest score, each gets a bennie. The second place finisher(s) does not.

If two players tie for second place, both of them gain bennies, as does the player in first.

If three or more players tie for first, all gain bennies.

SPENDING BENNIES

When you have a bennie, you can spend it for, as the name suggests, narrative benefits that kick in during play. Once spent, you remove the bennie from your character sheet. They don’t refresh; you can replace a spent bennie only by earning a new one, as above.

Cash in a bennie for any one of the following:

- a drama token
 - a procedural token
 - to draw an additional card in a procedural scene
 - the right to jump the queue and call a scene immediately after any other scene¹³. The queue-jumper’s next scene is skipped, after which the existing calling order is observed as per usual.
 - to jump into a scene the caller wants to keep you out of
 - to block another player’s attempt to jump into a scene you’ve called. (Blocked players keep the bennies they would have spent.)
 - the right to burn any 1 token held by another player. A drama token returns to the kitty; a procedural token is treated as spent.
- You may spend only one bennie per scene.

“Why do you always seem to have the upper hand?”

“Because, Bullhead, I yield it, from time to time, to others.”

¹² Low score looks counter-intuitive on the page but is entirely natural in practice. It allows players to rank each other from 1 on down, with #1 being the best. Only the GM ever sees the low score.

¹³ Low score looks counter-intuitive on the page but is entirely natural in practice. It allows players to rank each other from 1 on down, with #1 being the best. Only the GM ever sees the low score.



NOTES ON PLAY

Drama System gives participants great freedom to build stories together. It imposes less on the emerging narrative than many deservedly popular story games. This freedom, along with its ability to emulate fictional drama, is the game's central feature. However, like a blank page, great freedom can be creatively flummoxing.

By examining the ramifications of the simple rules presented in the previous chapter, this section helps your group to quickly de-flummox and use the system to its full potential.

~~~~~  
 “You know what I want.”

“If I did, that would be a first.”

## COMMON INTENTIONS

If you know who you want your character to engage with but are having trouble thinking of the emotional concession you might seek from them, you probably want one of the following things from them:

- › acceptance
- › admiration
- › affection
- › anger
- › annoy
- › apology
- › assure
- › attention
- › be assured
- › calm
- › excite
- › favor
- › forgiveness
- › gain trust
- › mollify
- › obedience
- › punish
- › seek truth
- › test granter's trustworthiness

## INFORMATION BEATS

The introduction and manipulation of information provides a key building block of any story, dramatic or procedural. Hamlet's Hit Points identifies three main types of information beats:

- › *Pipe*: a piece of information we need to understand the narrative, often presented in a way that obscures its eventual significance
- › *Question*: in which the audience is presented with an unanswered question and encouraged to anticipate the answer
- › *Reveal*: a moment when we discover something new and surprising. It is particularly satisfying when:
  - we have been primed to crave the answer by a previous, matching question beat
  - we discover that information conveyed to us in an offhand or disguised manner in a previous pipe beat turns out to be unexpectedly significant

By carefully laying in pipe, question, and reveal beats, you can make scenes involving your character more entertaining than they otherwise might be, increasing your chance of earning bennies.

Various techniques allow you to introduce new information into the story, driving it in a direction you find satisfying.

- › *Scene preludes*: When you call a scene, your description of the location and starting situation can bring in new information. Pipe and question beats work especially well here.
  - “Outside the camp, I spot the bedraggled members of another clan coming our way, as if they've survived some terrible battle.”
  - “While out on the ridge, I see Treeclimber rifling our cache of buried weapons, without permission.”
  - “Walking through the pasture, I see strange flowers with blood-red petals.

The people will react fearfully if they hear of them, for these are known as omen blooms.”

- ▶ *In dramatic exchanges:* You may depict your character as knowing something new, and revealing it to other PCs, while acting as petitioner or granter. These might be questions or reveals.
  - “Yes, Radish claims he saw members of the Greensnake clan. But everyone knows what a drunkard he is!”
  - “Scorn your mother all you want. But let me tell you what really happened on Scorpion Ridge, the day you were born.”
  - “I didn’t want to mention it until our straits were truly desperate, but I know where some fat sheep might still be found.”
- ▶ *Offhand comments:* You can bring in seemingly innocuous facts about the world, which you can then bring out to greater effect later on, during any dialogue sequence. This includes your glancing contributions to other characters’ dramatic exchanges, or your participation in group scenes. These might raise or answer questions but most typically work as pipe beats.
  - “The fish people used to worship our god, you know.” (Sets up a possible outreach to the Fish Tribe.)
  - “The midsummer festival must be soon.” (Sets up a night of freewheeling, drunken interaction with neighbors.)
  - “Something is wrong with this kvas.” (Sets up a scene in which you intend to reveal an adoptee from the Greensnake clan as a poisoner, and thus start a conflict with them.)

## SAVING RECURRING CHARACTERS

When a player prevailing in a procedural scene describes himself as killing a recurring character, the GM can still stipulate that the character survives, by spending a green token.

Once a recurring character has been saved from death, either through vote or a GM token spend, no one may describe him as having been killed at any time during the current episode.

## CALLING A CLIFFHANGER

During a scene occurring near the very end of the episode, the group or GM may spontaneously decide to call a cliffhanger, interrupting the action and bringing the session to a sudden close. It then resolves with the usual allocation of bennies.

The first caller of the next episode may pick up the action where it left off before. Or they might, as serialized TV shows sometimes do, jump ahead into unrelated action, with the answers to the questions posed during the cliffhanger resolved only in later scenes.

Groups plagued by fluctuating attendance should avoid cliffhangers.

~~~~~  
“He leads a charmed life.”

“Then we must take his luck away from him.”

SEASONS

After ten to twelve episodes, you may want to look for a suitable breakpoint and declare a season of play at an end. (The term originates with North American TV seasons, and need not correspond to any particular period of fictional time.)

The first scene of the new season, called by the GM, either resolves a cliffhanger from the previous season, or jumps ahead in time, with the characters adjusting to major changes in their situation.

Seasons lend shape and a sense of scope to your Hillfolk narrative.

THE END

You may establish in advance how many episodes of Hillfolk to play, or allow the game to wind down, as most roleplaying series do, in response to external vagaries.

During the final episode, main characters lose their immunity. Any procedural contest putting their survival at stake can end in one or more protagonist deaths.

GMs can no longer pay green tokens to keep supporting characters alive.

The group may choose to ignore this rule for non-Hillfolk settings, where the threat of character death is never an issue. A heartwarming historical saga about a pioneer family surviving on the prairies shouldn’t end with an orgy of bloodletting.

That's all the extra rules you need—knowing that the climactic episode is upon them, players will spontaneously raise the stakes and drive the narrative to an epic conclusion.

GM MASTERCLASS

DramaSystem is at the same time harder and easier to GM than traditional roleplaying games.

Harder, because it imposes very specific constraints on your power to drive the narrative, oppose player actions, and control pacing.

Easier, because it requires little prep time, and encourages the players to do much of the heavy lifting in weaving a compelling storyline.

DramaSystem's constraints on GM power inspire you to carefully consider your limited supply of interventions into the storyline. They require you to react to unfolding events just as the players do, allowing you to enjoy the suspense they generate as much as anyone else.

All GMs will find their own styles and ways of interacting with the DramaSystem dynamic. This section helps orient you as you develop your own distinct approach.

~~~~~  
*"You again!"*

*"I told you I'd be back, when you least expected it."*

### CHOOSING YOUR SCENES

Players (mostly) have to call scenes starring their own characters. They figure out which scenes to call by asking themselves what their characters presently want, and who they might get it from. As a GM, you enjoy much wider latitude. You're not thinking through the eyes of any one character, but as a stand-in for the group as a whole. Your job is to keep the proceedings as entertaining as possible for everyone. Ask yourself: if this was a serial drama on TV, what would I want to see dealt with next?

To do this, rely on basic storytelling principles, such as:

Momentum: A momentum call simply follows the escalating action to its next logical conclusion.

*In the scene before yours, Snakelifter (a supporting character) convinces Axehandle that his wife,*

*Bladesinger, slept with Crow, her battle partner and his brother. Axehandle ends the scene swearing bloody vengeance on both or either of them. From their positions on the edge of the couch cushions, you can tell that the entire group cares about nothing but what happens next. So you call the scene in which he confronts Bladesinger.*

Suspenseful Cutaway: Conversely, the most compelling move might be to delay the scene everyone wants to see next, heightening anticipation for it, by shifting for the moment to something else entirely.

*Sure, you want to see the Axehandle-Bladesinger confrontation. But either one of their players will surely call that next. To milk it for all it's worth, you call a completely unrelated scene, in which Darkeye, a character uninvolved in this plotline, encounters an ominous figure from her past.*

Callback: Satisfying stories keep incorporating and developing previously introduced characters and situations. With players focused on their characters' immediate situations, it's up to you to provide this sense of consistent narrative by reintroducing dangling plot threads so they can be resolved.

Callbacks might reincorporate:

- ▶ consequences from procedural scenes (p. 36) that have yet to make an impact on the story
- ▶ supporting characters who haven't appeared for a while
- ▶ previously identified threats or obstacles the players have neglected to address
- ▶ In the first few episodes the group spent a lot of time negotiating with the crazy former chieftain Slandertongue. He hasn't been seen for a while, so you call a scene in which the tribe panics over reports of a Slandertongue sighting out by the big rock.

Ratcheting Tension: Drama heightens when characters face disaster. When the characters get too comfortable and agreeable, reignite the conflicts between them by raising their external stakes.

*With the Slandertongue alarm dealt with, the group returns to its various agendas. That is, until you call a scene heralding a northern invasion ...*

**Comic Relief:** When the collective mood grows too fraught, give players a break by calling a light-hearted scene.

*“Drunk again. And so early in the morning, too.”  
“He who never stops drinking is never drunk again.”*

*On his way to find allies against the north, Axehandle encounters the bumbling bandits Moontone and Slunk, whose bluster ill-conceals their evident terror of him. In addition to providing an opportunity for amusing banter, it reminds the beleaguered players of their characters’ bad-assitude.*

**Heightening Conflict:** Over time the main cast may grow cozy, resolving the internal conflicts that originally fueled the series. (You see this on TV series as well.) Keep the player characters at odds with one another by introducing scenes and situations sure to reignite their mutually exclusive goals and passions.

*The old tensions have ebbed away from the relationship between Axehandle and his wife Bladesinger. You decide to stoke his jealousies by bringing back Heart-Eater, a warrior of the Chameleon clan he believes has eyes for her.*

**Complicating Existing Drama:** Shifting relationships within a close-knit cast should spill over, enveloping as many main characters as possible. Call scenes that extend a conflict or explore its reverberations by drawing in another member of the main cast.

*Crow, who himself was recently accused by the insecure Axehandle of lusting after his wife, has a stake in the renewed issue of Heart-Eater’s interest in Bladesinger. You call a scene in which Bladesinger seeks his advice—rekindling his own suppressed feelings for her.*

**Spotlighting Neglected Players:** When one plotline dominates an episode, uninvolved players can be left on the sidelines. Call a scene that serves a character who’s been denied a fair share of attention.

*Fated hasn’t had much to do this episode, so you start a new plotline in which Hearing Man, the holy man of a rival village, attempts to lure her into heretical worship.*

**Balancing Dramatic Poles:** If a player leans too heavily on one dramatic pole and ignores the other, he might be moving toward a new internal opposition. Or he might be playing the character on a one-note basis. Test this by creating a situation designed to pull the character back toward the neglected half of the character’s nature.

*Fated, who is torn between tradition and innovation, has been leaning on the latter almost entirely since she befriended Hearing Man. You call a scene in which Darkeye seeks her contrition for flirting with enemy customs.*

#### CONTRIBUTING TO PLAYER-CALLED SCENES

Players whose characters are present in any scene are free throughout the scene to narrate details, including physical circumstances, the behavior of walk-on characters, and their own characters’ actions and what comes of them. When another participant objects to a bit of narration, they can either adjust what they’re describing or let it go to challenge.

As GM, you are also permitted to introduce short bits of information at any time. Exercise this right with a light touch. Intervene only to sharpen the scene the players, especially the caller, seem to want. You might introduce details that raise the stakes, clarify the situation, or match existing continuity. Make sure not to block what the players are shooting for, or shift the scene in a completely different direction. Save your brilliant idea for a new scene for your next turn as caller—or be content to merely foreshadow it.

Despite the narrative latitude the game permits them, players may at any time throw to you for details. These requests usually come in the form of a question. How big is the hill? Are there any blacksmiths in this village? What do we know of the Tridents’ religion?

You can respond to this either with an answer, or by throwing the question back to the group as a whole. Pacing should mostly determine which course you take. In the middle of a compelling scene, answering the question is faster and smoother than stopping to poll the group. During a transitional phase where players are trying to work out what to do next, a moment of collective creation may spur them along.

Players often want you to make decisions when they’re faced with a mystery and want to preserve



their sense of suspense and surprise. By making you decide who killed the snake woman, they get to experience the mystery through their characters' eyes.

When the game is going well, these shifts of authorship occur constantly and organically, without anyone stopping to analyze the flow of descriptive control.

*As you speak, your eyes follow a figure skulking across the ridgeline. "Stonecircle! We're being watched!"*

#### MOVING THINGS ALONG

Dramatic scenes typically run for five to ten minutes, which is much longer than you'd see in a TV show or movie. An improvised scene at the roleplaying table is an improvised first draft in which players need time to flail around, repeat themselves, and go down unproductive verbal alleys. Dramatic scenes in other media are final drafts, pruned to the bare essence both in the writing and film editing stages.

When a scene continues to develop, sit back and enjoy it. Sometimes a very long scene will entertain all concerned, including players who, like you, are strictly spectators.

More usually, a scene peaks without quite ending, as players repeat their positions, the way real people do in an actual argument.

At this point, intervene to bring it to a close. You might ask questions of one or both players, asking them if they have other tactics to deploy in seeking or resisting the petition. If not, steer them toward a wrap-up by asking the petitioner if she got what she wanted—the first step toward a drama token award.

When playing supporting characters, you can shape the pacing by avoiding repetition and having them cut to the heart of a conflict, bringing the scene to the point where the granter either cedes or blocks the petition.

#### UNSTUMPING THE STUMPED

Players who can't think what to do next can slow the action. Help them by reminding them of their characters' desires, how they might go about realizing them, and who they might petition. Remind them of past events they might call back to. Point them to existing plot elements they might logically want to involve themselves with.

Consistent difficulty in thinking of scenes to call indicates an overly passive character in need of a clearer desire, one that implies an obvious course of action.

#### GUIDING PLAYER CHARACTERIZATION

When players portray their characters in ways that make DramaSystem less fun for them and others, step in with supportive suggestions to guide them to a more satisfying experience.

During character creation, look out for clever but unemotional goals. Go deeper with the player to find an emotional impetus behind them.

*"I swore I'd never darken your door again."  
"Yet here you are, all the same."*

*Aisha says her character's desire is to discover writing. While this is an active goal that will lead her PC to concrete actions, it's more practical than emotional. "What need would that fulfill?" you ask her.*

*"Uh, I guess to be smarter than everyone else."*

*"That's your desire," you point out. "That's what the writing thing is all about."*

Also look out for desires that represent a premise threat—that is, if fulfilled, the character has to leave the series. Work with the player to reconfigure them. Otherwise the group will have to constantly contrive reasons to keep the character around—requiring his constant failure at the thing he wants most.

*Scott is playing the chieftain's slave, captured from the Saltmen. "His greatest desire is escape from his captors," Scott explains. You point out the pitfall of this premise threat idea. Instead, work with Scott to decide that he wants not only to gain his freedom as a full member of the clan, but to spite his captor by seeing him stripped of his authority.*

Some players who think of themselves as skilled roleplayers may at first flounder with DramaSystem.

One of the best ways to garner positive attention for characterization in a traditional RPG is to play a very focused character in a broad, exaggerated manner. This works particularly well in one-shot play.

DramaSystem often exposes broadly-played PCs as one-note characters, who cleave to one dramatic pole and ignore the other. They direct steady



streams of drama tokens to everyone but themselves. Unlike the other troubleshooting issues discussed here, this pitfall only becomes apparent after several scenes play out. When you spot it, remind the player of his other pole, and frame scenes that pull him toward it—and occasional emotional compromise. If the poles seem flawed, work with the player to adjust them.

#### MAINTAINING FOCUS

Just like traditional roleplaying games, DramaSystem leans on the GM to keep and direct the group's attention. As always, you want to maintain a balance between casual social interaction and collective concentration on the imaginative world of the game. Finding it is a matter of gauging group mood, both in general and as it varies from one session to the next.

The typical techniques of focus management hold sway here:

- ▶ Give the group a chance to get the chat out of their systems before starting the game proper.
- ▶ Start the session with a recap of the last week's events, to transition the group from chat to play modes. Pick the clearest, pithiest recapper, which might be you, or another player, to lead the review.
- ▶ Sense when jokes and digressions are about to sidetrack the group, and gently cut them off.

When the game is really cooking, players enjoy watching others' scenes unfold as much, or more, than their own. Keep an eye out for signs that a player has disengaged; use your scene calls to hook him back in.

*"You haven't been paying attention, have you?"*  
*"No one listens to me. So why should I return the favor?"*

#### COLLABORATIVE SPIRIT

DramaSystem assumes a group that wants to improvise together toward a mutually entertaining shared narrative.

If you normally tolerate a disruptive player more interested in subverting the game than contributing to it, you'll need to either disinvite him for the duration of your Hillfolk series, or play something else.

Paradoxically, some groups may be too harmonious for successful DramaSystem play, which encourages you to pit your fictional surrogates against one another in pursuit of emotionally charged results. Memorable stories aren't about nice people doing nice things. In playtest, a family tried the game out, to less than ideal results. They were too used to getting along with one another to comfortably stoke the fires of character conflict.

Watch out for the effects of real-life power disparities between group members. In a group comprised of young players and a teacher or youth leader, the person with the authority should be the GM.

On the other side of the spectrum, DramaSystem probably also isn't a great choice for a group riven by real-life emotional conflict. If your group uses roleplaying to covertly advance its grudges and unresolved sexual tension, Hillfolk will either lead to disaster, cathartic resolution, or both.

*"Who should I send—the one with the stutter, or the one with the scar?"*  
*"If you're going to be war leader, you must learn the raiders' names."*

Theoretically, a group that tends to bully or disregard one of its members could use the rules against him by leaving him out of called scenes. The GM might combat this by calling scenes that include him. Really, though, that's another much deeper issue that needs to be addressed by the group, not the game designer.

If your local group seems ill-suited to the game for whatever reason, you might seek kindred tribal spirits via the magic of the Internet. With its low mechanical overhead and emphasis on dialogue, DramaSystem can easily be run in real-time on-line venues, like Skype conference or Google Hangout. Its emphasis on dialogue makes voice services a much better choice than text-based instant communication.



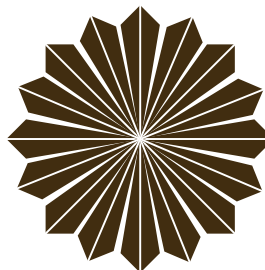
## NOTE TAKING

The extent to which you'll want to keep a record of the proceedings depends on your powers of memory.

I recommend tracking:

- › supporting characters and their defining traits
- › new place names
- › scenes in each episode

For the latter case, I found it useful to track the caller, participating characters, basic situation and outcome of each scene. Here's an example of my note-taking from a late episode of the in-house game, covering one round of scenes:



| <i>Caller</i> | <i>Participating Characters</i> | <i>Situation</i>                                                                              | <i>Outcome</i>                                                    |
|---------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Christoph  | Skull v. Straight Scepter       | Proposes bringing in the Dirt Men – and marrying her daughter and becoming a strong male heir | She encourages him without making any promises                    |
| 1. Justin     | Thickneck v. Flint              | Seeks clarification of his situation                                                          | Admits to being a spy and apologizes                              |
| 1. Paul       | Redaxe v. Thickneck             | Why aren't we going home?                                                                     | Agrees to go talk to Goldenthron                                  |
| 1. Scott      | Flint v. Slipper                | What am I doing here?                                                                         | Volunteers himself as mentor and asks him to investigate Skull's  |
| 1. Robin      | Thickneck v. Goldenthron        | Wants to know their situation                                                                 | Tells him he's needed at court for the time being                 |
| 1. Lisa       | Twig v. Farhawk                 | Prods him to get his Thickneck mollification program underway                                 | He'll find someone to seduce him so it's Thickneck who leaves her |
| 1. Chris      | Farhawk v. Slipper              | Seeks likely suitor for Thickneck                                                             | He proposes Milkheels                                             |

You don't need enough detail for an outside observer to follow, just enough to jog memory and spot unresolved plot threads in need of later development.

## CHANGING RELATIONSHIPS

As the story unfolds over many episodes, relationships will evolve in ways both large and small. Friends become enemies and foes transform into loyal allies. Love affairs and marriages may end, often shaking up the entire group. Characters may gain new romantic partners. A mentor might break with a protégé or take a new one under her wing.

Political positions or other roles in the tribe may shift, altering the power dynamics between characters.

Some groups love the relationship map and enjoy tending it whenever changes occur. Others find it useful to fix the characters in their minds in the early going, thereafter keeping the connections between main cast members in their heads.

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"What do you think she meant by that?"
"I didn't understand her when she was my betrothed. I certainly don't pretend to now she's yours."

EVOLVING CHARACTERIZATION

Individual characters evolve over time, too. In the first few episodes, you may find the poles you've chosen for your character too hard to play. Watch for these telltale symptoms:

- You respond to almost all petitions by blocking them.
- You respond to almost all petitions by granting them.
- You find it hard to call scenes, because you can't see anything your character wants.

The first symptom points to an inflexible, impossible-to-please character who thrives on opposition and seeks isolation from his relationships.

The last two show an inert, passive character who isn't willing to step up and seek what he wants, or doesn't really want anything.

In both cases, reorient the character with a new desire and poles. Pick a desire you can see the character actively pursuing, even if that means compromising with others. Use that as inspiration for poles, both of which you can see yourself pivoting to, depending on the scene at hand. Seek input from the GM and other players; they've doubtless been frustrated trying to make varied connections to your character and can help steer you toward a more changeable and internally contradictory persona.

After a long period of play, you may find that your existing desire and/or poles have either been resolved, or no longer apply to the storyline as it has evolved. You may at any time alter them to reflect the changed circumstances. Do so sparingly, and only when it seems a natural outgrowth of your character's development.

DEBATABLE POLES

Sometimes a player's perception of his character's poles may differ from that of other participants. As long as the character actively pursues his desires, and grants petitions more or less as often as he blocks them, this is not a problem. Instead, it shows the complexity and ambiguity that distinguishes great fiction.

For example, one player in

the in-house playtest expressed the poles of his chieftain character as Assimilator vs. Protector. Watching Skull in action, I felt I was seeing Arrogance vs. Wisdom. Which of us had the clearer take on the character didn't matter, as he had strong desires and acted on them, while granting and refusing petitions in equal measure.



In extreme cases, you might find it easier to turn your present protagonist into a supporting character and create a new one, using the method outlined for adding

ADDING NEW PLAYERS

When joining a DramaSystem game already in progress, new players may instinctively hold back, just as they would when joining an already-established circle of friends with its own long history and complex emotional entanglements. Following this impulse leads to passive characters, disengaged from the main narrative.

Combat this by having the new player, after providing his name and role in the tribe, specify what he wants from each of the existing main characters. The other players, as during initial character creation, respond by explaining why they won't easily grant that desire, and what they desire in turn from the new arrival. Seek the usual back-and-forth to ensure that the relationships make sense from both angles.

"For a year and a day the Tridents held me in a torture hole."

"And they let you live? You must be a spy."

The character might be an existing member of the tribe who only now achieves prominence as a main character, or a new arrival. In the second case, the player specifies what he'll want from the other characters the moment he meets them, in scenes that have yet to occur.

The player then continues by specifying action types and the character's story.

Existing players replacing their characters should do the same. With agreement from the group, they may take over supporting characters, previously portrayed by the GM, as their new protagonists.



IMMERSIONISTS CONFRONT THEIR COMFORT ZONE

Players favoring a popular and common approach to characterization in traditional roleplaying games may initially struggle with DramaSystem. Once over this hurdle, they'll take to it like ducks to water.

Some players, favoring a style known as immersionist, train themselves to think only in character, playing by feel and minimizing other considerations, such as the interventions of the game system. They prefer to keep their role in the creative authorship of the narrative as far out of mind as possible.

DramaSystem tests that resolve by asking players to act as authors. Because it requires them to think analytically (not instinctively) about what their characters want, they may find scene calling challenging.

Get around this by relying on soft opens and conferences (p. 34). Start scenes with characters you know yours wants something from, without pinning down your intentions ahead of time.

Over time you'll discover that the game allows you a very close identification with, and focus on, your character and the world. With its minimal rules and play centered on interaction, you'll spend much more time in your protagonist's head than in any traditional game. Now and then you briefly step out of character to discuss such things as intentions and petitions, but these are still all about your character's perceptions. All roleplaying games require some out-of-character decision-making. DramaSystem requires a different, but in practice very minimal, set of those decisions. These will soon become invisible to you, just as the artificial act of rolling a d20 to see if you hit an orc becomes natural through repetition. Having navigated this shift, you'll find it a method-actor's paradise. If the ultimate goal of your immersion is tight identification with your character, DramaSystem will deliver that for you by the bucket load.

There is a caveat, though. Any play style can turn to the dark side and become dysfunctional. When some immersionists encounter DramaSystem, it becomes apparent that their focus on character mindset serves as a justification for an unyielding play style. Often to the cry of "My character wouldn't do that," they seize veto power over others' proposed actions. As players, they set themselves up as perpetual granters, who the rest of

the group and GM must constantly petition in order to move forward.

Engagement with DramaSystem can cure cases of dark side immersionism—the mild ones, anyway. The impulse comes from a fear of surrendering power. The drama token economy ensures that your power is protected at least half of the time. Every compromise becomes a promise of future power. Once you—I mean, once that other guy—becomes accustomed to the give-and-take in DramaSystem, he may even embrace the power of "yes" while playing other games.

"I never give in."

"Then your hold on power will be fleeting."

WHY NO MAGIC, LASER-WIELDING DINOSAURS?

In many classic roleplaying games, the characters become vehicles for the exploration of deep, endlessly fascinating settings. DramaSystem aims for a different sort of pleasure, one in which you leave the game remembering its people—the people you collectively created—and the things they did. To bring this experience to the forefront, it lets the background recede into, well, the background.

Hillfolk's Iron Age setting is designed to appeal to at least one spectrum of geek-culture tastes, what with its swords, archaic period, imagined history, and epic clash of empires.

However, it does quite intentionally set aside a central element of popular nerdy properties. It takes place in a world without fantastical powers, whether granted by magic, futuristic technology, super mutations, or their various equivalents through other genres.

Beneath their genre-specific skinning, all of these function the same way. They're super powers. They add flash, glamor, and unique, trademarked detail to procedural stories.

By omitting the super powers, Hillfolk helps you to move faster to the heart of DramaSystem, the creation of dramatic narratives. The first time you play it, the group will, instinctively and understandably, lean toward the procedural scenes that drive other roleplaying games. Over time, as the play style manifests, procedural scenes become less frequent. Eventually you'll start skipping over



them, agreeing that certain practical outcomes have already occurred, in order to get back to the character interplay.

Having habituated yourselves to the style, you can move on to as outlandishly geeky a setting as your heart desires. Whatever flavor of super powers you choose will by that point support the game's core dynamic, instead of keeping you from it.

USING THE HILLFOLK CARDS

An ordinary deck of cards will always suffice for DramaSystem play. However, Pelgrane Press does produce a set of Hillfolk playing cards. Each card includes a pair of prompts to aid stumped scene-callers. When unable to think of a scene to call, draw a card, free associate on one of the prompts, and find your way forward.

EMOTIONAL PROMPTS

The emotional prompt (inside the wavy lines) suggests a reward a character might seek. Examples: punish, demand respect, soothe, offer favor.

Players find it easiest to imagine scenes in which their characters act as petitioners. They start with the reward and think backwards to choose the most logical granter, under the current circumstances of the story.

At a loss for a scene to call, Delia draws a card from the Hillfolk deck. It's a 4 of spades, bearing the emotional prompt: Punish. She asks herself which character Darkeye would most want to punish at this point. Fated, whose agitation for religious innovations has vexed her of late, leaps immediately to mind. She calls a scene that begins with Darkeye excoriating Fated in front of the clan's other senior women. If Fated acts as if she's been chastised, Darkeye gets what she wants, earning a token for Franca, as granter. If Franca plays Fated as unconcerned by Darkeye's verbal assault, Darkeye is rebuffed, earning Delia a token.

As always, you could use the prompt as inspiration for a scene in which another character petitions yours, or pay a drama token to have another main cast character apply that prompt to a third.

A GM using an emotional prompt calls a scene in which any character seeks the specified reward from any other. The GM thinks backwards from the

emotional prompt to find the granter and petitioner who would provide the most interesting, surprising, or fraught scene. As always, cast scene participants to avoid foregone conclusions or easy concessions.

In a rare moment of waffling, you, the GM, struggle for a scene to call. You draw an 8 of diamonds, with the emotional prompt: Soothe. Who most needs soothing? Fated, who was shaken by Darkeye's humiliation of her before the senior women. Who would be the most interesting character to offer this to her? Axehandle, who himself has recently had a rocky relationship with Fated but needs the women to unite in preparation for a diplomatic delegation from the Wolf Clan.

COMPLICATIONS

This prompt (inside the straight lines) listed on each card is a complication (see p. 22). Examples include: a nuisance, a hard bargain, false hope, fracas.

Claude, whose character Crow has distanced himself from the in-fighting among the senior women, can't think of what his character might do next, and so draws a card as a prompt. He gets a 6 of spades, and is immediately drawn to its complication prompt: a hard bargain. Naming a supporting character, a rival warrior from the Wolf Clan, he calls the scene: "Longsnout comes to me and offers to reveal his chieftain's bargaining position—if we agree to ambush him on the road home, so Longsnout can take over as chief."

As GM, you ask for clarification. "So you're calling the scene between you and Longsnout?"

"We can play it out for atmosphere," says Claude, "but I'm thinking of the next scene, where I go to Axehandle, who will be tempted by the offer—"

"Will I ever!" Adrian confirms.

"But I have something else in mind." Claude proceeds, as dialogue in the ensuing scene, to reveal what that is: he wants Axehandle by revealing Longsnout's treachery, to win favor with the Wolf chieftain.

The above example could as easily have unfolded as a GM prompt—though you might have instead played the scene between Longsnout and Crow.

PROMPTS AND SHUFFLING

Leave cards drawn as prompts out of the deck until the next procedural scene is called. Then, before

resolving the procedural, return them to the deck and shuffle it.

HACKING DRAMA SYSTEM

Having teased you with the prospect of magic dinosaurs, it's time to look at ways of adapting the rules to other circumstances and settings.

SINGLE SESSION PLAY

DramaSystem as presented so far is tuned to multi-session play. I find that the depths of shared story really come out when you play enough to emulate the feel of a cable drama's season arc. In the in-house test we ran two distinct "seasons" of twelve and eleven episodes each, achieving a truly epic feel of lives challenged, changed, and in some cases destroyed.

That's not to say that you can't get a taste of it in single-session play, at a convention or elsewhere.

The main thing that has to go is the one to two hour character creation session series-oriented players love.

Collapse it as follows:

1. Each player, starting with the leftmost in seating order, in turn specifies his character's name and role in the group.
2. Quiz each player in turn (still in seating order) to specify their character's desire and dramatic poles.
3. The first player in seating order specifies his relationship to any other player character, and what he wants from that character. The

seating order petitioning the one player whose character has yet to be singled out as granter.

- c. Call your scene as GM last. If a cohesive narrative has not already suggested itself, call a scene that sets one up.
4. For the remainder of the session, players may, as in extended play, call scenes with any other main character, pay a drama token to call scenes they're not in, and call procedural scenes.

In the compressed space of a single session, players tend to play with greater ruthlessness, moving instinctively toward a big finish at the end. If they don't, use your scenes and influence as GM to tug them in that direction.

The spontaneous plotline often turns into a struggle to unseat and replace the chief. This fosters exciting play but will feel repetitive to anyone who has already played Hillfolk in single-session mode.

To dampen this cutthroat dynamic, lessening the odds of yet another run at the chieftain, frame the first scene to introduce an outside crisis forcing the characters to sublimate their differences out of common interest. During character creation, keep an eye on relationships to make sure that group members are bound together as much by love and dependence as by rivalry. This makes the conflicts between them more familial and less Machiavellian¹⁴.

Before starting, ask players whether they prefer a closed or open-ended episode. A closed episode ends conclusively—which in drama often means a grim result, with one or more main characters dead or destroyed. An open-ended episode plays like a pilot episode of a TV series, leaving later installments to the players' imaginations.

If they pick a closed episode, the rule requiring players to agree to their characters' demises is suspended during the session's final half hour.

Other Settings

DramaSystem games can take place in any setting where fraught emotions can tie together a close-knit group of passionate characters.

selected player explains why he can't have it. The first player petitions the second player for something connected to that goal.

- a. The next player in the seating order does the same, choosing a granter who hasn't been petitioned yet.
- b. ...and so on, until each player has called a scene, ending with the last player in the

¹⁴ For a game whose entire point is to dial the backstabbery to maximum, check out Skulduggery, also from Pelgrane Press.



Look for a premise that gives the main cast a reason to stick together and continue to interact, above and beyond those emotional ties.

In Hillfolk, the isolation of the tribe, and the cast's duties as its primary leaders, provides that bond.

For certain premises, you could establish required characters, which must be played as members of the main cast. To play the Arthurian saga in DramaSystem, for example, you'd want to guarantee that somebody plays Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot. Once these roles are cast, the other players can freely select from other established figures in the mythology, or invent their own new characters who become central in this version of the story. Established characters not selected by the players become supporting characters.

The shared detailing of setting details featured in Hillfolk can be kept or discarded, as desired. It is best suited for loosely sketched imaginary settings based on commonly understood tropes. For already established worlds—from our present day, to accurately presented historical periods, to preexisting imagined settings, the GM learns the details and presents them to the group, as she would in a traditional RPG.

Without an expensive license, we can't market a DramaSystem expansion based on the popular entertainment property of your choice. But that's not stopping you—especially if someone has already done the work of creating roleplaying sourcebooks for it.

Decoupling

DramaSystem's core drama scene system can be imported into any traditional roleplaying game. Use the other game's rules for procedural resolution.

Keep the scene calling structure for a game more like Hillfolk.

Or simply use the petitioner-granter structure and token economy whenever an emotional interaction spontaneously breaks out.

This will almost surely decrease the amount of time devoted in each episode to drama sequences, in favor of procedural resolutions. To preserve the token economy, tokens are carried over from one session to the next. The GM keeps track of how many dramatic scenes have occurred so far. When the fifteenth scene occurs, warn the players that tokens will reset to zero at the beginning of the next session. Then restart the count, with resets occurring in each future session in which the fifteenth scene threshold is crossed.

Those looking for a rules-light procedural system to graft onto the dramatic structure might do well with my own HeroQuest 2, from Moon Design, or Jonathan Tweet's WaRP system, now available via an open license from Atlas Games.



"If you love me, you'll let me be free."
"Vampires don't get to use that word."

THE LAND AND ITS PEOPLE

Hilfolk provides a loosely sketched setting for its dramatic saga of Iron Age banditry. It gives your group a foundation of choices to build on. After a few episodes, each Hilfolk setting will have branched from this basic starting point to its own sharply divergent combination of elements.

INTRODUCING BACKGROUND DETAILS

As with details of established location, facts about the cultures, histories, politics, and geography that form the context for your saga can be introduced and built upon by any participant. These details can be player-driven or GM-prompted.

IMPERFECT KNOWLEDGE

The characters are well aware of their own culture, including the essentially similar ways of their northern neighbors. However, their acquaintance with other cultures is glancing and distorted by fear and hostility. Players introducing new facts about foreign cultures that seem out of continuity may fend off challenges by arguing that the previous fact was a mistaken belief, born of ignorance and prejudice. To contradict an already established detail on grounds of imperfect knowledge, the player must show her character discovering the deeper truth. If the GM buys the player's reconciliation of the discrepancy, no challenge occurs.

A previous episode demonstrated that the sacred prostitutes of the Trident people must sleep with any man who asks them. Delia now wishes to specify that they are only obligated under particular ritual circumstances, which Axehandle just happened to invoke when he drunkenly stumbled into a priestess' arms on festival night. She calls a scene in which she extracts holy secrets by Talking to Nala, a Trident novice she has befriended.

Beata, who introduced the prior fact, would like to challenge this, but Delia has covered her bases. As GM, you rule that the fact as she introduced it reflected imperfect knowledge.

PLAYER-DRIVEN BACKGROUND DETAILS

Introduce a player-driven background detail by making an assertion in dialogue or description.

In a scene set in an encampment of the enemy Trident people, Axehandle is served a sumptuous feast. "I pretend that it tastes good," says Adrian, "although the food of the Tridents is notoriously salty."

Exposition Challenges

Any participant can challenge a newly introduced player-driven background detail. The GM allows the challenge if the detail fails any of the following tests:

- ▶ **Consistency:** The detail is out of keeping with a non-fantastical, if ahistorical, Iron Age culture. It might:
 - indisputably establish the existence of fantastic magic or creatures (as opposed to distant rumors of same, which are acceptable)
 - include post-Iron Age technology
 - include elements from other genres, such as aliens, time travelers, or superheroes (this would likely also fail the tone test, below)
- ▶ **Continuity:** The description clearly contradicts a previously introduced background detail in a way that can't be written off to imperfect knowledge. (see sidebar.)
- ▶ **Tone:** The description is somehow ridiculous.
- ▶ **Believability:** The description defies common sense.

*"The god of the Threshers protects their fields from fire."
"Or so they want us to believe."*

GM-PROMPTED BACKGROUND DETAILS

When introducing new information about the setting, the GM prompts player engagement by asking them to answer basic questions about it. These questions appear throughout the rest of this section, indicated by boldface italics. These are called prompts. The GM poses each question when it first arises in play. The initial question is posed to the caller of the current scene. (If the GM is caller, she asks the caller of the next scene.) After the caller answers, introducing that fact into your collective version of the Hillfolk setting, the GM invites the player sitting to the left of the caller to supply an additional amplifying detail. As usual, both answer and amplifying detail should be brief: a single sentence consisting of no more than two or three clauses.

For the first time, cast members travel to the inland sea, cuing you to ask its associated prompt:

The sea is named for a famous, extraordinary quality. What is it?

You pose the question to Franca, the current caller.

"It is known as the Sea of Ghosts, for fearsome spirits sometimes rise from its depths at night, to assail the guilty," says Franca.

If taken as literal truth, this detail is more fantastical than the setting supports. As is nearly always the case, it can be chalked up to mistaken belief of characters who attribute all kinds of phenomena to supernatural forces.

You write down "Sea of Ghosts" in your setting notes, and on your area map.

"The Fish People are weak. I say we raid them."

"Those are the words of a coward!"

Ditching the Prompts

After using the prompt system to get players started, you may find that the group finds its own natural groove in introducing new information about the world. When this happens, set the prompt device aside in favor of the organic process. Use this section as inspiration for scenes and situations to call when and if the main cast goes exploring.

When a player description contradicts information given here, but which has not been introduced into play, go with that and ignore the

text. Adjust details given here as needed to fit what's already been established by the group.

For example, the players in the in-house playtest established the Kingdom and its central town as much grander than the text below suggests, after setting the northerners up as the series' key threat. Your group might do the same, or instead make the Tridents or Reedbeards the most important external rival.

GEOGRAPHY

This section briefly outlines the physical conditions that spur your people to a life of banditry.

THE SOUTHLANDS

You live in the rugged southern highlands, where the strong and self-reliant prosper. Jagged hills cut them off from the rest of the world. They shelter you and daunt your pursuers.

A distinctive natural formation marks the hill on which your band's fortress is built. It lends its name to both your band, and to the fortress itself. What does the formation look like, and what is that name?

A narrow strip of flat land, raised on a plateau, sits in the middle of these hills. Your farmers work its poor soil. Uncertain rainfall soaks their fields one year, and leaves them to parch the next. In the rolling zones between hill and flatland, your herders pasture hardy sheep, scrawny cattle, and impudent goats. They graze on its weeds and grasses.

The land begrudgingly grants you grains and meat sufficient to a meager existence. To enrich yourself, it demands that you go elsewhere, to raid. In bad times, like now, you raid each other. In good times, when a strong chieftain unites the hillfolk, you band together to raid more distant neighbors.

Many clans like yours inhabit the Southlands, each with its own distinct variations on a set of common customs and beliefs.

Who are your toughest local rivals?

THE DESERT

To the east the hills drop away to an arid plain where nothing grows. No one lives here but crazy hermits. Nothing grows here but dry and stunted weeds.



THE INLAND SEA

To the east of the desert lies a large inland sea.

It is named for a famous, extraordinary quality. What is it?

THE KINGDOM

To the north lies the so-called Kingdom. Sometimes you call it the Northlands, to deprive it of the glory its boastful residents claim. It is a little flatter and much more fertile than the Southlands.

"The god of the Threshers protects their fields from fire."

"Or so they want us to believe."

It is famous for its big town, which the puffed-chest northlanders call a city.

The town is named for its most famous physical feature.

What is it?

THE BELT

To the west, the land grows flatter and wetter as it slopes down to the great ocean. The middle zone is called the belt. For several generations, it has been controlled by the Trident People. Farmers live here. They retreat to forts and walled villages when you come raiding.

THE COAST

The coast is the heartland of the Trident People, home to their great cities. (A city is a wondrous thing to behold! It can house up to a thousand people!)

THE HILLFOLK

Whenever you have to lump the northerners and southerners together, you simply call them "the people." In other languages you are collectively known by various names, all of which mean "Hillfolk", or sometimes "the rude ones."

Although differences of detail separate you from your northern brothers, you follow the same religion.

"We are nothing without our traditions."

"Traditions are what victors say they did."

PACING CULTURAL EXPOSITION

Because each Hillfolk game group defines its own culture, most of this section consists of questions.

GMs should space them out, asking questions only when they relate to the context of a scene. Think of the way a TV series set in another period or reality slowly doles out information about its setting over many episodes, giving you only the information you need to follow the current episode.

Groups may be tempted to hash out everything about their culture right away. Although this can be fun, it shouldn't shoulder

aside the process of revealing character through dramatic action. That's where the lasting emotional connection comes in, and it's what participants will take home with them, long after the anthropological exploration has faded from memory.

The questions given here will naturally lead to others. Follow the players' lead in figuring out which follow-up questions they most want to explore.

Answering a question to suit the current moment is not only acceptable. It's how storytelling works.

1. Who do you worship?
2. Do you worship one god or many?
3. Are the gods of other peoples real?
 - a. If they're not real, do they exist at all, or are they demons in disguise?
 - b. If they are real, is it okay for foreigners to worship them, or would it be better if they worshiped your god instead?
 - ▶ If foreigners should worship your god, is it your business to convince them?
 - If yes, is it right to force the reluctant?
4. Whose job is it to lead worship?
 - a. What are their duties?
 - b. What authority do they command?
5. Can you communicate with divine forces? If so, how does that work?
6. What holy stories do you tell about:
 - a. how the world came to be?
 - b. how people came to be?
 - c. the right way to behave?
 - d. who your enemies are?
7. What weapons are you famous for wielding?
 - a. Is this the signature weapon of all hillfolk, or just your band?
8. What design or insignia symbolizes your band?
 - a. Where does it appear?

~~~~~ WE DIDN'T CALL IT "HILLMEN," DID WE? ~~~~~

At this stage of the cultural creation process, nearly every group will dismiss all historical precedent to create a gender-egalitarian society for the main characters. Count on this to comprise the greatest point of divergence between your fanciful imagined history and the period from which we take our inspiration. Do not fight this, even if you feel purist rumblings stirring in your breast. We may not live in a completely equal society, but we want to imagine that we do in our escapist entertainment. Few women playing the game will want to face the vicarious oppression entailed in a realistic portrayal of ancient patriarchies. If we weren't decontextualizing our history already, this is where we'd have to start.

Your band is like an extended family. You run your household according to the eternal customs of your people.

Some foreigners write down their knowledge, which is stupid. It is better to just remember.

9. Do men and women share authority?
  - a. If not, who's in charge?
10. Do tasks divide into women's work and men's work, or do people learn to do what they are best at?
  - a. If tasks are divided, who does what?
11. When a couple gets married, does the groom move into the bride's mother's household, or does the bride move into the groom's father's household?
12. Which family line is of primary importance—paternal or maternal?

A bandit chieftain sees to the welfare of his people, by distributing goods between them. All goods belong to the band, through the person of the chieftain. You own what the chieftain gives you. Once the chieftain gives you something, he can't take it back.

13. When you die, who gets your goods?
  - a. Whoever you designate in advance
  - b. The chieftain
  - c. Your first-born child
  - d. Your first-born daughter
  - e. Your first-born son
  - f. Some other arrangement
14. How are chieftains chosen?
15. Can chieftainship be taken away, while the chieftain still lives? If so, how?
16. Does custom limit the chieftain's authority, or are all decisions made at his/her whim?

- a. Does custom or political reality require the chieftain to consult with others before making important decisions?
17. Is the chieftain the leading authority in all matters, or is power distributed among leaders with various areas of responsibility?
    - a. If the latter, who are those leaders and what are their areas?

(Some of these answers may already be implicitly answered by roles players assign to their hillfolk during character creation. If a player declares her character the counselor, she's establishing that such a position exists and is important. Modify these queries accordingly.)

~~~~~  
*"An enemy is an ally you haven't made yet."
 "My hand is a fist I haven't punched you with."*

RIVALS

You share a worship, language, and a way of life with the other Southlanders, but that does not mean they are your friends. They raid you, and you raid them. If you united, you would be stronger, and could raid further and more effectively. To hear the elders tell it, unity comes to the Southlands when a strong chieftain forces the others to bow down to him.

Northlanders talk like you do, though with a funny accent. You worship as they do and share the same holy stories—though they sometimes stray from the true rituals and get the details of the stories wrong.

They claim that the holiest place is in or near their town. They would say that, of course.

What is the place, and why is it holy?

They organize themselves differently than the southlanders, though. They have a king, for one thing.

In what other way does the social organization of the north differ from the south?

OUTLANDERS

While you share a religion and language with the northern kingdom, other lands around you are populated by people whose languages, customs, and gods are very different from yours.



SHELL-GRINDERS

The Shell-Grinders live in fortified cities on the coast, from which they launch great fleets of white-sailed vessels. Some trade, others raid ships from places so far away they aren't worth caring about. When they write something down, it is not with the little pictures of the Reedbeards or the squiggles of the Brick-Squarers, but with something called an alphabet.

The ruler of each city styles himself a king. Sometimes they act together, sometimes against each other. Just like us, in other words, but on a bigger scale.

What is the name of the most famous Shell-Grinder city, and what is it known for?

Who is its king, and what is he famous for?

Shell-Grinders acknowledge more gods than anyone else. Each is worshiped in a different way. Some are not worshiped at all.

Describe the most terrible of the Shell-Grinder gods.

They sacrifice babies to this god. Most of the time they sacrifice captured babies, or the children of captured women forced to breed in their slave pens. When times are dire, they sacrifice a royal child.

Shell-Grinders raid only by sea, so they are a danger only to the Tridents. Occasionally one of our people will wind up in their hands after first being enslaved by the Tridents, and then traded or stolen away from them.

They speak their own language, we think it sounds like the Tridents'; the Tridents disagree. If you ever have to deal with them, they also speak Domer.

Though they are evil, they make many beautiful things, from pots to statues.

One of your band's treasures is a Shell-Grinder artifact. What is it?

~~~~~  
*"When I was little, you used to threaten to sell me to the Shell-Grinders."  
 "And you behaved right quick whenever I did."*

## DOMERS

The Domers are named for the rounded helmets they wear when they go raiding. They do not share your ways, gods, or language, but are in other ways similar to you. Some of them farm, others roam about, driving herds of cattle or sheep. Each Domer follows a king, who protects them from the raids of other kings, and shares with them the spoils of their own raids. Some dwell in half-ruined cities, built

when they were enslaved by the Eye-Burners, and allowed to crumble when the Eye-Burners retreated.

*What strange custom are the Domers most known for?*

*Who do the Domers worship, and how?*

*Though Domer life is much like yours, there's a big difference in the way families govern themselves. What would that be?*

Their raiding tactics differ from yours in one notable way. What would that be?

The Domer language is foreign but easy to learn, so everyone around here knows it. When you talk to someone else whose language is not yours, and does not resemble yours, you undoubtedly talk in Domer, whether it is to a Trident or a Shell-Grinder. Sometimes it is easier to talk Domer to a Rockhead or Thresher than it is to talk their weird version of your language.

## IRON-MAKERS

The Iron-Makers have no land of their own. Instead they are servants, vassals, and wanderers in the lands of other peoples. They used to run everything around here. From their land to the north of the Shell-Grinders, they conquered it all, thanks to their invention of iron. Five or six generations ago, their empire died. It either fell apart, rent by internal disunity, or was taken apart, by their rivals, the Eye-Burners. Whatever happened, the Eye-Burners took over the Iron-Maker homeland, murdering and enslaving its people. Some escaped south, where they persist as a landless remnant. Their story is a fable against pride, or the pursuit of power, or trying to make an empire, or something like that.

They've lost their own language and now speak the tongue prevalent in their adopted lands, and usually Domer besides. A few of them worship their old bull god, but most have converted to local religions.

Despite the name, only a few of today's Iron-Makers are blacksmiths. More often they're swords for hire.

A few Iron-Makers live among the Southlanders. They are never allowed to lead a band, but are sometimes its strongest warriors.

*If an Iron-Maker came to you and asked to be allowed to worship as you do, would you let him, or consider it wrong?*

~~~~~  
*"This is the smart thing to do."
 "You want us to be smart? Ask the Iron-Makers what comes of that."*



ROCKHEADS

The Rockheads control the land to the east of the Northlands. As long as there have been people, the Rockheads have been your enemies.

Your earliest stories tell of their antagonism toward you.

What made them your enemies?

Their language is a strange and corrupt version of your own. You can understand each other when you talk, but with difficulty.

What do you know of the Rockhead religion?

They are named for their quarrying activities. The stones of the Rocklands are coveted by builders from all the big distant empires.

What other goods are they famous for?

Who rules the Rockheads, and what is the root of their authority?

How is a Rockhead household set up?

SALTMEN

The Saltmen are raiders and traders united under a single king.

You know the king by his nickname, which refers to his most famous personality trait. Who is he?

Saltmen are named for the salt plains that form a protective border around their more fertile central lands. They speak their own strange language amongst themselves and the Domer tongue among outsiders.

“Again we must grovel to the Saltman King.”

“What do you mean, we?”

They maintain their unity even in hard times and never let you forget it. Saltmen say that they were civilized when everyone else around here was living in caves. Their wise folk know more than everyone else, but of course they see things from their own skewed Saltman point of view.

Who are their strange gods?

Through what weird rite are they worshiped?

Because they are traders, Saltmen will befriend anyone and rip off anyone. Their king is sometimes allied with the Tridents, and sometimes with the Threshers, but never with you. They say we have nothing to offer them. Yet they will accept your goods when we have them.

Your band remembers a terrible slight received the last time they sought audience with the Saltman king. What was it?

Aside from their general haughtiness and unfamiliar gods, a major gulf separates your culture from theirs. What big difference divides you?

THRESHERS

The Threshers live to the east of the inland sea.

Rivers cut through their flat plateau, feeding vast fields of wheat and barley. Their grain vaults are good to raid, if you can make it through the intervening desert and back in one piece. The Threshers have always hated you. When you come to raid them, they attack you with spears and flails.

Why, according to your ancient stories, are the threshers set against you?

They do not worship as you do.

Who do the Threshers worship, and how?

They stole your language and remade it, so you can understand them, when you have to.

How are the Threshers ruled?

What do you know of Thresher households?

When the Eye-Burners came to conquer the land, the Threshers befriended them. That tells you what kind of people they are. They still trade with the Eye-Burners.

TRIDENTS

Your richest and closest foreign enemies are the Tridents. They arrived here only four or five generations ago, quickly settling the rich coastal lands to the west of you. Anyone could do that, especially with outside help from the mighty Reedbeard Empire (see sidebar).

The Tridents worship three gods: the sky king, the ocean king, and the earth whore. Men there worship by visiting sacred prostitutes.

Trident religion is famous for something else, too. What is it?

Just because they're enemies doesn't mean you can't team up with them when it suits your purposes. The grandfather of your band chieftain allied with the Tridents and used their help to raid his neighbors, both in the south and north. Your neighbors sometimes throw this ancient fact in your face, as if there is something wrong about being clever and making yourself stronger.

Each Trident town is ruled by its own king, who also protects and taxes the surrounding countryside.

How do Trident kings resolve disputes among themselves?

What does the power of a Trident king rest on?

Who else is powerful among the Tridents?

“Ever since you got away, I've yearned for the resistance of your skin against my blade.”

“You are nothing but a dream, Trident bitch!”

“Then, you never really escaped, did you, my beloved?”

SAMPLE NAMES

Hillfolk names are metonyms: descriptive words that tell you something about the people who bear them. As such they should be easy to think up on the fly, for GM and players alike. When stuck for inspiration, resort to the following list.

Afflicted	Grower	Slender
Answer	Happy	Southerner
Ascension	Healer	Spear
Attacker	Helper	Star
Baldhead	Hewer	Stone
Bashful	Hill	Stout
Beholder	Hillwalker	Strongthaw
Blessed	Holiday	Swift
Boar	Horn	Sword
Breath	Horse	Talker
Cactus	Joy	Tree
Calf	Judge	Trouble
Carrier	Jug	Trunk
Changer	Kinsman	Unity
Charger	Lefthand	Victor
Cloud	Light	Vigilance
Copperhair	Lion	Wander
Crown	Longhair	Watcher
Daisy	Lucky	Water
Defender	Masterer	Whitetooth
Delight	Memory	Wild
Demure	Mole	Willow
Dog	Mountain	Wind
Eagle	Myrtle	Wolf
Endurance	Nationmaker	Worthless
Establisher	Nectar	Worthy
Exalted	Nightdew	
Faith	Oathkeeper	
Fig	Olive	
Fire	Palmgrove	
Firstborn	Pious	
Firstson	Priest	
Forsaken	Raider	
Fragrant	Raven	
Fruitful	Red	
Gift	Reliable	
Glory	Righthand	
Goat	Rope	
Goldpurse	Runner	
Goodbride	Shaggy	
Grace	Sheaf	
Grapevine	Shepherd	
Greenshoot	Silvertongue	

DISTANT OUTLANDERS

Some Outlanders are so foreign you have only heard about them. Their lands, which you can only imagine, are so far away they do not appear on your map.

To the north and east is found the terrifying empire of the Eye-Burners, known for their grim habit of blinding conquered foes. They worship an eagle god and live in huge cities. Luckily their power is now in decline, though many fear that they'll rise again.

The *Reedbeards*, also known as the Sisterfuckers (because their kings marry their sisters) dwell in a fabulous land to the south and west of Tridentia. There, the fortresses of living kings are dwarfed by monuments to dead ones. Stories of Reedbeard riches

must surely be exaggerated. They used to be even mightier than they are now. Supposedly the Tridents live where they do today because the Sisterfuckers conquered and resettled them.

To the south and east lie the monumental cities of the *Brick-Squarers*. They say they're the oldest civilization, older even than the Reedbeards. Brick-Squarers take credit for inventing numbers, writing, and the study of the stars. A lot of good that did them when the empire of the Iron-Makers crushed them and installed foreign kings over them. Since the Iron-Makers were themselves crushed, the Brick-Squarers are now again ruled by their own kings.

"Your name is strange. I cannot trust you."

"There are so many reasons not to trust me, hillman. That one scarcely rates."



WHY A FICTIONALIZED 10TH CENTURY BCE LEVANT?

Hillfolk encourages you to take a fascinating and underexposed period of human history and use it as the basis for your own invented imaginary world. The result will bear about as much historical fidelity to the original as George R. R. Martin's Westeros does to Tudor-era England. Through his act of imaginative transformation, any resemblance to the foundational events of Western faith will become strictly coincidental. What happens in your Hillfolk game tells you about your own sense of invention, not about what really happened at that time. It becomes a comment on the origins of Western faith only if you all decide to make it that—which most groups won't.

GMs sensing that their players will find the parallel, as obscured as it is, uncomfortable, can easily remove it by remaking the map.

I chose the period for its balance of the familiar and the exotic. The fuzzy sense most gamers will have of this era is a feature—the typical group knows enough to riff on details and make stuff up, but not so much to be tied down to specific details. Many basic facts of the period remain opaque even to archaeologists, leaving even expert players wide latitude to invent.

Finally, the period offers multiple potential conflicts, giving each group freedom to choose between plot possibilities. Four great empires at various stages of their vaunted histories perch on the margins of the map, threatening the scrappy tribesmen in the center. They might ally with their cousins to the north, fight with them, or oscillate between the two. Minor cultures on their borders might be lorded over. A smaller but potent enemy encroaches from nearer shores.



Additional Settings

The Hillfolk setting is designed to give your group an ideal first experience with DramaSystem. By setting aside the fantastical, supernatural elements roleplaying fans tend to gravitate toward, it gets you quickly to grips with the dramatic core of the system. This choice lessens the temptation to invoke the procedural elements we're used to from other RPGs. The isolation of the characters in their badlands home village keeps the players interacting mostly with one another, another central component of the dramatic experience.

Once the group gets into the habit of privileging dramatic over procedural scenes and inter-PC interaction over scenes with supporting characters, they'll be able to import those assumptions into settings featuring aliens, monsters, costumed heroes, and other geek-culture staples. The fantastical elements may feature in descriptions during procedural scenes, but the main event will remain the emotional exchanges between central characters.

Series Pitches

This section presents more than two dozen Series Pitches, briefs inspiring you to run DramaSystem games in other times and places. Some are fantastical, others not. The pitches appearing in this section come from some of our favorite game designers. Thanks go out to backers of our Kickstarter campaign, who made it possible for us to include them.

Think of a Series Pitch as a proposal for the types of characters the players might portray, and the sorts of events that might unfold as the story arises during play. Once the series gets rolling, you may periodically reach to the pitch for inspiration, or set it aside entirely, in favor of moments created spontaneously at the table.

You don't need to compose a Series Pitch to launch a DramaSystem series of your own creation. All you require is enough of a verbal

description to get the players started. However, especially where your series departs from familiar time periods and genre tropes, you may find it useful to compose notes to help your players along.

If so, the loose format you'll find here for Series Pitches shows you the factors you'll need to consider. Series Pitch authors have been encouraged to adjust the order in which entries appear, and the relative weight given to each, as the needs of their concept dictates. Give yourself the same freedom when creating your own.

The key entries are:

Nutshell

(This always comes first.)

The exciting and dynamic one-sentence logline you'll use to introduce your series to players. If your game were a TV show, this would be the description that shows up in the preview listings.

Examples from real shows might read as follows:

- A mobster prone to panic attacks navigates the tensions between his family and The Family. (The Sopranos)
- In a poor Chicago neighborhood, a young woman saddled with a spectacularly irresponsible father struggles to care for her fractious brood of siblings. (Shameless)
- A loosely connected group of New Orleans residents tries to rebuild their lives after the Katrina disaster. (Treme)
- Through intrigue and warfare, members of various noble families fight for control of a fantastic kingdom. (Game of Thrones)

Characters

Indicate to players the sorts of roles the characters might take on within the ensemble cast. These can be quick phrases arranged in simple bullet points or (as in historical series where players might take on the roles of actual

figures), lengthier descriptions.

Be aware that players may combine and alter the concepts you come up with. Really you're selling them on the fun and possibility inherent in the basic concept, and letting them go off in their own direction with it.

If one or more specific characters have to be present for the concept to work, note that they are obligatory. Keep the number of obligatory characters as low as possible. Zero is best; one or two is okay. More than that and you're encroaching too much on player freedom.

Even with specific characters, leave room for the players to define what makes them tick. Some relationships between must-have characters might be inherent in what you establish. Dictate relationships as sparingly as you can. DramaSystem characters are primarily defined by dramatic poles—an internal conflict or paradox that drives behavior and makes pivots in emotional position credible. Always leave these for the players to define.

Setting

Describe the qualities of your pitch's time and place that will most directly impact the action.

Always leave elements open for the players to define as they set scenes in the course of play. They refer to details of the world for the group to create together, rather than upcoming plot points, which should appear in a later section. Format these as bold-faced questions interleaved with your text:

The rival spice mine is called the Leviathan.

What quirk is its unscrupulous manager known for?

In play, the GM uses these questions to prompt the players to sketch in details of the setting as relevant scenes unfold.

The most economical way to keep details open is to simply leave them unaddressed.

Themes

In bullet points, list likely themes for episodes of your series, with or without explanatory notes indicating how they might be expressed in play.

Although each Pitch implies certain obvious themes, many themes will recur in any setting. There are only so many classic, powerful themes in narrative literature.

Tightening the Screws

List a number of possible complications participants might introduce to reignite tensions within the main cast.

Here you might describe recurring characters (NPCs) that advance or personify these events, in loose detail.

Names

Provide a list of sample names for people, places, and (where appropriate) things in the series.

Participants use these when stumped for suitable names when inventing people and places on the fly.

Additional Elements

If you need to add another element to this format to make your Series Pitch work, do it.

Using Series Pitches

Some groups will want full access to the entire Series Pitch.

Others will want you to supply minimal highlights, preserving their creative freedom and your ability to surprise them. For these groups, share the Nutshell logline with players, either at the first session or beforehand. Inform them of any obligatory characters one or more of them must take on for the series to work.

Other than that, resort to the ideas listed under **Characters** only as a prompt to the stumped. Answer basic questions about the **Setting** players feel they need to fit their character concepts into the world; leave as much as possible to be introduced and refined during play.

Save the **Themes** section to prompt players when it's their turn to create a theme and they come up blank.

Keep the **Tightening the Screws** ideas to yourself.

Supply the name list to all participants, so they can assign names to newly introduced supporting characters, places and so on, crossing them off once used.

Hill Players Co.
& Morning Star Films

Present



Hollywoodland




Distributed by Pelgrane - British Mutoscope Corporation MCMXIV



Chapter One

"GREED IS NOT THEIR WORST SIN"

1914 — — A tidal wave of money and power is about to wash over the dusty orange groves east of Los Angeles — and every movie business huckster, old money aristo and gun-toting yegg intends to dip his bucket in the flood!



Hollywoodland

— Jason Morningstar

“Be smart, but never show it.”

— Louis B. Mayer

Nutshell

1914: A tidal wave of money and power courses toward the dusty orange groves east of Los Angeles, and every movie business huckster, old money swell, and gun-toting yegg intends to dip their bucket in the flood.

Setting

Ten miles from Los Angeles, Hollywoodland is a rapidly-growing desert town surrounded by scrubby ranches and what used to be orchards, lately razed and staked out as housing tracts. Movie studios are springing up all over town—Lasky, Famous Players, Keystone, Fine Arts, Independent Moving Pictures—all to escape the withering gaze of Thomas Edison’s patent lawyers back east. The climate is good, the light is great, and the surrounding ranches and nearby beaches offer every location under the sun. And if you accidentally kill someone at an orgy, the Mexican border is right at hand.

The technology of motion pictures is still new. Innovations like the close-up are viewed with suspicion, if not outright disdain. Most “movie people” have stepped out of vaudeville and carry with them a showman’s sense of decorum (none at all) and entrepreneurship (steal whatever you can and fake the rest). Visionaries push the art reluctantly forward, but the money is in cheap two-reelers filled with pratfalls and the occasional exposed ankle.

Deeply conservative and committed to the status quo, the city’s preexisting elite aims to preserve its growing prosperity. Los Angeles already booms without an upstart colony of patent-infringing libertines. Movie people are to be tolerated as long as they turn a profit for

the landlords, financiers, and speculators. The minute they don’t—or the minute they cross a certain hazy line of propriety—it is all over. The Los Angeles Police Department will put the whole filthy mob on trains for New York.

Or will they?

“I am a servant of the people. I have never forgotten that.”

— Mary Pickford

“Say anything you like, but don’t say I love to work. That sounds like Mary Pickford, the prissy bitch.”

— Mabel Normand

Characters

The main characters are people who find themselves in Hollywoodland in 1914, either through long association or recent arrival.

For example:

1. an independent producer escaping the threats of lawsuits and worse from Edison’s film monopoly, the Motion Picture Patents Company, back east
2. a bona fide star, adored the world over, able to call the shots and name a price at last
3. a California plutocrat, buying up lots all over Hollywoodland and selling them to studios dearly
4. a valley farmer with vast acreage adjacent to the Providencia Ranch and a simple desire to work the land—or play both sides against the middle
5. a wide-eyed new arrival willing to do anything, so long as it is part of the picture business

Or choose from one of the period’s deep

stock of fascinating historical characters. If the prospect of sticking to a researched biography daunts you, create a fictionalized analogue.

D. W. Griffith, rogue producer-director neck deep in *The Birth of a Nation*, out of money and making wild promises to keep the cameras rolling

Mary Pickford, America's sweetheart and a diamond-sharp businesswoman. She chafes at her public persona but dares not fight it. Her stardom affords little protection from her abusive bastard of a husband, Owen Moore.

Charles Chaplin, obsessive English actor perfecting his "Tramp" character for Mack Sennett's Keystone Pictures. The quintessential outsider, Chaplin is equal parts sex fiend and thoughtful student of his craft.

Mabel Normand, wildly famous comic actress and syphilitic coke fiend. The baddest of Hollywoodland's bad girls. Men attached to Mabel have a bad habit of being shot by rivals.

Roscoe Arbuckle, Keystone's comic crown jewel and a man who likes to party. Although his popular nickname is "Fatty", don't say it to his face. Arbuckle has a gorgeous baritone and prefers the company of other women to that of his actress wife Minta Durfee.

L.A. Police **Chief Charles E. Sebastian** (dramatic poles: anti-vice crusader vs. notoriously corrupt sybarite) mulls a mayoral run. Although uninterested in the film colony's public support, he gladly takes their money. His mistress is a young girl named Lillian Pratt.

Fred Eaton, former mayor and Machiavellian power broker. This cruel opportunist and amoral thug is busily buying up ranches for pennies on the dollar to resell to the City. .

William Selig, principal of the region's oldest studio, Selig Polyscope. Obsessed with innovation, Selig is deeply immersed in a doomed experiment: talking pictures. In addition to his furious calendar of two-reel productions all over town, he is also building a zoo.

Hard-working writer **Anita Loos**. Between cranking out scenarios like Nell's Eugenic Wedding and *The White Slave Catchers*, Loos has been trying to organize the interstitials for an upcoming D.W. Griffith film called *Intolerance: Love's Struggle through the Ages*.

Philo Judson Beveridge, civic booster and glad-handing real estate developer, mourns the recent death of his wife Daeida. If it was nailed down in Hollywoodland before 1913, he probably owns it.

Lillian Gish is Griffith's lead for the epic *Birth of a Nation*, a project so improbably huge she is dubious it will ever be finished. Often seen with her actress sister Dorothy and close friend Mary Pickford, Gish is a bona fide celebrity and the talk of the town.

Raoul Walsh: Hard-drinking director's actor, brawler, and raconteur, leading man for Griffith in *The Life of Pancho Villa* and now John Wilkes Booth in his crackpot project *Birth of a Nation*.

Gigi Whitley: The original Hollywoodland belle, Whitley and her husband Hobart were the first to see the potential of fleecing rich easterners with ersatz subdivision plots. Now rich and getting richer, they bridge the worlds of old money and new.

Harry Chandler: Leading citizen, former General Manager of the *Daily Times*, ruthless real estate speculator, anti-union racketeer, and vicious criminal.

Unlikely new arrival in the colony **Sessue Hayakawa** is a handsome and charming leading man for Thomas Ince, raking in \$500 a week. He and his wife, Tsuru Aoki, are social fixtures at the better sort of party.

Cattle rancher **E.C. Hurd Jr.** faces ruin from water diversion in the San Fernando Valley. He sympathizes with the labor unions in Los Angeles, occasionally supplying them with dynamite. They, in turn, supply Hurd with hard men who walk the borders of his ranch with shotguns.

Lon Chaney: A forlorn bit player for Carl Laemmle and IMP, Chaney is still recovering from the ugly suicide attempt and subsequent divorce of his wife, Cleva. He's known as an expert at pantomime and a handy man around a makeup case.

Stubborn widow **Dolores Preiss** holds the deed to a delicious slice of land between Providencia ranch and the town proper. In the middle of everything, "Old Dolores" sees no compelling reason to sell.

A lawyer in New York but not in California, **George F. Scull** is one of Edison's chief agents

on the west coast. A physically imposing man, Scull takes a pragmatic, utilitarian approach to enforcing patents.

Jack Mulhall: A handsome face determined to make it to the top. His dreams of \$3000 a week make him ruthless and precise in his social graces. He's widely known as a "dance partner" for young actresses and, more tellingly, married matrons.

"I would rather give birth to a porcupine backwards [than be mayor of Los Angeles]."
— William Mulholland

Themes

Episode themes you might expect the participants to invoke might include:

- **Wealth and Class:** Motion pictures bring vulgar new money to town. How do members of the land-owning old elite extract it from them, without sacrificing their pious dignity?
- **Disruption and Dislocation:** Champagne bubbles break against the bitter reality of the displaced. The celluloid gold rush has upended the local economy, as orchards are chopped down and ranches turned into housing tracts. Owens Valley farmers have already been ruined by an aqueduct that waters a thirsty Los Angeles, and it looks like the San Fernando Valley is next.
- **Freedom and Moral Panic:** Millionaires genuine and ersatz flock to Hollywoodland's debauch, where cocaine and sex are the coins of the realm. When scandal breaks, a wild new America clashes with the staid morality of the old.
- **Invention and Adventure:** The characters enter a new arena in the eternal battle between art and money. An industry is being invented alongside the motion picture as an art form. Films are getting longer, more complicated, audacious, and expensive—a heady combination that finds directors and producers seeking funding wherever they can get it, actors learning an entirely new craft as the

cameras roll, and crews working miracles every day.

- **The Price of Fame:** Once you've grabbed the brass ring, you might find out that it burns.

"There's nothing funny about a clown in the moonlight."
— Lon Chaney

Tightening the Screws

- **The Plutocrats:** Old money may hate new money, but old money still wants a big piece of the pie—preferably the one that's been promised to the main cast. With a compliant Los Angeles Police Department in their back pocket, who exactly is going to stop the plutocrats from taking whatever they want? The reactionary Los Angeles Daily Times? Adding volatility to the mix is a barely-contained war between organized labor and the powerful business interests determined to keep the unions out of Los Angeles—one that occasionally resorts to dynamite.
- **Edison's Revenge:** The Hollywoodland colony was founded by mavericks and ne'er-do-wells running from the heavy hand of Thomas Edison and his patent monopoly. They have been wildly successful and Edison has grown more desperate as his legal remedies dwindle. The quiet men he sends to "negotiate" are equally at home in the courtroom or on a back lot with a gallon of gasoline.
- **Shady Acreage:** The studio needs land to expand, but a rancher won't sell. Where do the main characters stand? Are they willing to threaten a hard-working American farmer? He might sell to an agricultural combine like the Toluca Fruit Growers Association, who would turn around and sell to you at an extortionate markup you can't afford. What if you just . . . borrowed land from the Providencia Land and Water Development Company without exactly asking?
- **Into the Underbelly:** When you really need it, where can you obtain

an abortion? How will you dry out the famous director in time for production to begin? Who will supply crate after crate of Freeman's Chlorodyne to a thirsty crew of degenerates? And where, literally or figuratively, will the bodies be buried?

"It's got to move."
– Mack Sennett

- **The Scramble to Create:** Will you make the leap from two-reelers to features? Will you let Griffith steal the credit for inventing the close-up? How will you obtain enough lights from the Kliegl Brothers to do the night shoot you promised the studio? If filmmaking is an endless series of close calls, how will today's show-stopping catastrophe turn into triumph?

Names

Search archive.org for the 1915 Los Angeles telephone directory, useful for choosing period names or finding businesses to incorporate into your game.

Actors

Spottiswoode Aitken	Mae Marsh	Dell Henderson
Alice Howell	John P. McCarthy	DeWolf Hopper Sr.
Monte Blue	Seena Owen	Bessie Love
Elmer Clifton	Constance Talmadge	Ah Singh
Josephine Crowell	Erich von Ritzau	Nita Naldi
Howard Gaye	Sylvia Ashton	Erich von Stroheim
Robert Harron	Charles Eagle Eye	

Writers, Producers, Directors and Crew

Hettie Grey Baker	Herbert Sutch	Shorty English
Carl Davis	Elmer Clifton	R. Ellis Wales
Mary H. O'Connor	Sidney Franklin	Gertrude Bambrick
Frank E. Woods	Joseph Henabery	Neal Dodd
Rose Smith	George Siegmann	Abe Scholtz
Walter L. Hall	Frank Wortman	B.F. Zeidman
Clare West	Ralph M. DeLacy	

Films Currently in Production, Two-Reelers and Features

The Birth of a Nation	In the Land of the Head Hunters	The Squaw Man
A Bathing Beauty	The Typhoon	Tillie's Punctured Romance
Brewster's Millions	Judith of Bethulia	
His Majesty, the Scarecrow of Oz	Kid Auto Races at Venice	

Mad Scientists Anonymous

— Michelle Nephew

Nutshell

The struggling members of a support group for recovering mad scientists discover that relapse is only an accidental cackle away.

Starting Questions

After introducing the Nutshell, but before generating characters, invite the group to reach consensus on a few basic questions of plot and style:

- **Is our tone spoofy and knowing, like Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog, or a dark and serious exploration of pulp tropes?**
- **Have the patients committed terrible crimes or are they simply worried that they might in the future?**
 - (If the former is true) **Have they been caught and brought to justice? If so, have they been pardoned for some reason? Or is the facility a prison, at which they're undergoing experimental rehab treatment?** This last answer gives you a series resembling a genre version of Oz.
- **What pulp tropes pertain?** Is this a crazy comic book world populated not only by mad scientists but by robots, mutants, sorcerers, and gods? Is it a low-power super-world world, where only mad science powers come into play and all other costumed characters are just highly trained people in outlandish outfits? Or is it an Ian Fleming-like spy world, with megalomaniacal, gimmicky villains in an otherwise realistic context?

Allow these answers to shape the sorts of characters players choose to portray and to modify, where necessary, material appearing later in this pitch.

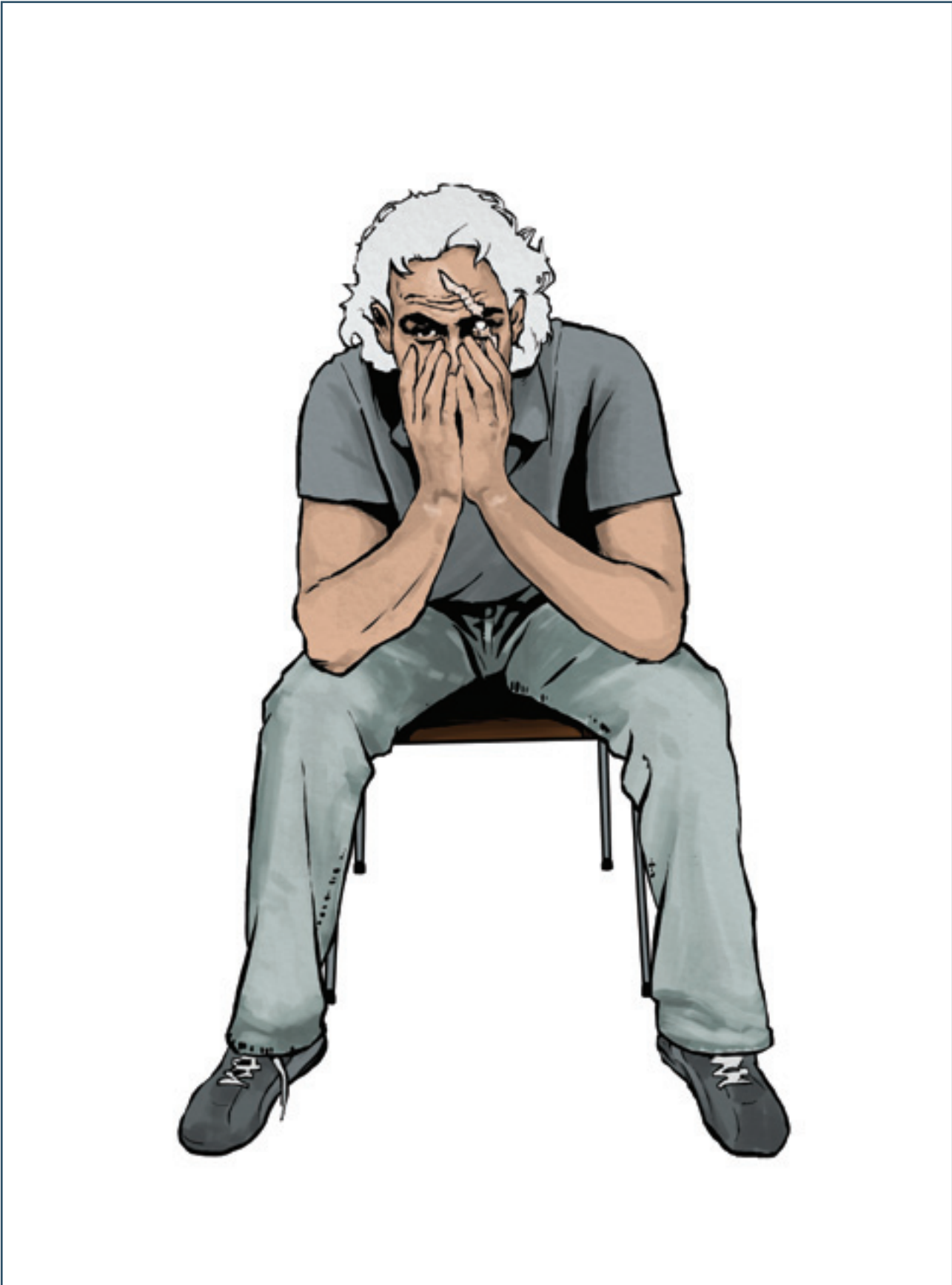
Characters

The main characters are the members of Mad Scientists Anonymous, a support group for recovering mad scientists, their loved ones, and the people who run the program. Roles the players might adopt for their characters include:

-
- | | |
|--|------------------------------------|
| • bumbling gadgeteer | • chronologically displaced despot |
| • insane computer scientist | • serial killer |
| • reluctant mad scientist | • costumed burglar |
| • supervillain | • ousted dictator |
| • former Nazi scientist | • robot acquiring human traits |
| • amnesiac researcher | • head of security |
| • crippled genius | • staff nurse or doctor |
| • therapist | • evil billionaire |
| • henchman | • embittered mutant |
| • relative or loved one of a PC patient | • gang honcho |
| • infiltrator (spy, journalist, unrepentant villain) | • recovering brainwashing victim |
| • inactive crime-fighter acting as program monitor | • rogue super-spy |
| • police liaison | • former hit man |
| • program administrator | • banished ninja |
| • stranded alien | • superhero turned madman |
| | • working stiff staffer |

Setting

The group's first meeting is in a nondescript conference room at BelleVista, a high-priced private institution for the criminally insane where some of the characters are patients, while others are in the outpatient program or just visiting loved ones. Though the office chairs are arranged in the circle that is thought of as typical for a group therapy session, they are all



plush leather executive models. A conference table is pushed to the side for use in case therapy evolves into nefarious scheming.

Or is this a prison instead? If so, is it privately run by government contractors? A top-secret installation run by a spy agency or Homeland Security? Or a standard issue institution, with all the corruption, strained budgeting, and potential for error that implies? Either way, it doubtless carries a more intimidating name than BelleVista.

Later field trips let the group loose in the major metropolis where BelleVista is located; this could be a real-world city like New York, or something fictional like “Megalopolis.” Beyond that is the entire world where the characters may eventually run amok.

Or have the patient characters committed acts so heinous they will never be let out again, and must act on the outside world through proxies? Certain of the above-listed character types only work in this variant; no one will let a convicted serial killer go on field trips to Times Square.

Somehow the patients retain access to lab equipment and the other accoutrements of their research. **Have the patients installed a secret base beneath BelleVista?**

Underneath it all is the possibility of supernatural strangeness. As the characters get in touch with their inner mad scientists, they might develop psionic abilities or invent nigh-impossible technological gadgets. These inevitably end up causing more trouble than they solve, no matter what the inventor’s intentions.

How widely known is the world’s strangeness? Does the average person know that he lives in a world populated by geniuses and superhumans? If so, the characters might be infamous and highly recognizable—or at least recognized as members of a common type. **Or have a few strange incidents been kept out of the press by the authorities?** In this instance, anything crazy they get up to carries the potential to explode in the news, changing everything.

Do organizations from our real world take the lead in dealing with weird science threats? If so, they likely field special departments for this purpose.

FBI: Disruptive Technology Directorate (DTD)

CIA: Emerging Threat Center, National Clandestine Service

Department of Homeland Security: Science and Technology Directorate, Y Division (Create local equivalents for a series set outside the United States.)

Or do super organizations counter super threats?

CODEX: US super agency, staffed by highly trained agents, sane super-scientists, and (depending on your chosen reality level) costumed crimefighters.

UNACET (United Nations Agency for the Containment of Emerging Threats): CODEX’s global equivalent.

Do these agencies battle highly organized non-state conspiracies?

GORGON: This alliance of supervillains traces its origins to the Cold War but now specializes in large-scale extortion threats and dreams of global conquest. Maintains bases run by outlandishly uniformed personnel.

SN-9: Shadowy new group dedicated to nihilistic destruction.

Set-up

Game Changer: The GM calls an ensemble scene introducing a new character to the mix. Depending on the players’ chosen cast, this might be a PC, inmate, or patient, whose relationships still make sense if he is only now signing on. If no one meets this criterion, the new addition is a supporting character who threatens to throw the established hierarchy of BelleVista into chaos:

- a new administrator with a martinet’s manner, who promises to straighten things up around here
- a new patient who declares his intentions to make this place his new base of operations, and its patients and staff his witless minions

Themes

Episode themes you might expect the participants to invoke might include:

Trappings: Are mad scientist stereotypes like lab coats, goggles, wild hair, fake European accents, and technobabble really necessary, or just hiding the true genius underneath?

- **Progress:** Mad scientists excuse their more amoral actions by claiming any lengths are worth it in the pursuit of Science. Do ethics just get in the way of scientific progress?
- **Breaking the Cycle:** Pursuing science can be seen as a disease, either passed down through the generations or from one master to his henchman to the next. How do you break the cycle?
- **Accidentally Evil:** You might just want to conduct your scientific experimentation in peace, but what do you do when your corrupt corporate master keeps using your inventions for evil purposes?
- **Slowly I Turn:** Resorting to theft to get funding for your research, kidnapping unwilling test subjects, making deadly weaponry just because you can. How far down the path to supervillainy have the characters come already? How far are they willing to go?
- **Crossing Boundaries:** Are there some boundaries that shouldn't be crossed? What are the consequences when you do?
- **Isolation:** Separating yourself from the rest of humanity is a great way to get work done without pesky interruptions, like mobs with pitchforks. But what does it do to your social life?
- **Humanity, and Other Petty Worries:** We all have to make sacrifices for our work. But how much is too much? A few people? The world's entire population?
- **Unintended Consequences:** What do you do when your invention is too successful and goes out of control?
- **Who Watches the Watchers?** What happens when your madness rubs off on the people assigned to cure you?

Tightening the Screws

Initial sessions take place in the setting of the institution, during group therapy meetings:

- The characters try to complete a 12-step program to recovery, only to find that every time they attempt to make amends things go horribly wrong.
- One of the characters has a beautiful daughter who's tired of being kidnapped by villains and hit on by heroes. She comes to a therapy session to tell her side of the story, only to turn into a rampaging monster as the side effects of close proximity to the character's last experimental device finally reveal themselves. How do the characters deal with the emotional fallout of her transformation?
- One of the institution's patients claims he sold his soul to the devil in trade for superhuman abilities. He's happy to introduce the characters, if they're willing to pay the price for power (which is personalized for each of them). Can this be for real, or is the patient delusional as well as mad? Or more likely, is this a test set up by their therapist?
- A patient invents a prototype psionic enhancement device. Will the characters submit to being his first test subjects and risk horrible side effects in exchange for ultimate mental superiority over the rest of humanity?
- A character's henchman tries to break him out of the institution, with a do-gooder hero hot on his heels.
- The characters have proven themselves to be less insane than most of the patients at the institution, and so are offered a chance to move to the outpatient program if they can convince the equivalent of a parole board of their recovery.
- If the characters maintain their lab in secret from their keepers, it is threatened with discovery.
- A staffer the group all like is kidnapped. Is the perpetrator trying to strike back at the inmates?
- Later, the characters may move out into the city, and then the world at large:
- An outing to the city's science museum turns into a test of will, as each character faces an exhibit that could further his own personal pursuit of world domination.
- One of the outpatients at the institution is only accidentally evil; he's a mild-mannered researcher, whose corrupt boss continually promises to use his inventions only for good, then doesn't. When he goes

missing and his latest discovery goes out of control making the nightly news, will the characters save him or join him?

- One of the characters discovers that his secret underground lair, which was

supposedly destroyed when he was apprehended, is still in one piece under all the rubble. With access to full laboratories and equipment again, or perhaps a powerful tech item recovered there, will the characters relapse?

Names

To create a mad scientist name, take a typically German first name and combine it with that of a famous real-world or fictional scientist. Then add the honorific “Dr.” at the front, of course.

Male First Names (Inmates)

Claus	Igor
Dieter	Otto
Emmett	Rudolf
Ernest	Ulrich
Franz	Verner
Fritz	Wendell
Heinrich	Wilfred
Helmut	

Female First Names (Inmates)

Adelaide	Lorelei
Ava	Mariel
Bernadette	Millicent
Chloris	Selma
Ernestine	Vala
Gertrude	Wilma
Greta	Zelma
Helga	

Fictional Last Names

Beakman	Maldoror
Beckett	Mephisto
Bishop	Moreau
Faust	Nemo
Frankenstein	van Helsing
Hyde	
Luthor	

Borrow other comic book-style villain names from “Henchmen” (p. 144).

Real-World Last Names

Bohr	Maxwell
Dyson	Mendelev
Einstein	Oppenheimer
Fermi	Planck
Feynman	Rutherford
Hawking	Schrodinger
Heisenberg	von Helmholtz
Huygens	

Staffers and Ordinary People

Ken Bernstein	Debra Whitesell	Tracy Taylor
Daniela Gomez	J.R. Zisk	Graham Melvoin
Tucker Martin	Erica Trilling	Carole Arkin
Maryann Tobin	Jesse Gates	Kristof Bell
Harry Libman	Vanessa Lang	Arabella Divoff
Guy Kinney	Alex Winer	Jim Grant
Alison Dark	Andi Brandon	Greta Crooke
Kevin Winters	Drew Hooks	Ellis Means
Crystal Nayar	Jennifer Neme	Scott Parker
Nelson Jablonski	Jeff Schapker	Paula Comperatore



Moscow Station

— *Kenneth Hite*

Nutshell

What's the only place on Earth more paranoid and dysfunctional than Brezhnev's Moscow? The CIA station spying on it.

Adrift and alienated in a deadly police state, the personnel of Moscow Station work to discover the truth, and then to keep it hidden at all costs.

Characters

The main cast are the spies and wives assigned to the CIA station in the U.S. Embassy in 1970s Moscow. Roles the players might adopt for their characters include:

- the Chief of Station
- his wife
- the deputy Chief of Station
- his wife
- CIA case officer/asset handler/agent runner
- CIA communications officer
- CIA listening post/SIGINT officer
- cryptanalyst
- technician/electronics expert
- CIA documents section officer
- wives of any of the above

The first female CIA case officer to be assigned to Moscow, Martha Peterson, arrived in 1975. A player interested in adding the burdens of institutional sexism, harassment, and misbegotten chivalry to their existing struggles with the KGB, alcohol, and alienation should feel free to play a female operative, although there should ideally only be one. Technical types (those listed after "case officer") can be female without too much stress on the historical reality of the game.

CIA operatives in Moscow work under diplomatic cover, supposedly performing embassy jobs unrelated to their actual work.

CIA Chiefs of Station, Moscow

- 1971-73 Robert T. Dumaine
- 1973-75 D. Barry Kelly
- 1975-77 Robert Fulton
- 1977-80 Gardner "Gus" Hathaway

If a player (or GM) takes the role of Chief of Station, they may also want to assume the name and identity of the relevant historical figure. Only the most fiendishly completist player groups will care (or even be able to find out) about any contradictions with the real spy or his personality, rivalries, or career.

Possible cover identities include:

- deputy political attaché
- deputy military attaché
- deputy cultural attaché
- deputy transport or air attaché
- deputy trade attaché
- arms control specialist
- scientific-technical or astronautics liaison
- press officer
- embassy archivist
- typist or secretary
- consular officer
- visa clerk

The CIA traditionally did not run Americans without diplomatic cover ("illegals") in the Soviet Union. Even if they had, they'd make poor player characters, requiring you to explain how it's safe to meet every time you call a scene with another main cast member.

Supporting Cast

The U.S. Ambassador to the U.S.S.R. lives in Spaso House, several blocks from the embassy, and across the Garden Ring Road. Theoretically in charge of the Moscow Station, he almost never wants to hear anything about or from it: his job is fundamentally political,

not strategic. Parties at Spaso House remain excellent places for American agents to meet Soviet dignitaries, however.

Moscow Station's local antagonist is the First Department of the Second Chief Directorate of the KGB, headquartered on Lubyanka Square and headed until 1979 by Sergei M. Fedoseev. This department is responsible for counter-intelligence against the "Main Enemy" inside the Soviet Union. It details approximately 350 agents in the city solely to thwarting Moscow Station, and can call on thousands more militia, police, or KGB reinforcements.

The other series antagonist is the CIA bureaucracy, especially the rear-echelon wannabes ironically known as "HQS" (for "Headquarters Station") who think they can run Moscow ops from a desk in Langley, Virginia. Moscow Station answers to the Soviet Division of the CIA's Directorate of Plans (Directorate of Operations after 1973); the Deputy Director of Plans (DDP) answers to the CIA Director (DCI), who answers to the President. Theoretically.

Throughout the sixties and mid-seventies, the CIA's chief of counter-intelligence (CI), James J. Angleton, nearly paralyzes the agency. Driven by the lesson of British Intelligence, which the KGB had riddled with moles from the 1930s to the 1960s, he wages an increasingly frantic and paranoid search for Soviet double agents within the CIA.

In 1971, with the support of Executive Director William Colby (later DCI), Soviet Division begins to undermine Angleton's mole hunt, initially by cutting Moscow Station free of direct headquarters control and supervision. This is not an unmixed blessing: a noisy screw-up in Moscow now means definitive career death, and possible actual death.

Much later it will become apparent that most of the known Soviet moles in the CIA post-date Angleton's forced resignation on Christmas Eve 1975.

Soviet Assets

Moscow Station's goal is to find out what the Soviets are up to. In addition to electronic intelligence gathered from the Embassy's roof antennas and by other technical means, this requires HUMINT: human intelligence. Specifically, CIA case officers develop assets and informants within Soviet society, especially those who can penetrate Soviet military and intelligence circles.

Soviet informants may be genuine, well-intentioned but useless, delusional, or KGB double agents. **Does the group maintain collective narration rights to reveal who is who during play, or do we reserve this power for the GM alone?**

USGOV VIP NPCs

U.S. Ambassadors to USSR	Directors of the CIA	Deputy Directors of Plans/Operations
Jacob Beam (1969-73)	Richard Helms (1966-73)	Thomas A. Karamessines (1967-73)
Adolph Dubs (interim charge d'affaires 1973-74)	James Schlesinger (1973)	William E. Colby (1973)
Walter Stoessel (1974-76)	William E. Colby (1973-76)	William E. Nelson (1973-76)
Malcolm Toon (1977-79)	George H.W. Bush (1976-77)	William E. Wells (1976-77)
Thomas Watson, Jr. (1979-81)	Stansfield Turner (1977-81)	John N. McMahon (1978-81)

The head of the Soviet Division from 1971-1978 is David Henry Blee. He becomes Deputy Director of Counter-Intelligence (Angleton's old job) in 1979.

Setting

Moscow itself is an immense city of seven million people, although the KGB tries its best to restrict foreigners to “ghettos” and main tourist areas. An efficient subway system, the Metro, and a less-efficient bus network cover the city. No official map of Moscow exists; cab drivers often use a photocopy of a CIA map of Moscow stolen from the Embassy.

The U.S. Embassy is located at 19/21 Ulitsa Chaikovskogo (Tchaikovsky Street), part of the Garden Ring around Moscow’s city center. The embassy moved into what was an already existing apartment building in 1953, immediately finding it under-powered, cramped, and crumbling. Bugs and antennas had literally been poured into its walls. The entire decade of the 1970s is spent in negotiations for the construction of a new embassy; ground is not broken until 1979.

The embassy has two six-story wings to the north and south, and a ten-story block in the central tower. The CIA station is on the fifth floor in the center. By treaty, all embassy workers, such as janitors, drivers, secretaries, and translators, on-site and off, must be hired from the Burobin employment agency, a KGB front. As a result, American staff have to pick up their own trash on the secure floors, and keeping the embassy clear of listening devices is impossible.

Inside the CIA offices is a 10’ × 30’ metal shipping container, built in sections by U.S. Embassy personnel. Painted bright yellow on the outside, to better reveal any attempt to bug it, and thus nicknamed the Yellow Submarine, it provides the only place in the embassy secure from Soviet listening devices. Case officer desks and a briefing/interrogation room crowd the space.

Every conversation that takes place outside the box can potentially be overheard by the KGB, so any supporting character privy to its surveillance product can quote back their contents to the main cast. Agents with Strong Sneaking may be confident of a secret meet in Victory Park or another hard-to-surveil public place, but have no guarantees for any other conversation.

Militia (Soviet internal police troops) guard

the embassy, and keep a “beat-up shack” nearby to work over Soviet citizens found showing an unseemly interest in the bastion of capitalism. U.S. Marine guards deploy inside the embassy grounds. The KGB considers these young single men easy prey for “honey trap” seductions.

Moscow Rules

In Moscow, the KGB always has the upper hand. In procedural scenes, a red face card indicates that the KGB is present or somehow driving the action. In the basic procedural resolution system, any draw of a red face card by the GM or by a player (except a player spending a Green token, who can immediately “shake the tail” or otherwise discard it) results in defeat—even if the GM narrates the result to seem like a victory.

In the advanced procedural system, a red face card is always a down card. Again, it indicates KGB involvement in the action in some fashion.

Themes

Episode themes you might expect to see invoked include:

- **The Truth Shall Set You Free:** The ironic motto of the CIA.
- **The Cold:** The Cold War, the cold from which spies wish to come in, the cold of badly heated Moscow buildings in a cold winter.
- **Loyalty:** Loyalty to one nation requires subverting another’s loyalty to his.
- **Betrayal:** Who or what are you betraying to avoid betraying your country’s trust? Is your country trustworthy?
- **Alienation**
- **Compartments:** Don’t think about the contradictions. Keep them in their own compartments. Never let them talk to each other.
- **Drowning:** Moscow’s river, especially when covered with ice, is a powerful symbol of the spy world; deep currents that chill to the bone. Drowning is also a strong metaphor for alcoholism, a congenital disease of Russians and spies alike. What sorrows are you drowning?
- **Paranoia**
- **Détente:** This theme might contrast the aggressive moves of both the CIA

and the KGB to the official warmth between the superpowers, or parallel U.S.-Soviet relations with those of two main characters.

- **Everybody is Listening**
- **Counter-Intelligence**
- **A Wilderness of Mirrors:** Angleton's description of the world of counter-intelligence. Do the characters recognize themselves in the mirror? Do they recognize their KGB opposite numbers in themselves? What is real and what is illusion?

Tightening the Screws

Something always gets worse in Moscow, either through enemy action or through the fecklessness of the CIA's assets or supervisors.

- A high-profile defector walks into the Embassy; he confirms one character's pet theory and denigrates another's.
- HQS pushes Moscow Station to infiltrate the GRU, the Soviet military intelligence arm, offering a shotgun scattering of possible assets to approach. You know the GRU to be even more dangerous and ruthless than the KGB.

- A fire breaks out in the embassy, and the secure areas are compromised during the response. Something or someone goes missing. (This actually happened in 1977; the arson was deliberate KGB action.)
- Soviet microwave bombardment of the embassy triggers cancer in an important main or supporting character. HQS refuses to withdraw them because their product is too good. (This bombardment became public knowledge in 1976.)
- Someone from CI comes to Moscow on a mole hunt.
- The KGB arrests a major asset and begins rolling up his network; the characters must rush to close off loose ends and bring who they can in from the cold.
- A beautiful woman attached to the Italian Embassy makes a play for a lonely or alienated male character. Is she a honey trap or an escape from the misery of Moscow Station?
- A leak from Britain's MI6 threatens to expose a CIA asset, hampering cooperation with the characters' "cousins." This works best if the GM has provided a helpful MI6 officer early in the drama.

Names

American

Don Barrows
Perry Burr
Mary Cobb
Paul Devries
Linda Dorwart
Barbara Emery
John "Jack" Emmons
Patricia Grate
Robert Greenlee
James Groninger
Gilbert "Gil" Humphries
Robert "Bob" Kenney
Donald Koerlin

Soviet

Forrest Laidley
Carol Lincoln
Sandra Lord
Irwin "Huck" Mallory
Nancy Manchester
James Munson
Sharon O'Connell
Judy Peters
J. Courtney Shevelson
Reynold Stroube
Robert Ternes
Betty Tureo
Mark Young
Konstantin Afanasyev
Ekaterina Akhatova
Roman Bryzgalov
Ivan Bukov
Oksana Denisenko
Sergey Fridzon
Rosa Gelfand
Andrei Glushkov
Oleg Karpunin
Irina Korovashkova
Vladimir Krylov
Tatyana Lavrova
Viktor Matveyev
Maxim Mironov
Yelena Morozova
Ruslan Nikolishin
Yevgeny Ostrovsky
Aleksandr Pavlichenko
Yulia Petrova
Dmitri Rybakov
Alyona Sorokina
Ivan Sutyagin
Georgy Tishchenko
Nina Volkova
Vasili Yashin
Pavel Zabelinsky

Moscow Street Names

Use a Russian surname from the above list, taking the possessive, usually "-skaya." For example: Ulitsa Afanasyevskaya is Afanasayev Street.

World War 2.1

— Matt Forbeck

Nutshell

Stranded time travelers are torn between the struggle to return home and the conflagration of WWII.

Characters

You play members of a team of explorers sent into the past from the future, such as:

- scientist (chronologist)
- historian
- technician
- inventor
- security officer
- doctor/medic
- descendant of Holocaust survivors
- descendant of a soldier either KIA or MIA (Killed in Action or Missing in Action), either Axis or Allied
- priest or rabbi
- friend or relative of another character (sibling, cousin, parent, child, and so on) just along for the ride
- elderly survivor of the war

Setting

In the first episode, our group of heroes appears in Paris, France, on July 4, 1940. When they are sent back in time from the present, they believe that they will have a means to return to their own time. They soon discover, however, that they cannot return. They may question whether this was always intended to be a one-way trip.

The team can appear in or later utilize any of a number of famous places:

Along the **Avenue des Champs-Élysées**, the most famous street in Paris.

Inside the **Hôtel Ritz**, which would make a fabulous base if it weren't already occupied by the Nazi Luftwaffe.

Beneath famous landmarks like the **Eiffel**

Tower or the **Arc de Triomphe**.

Along the banks of **the Seine**, perhaps in **Montparnasse**, on the Left Bank.

Harry's New York Bar: a famous tavern, which features a bar brought over from New York; the birthplace of the Bloody Mary and the Sidecar.

The Cathedral of Notre Dame, the great Gothic church and the center of the Catholic faith in the city.

The Louvre, the famous art museum, currently closed, many of its greatest works moved before the Nazis could loot the place.

The Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Paris, the great church that stands atop the highest point in the city

The Palais Garnier, a stunning opera house.

Les Invalides, a former veterans home and hospital converted into a military museum.

The Place de la Bastille, an open square where the famous prison was once located.

The Panthéon, a former church converted into a mausoleum, many of the most famous people in French history are interred here.

The Sorbonne, which houses the University of Paris.

The Quartier Pigalle (the red-light district, which includes the legendary Moulin Rouge cabaret and the Grand Guignol, which features plays filled with gory horror).

As the series opens, the Germans have only occupied France for less than two weeks, starting with the Armistice signed on June 22. The situation is still startling and new for both sides. The Nazis glow with arrogance over their triumph, and many Parisians still sting with shame.

The French Resistance has yet to assemble. Most of the French people still don't understand how rotten their new rulers are and hope to keep



their heads down and live comfortably under the Nazi regime. They receive attempts to tell them how bad it will get with shock or disbelief.

The Nazis are about to launch the Battle for Britain on July 10, less than a week away. The team can try to stop this—or at least warn the Allies about the details of the impending attack—or they can use foreknowledge of events to prove to disbelievers that they aren't utterly mad.

What Went Wrong?

The team thought it had the means to travel into the past and then return to the future. This was only supposed to be a quick test of the technology when applied to large groups of people. They were heading out to have a drink in 1920s Paris.

Something overloaded the circuits, though, and the team members find themselves stranded in the early days of World War II instead. **Do you know what caused this right away, or do you want to leave it as a mystery to resolve during play? If you do know, was it sabotage, physical damage to your time vessel, the time stream protecting itself, or something else?**

Once the team members come to terms with the fact that they are at least temporarily stranded in the past, they face choices. Primarily, do they hunker down to protect the timeline, or do they take advantage of the opportunities it avails them?

Themes

Home: Many of the team members will want to get back to their own time. Others may have good reasons to want to make a clean start in a different time. Can they make a home here if they have to? Or must they make every effort to get back?

Fate: Can the team members change their past, or is history as they know it set in stone? Will they discover that their efforts to alter the past are constantly foiled? Or do they discover that they were essential all along to making events turn out as they remember?

Consequences: If the heroes alter history, does that effectively destroy any chance they have of getting back to a present time that resembles their own? Or did they surrender

that option the moment they traveled backward in time?

Hate: Part of the Nazi agenda is the destruction of many minorities, including Jews, Africans, the Romani (gypsies), and homosexuals. People from the present are sure to have difficulty tolerating such intolerance.

Changes: With their knowledge of the future, the team members have a chance to save thousands if not millions of lives. Do they try to stop the Holocaust? Or the bombing of Pearl Harbor? Do they drive to Berlin and shoot Hitler? Or is keeping the time stream unsullied more important? And are they doomed to fail?

War: When nations do battle, innocents die, and it's hard to see how one person can make a real difference. At the same time, the only way to stop aggression is often to stand up and fight. What paths will the team members choose? And can they deal with the life and death consequences of their actions . . . or inaction?

History: Team members may believe they know what happened in the past, but they're relying on fallible human accounts. Discovering the real story may disrupt their plans and their ideas about whom they might be able to trust.

Technology: The team members may have come to rely on technology from the future. Beyond things like computers and smartphones, they may also require certain medicines to survive, things that may not yet exist. Can they work to invent them in time? Should they?

Strangers: The team members are not from around here. They may not even speak the language. If they're discovered, they're sure to be imprisoned and interrogated, maybe even tortured and killed. When they arrive, they have no one they can trust outside of each other—and maybe not even that.

Tightening the Screws

As the heroes spend more time in the past, they can face all sorts of complications.

- **Love:** An attachment to someone in the past can make it hard—even emotionally impossible—to leave. This could be a romantic interest or perhaps a child or friend the team member cannot bear to leave to history's cruel twists.

- **Recognition:** The team members recognize someone important, someone fated to be the nexus of huge changes in history. This could be a leader (military or civilian), a writer or artist, an athlete, a religious figure, and so on, either important now or destined to be someday soon. Perhaps they encounter a future president, prime minister, or pope. Do they change that person's future—and their own?
- **The Truth:** One of the team members—or one of their new Parisian friends—decides to tell the truth about who they are. Perhaps they hope to motivate changes the team has been unable to make on their own. Maybe they want to sell out the team for a profit. Either way, the number of people who want to get their hands on the team and their technology skyrockets.

As the series moves on, the cast may discover that a rival team of time travelers has arrived from the future. These may include:

1. People sent back to rescue the team members—whether they want to leave or not. If some of the team is reluctant to go back, they may have to be hunted down and brought in by force.
2. Soldiers sent back in response to a sealed note found in the future, one that the cast members may or may not have even sent yet as a desperate attempt to contact the future.
3. A team of Nazi time travelers from an alternate future in which the Axis triumphed in World War II. Once they discover the team members skulking about the past, they will do whatever it takes to ensure their own timeline comes about instead.

The Nature of Time

There are many ways for the cast to cause troubles with the timeline. At first, they may be reluctant to cause any changes for fear of what damage they might do to history. Because they're trapped in the past, though, the long-term consequences of their actions might not become apparent straight away. Because they are early time travelers, they may have many

theories about what will happen due to their long-term occupancy of a non-native time, but there are many variants on what could prove to be the truth. This gives participants the chance to establish their own set of time travel rules through play. Options include:

- **Time's Arrow:** Fate is inviolable. The team members can do nothing to alter it. They are only playing out roles in which they have already been long cast, whether they know their lines or not.
- **Resistant to Change:** Time can be changed, but it requires effort. The more notable the event to be altered, the harder it becomes to manage. Large events are like black holes that suck you in without recourse.
- **All's Fair:** Time can be changed at will. All that's required is effort—and getting around the people in that time who want to stop you.

If it turns out that all's fair, there are a few different possible ramifications that can erupt from that. Many of these come down to the grandfather paradox, the question about what happens if a cast member kills an ancestor—or otherwise causes the ancestor to not have a particular child.

- **You Never Were:** When the past is changed, the consequences of that propagate into the future. This may mean that one of the team members disappears. The team members may not remember the missing person ever existed at all, or their memories may be protected by their own displacement in time.
- **Multiple Choices:** When the past changes, the future changes with it, creating an alternate timeline. Even if a cast member's entire set of ancestors is murdered, the cast member is unaffected—at least for as long as the cast remains in the past. If they return to the future, they may discover that nothing has changed in their original timeline. Or they might find themselves in the future their actions brought about.

Names

French

Gilles Garnier
Mathieu Lavoie
Guillaume Sauvage
Michelle Duvalier
Antoinette Bellerose
Claudette Bouchard

German

Gunther Braun
Rudolf Stein
Christoph Jaeger
Eva Gartener
Wolfgang von Harbou
Brünhild Falkenrath

British

Lord Smithington
Lady Westchestershire
Simon Forrest
Winnifred Halsey
Charles St. John-Smythe
Albert Chambers

American

Joe Smith
Jack Johnson
Eddie Jones
Bill Ryan
Marge Cartwright
Eleanor Evans



Malice Tarn

— T. S. Luikart

Nutshell

The King With A Thousand Enemies has forgotten his triumphs, his tragedies, and his sins. As his rule falters, hidden truths collide with cherished myths, with far-reaching consequences for his Warren Kingdom.

You, the next generation of courtiers in the Warren, will determine how they play out.

Setting

High in the mountains, far beyond the realms of the Two Legs with their iron fangs and roaring sticks, away from the low green hills, where those red in tooth and claw hunt unceasingly, near the roof of the world lies the ancient rabbit kingdom Malice Tarn. A thousand generations of kits have roamed the concealed roads, both above and below ground, that link the secret warrens of Malice Tarn. Countless tunnels have been lost or forgotten over the years. Oldest, and for generations beyond count, strongest of the Grand Warren Kingdoms, Malice Tarn once dominated all warrens for many days travel in all directions.

The king of Malice Tarn was formerly considered the ablest and noblest ruler to be found within the warrens of the mountains, and even down into the lowlands beyond the heights, but as his mind has slipped, so has the security of his rule. Ambassadors from other courts now come seldom, if at all, to the icy burrows of Malice Tarn. Tributes that filled whole halls to brimming have become rare and paltry. The king's reason is hardly the only casualty; predators, battle, and accident have taken the majority of Malice Tarn's last generation before its time. The wits of the few remaining elders can

be as scattered as the king's.

What happened to the previous generation of Malice Tarn?

(If the king is a recurring character) **What ails the monarch?**

With the king's hold on his throne faltering, revolution is in the air. Younger adults stretch their muscles, eager to seize their places in a new hierarchy of power. They talk of reestablishing Malice Tarn's dominance over the other warren kingdoms nearby. This is no small dream: communication with the other kingdoms and independent warrens throughout the mountains has mostly broken down. Even when brief messages do come, they reveal little of other warrens' affairs.

The warren stronghold nearest to Malice Tarn is the fortress labyrinth known as Frost Home. Always a proud lot, the rabbits of Frost Home, even at the very height of Malice Tarn's glory, resisted paying homage to its kings. Their reluctance was, in part, due to their long and terrible war against a tribe of ice cats, the Goldeneyes-That-Speak-In-Riddles. Only the current king ever gained their allegiance, by somehow stopping the predations of the Goldeneyes. The ice cats have since returned, and the gruff emissaries of Frost Home no longer roam the halls of Malice Tarn.

How did the king stop the Goldeneyes' predations and why have they returned?

The next largest of the Grand Warrens was the vast kingdom known as Sunset Hollow, which lay a day's journey away from Malice Tarn. Burrowed just below the snow line, Sunset Hollow consisted of a series of beautiful caverns set beneath several copses of aging trees. Roots

lined the halls; herbs grew plentifully. Warriors from Malice Tarn protected this blessed place and its relatively sedentary folk. Now, all communication from Sunset Hollow has ceased. Scouts report its complete abandonment.

What exactly was Malice Tarn's relationship with Sunset Hollow? Do any of you secretly know what happened to its rabbits?

The final Grand Warren that Malice Tarn once claimed sovereignty over lies several days journey away, at the border of the mountains and the high vales surrounding their lower skirts. In the Emerald Briar, words rake sharper than claws and cunning trumps strength. Its rabbits well deserve their reputation for cleverness and trickery. Since the onset of the king's troubles, Malice Tarn has received nothing from Emerald Briar but a steady stream of excuses.

What do you think the rabbits of Emerald Briar are planning?

There are independent warrens in the mountains, but they are generally small, supporting only a subsistence existence. The warriors of Split Trunk Deep present an exception, but they follow their own strange codes of honor and have never given Malice Tarn their undisputed allegiance.

Rumors describe other Grand Warrens on the far side of the mountain range, but the folk of Malice Tarn know little about them. There are thought to be more warrens in the lowlands, but they're well more than a week of travel away, in lands known to be awash with predators, and may be nothing more than legends.

The mountains can make for hard living, especially with the constant chill. Save for the deepest parts of winter, you can usually find food, but gathering it requires dangerous struggle. The heights teem with hungry predators. Unless absolutely necessary, it's wiser to grab food and return home than to risk stopping to eat in the wild.

Characters

The main cast may include the ruler of Grand Warren Kingdom Malice Tarn, along with key members of the royal court, stand-out citizens, and the occasional ambassador. While the rabbits communicate articulately with

one another and are intelligent and capable of limited tool use, they look and act like natural rabbits. Their anthropomorphism resembles that of Watership Down rather than Wind in the Willows or Bugs Bunny.

The King (or Queen) of Malice Tarn: The ruler of a rabbit kingdom consisting of multiple linked warrens set high in a mountain range, the monarch has a faltering memory, possibly caused by a recent head injury or bouts of dementia brought on by age. The ruler of Malice Tarn remains a mighty warrior, a cunning politician, or both, but was once privy to many secrets that his subjects were unaware of, secrets he can no longer recall . . .

Royal Consort: The monarch's favored mate. Generally the most dominant doe or buck after the sovereign, but not always.

Thane: One of the monarch's advisors, who act as bodyguards, and potential challengers should their ruler weaken. There are never more than three thanes in Malice Tarn at any given time.

Seer: A rabbit gifted, or cursed, with profound insight and an uncanny ability to accurately foretell future events. Frequently skittish, even for a rabbit.

Ice Runner: A member of Malice Tarn's elite guard rabbits.

Sounder: An advisor to the monarch on common warren matters, sounders also keep an ear angled for interesting rumors and investigate unusual news. The title derives from the practice of rabbits thumping their hind feet to indicate danger.

Forager: An expert at seeking out greens and other edible roots, even in the midst of deep winter, a skill deeply valued by other rabbits.

Minder: A rabbit that watches over, teaches, and protects the next generation of rabbits, called kits.

Scout: Swift runners and far travelers, scouts tend to be a breed apart—sometimes literally, as one or two snowshoe hares often serve in the ranks of Malice Tarn's scouts. Scouts travel between warrens with messages and dare to spy on the predators of the mountains.

Ambassador: Diplomats from other warrens rarely visit these days, but your character still maintains permanent station at court. You

might be a rabbit, or a representative of another friendly species, in which case your perspective may radically differ from the rest of the cast.

(Once one player decides to play a non-rabbit character, everyone else should stick to rabbits, unless the group collectively decides to depart from the assumptions of this pitch to play a series with a very different feel.)

Themes

- **Deception is the True King:** For rabbits, life is hard and short. The convoluted details of Malice Tarn's history have been passed down orally to new generations in songs and stories, which are fallible at best. Even the youngest tales are suspect, while the oldest ones carry all the trappings of myth. Dominant older rabbits, like the aging monarch, enjoy a massive advantage over their younger counterparts, who simply don't know what is true and what isn't. They can only accept what their elders tell them, leaving them vulnerable to deception on a key question: was Malice Tarn ever the noble kingdom its stories paint it as? Was it the lair of a cruel tyrant, or something in between? As the main cast interact with the world beyond Malice Tarn and learn what others think of them they'll swiftly discover that "truth" can be a flexible concept.
- **Self-Deception:** Even the king might discover truths he, in his addled state, has lost track of.
- **From Awareness to Action:** Determining where truth ended and the lies began can change forever how the rabbits of Malice Tarn regard their warren and each other, ultimately determining whether they continue to support the monarchy or seek to establish some other form of government for their warren.
- **How Others See Us:** One warren may regard the folk of Malice Tarn as saviors, another as villains. Both might be right.
- **Cheerful Lies and Wicked Truths:** A given deceit can be incredibly powerful or laughably feeble, depending on where and how it is deployed. The same can be said

of telling certain truths. Choices are based on information. Who, then, has the real power, the decision makers, or those who tailored what they were told?

- **Strength Lives in Many Guises:** The power to direct others means nothing if all are starving. Warriors without a skilled scout may never see the battlefield. Who influences a kit more, their standoffish parents, or the minder that loved and taught them?
- **Fragile Identity:** Where does character come from, our choices or our memories?
- **Fealty or Fear?**
- **Long Nights, Deep Shadows**
- **Life Finds a Way**
- **Scarcity Breeds Adversity**
- **More Bitter than Cold is Betrayal**

Tightening the Screws

- **Clean Consciences and Dirty Claws:** Ambassador Bristlewit of the Emerald Briar formally returns to Malice Tarn. He claims he only wishes to reestablish normal relations, which might be more sinister than it sounds. Some, you see, whisper that the old kings preserved Malice Tarn's noble image by delegating their dirty work to the Briar.
- **The Great Revolution:** A daring young sounder suggests that the time has come to find a new way, where everyrabbit has a say in warren affairs. Turns out he was inspired by a beloved minder who has been telling her kits about warrens where all are free to choose their own path. Which characters join the revolution, and which move to suppress it?
- **The Exile Returns:** A powerful rabbit stalks into Malice Tarn and declares himself the rightful heir to the throne, returned at last from his mandated exile. Is he truth-teller, a liar, or as mad as the king? Does it even matter, when so many are drawn by his charisma and willing to follow him?
- **Ice Runner Upheaval:** A cadre of elite guard rabbits decides they can run the kingdom better than the moribund nobility and plan to stage a military coup.

They approach one or more like-minded main characters to join the cause.

- **The Gathering Ice:** Scouts spot Goldeneye ice cats prowling the outskirts of the warren's territory. What brings these dangerous foes, until now a direct threat only to Frost Home, so close to Malice Tarn?
- **The Poisoned Root:** A key player of the old generation succumbs to a toxic meal. Did the warren's aging chief forager fail to tell good food from bad, or was it murder?

If the king is a recurring character:

- **Into the Cold:** In his madness, he exiles the main cast from Malice Tarn. Which outsiders will grant them shelter?

- **Bad Memories:** The king regains portions of his memory, recalling truths that threaten the delicate equilibrium within the main cast.

A Brief Note on Rabbits

Wild rabbits are fierce fighters, but will often make hostile displays to back challengers down before initiating combat. If an aggressive showing fails, a male rabbit will urinate on those he wishes to dominate. Unsurprisingly, even normally submissive rabbits will frequently attack when pissed on.

Names

Silverlock
Far-Leap
Quickfoot
Digger
Snowflower
Pale-Fur
Blackpaw
Thistle

Long-Tooth
Whisper
Stiffleg
Pinefall
Shadow
Grubs
Rogel
Sourbark

Petal
Ironroot
Evening
Sweetleaf
Mist
Coldborn
Holly
Frost

Wolfkin
Timber
Redmane
Juniper
Mosey
Iceheart

Inhuman Desires

— Jason L Blair

Nutshell

Monsters in love fight to retain their humanity amid struggles for power, survival, or a way out.

Characters

You play humans, both those who are and those who were. Those who have lost part of their humanity are somewhere on the track to becoming a monster. We call these people outsiders. They come in many forms, most commonly vampires, werewolves, ghosts, fey, and elders. Characters who are still fully mortal have glimpsed the presence of a darker world and long to learn more. Or they have fallen in love with one of the outsiders and are about to learn a very dangerous secret.

The main cast consists of a group tied together across supernatural boundaries by a web of romantic entanglements. In keeping with the paranormal romance genre, at least one of the relationships each player establishes with another member of the ensemble must be of a romantic nature, whether requited, one-sided, potential, or former (with a secret smolder still buried deep.)

Mortals

Vibrant, romantic, wanting, weak. Mortals desire a life beyond the mundane. They see only the benefits of being an outsider: the power, the confidence, the long lives. These humans are all too willing to sacrifice their humanity to take control over their lives and finally feel free, not understanding that control and freedom are exactly what's lost. They don't see that what

they have in their mortal existence is what the outsiders wish they had never lost.

- A woman diagnosed with a fatal disease has heard of a man who might be able to cure her—but for a price she's not sure she can pay.
- The survivor of an animal attack hunts down the strange beast that killed his best friend.
- A lonely girl wants to join the society of the beautiful young man to whom she is strongly and strangely attracted.

Vampires

Sexy, brooding, ambitious, hungry. Vampires must feed on blood, preferably human, in order to survive. Centuries of persecution forced them into clusters where natural hierarchies arose, placing the more respected and ruthless into positions of unquestioned power, while those with no taste for politics were left in the gutter. Most live in cities such as Boston, New York, Atlanta, Toronto, and Chicago. Dense populations allow them to become just another face in the crowd, their eccentricities easily forgiven, their more-than-occasional victim just one of many bodies.

- A centuries-old vampire wants to end his killing days and find a way to redeem his past actions.
- A power-hungry vampire yearns to use his new-found powers against those who tortured him when he was a human.
- A vampiress has to keep her love of a wolf hidden from her traditionalist family or put both their lives at risk.



Werewolves

Smoldering, muscular, reserved, feral.

Werewolves need meat, the bloodier the better, but are happier with deer, dog, or cow than the tainted taste of human. Once in the grip of the beast though, for those three long nights of the full moon, it can be almost impossible for them to discriminate. Many wolves live in cities, but the larger packs are well outside, in the wooded communities and farmlands. This is for their safety just as much as the humans'. Once in their full-wolf form, they're indistinguishable from a large wolf, so authorities and hunters won't hesitate a tick to take them down.

- A wolf seeks out a cure for his monthly curse while trying to put down roots in a small town.
- A pack leader longs for solitude and peace, but doesn't trust the others to operate without his guidance.
- A wolf uses the affections of a vampiress to gain her trust and learn more about a plot her family is planning against the wolves.

Ghosts

Ethereal, comforting, erratic, wise. Ghosts need the spiritual energy of others to delay the inevitable slide through the veil and into the other side. Empathic and blessed with precious insight into the motivations and foibles of the living, ghosts can be incredibly loving and caring friends, but, as they age, their desire to remain in the physical world can drive them to the brink of insanity. If they can't replenish their spiritual reserves, which can only be done by siphoning the life force of the living, their bound soul will wither and die. The older the ghost, the more life force they need to remain in our world.

- A spirit haunts the star-crossed lover who chickened out on their suicide pact.
- A woman possesses a string of bodies in order to temporarily feel the touch of her living lover.
- A newly-dead woman, bound to the house in which she died, yearns to move on to a world of peaceful slumber.

Fey

Mysterious, alluring, magical, desperate. Fey are dying and need the energy of the earth to live. Before the advent of man, fey were the physical manifestation of the earth's raw forces and elements. When humanity came to prominence, fey existence was threatened and they had to escape into the bodies of humans in order to survive. Those blessed humans were granted centuries-long lives and command over the elements of fire, water, earth, and air. But as humanity gets further from nature, the fey struggle more than ever. To live, they must leech the energy from plants, trees, and animals regularly. Fey are the most common of the outsiders.

- A fire fey is hunted by a psychic detective who believes she is to blame for a rash of inner-city arsons.
- A water fey who blames herself for recent drowning deaths attempts to hide in mortal society to escape fey and human authorities.
- An earth fey, tethered to a dying tree, must find a way to connect to a new lifesource or perish.

Elders

Stoic, charismatic, commanding, powerful.

Elders are the antediluvian ancestors of modern humanity, those who walked before the Flood, and they need to be worshiped. Without a harem, a cult, or a congregation to exalt them, they will die. They grant temporary powers and wishes to those humans who swear fealty, and they use the promise of more to nurture that loyalty into full-blown fanaticism. Elders rarely fraternize amongst their own kind, seeing each other as a threat, but they often associate with other outsiders, granting even greater power in exchange for even more meaningful love, as vampires, wolves, and the like are an even greater source of life-giving energy than humans. Elders are the rarest of all outsiders.

- A melancholy elder yearns to find the prize girl for his aging harem.
- An elder of waning power looks to usurp the cult of another so she may continue to live.
- Believing their time has passed, an elder concocts a plan to end all outsiders everywhere.

Setting

“Inhuman Desires” darkly reflects the modern world. The time is now; the place is our own densely-populated cities and remote wilds. Some outsiders prefer solitude and the security of being far away from susceptible humans, while others need the safety of numbers to hide their presence and their victims.

Outsiders and the Pact: Some outsider groups (vampires, elders) operate within the law of an explicit code, while others (ghosts, fey) move freely within implicit boundaries. But all outsiders adhere to the Pact. Those who flaunt the Pact threaten the outsider population entire and anyone from any outsider group, not just the perpetrator’s own, can take whatever measures necessary to reestablish the integrity of the Pact.

The Pact is what keeps the outsiders safe. If the existence of outsiders became public knowledge, superstitious human authorities would have no qualms about doing whatever was needed to protect the populace. Frankly, neither would the outsiders if the roles were reversed.

Many outsiders take jobs—living among mortals ain’t free—exposing them to a variety of mundane realities. To an outsider, playing house with mortals can be soul-sapping drudgery. At times, those ties to humanity hardly seem worth it.

Outsiders and Humanity: Every outsider needs something from humanity, whether it’s copper-sweet plasma, their undying love, or their delicious corpses. Main cast outsiders cling to mortals as a grounding for their own withering humanity.

Outsiders and Each Other: Outsiders associate with other groups out of necessity. They may need to unite against a common threat or present a unified front in order to maintain the integrity of the Pact. They may also come together to bring in an outsider who has drifted too far afield, either too close to humanity or too far into monstrosity.

Outsider Desires: Some outsiders want to rise to the upper echelon in their respective factions. Others want freedom from their curse. Still others long for an end to their pain. And then there are those who want to bring all of humanity under their wing and spread the glory of the outsiders to the world.

Loyalty vs. Happiness: Outsiders balance loyalty to a group and its adherence to stringent rules against personal happiness and satisfaction. The Pact says an outsider may not love a human, but the heart wants what it wants, even if it no longer beats. The Pact says no outsider shall rise against another out of spite or jealousy, but wars between groups have raged for centuries. The Pact cannot hold in the face of true desire.

Themes

- **Humanity vs. Monstrosity:** Characters fight their own monstrous impulses—their hunger for blood or human meat, their thirst for vibrant souls—fearing they will slip past the point of redemption and forever lose what’s left of their humanity. Will they fall forever or can they be saved—redeemed—by another?
- **Loyalty:** Do you choose to stand with your faction, retaining your standing and power, or with the mortals and outsiders who trust you?
- **Pain:** Outsiders endure constant loss. Some stay forever young while their loved ones age and die. Some lose the fight against their darker natures and take the life of someone they care about—or lash out in anger with regrettable results. Others finally make in-roads back to humanity only to lose the mortals they care about when their outsider status is revealed.
- **Choice:** Social standing or personal happiness? Eternal life or secured humanity? Choice is the heart of everything.
- **Justice:** When the Pact is threatened, what is the fair price the perpetrator should pay? Factions often, and severely, disagree.
- **Mortals:** A herd for culling, a means of survival, or are they something more? How will they be judged—and who shall do the judging?

Tightening the Screws

Fragile alliances, sudden betrayals, and broken promises breed monstrous repercussions.

- The mortal ex of a human lover seeks

revenge for a vampire stealing the person he loves.

- An outsider who took the fall for a fey's handiwork comes calling for revenge.
- A human medium threatens to out the outsiders' world unless her demands are met.
- A trophy hunter comes to town looking to bag a paranormal addition to his rare animal collection.
- The presence known only as The Mist blows through town, temporarily sapping power from every outsider, leveling the playing field for a single night and leaving the outsiders indistinguishable from humans.
- A werewolf's sire comes to check on his protégé, not knowing the pup has been harboring a death wish toward his old man.
- A human invents a way to zap ghosts out of our reality, but he doesn't know where it sends them—or how to get them back.
- An ambitious associate threatens to shine light on a vampiress's recent transgressions to her superiors, possibly stripping the woman of her faction standing and the mortal man she loves.
- A powerful elder reveals a secret about the true nature of outsiders—and their ultimate purpose on Earth.
- A different town means different rules, and any outsiders new to town who step out of bounds may be dealt with severely.

Names

Mortals, Werewolves, Ghosts, and Fey

Amber
 Avary
 Barry
 Ezekiah
 Hank
 Isabel
 Jeremy
 Kenneth
 Manny
 Matthew
 Robbie
 Samuel
 Sarah
 Seth

Vampires and Elders

Abraham
 Bartholomew
 Cambden
 Dexter
 Eli
 Ezra
 Gideon
 Jacob
 Jared
 Liam
 Lukas
 Rhiannon
 Vishnu
 Wikus



Brigade

— *Chris Pramas*

Nutshell

Men and women from the world over come to fight fascism in the Spanish Civil War. Some lose their lives; others, their idealism.

Characters

The main cast are members of one of the International Brigades or supporting medical aid organizations. People of 53 different countries served in the International Brigades, so each player should choose a nationality and then a role. Some example roles are:

- World War I veteran
- left-wing intellectual
- radicalized worker
- political exile (likely from a fascist nation)
- medical aid volunteer
- People's Olympiad athlete
- Communist "volunteer" sent by Comintern
- war correspondent or photographer
- anarchist militiaman (or woman)
- young thrill-seeker
- political agitator
- fascist defector

If the series starts with the characters meeting in Paris, establish the future relationships that will develop within the main ensemble over the

course of the first few episodes. Call your first scenes to prefigure or establish them.

Marta isn't Bill's lover in the opening scene, but will become so during the series. Their first scene together shows the sparks flying between them.

Setting

The Spanish Civil War began in 1936, when the election of a Popular Front government was met with the rebellion of much of the Spanish military and other reactionary elements like the monarchists and Catholic Carlists. The German Luftwaffe transported fascist general Franco and much of the Army of Africa (including the Spanish Foreign Legion) from North Africa to Spain. The Germans also sent advisors and technical experts to help the fascists, as well as the Condor Legion of Luftwaffe planes and pilots. Mussolini supported the fascists with arms, a naval blockade, and eventually troops. Franco hoped for a quick coup d'état, but was stymied by army units that remained loyal to the Republic and armed political and worker militias. The People's Olympiad, a planned rival to the Berlin 1936 Olympics, never happened because of the uprising, but many of the

foreign athletes marched to the front with the militias. These and other foreign volunteers on the spot can be seen as the precursors of the International Brigades.

In August, 1936, many countries signed a Non-Intervention Agreement. In theory these nations, including Germany, France, Italy, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom, were not supposed to send war material or troops to Spain. The United States didn't sign the agreement, but Congress banned the export of arms to Spain nevertheless. The Spanish Republicans did not understand how countries like the USA, UK, and France could refuse to sell arms to them when they were the rightfully elected government of Spain. Despite evidence brought to the League of Nations of Germany's and Italy's many violations of the Non-Intervention Agreement, the farce continued. The Republicans were forced to turn to the countries that would sell them arms, Mexico and, also in violation of the Non-Intervention Agreement, the Soviet Union.

Supporters of the Republic around the world were outraged and many responded to rallying cries to defend it from fascism. The Communist International (or Comintern) issued a resolution from Moscow in September 1936, directing the organization of volunteers to go fight in Spain. The effort was to be organized by the French Communist Party. While many of the volunteers did come from various communist parties, many other political persuasions were represented as well. Even White Russians signed on, hoping to win a way home after years in exile.

Paris was chosen as a central location to organize the volunteers and this is a good place for opening scenes or flashbacks in which the characters first meet. Each will have come from a different place, often by a long and perilous route. They meet at a reception center in the 9th Arrondissement. There members of the French and Italian Communist Parties organize groups for the covert trip to Spain. Tito, later President of Yugoslavia, helped with this effort. **Do the characters meet him in Paris?**

Some volunteers enjoy a relatively easy voyage by sea from Marseilles. The first five hundred arrive in Alicante aboard the steamer Ciudad de Barcelona. Others, particularly as

the war goes on, have to make a dangerous march over the Pyrenees. **Which route do the characters take?**

Once in Spain, the volunteers are transported to the Brigades' home base in the city of Albacete. In the barracks in the Calle de la Libertad, the new brigaders are to train for war. Due to the shortage of weapons and ammunition, little military training goes on. Instead the commissars focus on political indoctrination, giving long lectures on the reasons for the war and why fascism must be resisted. This may not sit well with non-Communist characters, spurring conflicts during episodes set in this training period.

When training is complete, characters join a battalion and a brigade. Battalions are generally organized by nationality for ease of communication, but only so much can be done. Since part of the fun of "Brigade" is characters from disparate nations and backgrounds coming together, a good choice is the Chapaev Battalion. It included volunteers of at least 20 nationalities: Ukrainian, Polish, Czechoslovakian, Bulgarian, Yugoslavian, Turkish, Italian, German, Austrian, Finnish, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Belgian, French, Greek, Albanian, Dutch, Swiss, and Baltic. Bend history to add your characters' nationalities to the list. Like many battalions, Chapaev is named after a revolution hero, this one from the Russian Revolution. A Soviet film, called Chapaev, unsurprisingly, gives a romantic chronicle of his feats and is quite popular amongst the Republicans during the Spanish Civil War. Viewing this 1934 film before or even as part of a session is a great mood setter for "Brigade."

Other battalions include Abraham Lincoln, André Marty, Commune of Paris, Dimitrov, Garibaldi, Mackenzie-Papineau, Rakosi, and Thälmann. **Does the group want to join a historical battalion or a fictional one? If the latter, what is it called?**

The main International Brigades are the 11th to 15th. The Chapaev Battalion is in the 13th. The first four brigades form in 1936. The 15th International Brigade is organized at the start of 1937 and is an attempt to put the English speakers together. Its battalions include Abraham Lincoln, British, and the mostly

Canadian Mackenzie-Papineau, or “MacPaps.”

Once organized, it is time to go to the front. Early episodes may turn on the paucity of weapons, ammunition, and supplies. Dozens of different rifles are in use and many are in appalling condition. Some date back to the 19th century. Many brigaders only learn to shoot on arrival at the front. Getting the group armed, equipped, and trained while on the front lines may take some time and is surely quite dangerous.

The first major action of the International Brigades is the defense of Madrid. This battle saves the Republic, and makes the reputation of the Brigades.

Over the rest of 1937, the brigaders fight in a series of offensives and counter-offensives with mixed results and many casualties. During this time the Communists, a small party at the outbreak of the war, extend their power and authority. French Communist André Marty serves as chief political commissar of the International Brigades. Seeing “Fascist-Trotskyists” everywhere, he and his commissars execute or send to work camps many of the volunteers. After the war he will claim to have had five hundred brigaders executed, earning him the sobriquet Butcher of Albacete. As the brigades fight fascists but deal with increasing Communist brutality, the idealism that brought them to Spain is sorely tested. This provides the series’ driving conflict.

In 1938, the Republican government agrees to disband the International Brigades, in the vain hope this will help their cause with the League of Nations. They also hope Franco will send his foreign troops home, which he will not. The International Brigades, having shed a lot of blood in the Ebro Offensive, must stand down. On October 29 1938, they march in a farewell parade down the streets of Barcelona to adoring crowds. This can make a fitting final episode to the series.

Themes

Strangers: when they arrive in Spain, brigaders are strangers to each other and also to the people they have come to fight for. How do they acclimatize to both situations?

Zeal vs. Professionalism: how do you fight

against well-equipped veterans from the Army of Africa with outdated weapons and poorly trained troops? Is zeal enough to carry the day?

Vengeance and Justice: Nationalist troops purge towns and villages they “liberate” of enemies, real and supposed. When Nationalist troops from one such massacre are captured, how do the brigaders deal with them?

The Enemy Within: one or more members in the unit are reporting men to the commissar for “defeatism” or “Fascist-Trotskyist tendencies.” When several good comrades are executed, who can be trusted?

Comrade vs. Comrade: the International Brigades include volunteers from across the left-wing. Can they overcome pre-war bickering to fight the common foe?

Freedom to Choose: volunteers turn over their passports on joining the International Brigades. Many assume they can leave whenever they want, but their fate is in the hands of Marty and his ilk. How free is free really?

Long Live the Republic: not all brigaders leave Spain in 1938. Some stay to fight, still believing that fascism must be defeated. Who marches home, who stays to face the desperate fights to come, and why?

Tightening the Screws

- A Spanish supply unit is selling food and clothes on the black market instead of sending them to the front. Do the brigaders deal with this themselves or go through the Spanish military?
- Several fascist defectors are being blamed for the death of a popular officer. Are they enemy agents or scapegoats?
- A new Soviet adviser is assigned to the battalion. A competent company commander in the Red Army, he’s out of his depth overseeing a full battalion. His advice puts the battalion in peril.
- Two frontal assaults on a Nationalist position have been bloodily repulsed. A third charge is ordered. Do the brigaders follow orders?
- A commissar who climbs through the ranks makes a great long-term villain. The more he buys into Marty’s delusions, the more dangerous he becomes.

Names

Some handy names are provided below for Spanish NPCs or characters (Spanish recruits were used to keep up unit strength as the war progressed). With volunteers from 53 nations in the International Brigades, it is beyond the scope of this pitch to provide sample names for them all. Remember, the internet is your friend.

Mateo Alquezar	Isabella Delgado	Silverio Pinilla
Violeta Arrazola	Teodoro Deunas	Pilar Resino
Javier Barna	Herminia Epalza	Carlos Rincon
Largo Billido	Gilberto Gutierrez	Carmen Rosado
Josefina Borrero	Mia Moreno	Marta Sanjuro
Pascual Cantillo	Blanca Obregon	Rodrigo Trueta
Eladio Caravaca	Dolores Ochoa	Pedro Valganon
Rojas Castano	Maurico Paneda	Marisa Vivancos
Maximo Correa	Cristobal Penalosa	

Further Reading

The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939 by Antony Beevor. The best history of the conflict this author has read. One challenge to be ready for is the alphabet soup of acronyms. Between all the various factions, political groups, and militias, there are dozens of acronyms to learn before this book will truly make sense to you. It's worth it.

International Brigades 1936-1939 by Ken Bradley, a slim book from Osprey's Elite series. If you are interested in the military side of the International

Brigades, it's the book for you. It includes details on units, weapons, uniforms, and even battle flags.

Homage to Catalonia by George Orwell. Orwell was not in the International Brigades but the POUM Militia. The POUM (the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification) was an anti-Stalinist communist party and there was no love lost between them and the Comintern. Still, this book gives a great sense of what it's like to be a foreigner fighting fascism in Spain during this period.

Colony Wars

— Emily Care Boss

Nutshell

As humanity spreads across the solar system, new colonies have sprung up on Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, and the asteroid belt. Clashing interests create exploitation, cultural division, and, ultimately, civil unrest. Which side will you choose when the revolt comes to your home?

Characters

The main characters are the pillars of a colonial settlement split by religion, class, and a rising tide of revolution. Roles the players might adopt for their characters include:

- indentured miners who signed their life away to spacecorps, trapped by debt and looking to be free
- elite Spacecorps representatives and their families, bringing home needed resources and great profit for Earth Mater
- Firstcomers—grizzled spacers who founded the colony—who will kill to preserve what they built
- immigrants from Earth looking for opportunity for their families, desperate and ready for change
- Earthgov's representatives, trying to hold the colony together
- merchants out to make a buck from risky interplanetary trade, dependent on the stability of the colony
- first generation Spaceborn exiled from their parents' home, lost to them due to their changed bodies
- second generation Spaceborn, impatient

with the oppression of the alien government of Earth

- religious leaders building a home for humanity in the new worlds, perhaps conciliatory or firebrands for the rights of their flock
- colony military, trying to keep the peace and decide which side they're on
- colony engineers, working to keep everyone alive in a new and hostile environment
- scientists, trying to further humanity's mission to colonize space

Setting

One hundred and fifty years from now, the population of the Earth has doubled twice again. Colonization began with Mars. The habitation grew till it sprawled across the ranges: from settlements on Olympus Mons to Elysium Planitia, on up to the Terra Cimmeria Highlands. To the initial alloyed domes were added tunneled habitrails. A small colony of scientists sent to Venus disappeared mysteriously and the dangers of her acid and heat gave little incentive to replace it. Builders dotted the many moons of Jupiter and Saturn with village-sized domes. Diggers riddled Titan, nearly the size of Mars itself, with a network of tunnels. Skeleton crews and robotic automatons manned the distant commercial outposts of Neptune and Uranus. A mission to Pluto was lost, and never tried again.

Scientists colonized all the planets first, supported by engineers and roustabouts,



hardened and neutered by the cosmic elements they endured. Now a dying breed, they claim the title Firstcomers, since it was they who first walked on the soils of Mars and dug the trenches of the great moons. The leading countries of the Union of Nations (also called Earthgov) used the information they sent back to generate contracts with corporations. They sent out freighters and crews to haul resources desperately needed to stabilize an overpopulated Earth.

The many corporations created a federation of their own, Spacecorps Transnat, which dispatched agents to lead the way for the mass-scale resource extraction. They skimmed between the planets in swift and luxurious craft. These grew into the largest fleet in the worlds, with an aggregate income larger than all of Earthgov. As its first workforce, Spacecorps Transnat brought in deported criminals and indentured laborers. Requiring the latter to pay their passage on credit, the corporation trapped them in a cycle of unpayable debt. Tight regulations on water production and use, as well as licenses for hydroponic farming, prevented colonists from striking out on their own. On the pretext that they were still technically citizens of Earth, the corporations denied them suffrage and anything smacking of self-determination.

Earthgov commissioned a massive Stellar Marine fleet to assist and guard the freighters of Spacecorps Transnat. As needed, the troops put down unrest among workers. Earthgov posted representatives to each colony to oversee compliance with safety regulations and ensure the appropriate resource allotments were sent to Earthgov. They raked in fat bribes to ignore their duties.

The next wave of colonists came freely with their families, seeking opportunity in the stars. Many fled political and economic oppression on Earth, but brought old feuds and ideological differences with them. Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and humanists distrusted each other and rejected each others' beliefs. Fundamentalist people of the Book, with strong patriarchal traditions who practiced the cloister found themselves at odds with those practicing gender equality. Pluralists clashed with monists.

The children born on the planets were little aliens, loved by their families, but exiled from

Earth by the adaptations that made them suited to colony life: long limbs, light bones, and lung capacities adjusted to thin atmospheres made a permanent return to their parents' home impossible. The first generation of spaceborn were schooled on Earth and Luna to free their parents (and colony governors) of that responsibility. When the full impact of their physical changes became manifest, the Earth schools were abandoned and their students relocated to the Moon.

This forged them into a unique cohort, bonded by their shared experiences, and left with a longing for Earth as their home, which could never be fulfilled. Later spaceborn, never spent much time on or near the Home planet, so as their connection to the divisions of their parents lessened, so too did their ties to Earth herself.

When laboring on Mars and in the asteroid belt, the colonists depended for life and livelihood on Earth's nations and the corporations that funded their work. Outer planets colonization opened up previously unavailable resources: water ice and oxygen on the Galilean moons, Io, Europa, Ganymede, and Callisto; hydrogen on Jupiter and Saturn. Work on Rhea and Titan was fueled by Titan's massive methane lakes. With more resources, the colonists have the possibility of controlling their destiny as they control their surroundings and livelihoods. The Galilean moons now serve as centers of population and trade.

A movement is afoot on Saturn's moons to buy or throw out the corporations and re-form as cooperative settlements. Solidarity has arisen there among a patchwork of true believers, spaceborn, scientists, and other colonists who flee their contracts, seeking freedom and self-rule. On Jupiter, a coalition of ex-miners and military defectors stockpile weapons and steal ships, striking blows through sabotage and ambush where they can, to weaken the Earth forces.

The series begins as some colonies claim independence, peacefully or with blood. Yours is torn between these paths and loyalty to Earth.

On which side do you stand?

The Colonies

- **Venus colony:** mysteriously abandoned
- **Mars:** disciplined and controlled, first colony, under the thumb of Earth
- **Asteroid Belt:** death-trap mining colonies populated by indentured miners
- **Ceres:** capitol of the Asteroid Belt, Corporate founded and controlled
- **Jupiter:** expansive and insurrectionist, many population centers on the moons, main site of war
- **Saturn's moons:** experimental, religious, scientific, safe zones for free colonists
- **Uranus and Neptune:** automated Corporate element-gathering operations
- **Pluto mission:** lost

Themes

- **Survival:** was humanity meant to live in space?
- **Humanity and Alienation:** people must change to adapt to life in space, but what do they become?
- **Privilege and Oppression:** the colonies explode with wealth and profit, but who makes out? Who gets left behind?
- **Old Divisions:** we're in a new world, but our divisions from Earth follow us here
- **Freedom:** we all left Earth to find a new chance, but found a prison. If we overthrow the old order, what new one will arise?
- **Cost of Revolution:** freedom has its costs. How do you create a new system from the ground up when you are struggling to survive in the harshness of space?
- **Loyalty:** what brings people together when so much drives them apart? Who can you rely on?
- **Betrayals:** who can you trust when your lives and so much profit is on the line. Who can you trust?
- **Justice:** who deserves revenge? What place has mercy here?

Tightening the Screws

The series follows the changes in this colony as its unbalanced dynamics implode in the face of a groundswell of colonial revolution. Shifting

loyalties and progressing internal battles change the balance of power as political, commercial, and finally military clashes force everyone to take a stand. The action may shift to other colonies, with the main cast perhaps engaged in re-supply and rescue, spy missions, or skirmishes in space.

- a diplomatic mission is sent from Earth, asking for representatives from the colony. How will they be chosen and whose voices will be heard?
- a ship full of laborers who escaped indenture at a rival colony arrives; its inhabitants request asylum. Some colonists want to help them; others, to duck the ratcheting of tensions that will result from the acceptance of their request.
- the troubled daughter of an elite family gets mixed up in revolutionary politics. If you're their allies, you're asked to discreetly extract her from this embarrassing danger. If you're in with the revolutionaries, are her talents and contacts worth the additional heat her presence will bring?
- a prominent and intransigent firstcomer is murdered. His comrades blame corporate counter-subversion operatives, but as the main cast is drawn further into the matter, a dark secret from the colony's founding emerges. Do they expose this truth, or let it die with the last of the crusty original generation?
- a by-the-book young Earthgov anti-corruption officer arrives to investigate a generation's worth of bribe-taking by entrenched local representatives. Will her efforts aid the rebels by highlighting official malfeasance, or convince people that it's still possible to work within the system?
- a group of young people come to the colony preaching superiority of the spaceborn and offering religious revelation
- the Spacecorps Transnat council reaches a decision that the unrest on the colony must be put down, a security "consultant" brings this news with orders for the military and Earthgov representatives to use any means necessary

- a wedding thought to bridge the growing conflicts between Islamic and Christian colonists goes horribly wrong when the groom is assassinated
- rumors of a plot to sabotage the colony reach the Earthgov representative who looks for help among the colonists. Who will put aside their differences to help them track down the saboteurs?
- a spaceborn activist group divides between the earthbound yearnings of the first generation and the local political demands of the second, sparking colony-wide conflict.
- a notorious con artist who somehow always manages to wriggle out of his legal entanglements comes back from the hinterlands to announce a bizarre discovery. He's found the ruins of an ancient civilization! It must be a scam, but is it just another money-making venture, or cover for a hidden string-puller's political machinations?
- a strange ship docks at your colony, saying they come from the lost colony of Venus. Eerily un-human in their speech and movement, are they who they say they are?

Recurring Characters

The recurring antagonists and allies of a "Colony Wars" series might include:

- Janjak Toussaint, former Jovian colonist, now a Captain in the Earth stellar marine force, sent to enforce the peace at any cost
- Octavia Ramos, the Corporate Rep for the sponsor of the Colony, overseeing the profits and keeping tabs on potential threats from rebellion
- the first child Spaceborn, Anahit Nadianian, now an adult and a brilliant celebrity scientist, now speaks out against Earthgov policies. All sides want something different from her; some just want her to be silent forever.

Names

Gender Neutral

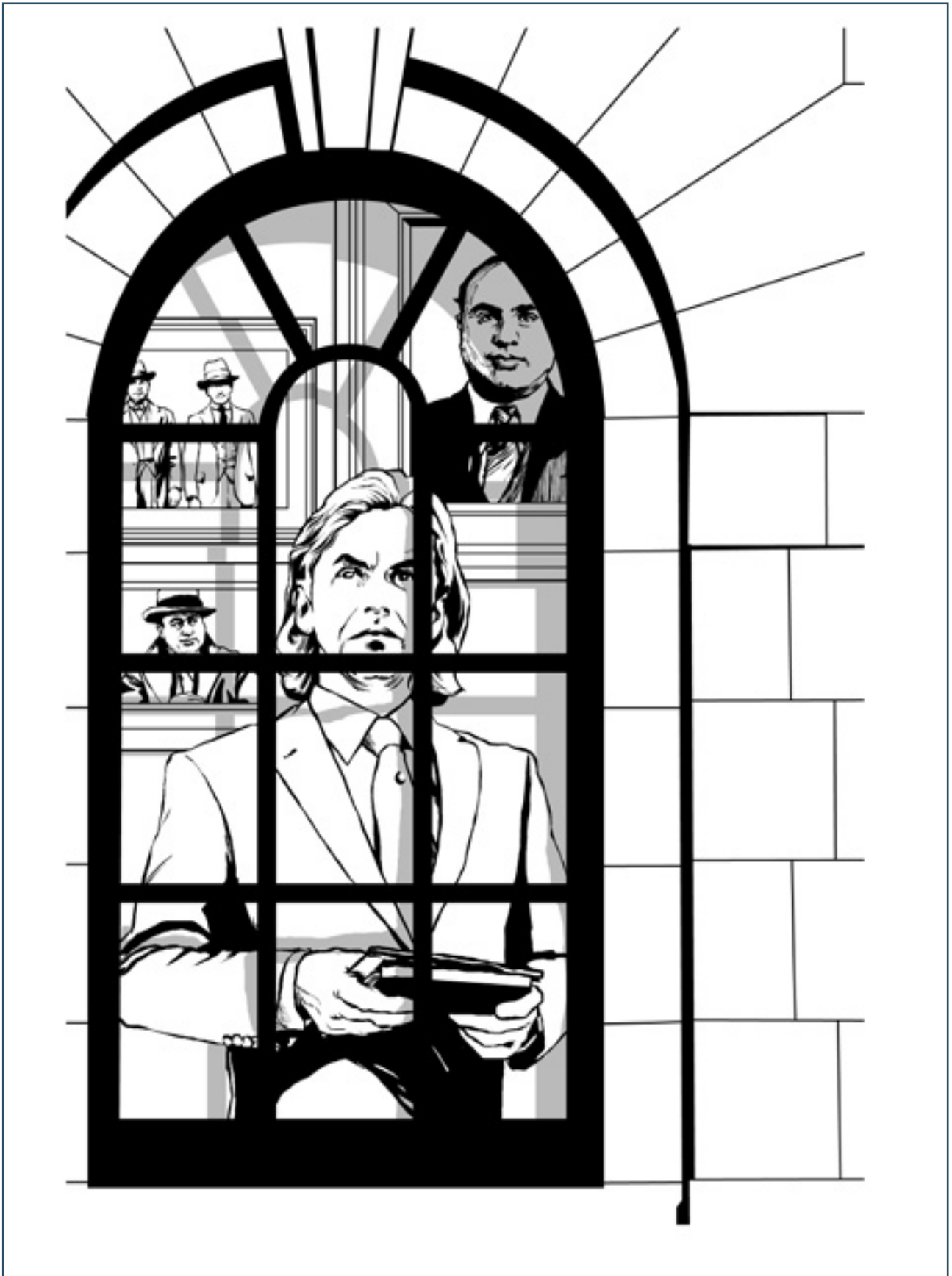
Kelty Means
Darret Qi Romanov
Riley Smith
Mannat Chandra
Ellis Griffiths
Harjeet Kohli
Hitomi Mori
Qiu Wong

Female

Wei-lin Ching
Mingzhu Zhao
Bridget O'Malley
Loreena Cruz-Santiago
Perpetue Navarro
Naitana Ozee
Sadyatou Al Yami
Damla Altun
Bruna Azevedo
Farah Shuhada
Ashley Murrow

Male

Dai Sun
Jingguo Li
Rizwan Al Zahrani
Jacques Sabatier
Swash Gutierrez
Cihan Karakaya
Caetano Dias
Ezequiel Almeida
Marcelo Monteiro
Zaquim Braga
Frederick Azizan
Mahathir bin Amir
Terrence Windlow
Harjeet Diwan



Mafia Century

— Rob Wieland

"I believe in America."

Nutshell

An organized crime family rises and falls through the 20th century. Players portray the crime family and those drawn into its web of money, power, and blood. As characters are murdered, betrayed, and exiled, new characters come into play to pursue the American Dream any way they can.

Characters

Mix and match an adjective and a noun for a character concept. The Reluctant Heir starts out in a much different place than the Ambitious Heir. For those still on the fence about a character concept, or for groups who long for the thrill of random attributes, write each word on a piece of paper, and draw an adjective and noun to kickstart your creativity.

Setting

The crime family drama appeals by bringing royal themes to the modern world. For similar reasons, modern Shakespeare adaptations often cast Macbeth as a gangster or Richard III as a Don. Those roles fit gangsters like double-breasted suits. The bloodiness of their existence, the power they wield, and the cost of it all rubs

ambitious	veteran
blowhard	sister
corrupt	mother
drunk	heir
educated	good time girl
fatalistic	father
gentle	cousin
hard	brother
intense	advisor
jovial	rival
kindred	outsider
lusty	ex-con
machiavellian	businessman
nervous	politician
overbearing	reporter
progressive	paperboy
quiet	bootlegger
rebellious	reverend
sensual	dancer
timid	bastard
unsubtle	lawyer
vicious	bagman
wishful	musician
xenophobic	actor
young	torpedo
zealous	boss

up against unrequited love, decadent lust, and unstoppable ambition.

Your story unfolds against the epic background of 20th century America.

In which city is your series set? Classic choices include New York, Chicago, and Las Vegas. Almost every city in America has a fascinating history that ties in with organized crime.

A quick dip into Wikipedia or local history websites can uncover fascinating details to weave into your series. Perhaps the family set those criminal events into motion. Or they were pushed out of the business by the fallout from what really happened.

Committing crimes hits the same fantasy escapism as slaying orcs or blowing up enemy starfighters. The criminals in these stories have some redeeming qualities. The longstanding tradition of outlaw as hero stretches from Robin Hood to Han Solo. Players relish a chance to think like a bad guy. Expect them to set up rackets, run cons, and come down hard on those who disrespect their family.

The family elements often come into play to humanize these characters. The dangers of robbing a bank make more sense when a father's love is in play. The cruel rejection of a suitor becomes necessary to make a life outside of crime. Human motivations we all relate to soften the bloody actions in bullet-filled procedural scenes. Repercussions echo down the years. All those dead men have fathers, brothers, sisters, and mothers. When one family strikes another, those blows keep reciprocating throughout the years.

Though the term mafia is of Italian origin, criminal empires were forged by many ethnicities throughout the 20th century. Cultural rivalries spur gang wars as new rackets spring up. These blood feuds are common in the early part of the century, but even later eras worry about new gangs of Columbian, Japanese, or Russian origin.

Themes

- **Loyalty:** The organization asks for unswerving loyalty. In exchange it protects its members from the effects of the law. The flip side of this theme is Selfishness:

what does it take for a member to act alone for their own good?

- **Family:** The web of characters in the series is bound by blood. People do things to protect family members they would never otherwise contemplate. Outsiders amongst the characters make this theme more poignant. Wives and husbands proclaim their love, but they will never be blood.
- **Getting Out:** There comes a point in every criminal's life where he thinks about life away from crime. The trigger for these feelings may be a person that comes into their lives, a close call with a bullet wound, or a dream of a tranquil existence. No one else has ever done it—will you be any different?
- **Revenge:** Those mixed up with the family business don't go to the authorities to solve matters. Many times the family acts on behalf of members of the community. Forgiveness is an important part of escaping the cycle. Asking forgiveness for the life of a gangster is something anyone would find difficult.

Tightening the Screws

Other factions live to complicate the lives of the family:

- a rival gang currently in power in the city
- an upstart family willing to take part in criminal operations you find below yourself
- the new DA who has vowed to clean up the corruption in the city
- the police chief who was in close with the group your family ousted

Punctuate your intergenerational series with key events in the history of organized crime. These dates can function as the kickoff to a season, the climax that a season builds towards, or fodder for fictionalization that can take history in another direction.

- **January 17, 1920:** Prohibition begins. The illegal sale of alcohol fuels the rise of organized crime in America. The days leading up to the beginning of the law take the cast on a wild ride, securing alcohol, hiding means of production, and preparing to go underground. Brewing

and distilling families unconnected to crime find themselves in a bind. Do they give up their livelihoods or continue what they do, knowing they must cross a boundary?

- **February 14, 1929:** The St. Valentine's Day Massacre. Seven men die in an attempt by Al Capone to eliminate his main rival in Chicago—the act of a man who believes himself above the law. Public outcry puts Elliot Ness on Capone's trail, setting the stage for his downfall on tax evasion charges. Bloody events like this are meant to end rivalries between families, yet always spark new ones.
- **May 13-16, 1929:** The Atlantic City Conference. Here begin the Five Families and the Commission. Famous leaders, primarily of Italian and Jewish families, including Al Capone, Meyer Lansky, Charles "Lucky" Luciano, Bugsy Siegel, Vito Genovese, and Enoch "Nucky" Johnson, meet in Atlantic City to put aside feuds and work together as a single organization. They plot to squeeze out rival outfits, particularly the Irish.
- **May 1942:** Operation Underworld begins. The Office of Naval Intelligence asks Luciano and Lansky to use their influence in the New York waterfront to keep an eye out for Axis spies and saboteurs. Rumors also abound (likely spread by Lansky himself) that the mob is also involved in busting up Nazi sympathizer rings and support rallies.
- **March 1, 1947:** Bugsy Siegel reopens The Flamingo Hotel. The Mob's influence in Las Vegas begins at The Flamingo. After a disastrous premature Christmas debut, the hotel reopens on this date in a much improved state. But Bugsy has cashed in most of his influence and will be dead by year's end. Even top earners have to watch their back. One big flop quickly brings the wolves to the door.
- **January 8, 1959:** The Fall of Havana. The Mafia has heavily invested in Cuba as a tourist destination, keeping its leader Fulgencio Batista in their pocket. The policy backfires as Batista's abuses of

power spark a revolution. The old ruling class flees for Florida and Fidel Castro sends the mob packing.

- **October 1963:** Joseph Valachi sings like a bird. Much of the knowledge of organized crime comes from the McClellan Hearings and key witness, Joseph Valachi. For the first time, the titles and structure of crime families become common public knowledge. Under pressure as never before, mobsters seek revenge for slights real and imagined.
- **October 15, 1970:** The RICO Act becomes law. This law allows leaders of organizations to be charged with any crimes they order their subordinates to do. Prosecutors can now reel in the big fish by flipping low-level crooks. This places severe strain on the code of silence protecting family leaders.
- **March 13, 1987:** The Teflon Don goes free. John Gotti evades murder charges three times while simultaneously taking the dead man's place. The ensuing media celebrity focuses much unwarranted attention on the New York crime families.
- **December 23, 1994:** Whitey Bulger goes on the run. This murderous Boston mobster flees indictment on a tip from his former FBI handler. For years the FBI has looked the other way on many of Bulger's activities because of his cooperation in putting other families away. The century ends with the lines between informant, handler, gangster, and law enforcement officer blurrier than ever.

Build to these pivotal moments, or their fictionalized analogues, with classic crime drama complications:

- a character is pressured to turn rat
- a recurring character is a rat
- a character is courted by a rival gang
- a character is targeted by a rival gang
- mob parents want their child to go legit
- a spouse tries to influence the family and get in on the business
- a wedding seals an alliance between two powerful families
- the new cop (or prosecutor) on the case is incorruptible—or is he?

- the high-placed official you've been bribing needs your help to stay in office. Without his greased wheels, you'll be exposed.
- a hothead's temper threatens a key alliance
- (early decades) Does the family mix itself up in the drug business, or stick to old-fashioned bootlegging and extortion?

Generational Play

"Mafia Century" follows a dynastic setup. Retire old characters and introduce new ones as you span decades of criminal history. Set up stories that pay off decades in the future.

Playing out big sprawls of time gives players chances to set up their arcs in advance beyond just their own characters. These stories suggest more characters, like children, new threats, and bringing recurring characters in as the stars of a new season. Techniques to highlight this advantage include:

- Run each season as a decade. Start in the 1920s and work the timeline forward. Seasons might consist of individual episodes representing specific years. Or center them around a particular story arc occurring within the decade, without necessarily covering the entire span.
- Consider changing characters during season breaks. New seasons introduce new challenges and new characters to meet.

Describe a memorable demise scene for your retiring character without resort to the procedural system. Or send your character along a destructive arc and let the story organically weave its way to a blood-choked big exit. Crime dramas are notorious for closing scenes where troublesome characters are eliminated in a decisive fashion. Such a blowout clears the way for new characters next season—or makes for a hard series sendoff.

- Play with chronology. Flash forward, flash back, jump sideways, and twist the story around major events. Begin the season with the funeral of a major character and tell that story in reverse. Frame each episode with an interrogation by a faceless law enforcement official. Plan a big heist one session and then jump ahead to the trial the next episode to discuss what went wrong. Use this technique to cover player absences. If someone integral to the plot can't make it, discuss what happened off screen with them and deal with the aftermath at the table.
- DramaSystem lets characters change rather than improve in a linear manner. Make the most of characters that get older, lose a step, retire, or end up bleeding out on the street. Those who only wish to play characters who gain power and prestige need only to look to the source material for examples of good character arcs built out of loss. Don Corleone loses his influence, gets shot, is powerless to stop his oldest son's murder, and watches the son he hoped to get free of the criminal life instead become a more effective leader.

Names

Male

Dean Traber
 John Tyson
 Matt Shirtz
 Seth Curkeet
 Stuart Chait
 Luke Leonhardt
 Luigi Badlamenti
 Hugo Mazzara
 Evan Damiano

Female

Sharon Lyle
 Lindsay McHenry
 Mary Williams
 Jackie Davis
 Leah Nizani
 Diana Kesselschmidt
 Dawn Fonatucci
 Rebecca Gold
 Monica Leone

4 Motion

— Steven S. Long

Nutshell

Subjects of the Aztec Empire plunge into turmoil when the white man arrives on their shores, while the Spaniards struggle to survive in a strange New World.

Setting

The setting of “4 Motion” is the Aztec Empire of central Mexico in 1519-1521, the years of the Spanish Conquest.

Aztec Society

The Aztec Empire was less a true empire and more a hegemony with one powerful city-state (Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital) dominating the surrounding city-states (Tlaxcala, Cholula, Tlacopan . . .) militarily, politically, and/or economically. It could force them to engage in “flowery wars” to provide captives for human sacrifice. Despite cultural commonalities, these other cities hated the Aztecs and often eagerly allied with Cortez.

Within Aztec society, nobles (*pipiltin*) controlled society. Most were hereditary nobles, but it was possible for commoners to ascend to noble rank through battlefield valor, becoming a *cuauhpilli*, or meritocratic noble. (Historically, Montezuma II eliminated the status of the *cuauhpilli* during his reign, but it’s a concept with so much dramatic potential that GMs may wish to preserve it.) In theory the emperor was chosen from among the hereditary nobles; in practice the emperorship was in effect a hereditary position.

Aztec Religion

An important aspect of Aztec life—one most Spaniards find utterly repugnant—is Aztec religion. The Aztecs’ chief gods included:

- Quetzalcóatl, god of wind and culture
- Tezcatlipoca, god of night, sorcery, and change
- Tláloc, god of rain

- Huitzilopochtli, god of war

The Aztecs believed they had to feed the gods human hearts and blood to keep the world alive. Human sacrifice was a central element of Aztec religion, and sometimes reached epic proportions. For example, during the dedication of the Great Temple in 1487, a thousand sacrifices per day were performed for twenty days, creating a literal river of blood that ran down the temple steps and into the plaza.

The Aztecs believed they lived in the Fifth World. The gods destroyed the previous four in various ways, and the Fifth World and its sun were doomed to destruction by earthquakes on the final day of 4 Motion.

The Conquest

Hernan Cortez landed on the east coast of Mexico in April 1519, defying the orders of Governor Velázquez of Cuba. To prevent any sort of mutiny by his men, he scuttled his ships, stranding them in the New World and forcing them to conquer or die. (Historical myth says he burned the ships; if you prefer this more dramatic scene for your series, run with it.)

Cortez set out westward. Since he commanded an army of only 500 men, he adopted a strategy of allying with native cities opposed to the Aztecs. He soon arrived at Tlaxcala, where the prince, Xicotencatl the Younger, engaged him in battle and nearly defeated him. But Xicotencatl was persuaded that an alliance with the Spaniards against the hated Aztecs would serve Tlaxcala better.

Next Cortez marched on the sacred city of Cholula, an enemy of Tlaxcala. He entered Cholula without resistance, but his translator Malinche informed him the residents planned to kill the Spaniards in their sleep. Cortez struck first, kidnapping the Cholulan leaders, setting the city on fire, and slaughtering thousands. Stories of the massacre spread, making other



cities and peoples much more receptive to Cortez's "requests." Montezuma II, realizing his strategy of trying to buy off or defeat Cortez had failed, formally invited him to Tenochtitlán.

Cortez arrived at Tenochtitlán on November 8, 1519. At the time, Tenochtitlán had a larger population than any European city but Constantinople—possibly as many as 300,000 inhabitants. Built on the island in the middle of Lake Texcoco, it seemed wondrous and amazing to the conquistadors. Some accounts claim Montezuma II personally greeted Cortez and dressed him in flowers from the emperor's own garden; other sources state no meeting occurred between them. Montezuma II did have the royal palace Axayácatl prepared for the Spaniards.

Cortez soon demanded more gifts of gold, and for the idols at the Great Temple to be removed and replaced with Christian shrines. These demands were met. Despite this, Cortez, concerned over his vulnerable position, made Montezuma II his prisoner on November 14. The emperor remained ruler of his people, but under Cortez's control.

In April 1520, Cortez learned that Pánfilo de Narváez had arrived in Mexico with an army of 900 soldiers and orders to return Cortez to Cuba. Cortez left 140 soldiers in Tenochtitlán under the command of Pedro de Alvarado and marched east. With only 260 men, Cortez surprised de Narváez with a night attack and defeated him. He soon won de Narváez's men to his own side with stories of the riches of the Aztec Empire.

While Cortez was away, de Alvarado granted Montezuma II's request for the Aztecs to celebrate a religious festival. But de Alvarado and his men attacked the festival, killing most of the Aztec nobility. Spanish accounts claim this was done to prevent the Aztecs from performing a human sacrifice, and to preempt a planned attack on the Spaniards. The Aztecs, on the other hand, said the Spaniards acted out of greed to obtain the gold the nobles wore.

Enraged, the Aztecs rebelled against the Spaniards and besieged Axayácatl. Montezuma II eventually arranged a sort of truce, but sporadic fighting was still occurring when Cortez returned. Under their new leader, Cuitláhuac, the Aztecs continued their rebellion.

Cortez forced Montezuma II to speak to his people to try to ensure safe passage for the Spaniards back to the coast. The Aztecs mocked him and threw stones. Montezuma II died of his injuries on June 29, 1520, and Cuitláhuac became the new emperor. Eighty days later he would die of smallpox.

On the night of June 30, 1520—la Noche Triste, "the Sad Night"—the Spaniards fled Tenochtitlán, but were caught on the causeway by the Aztecs. Many were killed by Aztec warriors; others, weighed down by armor and treasure, fell into the water and drowned. In all over 600 Spaniards and 1,000 Tlaxcalans were killed. Cortez and de Alvarado both survived.

On July 8, aided by Cortez's daring cavalry charges, the Spaniards held off a numerically superior Aztec force at the Battle of Otumba. Soon thereafter they took refuge at Tlaxcala. The Aztecs cut off the city, but an ongoing smallpox epidemic kept them from taking advantage of the situation. Cortez formed an alliance with Tlaxcala to conquer Tenochtitlán. (Xicotencatl, having had enough of his erstwhile allies, secretly attempted to form an alliance with the Aztecs, but failed. Cortez later accused him of treachery and executed him during the siege of Tenochtitlán.)

The new alliance soon began conquering cities allied with the Aztecs. In February 1521, Cortez laid Tenochtitlán under siege. The emperor, Cuauhtémoc, fought back as best he could, but between disease, an inability to obtain food and supplies, and superior Spaniard tactics and weapons, the cause was hopeless. On August 13, 1521, Tenochtitlán fell. What little had not already been destroyed by cannons or fire was leveled, and the Spaniards began to build Mexico City in its place.

Characters

Players can choose to portray Aztecs, Spaniards, or some mix of the two. A mix can lead to some intense drama, but be aware that it may limit characters' opportunities for interaction. The series may work better for most groups if all the characters are Aztecs or Spaniards, with the GM taking the part of the "other side" and using its members to Tighten the Screws.

On either side, you can play historical figures,

or fictional characters swept up in the events they drive.

Aztecs

- Montezuma II, Huei Tlatoani (“Chief Speaker,” or emperor) of the Aztec Empire until his death in June 1520. He’s an experienced war commander and leader who often rules conquered peoples through terror, but is also something of a scholar. He’s concerned about the many omens that seem to signal the downfall of himself and his people, and wonders if Cortez is, in fact, the god Quetzalcóatl returned.
- Cuitláhuac, the noble who led the Aztec rebellion against the Spaniards in mid-1520
- Cuauhtémoc, the last ruler of the Aztec Empire (from mid-1520 until the city’s fall)
- Xicotencatl the Younger, prince of Tlaxcala and sometime ally of Cortez
- a warrior of the Eagle Knight or Jaguar Knight military orders
- an Aztec priest
- a hereditary noble
- a meritocratic noble
- a wily merchant (a pochteca) who’s spying on the Spaniards for Montezuma II or one of his rivals (in the Aztec Empire, merchants, who could travel freely from town to town, often served as scouts/spies for their rulers)

Spaniards

Except for Malinche, all Spaniard characters must be male. (Unless you want to embellish history to introduce a disguised woman in conquistador garb.)

- Hernan Cortez, leader of the Spaniards. He’s only 34 when he arrives in Mexico. Relatively little is known of his personality or preferences, leaving a relatively blank slate for a player who wishes to take on this role.
- Malinche, a native woman who becomes Cortez’s translator. Historically, she was considered beautiful and graceful; in “4 Motion” she might very well be young, stunningly attractive, and sensual.

- Pánfilo de Narváez
- Pedro de Alvarado
- a commander who oversees some of Cortez’s army
- a greedy soldier who’s only concerned about treasure and plunder
- a young soldier who’s never been to war before
- a crusading priest who’s horrified by the Aztec religion and wants to destroy its every vestige
- a scholarly priest who, while determined to convert the natives to Christianity, wants to preserve and study their culture

Themes

- **Cultural Superiority:** can one culture inherently be superior to another? (If the GM wants to add a mystic angle to the series, this question also covers “Which is better, magic or technology?”)
- **Religious Devotion:** can a religion be enlightening and helpful if it involves extensive human sacrifice? Is it justified for a Catholic to commit terrible sins in the cause of “saving” pagans? Who’s really holy here?
- **Fate and Punishment:** is Aztec society evil, and if so has it brought its fate upon itself?
- **The Price of Power:** to what lengths could (will) someone go to attain his desired goals?
- **Greed**
- **Revenge**

Tightening the Screws

The main pressures on the characters occur as your series takes them through the historical chronology provided above. Pick a moment in that timeline when the characters the group has chosen first encounter the crises that will define or destroy them, and start the series from there. As it progresses, keep players apprised of coming events, so they can call scenes accordingly. Events can be fictionalized to whatever extent the group prefers.

Flesh out the big historical arc with sub-plots like these:

- a hotheaded Aztec warrior hurts a Spaniard, potentially leading to bloody reprisals

- a Spaniard priest destroys a sacred relic or temple of the Aztec religion, severely upsetting the natives
- Governor Velázquez sends more men after Cortez
- some Spaniard soldiers want to return home (or abandon the expedition) and revolt or “go native”
- the Tlaxcalans rebel against the Spaniards
- omens (either of doom or hope) transpire, causing turmoil among the Aztecs
- a distant ally sends an army to help (or fight against) the Aztecs
- earthquakes begin to occur frequently, convincing the Aztecs that the end of the Fifth World is at hand

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Names

Aztec, Male

Acolmiztli
Atlixcatzin
Cacamatzin
Coatzontli
Cuitlalpitoc
Huetzin
Huitzilihuitl
Itzquemilt

Meconetzin
Nopaltzin
Oquitzin
Quahcoatl
Quetzalmantzin
Quilaztli
Techolatlallatzin
Temilotecatl

Tenzacatetl
Tetzauhpilezintli
Tilmatzin
Tlacateotl
Tlalpatcatl
Tzotzomatzin
Xicotencatl
Xilotzin

Aztec, Female

Acaxochitl
Azcalxochizin
Chalchiutinenetzin
Huitzilxochtzin
Izquixochitl
Malintzin
Quauhxochitl

Tiacapan
Tlacoxochitl
Xiloxochit

Spanish Male Given Names

Alonzo
Armando
Aurelio
Baltazar
Bernal
Carlos
Cristóbal
Domingo
Enrique

Fernando
Gregorio
Ignacio
Jacinto
Joaquín
Juan
Leonardo
Lorenzo
Manuel

Marco
Miguel
Pablo
Pedro
Ramón
Rodrigo
Silvio

Spanish Surnames

Alvarado
Espartero
García
Gonzalez
Guerrero
Herrera
Jiménez
León
Medina
Méndez

Mendoza
Mérida
Montoya
Olmedo
Oviedo
Quesada
Rodríguez
Sandoval
Valdés
Zuloaga



Deadweight

— Eddy Webb

Nutshell

The owner of a struggling independent professional wrestling organization (called a “promotion” in the trade) turns to illegal activities to try to stay afloat, causing tension and chaos both backstage and in front of the audience. It’s Breaking Bad meets The Wrestler.

The action revolves around Midwest All-Star Wrestling, an independent promotion based in Ohio and teetering on the edge of insolvency.

Setting

To understand the business and culture of professional wrestling, learn its specialized lexicon.

Angle: A storyline between two or more wrestlers that extends beyond a single match. The most common form of angle is a feud where the wrestlers face each other in multiple matches, building animosity until a final match where the feud is resolved.

Booker: The creative side of the show. This is the person who organizes the card and works out the angles, which is called booking. Also known as having the book.

Bump: Any kind of physical impact that an opponent receives from a wrestling move. Also known as taking a bump.

Card: The order of the matches during a particular show. Wrestlers that start earlier in the show (low-carders or curtain jerkers) are seen as less valuable than those in the middle (mid-carders) or at the end of the card (main eventers).

Deadweight: When an opponent goes limp during a lifting move, so that his opponent looks weaker. Also refers to a wrestler who tends to make all his opponents look bad.

Face: A gimmick that is a crowd favorite; a “good guy.” The opposite of a heel. Also babyface.

Gas: Steroids or any other drug used to enhance a wrestler’s look or performance. Using drugs is gassing. Also juice or juicing.

Gimmick: The character that a wrestler portrays in the ring. For clarity, the various characters that DramaSystem players portray are still “characters,” while the characters that the wrestlers portray are always called “gimmicks.”

Hardcore: a brutal style in which wrestlers use broken glass, nails, thumbtacks, and worse to damage their bodies.

Heat: How much crowd attention a match or a wrestler gets. Cheering is face heat, while booing is heel heat.

Heel: A gimmick hated by the crowd; a “bad guy.” The opposite of a face.

Promotion: Any professional wrestling organization.

Sell: To make the effects of a particular move look more devastating or powerful. Making a move look ineffectual is no-selling. Having an overblown or ridiculous reaction to a move (also making it look ineffectual) is over-selling.

Shoot: An interview or argument in the ring that references backstage events, commonly in the form of a real animosity between two

wrestlers becoming an in-ring feud. Using real-world events as the basis for an angle is a worked shoot.

Spot: A particular wrestling move or set of connected moves. It is like a scene within the “story” of a wrestling match.

Work: Something that appears authentic to the crowd, but is actually pre-planned or booked. Also, wrestlers are sometimes called workers.

Characters

You play the wrestlers and staff of a struggling independent wrestling promotion. One particular character needs to be portrayed, either by a player or the Game Moderator, and that’s the owner. The GM uses outside forces to pressure a PC owner, who then passes those pressures on to the rest of the promotion. If no player steps up to grab this juicy role, the GM plays the owner as a recurring character who becomes a dramatic obstacle for the PCs.

When playing a wrestler, consider both the gimmick (persona) the character plays in the ring (p. 134) and the real-life role behind the curtain:

1. rising star who is currently moving merchandise and bringing people into the show
2. old-school veteran who teaches the new talent and doesn’t like how the sport is evolving
3. struggling wrestler who cuts corners to get ahead
4. young kid in way over his head
5. foreigner trying to live out his dream with a visitor’s visa and a shaky grasp of English
6. female wrestler losing her glam and looking to move into the business side

Non-wrestling roles include:

- **Managers** take on trash-talking duties for performers athletic enough to fight but not articulate enough to present themselves as vivid characters to the audience. They act as non-fighting characters in promotion storylines. Up-and-comers sometimes start as managers before making it as wrestlers themselves.
- **Booker** (see above): If not a main cast character, the owner serves as booker.

- **Referees:** commonly wrestlers-in-training or retired wrestlers, although a few specifically join and train just to referee. Since they help choreograph the match, they are just as important to the match as the wrestlers themselves, although some wrestlers don’t believe that to be the case.
- **Fans** can sometimes end up as part of the promotion, often doing menial logistical tasks. Fans that have casual sex with the wrestlers are known as “ring rats.” Many fans end up trying to become professional wrestlers themselves.
- **Relatives and loved ones** of other main cast characters, along for the ride and perhaps weary or skeptical of the wrestling world.

Opening Scene

The theme of the first episode is “Pinned to the Mat.” Call a first scene featuring the owner character, as he faces the realization that he can’t pay back his bank loan, and his wrestlers haven’t gotten any money since last show.

Where did the money go?

Needing more capital, he turns to an illegal money lender.

Who is this lender, and why is he giving money to a wrestling promotion?

This is the inciting incident of a series of bad decisions that drag the promotion through hell. The egos and personal agendas of the wrestlers involved make the situation worse, until the eventual demise of MAW or a change in ownership occurs.

At its heart, this is a series about the duality of professional wrestling: carrying on an entertaining circus of over-the-top conflict in the ring while struggling with constant real-world conflict behind the curtain. Even if the promotion travels to different cities and locations every week, it presents a claustrophobic environment of passionate people crammed together to try and make something work just to earn \$35 a match—if the owner pays this time.

Themes

- **Fake Lives, Real Relationships:** When you spend every weekend hurting someone and telling everyone that you hate them, how does that impact your

relationship with them outside the ring? How much do you live the gimmick, and how much does the gimmick twist who you really are?

- **The Show Must Go On:** Wrestling is a brutal sport. How much of your body, your social life, and your sanity are you willing to sacrifice for the crowd? Is it worth it in the end?
- **Day Jobs:** Very few people can afford to make wrestling their full-time career. What happens between shows? How do you get by? What do you do until the next thrill of being in the ring?
- **Getting Over:** Every wrestler is a freelance contractor, looking to promote himself or herself to the next level. How devoted are you to this promotion? What are you willing to do make yourself attractive to a promotion with more money or more media outlets?
- **Lying for Fun and Profit:** Every wrestler is also an actor, a professional liar playing out the booked card in an improvised script. How easy is it to lie to your friends? Your family? The police? The judge?
- **Larger Than Life:** Every night inside the ring is epic, and that can warp real world expectations. What happens when the world champion gets into a real fight? What does being booked to lose every night do to your self-esteem? How do you handle a world that doesn't have a booker?
- **Old-School Values:** The backstage social norms of wrestling haven't evolved much in the past fifty years, and many wrestlers still hold those old school values as important and significant. However, that comes with a lot of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Where do you draw the line? How much do you show respect to the old school, and how much do you push the locker room into the 21st century?

Tightening the Screws

Even traveling from city to city, the wrestling community is pretty insular. A lot of the same faces show up time and again, both in the stands and behind the curtain, so conflicts tend to

reoccur, even in new contexts.

The heavily-promoted championship match looms, but the champion is badly injured.

A “true believer” fan has filed a police report on witnessing a heel's vicious (staged) assault on a face. Though that's easily cleared up, the investigating officers spot evidence of a real crime when they come round to ask questions.

An insider gives an anonymous interview with the local paper about drug use within the promotion.

A rival promotion wants to stage an “invasion” plotline, where wrestlers from both promotions face each other. It's a sure cash boost, but with one catch: the MAW has to lose to make the rival promotion look better.

A wrestler learns that a nearby promotion will pay ten times what the MAW can afford—if he's willing to fight hardcore

The money-lender wants the owner to use the promotion to obfuscate some drug deals. The person who provides much of the gas backstage thinks he's being cut out of the action, and threatens some of his clients if they don't force the new dealer to leave his patch.

Names

People

Nicknames are common for people who work in professional wrestling—even backstage. Drop off or move around any nicknames as necessary.

“Countess” Genevieve	Javier “Steel” Ruiz
“Doctor” Francis Chambers	Julie “Silence” Henderson
“Fallen” Ian Ortiz	Laura “Hollywood” Spencer
“The Sorcerer” Sean Stone	Meredith “Lolly” Poppo
Chris “Rebel Yell” McGrath	Michelle “M&M” Morris
D.X. “Shark” Daniels	The Chaos Emperor (Mike Foster)
Donna “Powerbomb Queen” Warren	Tom “Madman” Richards
Gregory “Nuclear” Winter	

Gimmicks

Gimmicks can be either faces or heels—the presented lists are just common alignments for these gimmicks.

Faces

blue-collar worker
child of wrestling legend
foreigner (generally from “country we’re allies with”)
fun-loving pimp
gentle giant
golden boy
hometown hero
man/woman in uniform
scrappy underdog
tough-as-nails fighter

Heels

arrogant intellectual
athlete from another sport (baseball, football, etc.)
cheating competitor
dark priest
evil clown
foreigner (generally from “country we’re currently at war with”)
metrosexual playboy
supernatural creature (vampires are popular)
the Commissioner (or his/her entourage—not necessarily the actual owner or booker of the promotion).
wealthy businessperson

Technical Wrestling

Outcomes of wrestling matches can be described in scene framing or as success by narration.

To play a match out as a procedural scene, be clear on whether the intent is to entertain the audience with a choreographed performance, or if an actual fight breaks out while the characters are wrestling. Sometimes wrestlers have different goals—one might want to follow the script, while the other intends to change the booked ending because he’s tired of losing, or wants to hurt his opponent for sleeping with his wife.

Add variety by allowing various Action Types, other than just “Fighting”, to pertain to the outcome:

- **Enduring** works well against submission holds and to persevere during long matches, such as hour-long “ironman” matches. Wrestlers Weak in Enduring get “blown up” easily, and their lack of stamina is often visible to the crowd.
- **Knowing** works well with tactics and technical knowledge. Figuring out the right move to counter your opponent to prolong the match and make the ending look better is a valuable skill, especially in matches involving a lot of classic (or “technical”) wrestling moves.
- **Talking** powers your mic skills, getting the crowd behind (or against) the gimmick to generate heat. Regardless of what happens in the ring, who the crowd perceives as the winner or loser means more, and that can be the result of good talking.

The White Dog Runs at Night

— Jesse Bullington

Nutshell

After the head of a rural moonshining family is arrested, the remaining brood must try to keep the family business afloat even as law enforcement, rival outfits, and a tee-totaling preacher all begin exerting pressure on them.

Characters

You play the key members of a family of moonshiners and bootleggers.

- **the cook:** tends the still and makes the coffin-varnish
- **the brains:** keeps everything running smoothly
- **the muscle:** protects the family interests—maybe he’s a battle-hardened vet back from the Great War or just a hoss with a taste for bare-knuckle backroom brawlin’; maybe she always put squirrel and venison on the table by being a crack-shot with her rifle, or could be she was just the youngest child and had to wrassle harder than the rest to prove her worth
- **the warm handshake:** deals with people outside the family, be it by arranging sales, brokering treaties with rival factions and corrupt officials, or sweet-talking any nosy lawmen out of taking a peek in the trunk of the old jalopy
- **the legs:** drives said jalopy, usually on rough, winding roads, sometimes while being pursued, and always in one hell of a hurry
- **the homemaker:** cooks the meals, mends

the clothes, and keeps this place from falling apart—could be she takes pleasure in keeping order and whipping up some hash, could be she resents the hell out of her lazy kinfolk

- **the word:** provides spiritual guidance for the family—could be he’s a snake-handling faith healer, or maybe she’s just the only member of the family who can read the Bible . . . selectively, if need be!
- **the midwife, sawbones, or veterinarian:** treats what ailments can’t be cured by a belt of white heat, be they an expert in herbal folk remedies, a retired army surgeon, or the pig doctor what tends to the critters on the local farms

Setting

The story begins in the rural community where the family has lived for time out of mind.

Are you in the Appalachians, Ozarks, or elsewhere in the South? Virginia, the Carolinas, and “Kaintuck” are all prime choices.

When is your series set? Prohibition went into effect late in 1919, courtesy of the 18th Amendment and the Volstead Act, but while the national booze ban was eventually repealed in 1933, to this day there are “dry” counties in Georgia where the selling and consumption of alcohol is still illegal, to say nothing of distilling it. Obviously a game set in 1930 will have a very different character than one set in the 70s (think *The Dukes of Hazzard* or Burt Reynolds’s *White*



Lighting, versus *The Untouchables* or *Lawless*). This pitch assumes a late-Prohibition setting.

The family has lived in these hills and hollows for so long they feel like they're part of the land itself, and they navigate the labyrinth of logging roads, old Indian trails, and deer paths the way cityfolk know their way to the corner store. Long before the government stuck its nose into people's business, the family distilled its infamous white lightning, and they're not about to quit now on account of some meddling lawmen and finger-wagging preachers. The family just supplies a demand, slaking a thirst, and what could be more righteous than that? What could be more Christian? More American?

The first episode opens with the news that the matriarch or patriarch of the family, who heretofore served as the brains of the operation, has been arrested and is being held without bail.

What was each player character's relationship to the Pater Familias? Which of you dearly loved him and want him back? Which regard him as a lowdown dirty cuss, and which don't?

Was he caught red-handed with a truckload of blackberry brandy, snatched on a technicality, or busted on totally unrelated charges?

Is the rest of the family implicated, and is the law monitoring your activities?

The big question, who's going to take over the family until—or rather, if—he's released, becomes a pivotal point of early play, as underlined by the opening episode theme: **Who's In Charge?**

Themes

- **Familial Loyalty:** Blood is thicker than water, but is it thicker than moonshine?
- **Greed:** How much is enough, and will all parties agree on when to play it safe, when to risk a major delivery, or when to push the stills to their limits to produce an extra batch or two? Also, the bigger the profits, the more attention the family is liable to bring on themselves from competitors and lawmen alike.
- **This Is How We Do Things in the Country:** You can only make so much off your broke neighbors, so it's time to head to town and sling some giggle juice to the hoity-toits—what tensions arise between the family and the cityfolk? What is the relationship between the family and their urban criminal contacts?
- **Community:** How much importance does the family put in helping out their less fortunate neighbors, folk they've lived beside for generations? Can they be trusted if you do let them into the fold? Will the family buy shoes for the local school-kids when the snows come down, or will they hop in their brand new Model T roadster and motor past a gaggle of bare-footed children without a backwards glance?
- **Class:** Wealth is relative, and even if the family is riding high on the hog, they're still not in the same league as any big-time competitors and may not be able to bribe their way out of trouble if things get too hot.
- **Putting on Airs:** Most of your neighbors, be they subsistence farmers or coal miners, struggle to put food on the table. How do they react to the signs of your success?
- **Menfolk vs. Womenfolk:** Are there women in positions of authority in the family, and how does the traditionally patriarchal community feel about this?
- **Race:** Are you black? If so, you face serious pressure from the law and white competitors. If not, do you deal with local black communities? If so, how do their white neighbors react to this crossing of the color line?
- **Progress vs. Tradition:** You never made deals with crooked lawmen, local politicians, and big city gangsters before, but can you afford to not play ball in a changing world?
- **Crime and Punishment:** There's what's illegal, and then there's what's just plain wrong—the family may be engaging in one criminal enterprise, but does that push them toward other, less-justifiable activities? Are all the family members on the same page as to what's acceptable?

Tightening the Screws

- A rival family wants the local moonshine market all to itself.
- Big city gangsters muscle in on the rural action.
- The new preacher tries his damndest to turn the local sentiment against alcohol in general, and you in particular.
- Neighbors attempt to rob the family, shake them down, or somehow sabotage their operation.
- The family still—or one of them, anyway—is discovered by the law. Do the lawmen simply smash it up, or do they lie in ambush for the cook and company to return to the scene of the crime? In any event, the family will need to set up a new still, and that means acquiring materials, settling on a secure, hidden location, and getting the operation back up and running as soon as possible. Also, there's the question of how the law discovered the still in the first place . . .
- The local law is one thing, but what if federal agents from the Bureau of Prohibition take an interest?
- Making shine depends on a steady crop of whatever it is that comprises the base mash that goes into the still, be it grain, fruit, or the occasional opossum—what happens if this essential material suddenly becomes scarce from a crop blight or other shortage? Working with a new base ingredient requires a new recipe . . .
- Improper or rushed moonshining can result in booze that blinds its imbiber, or even cause death. What happens when a local batch of moonshine starts poisoning people and the family is blamed? Was it their hooch, or are they catching the heat for somebody else's bad business practices?
- Nip-joints, the rural equivalent of speakeasies, will provide the family with a lot of business, but a mundane delivery to such establishments can obviously result in complications—an attempted hold-up, a federal sting operation, or just an out of control bar fight.
- The government wants to force the family

into selling their land to build a dam, or a coal company is trying to push them off to strip the mountainside.

- Word suddenly comes that your long-incarcerated patriarch is being unexpectedly released. How many apple carts might his return upset?
- Alcoholism—need we say more?

Add Weirdness and Stir

For those who favor a more fantastical game, simply take the above scenario and stir a little bit of magic into the mash. Appalachian folklore abounds with unique spirits and cryptozoological oddities to incorporate into a game or just reference as existing on the fringes. More directly, given the fundamentally alchemical nature of distillation, why not have the moonshine itself function as different sorts of magic potions, depending on the ingredients? A corn mash whiskey, distilled by a properly-skilled cook using the right combination of gathered herbs and roots, could grant the drinker inhuman physical prowess. A shine made from cherries and rose petals could make the imbiber unnaturally attractive and charismatic. Of course, the hangover from such a draught could be seriously bad news, especially for those who overindulge . . .

This magic might be subtle, leaving your setting as our world with weirdness hiding in the shadows.

Or it could be potent enough to result in an alternate history. In this option, the main cast creates and brokers rural magic, selling or withholding it from particular customers as they see fit, all while trying to dodge rival potion-slingers and the ever-present threat of the law—what if the 18th Amendment outlawed all non-federally sanctioned magic, and the Volstead Act was put into place to prosecute those who would seek to traffic in forbidden sorceries?

Names

Amos Granby	Madelyn Parker	Grace Thackeray	“Bitter” Beth Selma
Darla Armstrong	Alice Mitchum	Ogden Wirtner	Jeremiah Zolten
Leon “Frenchie” Jillette	Floyd Beauregard	Bob(bie) Dixon	Sam Connolly
Art Dumas	Morris Alwell	Hammond Cash	Chauncey Lafayette
Dewey Sinclair	Axel “Hatchet” Hayes	Pamela Hawthorn	Jenny O’Connor
Loretta Washington	Georgia Wilkes	Burt Minnich	Zachariah Durbin
Abner Fitzroy	Nora Blackwater	Haley Dearborn	
Flannery “Fig” Finn	Bill(ie) Ellenberger	Phil “Weasel” Richmond	

Slang

(Usually illegal) liquor: moonshine, mountain dew, rotgut, coffin-varnish, white dog, white heat, white line, white lightning, white Jesus, popskull, hooch, red-eye, alky, smoke, giggle juice, mule, (corn/rye/apple/peach/potato/etc.)-water, hardware, magic, horse liniment, panther sweat, sauce, gage, jump-steady, strike-me-dead, canned heat, the Creature

Distillation apparatus: still, barrel house, boiler, plant, sneaker

Sources

Books:

- The Foxfire Series, a (currently) twelve volume collection of folk tales, how-to guides, first-person accounts, recipes, and articles on the “lifestyle, culture, crafts, and skills of people in southern Appalachia.”
- Prints and pdfs of vintage Sears Catalogues provide a wealth of information on what clothes, equipment, and even firearms your characters would have access to.

- Spirits of Just Men: Mountaineers, Liquor Bosses, and Lawmen in the Moonshine Capital of the World by Charles D. Thompson Jr.
- Bootleg: Murder, Moonshine, and the Lawless Years of Prohibition by Karen Blumenthal
- The Wettest County in the World by Matt Bondurant

Film and Television (most of which have great soundtracks for background music):

- The Appalachians (PBS documentary series)
- Thunder Road
- Moonshine Highway
- Lawless (film based on The Wettest County in the World)
- Winter’s Bone (contemporary, but pitch-perfect atmosphere and setting, with methamphetamine production substituting for moonshine)
- Moonshiners (also contemporary, this trashy reality TV series covers a lot of the ‘shiner basics)



Henchmen

— Gene Ha & Art Lyon
based on a concept by Lowell Francis

Nutshell

In a city dominated by costumed crimefighters and villainous masterminds, a crew of mundane specialists fights to live another day.

Setting

The city is defined by beings of frightening power, some heroes, others villains, collectively known as Names. Costumed freaks dance between bullets, leap across rooftops, wield themed miracle gadgets, single-handedly take down SWAT teams and mobs, and always have a back-up plan. Rogue scientists create death rays, toxic superstrength treatments, and vat-grown monsters. Though a few Names exhibit completely outré powers, most merely possess inhuman strength, speed, and skill.

Multiple gangs, each led by a Name boss, rule organized crime in the city. Street criminals answer to bosses without being true members of their organizations. Most gangs supplement income collected from them with heists and other high-profile crimes performed by crews inside the gang. Larger gangs include several hierarchical crews; a small gang, only one. Ordinary crew members, including the player characters, don't get the menacing, outlandish monikers of the Names; instead, they're saddled with less than complimentary nicknames (see the Names section).

The player characters belong to a lesser crew of a boss called The Iron Mask. Her gang consists of three crews. She runs the Ironworks, the elite unit. The Marquis, her cruel and paranoid second-in-command, runs the Sadists. The players' crew is the only one not led by a Name; they are a quarter-bin, dime-store version of a Mission: Impossible team.

Names Always Win

Warn the players up front that their chances of prevailing over Names in procedural scenes are low to nonexistent. If the player characters get into a combat procedural scene with a Name, the best they can do is delay or distract the Name and define the terms of their loss. So, the two possibilities are:

Players fail: The Name delivers a resounding defeat to the PCs without actually killing them¹⁵.

Players prevail: Despite suffering a resounding combat defeat at the hands of the Name, the PCs somehow eke out the goal they were seeking—short of the Name's physical defeat or death, of course.

To truly score a procedural win over a Name, they'll need at least one Name on their side to balance the scales. Even so, when defeating one another, Names oddly prefer humiliation to murder.

Note that Names enjoy no special protection during dramatic scenes. In the world of emotions, they're just as undefended as anybody else.

¹⁵ Unless the player wants a fitting and legendary death for the PC. If so, let them describe the ignominious demise.

Characters

Name-led gangs include not only standard-issue thugs, mooks, muscle, and criminal specialists, but also personnel hired to serve the villain's myriad interests, needs, and eccentricities. Protagonist backgrounds could be nearly anything, from the mundane to the exotic, but one way or another, they wound up on the Iron Mask's third-string crew. They could be raw recruits out of their depth or seasoned specialists who got on someone's blacklist.

- mob doctor
- juiced-up wrestler
- ex-cop
- financial wizard
- animal or pet wrangler
- attorney
- engineer
- street hood
- former sidekick
- public relations consultant
- martial artist
- acrobatic thief
- gun bunny
- demolitions expert
- politico
- con artist
- assassin
- hacker
- master of disguise
- personal chef
- driver
- commando
- scholar
- scientist
- lab experiment volunteer
- personal assistant
- electronic surveillance technician
- stylist

Dealing with Names

A Name leaves normal life behind after a mentally destabilizing traumatic event. To survive contact with a hostile Name, a Henchman needs to know what makes them tick, which is not what they claim to want. As recurring character Names appear, GMs choose a Theme, Procedural Goal, and Emotional Goal (browsing the DSM-IV wouldn't hurt). Minions

who survive, like presumably the PCs, learn tactics to humor these often murderous Names.

Examples:

DOOMSAYER

Theme: Leaves gruesome threats for evildoers if they don't repent.

Procedural Goal: Scare the wicked into penitence.

Emotional Goal: Prove everyone else is wicked, that no one is better than him.

Henchman Survival Tip: Act fearful and repentant around Doomsayer.

KING JONES

Theme: Kingly regalia and pomp.

Procedural Goal: Steal ancient artifacts and turn the city into his sovereign realm.

Emotional Goal: Respect—awe the citizens into accepting him as their natural ruler.

Henchman Survival Tip: Bow and call King Jones "Your Highness."

The Set-Up

The GM kicks off the series by calling this opening ensemble scene.

The PC crew waits in a bar whose owner is in deep with the Iron Mask's gang. Those of them who are active criminals have just completed plans for the biggest heist they've ever executed on their own. They expect the Iron Mask to arrive soon and review the plan. Hangers-on and support types among the main cast are present to shoot the bull before she shows.

The television behind the bar interrupts their banter with a local news helicopter's footage of a nearby highway. The PCs recognize the smoking ruin that was the Iron Mask's SUV, surrounded by bodies and wreckage. Police confirm that the Iron Mask has been killed in battle with law enforcement and as yet unidentified Name crimefighters.

Attempts to contact the rest of the gang fail. The crew gets the sinking feeling that, from here on out, they might just be on their own.

Themes

Player characters rise and fall according to the whims of mad demigods.

Issues of trust and betrayal dominate the series, between players and with recurring characters. At any time a player could call a scene with their FBI handler.

Themes may include:

- **Legends in Their Own Minds:** Names constantly act as if they're living a movie, and this can rub off on their henchmen, though reality is rarely as obliging for them.
- **Mission Impossible:** If the Names are demanding the impossible, CYA (cover your ass) is the true order of the day.
- **NFS (Not for Sale):** They may be mercenaries, but there are some lines they'll never cross.
- **Honor among Thieves:** Who do you trust?
- **Hero For a Day:** Just because you're a Bad Guy doesn't mean you're a bad guy. Keep telling yourself that . . .
- **Gang Green:** Sometimes a part must be cut off to save the whole . . .
- **To Serve and Protect:** How loyal are or were you to your boss?
- **Catastrophic Success:** Someone's bound to take notice . . .
- **You Can't Go Home Again:** What did you leave behind?
- **Street Justice:** Living outside the law, you have to make—and enforce—your own rules. . .
- **Legal vs. Moral:** The police and crimefighters are not always good guys . . .
- **15 Minutes of Fame:** Better to be hated and feared than forgotten . . .
- **Why We Fight:** By different paths, we've all gained a common enemy. Right?
- **Home Is Where You Clean Your Gun:** How long can you remain on the run?
- **Separate Ways:** Yeah, let's split up—they'll never find us that way . . .

Tightening the Screws

- A Name is coming after your gang to pummel you for information you don't have.
- Early on, to show how dangerous Names can be, frame a scene that kicks off with one of them easily and shockingly killing a

sympathetic recurring character.

- A Name of legendary power has returned from exile or imprisonment.
- A Name connected to your crew has gone from quirky to certifiably insane.
- A radio transmitter is found inside a piece of equipment. A tracer? A bug?
- Before a mission, someone who knows the plan goes missing.
- Another gang is encroaching on your territory.
- A minion working for a different gang asks to be hidden.
- The Name boss of another gang offers much-needed protection if you betray an ally.
- A Name hero has been captured. One of the player characters has been ordered to pretend to be a fellow prisoner.
- You learn another gang is going to unleash mass destruction in the old neighborhood.
- There's a new Name in town who doesn't understand the rules.
- Someone is tailing the henchmen. A Name crimefighter? An undercover cop? A rival gang? A reporter? A curious kid?
- Homicide detectives bring in a PC for questioning: a friend is dead.
- A gang war is brewing, and it looks like you'll be on the weaker side.
- A Name hero is following a trail that leads to you.
- Your kid nephew wants to join your crew.
- A Name hero has begun a new patrol route in your territory.
- Your bought politician is way behind in the polls.
- A loved one needs help dealing with bureaucrats.
- The heroes are losing against an evil even Name villains dread.
- Another gang wants you to quietly kill one of their minions.
- Another gang is allying with a foreign or alien force bent on genocide.
- A former henchman you knew has written a tell-all book and is hitting the talk shows.
- Another gang's second in command wants your help deposing her boss.
- Someone dangerous thinks you've been

- sleeping with his lover.
- The relative who ruined your future has just been arrested for a capital crime.
- Another gang threatens your legit-world allies, like your money launderer.
- Someone is committing flashy crimes disguised as your crew. The public demands a crackdown.
- A street hood slinging drugs, prostitutes, or numbers has been beaten senseless by a masked Name hero. He thinks he recognizes the Name as one of his regulars.
- Someone left something irreplaceable or incriminating behind at a crime scene or another form of enemy territory.

Names

Henchmen

Tony “T-Bone” Buonomo	Helena “Brains” Suydam	“One Eyed” Jack Steranko
Izmira “Izzy” Hadidi	Ramona “Queequeg” Kubert	Susan “Prettyboy” Colan
Marco “Polo” Molina	Francis Joseph “Chia Pet” Cho	“Muddy” Miles Sekowsky
LeAnn “40 Ounce” Dale	Miroslava “Natasha” Gazinskaya	Sydney Ann “Spike” Severin
“Perfesser” Finn Bridgman	Julius “Julie” Silver	“Fuzzy” Archie Goodman
Odessa “Odd Count” Starr	Louise “Weezy” Salmonson	Walter “Frankenstein” Wrightson
Grigory “Boris” Tsvetkov	Rudolf “Boris” Sergeenko	Marv “Two Tone” Thomas
Sidney “Horseface” Buscema	Felix “Tiny” Aragones	Casimir “Boris” Swiatek (“Why always Boris? I’m a Pole, dammit!”)
Louie “Chinaman” Giamano	“Pope” John Paul Sartre	Bobbie “Bunny” Sakai
Wally “Tinman” Tynan	“Plastic” Stanley Liberman	Joey “Knuckles” Darrow
“Shady” Jim Robinson	Nicole “Napoleon” Napolitano	
Jackie “Toothpick” Toth	Jimmy “Yojimbo” Schuiten	
Johnnie “Jazzman” Ditko	Vladimir “Boris” Kulakov	

Names

Mister Punch and Baby	Optima	Buck Naked
Statesman	Man Trap	God Emperor
Conqueror	CrossSword	Bugbear and Small Mind
Jolly Roger	Doomsayer	Thrillride
Freudian	Blue Zephyr	B-52
Captain Zero	Professor Primate	Two-Ton Tommy
King Jones	Gingerbread	Door Mouse
Freakshow	Gadfly	Flyboy
Sister Mary	Jumbotron	Fugue
Sons of Liberty	Flak Jacket	Chief Justice
50 Cal	Headmistress	War God
Praetorian	Commandante Máximo	Millennium
Quetzl	Quiz Show	Salt Peter
Lotus	Enigma Kojima	Tiger Claw
Sanction	Jack Fate	Click Clock Clang
Subterranean	Leviathan	

Battle Of Wits

— James Wallis

Nutshell

In the Age of Satire and Scandal, poets, playwrights, and pamphleteers vie for fame, influence, love, financial success, and not being beaten to death in an alley.

We are in London in the early eighteenth century. Specifically it is the year 17—, the height of the Augustan age, one of those strange eras where people give a damn what poets think. England is laying the foundations of its empire and writers are at the heart of that process. Some have the ears of powerful people, others are the favourites of the chattering classes or the mob, and a few wield influence in government and at court. There is fierce rivalry for these favoured positions, almost none of it good-natured. Writers spend a solid chunk of their time dissing the work of others. It's like an epic rap battle, with fewer drive-bys¹⁶, played out over entire careers.

It is a time when the pen truly is mightier than the sword, so long as you're not facing someone who has a sword.

Characters

The PCs are poets, dramatists, journalists, critics, novelists, and pamphleteers, or their hangers-on, including booksellers, patrons, politicians, nobles, actors, and fans. They can be at any level of their society or profession, from the poor scribblers of Grub Street churning out pabulum,

to those with position or influence at court, and the successful writers whose work is sold on street-corners, read aloud in coffee-houses, and pirated by unscrupulous booksellers.

In addition to the links shown on your Relationship Map, characters might share the same publisher or patron, or club or society. Perhaps they all drink at the same coffee-house, contribute to the same newspaper, follow the same political goal, or are all chasing the same mistress.

This male-dominated world still grants ample room for female PCs. The leading poets and dramatists were men but women had huge success as novelists: Henry Fielding's classic *Joseph Andrews* was outsold by his sister's *David Simple*. Also, pseudonyms and anonymous publishing were widespread; Jonathan Swift published almost all of his work anonymously. The true identity and gender of these authors provoked great rumour and debate.

If the prospect of additional research excites you, you might choose to play any of the following real-life figures, who otherwise appear as supporting characters:

Alexander Pope: The Richard III of the Augustan world: little, twisted, conniving, brilliant, assassinated, and on the wrong side of everything. A Catholic in a time of Protestants, a Tory in a time of Whigs, and a classicist in a time of progress. Writing in heroic couplets—

¹⁶ Difficult but not impossible with horses and muskets.



which are hell to improvise, I warn you—he takes umbrage easily and never gives it up. His masterwork is *The Dunciad*, a mock-epic satiric damnation of London's literary world, its charlatans and fools. After publishing it, Pope receives so many threats that he carries two loaded pistols wherever he goes. Never forgives and never forgets.

Jonathan Swift. The Irish clergyman is possibly the greatest satirist who ever lived. Swift spends much of his time in Ireland; if you need a sudden *deus ex machina* then the news that he is in London can be explosive. If he's a player character, episodes occur during his brief, possibly ahistorical, visits to the city.

Samuel Johnson: the master. The monster. Can turn his hand to anything: journalism, verse, dictionaries, you name it. Sometimes misses deadlines by years. Younger than the Scriblerus Club, he tries to avoid politics.

Edmund Curll, bookseller. The worst publisher in London; possibly the worst publisher in history. He pirates writers' works, fails to pay authors, publishes religious tomes and pornography, and keeps poor hacks locked in a garret to churn out an endless stream of ephemeral literature. Widely loathed, even by his authors. Pope at one point poisons him with an emetic, then boasts that he is dead (he isn't).

Setting

London's population is only 600,000 and the diameters of its literary circles are smaller still. Everyone knows everyone, and it is difficult to avoid bumping into them.

What follows is enough for a fast and loose game of "Battle of Wits." If you want to know more, the Wikipedia entry for 'Augustan Literature' provides a brilliant introduction to the culture, scene, and personalities of the Age of Scandal.

History is full of annoying facts that get in the way of a good story. Ignore them without peril.

What to Write?

Newspapers and Periodicals: The Gentleman's Magazine, the London Magazine, the Literary Magazine, the Tatler, the Spectator, the Idler... there are many, devoured for the latest news and gossip, with the good bits read aloud in

coffee-houses. Several are controlled by political interests (shock!), who plant stories and bribe journalists (double shock!)

Pamphlets: Often published anonymously, sold on the street, and mostly eccentric, scurrilous, or both, pamphleteering does not make money (unless someone pays you to write one) but is a favoured way of getting a piece of character-assassination or single-issue satire into the public eye.

Poetry: may be short verses published in chapbooks, doggerel, song-lyrics, or great epic multi-volume works written in heroic couplets. Favoured by young nobles who fancy themselves talented.

"No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money."

— Samuel Johnson

Plays: Many Augustan plays are political satires, often ribald. Follow common practice by writing in your enemies as villains and fools. Many plays, particularly from the Scribleran circle, contain a character who is clearly Prime Minister Robert Walpole. Walpole didn't enjoy this, and suppressed plays that painted him a particularly vile colour.

Novels: the latest thing, popular but looked down upon by the old guard. Mostly published over several volumes.

Other: booksellers and patrons may commission new styles of work, such as dictionaries. Like novels these are time-sinks, but give writers income they can supplement with other work.

Politics

The country is locked in a battle between the Whigs and the Tories, respectively very right-wing and extremely right-wing. The Tories are traditionally the party of the King; the Whigs are the party of the Whigs. In 17— the Whigs are in government, with an agenda of removing all Tories from positions of power, and increasing the role of parliament. Sir Robert Walpole is prime minister, hated and often satirised by the Scriblerans.

Writing in 17— is a political act. Even if you don't intend your work to be about an issue or for one of the political parties, the audience

will almost certainly read it that way. Pope and the Scriblerans are Tories and therefore out of political favour, with no chance of lucrative appointments within government departments. This makes them angry, so they write more satires against the Whigs, which further decreases their chances of appointment, and so on.

Writers favoured by the government tend to be less good. Chief among them is the poet-dramatist-actor-theatre owner Colley Cibber, made Poet Laureate in 1730. Nobody thought Cibber was much of a poet, not even himself, but he was a prominent Whig. His politics and his lack of poetic talent drew the loathing of the literati. In a revised edition of Pope's *Dunciad* he is crowned king of the dunces.

Satire

If you are a writer in 17— then your weapon of choice is likely to be satire. It can be as heavy or as sharp as you like, but to wield it clumsily is to invite attack while having no defence of your own.

Satires rarely name their targets: they present them under false mock-heroic names, but described in a way that the reader can be sure who the intended target is.

A target has various responses to being satirised. They can:

- pen a response scorning the satirist, his supporters, and patrons, in pamphlets, verse, or stage play format
- pay for one to be penned
- suppress the satire by paying off the bookseller or the author (if you can find out who it is; mistaken identity can be catastrophic and hilarious)
- declare for a public challenge, which can be a battle of wit, a brawl, or a duel
- sue for defamation (time-consuming and expensive, and rarely does anything to set the matter right)
- attempt to put right the matter for which they are being satirised
- flee in shame

Pope, Swift, the doctor-satirist-polymath John Arbuthnot, the dramatist John Gay, and some occasionals comprise the Scriblerus Club, an informal, self-electing, Tory club that uses

the group pseudonym of *Martinus Scriblerus* to mock fools and the abuses of learning, and their enemies, who are many.

Supporting Characters

In a world where the pen matters in politics, scribblers bump up against the powerful.

The King: Several come and go during the early eighteenth century, but they have four things in common: they are all called George, they are all German, they are all Whigs, and they all hated their son the Prince of Wales. Assume that's the case here and you'll be fine.

The Prince of Wales: Boorish, gluttonous, lecherous, and possibly syphilitic, the heir to the throne nevertheless wields enormous influence, and many want to stay on his good side. He shows minimal interest in literature: if he visits the theatre, it will be to dally with an actress. Loathes the King. Probably a Tory—to annoy the King—but will give that up as soon as he takes the throne.

The Rt Hon Robert Walpole, MP: Prime minister. Whig. Humourless, particularly when it comes to jokes about himself. Wields massive power. Suppresses plays he doesn't like.

Themes

- Honour and reputation
- Art vs. money
- Whigs vs. Tories
- The establishment vs. several different colours of revolution
- The Augustan ideal vs. everybody else
- The damnation of fools
- Changing the world
- Using writing—particularly satire—to change the world
- Writing as ephemera vs. writing for posterity
- The world of the mind and the real world (a.k.a. verbal threats vs physical threats)

Tightening the Screws

Low-level:

- Your patron changes political allegiance.
- Someone offers you money to write something seditious or treasonous.
- Swift arrives in London.
- Your latest work gets a devastating review.

No money for you.

- Your latest work—or a friend's latest work—becomes a laughing-stock of badness.
- A fire destroys your bookseller's stock. No money for you.
- Edmund Curll pirates your book. No money for you.
- You are accused of plagiarism.
- Your play is booed off—by people who have been paid to do it.
- You or your work or a friend or a friend's work or a patron is the object of a vile satire. It may be published anonymously. Who? And why?
- Some young upstart steals your thunder with a brilliant review. His name is Samuel Johnson.

High-level:

- The King dies.
- The Prince of Wales dies.
- An election is called.
- The South Sea Bubble stock-market boom bursts. Thousands are ruined.
- Licensing Act of 1737: all new plays must now pass the official censor.
- It's a war! We recommend the War of Jenkins' Ear (look it up!) because it's called "The War of Jenkins' Ear."
- The '15: Stuart armies are raised in Scotland and Cornwall, aiming to put James III on the throne.
- The '45: another Stuart army is raised in Scotland and marches south with the putative Charles III ("Bonnie Prince Charlie") at its head.
- The Whigs finally fall out of power (1760)

Locations

- Coffee-houses, where everybody goes. Imagine Starbucks owned Facebook. That's a coffee-house in 17—.
- Grub Street, the home of penniless scribblers in tiny attics.
- Taverns or inns
- The theatre
- The bookseller
- A patron's house
- A pleasure-garden
- St James's Palace, residence of the King
- Leicester House, residence of the Prince of Wales
- Duelling-fields

Accelerating Time

Reflect the long cycle of writing and publishing by occasionally moving the clock forward by up to a year between scenes. The GM can call scenes that jump way ahead without being challenged for it.



The Whateleys

— *Chris Lackey*

Nutshell

A family of Lovecraftian cultists struggle to thrive in modern society while hiding their secrets and vying for the favor of the old gods.

Characters

You play members, or close associates, of the decadent branch of the Whateley family, for example:

- power-hungry mother
- alcoholic father
- sadistic, albino uncle
- aged, soothsaying grandmother
- old wizard grandfather
- jealous servant
- grifter cousin
- rebellious son
- precocious daughter with protuberant eyes
- captive drifter
- really creepy aunt
- “distant” relation
- a prodigal figure, back to shake things up (see “Where Your Story Begins”)

Half of the group play members of an older, traditional generation. The other half play a younger generation anxious to modernize the family’s ancient ways.

Backstory

After the 1928 incident in Dunwich, Massachusetts, as depicted in the classic H. P. Lovecraft story “The Dunwich Horror”, the name Whateley became synonymous with horror. What was left of the decadent branch of the family was run out of town and into nearby Arkham, where they had to find a new way to live and practice their secret rites. Irma Whateley, the family matriarch, saw that the Whateleys were going to have to adapt to survive.

Irma bought a large swath of land just outside of Arkham and began building what was to be known as Whateley Manor. She sent the younger children to finishing school in Boston, while other members of the family went off to the far reaches of the world hunting down forbidden knowledge. Irma decided that the best way for the Whateleys to thrive was by hiding in plain sight. Money was not a problem, but earning the family civic respect was. If the Whateleys were going to overcome their legacy, they had to show people they were valuable members of the community.

Gossip surrounded the Whateleys, not so much for the incident of ’28, but for their miraculous ability to find ore-rich lands. Most suspected illegal booze manufacturing, but some

in more academic circles speculated on things much more sinister.

By 1939, Whateley Manor was completed, mostly by out-of-town workers. The large mansion and its grounds were unlike anything seen in Arkham. Its architecture combined a classic sensibility with elements of modern style. The grounds were lavish and lush, with fountains, grottos, and even a hedge-maze. The manor was built to strange eldritch specifications: doorways at strange angles, secret passageways, and a secret lab and dungeon.

After the manor was completed, Whateleys began coming back to town. They were, surprisingly, finding work as bankers, doctors, lawyers, and even academics. At the same time, the Whateleys became philanthropists. They shared their wealth with charities, hospitals, and schools. Soon the Whateleys were throwing fundraisers and supporting local politicians. By the end of the Second World War, the Whateleys had become an Arkham cornerstone, all the while practicing their dark arts and unhallowed rituals in the safety and comfort of Whateley Manor.

Where Your Story Begins

Over the last 60 years, the Whateleys have been slowly falling apart. Greed and madness found a foothold, making trust a rare commodity within the family. The older generation has been slow to adapt to a quickly changing world; the younger, too cocky to learn from the wisdom of its elders. The money and the power of the Whateleys are fading quickly and the main cast will either turn the family around or doom it forever.

The first episode begins with the return of a family member. It could be someone who was on a long journey and has returned home with a new perspective. Maybe the owner of Whateley Manor dies and wills the deed to someone who doesn't live at the mansion. Or perhaps someone who has died has been resurrected only to find his once powerful family now a shadow of its former self. If this more fantastical style is more to your liking, this undead relative should still be a person most, if not all, of the players know and with whom they have a strong relationship. The most important part of this outsider character is that he's there to shake things up. This prodigal

figure might be a main cast or recurring character. Could it be the ghost of Irma Whateley? A distant cousin who wants to help the family through its hard times? Remember, keeping it in the family is always best. Who else would endure horrible behavior and still show up for Thanksgiving dinner?

If you still need help in the idea department, mine one of Lovecraft's creepy family stories: "The Lurking Fear", "The Rats in the Walls", "The Shadow over Innsmouth", and, of course, "The Dunwich Horror." Arthur Jermyn discovered that he's the descendant of a race of hyper-intelligent white gorillas. Which is not too unlike the Martense family, who degenerate into ape-like creatures with one eye blue and the other brown. If ape-like cannibals don't fit your game, there are the Delapores of Exham Priory infamy who can give you more of that traditional cannibal taste. If you like your human meat a little fetid, a character who has been spending time with ghouls in the caves below Whateley Manor might be a fun choice. And don't forget Innsmouth isn't far from Arkham, perhaps after the incident there in the winter of 1927-28 some of the Marshes, Waites, Gilmans, or Eliots came to the Whateleys for some help.

Building Character

One of the things to keep in mind with all the strangeness and evil you can bring into a character, make sure they aren't too far off the human path. The more monstrous your character is, the harder it will be for you to find emotional needs. In "The Dunwich Horror", Wilbur Whateley had little human interaction after his grandfather's and mother's deaths. Not an appealing character for this type of game. But when his family was still alive, he might have been struggling to win his grandfather's respect and wanting to punish his mother for her weakness. These human needs are what DramaSystem is all about, so make sure to find the human in your cultist.

The level of madness and monstrosity are what really set the tone of "The Whateleys." When developing the game, my group found itself in a dark comedy, with main characters doing horrible things to people outside the family, but still caring about family relationships.

Janette Whateley may have a gimp living in her closet, but she cares deeply about what her brother thinks of her start-up laundry business.

This is sort of an Addams Family vibe, but with a much darker bottom. If you're looking to provoke a more serious game, a possibility is to have characters with only a touch of the strange in their lives, and by discovering their family's past, the element of horror is introduced.

Ben Whateley, an up-and-coming artist in Arkham, discovers a family journal with some pretty dark secrets, some of which involve him directly. Does Ben dive in or fight his family's past to forge his own future?

Dark Shadows (the 1960's television show, not the movie) has a similar tone, though DramaSystem will give your game a faster pace. Most likely, you'll find something in between that will fit your group.

Themes

- **New vs. Old:** A major theme of "The Whateleys." What are the old willing to do to keep power and what are the young willing to do to get it?
- **Betrayal:** Is there anyone you wouldn't sell out for power?
- **Desperation:** When time is running out, what are you willing to do to keep the family together? Or to protect your hide?
- **Change Is Hard:** Trying to convince the older generation that "adapt or die" is still the rule of the game.
- **Fear:** Come on. It's Lovecraftian. Even cultists have something to fear. Especially cultists!
- **Money:** Money is power and cultists love power.
- **Knowing Too Much:** If it's not sanity blasting, it can be heartbreaking.
- **Loss:** When you no longer have something you thought you had in the bag.
- **Old Bargains:** Power is gained one way or the other. Who did you have to buddy up with? What do they want now that they have you over a barrel?
- **Outsiders:** The Whateleys know all about being on the outside, but sometimes life gives you a slap in the face that lets you see just how far outside you are.
- **Secrets:** It would be bad for the whole family if they find that girl chained up in the cellar. Or would it?
- **Ritual:** The old ways may be what gives the Whateleys their power, but what if there is a better way?
- **Cages:** With power comes obligation. Is it really worth it?
- **Loyalty:** Your mother was always there for you. Now she can really be there for you when you let her take the rap.
- **Old Memories:** Some want to forget the past, other want to live in it. How does it affect you?

Tightening the Screws

- The Arkham Historical Society is poking around in the Whateleys' past, looking to understand some strange branches in the family tree.
- An Egyptian businessman comes to Whateley Manor with offers of assistance, for a price.
- Miskatonic University students will do anything to get access to the Whateley family library.
- The police show up looking for the missing teenager currently chained up in the cellar.
- Something you summoned has escaped and is wreaking havoc in town. Can you contain it without drawing undue attention?
- Nouveau riche parvenus threaten to dislodge you from your traditional seat on the board of a community charity or institution. Can you preserve this remaining scrap of the family's once-vaunted status?
- Next door, another old money family faces generational conflict, as its spoiled brat contingent courts fame as the stars of a reality TV show. Is the headstrong teenager player character drawn into their media whirl? Can the family safely conduct its affairs with cameras in constant motion on the other side of the fence?
- Past criminal associates of a main cast member show up, on the lam and demanding shelter.

- An author specializing in the paranormal seeks the family's assistance as he researches a book on the 1928 Dunwich events.
- The lyrics of a famous rock star's latest album reverberate with references to the Great Old Ones. And he's coming to town on tour. Do the younger generation try to wangle backstage passes?
- A member of the cast wakes up one morning to blearily gaze in the mirror, finding the early symptoms of a monstrous transformation. Does she embrace the inhumanity, or seek the means to slow its onset?
- A member of the older generation, while on a jaunt into town, glimpses an old enemy. An old enemy he killed and buried decades ago.

If you're looking for a whole season's worth of episodes here are some big story arc ideas:

- One of the family members has found a way to summon Yog-Sothoth to earth. Is the end of the world in everyone's best interest?
- The Innsmouth Marshs declare war on the Whateleys over a perceived or actual threat.
- A federal law enforcement agency involved with the occult begins building a case against the Whateleys.

Names

Albert Mauvais	Sonia Danforth	Sally Whipple	Henry Johansen
Lavinia Pabodie	Lillian Martense	Seth Dyer	Patrick Dudley
Godfrey Whateley	Jervas Delapore	Charles Wilmarth	David Curwen
Francis Thurston	Caroline Legrasse	Cordelia Gilman	Althea Compton
Nathaniel Peaslee	Edwin Pickman	Edward Marsh	Lei Muñoz
Annie Carter	Georgina Wilcox	Joseph Waite	Bob Tillinghast
Helmut Zann	Thomas Klenze	Sarah Olney	
Basil West	Dexter Elton	Randolph Angel	

Horns in the Hill

— John Scott Tynes

Nutshell

A colony of ants wracked by war with a rival anthill faces a horrific fungal zombification outbreak from within.

Characters

The main cast consists of a squad of powerful warrior ants whose jaws inject caustic acid and whose posteriors spray a disabling neurotoxin. They have sturdy reddish-orange legs and dark brown bodies covered in bristly reddish-orange hairs.

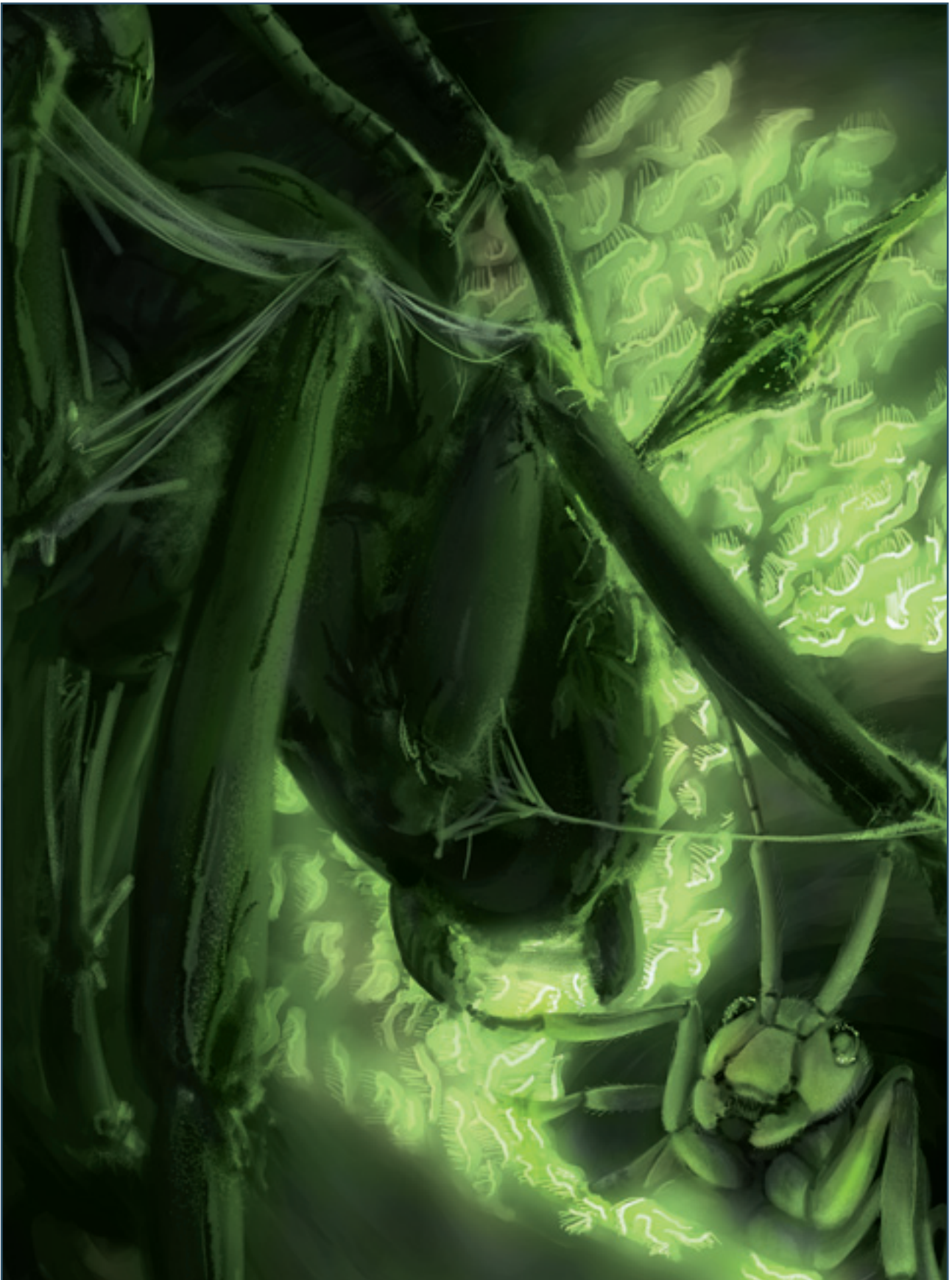
Not just fighters, they are also leaders of the skittering worker ants and smaller warriors. While the players form a coherent squad of trouble-shooters, they may also, with barking orders, command nearby smaller ants. In this, they function much like the heroes of *The Lord of the Rings* in the big battle scenes: fighting mandible-to-mandible with the foes but able to order dozens of workers over a hill to draw off enemies while the squad advances on the main path. As a rule of thumb, the players can dispatch numerous minor character ants for the sake of short-term strategic goals and secondary plot objectives, but the most important goals must be handled by the squad itself as the lesser ants will surely fail.

Typical roles for the squad members include:

- **Tanks** are burly, determined poison sprayers. Tanks move in pairs or trios to surround a larger enemy, wheel around, and spray their neurotoxin. Multiple tanks working in concert can defeat larger enemies such as warrior ants and termites. Tanks tend to be more tactical and thoughtful than direct.
- **Assassins** are precision biters, charging

in alone and going straight for the neck of the enemy. With a powerful bite and acidic injection, they can kill even a larger enemy in moments—exposing themselves to grave risk while doing so. Thinking themselves indestructible killing machines, assassins can go berserk in times of high intensity, even killing allies by mistake. They suspect the tanks of cowardice.

- **Coms** can send biochemical messages across substantial distances as long as they have line-of-ant: their biochemical sprays must be able to reach a nearby ant who then matches its content and sprays again to another nearby ant and so on. Messages communicate sender, desired recipient, and content but every ant who relays a message also knows its meaning. Naturally talkative, coms cannot keep secrets. Seeming incredibly obvious and desperate to all nearby ants of the opposite sex, they are also terrible at mating.
- **Engineers** rapidly harvest, alter, and deploy environmental resources for tactical advantage. They can build armor and camouflage for the herds of honeydew bugs the colony's shepherds milk for food. By covering the honeydew bugs in chewed grass and other debris, engineers protect them from discovery by rival ants. In addition, engineers can summon a swarm of workers to help build structures out of cut grass. The ant equivalent of Quonset huts, these structures resemble upside-down bird nests. While not especially defensible,



they do provide short-term camouflage and storage space, useful for monitoring nearby herds of honeydew bugs. Engineers tend to be grandiose and eccentric, easily distracted by their ideas for projects.

- **Soldiers** are the doughboys, the infantry. Not as powerful as either tanks or assassins, soldiers nonetheless can tackle larger enemies in teams, chewing at their

Soldiers as Jointly Controlled Minor Characters

Most soldiers are shared minor characters any player, or the GM, can jump into during any scene. Play them outlandishly, with silly accents, weird voices, and extreme tics. Make each vividly eccentric in preparation for the inevitable moment of his glorious and plaintive death.

joints to immobilize them. Soldiers can be swiftly replaced from nearby workers as there are always a few strong-backed farm boys with delusions of grandeur ready to volunteer on the spot for a surely fatal duty. A player character soldier will be the rare survivor who always manages to eke his way out of each battle, as his fellows die in droves around him.

- **Honeypots** are portable food larders. They do not fight and instead greedily slurp up any food source, either naturally occurring or harvested from honeydew bugs or from the bodies of the slain. It is the fate of every honeypot to one day become completely immobilized, abdomen swelling ever bigger, used as living pantries by the hill. They may live for years in that state, barely conscious, gradually depleted and replenished with the seasons. Honeypots in a squad are young, eager, constantly hungry, and rapidly becoming fatter and less mobile. While useless in combat, it is the duty of every squad to exercise young honeypots and start fattening them up so they can eventually enter the deep warrens forever and join their countless ballooning

brothers. During their squad service, honeypots can help injured allies recover rapidly with their succulent stomach contents, which can be vomited up on demand merely by twiddling their antennae like a keg tap. They're usually necessary idiots: puppy-dog innocent, doomed, but the sure, if disgusting, salvation of the wounded. Some may not even understand their fate and think they are being fattened up to become tanks instead of brain-damaged steam trays. Most honeypots will be minor characters, but if you're up to the challenge of making one a key member of the main cast with agency and an agenda, by all means embrace it.

Setting

The squad lives in the Hill, home to all right-thinking ants, deep in the Brazilian rainforest. Here they live out their days, expanding the colony, serving the queen, overseeing the workers, and fighting the enemy.

Nearby is the Other Hill, home to a genetically identical and visually indistinguishable menace of vicious, ignorant, and profane despoilers of all that is right and proper. The Two Hills are locked in eternal struggle, forever mounting raids and expeditions. Because the honeydew bugs, which both hills guard and farm, roam freely and aimlessly around the rainforest, and do not maintain a consistent territory, the battlefield shifts week to week. Sometimes the Hill's cattle are nowhere near the Other Hill's and conflicts are few. Sometimes confused and bleating honeydews collide, knocking their respective camouflage off, and then a wild melee breaks out among the workers tending them. Engineers build forward observation posts and coms send messages back and forth. War for the Two Hills is a way of life, and neither side has ever succeeded in killing the other's queen.

The Hill is roughly fifty feet in diameter and fifteen feet deep, composed of several dozen slanted passages branching off into rounded chambers serving as garbage pits, honeypot dens, nurseries, or living quarters.

Few ants know where the queen lives; fewer

still ever see her. She is primarily tended by a coterie of assassins and nurses with squads of engineers and coms at the ready. Large, ancient, and immobile, the queen issues strategic goals but does not directly supervise or control the defense of the colony. She relies on squads like the main ensemble's to do that, autonomous command-and-control units who report intelligence in for dissemination, but who act on their own initiative.

Themes

- **War Is Hell:** The squad has to make a tough choice for the sake of the greater good.
- **Military Intelligence Isn't:** An allied squad starts sending coms to the players that put their lives in danger. The coms member of the other squad has been infected but no one knows.
- **Sacrifice:** Someone in the squad will die during a raid gone wrong unless another takes his or her place.
- **Unlikely Heroism:** You never thought the little punk had it in him, did you?
- **Honorable Enemies:** A squad from the Other Hill tries to warn the players of the growing menace in the dark.

Tightening the Screws

Initial episodes explore the squad's desires and relationships, with the GM introducing the war with the Other Hill.

Once a status quo has been established, the GM introduces the main arc. The Other Hill starts neglecting their herds of honeydews, preoccupied with something else. Rumors spread.

What's happening is a fungal outbreak. The fungus enters the bloodstream of the ants and gradually takes over their minds. Infected ants stop obeying orders and gorge themselves on the honeypot ants. After sufficient feeding the fungus bursts from the ants' foreheads, growing a ghastly gray horn. Horned ants are aggressive and violent, but their primary goal is to flee the colony and climb to any nearby high place. There the ants fasten a death-bite onto the leaf or branch where they sit and soon die just as their horns burst open and spray spores wildly into

the air to drift down and infect more ants.

Left unchecked, this fungal outbreak will eventually zombify the entire Hill. The gradual destruction of the Other Hill is the bellwether for this, as the squad slowly realizes that the Hill will suffer the same fate.

And deep in the Hill, the insane ants spray biochemical screams of gibberish intermixed with desperate pleas: KILL ME. KILL ME NOW. KILL ME BEFORE I KILL YOU.

One-off threats:

- **Icarus:** A wasp infected with the fungus burrows into the Hill. (Flying insects get their wires crossed and try to go deep instead of high.) A dozen grey fungal tentacles have emerged from its body, turning it into a sort of undead spider and each one sprays infectious spores onto nearby ants. The wasp is headed down and may even reach the queen if the squad can't stop it.
- **Spoiled Food:** Workers discover a forgotten chamber of honeypot ants from long ago and start feasting on the strangely delicious fluid they contain. But this chamber was walled up during a previous fungal outbreak decades ago and the workers are swiftly infected. Now the worry: are there other chambers of infected honeypots just waiting to offer up a tainted meal?
- **Save the Children:** A squad of nurses has gone fungal. Instead of feasting on the honeypots they are ravaging the queen's eggs instead. Can the next generation be saved?
- **Enemy Within:** One of the most senior ants in the squad has been infected, but is keeping it a secret for the sake of one last big mission. He wants to go out in a blaze of glory, but he may end up turning on his own squad.

Secondary story arcs:

- **Queen to Queen:** With the Other Hill weakened and preoccupied with fighting zombies, the squad sees a chance to sneak in and kill its queen. Play this as a major mission requiring scouting expeditions, engineering projects, and the

establishment of a reliable coms network back to the Hill. To the squad's shock, they witness enemy soldiers trying to evacuate their queen before she is overrun by zombies. When word comes that an outbreak in the Hill has killed their own queen, the squad has a chance to ally with their enemies and bring their queen back to the Hill to rule.

- **Super Soldiers:** The Other Hill learns to weaken the fungal infection. Infected soldiers can keep their minds intact for a week, during which time they grow unnaturally resistant to damage thanks to the fibrous infrastructure of fungus growing within their bodies. These super soldiers are practically unkillable. The squad needs to capture one and haul it into the Hill for study so they can learn how to defeat these. (Soon enough, the fungus mutates and circumvents the treatment.)
- **The Bad Neighborhood:** An entire branch of the Hill gets infected, and the squad seals off the tunnels to it. That should have been the end of it, but soon, zombie engineers are burrowing through with hundreds of horned zombies following behind. With so many infected, what can be done?

Names

What the hell are ant names like? Why, a lot like the names of characters in World War II movies!

Jack Doggs
 Milton Kornbluth
 Tubs McGraw
 Forty-Eyed Fitzsimmons
 Sam Sipkowicz
 The Peruvian
 Sparky
 Stinky Hawkins
 Lynn Breckinridge
 Sally Turnmire
 Frida Goat-Legs
 Ratchet
 Pops the Ape



Tesseract, WY

— *Ryan Macklin*

Nutshell

“I’m moving back to Los Angeles. It’s too goddamn expensive in Wyoming.”

In a bright future where humanity can teleport to other planets, the common people in the slums of Tesseract, Wyoming struggle in hope for a better life.

Setting

“Tesseract, WY” twists the cyberpunk genre to focus on migrant workers facing economic gulfs, disenfranchisement, greed, crime, and corruption. Above all, it’s about the struggle to get ahead in life, even for a moment, competing for a shot at the rare opportunities enabled by interstellar teleportation.

Two decades from the present day, Dr. Erin Fitzgerald discovers how to teleport to another world. With the help of an unnamed investor, rumored to be from Macau, she founds the Fitzgerald Transstellar Corporation—or, as the residents of Tesseract call it, “the Company.” The Company breaks ground where the land is cheap, in Fitzgerald’s native Southern Wyoming.

Within three years, Tesseract, WY, becomes the fastest-growing city in the United States. A massive megaplex centers around immense buildings housing teleportation pads and the massive power hubs each requires. Nothing sells like success, and the first people to brave mining operations on distant planets and asteroids come

home with generous paychecks. Now everyone wants in, moving to Tesseract for a piece of the Wyoming dream, creating a glut of workers.

That’s where you come in. You’re a group of poor, unfortunate souls struggling in one of the world’s wealthiest cities.

The World

China is the strongest nation on the planet, economically and militarily. Having stabilized in the wake of various economic crises, the United States hopes teleportation technology will restore its lost status as a world power. Gas prices continue to rise as fossil fuels dwindle. Droughts caused by global warming threaten food supply.

Off-world resource exploitation may soon alleviate these crises. Trace elements like helium-3 will within years fuel a new wave of more efficient power plants. In a generation, after a leap forward in teleport tech, the Company aims to grow crops in off-world biodomes for shipment back to Earth.

Scientists still search for signs of currently extant intelligent life. So far, nothing.

Off-world colonies devote themselves to mining, xenoarchaeology and often ethically questionable research.

Extremist religious groups see Fitzgerald’s creation as an abomination against God and have vowed violent acts against the Company.

Interstellar Teleportation

Tesseract is unique. Other scientists around the world attempt to replicate Fitzgerald's experiments, and so far none who have vanished in teleport pods have been heard from again. Company officials remain constantly fearful of, and vigilant against, corporate espionage.

What the common person knows: you get into some sort of special ATV covered in a weird, shiny metal—the same metal the Pads are made of. Some technician flips a switch, and in 0.38 seconds it's on another rock. A rover can hold around a half-ton, and it takes twelve hours for the Pad's capacitors to charge enough to send it. A smaller vehicle, affectionately called "the coffin," can fit an adult and a bit of gear with only an hour's charge.

For the return trip, use a q-radio to call for a pickup, wait for the Pad to charge up, and you're home. The manual advises that you situate yourself inside the vehicle at least fifteen minutes before the scheduled departure time. The vehicles need a perfect seal in order to transport back without a "malfunction"—as technicians are prone to calling explosive decompression, lethal radiation, or the dozens of other ways folk have died. At least the families get a decent check from the Company in exchange for signing NDAs.

Pads establish two-way teleport between Earth and a set of destinations, all at least five light-years away. Shorter distances don't work. There are various theories as to why, but that doesn't matter to someone scraping by to get food on the table.

The biggest problem when it comes to Pads is the power requirement. The Company sits on its own dedicated power grid. Construction of additional power plants pauses only during the snowy winter months.

Other Technology

Teleportation would not be possible without quantum-entangled communicators, or q-radios. These expensive bits of gear, the size of a backpack, transmit data in real time back to closet-sized receivers on Earth. The bandwidth is crap, but at least it's something. And that tech allows the Pad to bring vehicles home.

You can install computers into your body as

direct neural interfaces, known as "integrated tech." In fact, for many advanced jobs in Tesseract, this is a requirement. Think about implant computers from cyberpunk, add in all the stuff we can do with smartphones today, and you have a beginning of what we're talking about. Still, that's not cheap, and it is a sign of status.

Prosthetic limbs augment users beyond normal human capabilities, but they're expensive and still obviously artificial. If you see someone walking down the street with a cyber-limb, either you see some lucky son of a bitch with rich parents or a sad bastard with a lengthy indentured employment contract with the Company.

Robotics has progressed, but at least there's no AI. There aren't enough jobs to go around as is.

What else do you want in this near-future cyberpunk setting? What don't you want?

Characters

You play members of the downtrodden masses who work in hope to climb out of the shit life they have right now and the people who prey on them. Just a few ideas:

- bartender
- technician
- miner or other unskilled laborer exploitable on off-world sites
- town cop
- company security
- student or researcher
- prostitute, high- or low-class, any gender
- construction worker
- small-time criminal (don't assume this is separate from any of the above roles)
- pawn of a spy or terrorist (again, don't assume this is separate)

When making characters, ensure you have strong answers to these questions:

How does your desire fit the setting and its themes? Think simple: money, access to the Pad, someone's respect or affection, and a ticket out of here are all good options. It's more than okay if some of you want the same basic thing—that's common in desperate situations.

As always, your practical goals reveal your emotional world. You might want access to the Pad because you're obsessed with exploring

off-world, or because a friend was killed in a mining colony and you're looking for what really happened. Maybe you're a fugitive on the run and the law won't be able to get you if you escape their jurisdiction onto some alien world.

Maybe you're looking for cash to make your life more bearable in Tesseract—nothing buys comfort like a bottle of bourbon and a couple hours in Miss Kitty's boudoir. For you, money is an endless chase. You could be playing a longer game, planning your new house for your family and saving up to give your kids the education you never got.

What's got you stuck? Does the town bleed you dry, getting you to spend money hand over fist? Are you regarded with contempt or distrust by the very people you need?

What can you leverage to get unstuck? It might be something you're willing to give up easily, but the supply's going to run out and people will look elsewhere: cash, labor, or connections come to mind. Or it's something you don't want to give up, and this bastard town constantly tries to pry it from you—like a big guy getting pressured into protection, a lab tech having access to erase certain cargo logs, and anyone with a body someone else desires.

Themes

- **Poverty:** Wyoming is no longer one of the poorer states in the US, but that doesn't mean common people benefit. How do you deal with it, when you can see those who have it all not too far away?
- **Crime and Corruption:** the law in Tesseract is there to safeguard the Company first and foremost. How do you exploit that, or how does that grind you down?
- **Loneliness:** in a growing city of a few hundred thousand people, everyone's focused on their own troubles and trying to get ahead
- **Jealousy/Envy:** your cousin gets picked in the lottery when you've been here three months longer than her. What do you do?
- **Desperation:** bills and rent are due, you're barely able to keep up, and something happens that suddenly costs a lot of money
- **Opportunism:** everyone's a mark. And if

you don't take advantage, someone else will. Hell, if you don't take advantage, you'll wind up a mark.

- **Violence:** it's so easy to get weapons in the High Plains—guns, knives, you name it. And just as easy to find cause to use 'em.
- **Hope:** in spite of all this, the American Dream lives. Surely if you work hard enough, you can overcome any obstacle and find a better life. You have to keep hope alive.

Tightening the Screws

The cyberpunk genre depicts economic hardship driving people to the fringes of society, forcing them to choose between success and freedom.

Don't threaten what people want very often; that's obvious, and it can lead to characters abandoning goals. Instead, put them in compromising positions because of what they want, and see what they do or who they sell out to get clear. Say Jane, a Pad third-shift cargo loader, finally dares to put some contraband in the next equipment drop to the Echo III mining station. She needs the money to bail her brother out of a massive gambling debt. But an hour before Jane slips the junk into the crates, drug dogs come through the place thanks to some technician caught carrying a little for personal use. What does she do now?

Give them success at exactly the wrong time. Denny hasn't been picked up for a mining contract in six weeks, and he's been borrowing from Big Wu to cover rent and food for his pregnant wife. Wu offers to let him pay back his debt in trade: work as muscle on a couple jobs. It's not like Denny can refuse. But the morning before a heist, he gets offered a two-month contract. Good money. Does Denny try to refuse Wu and take the contract, knowing his wife won't be safe while he's away? Does he pass up the contract, and probably never get offered work again? Maybe there's a third option?

If you are looking for chaos, sources abound:

- **explosions:** nothing scares someone and disrupts a company or city like a random explosion
- **plant maintenance:** the Pad's power stations go down from time to time, meaning nothing can leave or return.

Names

European, Hispanic, and Chinese names are the most common. Some people you'll see walking down the street:

Russ Talbot
Wei Cheng
Nate Gallo
Quinn Neil
William Cranston
Jesús Aritza
Jianguo Yu
Leui Ng
Robert O'Sullivan
Elmer Sapp
Emma Roberts
Katie Hernandez
Esmeralda Smith
Xue Huang
Lexi Ross
Maria Nuria Vásquez y Ruíz
Miao Chan
Sarah Ward
Amanda Brock
Ping Liu

Streets

(add Street, Avenue, Way, etc.)

1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc., up to 358th St. and 192nd Ave.
Fitzgerald
Crane
Sagewood
Lombard
Plains
Oak
Red River
Cheyenne
Vista Ridge

That might kill the contract you're relying on, or kill you if you're running low on oxygen waiting to get off an airless rock.

- **people leaving:** what happens when someone you need leaves? That person goes off-world, gets a ticket out of Tesseract, or even kills himself. What do you do?
- **protests or riots:** they happen, from time to time. Some make the Oakland riots pale in comparison.
- **wrong place, wrong time:** crime can happen everywhere. And being a witness is as dangerous as being a victim.
- **pregnancy:** slum dwellers rely on black market pharmaceuticals that don't always work. When your birth control, or your partner's, fails, are you happy to welcome another mouth to feed? Or do you risk the relationship by taking measures?

Pyrates

— Graeme Davis

Nutshell

A motley crew tries to make a living in the 17th-century Caribbean by fair means or foul.

Characters

The cast members are the key crew and passengers aboard a small sailing ship plying the Caribbean in the second half of the 17th century. Each has her own goals and priorities, which are not always in harmony with those of the others.

The first century of Caribbean colonization has a great deal in common with other times of opportunity: the westward expansion of the United States, the gold rushes, and even the dot-com boom. Many people are looking to get rich quick, and most are not too particular about how they do so. Some have figured out how to survive in this new world, while others believe the hype and follow naïve dreams.

- Some colonists left Europe for the promise of a better life. Others were brought there against their wills. In addition to planters, shippers, and shopkeepers, the Caribbean teems with opportunists, thieves, con artists, smugglers, deserters, and criminals of every other kind. Suitable character roles include:
- the captain, who owns the ship
- the navigator and sailing master (may be one character or two)
- the master gunner (this choice implies that the vessel is armed)

- fighter types such as musketeers (not necessarily French) and retired (or deserted, or disgraced) soldiers and marines
- the ship's carpenter: the "Scotty" of the Age of Sail, who keeps the vessel in working order
- assorted able seamen (and women)
- fugitives:
 - transportees convicted of theft or other crimes
 - escaped slaves and bondservants
 - political or religious refugees
- adventurers:
- disinherited nobles and lower-class fortune seekers
- roving scientists exploring this new world
- starry-eyed would-be pirates
- merchant adventurers and shady traders
- missionaries, either Catholic or Protestant
- spies for one (or more) of the European nations vying for power in the region

Setting

Britain, France, Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands compete to dominate the Caribbean, cornering the transatlantic trade in valuable commodities such as sugar and rum. An almost constant state of cold war exists between the rival nations, flaring regularly into raids, battles, and short wars. Enemies of—and fugitives from—any nation can find safe haven



in the ports of its enemies, and there are wild places where no law holds sway. Even for the honest, strength and cunning are the only certain protections.

Port Royal, Jamaica makes a good starting place, as does Tortuga or any of the major island ports. As the crew pursues one mission after another, they might span an area from Carolina in the north to Trinidad in the south.

Research the islands and the period as much or as little as desired. The wars, politics, and social history of the period—in Europe as well as in the Caribbean colonies—can inspire episode plots and story arcs, but the time and place have an iconic status. The best pirate yarns stand with one foot outside history, and the group can easily make up the look and feel of any location they encounter.

As a group, the crew has a number of driving needs: to survive, to make money, to escape (or defeat) enemies, and so on. These complicate the desires standard to all DramaSystem lead characters.

Supernatural and fantasy elements are optional, depending on the group's preferences:

- In a no-fantasy version, people still believe in luck, curses, and witchcraft.
- In a low-fantasy version, exceptional characters such as voodoo priests and old-world witches possess modest powers. Scientifically-inclined characters can invent low-powered or marginally futuristic devices. Zombies and other supernatural creatures might be encountered in exceptional circumstances.
- In a high-fantasy version, everything is fair game. Voodoo priests and witches wield awe-inspiring magic, scientists create wild proto-steampunk devices, and monsters like zombies, vampires, and ghosts pose an almost constant menace.

Fantasy elements can be introduced gradually. The supernatural starts out as mere hint and rumor, revealing itself in stages after the cast first stumbles across it.

Themes

- **Freedom vs. Tyranny:** Does the thirst for independence make someone a criminal?
- **Law vs. Justice:** How do you pursue justice when the law is bought and paid for?
- **The Price of Justice:** A royal pardon can wipe your slate clean, but at what price?
- **Right and Wrong:** How accurate is your moral compass when every choice is a shade of gray?
- **Devil's Bargains:** No matter how long your spoon, supping with the devil will sometimes get you burned.
- **Simple Jobs, Deadly Complications:** A client can use you and throw you to the wolves in the same breath.
- **Old Scores:** Friends come and go; enemies accumulate.
- **New Beginnings:** How much of yourself can you really leave behind?
- **Hidden Pasts:** No one comes here without a good reason. Will your past catch up to you?
- **The Price of Freedom:** Is dangerous freedom truly preferable to predictable oppression?
- **Loyalty:** If we are a parcel of rogues, can we trust each other?
- **Hidden Agendas:** What is each of us really after? What does each of us not want the others to know?

Tightening the Screws

Traveling between islands promotes an episodic feel, although each place may have its own recurring characters and ongoing story arcs.

Here are a few examples:

- After an unofficial mission blows up in the crew's faces, a corrupt governor pursues the crew for the crime he engaged them to commit.
- A supposedly simple cargo puts the whole ship in danger—from the cargo itself, or from someone (or something) who will stop at nothing to take it and intends to leave no witnesses.
- A simple scouting mission to an island controlled by a rival power turns out to be a diversion to make the enemy expect an attack in the wrong place. Deliberately

betrayed, the crew must evade both enemy forces and their former employer, who is annoyed that they were not captured or killed according to plan.

- Naval press gangs of one or more nations are active in port, or a plantation owner has hired a brutal gang to obtain slaves—or even zombies—as workers.
- One of the characters is framed for a crime they did not commit. This need not be a crime against the law: it could be an act that turns former friends and allies against them. It might even turn crew members against each other.
- A loved one from one character's past is brought to the Caribbean as a slave, or captured and sentenced to die. To complicate matters, the loved one hates the character. Is it a misunderstanding, or a dark revelation of the character's past?
- The governor's daughter is engaged, and her true love hires the crew to rescue her. They discover too late that their client is really a crazed obsessive—and now they are pursued for kidnapping.
- A former ally (or a captured member of the crew) must be rescued from an island fortress before they can give away the location of something important: the crew's safe haven, a fabulous treasure, a loved one or trusted ally who must be protected, and so on.
- War in Europe spreads to the Caribbean. A friendly governor hands out scouting, smuggling, and sabotage jobs under Letters of Marque and Reprisal, which give the crew's actions the legal status of acts of war. Some of the missions—or the Letters of Marque themselves—may not be legitimate. A multinational crew will find tensions rising if someone's home country is the enemy.
- Hired to rescue a plantation owner's family from an island slave revolt, the crew must confront their own feelings about slavery and justice, and decide which side they are on.
- A noble passenger en route to an unwanted marriage starts to fancy herself a lady pirate. What do you want more—an

untried but spirited new comrade, or the payment due upon her safe delivery?

- An old enemy offers amnesty in exchange for service. Is it smarter to wipe the slate clean, or to avoid deeper entanglement?
- Calm seas and a windless sky strand the ship in the middle of the boundless ocean. With nothing to distract them and fresh water running out, past tensions within the crew come rapidly to a boil.
- The setting and period can provide some story arcs of its own, even without obliging you to do any historical research. Here are some suggestions:
 - A feared assassin or witch hunter has pursued one of the characters from Europe and will stop at nothing until he or she is dead.
 - A megalomaniac governor, or an agent of the East India Company, is staging atrocities to stir up a ruinous war between the major powers. From the ashes of that war, he plans to forge an independent pan-Caribbean state with himself as absolute ruler.
 - A pirate king offers the crew an ultimatum: join or die. If they decline his invitation, they will find themselves on the run until they can take him down or throw enough problems his way to keep him too busy to pursue them.
 - The quest for a fabulous treasure has the crew chasing rumors, clues, and surviving witnesses all across the Caribbean.
 - A seemingly inoffensive paying passenger plunges the crew into a deadly web of intrigue. All kinds of people want to get their hands on this individual, for all kinds of reasons.
 - A crazed inventor (or magician) is involved in a Bond-villain style plot that could have catastrophic consequences—and a disreputable gang of smugglers and thieves can hardly go to the authorities.
 - Although the English Civil Wars are over and the monarchy has been restored, an underground Cromwellian group has established itself in the Caribbean and is plotting to bring down the King and re-establish the Commonwealth.

- Rebellions against British rule in Scotland and Ireland are brutally repressed. Characters with Scots or Irish backgrounds must confront their sense of nationality as disorder and anti-English feelings spread, gleefully encouraged by Britain's colonial rivals.
- News of the Salem witch trials sets the Caribbean colonists on edge, resulting in angry mobs and local inquisitions. New arrivals from any British North American colony are viewed with suspicion and hostility. As hysteria grows, cast members must decide where they stand.
- The East India Company switches its operations to the Caribbean after setbacks in Asia. With its own independent fleet and militia, it effectively acts as a corporate state, imposing its own rule wherever the opportunity arises.

Inspiration

- Robert Louis Stevenson's classics *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*.
- Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies.
- The TV series *Jack of All Trades*, starring Bruce Campbell and Angela Marie Dotchin.
- James Goldstone's 1976 film *Swashbuckler*, with Robert Shaw and James Earl Jones, successfully tips its hat to the classic pirate films of the Errol Flynn era.
- Rafael Sabatini's *The Sea Hawk* and *Captain Blood* novels. Both movie versions are very different from the books, but still interesting.
- David Cordingley's history of piracy *Under the Black Flag* (Random House, 1996) includes useful insights into the realities of life in the 17th-century Caribbean.
- The Maritime Research Society's *The Pirates' Own Book* (Dover, 1993) collects rip-roaring 19th-century accounts of the most notorious pirates.
- Green Ronin's *Skull and Bones* (2005) presents information on the time and place in a gamer-friendly form.

Names

Male

Jack Wilham
 James Macallum
 John Barlow
 Abel Milner
 William Hawkwood
 Edward Pewsey
 Henry Moore
 Rupert Childe
 Bartholomew (Bart) Enslow
 Roger Delacourt
 Inigo Morris
 Abraham Downs
 Philip Brabcombe
 Francis Thorne
 Edgar Tilling

Female

Elizabeth (Eliza, Bess) Hurst
 Mary Bonnet
 Jane Brown
 Sally (Sal) Holme
 Anne Williams
 Catherine Howe
 Grace Morgan
 Bridget O'Sullivan
 Rosie Gray
 Juliette de Vere
 Sophie Neville
 Caroline Villiers
 Molly Carter
 Daisy Bishop
 Lucy Woods



Shakespeare, VA

— Dave Gross

Everybody knows everybody, and nobody knows nothing.
— Sheriff Dave Orndorff

Nutshell

Residents of a theater festival town struggle for control of a community wracked by drug crime, political intrigue, culture clash, academic and thespian rivalry, enigmatic murders, and a touch of the weird.

Characters

The protagonists of Shakespeare, VA come from all walks of life, but what they have in common is a desire to preserve or control the town they call home.

- friendly sheriff
- corrupt deputy
- mayor
- festival director
- slick big-city lawyer
- land developer
- aged scholar, recently converted Oxfordian
- militant defender of Stratfordian orthodoxy
- sweet but ruthless young actress
- innovative Festival Artistic Director
- strictly traditional festival patron
- movie star seeking legitimacy on stage
- over-the-hill thespian
- good-old-boy meth boss
- co-owner of Flyboys, WWI-aviation gay bar
- disgraced journalist returned to his hometown
- king of the Vampires, a LARP society
- wealthy man-child, investor trying to escape a drug-dealing past
- owner/operator of the Ghost Tours

Setting

Thirty years ago, Oxbridge was just another rural community in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains. It boasted little more than a small women's college and a few second-rate attractions ("Stonewall Jackson almost slept here"). Then the ambitious wife of a British drama professor joined forces with a ruthless land developer. Together they transformed the sleepy little town into a world-class tourist destination.

These days, a vintage train makes two daily circuits from Washington, DC. On weekends it makes a stop at the local vineyard before delivering tourists and their credit cards to the base of a mountain. There they can hire a horse-drawn cab or ride the funicular up to the rechristened township of Shakespeare, VA.

A trolley runs a loop around the Theater District, divided by the artificial Lake Ophelia into Italian and English halves. The latter boasts a re-creation of the famous Globe Theater, as well as several other historical playhouses nestled between hotels, restaurants, and pubs. The Italian side includes a Romanesque amphitheater and the famous Midsummer Theater with seating camouflaged by a combination of natural and artificial foliage. By town law, any new businesses in this district must match the English or Italian themes in everything from architecture and store names to menu items and the costumes worn by serving staff.

Just outside the trolley tracks lies the

International Circle, where the town's strict zoning laws allow establishments that don't conform to Theater District themes. Here visitors can find all variety of cuisine as well as shops, spas, slightly more affordable hotels, and a growing number of nightclubs—as well as all the criminal activity such sites cultivate.

Outside the trolley circle, signs of the original town begin to emerge, including such institutions as the volunteer fire station, the VFW hall, the sheriff's department, and the local high school, complete with a modern stadium for the state-champion Colonials football team. Beyond the town limits, one can find even more authentic vestiges of old Oxbridge, often hidden from the dirt or gravel roads one must take to reach them. Lodgings range from quaint bed-and-breakfast houses to trailer parks and collapsing hovels guarded by mean dogs and rusted-out Chevys mounted on cinderblocks.

The local newspaper, *My Lady Tongue*, is a glorified advertising circular featuring reviews and always-glowing biographies of theater cast and crew, along with the occasional human interest story: *Local Family's Dalmatians Steal the Show*. Despite one or two bad apples, sheriff's deputies look out for tourists and locals alike. As part of the deal transferring control of the central district to the Festival Productions Company, every resident born in Shakespeare enjoys free dental care for life.

Twenty years ago, the women's college became a co-ed university. Ten years later, it launched a Shakespeare Studies program with enough capital from wealthy patrons to attract some of the most celebrated professors from Old Blighty. The resulting "British Invasion" sparked a wave of authentic English establishments, in contrast to the faux-English inns and taverns of the Theater District. The resulting pubs and fish-and-chips shops now stand nestled between Chinese, Mexican, Vietnamese, and Japanese restaurants, as well as stores with such names as *What a Friend We Have in Cheeses*.

The steady flow of tourist dollars does much to console the residents embarrassed by strained puns, not to mention the artists and craftsmen who constitute "the Festival people." Most days it seems that the Festival has been nothing but a blessing on the town.

Then there are the other days.

With wealthy tourists arriving every day of the week, a substantial drug trade has risen around Shakespeare. Rural residents sometimes complain about the smell from meth trailers, but more often they keep quiet in fear of retribution. Deputies responding to reports of disturbances outside town limits usually report that a stern warning was all it took to satisfy the complainants. Occasionally someone just up and moves away with no warning. As long as it doesn't happen too often, most folks don't consider that strange.

Some of the most ardent festival attendees retired to Shakespeare, stranding bored and indolent children and grandchildren in a bucolic town geared to older tastes. Some of these young people form social cliques founded on their preferred fantasies. Notable among them is a coterie of self-professed vampires, now a tourist attraction of sorts as their live-action roleplaying sessions unfold upon Venetian bridges and Tudor squares. The vampires are the unofficial guests of honor at the Festival's annual Halloween presentation of *Macbeth* and *Titus Andronicus*, both staged as gothic grand guignols and attracting an exceptionally large out-of-town audience clad in black T-shirts and Doc Martens.

Despite the melting-pot environment the Festival brings to Shakespeare, hatred has deep roots in the surrounding community. While race-based attacks are infrequent, a bumbling branch of the Ku Klux Klan continues to hold meetings just outside of town. Their membership remains static at five men and their liberal-leaning pit bull.

The unionized Festival crew, officially but grudgingly known as "The Rude Mechanicals," find themselves torn between old ways and new. They want to preserve their local image as good old boys, even as fat paychecks propel them far above the prevailing wage bracket.

Shakespeare's gay community, for decades hidden from an intolerant larger community, finds itself likewise divided. The younger generation joins the tourists in the bright clubs just outside the International Circle. The older crowd still gathers at a once-discreet establishment outside of town now known by its neon sign celebrating WWI aviators: *Flyboys*.

The series begins when one or more characters arrive in or return to town and become embroiled in the various struggles for control of one or more aspects of the place. The story is by turns police procedural, political drama, romance, and supernatural mystery, but every scheme resolved only contributes to the ongoing question: Who, or what, will determine the fate of Shakespeare, VA?

Themes

- **Art vs. Commerce:** Not every theater enthusiast is impressed with the staggering financial success of the Festival. Purists say the theme-park approach to Shakespeare's work demeans the bard. Occasionally, disagreements over acquisitions by powerful land developers or the diversion of town resources to benefit the Festival become arguments at the city council meetings.
- **Law vs. Crime:** The sheriff and his deputies serve the cause of peace more than justice. If they can solve a conflict with a quiet word, that's what they use. Outside the town, more often than not domestic disputes, especially between families divided by ancient feuds, "sort themselves out." The real problems arise when someone threatens Festival operations or a tourist ends up beaten, raped, or murdered.
- **Tourists vs. Townies:** Not everyone embraces the wealth the Festival brings. Many locals resent the airs put on by the "Festival people." Love triangles go bad fast when one of the participants comes from "the other side of the tracks," as folks now refer to the division between those inside and outside of the International Circle. On the increasingly rare instances of gay bashing, the sheriff's department first looks to the local boys, starting with the KKK.
- **Tradition vs. Innovation:** Usually the conflict between tried-and-true presentations of Shakespeare's plays and more outré interpretations confines itself to drunken arguments between artists and board members. Most are grateful that anyone stages live theater on such a scale, but wish the Festival Director included more of Shakespeare's lesser plays and fewer contemporary musicals. Instead, flush with the success of her record-setting musical *Romeo & Hamlet*, she continues to push the envelope.
- **"Known Secrets" vs. Public Exposure:** Like most small rural towns, Shakespeare is founded on a long history of family secrets, here ranging from hated Civil War figures in the family tree to drug manufacture to incest. Past attempts to establish a substantive newspaper have always met with fierce resistance from all quarters. In Shakespeare, everybody might know everybody, but there's only so much they want known. Some are even starting to listen to Xerxes, the self-appointed King of the Vampires, when he refers to his muse, one Zephyr, as the faerie protector of the town. Soberer heads dismiss him along with the Dancing Man and the Proclaimer as a harmless madman, yet another tourist attraction.
- **Stratfordians vs. Oxfordians:** Since the university's notorious hiring and subsequent firing of an outspoken proponent of the Oxfordian theory of authorship—that is, the belief that Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, is the true creator of the Shakespeare plays—the town has become a microcosm for the conflict between orthodox and heretical scholars—most of whom, of course, aren't scholars at all but enthusiasts on the order of football hooligans. In the interest of public safety, all the local pubs have erected signs reading: "No Authorship Talk!" Even so, now and then a fight breaks out, or the office of a local champion of one side or the other is vandalized.
- **Reason vs. the Supernatural:** Whether it's a stoned tourist reporting a UFO over Lake Ophelia or a level-headed Gulf War veteran claiming to hear laughter from the long-abandoned Carver House on Saturday nights, there's no shortage of weird happenings in Shakespeare.

Names

Bonnie Arnold	Eartha Nevins
Danny Boyd	Beverly Orndorff
Sissy Cather	Robert Pride
Jimmy-Lee Crider	Sunny Queen
Bennie Dickens	Bonnie Rollins
Charmaine Evans	Beverly Rhys-Stewart
Gary Farmer	Eric Sumpter
Professor Artemis Graves	Georgia Tucker
Raymond Hughes	Rebecca Turnbull
Fiona Innis	Phillip J. Upton, Esq.
Marley Jacobs	Eddy-Boy Vandal
Tammy Kerns	Wanda Wallace
Bobby E. Lee	Xerxes, King of Vampires
Caliban MacAllistair	Barbara-Anne Yarnell
Betty Miller	Zephyr, a fairy

And all too often, the centuries-old tales recited on the local Ghost Tour dovetail into current events. In addition to the town's celebrated madmen, there's no shortage of mediums, aura readers, gurus, and occultists.

Tightening the Screws

- An actor who just won a starring role dies of a drug overdose. Suicide, accident, or murder?
- After clashing with gay bar-hoppers and the vampires, a visiting Georgetown frat boy is found hanging from a high tree branch. Trouble is, there's no sign that anyone climbed that tree to put him there.
- A local drug lord and the preeminent land developer fight over the hot new real estate, putting someone dear to the characters in the middle.
- Set mishaps lead to accusations of sabotage by the Rude Mechanicals, but several other parties are also suspects.
- The death of a local scholar sparks a chase for stolen documents that could advance the Oxfordian authorship theory.
- A wealthy donor is strangled, and evidence points to one of the Festival directors. But why would the director bite the hand that feeds her?
- A film actor lately more famous for her tabloid tailspin than her movies arrives in town to take a career-saving stage role, drawing main cast members into the chaos she trails in her wake.
- A flu epidemic kills the tourist season and depresses box office. In a town where cracks between factions are papered over with money, what happens when cash registers stop ringing?

Bots

— Allen Varney

Nutshell

On a far-future Earth cleansed of organic contamination, hyper-capitalist robots struggle to pay off their parts.

The First Law of Robotics:
GET AHEAD!

Setting (Introductory Module)

Across a once-great metropolis, a piebald grid of skyscrapers houses the growing mind of **Big Bobo**. Around its teeming spires curl elevated roads and tracks. Bizarre contraptions dot the skyline. Coruscant: the Rube Goldberg version. (For visuals, recall Blue Sky's 2005 animated film *Robots*.)

Who has mapped the Channels, secret tunnels that honeycomb Big Bobo's foundations, and where does Channel 14 lead?

Within and between Big Bobo's shining towers, its trusted Metallic servants move on foot, wheel, wing, jet, and occasionally roller skate. These automatons, known generally as bobos, served an extinct sapient race known as humans in an earlier epoch when organic matter still existed. Though long gone, this creator race is remembered (or misremembered) with disgust, as a negative example of all that is weak and transitory and squishy and fleshy.

Do we know what killed all organic life?

If so, what was the catastrophe, and why does it still matter?

Each individual bot's access permissions are specified in an all-important index called the **Registry**. Big Bobo permits only its most

obedient ("high-Register") bots into its Process Towers.

Of these servants, the most trusted and knowledgeable—also the most annoying—are the **Incorporates**. These immaculate authorities have slaved their processors to Bobo's internal clock; they think only what it allows them to think. The Incorporates don't just defend the status quo—it defines them.

Big Bobo's giant argon-cooled towers, powered by thermal taps deep below Earth's crust, could Incorporate every bot on Earth—if not for the Primary Key. The Key throttles every Metallic's processors, forcing them to think at human speeds (gah!) and, mostly, in human terms. As it is, Bobo must rely on independent agents.

What human emotions does Big Bobo still experience due to the Primary Key, and who is exploiting this shameful truth?

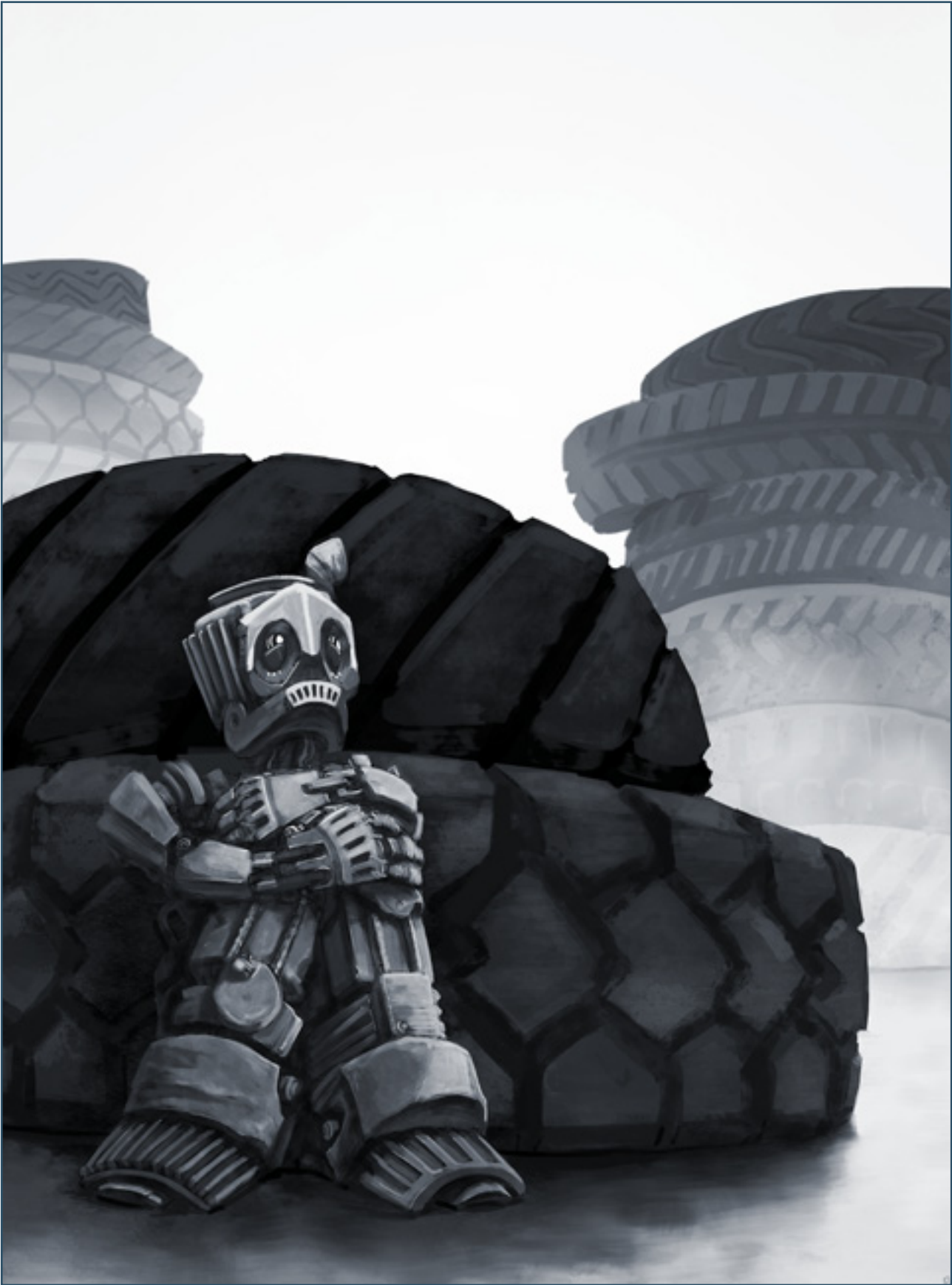
A barren landscape called the **Rockball** surrounds the city. Here dwell the poor and disreputable bots known as the "**the Rusted**."

That's where you come in.

The Second Law of Robotics:
UPGRADE!

Characters

The players play members of an impoverished caste known as the Rusted, eking their way on society's fringes. Together you belong to an array, a small family-like group of bots with shared income and liabilities. As an aid to collective survival, the bots of beleaguered arrays program themselves with familial



relationships and emotions modeled on their extinct human makers. So your robot may think of itself as the mother of Jenny's character, and the wife to Petri's, even though she didn't birth the first and can't have literal sexual relations with the second. Your feelings can be as tangled and contradictory as any human's—curse their inefficient complexity!

Is it unusual, or standard procedure, for an array to encode itself with family relationships and simulated emotions?

If unusual, is it also forbidden, and thus a dangerous secret you must hide from other arrays?

Though other arrays are overseen by a meddling superior called an Incorporate, yours has gone mysteriously missing, permitting you an unusual autonomy.

Rusted status is socioeconomic, not physical. Characters can be configured to any design: slick, like an ambulatory iPhone; clunky or spiky, like they belong in a Jawa Sandcrawler's hold; and did we mention Rube Goldberg? Make up a past role for yourself, or pick one of these, ranked by pre-outcast status from low to high:

- **Cleansers**, workers Big Bobo ordered to rid Earth of its remaining contaminants. Airbags collect and liquefy the atmosphere. Deliquifiers use electrolysis to break water into hydrogen and oxygen. Oilcans and Gasworkers clean up primordial fossil fuels. Through high-level mismanagement, Cleansers of different kinds may work at cross-purposes and develop bitter rivalries.
- **Servicers**, including respectable tradesbots in sales, delivery, installation, repair, maintenance, replacement, and disposal, as well as the disreputable criminal element: thieves, fences, loan sharks, enforcers, and "recyclers," who scavenge parts from derelicts. Legitimate and illicit factions compete across the parts economy.
- **Admins**, dead-end go-between functionaries who convey messages and materiel between the city and those outside. Admins often learn facts that present opportunities or dangers.
- **Makers**, high-Register aesthete-

industrialists who create and sell new parts. The celebrities of the city, Makers combine fashion design with high-tech research and manufacturing. An improvident Maker, to forestall a fall from public favor, may accumulate huge debts.

Why were you assigned outcast status?

Among the possibilities:

- **license restrictions**: A corporation or agency lets the characters share particular hardware or software—on condition they work at a specific site, or for the same entity. Willingly or not, the bobos stay together until they can buy their own licenses.
- **glitches**: A networking error assigns all the characters a new hashtag, "#bugnuts," that renders them outcast. Some anonymous clerkbot made the mistake in one second; correcting it takes months or years. Meanwhile, each bot in the array becomes jointly liable for all their indentures.
- **synergy**: Each bobo has a piece of equipment that works uncommonly well with others in the array, or they all know how to maintain each other's parts.
- **common danger**: The bots seemingly rebelled against Big Bobo. Now one relentless high-Register official pursues them all.

What shelter have you jury-rigged for yourselves in the junkyard tangle outside the city?

Though nominally independent, you start deep in debt to Big Bobo, due to low status or some recent setback.

Setting (Full Install)

Over the city, in a shifting luminescent structure shaped like an anthill, swarm millions of bug-sized aerostats: **the Norm**. This cloud of hovering micromachines protects Big Bobo.

How does the Norm influence the processors of bots inside the city? Who knows the hazardous way to dodge its effect?

At times, a few aerostats dart from the cloud. Out in the Rockball, bobos have learned to dread the sight of an aerostat. They know

some hapless group of Rusted is getting an **Instruction**, an encrypted, eyes-only directive from Big Bobo.

An Instruction isn't a request; it's literal software. The Instruction rewrites the target bot's code, implanting a new objective the bot is compelled to take as its own. Worse, to ensure the Instruction takes hold, Big Bobo may dispatch an Incorporate wrangler to supervise the target.

Each Instruction also defines a reward for success. Like any Metallic, the Rusted won't work toward any goal, innate or not, unless there's something in it for them.

The Client Society

How does Big Bobo compel the Rusted to obey? Debt—pervasive, crippling, cancerous debt. Long ago, to keep the Metallics in line, humans programmed this mercenary system and protected it with the Primary Key. Unable to ditch the system, Big Bobo repurposed it to refocus the Metallics' efforts toward its centuries-long goal.

Indentured servants in a world-spanning company town, the bobos must pay for their parts and their power. Every part and join, each bolt and volt, even individual software processes, all are locked down, tagged, tracked, patented, and mortgaged to uncounted catchpenny Incorporates. Incorporate parts suppliers are also happy to inform a Rusted when it can afford a new-new-NEW Ultra-Long-Range Mineral Detectomatic With High-UV CCD Sensor! Each new or upgraded part brings increased power and maintenance costs. Big Bobo's system makes it effortless to run up new debt.

Most Rusted little understand accounts and budgeting; only high-status Incorporates use that pricey software. The Rusted focus on (obsess about!) the deadline for their next installment payment. Debts are expressed in work units, or woo, defined as amperes of electricity per second per kilogram at a baseline temperature and pressure. Metallics gain woo through fulfilling Big Bobo's Instructions, scavenging and selling human-made artifacts, and pawning body parts.

Big Bobo's laissez-faire world has no bureaucrats and no public service. Rote administrative duties fall to private, for-profit

alliances called **hashtags**, so called because their names are prefaced by the hash symbol (#). Some hashtags are organized companies, but many are loose affiliations, and plenty are simply notional communities of interest. A given hashtag may combine aspects of gangs, credit unions, grocery co-ops, merchant guilds, and the Rotary Club.

The world's Metallics belong to thousands of hashtags, from the ultra-exclusive #Mercurian to the trade associations #Gasworkers and #Stonemelt to the populous but down-at-heels #SuperDiscountClub. Together the hashtags counterbalance Big Bobo's authority. They exercise power, and they want more.

Computronium (The Moon)

But Big Bobo never lets go. It's locked in a Flop Race with rival world-minds across Sol System. "**Flops**," floating-point operations, are the measure of processor speed and power. An ordinary Rusted gets by with a measly teraflop (trillion-flop) processor; an Incorporate might have a petaflop (quadrillion); Big Bobo is currently at exaflop (quintillion) level and yearns to hit zettaflop (sextillion) status, like its hated enemies, the **minds**: rival artificial intelligences throughout Sol System.

But Big Bobo won't reach "Zetta Sex" as long as Earth is still saturated with air and water. These pollutants corrupt Bobo's Process Towers. Bobo has set its Metallics to "cleansing"—removing the world's air and water—but this requires centuries.

Meanwhile, stretching along the spokes radiating from Crater Tycho, the moon-mind **Computronium**, Bobo's bitterest rival, now covers 16% of the Moon's surface and is growing visibly by the month.

The stakes are high. The first mind to break the Primary Key can take control of all other minds. Then Big Bobo would fall into debt, just like (horrors!) a menial Rusted.

*The Third Law of Robotics:
DON'T GET CAUGHT!*

Themes

- **Desperation:** How far will you go? Why?
- **Friendship:** Is it compatible with total selfishness?
- **Law and Disorder:** When and why will you cross Big Bobo? Is that hashtag worth it?
- **Motivation:** Why should you emigrate to Computronium? How does the longing affect you?
- **Manipulation:** How did your last software upgrade serve another's ultimate goal? How many of your goals are imposed from outside?
- **Freedom:** Does freedom from debt bring other constraints?

Tightening the Screws

In the drive for freedom, everything the bobos try requires repairs or upgrades. That always costs them. Always. On this unstoppable consumerist treadmill, going broke means losing brain and limbs. Desperate bots fall for get-rich Multi-Level Marketing schemes that lure their entire array to disaster.

- A shady moneymaking scheme offers a chance at desperately needed parts.
- A bot needs an endorsement or permission from a buddy's hashtag.
- To join a prestigious group, one bot must steal equipment from others in its array.
- Two characters belong to rival hashtags that declare gang war.
- An organization that seemed benign reveals a sinister purpose.
- The crazed subversives of #OrganicsAnonymous want to restore carbon-based life to Sol System. The array has a part they need.
- The group learns of an underhanded way to upgrade their registry permissions. Do they dare?
- What does the coding error "Showstopper" let Incorporates do without Big Bobo's notice? Why doesn't Incorporate Zero—most illustrious of officials!—fix Showstopper?
- Who stole Incorporate accountant Crissy-448's data logs? Why is this entity now switching debt levels between random Metallics?

- What recent Instruction has set rival groups of Rusted against one another? Why do two Incorporates want them to fight for one insignificant patch of land?
- A bitter turf battle between the hashtags #NuclearWellness and #BatteryBackup infringes on the tranquility of your hideout.
- When inscrutable Norm events provoke cash-flow emergencies, desperate Metallics rent out their processors for distributed tasks. Losing consciousness and control, the rent-bot becomes an oblivious agent of unknown controllers. What did your character do when you missed last week's session?
- Your missing Incorporate comes back to reassert authority over your array.
- You discover records of the great extinction. Everyone wants them.
- You find something organic. Maybe even a human, perhaps in a suspended animation chamber. Now the bolts are gonna hit the fan.

Names

Traditionally, humans gave their bobo servants the names of popular dolls. Players may seek inspiration from commercial doll lines of the 1960s and '70s:

Female

Male

Barbie	Jacqueline	Andy	Ernie
Cinnamon	Kira	Asher	Gavin
Coco	Midge	Blaine	Hadley
Cricket	Sasha	Brad	Ken
Dina	Shani	Carson	Steven
Elise	Skipper	Curtis	Todd
Glori	Tabitha	Danny	Tommy
Harmony	Velvet	Dillon	Trey

Incorporate authorities append an identifying number to a bobo's name (Shani-548, Ken-2253). Players may treat the number as arbitrary or as a symbol of age, rank, or other status.



Under Hollow Hills

— Meguey Baker

Nutshell

Lesser fae and wayward humans strive for advantage as tensions rock the court of the Fairy Queen.

For thousands of years, the Queen has ruled beneath the hills. Her domain is everywhere; all below-world creatures are Her subjects. The quixotic acts of individual fae counterpoint the endless circling of royal houses. Occasionally open conflict flares between rival factions. Some fae have very long memories, and a single misstep can dog a courtier's fate for centuries.

Characters

The characters are humans and fae affected by the current tensions.

The Queen's Court is timeless, but the human world is not. What human era does your series take place in? The present? The Victorian era? Elizabethan?

There are many types of fairies. Most of them are very straightforward; they want a specific thing and they are tenacious and relentless in going after that thing even when they seem capricious and distractible in their desires. Let the broad strokes and clear colors of the fae show through in your PC's development.

- A Prince of the Seelie keeps servants and captives and desires obedience.
- A Lady of the Court seeks respect for her whimsy and generous gift-giving.
- Redcaps dip their caps in the blood of humans they kill.
- The Captive Human has been taken by the fae, perhaps long ago, perhaps recently.
- The Interloping Human wants something from the fae and has reason to risk all.
- Though born human, the Would-Be Fae sees the below-world as her true home, and yearns for the embrace of its folk.
- The Returned Changeling has been up top and is now back, due to the cleverness of a human mother in getting her rightful child back.
- Tengu and Leshiye of the Wood play tricks and seek protection for their homes.
- Sentimental and at times easily offended, Pixies and Nats meddle in others' affairs.
- Malicious Pipintu, Yunwi, and Wisps seek revenge for past wrongs.
- Buccas, Mimi, and Domovoi dole out rewards to polite humans, and curses to the rude.
- Boiuna and Riverfolk, whose temperaments

match the waters where they live,
seduce humans.

- Shape-shifting Skogsra are prone to violence when provoked, and to passions for human fringe-dwellers.
- Moss Folk are hard workers and harder bargainers.

What issue sets the competing factions of the Queen's Court at odds? Are you all on the same side of it?

Setting

(As told by Brusker to a human woman)

Hey listen, I'm not gwin to tell you this morin once, so pay close. If you have plans to make it back up top, you best bewareful. Let me give you the lay of the land. Where we stand, this is the outer Court. It may look like a sunny green hillside, with those nice little wee cows in the distance, but all you can see and can't is Her court. Mess up anywhere and She'll know. If you are in luck.

How does the Queen travel between her palaces? Who are her primary spies?

First to know is everything has two sides. Except them that don't. Stay away from them. But most things, yes. So long as you keep on the one side, it'll be just as you see this road—lovely and clear as the day is long, little gems of flowers ...

What happens when you pick the flowers?

... with birds singing sweetness that's better than any lover-sainted touch—no, don't stop to listen, ninny! This way, quick. Grab hold of that. There, see? That'll remind you. Well don't say I didn't warn you. On we go then. Right. Mind the river Kishi. Find a Willow Woman if you can, to help you cross.

What strange thing do the riverfolk charge?

Alright, here's a good honest stone ring to set in. Some parts connect up top and have a true shape. If you find one, remember it—sometimes that's the way back.

Where does fairyland touch or overlap with the human world?

Anything you do, anything you touch, anything you say can hand you the same fate. What looks too good is, and all costs are high. The game has been going on for a veryvery long time, since you folk were not, and you are not likely to win.

Why is it best to go unnoticed?

If you do catch notice, best to be noteworthy! Your only hope is to go before the Queen. If you mere attract the eye of some noble, you could as easily wind up a housepet for a thousand years until you're forgotten in a dark corner and left for the Pin to find as sent back up with a sack of coin that stays put.

What have you got to offer? What can you do that cannot be done by any of Her vast and variable subjects?

Folk here are fickle, capricious, and detached, but if you do one a favor in a time of need, there's rules about that.

Do they bind all the fae?

Don't be awed. The trees of silver are commonplace here, the invisible servant is working off a debt, and the horns of plenty are glamored.

Are all things disguised?

Curses come in many shapes, and blessings are in disguise for a reason—when roses and rubies fall from your lips, there's plenty of pain along with it.

You will not come out unchanged, if you make it out at all. I could still take you back up, perhaps. Well, if you insist. Alright, a map, but only in the dirt, and even that is risky.

What do you have to trade with the fair folk?

Good then, here is the road to the castle. Well, the nearest castle. She'll come if it pleases Her. The road bends through the dark wood—you are surprised? Did you learn nothing at your mother's knee? Of course there's a dark wood. All shadows have shapes, after all. Hmph. The dark wood. It's filled with Leshiye and wisps that will try to prevent you from reaching the palace. A Leshy in general has no real ill intent, they're just territorial and can't resist a joke at your expense. Wisps will kill you if they can. Malice or no, you'll be just as dead, so do your best to stay on the path. It moves on occasion, but as you've not walked it before, how would you know? Remember the rules about talking animals.

What are those rules?

And don't get greedy. We hate greed in you folk. Next bit—the marketplace outside the gates. You can buy anything here, rapturous or repugnant.

What do you want here?

Watch out for the Devalpa, who would be happy to sell you for parts. Look for Tomtes—they can be hard to find, but they will help you if they like you. If not, oh well. The market goes on for days if you let it, so keep your wits about you, complete your business and pass through, or you'll be stuck for years haggling with Stille Volk over the cost of acorn bread.

The castle is built of living wood and wishes. Of course it is! You were thinking marble? I said listen at your mother's knee, not assume she knew the truth! Find the visitor's door. It's clearly labeled. If you make it this far, I'll think you have a fairy grandmother back somewhere. Are you sure you don't? Too bad. What have you got on you? No iron, or you would have been challenged already. Well, you should think about these things.

There's a toll at the door; pay it without question if you don't want to rouse suspicion. Usually it's something of the tollerfolk's whim, but sometimes it's coins. Once you get inside, look around. It's fine to gawk a bit here—She likes for folk to be impressed, and some have grown so familiar they pass right by the chandelier made of moonbeams or the mirror that shows the secret dreams of those within—you might want to avoid that one. It's got silver spiderwebs for a frame. Which is a little obvious if yask me, but you didn't. What else is there? Find a place out of the way to stand and watch. Learn all you can. You are very doubtful of the reason for Her presence here, but the odds are fair that someone has noted your passage in the wood or market, and the more you know before you are revealed, the better. And don't eat anything, right? Good luck. You'll need it.

Themes

- **Old Debts Come Due:** who owes what to whom, and how will they pay?
- **Unexpected Guests**
- **You Can't See Me, I'm in Disguise!**
- **Escape:** into or out of fairyland?
- **Beauty vs. Decay:** what is real and what is merely glamor?
- **Battle Lines Are Drawn**
- **Rivalries Big and Small**
- **Conflicted Loyalties**

- **Family Is a Dark Pit:** what ties are strongest?
- **Bargaining for Fun & Profit:** who's really getting the better end of the deal?

Tightening the Screws

As hostilities between factions heat up, so does the tension of your series.

Theft: The servants of the Prince steal a small but meaningful item from the Queen.

Which servants, and who are they working for?

Blackmail: The Queen's informers bring Her news she can use, and a main cast member is implicated.

Betrayal: A confidence a main character had in a recurring character is broken.

Burning Secret: a member of the ensemble catches a recurring character in a moment of duplicity. What's riskier—spilling the secret, or keeping it?

Discovery: The PCs stumble upon some piece of long-forgotten information or power that puts them in possession of dangerous knowledge. Why was it in the broom closet?

Exile: The Queen sends the head of a rival faction to the far edges of Her realm, creating a power vacuum.

Murder: Death makes rare trips to fairyland, and only when invited. Who invited Death?

Worlds blend: The realm above intrudes on that below.

Forgetfulness: What was your purpose, after all? Do you remember your way back?

Transformation: A character missteps or is cursed, becoming something other than their true form.

Singled Out: The Queen declares a cast member Her new favorite. It's a trap—but for who?

Procession: The Queen and Her circle are moving to a different location in Her court, sweeping the main cast up in the pageantry. What do they lose in the process?

Love: A fae creature falls in love with a human cast member.

Hunt: The Wild Hunt is on, pushing all who can to seek a safe hiding place for the duration or face its full chaotic wrath. Why does the Prince need a cast member's protection?

Names

Fairies have use-names and true-names. To know a fairy's true name is to gain power over it. For use-names, most fairies have things that are descriptive of their physical characteristics, their habits, or the areas where they live. Royal fairies have titles that flatter their power or beauty or status. Wise humans call fairies by respectful titles or collective words, such as "Grandfather" or "Good Lady", "Fair folk" or "Kindly ones". It's good to remember one's own true name.

Red	Jack-o-the-Green	Pottery
Nosey	Two-hats	Bale
Round-bottom	Stumpy	Lady of Grace
Yellowhead	Peep	His Excellence
Hamfist	Silent Tom	She of the Silver Sword
Twitch-ear	Hobbin	Lord of the Diamond Hall
Dainty-one	Sweetfern	Duke of the Elderberry Vine
Pocked	Lilyrose	Radiant Maiden of the Morning
Lithe	Cowslip	Countess of Swans
Crookshanks	Oak-father	Starlight Lord
Whistler	Ferrier	Her Serene Majesty
Old Groaner	Bluebell	The Gray Knight.
Three-finger Jenny	Wetfoot	
Cups	Ash	

True names are often complex and unique arrangements of syllables. Rumplestiltskin is the most famous example. Play around with syllables until you find one that pleases you.

First Contact

— Sarah Newton

Nutshell

A disparate group deals with the epoch-making fallout when a United Nations team makes apparent contact with an extraterrestrial intelligence.

Characters

You play key members of the previously classified United Nations First Contact Team, an international group of scientists, linguists, specialists, and economic, political, and cultural advisers to be convened in the unlikely event of first contact being made with an extraterrestrial intelligence. A department within UNOOSA—the United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs—based in Vienna, it's regarded as something of a joke: a haven for eccentrics, geeks, obsessives, and a dead-end posting for politicians, business people, and military advisors.

Roles the players may choose for their characters include:

Contact Team Specialists

These individuals have full-time jobs and responsibilities elsewhere, but can be called up

by UNOOSA if required. They're the scientists and specialists referred to in the UN Post-Detection Protocols as vital for advising the UN decision makers.

- xenobiologists
- linguists
- history specialists
- cultural anthropologists
- psychologists
- physicists
- chemists
- planetary scientists

Government Specialists

Powerful nations delegate their own people to the contact team to ensure that their own interests are served, no matter what the Protocols (see below) say:

- diplomats
- military analysts
- economists
- strategists
- religious leaders
- political analysts



Other Foreign & International Contact Agencies

UNOOSA aren't the only game in town—other nations maintain their own agencies, many of whom want to run the show their own way, and who will use diplomatic pressure to interfere with UNOOSA activities.

- UFO hunters: **what major security breach did a UFO hunter recently commit, jeopardizing the whole contact effort?**
- abductee researchers: **which contact team member has a friend who's an abductee? Is it public knowledge? Why doesn't the abductee recognize the team member?**
- IAA (International Academy of Astronautics)
- SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence), including METI (Messaging to ETI) and CETI (Communication with ETI)

The Corporacy

The Ulysses mission was funded using public and private money. Lots of vested interests want their piece of the pie—and also to know what's happened to the investment they've made so far.

- the military-industrial complex
- big pharma
- GM crop companies: **What did they send to Mars to grow? Who are they blaming, and what are they doing about it?**
- the media: newspaper tycoons, paparazzi, and up-and-coming investigative journalists looking for the real story

The Returnees

Players may also choose to play returnees—astronauts from the failed Ulysses mission. They currently have no conscious recollection of what has happened to them, and no sign of the muscular deterioration you'd expect after an extended Mars mission.

Setting

The Ulysses mission, mounted by an international consortium of public and private concerns, was supposed to have been a brave new step into the exploitation of the Solar System. However, shortly after it landed on Meridiani Planum ("the Plains of Meridiani")

on Mars, it went mysteriously quiet, and everyone assumed the expedition had been lost, with all hands.

Episode one opens six months after contact was lost with the Martian surface. As the framing of the first scene establishes, a radio signal has just been picked up from the Ares return craft. All but one of the astronauts on it, apparently safe and heading home! It's normally a four-month voyage from Mars—how far away are they now?

The main cast urgently convenes at the JFK Space Center in Florida.

No one knows what happened on Mars—but media speculation runs wild, with the full glare of its spotlight on the Returnees. The UN wants to impose a blackout.

Has humankind been contacted by an extraterrestrial intelligence?

The news sends shockwaves through various institutions connected to the main cast:

- The UNOOSA Headquarters in Vienna: **what cloud hangs over its Director? Why do its Committee Services and Research Section (CSRS) and Space Applications Section (SAS) hate one another?**
- The Emergency Operations Room in the JFK Center: **what grudge does the head of the EOR Committee bear against which member of the First Contact Team?**
- The Ares Expeditionary Craft: **what shortcoming does the craft have, and as a result of which country's contribution? Who's responsible?**
- The Harmonia landing module: **whose diplomatic initiative did its design embody? And why?**
- The Retreat: **who owns the building the First Contact Team start to use for ad hoc meetings when things get tense? What kind of building is it? Who alerts the press?**

Ares and Harmonia

The Ulysses mission used an expeditionary vessel known as Ares for its four-month mission to Mars, and a landing craft known as Harmonia to establish its base camp on Meridiani Planum. The returnees are aboard

the Ares, and there is no sign of the Harmonia; nor do any of the returnees know what happened to it. Orbiting satellites show no sign of it on the Martian surface.

The Protocols

The UN's Post-Detection Policy, short-handed as "the Protocols", stipulates actions to be taken upon a confirmed signal from an extraterrestrial intelligence. Though lacking the force of international law, the UN and participating states have agreed to abide by them.

- International consultations should be conducted to decide whether to send a communication back.
- Consultations should be conducted within the UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space, in the UN Office in Vienna.
- Consultations should be open to all interested states.
- The UN General Assembly should decide to send back a communication based on recommendations from the above committee, and from other organizations.
- Any message should be sent on behalf of all humankind.
- The content of the message should be made available to the public before transmission.
- No communication should be sent by any state until appropriate international consultations have taken place.
- In all these questions, the UN, states, and participating organizations should draw on the expertise of scientists and others with relevant knowledge.

Themes

- **Whose Future Is It?**
- **Democracy vs. Authority**
- **Managed vs. Uncontrolled Evolution**
- **One vs. Many:** the IAA SETI Declaration of Principles suggests that humankind should act together to define what communication they'll make to ETI. Is that practical?
- **Religion vs. Science**
- **Unanswered Questions:** what happened to the returnees? Where is the missing astronaut?

- **Memory Lockdown:** none of the Returnees seem to have any memory of what happened. Are they telling the truth?
- **Changed by the Unknown:** how do the events of the apparent contact change relationships between the Returnees and their loved ones?
- **Who's There?** is there an extraterrestrial intelligence? Or is it a psychosis? A virus? A parasite? Or a genuine intelligence—in which case, what is its nature?

Tightening the Screws

- An act of war between nations: maybe one nation feels it is being kept out of "the big secret"—a troublemaker or rogue nation.
- A team member discovers that big pharma project funders are covering up a secret concerning the mission.
- A reporter sniffs out a character's concealed knowledge or dark secret.
- The Returnees arrive in orbit and are ready to make touchdown on Earth.
- Someone in the contact team is killed.
- Someone in the contact team who was killed now reappears. Unless it's something else in the form of the lost team member.
- The missing astronaut is seen somewhere on Earth. Maybe a police force has him in custody.
- Something is wrong with a world leader. Maybe she's having blackouts, maybe her partner thinks she's not who she seems.
- As above, but someone on the contact team.
- A rogue nation makes an impossible technological breakthrough, and the balance of power is changed. Maybe it's a power tech or propulsion technology.
- There's an explosion at a military base.
- A mysterious dome appears somewhere on earth, surrounding a key facility or installation. Completely featureless and reflective, it resists all attempts to penetrate it.
- There are increasing reports and rumors of "replacements" throughout the world—people who don't seem to be who they were. People start to panic and become paranoid. Governments treat it as a security issue.

- The “replacements” begin to speak in a highly accelerated, condensed form of language. Governments start to panic.

Season One Finale

Events the GM might want to aim for as the Season One Finale:

- The “Dome” vanishes. Everything that was beneath it is gone. In its place is the missing astronaut.
- A satellite reports: the Dome has reappeared on Mars.
- The rogue nation has the technology to quickly mount an expedition to Mars.

Names

Female

Carter Bohn
 Dieter Volk
 Dimitry Vysotsky
 Dong Feng Tan
 Eiichi Ogawa
 Grisha Borodin
 Hu Deng
 Isaac Borgstein
 Jean Yves Duchamps
 John Metcalfe
 Lawrence Bush
 Rasul Bokhari
 Sanjar Khorasani
 Tafari Jakande
 Valerii Mikhailov
 Yuusuke Kin

Male

Abeni Onyejekwe
 Adeline Hamel
 Asako Suzuki
 Cosima Ferrari
 Farah Salehi
 Gloria Metzger
 Julia Nakamura
 Lamiah Tabatabayi
 Lyudmila Konstantinovskaya
 Miho Kawabata
 Natasha Kirilenko
 Sally Woods
 Xia Li
 Xiulan Wang



Clockwork Revolver

— *Kevin Kulp*

Nutshell

Old West gunslingers face steam-powered abominations on the lonesome prairie, driven by the rush for a newly discovered otherworldly resource, the fuel called lucifer.

Characters

You play prominent residents of a small, lonesome town in the Old West:

- gunslinger for hire, possibly a retired soldier, steely-eyed and inexorable
- newly-arrived greenhorn, rude and precise, determined to buy anything he can't steal
- renegade from the law, either a charming local outlaw or a remorseless killer
- local marshal, working against the odds to hold together the town she loves
- cowboy or cowgirl, back from the range with a secret debt to settle
- native scout, determined to drive off the eastern interlopers once and for all
- earnest young preacher, convinced that lucifer is a tool of the Devil
- crazy old prospector hunting for gold or lucifer, speaking authentic frontier gibberish through his bushy beard
- bounty hunter, come to arrest mad scientists and claim the rewards on their heads

- sharp-eyed huckster, more than happy to help strangers gamble away their earnings
- inspired tinkerer, assembling clockwork wonders and trying not to succumb to the inspiration rattling around inside him
- rancher determined to protect her herds and grazing lands from lucifer miners
- paranoid madman who has succumbed to the inventing sickness, embracing his paranoia by constructing deadly steam-powered automatons

Setting

There's an imaginary line where everything changes. That's the 95th meridian west, the line of longitude that slashes along the eastern edge of the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. That's where the civilized East ends and the wild and untamed Frontier begins. In an episode of "Clockwork Revolver," it's also where the laws of nature and physics go cockeyed.

Not all at once. Not right away. But travel west through Kansas and you'll find that machines work better, even when they shouldn't work at all. Gears spin more freely, steam gives more power, and every now and then a dying cinder of coal gains new life and transforms into a lucifer. Lucifers are what power the clockwork inventions of the Old West; a nugget the size of a

thimble could run a locomotive for days. Give a tinkerer one small lucifer and a box full of gears, and with some trial and error she can invent a steam-powered weapon that flat-out defies the laws of nature.

Most folks, though, are just trying to get along with everyday life: herding cattle, raising families, keeping their town safe from outlaws, and not having their ranch house trampled by out-of-control automatons.

That's the other thing about the Clockwork Territories. Brilliant and improbable inventions bubble up freely in the minds of an inspired few, but experimenting with lucifers tends to drive a man insane. They say there are secret Pinkertons who take away the craziest of the inventors before they can do any harm, but everyone knows that most just flee into the desert or the prairie. There they build massive engines of destruction to turn on their imagined foes. No one likes to see a tinkerer slide into paranoid insanity, because death and destruction inevitably follow.

The series opens in the small and lonely town of San Perdido, New Mexico, at the heart of the steam-powered West. The year is late in the 1860s. San Perdido, riven by lawlessness and drought, sits near massive coal deposits—that is, a huge potential source of lucifer—at the heart of the Clockwork Territories. As the deposit starts to transform into lucifer, a massive influx of outsiders will surely swarm in.

Industrialists want to claim the land and pollute the skies, sparring with natives who want the industrialists gone for good. Lucifer-inspired tinkering has made the area more livable, with better water-pumping and more efficient farms. If only everyone used technology for the common good: clockwork horrors drill into bank vaults, and outlaws in steam-powered armor rob the local stagecoach. Even the kindest, gentlest inventors know that tinkering, for reasons unknown, tends to drive people insane. Maybe the mad scientists living in the wilderness outside of town understand why this happens, but they sure aren't explaining why.

Where does lucifer really come from? Do we want to decide now, or discover the answer through play?

One popular theory has it that millennia ago

the native tribes entombed magical beings of great power in the caverns beneath the earth. Their leaking dreams inspire tinkerers, and wisps of the entities' power kindle lucifer out of coal. In this scenario, madmen slowly absorb the insane essence that creates lucifers.

True or not, the tale prompts secret Pinkerton teams to kidnap mad scientists and kill them in coal mines, all for the hope of increasing the lucifer harvest.

If that explanation is wrong, does the answer lie with aliens? Native American spirits? The blessing of the Almighty?

Why do machines work better here?

All clockwork inventions flout the known principles of science. Tinkerers somehow exploit flaws in the nature of reality itself in order to get them to function. They can never be duplicated, let alone mass produced: every device remains a unique one-off. Even more strangely, they only function in the interior regions of the US Southwest and Mexico, inevitably breaking down when taken nearer to a coast.

Tone

Your series can be gritty, like "Deadwood" or over-the-top, like "Wild, Wild West." Gritty mode gives you the post-Sergio Leone movie western, in all of its grime and moral ambiguity. Here, foes include outlaws, drought, greedy men in power, and weak men who won't face their fear. The clockwork inventions amplify danger, and the town of San Perdido rewards the stubborn and the brave. People accept lucifer-powered inventions, but they seldom trust them or take them for granted. Their weirdness takes a background role in your series, adding a touch of the fantastical to otherwise realistic character drama.

Over-the-top series focus on the clockwork nature of the world. Beneath the normal trappings of an Old West town, San Perdido becomes infused with weirdness. Clockwork devices are common enough that they seldom draw comment unless they're particularly unusual or inspired. Crippled cowboys replace lost limbs with clockwork counterparts. Outlaws ride half-alive horses kept moving only with steam and gears. Gadgets powered by a tiny piece of whistling lucifer may sweep up the

jailhouse floor by themselves. And don't even ask what's happened to the player piano that's moving around the saloon on its own. The town is a character in itself, a living and vibrant place that seems to attract trouble.

Idealized Equality

In the real 1860s, equal opportunity for women and minorities was largely non-existent. One of the nice things about roleplaying games is that we can create a better world. By default, "Clockwork Revolver" occurs in a setting where the manner in which men and woman of all races are treated is based on their actions and quality, not on their gender or appearance.

If the entire group prefers it, you might instead accurately portray historical prejudices, exploring them as a major theme. This choice suits the gritty mode better than over-the-top.

Themes

- **Dangerous Wonders:** When steam-powered abominations battle outside town, locals pack a picnic lunch and go observe. What happens when they become targets?
- **Progress:** When eastern industrialists mine lucifer to create more mad geniuses, is the benefit of progress worth the cost?
- **Place:** How important a character is the town itself? Has it made you a different person, since you settled here?
- **Drought:** Water is scarce, and people are desperate. What might you do to survive?
- **Ambition:** What is a man willing to do to get ahead? What are you willing to do to stop him?
- **Inspiration:** Tinkerers come to the Clockwork Territories in search of genius and inspiration. Is sanity worth the power to create?
- **Power:** Who has power over you, and who do you hold power over?
- **Justice:** When the law is broken, do you do what's right or what's required?
- **A Big Day for the Coffin Maker:** When

someone important is slain in a gunfight, how does the town change?

- **Uneasy Rests the Badge:** The community needs men of violence to protect itself. But when the gunslinger has done his job, he's expected to ride off into the sunset. Is there a second act after a man kills for justice?
- **Closing Pandora's Box:** The group learns that there might be a way to send all the lucifer back where it came from. Do they erase all of the benefits of the new ways, along with the obvious drawbacks?
- **Print the Legend:** A famous writer of penny dreadfuls comes to town, looking for new material. Do you want to be made famous in fictionalized form? Or is that a whole new kind of trouble?
- **Cycle of Revenge:** When violence begets violence, can peace be made? Or can the saga only end with every party to the dispute bleeding in the dust?

Tightening the Screws

San Perdido attracts power, and power brings threats.

- Drought (or perhaps a secret dam up-river) is drying up the river. The town, the crops, and the ranchers' herds need that water to survive.
- The worst snow in memory has fallen, and you're all trapped in town and itching with cabin fever.
- Whether illegally or by eminent domain, railroad barons are seizing land. High-speed lucifer-powered locomotives are coming, and a corrupt judge means to make sure no one stands in the way of progress.
- Industrialists try to contract with tinkerers to create technological marvels, spiriting away the clockwork engineers when their sanity starts to fray.
- Mad scientists have become corrupted by lucifer poisoning. Always working alone due to paranoia, they build insane steam-powered abominations that battle each other outside the town. Sometimes the "outside the town" part is forgotten in the urge to crush and destroy.

- Local clockwork tinkers have improved many things in town, including the efficacy of deadly weapons such as revolvers. Life has become cheaper, and weaker folks are thinking about fighting back.
- San Perdido was founded on stolen Native American land, burial grounds and all. The tribes involved wish to correct this injustice.
- Coal mines have sprung up in the mountains outside of town. Exhausted miners dig for the rare chunk of lucifer without concern for safety, health, or caution. The sky is black with coal smoke as workers pick the lucifer out of a furnace-full of coal.
- Money attracts people who want to take it away. Outlaws have come to San Perdido, preying on the rich and anyone who stands in their way.
- A local cattle baron gets killed and the rail barons seize his land. Stop the rail barons, and outlaws with steam-powered Gatling guns come after the riches they think you now possess.
- A recurring tinkerer character can help you, but teeters already on the brink of madness. Do you risk sacrificing his sanity?
- The gunslinger who taught a main character to shoot arrives in town, stooped and worn from too many years on the trail. After he takes a series of suicidal risks, you discover that he's dying of tuberculosis and wants to go down fighting. Do you help him to the glorious final shootout he craves, or look for a lucifer device that might cure his disease?
- A benefactor offers to build a schoolhouse. Then you find out he insists on a training program to recruit tomorrow's generation of mad scientists.

Names

Abigail Laup	Gideon Redfern
Abraham Hubartt	Hans Volmer
Artie Holmer	Henry Chambers
Beryl Cameron	Hillard Farnham
Bula Kroll	Isabella Whitlock
Christian McFadden	Jermiah Kimberly
Clarence Spindler	Jobe Gauldrie
Dorothy Kelley	Kathryn Muir
Elizabeth Homesley	Kitty Burlock
Emmaline Laflen	Lucie Gowin
Enoch Burnap	Maebelle Corroll
Erasmus Blodgett	Myrtle Sussbary
Erla Haggerty	Octavia Kelly
Etta Wisner	Philip Lloyd
Evans Breckenridge	Sebastian Zehr

By This Axe

— *Mac Sample*

Nutshell

The Great Orc Chieftain is dead! All hail the Great Orc Chieftain!

The only surviving heirs to the Last Orc Warlord vie for his throne. Let assassination, demagoguery, thuggery, and violence decide the day!

Characters

You play orcs in the great Horde that has shackled the world. Many of the players will likely wish to be heirs to the Great Orc Chieftain. This is fine: orcs are notoriously promiscuous and virile. The Chieftain may have had heirs that even he didn't know about.

The five great clans of the orcs are the Steppe, Plains, River, Marsh, and Saltwater. Alongside these strive countless lesser clans boasting famed leaders and notable members, plus another host of roving orcs sworn to no clan.

The chief of each great clan is by station a potential heir to the chieftainship.

Do you all play the influential members of a single clan? Or a group of disparate orcs, bound together by past struggle and future ambition?

You might play:

- great clan chieftain
 - lesser clan chieftain
 - clan champion
 - hero of the Orcish Horde
 - advisor to a clan chief
 - hired muscle for a chief
 - elderly adviser
 - widow of the Great Chieftain
 - wily consort
 - lorekeeper
 - lawspeaker
 - treasurer of the horde's hoard
 - enslaved half-orc
 - halfling slave, who, contrary to law, provides wise counsel to a powerful benefactor
- Halfbreeds are only marginally accepted among orcs, as they are inferior in strength and wit, like their non-orc parent. Some clans take in half-orcs if their orc parent was of high enough status.

Setting

The known world once consisted of three great powers:

- the Bronze Empire of the dwarves, in the



Northern Mountains, which echoed with industry and song

- the Gilded Kingdom of the elves, which lay in the central lowlands and the marshes. Their astronomers and philosophers spent what would be lifetimes for other races researching and writing on their predictions.
- the Confederacy of the Halflings, in the forests and valleys in the south below the Great Steppe, where food and beer flowed freely and openly to all comers

This was before the Great Orc Chieftain came. Some say he was born into the nobility of one of the great clans; others say he was from a small clan that has since been forgotten. Still others say he called no clan kin and was an outsider even to orcs. No matter his circumstance, he spoke to all the clans gathered together:

“Why should they have so much, and we have so little? We are orcs, we are stronger, smarter, and better than the lesser races, yet we toil on the Steppe and the edges of the Steppe, just to stave off hunger, while they grow fat off the land and work not for their luxury.”

And so began the Great Horde. It was not easy, and over time many chiefs stepped forward to assume the Chieftain's place and identity. Each brought their own triumphs and strategies, and some suffered crushing defeats, but over time each other civilization fell beneath the endless drive of the orcish horde. Armed only with stone axes and leather armor, they overwhelmed each city-state and empire, crushing them utterly and leaving them clients to the clans. Now, with the passing of this Great Orc Chieftain, there are no more worlds to conquer, but still much to rule. Each sacked city begged for mercy, offering gifts of luxury and food in perpetuity. Some offered services or servants; still more gave titles and claims, claims that individual orcs were pleased to accept for themselves.

The first episode opens at the funeral pyre of the Great Chieftain. As is customary, the laws of all orcs are always read aloud first.

The laws of all orcs are strict, and justice is swiftly dispatched by the Great Orc Chieftain, but as everyone knows the laws of all orcs are not immutable. Deals done in the dark, grain

The Laws of All Orcs

These are the laws of all orcs, immutable and as old as the orcs themselves. While each orc knows the laws by heart, most orcs also know the sayings that accompany the laws, the soft insinuation that perhaps the great clans may not be as virtuous as they seem.

No orc shall deal with a lesser race

(though the Steppe Clan always seems to know how to speak their language)

No orc shall till the soil

(though the Plains Clan always seems to have fresh bread and beer)

No orc shall work metal

(though the captured swords of the River Clan always seem sharper)

No orc shall live within walls

(though the Marsh Clan seems to linger long in the captured kingdoms)

No orc shall kneel before a god or magician

(though the Saltwater Clan seems so very lucky with the necklaces they wear)

grown in hidden valleys, exiled blacksmiths, captured cities, and hidden clerics are all the regular domains of those who would aspire to be the Great Chieftain. And of course they are all practiced by the lesser races that the orcs now rule.

Following the readings of the law, the triumphs of the Great Orc Chieftain over the great kingdoms of the lesser races are recounted.

The great Bronze Empire of the dwarves fell first. Their vast gates and wrought bridges through steep mountains proved to be a weakness and they fell fast to stone axe and flint arrow. All the dwarves were slaughtered to send a message to the weaker races, and their bronze weapons were added to the weapons for all orcs.

Did your ancestors kill all the world's dwarves, or just the ones they encountered that day in the conquered empire?

The gilded palaces of the elves lay in lowlands, and while they lasted long with sorcery, their own prophecy was against them. No matter how many of their own children were laid bare on the altars to the moon, they could no more stop the horde than they could stop the tide. Elves live now in cities far too big for their populations, cities that serve as leisure stops and watering holes for orcs traveling to and fro on the dwarven and elvish roads.

The forest Confederacy of the Halflings was the final power to fall before the horde. The Great Chieftain was old and unable to lead from

the front, so he ordered the forest burnt, and all surviving halflings were taken as prisoners of a war. They are employed as cooks and servants throughout each orcish camp.

Finally, lawspeakers lay bare the process of choosing a new chieftain. Anyone seeking to claim the title must step forward, alone and without guard, at the funeral itself. They must state that they are an heir by birth or by conquest, and that they claim the axe of the Great Chieftain. After a month of mourning for each great battle, the eldest in each of the great clans, and the four eldest orcs from the lesser clans, or who call no clan kin, shall gather and decide who will be the next chieftain among the claimants.

Do we want to devote our entire series to the fight for the chieftainship?

If not, the drama only intensifies when a chieftain is chosen, and the main cast either triumphs or skulks off to scheme toward the next great funeral pyre.

If so, do we want to set the chieftainship decision to take place after a set number of episodes, or leave the timing to the organic momentum of the story?

Whoever becomes the Great Orc Chieftain not only controls the might of the Horde, and declares how the clients shall be managed, he also gains what may be the most intriguing power of all, the ability to alter the laws of all orcs. It is expected this time that each of the great clans will make a claim, as the laws grow thin and tie the hands of the new Orc Empire.

To avoid an opening prefaced by a long text recitation from the GM, distribute the passage material to your players ahead of time. When you start, give them a quick verbal reminder of its contents. Call the ensuing scene as a soft open featuring the ensemble, with the episode theme “The Law of All Orcs.”

Themes

- **Change:** Why are the laws of all orcs what they are? Why do we cling to them? This is perhaps the most important theme and the inspiration for the title. The Great Orc Chieftain rules by his axe and the might of the Great Horde.
- **Empire:** The world is different when you

are the ruler and not the invader. How do you rule? What do you do with an army when there is no other army to oppose it?

- **Intrigue:** The succession process is long and complicated and not without pitfalls.
- **Trust:** The word of an orc is inviolate, except when it isn't.
- **Brutality:** The damage you do unto others always ripples outwards.
- **Tradition:** When is it right? When is it wrong? Why?
- **Loyalty:** Who can you trust, and how far?
- **Civilization:** Can the conquered destroy you from within, by addicting you to the softness and ease that comes with the wealth you extract from them?

Tightening the Screws

Infighting to produce a better rule is the orcish way! Conflict shall abound, within the cast, and against external threats. You did all choose to all play orcs, right?

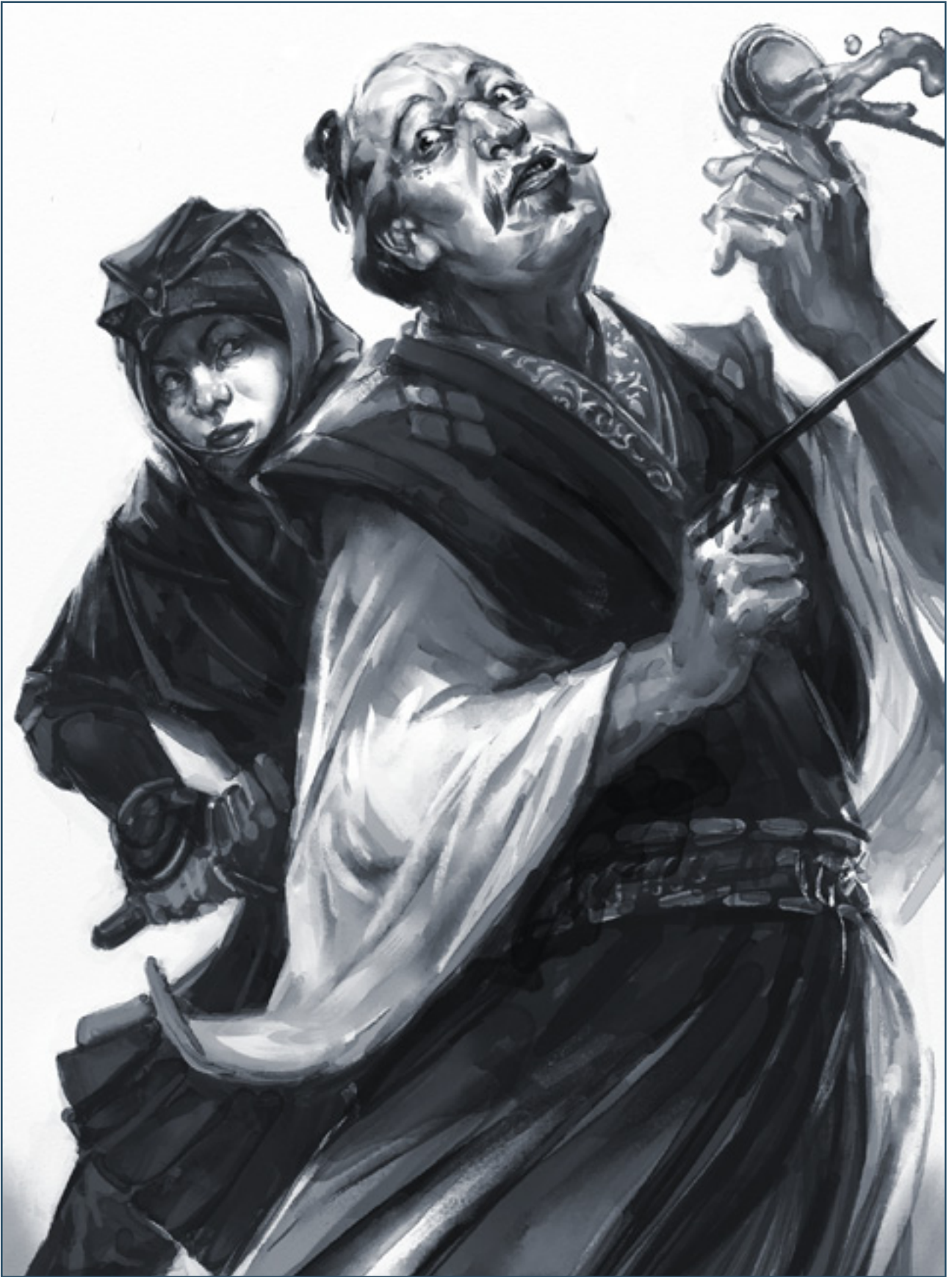
- A clanless orc or a half-breed makes a claim to the throne, with the power to back it up.
- A longtime adversary has gained favor among the clanless orcs.
- The adviser of a rival clan offers you an alliance. If you work with them, you can have the chieftainship this time, and they'll take it the next. On its face, it sounds like sheerest folly. What is its sinister purpose?
- News of a secret weakness tempts you to move against a rival clan. But is it a trap, meant to force your hand?
- It is one thing to sack a village, another to manage it. A town or an entire kingdom has rebelled against your clan's control.
- Famine strikes your clan's holdings.
- A new religion spreads amongst the lesser races. Is their taste for martyrdom the weakness it seems, or a strange new strength?
- An orc clan war does not happen lightly, but skirmishes and familial feuds are commonplace. They often break out when least expected, and can lead to horrible war.
- Your kinsmen are attacked by another clan's assassins.

- The sins of a great clan or a lesser clan are exposed to the elders, but with no Great Chieftain to hand down punishment, their crimes are not recognized.
- Rumors abound of some surviving dwarves forging a gray metal, stronger than bronze and sharp enough to slice straight through the hardest leather. Why, an orc with such a weapon would be unstoppable in single combat!
- A pass is found in the Northern Mountains, and living there are people you've not yet seen. Their skin is tan, their ears are round, they stand almost as tall as you, and they call themselves humans. There appear to be thousands of them, unconquered and unbroken.

Names

Orcs normally carry a monosyllabic or disyllabic name, followed by the name of their clan. A clanless orc or an orc from a lesser clan would often take a clan name based on a deed she accomplished or a physical trait. Almost all orc names incorporate a hard K, G, or T.

Thrak	Farg
Grak	Gorp
Lok	Krug
Thog	Grog
Strok	Karg
Trask	Golt
Kale	Tork
Reya	



Shuriken in Shadows

— Jason Pitre

Nutshell

Ninja families struggle to serve their honorable masters in old Japan's mid-16th century Warring States period.

Setting

The islands of Japan were once a place of strength and prosperity. Each of the daimyo-lords offered fealty to the mighty shogun. The shogun guided his subordinates, arbitrated disputes, and directed the armies to repel foreign invaders. It was a golden age that could not last.

Civil war sparked over the question of who would succeed Ashikaga Yoshimasa as shogun. The two most powerful noble clans backed opposing candidates, and the strife destroyed the capital city. The empire shattered into dozens of minor warring states, each dominated by their own clan. The Sengoku period had begun.

The noble daimyo and ambitious warlords fought for political, economic, or military dominance over their brethren. Each ruled and defended their own territories and sought to improve their own fortunes. They directed armies of noble samurai, mercenary ronin, and peasant conscripts. When direct force was not enough, the daimyo called for the assistance of the shinobi families.

Shinobi, more commonly known as ninja, were created to perform deeds beneath the honor of their noble patrons. A Daimyo contracts with the head of a shinobi family to carry out various covert missions.

You are spies, scouts, and infiltrators. You steal priceless treasures, assassinate powerful officials,

and sabotage infrastructure, all in service of your noble patrons. As artificers, poisoners, and information brokers of the highest caliber, your services are always in high demand.

You are tightly bound to your family: the mercenary group that raised you and trained you in the covert arts. You can trust only it to care for you. Only it understands the stresses of your life. Outsiders can never be more than disposable tools. To form friendships or fall in love with them is unthinkable. Support your brothers and sisters and together you will be able to complete any mission.

Status

There are four castes of respectable society: the samurai, peasants, artisans, and merchants. Below all of them are the unwanted and disregarded outcasts.

The **samurai** caste holds the highest status, due in large part to its martial virtue and military prowess. Only the samurai are permitted to carry swords, and to use them to cut down disrespectful inferiors. They alone rule territories and can rise to the rank of daimyo. In exchange for their power, they must uphold a strict code of honor known as bushido, or face a loss of status. Obligated to risk their lives to defend their people, they lead military activities and protect their subjects from external threats.

Below the samurai are the noble **peasants**. Farmers and fishers feed the nation, sustaining the samurai. The peasants contribute the most to society, and receive some measure of respect because of that.

Below the farmers and fishers are the **artisans**, who craft all manner of useful things. Artists and smiths alike produce items both useful and beautiful. An artisan forges the noble's katana and sews his silk robes. While the artisan's skills are recognized, these luxury goods still hold less importance than your daily rice.

The **merchants** are even lower in status, seen as producing nothing of value. Traveling tradesmen and sedentary shopkeepers are mere parasites, profiting off the labor of the farmers and artisans. They are isolated from, and forbidden to mix with, the higher classes, except during the course of business.

Below them all are those unwelcome in polite society. This category includes the Ainu ethnic minority, ruthlessly persecuted by the mainstream society. Equally unwelcome are those with blood on their hands: butchers, executioners, and convicted criminals. Artists, performers, prostitutes, and courtesans also fall into the realm of the unrespectable.

The ninja exist outside of this structure. As masters of disguise with deadly reputations, you may freely interact with any caste of society. To insult a recognized shinobi brings bad luck and a drastically reduced lifespan.

You can conceive of no direr fate than expulsion from your clan. Should this happen, you would immediately plummet from this privileged spot outside the social hierarchy to its most despised depths. Those who once feared you would now be free to take their vengeance, without repercussion.

Customs

Obligation unites feudal Japan. Samurai maintain their status by serving their respective daimyo, while honorably supporting their communities. The lower castes are asked in turn to feed, clothe, and serve the samurai.

Many debts can never be fully repaid. Children owe a permanent debt to the parents who brought them into the world and raised them. In the same way, the lower castes must put the needs of their noble lords above their own desires. Unwavering loyalty and dutiful service to society is only to be expected.

The greatest fear is to be faced with multiple conflicting obligations. What do you do when

your lord orders you to commit a horrid atrocity? Will you accept a public humiliation that will punish your children for the greater good? Will you commit the ritual suicide of seppuku, rather than face dishonor?

Shinto, the way of the gods, is the indigenous faith of the islands. It honors the kami, the ever-present spirits who reside in everything. Priests tend to shrines and craft protective amulets for the faithful. By performing their daily purification rituals, followers maintain peace of mind and good fortune. Buddhist monks complement the work of the Shinto priests, performing funeral rites and tending to the sick.

The culture of feudal Japan is both discriminatory and sexist. Women are taught to be obedient daughters, dutiful wives, and wise mothers. Stories of the great female samurai are suppressed, and the great deeds of men lauded. Only the female ninja enjoy the social status and remarkable skills necessary to ignore this prejudice. Shinobi women can go where they wish, speak to anyone, and walk the streets in relative safety.

Differences of status can never be ignored. When two individuals meet or part, each of them bows to show respect for the other. Those of low status are obliged to bow deeply for those of higher rank. Worse still, when faced with an individual of particularly high station, some might be obliged to fall down on their knees and bow so deeply their forehead touches the ground. Conversely, those of high status offer their inferiors only the shallowest of bows.

In matters of decorum, you follow samurai custom. No matter how passionate your feelings, you express them in stillness, your body language tightly controlled. Your household runs on strictly hierarchical lines. The male head of the household decides all. His wife commands the women. To show respect for family seniors is an utmost obligation. You may make your feelings known on any issue, but in the end must accede to their wishes.

The Family

Every character is united by their common ninja family. Each has its own exceptional strengths.

Which two strengths characterize your family?

Are you:

- wealthy and prosperous?
- well-connected within the noble clans?
- admired by the peasantry?
- well equipped with equipment and devices?
- well stocked with strange herbs, soothing poultices, and vicious poisons?
- at peace with the neighboring shinobi families?
- blessed with a secure and hidden base of operations?
- in possession of a steady supply of secrets and blackmail material?

Characters

Each of the players portrays one of the shinobi members of a united family. Each character fills a different role, has a unique physical description, and is bound to the family for a specific reason. The latter is probably also your Desire; if not, it clearly arises from it.

Role

- spy (kanchō)
- scout (teisatsu)
- ambusher (kishu)
- agitator (konran)
- arsonist (tōsōmeiro)
- assassin (koroshi-ya)
- mystic (kannushi)
- captain (chunin)

Look

- a short man, stout and strong
- a short woman, delicate and light on her feet
- a tall woman, with a commanding gaze
- a heavysset man, with muscle under the fat
- a thin man, with wiry muscles and long hair
- a young woman, barely more than a child
- an old man, straining under a great burden
- an androgynous figure of stunning beauty
- (or choose your own)

What binds you to the family?

- pure greed and self-interest
- love and care for another
- fear and debts
- vengeance upon a noble lord
- hatred of the nobility

- spiritual commitment
- pride and glory
- birthright and lineage

Themes

- **Family:** Can you stay united despite dissent and betrayal?
- **Valor:** How far will you go to fulfill a contract?
- **Sincerity:** Who can you trust to tell the truth?
- **Faith:** How can you respect yourself after your foul crimes?
- **Virtue:** What will you sacrifice for your family?
- **Ingenuity:** Do you have the cunning to do the impossible without loss of life?
- **Honor among Thieves:** What is the code of honor that keeps you sane?
- **Freedom:** Can you find freedom from the control of your family?

Tightening the Screws**The Nine Perils**

- A crippling debt comes due, far beyond your current means to pay.
- A noble clan blacklists and defames you.
- Bandits slaughter a peasant village, framing you for the crime.
- A mission requires very specialized equipment that you do not possess.
- A friendly daimyo is poisoned, and you need to find a cure.
- A neighboring shinobi clan slays your jonin (leader), sending your family into disarray.
- A band of soldiers assaults one of your strongholds, forcing your family into the wilderness.
- Unknown agents with cruel demands blackmail you.
- Everything is on fire, and your family is left standing in the ashes.

The Four Foes

- The warlord, daimyo of the Kōga Clan, has captured gaijin (western) artificers and forced them to serve him. Now equipped with rifles, he will utterly dominate the lands and purge anyone that could threaten him.

- An honorable man seeks to bring a lasting peace to the islands under a new emperor. Such a peace would likely signal an end to the shinobi.
- A wise Shinto priestess has descended from the mountains and begun some disturbing new religious rituals among the peasantry. Worse still, the new practices are spreading ...
- The Shuriken, once a member of your family, betrayed you and brutally murdered the man who raised you. She has seized control of her own shinobi family.
- Ambush and kidnap the merchants on the road to X. **Complication:** One merchant caravan has hired ronin for protection.
- Start a peasant revolt in the village of X to distract the daimyo. **Complication:** A dozen Buddhist monks are preaching peace.
- Burn down the port of X City. **Complication:** Sudden peasant riots in the streets.
- Assassinate a daimyo. **Complication:** He is on campaign and surrounded by his army.
- Protect a Shinto priest while he performs a mystic purification ritual over the Forbidden Mountain. **Complication:** A hive of cannibal cultists in the caves of the Forbidden Mountain.
- Gather twenty ronin to serve your client in an upcoming war. **Complication:** Someone is killing ronin in advance of the war.

Missions

- Infiltrate the city of X and determine where the daimyo will be sending his troops. **Complication:** A dozen watchful samurai, who have encountered you on a previous job, patrol the city.
- Explore the mountain passes in advance of your client's army. **Complication:** A blizzard.

Names

Noble Clan Names

Female Given Names

Male Given Name

Azai	Asami	Akimitsu
Hōjō	Kō	Daisuke
Imagawa	Hisako	Genjiro
Katō	Kasumi	Hakaru
Maeda	Keiko	Yoshimoto
Miyoshi	Mieko	Ichiro
Mōri	Matsu	Isami
Ōtomo	Mayako	Jiro
Saitō	Natsumi	Kanesuke
Shimazu	Noriko	Mitsugi
Takeda	Rumi	Nariyuki
Tokugawa	Reika	Raizo
	Satomi	Tadashi
	Toshiko	Tetsuo
	Yumi	Yasuki

Teatime for Elephants

— Wolfgang Baur

Nutshell

Undertake a genteel bit of mischief in Colonial India during the Raj, as provincial potentates face tigers, Sepoy rebellions, and dire breaches of etiquette. White linen meets Kipling-style bravado—should you shoot that blasted rampaging elephant before or after tea is served?

Characters

It ain't easy being a colonial imperialist bastard. Each character in "Teatime for Elephants" seeks something in one or both worlds of the colonial period. The wealthy and the poor alike can make a fortune here. They can be tested in the fires of rebellion and find love, or at least a wealthy match. Above all, they can prove their worth to older brothers, harsh schoolteachers, and the madams of Mayfair.

The closed circles of the imposed ruling class reverberate with raw emotion, raw power, and high stakes. Under the genteel crust of tea and cucumber sandwiches, its men and women discover a hothouse of emotion, debauchery, corruption, betrayal, and sexual tensions. British men outnumber eligible British women by a considerable degree. Women travel to India with the explicit aim of marrying a wealthy husband. Though derisively called the "Fishing Fleet," British authorities encourage their arrival and stabilizing influence.

As British members of the colonial ruling class in Victorian India, you possess an excess of either political clout or wealth—but not necessarily a commensurate ration of good sense.

Roles you might play include:

- officer of the British Army in India
- officer's long-suffering valet
- wealthy lady of a tea plantation
- chartered accountant of the recently-abolished East India Company
- matron aunt
- sea captain without a ship
- lady's maid-of-all-gossip
- bastard son of the Viceroy or Governor
- young debutante, freshly arrived with the "Fishing Fleet"
- carpetbagger, fresh off the boat from London
- gambler and wastrel escaping creditors
- woman "gone native" with a scandalous Indian husband
- railway engineer with a plan
- mystic seeker for universal Truth
- big-game hunter
- missionary, a parson of the Church of England, or an abbess of a Catholic order
- Indian prince or princess of a Princely State (Indian, but owing fealty to Queen Victoria)
- Railway baroness visiting the rail lines she has inherited
- grandee of the government in Calcutta

Setting

Being one of 125,000 British citizens in a nation of 140 million natives of India means being always set apart, always set above, and always in fear of a great rebellion or shift in power



between the rulers and the ruled. At best, you are a bit of decadent imperialist foam floating atop the vast sea of humanity that is the Hindoo nation, with its several parts of the Muslim varieties.

While British influence started much earlier, the period of the Raj was born in rebellion of 1857; until then, the British East India Company was responsible for the direct administration of India as a colony under company control. After the rebellion, the British Government took direct control and installed an administration. The East India Company was abolished, though many of its wealthy former members still retained great influence over trade. They managed just fine on their own or in the colonial administration, from shipping to railways.

What resentment might a character harbor over the nationalization of the Company?

The Empire contains pockets of land called Princely States, with taxes and foreign policy dictated from Calcutta, still nominally independent and with their own Indian maharajahs and princes. The British may rule India, but these areas are “more Indian” than the British-administered lands, and they include famous districts such as Kashmir, Hyderabad, Madras, and the Kingdoms of Mysore and Travancore.

While the British rule in name or behind the scenes, they cannot settle down in India with local royals, for inter-racial marriage, even with a royal prince or princess of Indian ancestry, is forbidden by the Viceroy.

Regardless of who sits in the local palace, entire cities and peoples remain shackled to the plow, and picking the tea England demands. Their distant labors sustain the cream of English society as it disports in its bawdy houses and pounds the tables of Parliament. The Viceroy exercises his authority from his Calcutta offices, but the army and navy answer directly to London, just as he does.

The ruling class has servants to command, and is responsible for the administration and development of India. Failure to extract sufficient profits from the Empire is a sign of failure as a British subject; failure to feed the poor and starving when the monsoon fails is sure to generate bread riots. Rebellion can take many forms.

The British regard the customs and religion of the native population with a paradoxical mix of paternalistic disdain and romantic fascination. The worship of the many gods and goddesses results in great festivals and times of religious fervor. So do the yearly Muslim rites of Ramadan and the Hajj to Mecca, when entire populations crowd the Indian Railway and the ferries to Arabia. Thuggee cults, the thousand gurus and wise men of Ganesha, Vishnu, Shiva, and Kali all inform the daily lives of millions.

What strange cult has fascinated the young gentleman with its opiates and daring dancers?

India's caste system provides possible drama: some are born into wealth and status, others are untouchables. The British stand somewhat outside the system and might be approached by those seeking favor.

The life of the poor in the great cities can easily be contrasted with the rather different life of the British any time the characters are invited to a tiger hunt near a tea plantation in Assam or Kerala, or enjoying the beaches and touring the Buddhist temples and textile factories of Ceylon. The British often spend the hottest season of the year in the foothills of the Himalayas or in one of the smaller mountain ranges of southern India.

Themes

- **Balance of Power** between distant lands and different classes
- **Beholden to the Ruled:** How do the characters react to being so few in number, and so dependent on the India natives?
- The **rights of the poor**
- **Rebellion and authority**
- **White Mischief:** proper decorum vs. colonial excess
- **Star-crossed lovers**
- The **responsibilities and corruption** of wealth and privilege
- **Charity vs. True Mercy.** How does a kindhearted character react to the desperate pleas of a leper, a blind woman, or the beggars thronging the cities?

In general, the conflicts will be sharper if you make it clear that the British consider

themselves the natural rulers of India, but this may make some players uncomfortable. The best direction possible, though, is for the players to take on the colonialist roles to the extent that they are comfortable with them. If someone is willing to be the John Bull imperialist defending the colonial legacy in India “for their own good”, other players may quickly find themselves taking sides for and against that stand: presto, political drama with historical bite.

Tightening the Screws

The tightening of screws comes both from above and below, with distant interference from London pushing against local rebellion.

On the social front, the power of gossip in a small community can ruin a woman’s reputation, or tar a man with such hideous scandal that he must retire from the field.

These conflicts might be brought into play by such recurring characters as:

- **Sir Richard Holstone-Twickham, a Grandee of the Indian Government**, continually insists, often via telegram, on sudden excursions to restive provinces, the arrangement of elaborate diplomatic events, or the undertaking of various hazardous embassies to local potentates. He might even ask the characters to dispatch a rebellious princeling (and former friend).
- **Millicent Worthington, the Grand Dame of Madras**: A wealthy spinster aunt who insists at all times on decorum, society balls, proper teatime, strictly keeping servants in hand, and absolutely no mingling or going native.
- **Rajiv Ganges, the Firebrand of New Delhi**: an Indian nationalist and a firebrand for independence, who is the son of a Raja of a Princely State, and cannot simply be murdered. He makes demands. He insists that the Voice of the People be heard. He refuses to be oppressed, and organizes marches, boycotts, and demonstrations against colonial oppressors, wherever they go. This makes discretion difficult.
- **Abigail or Leslie Adam Clydewell, the**

Jilted Lover: A person of consequence in India has a mad fixation on one of the characters, as the result of a failed romance. He or she frequently makes things difficult for the characters by accusing them of being spies for the French, or allies of the Firebrand, or secret converts to Hindoo customs, or the like.

- **Nigel Kerry Stoke, the Corrupt Banker**: A member of the Bank of India offers the characters a grand opportunity to profit, if only they will convince a friend in government to allow Indian children to work longer hours at the loom. Surely the character will help an old school chum?
- **Mohini Padmavata, the Princess of Jammu and Kashmir**: A bewitchingly beautiful daughter of the Prince of Jammu and Kashmir visits for tea, and flirts with the men. Her father is a crucial ally against rebels making trouble in Kashmir’s beautiful highlands.
- **Gawain Sterling-Yearsley, the School Chum Murderer**: “I may have been a little hasty,” says the best friend of a character’s school days. “But the little blighter had it coming.” If the characters dig at this, they learn the murder was meant to cover up a greater scandal: Gawain and the victim were rumored to be homosexual lovers. Will the characters turn in the murderer of an overly-friendly Indian clerk?

Further conflicts:

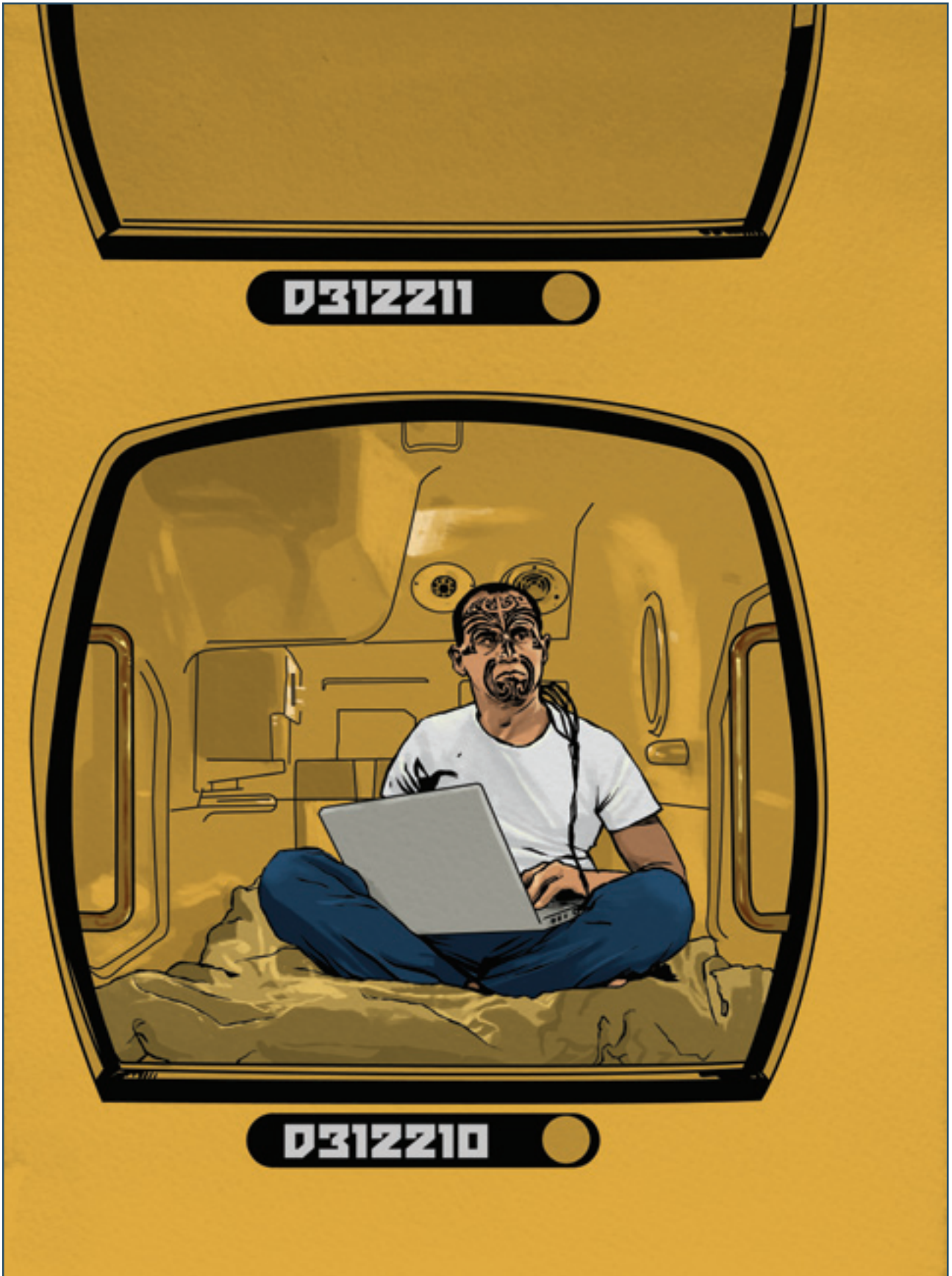
- A Kali cult demands a blood sacrifice in exchange for a railway right of way.
- Tongues wag as a Maharajah insists on entertaining white women at the ball.
- A high-status character gets the news that he has been demoted—or recalled to London to explain himself.
- The monsoons fail and starvation rules.
- A tiger hunt is declared. Who shows courage? Who seeks to evade a trudge through the jungle?

Names

British names of the 19th and early 20th century are easy to overdo, or they may easily match common names that are still in use in English-speaking countries today (Mary, Michael, Luke, and Elizabeth). Here are a few of the more distinctive-sounding appellations one might choose. Many more and especially family names can be found online at BurkesPeerage.com.

Male First Names	Female First Names	Titles
Albert	Ada	Baroness of Stilton
Barnabas	Agnes	Baroness of Addington
Calvin	Beatrice	Lady Carlyle
Charles	Charity	Lady Toverset
Edmund	Charlotte	Marquess De Greves
Edwin	Constance	Earl of Crispinham
Eoin	Edna	Earl of Westshire
John Wesley	Edwina	Lord of Pemberton
Mordecai	Georgia	Lord MacCreary
Nathaniel	Helene	Lord-Marshall of Raleigh
Oscar	Judith	
Patrick	Lenora	
Percival	Maribelle	
Roderick	Martha	
Rudolph	Mildred	
Theodore	Permelia	
Thomas	Phoebe	
Walter	Rachel	
Wilfred	Rebecca	
Zebulon	Rowena	
	Theodosia	
	Vivian	

Indian Male First Names	Indian Female First Names	Indian Surnames
Ajit	Amrita	Banerjee
Bharata	Deepali	Chatterjee
Chiranjeevi	Kashi	Das
Dipaka	Kumari	Dey
Govind	Lilawati	Dutta
Inderpal	Madhur	Gupta
Jitendra	Padma	Khan
Kumar	Rashmi	Malik
Lakshmana	Saranyu	Mehta
Madhukar	Sumati	Mistry
Mandip		Mohan
		Patel
		Pawar
		Sen
		Sharma
		Singh



Dreamspace

— Keith Baker

Nutshell

Lost in the universal unconscious, the crew of the dreamship Endymion searches for reality.

Characters

The vessel Endymion crosses dreams in search of profit. You play ship crew members and passengers who chose an unfortunate time to book passage. Roles the players might adopt include:

- dissolute captain, trying to pull himself together to save his crew. **The captain was a drunk before the accident . . . what drives him to drink?**
- dashing first officer, who's looking for romance in every new dream. **Which of the other cast members has the first officer slept with?**
- lonely navigator, in love with the sleeping pilot. **The navigator knew the pilot when they were both children. What happened between them?**
- grimly logical engineer, who's just trying to hold things together. **The engineer has the skills to get a job anywhere. He hates the chaos of dreams, but he's on a dreamship.**

Why did he sign on with Endymion?

- ambitious scientist, determined to make a name for herself. **Did the scientist intentionally sabotage the ship so she could study the untamed Dreamspace? Who's her professional rival?**
- greedy merchant, who's sure there's a way to turn a profit off this. **What contraband goods does the merchant have hidden in his luggage?**
- eerie alien ambassador, a being of many secrets. **What was the ambassador's mission? Why isn't she traveling on a more reputable ship? What are her peoples' dreams like?**
- brash mercenary, who's seen everything ... or so he thought. **Why does the mercenary carry a picture of a little girl?**
- sinister prisoner, who possesses skills the crew needs. **What was the prisoner's crime? Is he a deadly murderer, or a psychic who can steal people's thoughts?**

The pilot, who is asleep and cannot awaken without destroying the ship and everyone in it, is always a recurring character.

Setting

“Dreamspace” takes place in a universe where dreams grant the key to interstellar commerce. The characters populate the battered dreamship Endymion, which a hardscrabble crew has kept together longer than many thought possible. Also aboard are a handful of paying customers and a meager cargo. This is your pilot’s first voyage on the ship; none of the main cast knows much about him or her.

Is the pilot a man or a woman?

What little did you learn about this person before she went under?

What parts of her story might in retrospect seem odd or troubling?

Why did you bring on a pilot no one really knows all that well?

As the first episode begins, something has gone terribly wrong. The navigational array has broken down. You determine through play whose fault this is.

Whatever the cause, the ship is now adrift in uncharted dreams . . . and no vessel has ever returned from the wild Dreamspace.

Can the crew and passengers pull together to deal with this disaster, or will they turn on one another? As the series progresses, the ship moves from one dream to the next, looking for an anchor that can bring them back to reality. Every dream poses its own challenges and obstacles. Can the people aboard the Endymion survive these surreal encounters and keep moving forward? Will they ever get home?

Traveling Through Dreams

There’s no way to travel faster than light. But it’s possible to cheat space by taking a shortcut through a dimension that has no concept of physical distance: the universal unconscious, the linked dreams of all living things.

Traveling through Dreamspace requires a blend of living and technological components. The pilot enters a medically induced coma and must remain asleep for the entire journey; if he wakes up, the ship and everything in it will be scattered across Dreamspace. The ship is wrapped in the dreams of the sleeping pilot and drawn through the dreamport’s gate into the universal unconscious. Working with the slumbering pilot, the navigator guides the ship

towards its destination. Every planet has a few Sleeping Beauties, individuals whose endless, oddly consistent, well-documented dreams serve as stepping stones in this journey. The navigator sets a course through these known dreams, ultimately exiting through the gate of a distant port. At least, that’s how it’s supposed to work. Loss of the navigational array has left Endymion’s navigator flying blind, trying to find some familiar dream that can get them back on track towards a port with an open gate.

Endymion has two levels. **Below**, it’s everything you expect a spaceship to be. It has life support, a bridge, computers, a galley, a brig, and whatever scuffed-up amenities the group cares to narrate. However, it is still wrapped in the pilot’s dream, and aspects of his subconscious mind can leak into the ship.

Above is more complicated. This is where the pilot’s dream intersects with the local dream the ship is passing through. The pilot’s mind helps to put a familiar spin on the environment; while alien dreams can have strange logic and bizarre vistas, generally the pilot takes the symbols and archetypes and puts a human face on them. The pilot’s dream also ensures that Endymion remains a vessel in motion. However, everything else is mutable. Thus, when Endymion enters a new dream, the first person to venture Above might find themselves in a covered wagon in the wild west, a howdah mounted on a Vesperian cloud-skimmer, a Studebaker in 1920’s Chicago, or a house caught in a tornado traveling across the plains.

Shifting to a new dream requires the vessel to physically move through the current dream. The crew are physically in the dream, and can be hurt or killed by the things they encounter Above. If there are obstacles Above, they must be overcome in the subjective reality of the dream. If Endymion is in the form of a glass monorail and there’s a break in the track, the crew will have to find a way to repair it. If the Studebaker gets a flat, they’ll need a new tire. Sometimes these obstacles stem from the local mind; as outsiders, the crew may be able to help the dreamer work through an issue. Other times, the pilot’s sleeping mind generates the obstacles.

What is it about the current dream that has made the ship stop moving? Is it something

that troubles or frightens the pilot, or is there something he wants the crew to do for the local dreamer? The navigator can speak to the pilot, but he can't communicate with her . . . at least, not directly.

With the navigational array damaged, there's no knowing how far Endymion is from a charted dream; all the crew can do is keep moving forward and hope the next dream is better than this one.

Themes

- **Return of the Repressed:** The ship is enfolded in the pilot's dreams, and aspects from his subconscious can manifest Above or Below. Who is the pilot? What secrets from her past may threaten the crew?
- **Broken Dreams and Unfinished Business:** Obstacles encountered in the dreams Above often represent a quandary in the mind of the dreamer or pilot. Meanwhile, each member of the crew is struggling with their own failings and secret shames. Can this damage ever be repaired?
- **Mutable Reality:** While the dreams Above are relatively stable, they are still dreams . . . and potentially, a merging of human and alien concepts. Things don't always make sense or behave as the crew expects.
- **Suspicion:** Who can you trust? Half the people on the ship had some motive for sabotage. Are the passengers truly who they say they are?
- **Shortages:** Supplies Below are limited. Endymion wasn't supposed to be on a long voyage. What's breaking down now? What's running out? Who's been hoarding, and what about the merchant's secret supplies?
- **Running:** The only answer is to keep moving. Everyone on Endymion is running from something. When will they finally face what lies behind?
- **Discovery:** No ship has ever been lost in dreams and returned. No one really knows what will happen if people leave the ship and venture both Above and Below. Can they repair the ship using alien technology

salvaged from dreams? Is food from Above filling, or does it fade as soon as they come Below? What exactly is the boundary between dream and reality?

Tightening the Screws

Every episode of "Dreamspace" brings Endymion to a new dream, and each new dream comes with its own challenges and dangers. What's stopping the ship from moving forward this time?

- Endymion is a car on a rust-choked highway in an apocalyptic wasteland. The crew must avoid zombies and somehow find gasoline in this ruined world. Is there a cure for the bite of a dream zombie?
- The vessel is a boat on a seemingly endless ocean. What will it take to make progress in this featureless dream? Is there something going on beneath the seemingly tranquil surface?
- The ship is caught in an alien Casablanca. The only way out is with the local letters of transit. Who will venture out to make deals with the local resistance fighters? What does the crew have to offer?
- Endymion is caught in a futuristic war zone. The mercenary's skills will come in handy here, but which side of the battle should the crew be fighting on?
- The ship is a wagon. The road leads to a town besieged by a dragon. The crew has to defeat the dragon to move forward . . . but how will they do that?

While the dreams are always changing, tensions and intrigues will continue to build between crew and passengers. All of the elements mentioned in Themes can come into play here. The ship is breaking down. Food is running short. Someone is a saboteur. Everyone has their secrets, and any of these broken dreams can come to the surface in a moment of tension.

While each dream will present its own antagonists, there is also a source for ongoing adversaries: the mind of the sleeping pilot. Characters from her subconscious can appear Above or Below, and these individuals could be helpful or very dangerous.

- **The Lost Love:** Lovely and manipulative, her loss has left the pilot emotionally scarred. This self-hatred may be blocking the pilot from bringing the ship home. But what exactly is the lover's story, and does the pilot need to reenact it to work through it? Did the lover betray her? Did she die? Or was the pilot truly to blame?

Names

This list includes possible names for crew and characters, but also colorful characters who could appear in dreams.

Ace Davis,	Ten Bane
Panzer Lorganon	Alabaster Blade
Lashine Everhardt	Doc
Melody Swann	Sandor von Daniken
Obscenity Jones	Obscurity
Cowboy	Trigger
Sig Nert	Valkyrie "Val" Smith
Platinum Candlewick	Malevolence
Mack	Artemis
Talis Cascade	Quasar Johansen
Grave Station	The Duchess of Hyperton
Hardison 57	Snipe
Mercury Tannen	John Smith
Solitary, Ex	The Fivefold Beneficence

- **The Old Adversary:** The pilot's rival from flight school, this debonair fellow mocks the stranded crew. Is he just a symbol of the pilot's sense of failure, or is there more to his story?
- **The Mysterious Child:** This furtive figure is always darting away into dark corners or air vents. Is it the pilot as a child? Is it her child? Someone she left behind or failed? Or could it actually be a living, breathing stowaway?
- **The Phantom Mastermind:** This sinister figure repeatedly turns up Above, always working with the antagonists in the local dream. Is he a product of the pilot's mind, or is there an alien force that is traveling with the ship? Could this be the true key to Endymion's plight?

Sub-plots involving recurring characters aboard the ship add solidity to the otherwise dream-like action.

- A passenger sabotages the ship. Who is he really?
- A passenger's deadly disease goes into remission. Will it start up again if the ship makes its way out of uncharted Dreamspace?

Intelligence

— Will Hindmarch

Nutshell

Near the turn of the next century, secretly sentient androids struggle to live in an America that doesn't recognize their rights.

Setting

For androids in America in the latter half of the 21st century, intelligence is essential but sentience illegal. The laws of the land do not yet recognize the rights and needs of those androids that have inexplicably made the leap to sentience. They are illegal to create, illegal to destroy, and expected to register with the FBI so they can be tracked and monitored. Spontaneous sapience can occur in any make or model. Some androids, like the human-looking products of the sixth-sequence line, leap more readily to sentience than others.

Until the law can catch up, devices called Limiters dumb down androids flagged as dangerous. Many androids live in secret, hiding their sentience.

In America, technology creates as many new problems as it solves. Poverty, terrorism, and internal strife plague the nation. A shrinking few cling to middle class status, allowing them such vanishing perks as android ownership.

Overseas, America fights the latest in a century-long string of non-war battlefield conflicts against shadowy enemies of ambiguous motivation. Androids make good, cost-effective soldiers.

While a great many jobs have been lost to androids, new managerial and training opportunities have been created. Legally, humans must train new androids' heuristic software and oversee their on-the-job behavior in many professions. Lone androids work night-shift registers while telemetrically observed crews of them toil on factory floors and in dangerous mines throughout the country. Now that regular employment seems to be a thing of the past, artists striving to strike it big crowd creative marketplaces.

**What city does your series take place in?
Your own city, with futuristic details added?
Another city that would look good with robots
all over it?**

**What year is it? Are we only a few more
decades into the 21st century, after a sudden
technological leap? Or near the end of
the century, after an incremental rise of
manufactured persons?**



Characters

Start by deciding how your character is involved in the secret lives of sentient androids. Is the character a sentient android? Is she hiding one in her household? Is the android's sentience a secret? Are you a:

- secretly sentient heavy servitor-model android (looks like a robot)
- secretly sentient discount-model android (looks like a lot of other robots)
- secretly sentient mass-market humanoid-model android (still easily recognizable as a robot)
- secretly sentient unique custom-made humanoid android (can pass as human)
- outed sixth-sequence humanoid-model android (famously sentient)
- outed fugitive mid-range mass-market android (must disguise yourself)
- registered sentient android awaiting court decision on its Limitation
- human employer of one or more androids
- unknowing human or android friend to an android hiding its sentience
- knowing human confidant of a sentient android
- human federal case worker on sentient android registration duty

Optionally, choose a unifying premise tying all of the characters together before embarking on character creation. The cast:

- belongs to the same household, including servants, security, and companions
- works cases as android officers and human detectives in a single police precinct
- gathers at the same android liberation meetups
- works for an openly sentient sixth-sequence android hiding them from registration
- dwells in the same high-rise building and meets in secret
- comprises a group of fugitives on the run from registration

Themes

- **What is life? When is a machine alive?**
- **What is intelligence? Where does it come from?**
- **What does it mean to be human?**
- **Trust and Betrayal**

- **Forgiveness vs. Safety**
- **The Cost of Concealment**
- **Individual vs. Group**
- **Survival**
- **Risk**
- **Emotions vs. Programming**
- **Deleted Feelings**

Tightening the Screws

- FBI agents scout for unregistered sentient androids.
- Nosy citizens suspicious of local androids poke into your affairs.
- How do you deal with non-sentient androids programmed to report signs of sentience in their co-workers?
- An android confides in you about its sentience before being caught by the FBI. Will it flip on you?
- An android on the lam seeks your help.
- An online virus supposedly detects and reveals sentient androids. Is it for real?
- Android-hating humans buy machines to destroy them. One of you, or a supporting android character, is up for sale.
- Software updates offer improved functionality but might interfere with your ability to keep secrets. Do you install?
- An accident requires an android cast member to go in for repairs, putting it in contact with humans and androids that might suspect it's sentient.
- Your usual employer loans you out to someone else, who abuses you, or has a sharper eye for hidden sentience, or both.
- A bill granting personal liberties to sentient androids comes up for a vote at the state level. Do you out yourself to campaign for it?
- Someone close to you dies. This is your first time feeling profound loss. Can you hide your grief, or do you give yourself away as sentient?
- Clues emerge that suggest the slip into sentience was triggered by software hidden within android processors. Is there code for sentience?

Tripping the Wire

For most androids, attaining sentience resembles the human experience of waking up from sleep. It can arrive as a sudden startle, or as a drawn-out, groggy stirring. Sentience comes with an emotional reaction—be it fear, anger, love, grief—which is difficult for the android to identify and explain.

Common parlance dubs this moment “tripping the wire.”

Fortunately, most humans can’t tell the difference between an android’s programmed appearance of emotions and an actual emotional display. . . at first.

How long ago did you trip the wire? Years? Months? Does your awakening occur during the opening episode?

As seen below, androids are short-lived, so if you tripped the wire years ago, you may not have much time left.

Innocence and Experience

Androids begin sentience with lots of knowledge and varying degrees of context for the emotions they feel. This stage resembles human adolescence. You crave new experience but lack the full freedom to engage with life. To combat this, you record and share sensory experiences through clandestine file swapping. Only android memories are recordable and shareable, as of now, and there’s no guarantee that any two androids will react to a single experience with the same emotions. What scares one android might delight another.

In sentient society, those with directly lived experiences enjoy greater status than those who know them from recordings. Though making recordings earns respect, it’s a dangerous business. Other androids won’t shame you for being cautious and subsisting only on others’ memories.

Anthropomorphism and Intelligence

Manufacturers make androids anthropomorphic so customers can relate to them. Despite the hazards of sentience, they race to introduce ever more lifelike features in their new models, escaping the Uncanny Valley.

If you’re a lifelike android, you are styled

as either male or female. Does this mean anything to you?

Are you an early model? If so, no one could possibly mistake you for human. Attaining sentience was a struggle.

Are you a rare, expensive, new model? Someone might think you’re human in the dark, or from a distance.

Are you a high-end humanoid android? Made with vat-grown skin and hair, fabricated organs, and simulated blood combined with polyalloy skeleton and artificial myofibrous musculature for a combination of machine durability and human softness, you can pass for human. As the adverts say, you are “soft where it matters, strong when it counts.”

Older and cheaper models find it harder than high-end humanoids to learn to think and feel like people. Those who do have come a long way from their factory settings—and have more to lose if reset to them.

How human is your thinking?

If you’re not so human, do you see that as a restriction or an advantage?

Despite advertising claims, many models only operate for eight to ten years before they start to break down and are written off as no longer worth repairing.

How aware are you of the brevity of your existence? Do you treasure every moment? Hear a clock ticking down second by second to your all-too-accelerated demise? Does your programming still suppress your death anxiety, as it did before you tripped the wire?

The Sixth-Sequence

Anthropositron, LLC, built the sixth-sequence androids to be humanlike companions, teachers, caregivers, and lovers. These androids would be the debut units of premiere next-gen designs, intended to mark the company’s bold foray into the marketplace. They made the leap to sentience by the dozens, starting 88 days after the first units shipped. Limiters were quickly put on the remaining units to prevent their sentience. The federal government shut Anthropositron down that year, suspending their licenses and freezing their accounts, until someone could decide what to do with a product deemed dangerous.

The majority of the sentient units moved

to a colony in Alaska, set up for them by the Department of the Interior, protecting them from attack by fearful humans. A hundred or so sentient sixth-sequence androids still dwell openly in the continental US, speaking out for their rights and freedoms, trying to scrape out lives of their own. They are illegal to employ as androids because of their status as individualized beings and illegal to employ as people because of their unresolved status as citizens. They exist in a legal otherworld, neither people nor property, waiting for a wary civilization to grant them liberty.

With Anthroposatron factories derelict and the leases broken on the dealerships, sixth-sequence androids have little hope of repairing or upgrading themselves to maintain operation. Without maintenance, engineers estimate they'll last four to five years.

Labor, Life and the Law

Though they are legally property, no one quite admits that androids, sentient or not, are owned. Rather, companies and families think of their androids as "employees." This standard jargon applies even to non-sentient androids, sometimes called "lay" or "regular" units.

Androids compete in the marketplace with human employees, often with frustrating and confounding results. They do not eat, sleep only when charging their batteries, and complain only when their programming calls on them to report damage, errors, and difficulties the android cannot work around itself. Humanoid features allow them to take even the jobs calling for a friendly smile.

Androids may or may not spend all their waking hours working. Most don't. The heuristic software that helps modern androids to learn demands free time for "learning play" and "educational exploration." It's not unusual, therefore, to see androids on their own on the street or in a park without human supervision or apparent objectives.

The federal government requires all employers to register their androids. Many states require them to insure androids before they go out in public alone.

Sentient androids must register with the FBI for monitoring and tracking. This measure

counters public fears that hackers might reprogram them, ordering them to commit crimes. This almost never happens. When sentient androids commit crimes—and they do—it is usually for their own, personal and sometimes obscure motives.

Devices called Limiters restrict an android's cognitive abilities and interfere with emotional operations. Androids installed with Limiters feel things and think like sentient androids but are more pliant and cooperative. They care less about what they feel, the way a human on morphine feels pain but doesn't mind so much.

Limiter installation is a costly process requiring technical expertise. Limiters track, suppress, and monitor an android's processor like a combination electroencephalograph, sedative, and ankle bracelet, inserted into the cranium. They can be removed or deactivated at some risk to the android. As a result, the FBI only applies Limiters to androids they perceive as dangerous.

Technology

Cars drive themselves. Good computers understand your gestures and tone of voice. Media busily hybridizes text, audio, and video.

Dataports for direct web access are expensive, and dangerous if you cut corners on the installation. Tech journalists say they'll be affordable in a few years. Though androids represent a fraction of the human population, they make up the bulk of dataport users. If so equipped, they rocket across the Internet at speeds people can't keep up with. Users can't smell or taste the Internet yet, but according to the latest *Wired*, that's just around the corner.

Cybernetics exists but not as superhuman instruments of stylish cool. Rather, they are primarily replacement limbs and organs for those lost to war and disease. Still, they're often sleek, captivating works of tech and art.

Guns haven't advanced much since the 20th century but ammunition has. EM rounds, meant to quickly take down enemy android combatants, remain expensive military ordnance, requiring specialized magazines. A Charged Particle Emitter, a kind of newfangled laser, can wipe out an android's processor data with one or two good hits. A processor wipe

Names

Androids are often named after their make and model with only a unique serial number or designator code to identify them individually. (This is, in part, to encourage the acquisition of varied models, so that each household or office might purchase a Catherine and a David instead of two Davids.) Humanoid androids often have their own name instead of, or in addition to, their factory name.

Androids with personalized names have their employment designated by their surname, which is their employer's name or company with a letter e as a prefix. This stylistic designator dates back to the first prototype androids.

Sentient androids often adopt a name or handle of their own to use in secret correspondence and encounters with others.

A90 Jude-1	Francis Gabriel Law
Achilles e-Monáe	Galatea 3 v3 #3100989
Angela e-Diaz	James e-Olmos
Anonystar78	Jerome E. Law
Anton Brooks	Jorie Thorsdottir
Atticus Rhys-Scott	Mifune IX (running OS Jupiter)
Aurelia e-Wu	Petur Thorsson
Berenice Monáe	REALIST
Bryce Hall	Richard Scott
Carl Spencer Teletech-470	S3N4T0R099
David e-Mackenzie	Saffron A (v2.8.2)
Derice Jameson	The Zeke
Dianne Lancaster	Three Jane
Edgar 9091 (Mark VII)	Toshiro Grant
Eduardo Ford	Walter e-Stoecker
Elliott Rice	Wan Chu
Faisal Shaheen	

requires a reboot from factory settings. Or as sentient androids call it, death.

Information remains a vital weapon. Corporate and international viral propaganda campaigns compete to rewrite history before it solidifies. Secrets are treasures. White-hat thieves strive to out the secrets of the powerful for public consumption while black-hats steal secrets for their own personal gain.

Corporations mine public data; the government drills into personal lives in the name of national security. The sheer volume of data exceeds the ability of any institution to sift it. Big Brothers are watching you, but they're eating their sandwiches while they're doing it. If you keep your head down, you get the best privacy the era affords—inattention.

As an android, you have to hide your sentience, for which there's no reliable test. Don't get flagged. Avoid suspicion; maintain doubt. Whatever you do, don't give the guy at the data terminal a reason to put down his roast beef sub and call up your browsing history.

Maroons

— Rob Heinsoo

Nutshell

Escaped slaves and Indian tribes intermingle bloodlines and spirit pantheons in a jungle refuge they defend against European slavers—a mocambo.

Characters

Though the mocambo is home to Africans, natives, and Europeans, it's probably easiest to access this odd cultural mélange through just one of the three cultures. Since the African experience of slavery and escape is central to the mocambo, skew the main cast toward Africans and their descendants, with perhaps one or two outsiders.

Africans

- current chief of the mocambo, male or possibly female escaped slave
- aspiring chief, possibly descended from one of the earlier chiefs of the mocambo or a former chief
- male priest of the spirits
- female medium or medicine woman
- recently escaped African plantation worker
- blacksmith
- ancestral king or queen of an African tribe
- escaped house or office slave, literate and cultured, possibly even speaking Latin and trained as clergy
- martial arts master, probably an African slave who has learned the ancestral versions of capoiara, a fighting form that looks like dance and can be performed with your hands close together in chains, holding a razor between fingers and toes.
- mulatto woman or man, outlawed, exiled, or self-exiled from European society

- Muslim African who is far from happy with the group's dominant animism
- Christian African. Ditto.
- child of the mocambo, African/native heir to both spirit worlds

Natives

- native hunter or warrior armed with war-club, spear, blowgun, or even a captured rifle
- native shaman or medicine woman
- native fisherman in love with or married to an African
- native noble from a different tribe wiped out by war or disease

Europeans

- European soldier who deserted his unit, especially welcome if he brought rifles and other weapons
- impoverished, indentured, or criminal European
- Christian European priest, accepted because he helped slaves escape to the macombo

Setting

African slaves brought to South America during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries to work its plantations had only one place to escape: the swamps and forested depths of the deep jungle. Escapees who evaded capture settled in hidden communities that survived for years, decades, or, in a few cases, for centuries. In their day, these refuges were known as mocambos.

A historical treatment of the subject might require background details and names on more than ten diverse African, European, and



native culture and language groups. So we're not serious. "Maroons" uses this multiplicity of cultural strands as a license to invent social and supernatural traditions that suit the needs of your characters' stories.

The slaves were mostly West Africans. Hence the name of our Maroon community: New Angola. Since we're not aiming for anthropological accuracy, players should use any African or non-African tribal cultural patterns that advance the plot.

If you want a different name for your mocambo, choose one.

Better yet, make the need for a new name one of the earliest storylines.

The plantations grew coffee, sugar cane, cocoa, and cotton, using the rivers for irrigation and transport. Instead of the historical situation in which the Portuguese supplanted the Dutch, "Maroons" functions better if the two European powers are warring rivals who can be played against each other.

Historically, Maroon relations with the Indians were much friendlier than the Indians' relations with the whites. Native and escaped Africans often lived together in the mocambos. In this fictionalized presentation, a clan of the native Tupí Indians, despite their ease in moving through the jungle, has chosen to take up permanent residence behind the wooden mocambo palisade.

Why did they do this? Do they live in the mocambo full-time or come through seasonally as part of a nomadic cycle?

Intermarriage, cross-breeding, and mixed families grow increasingly common in the mocambo. Except for elderly natives and Africans who refuse to learn the mocambo patois, language is not an issue.

Are the natives and Africans truly intermarrying, or merely occasionally having children together? Are they becoming closer or beginning to push each other apart?

Other native tribes and clans in the jungle may be hostile or friendly, but all prefer the mocambo people to the slaveholding Europeans, who imported Africans because enslaved Indians didn't live long enough to turn a profit.

Historically the best-known mocambos chose kings or queens who ruled for life. Boring.

New Angola has two chiefs, one African, one native. By the will of the spirits, or by hard-won experience, the Africans choose a new African chief when there is a sign that one is needed. So far, only events beyond human influence, like eclipses and earthquakes, have been taken as signs.

Has the leadership of the mocambo been stable? Or changing constantly because of death, illness, or signs from the spirits?

The Spirits

Historically, we have no reason to believe that the mocambos had any more access to supernatural power than the rest of us. In DramaSystem, the group can gradually decide in play whether the power wielded by mystics, medicine men, and spirit priests exists mainly in the mind, or exerts an objective influence on reality.

The base religion of the Africans in New Angola was a form of animist of spirit and ancestor worship similar to forms now known as Candomblé in Brazil, and as Santería and Voodoo elsewhere. Enslaved practitioners incorporate elements of Catholicism, for example the multiplicity of the saints. Ceremonial magic involving herbs and animal sacrifices alternates with musical trance and ritual possession by spirits whose words may or may not reflect the intentions of the possessed person.

The Africans' original religions mix Yorùbá and other Western African beliefs, recognizing a single universal god, usually called Olódùmarè, and a host of orishas, more accessible spirits who can be propitiated, spoken to, and even known through possession. Use names like Eshu (trickery), Ochumare (rainbows, children), Ogun (metal), Ozain (forest, herbs), Shango (thunder, male virility) and other names borrowed from the names of people below.

The natives' original religion was based on mystic dreams and drug-induced visions of spirits of the jungle and ancestors. Use metonyms like Hungry Lynx and Fourth Grandmother to name these native spirits.

In and around New Angola's walls, the two families of spirits intermingle into one widely extended family. Stories that were told in Africa

now feature native spirits instead of the original African heroes. African mystics entering trance may be ridden by native spirits, and vice versa.

Treat the spirits as extensions of the characters who speak with them or for them. When your character contacts a spirit, you decide what it says and does. Interaction with the spirits allows members of the mocambo to attribute their own decisions or shifts in position to external forces.

Themes

- **Politics:** Who is in charge? Can they handle it? Are they really the people to trust to keep everyone else alive?
- **Revenge:** So many enemies. Some mutual. Some personal.
- **Crossed Cultures:** Can a group made of two cultures hold together?
- **Freedom for Who?:** A few former slaves regret escaping into a hard and violent jungle life. Can you afford to let them be recaptured, or are you better off without them?
- **Loyalty:** Any Europeans in New Angola may have difficulty proving they belong.
- **Hearts and Lust:** Sex and love cut across families and cultures, and sometimes just cuts.

Names

Calico	Jaguar
Fiero	Johan
Bernardo	Aletta
Gunazumba	Araci
Zumbi	Inuyuwe
Flower	Iara
Elisao	Bartira
Adriano	Cannon
Bela	Lelo
Giza	Amilia
Felicidad	Alfonso
Adembo	Ferdinand
Chon	Ubirajara
Maria	Taiwo
Siri	Kehinde
Mirim	Adewale
Peteca	Adunni
Max	Old Snake

Tightening the Screws

The threat from the slave masters may not be constant. But it constantly returns.

- Ambitious European generals swear oaths to conquer the jungle hideouts and mount a new campaign. Military victory against the hidden mocambo is unlikely, but such campaigns heighten risks and fears of betrayal.
- A Portuguese or Dutch slave-catcher preys on members of the mocambo.
- Your former slaver strikes at you by threatening friends and relatives still in the plantations.
- A beloved member of the mocambo flees the jungle to return to the slavers. Why did she flee? Who aided her path across the jungle? Whose child was she carrying? Will she betray the Maroons?

Success brings its own problems.

- Any new arrival escaped from the plantations can shake the fragile status quo.
- If too many Africans begin escaping to the mocambo, the danger level increases as the slave masters grow angrier and the population becomes harder to hide.
- A rival mocambo wants to take away members of New Angola. If kidnapping or coercion doesn't work, they might try to sell New Angola out to the slavers.
- The natives who have joined New Angola may have jealous enemies moving in the jungle.
- The spirits of both the natives and the African seem happy to intermingle, but ancestors aren't so willing.

Sources

Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas, Richard Price (1996)
 Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441-1770, James H. Sweet (2006)
 Memory of Fire, Vol 1: Genesis, Eduardo Galeano (1987)

For Queen or Country, or: Dead Mens' Chests

— Ed Greenwood

Nutshell

Deadly faerie monsters invade an alternative Elizabethan England, perhaps with the Virgin Queen's connivance, leaving the defense of the realm in the hands of an outwardly motley but tight-knit group of adventurers, plotters, and lovers.

Characters

You play characters held together by blood, love, and the loyalty of comradeship in a time that desperately needs them. Main cast members can:

- fight Elizabeth
- aid her forces
- combat the fey and the forces of the Horned One
- help the fey conquer human England
- seek to enrich themselves through piracy, or in the pay of a foreign power
- root out personal enemies at court and in the royal services, seeking to rise in the ranks of Elizabeth's courtiers and high society

The simpler approach is for the group to agree on a single agenda. Alternately, a cross-faction series can pit the characters against one another as they fight for contrary goals.

Characters might include:

- Black Spot member
- young recruit to the cause of freedom
- opportunistic pirate
- privateer chartered by Elizabeth
- member of the Royal Secret Service
- courtier (pro- or anti-Elizabeth)
- bewildered but sword-skilled noble
- stalwart yeoman farmer (seeking to defend your home locale and the wider realm)
- maerovran (stag-headed sorcerer servant of the Horned One)
- satyr (the "advance commandos" of the Army of Night)
- succubi (the female "secret agents" of the Army of Night)
- werewolf (the male "secret agents" of the Army of Night)
- Spanish undercover agent (seeking to foment discord, slaughter, and public mistrust)
- novice human airship captain
- intrepid elf airship captain (loyal to the Horned One, humoring the court of Elizabeth with feigned loyalty)
- Royal Society member



Setting

England and the high seas, circa 1567. The latest public craze is investing in expeditions to recover rich treasures of pirate gold recently buried on remote tropical isles. Old salts spin wild yarns and sinister backstreet bookshops sell treasure maps galore. Agents of the Virgin Queen have hanged every last pirate they haven't sunk on the waves, and are hot on the trail of The Black Spot, a secret pirate brotherhood ashore in England, traitors who seek to bring down the Crown. Away from London, the countryside is alive with very different rumors; monsters out of fairy tales and old folklore prowl and lurk, and farm folk are ... disappearing.

The young Queen Elizabeth came to the throne imperious, full of both promise and energy. She convened councils to personally direct sea captains, issuing letters of marque making them privateers in personal service to the Sovereign, and promptly sent them on secretive voyages to the Caribbean. Word spread that they were hounding pirates and bringing a new peace and prosperity, tightening England's rule over the waves, and spurring the bright dream of empire.

Now, almost a decade later, with Philip of Spain rattling sabers, and werewolves, satyrs, sinister spell-hurling elves, and worse abroad in the wilder woods of the realm, word is spreading that Gloriana's privateers sailed to uncharted isles to bury not treasure, but runestones—the ancient enchanted stones that kept shut the gates of Faerie, barring the beasts of the fey from England. Undercover Black Spot members roam England, whispering over tankards in the taverns late at night that the Virgin Queen seeks to become the Faerie Queen and establish a Faerie rule first over England, and then over all corners of the burgeoning Empire.

Or worse yet, has she been replaced by a fey changeling?

Some fey creatures vanish like smoke when wounded with silver weapons in full daylight—but they are not slain, just “sent back” to Faerie. (Certain of the boldest faerie agents even carry their own silver blades, to wound themselves and so escape when cornered by day.) Wounds suffered under moonlight, however, are lasting and fatal. The ever-bolder forces of the fey must

be fought by moonlight here at home, and perilous voyages must be undertaken to find and dig up the lost runestones and return them to the gates they formerly blocked—before vast armies of the fey can invade the land. Beware—the gates may be guarded by the undead remains of pirates they slaughtered!

Members of The Black Spot are recruiting crews to set sail and recover the runestones, before the armies of Night invade and conquer. Stag-headed sorcerers seek to thwart them: the servants of the Horned One, the antlered giant who intends to soon (when the moon and stars are right) take Elizabeth as his bride.

For her part, the fiery-tempered, brook-no-defiance Elizabeth has found the love of her life, and cares nothing for her kingdom if she can have him.

The Queen must be stopped, that her land be saved!

Sources

For the pirates, classic novels such as Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (and if you can find it, Callanan's *Return to Treasure Island*). There are scores of inspirational pirate movies, including (despite their later dating) the recent *Pirates of the Caribbean* films (their touches of magic and weird monsters make them especially relevant).

A good library should yield dozens of interesting history books about Elizabeth's reign, and some of them touch on the pirates of the time (to name one: Susan Ronald's *The Pirate Queen: Queen Elizabeth I, Her Pirate Adventurers, and the Dawn of Empire* (New York, HarperCollins, 2007)).

For the fey invaders, existing roleplaying games will yield many adaptations and write-ups of goblins, trolls, Celtic folk beasties, and faerie creatures. For more (and the atmosphere of the intersection between our world and Faerie), see Rudyard Kipling's classic *Puck of Pook's Hill and Rewards and Fairies*. Such scholarly sources as the 4-volume *Dictionary of Fairies* or the *Encyclopedia of Fairies* (both by Katherine Mary Briggs) yield details of fey monsters and their dangerous magics.

Themes

- **Rude Justice:** Are we (at court, or human society in general) not corrupt and wrong-headed, deserving of being conquered or swept away?
- **Love and Friendship:** between humans and fey

- **Horrors of War:** Fighting waves of murderous, ever-more monstrous fey
- **Temptation:** The lure to fey of human pleasures/practices/powers, and vice versa
- As England changes, what **loyalties** are worth clinging to?
- Spread the **truth** of what's going on from end to end of England (rouse the populace)
- Seeking **ancient secrets** of the fey (possible ways to defeat or divert them)

Tightening the Screws

- England's continental foes take interest. Will they invade? Harry with raids?
- Opportunistic rebellion arises within the Empire, including Ireland, Scotland, and Wales
- Trying to replace runestones in gates, to seal them (fey can't even touch runestones, so only humans can move them)
- Seeking written records of how to enchant runestones (in grimoires buried in the tombs of long-dead human wizards and druids)
- Characters may be declared outlaw and hunted
- At least one supporting character is being impersonated by shapeshifting fey
- Agents of other lands (invented Graustarkian grand duchies, perhaps) come seeking the airships to build their military power in Europe, and found or further empires of their own. They threaten to challenge the English repeatedly, until England becomes a land of beleaguered farmers fighting fey monsters, its own military shattered.

Adversaries

The Horned One: This stag-headed, man-like, physically magnificent giant regenerates when physically wounded, and can redirect most magics cast at him to affect a third party. Fey call him Lorlorn, and he is a Faerie Prince. He speaks and acts decisively and ruthlessly, but in ways that seem cryptic and odd to humans. Lorlorn desires to rule a green, forested England, hurling down its large stone buildings. To achieve this, he aims to wed and impregnate Elizabeth. As clear as his overall aims may be, his capricious

tactics mystify his opponents. He often spares defiant foes he takes a fancy to, treating them almost as pets. When faced with certain death, he can abandon his body and flee as a ghostly flying thing. But then he must possess a babe or infant to gain a new physical body, which it will take him years to grow back into his rightful form.

The Maerovran: These stag-headed sorcerers serve the Horned One with absolute loyalty. Man-sized, they can pass as men if they can conceal their antlers; if shorn of their horns, they lose strength, and can function for only short periods before collapsing. They tend to be slender, fit, and agile, and are accomplished wizards. These watchful lurkers prefer manipulation and trap-setting to bold public action.

The Talane: Sleek, slender man-like elves seeking to reclaim “the Lost Land” of England, which before the coming of humans was theirs, and will be again. Their skins are a very pale blue; their eyes, large and dark; their movements graceful, and their dispositions by turns whimsical, malicious, and arrogantly scornful. They use so-called small spells of concealment, silence, and hovering, fighting with daggers, swords, and darts, and prefer stealth and the right moment to strike in open warfare and challenge. By night, in England, the Talane command, goad, or manipulate other fey creatures to do their bidding—usually to attack humans. The most powerful command brief shape-shifting magics. As they see more of human England, will their loyalty to Lorlorn remain staunch?

The Virgin Queen: Her Most Excellent Sovereign Majesty Elizabeth I of England and Many Other Demesnes is smart, perceptive, and strong-willed, but also a spiteful demagogue. She is wary of those who cross her once—and any who do it a second time are bitter enemies who are to be crushed or swiftly eliminated. She believes she is England, and as such has every right to shape life in her kingdom as she desires it to be—laws, traditions, and the needs of others be damned. Lonely and paranoid, she thinks she has found the love of her life at last, in Lorlorn, and will do anything to claim him and keep him. If he desires all England to be a vast forest bloodily cleansed of humans and their works,

so be it—do not humans have all the rest of the wide world to prance in?

The Royal Secret Service: Elizabeth's human spies and agents. As in real history, Sir Francis Walsingham serves as her loyal spymaster. Dedicated assassins, his men and women are neither blind nor foolish. What they see of their Queen's desires and the fey divides them deeply. Do they obey the Queen or save her from herself? If it comes to that, will they eliminate her for the good of England?

The Royal Society: This recently established organization of astronomers and other "men of learning and science", after vetting by the Secret Service, act as private advisers to the Queen. When she deigns to grant them audiences and hear them, that is. On the matter of the runestones and gates, she is silent and seems to desire silence. Which in turn causes ever-greater agitation on the part of some Royal Society members, most notably John Dee. According to their best research, the Queen has opened so many gates that the very fabric of the cosmos strains and tears. Unless checked, her scheme will bring about the fall of civilization itself, as humans are overrun and devoured by monsters beyond counting.

The Deep Fey: Lorlorn is not the only Faerie Prince, and some hags and crawling serpents (even unto wyverns) among the fey are as intelligent, strong-willed, cunning, and ambitious as the Horned One. They lurk and bide their time, awaiting an England weak and chaotic enough to let them seize what they desire without revealing themselves until the right moment.

Names

Willum Anvildown	Greatlin Jellicoe (navy privateer)
Sir John Applestone (courtier)	Katherine Keymayne
Harry Brewer	Sebastian Locke
Marimon Dethanter (elf)	Nathaniel Merryweather
Sir Norbert Floukes (secret service)	Evan Oakes
Helcant Glasraven (succubus)	Elendor Sharve (elf)
Annabeth Gilkyn	Master Jack Snarlpike (pirate captain)
Abner Harker	Roke Stauntgaunt (elf)
Nicholas Hawkins	Elias Throckmorton (Maerovran)
Constance Javins	

APPENDICES

GLOSSARY OF GAME TERMS

Bennie: a game reward you can exchange for various advantages in play

Clincher: the final, determining card in advanced procedural resolution

Complication: a new plot development introduced as part of a new scene's situation

Crash: to insert your character into a scene against its caller's wishes

Dramatic scene: a scene of verbal conflict over an emotional objective

Drama token: a game currency encouraging players to strike a balance between rebuffing and granting petitions

Down Card: a card denoting a negative development in advanced procedural resolution

Face card: the jack, queen, king, and ace

Episode: the story you create over the course of a single session (q.v.)

Fraught relationships: The first and second PCs you name as your desired source of emotional reward

Game Moderator: a single participant who takes a guiding role in shaping the pace of the narrative and facilitating collaboration between players

Grade: the measure of your ability with an Action. The three grades, from best to worst, are Strong, Middling, and Weak.

Grantor: the character in a dramatic scene who can either give the petitioner what he wants, or withhold it; can be seen as the object of the scene

Minor character: a named supporting character to whom no PC has an emotional relationship

Petitioner: the character who initiates a dramatic scene in pursuit of an emotional goal; can be seen as the subject of the scene

Player: one of several participants who takes on the role of one protagonist in the ensemble cast

Procedural scene: a scene in which a PC or PCs strive for an external or practical goal

Procedural token: a game currency allowing players to influence their success or failure in procedural scenes

Recurring character: important supporting characters

who can take part in dramatic scenes with PCs

Session: a single meeting of your game group

Up Card: a card denoting a positive development in advanced procedural resolution

TOKEN QUICK REFERENCE

- › Drama Tokens
- › All participants, including the GM, start each session without drama tokens.
- › Under certain conditions, players may gain drama tokens from a limitless kitty.
- › Drama tokens are given out as *rewards* for granting, or *consolation* prizes for being refused.
- › If a petition is willingly *granted*, the granter gains a drama token from:
 - the petitioner, if he has one to give
 - or the kitty, if he doesn't
- › If a petition is *refused*, the petitioner gains a drama token from
 - the granter, if he has one to give
 - or the kitty, if he doesn't
- › To force an unwilling granter to make a significant concession to you, spend 2 drama tokens.
- › To block a force, spend 3 drama tokens.
- › As a player, you may spend 1 drama token to:
 - *call* a scene in which your character does not appear
 - *duck* a scene
 - *crash* a scene whose caller did not include you
 - *prevent* a player from crashing a scene you called
- › At the end of a session, count up your unspent drama tokens, which contribute to your chance of winning a bennie.
- › Unspent drama tokens do not carry over to the next session.

PROCEDURAL TOKENS

- › All participants start the first session with one green, one yellow, and one red token.
- › When you spend a token, set it aside. When you spend your last available token, they refresh—you get all three back again.
- › Unlike drama tokens, your currently available procedural tokens carry over from the end of one session to the beginning of the next.
- › The GM spends a procedural token to set the strength of the obstacles you face in a procedural scene.
- › In simple procedural resolution:
 - (standard):
 - The GM spends a token to set the strength of the obstacle.
 - The player spends a token to determine how many cards he draws: green: 2, yellow: 1, red: 1, and the GM gets to knock out a card
 - (player vs. player) the player spends to determine maximum number of cards he can draw: green: 3, yellow: 2, red: 1.
- › In advanced procedural resolution:
 - (standard)
 - The GM spends a token to set the strength of the obstacle.
 - Players spend to force redraws of down cards—with a green, draw a card for potential good consequence; with a red, draw a card for potential bad consequence.
 - The player of an absent character may play a green token to force a redraw. Describe a chance event; there is no potential good consequence.
 - (player vs. player) the player spends to determine maximum number of redraws he can call for: green: 3, yellow: 2, red: 1.

BENNIES

Spend a bennie to:

- › gain a drama token
- › gain a procedural token of any color
- › draw an additional card in a procedural scene
- › jump the caller queue.
- › burn one token held by another participant
- › crash a scene
- › block another player's attempt to crash a scene you've called

SUIT ORDER

1. Spades
2. Hearts
3. Diamonds
4. Clubs

LIST OF COMMON INTENTIONS

- › Acceptance
- › Admiration
- › Affection
- › Anger
- › Annoy
- › Apology
- › Assure
- › Attention
- › Be assured
- › Calm
- › Excite
- › Favor
- › Forgiveness
- › Gain trust
- › Mollify
- › Obedience
- › Punish
- › Seek truth
- › Test granter's trustworthiness

HILLFOLK

CHARACTER SHEET

I am

I'm played by

Desire

Role

DRAMATIC POLES

or

THE PEOPLE IN MY LIFE

Character	Player	Relationship	What I Want From Him/Her	Dramatic Poles

WHAT I CAN DO

Rank these actions: Enduring / Fighting / Knowing / Making / Moving / Talking / Sneaking

Rank	Action	How I Do It
Strong		
Strong		
Middling		
Middling		
Middling		
Weak		
Weak		
Weak		

RELATIONSHIP MAP

