

# Universalis Ressources

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# Getting Started

Universalis is not a difficult game to play, but it can appear rather daunting at first. If you're a veteran role player you'll notice right away that most of the familiar places to begin (like character creation or how to make a skill roll) don't exist in Universalis. If you've never played a role playing game before you'll notice that the rules and game play aren't very similar to the traditional card and board games you may be most familiar with.

When it comes time to actually play the game for the first time and introduce a bunch of friends to it, it can be hard to know where to start. For this chapter I'll describe the method I've used over the last two years to introduce new players into the game. My method is to break the game up into stages, describe the basic core of each stage, but leave the more advanced or tangential parts for later. I'll structure this chapter kind of like a script. It's the sort of things I say at the table when teaching the game.

## **Where to begin? I start with what the game is about.**

"Universalis is a game about creating stories. Every story needs a setting, characters, and plot. We'll be developing those as we play. Each of you count out 25 Coins from the Bank, there. Coins are the resource that gives you control over the story. Every character you create and everything you have those characters do will cost Coins. setting element or character you create, everything you have those characters do, and every place you have them go will cost Coins. The Coins are a way of regulating how much of the story any one person can tell at a time. Basically, every statement you make that establishes some fact about the story will cost 1 Coin.

"When you run low on Coins you're actually running low on the ability to influence the story, at least until you acquire more Coins. Everyone will get a few additional Coins periodically during the game but the best way to replenish a low supply is to introduce plot conflicts, obstacles, and complications into the story (usually on another player's turn). We'll get into that later."

## **Then I talk about the game preparation phase and facts.**

"First we need to decide what kind of story we're going to be telling. Is it going to be an action adventure story, a romance, a mystery, a psychological thriller? Is the mood going to be dark and gritty, a light comedy, outrageously absurd humor? How strictly are we expecting the other players to abide by the conventions of the genre we're playing in? What's the setting? Is it going to be a science fiction story featuring space ships, or will it be set on an alien planet, or is it a future version of earth? Is it going to be fantasy, based in actual history, a western...?" I go on like this using examples of movies or TV shows until it's apparent everyone gets what we're talking about. Usually it just takes a couple.

"To do this we're going to go around the table and everyone is going to spend 1 Coin to add one element about the type of story we're going to tell. As I mentioned, anytime you make a statement about something in the game it costs 1 Coin. Once you spend a Coin on something it becomes Fact. Facts are important when there is a disagreement among players about a statement someone made. Basically, anything anyone says about anything related to the story is subject to being challenged by one of the other players who doesn't like it or thinks they have a better idea. But once something is established as Fact it's more difficult to challenge it later.

"When a disagreement arises you discuss what you don't like and offer suggestions. If you can come to an agreement, great, play goes on. If you can't agree, then a full Challenge occurs where everybody spends Coins voting for the outcome they prefer. We'll talk more about that if it ever comes up, for now just be aware you can do that." Often this has been all I've ever said about Challenges for

the whole game. Players just worked it out amongst themselves with Negotiation and never felt the need to call for the full bidding process.

“Ok, so, let s start collecting the elements of our story. I ll start and we ll go around clockwise how ever many times we need to. Once everyone feels they have a good idea what kind of story we ll be telling we ll move to the next part of the game. As we go along start thinking of a good opening scene, like the opening scene of a movie, something that will get our attention and give the story something to build on. Usually, once you get an idea for a good opening scene you have enough to work with and its time move on to actual play and get that scene started. Ok, here s my Coin, tonight we ll play a game that involves...”

Usually I try to keep my opening Tenets pretty basic for a first game so that there is a familiar genre or story style for players to latch on to. While Universalis can be used to do a story like Memento or Pulp Fiction, such play is best left for experienced players. For first time play I stick to convention and cliché (although depending on the group I may make a point to mention that this is for teaching purposes only).

If play has gone around a few times and after a little prompting no one seems like they re really getting an opening scene idea I ll grab one (again relying on cliché or scenes stolen right out of a movie) and bring this phase to a close. There are 3 keys to keep in mind during this phase.

- 1) If the other players are struggling with it you need to kill the prep quickly and get to the fun parts before they get discouraged and lose interest.
- 2) If the other players get into it full bore right away you want to try to avoid starting to actually play scenes in the middle of prep. If that s happening, they ve obviously got it, so kill the prep and get right to the scene bidding.
- 3) I really prefer that one of the new players come up with the opening scene unless it just gets obvious that isn t going to happen. The reason is that, if I do the opening scene, it can get players thinking that I m running the show and am in charge of how the story is supposed to go. Its best is when one of the players immediately grabs the opening scene and runs with it...shattering that expectation right from the start.

## **Setting up the Scene**

“Ok, now we re going to get into scene by scene play. The whole game is played in scenes just like the scenes of a movie or TV show. All scenes in the game start by being framed, which just means establishing what s initially going on so the other players can visualize what s happening. All scenes have a beginning and end. Before each new scene begins three things happen: 1) everyone gets 5 new Coins. 2) We bid for the privilege of framing the new scene, and 3) the scene gets framed. Ok everyone take 5 Coins.

“Bidding for the scene works like this. Everyone, secretly take a number of Coins into your fist as your bid. If you have a really great idea for what to do with the next scene bid a lot of Coins. If you don t, bid few or none. Keep in mind that a big part of the overall direction of the story will come from what scenes are played so being the framer is a fairly influential thing. Since this is your first game I d keep your bids to less than 8-10 Coins but I ve seen players bid more than that once they got the hang of things.

“Bids will be revealed simultaneously and whoever wins will frame the first scene. Losers will get to take their Coins back. Winners will spend their Coins during the scene” I don t get into ties and all that stuff unless it happens. Usually this part goes pretty easy and if you re really lucky you have 2 players both bidding high, which means at least 2 people have some really good ideas for what to do and you can sit back and watch them go. I always bid 0 or 1 at this point unless I m convinced I m with a group that really requires additional hand holding before they ll try it themselves.

“Now that you’ve won the bid you have to frame the scene. You’ll spend the Coins you just bid to do this (plus any others you want). Your job as scene framer is to set the stage for us. Tell us where the action is taking place, when it’s taking place, and who’s there. At this point, assuming the player doesn’t require additional prompting, I generally will let them riff for about a paragraph or so. Then I’ll stop them and say, “Ok, hold up a second and let me tell you how much all of that costs”

At that point I’ll pick up the pencil and summarize what the player said, writing down statements he made that I can identify as Components and Traits. I indicate what specifically I’m writing down and the rough hierarchy I’m placing them in to give a sense of how the game stats are organized. “Congratulations, you just created your first game Components. The location you just named and the characters you just introduced are now officially part of the story. They exist and can be used and manipulated by any of the other players throughout the game. Those descriptive phrases you added about each of the characters are now Traits of those characters and cost 1 Coin apiece. .

“Anything can be a Trait. Even the character’s name (if they’re important enough to bother giving them one) is a Trait. Think of how you’d describe a person you know or a place you like to hang out to another friend. Just about any phrase you’d use can be treated like a Trait in the game. For a person this can include how smart they are, what they look like or even what their goals are, what they own, and who are their friends. If a Trait is supposed to be particularly important it can be purchased more than once.

“Any time one of these people, places, or things is brought into the story from now on, all of their Traits come with them and are considered Facts of the game. Note that you don’t *have* to pay a Coin for every single detail. If it’s just a minor descriptive feature that adds a bit of color but isn’t really important it’s free. But if you didn’t pay for it, it doesn’t get written down and it isn’t considered a Fact.

“Ok, now go ahead and begin to describe what happens. Give us a little bit about what’s going on and what the characters are doing. When you think you’ve done enough, pass your turn and the next player will continue with the scene with those same characters.” After another paragraph or so I’ll stop them and repeat the pricing routine, this time referring to Events instead of Components. Most players at this point are a little tentative and are fairly quick to pass. If the player seems like he’s heading down the road of trying to tell the whole story in a single scene I’ll point out how many Coins he’s spending relative to how few Coins he got at the beginning of the scene; and suggest he let some of the other players help pay.

When it’s the second player’s turn to go, I introduce the concept of Control. “Great, before you get started let me tell you a little something about Control. Right now, everything in the scene belongs to <player 1>, not because he created them, but because he brought them into the scene. It never matters who created what, only who introduced it into the scene. You can’t do anything with those Components, because you don’t Control them. So here’s what you can do: you can either introduce your own characters and other things into the scene and have them do their own thing, or attempt to have *them* do something to his characters...or you can pay 1 Coin and simply take Control of one of his characters so it becomes yours.”

At this point one can bring in the Dialog rules or Complication rules as needed. I will typically wait until it seems like people are grasping the nature of Control and the “paying Coins to do stuff” routine before bringing up the ability to start interrupting each other...especially if it looks like there are 1 or more shy or reserved players at the table. I definitely want them to get at least 1 turn in before other more vocal players start interrupting them. Also, unless someone specifically asks, I don’t mention how to bring a scene to an end until it gets back to the first player and everyone’s taken a stab at scene one.

For my own turn, the first time around I do one of two things. I either take the lead and create some interesting characters who have obvious sources of conflict (or create conflict for existing characters); or, if it seems like the players are getting the hang of it themselves, I try to hang back and let them go without much interference. As I’m taking my turn I’ll take a handful of my own Coins and drop one in the bank every time there’s something worth paying for. This gets the players into the habit of counting out the Coins as they’re talking rather than stopping the narrative to do accounting, and also clues me in as recorder what they think is important enough to pay for. Once they get in the habit of

that I'll interject just enough to keep everybody at about the same scale of what they're getting for 1 Coin.

## **Other Stuff**

From there the game starts to take care of itself. All of the other subsystems of the game are brought up only when a player starts to do something for which those rules might apply, or if they express puzzlement about how to "do" certain things. The first one that usually arises is the Group Trait. Another early one tends to be Importance, depending on how eager the players are to start offing the characters. Using Traits to represent negative features like "He's been shot" or giving the car a "Flat Tire" is often an epiphany moment for many players. I'll often make a point to do this one myself as an illustration if no one else has thought of it.

Once things get going and it's clear that players are grasping the basics I'll start to introduce other elements, usually by doing them myself as an illustration or pointing out when they'd be appropriate for someone else. These include things like Rules Gimmicks, Framing Scenes into the past or into the future, Mini Scenes, Fines, Fading to Black, cutting back to a previous scene. Any thing to highlight the flexibility the players have and to get them thinking of how to use the rules creatively.

More advanced techniques like Master and Sub Components or nesting complications I usually save until later unless the players seem in the mood to dive right into the deep end.

Universalis is actually pretty easy to play once the basics are grasped and we tried to draw on familiar concepts like scenes and spending Coins to make play pretty intuitive. This chapter provides a few tips I've picked up over 2 years of running demo games for new players. If you use any of these successfully, or develop a few of your own, we'd love to hear about it on our discussion forum at [www.indie-rpgs.com](http://www.indie-rpgs.com).

----Ralph Mazza

# Intent and Departure from Tradition

Universalis is not the first game to push the envelope of what role-playing games are. In fact, elements of the Universalis can be seen in games like Story Engine, Once Upon a Time and Baron Munchausen. Even so, it is quite different from any of those and vastly different from any traditional RPG. Many aspects of Universalis are so different that it has led some to question whether it is even a role-playing game at all. We think there is great opportunity for role-playing within Universalis, but it all depends on how you use it. More than anything, Universalis is a tool kit for the creation of stories. With it, you can create entire worlds and civilizations to whatever level of detail you desire. You can populate those worlds with a cast of characters limited only by your imagination and the needs of the story; and you can concentrate on defining only those aspects of the world that are important to that story.

The plot of the game is entirely created and motivated by the players. Other games in the past have used various mechanisms to give players a degree of control over the story. "Hero Points" as a way of cheating death, or "Drama Points" used to achieve some cinematic effect, are examples of granting limited power of this kind to players. Other games use "Plot Points" to give players a great deal of dramatic control over the course of a game's events. Some even empower players to describe the entire resolution of a conflict in whatever manner they choose. Universalis goes further and puts the entire story in the hands of the players. Not only what the characters want to achieve and how they will achieve it, but also what their enemies are doing and what obstacles they'll have to overcome along the way as well. All of it (including everything normally reserved for the Game Master only) is player created, player developed, and player driven.

There is no pre-established setting. While many games are designed to be generic in that they can be used with a variety of different settings, Universalis can be played literally without defining any setting at all in advance. While it is possible to play Universalis using already published settings for inspiration, or predefining a few features; the game is at its most revolutionary when players sit around a table for the first time with no characters and no clear idea of even what sort of game is about to be played. Everything in Universalis is under your control as a player: the setting, the genre, various genre conventions; even the theme, mood, situation, and plot are all decided upon and moved forward by player interaction, collaboration, and even competition. Every mountain range, every city, every NPC, every monster, every mission, every powerful evil empire is totally invented by you and your friends as you are playing. Even the characters in the story will be created "on the fly" as play progresses. Universalis's rules are designed to promote the creation of a good story, and a good story can be told about any place and any situation.

There is also no Game Master. Almost all traditional RPGs, and even most non-traditional ones, rely on a Game Master. The Game Master is the one who does not play an individual character himself but rather controls the game world and everyone else in it. In Universalis the GM's powers aren't just shared with the players, they're totally ceded. Player's have all of the control, all of the power, and do all of the decision making. As players, you will decide where the characters of the story are

going and what manner of obstacles they will find when they get there. You will decide the nature of the adventure, who the enemies are, and what those enemies are plotting. You will decide the reward for success and the price of failure. You alone have absolute power. Essentially, every player is a Game Master and Coins are a measure of your authority.

But don't be fooled into thinking there is no game to be played, that with absolute power there will be no suspense and no challenge. Indeed the opposite is true. For while it is true that you have enormous power to influence the world and everything in it, so do each of the other players. Each of them will have their own ideas of what to do, and where to go, and what should be found there. Instead of several players trying to unravel the twists and turns of a single GM's story you have several players trying to unravel the twists and turns of several GM's stories. You can't do everything your way. You can try, but then you'll quickly run out of Coins and hence out of power. The collaboration, competition, and even subterfuge of play provides its own very powerful form of suspense and challenge.

But don't take our word for it. Head on over to the [Play Examples](#) page and see for yourself the kind of stories that have been told using Universalis.

----Ralph Mazza

# Coins and Currency

Every RPG has its system of rewards. What kind of activity in the game earns a player a reward? What form does that reward take? What can that reward be used for? In many traditional fantasy RPGs for example, characters are rewarded for defeating monsters. The reward takes the form of experience points and treasure. Experience points are used to make the character tougher by increasing his skills or level; and treasure is used to make the character tougher by giving him powerful items or the gold to buy powerful items. The effect is to render the character better able to defeat more monsters and thus earn more experience and treasure.

This circular system of rewards functions as the game's currency, or money. In the real world people pursue different ways of earning money, and then spend that money on the various products and services that are available. While playing the game, players will pursue various ways of earning game rewards, and then spend that reward in whatever manner the game makes available. The game's flavor text may say that the game is "about" something. But it is the system of rewards provided that determines how it will really be played.

The core mechanic of Universalis is its system of rewards. Beginning with the thought that these rewards function like a game's currency, Universalis uses Coins as its primary resource. They are spent to gain dramatic control over the story and all aspects of the game world itself. The entire game world is available for player creation and manipulation: geography, economics, politics, religion, and the people and creatures who populate it. Likewise the plot will be written, developed, and negotiated by the players through the mechanism of Coins.

The spending of Coins creates an entire Coin based economy to the game. As a player, you will notice that your play is different you are "wealthy" than when you are "strapped for cash". You will learn to keep a close eye on the "money supply" of the game and who is currently rich and who is currently poor. This economy is the driving factor behind the entire game. All game mechanics are essentially 1) a means of spending Coins, 2) a means of acquiring Coins, or 3) a means of settling disputes (in the absence of a Game Master) about how Coins are spent or acquired.

It is important to understand what Coins represent in Universalis, which may be most easily explained by what they are not. Coins are not a literal measure of in game character wealth, nor are they "Hero Points" which allow characters to achieve extraordinary feats. They are not a measure of Action Points, or who is more powerful. In fact, they are not associated with individual characters in any way.

What they are is very simply clout. Players as a group have ultimate authority over every single aspect of the game. Coins are a measure of how that authority is currently distributed among those players. You achieve control over the world and story by spending Coins. Your current Wealth is your store of potential authority for the future. This has great impact on play. If you spend a lot of Coins in a brief amount of time you'll have had tremendous impact over events and the scope of the world. However, your impact in the future will be more limited because you will now have fewer Coins relative to your fellows. Hoard Coins in order to have decisive control in the future (enough to win Challenges or Complications with ease) and you'll find a large part of the story has already been told, and a large part of the world defined without you. Balancing this dynamic is a key to play.

Universalis can be compared to a team of scriptwriters working on a TV show episode. Everyone has ideas of what they'd like to see in the show or how a scene should play out and many ideas are tried and discarded and batted around for commentary. What Universalis does is superimpose a game structure on this collaborative process, using Coins to measure each player's ability to contribute.

---Ralph Mazza



# The Importance of the Social Contract

Before the game begins, players are encouraged to establish a Social Contract, that is to get a consensus about individual play style preferences and expectations on the record in advance. Chapter Two mentions several features that can be included in a Social Contract. The Contract is an explicit acknowledgement that every group has its own dynamic. Everyone has their own preferences and their own expectations. They have their own ways of dealing with situations and with other players.

Preferences are a collection of things a player likes and dislikes. Often times if a game does not fit within a player's set of preferences there is not much to be done. Everyone is different, and everyone is entitled to like what they like. This means Universalis may not be for everyone. However, most of the time, preferences are flexible. There is usually a lot of gray area between features players insist on having and things they refuse to play with. This is where expectations come in.

Expectations are what a player believes he will be getting when he sits down to play. In any game, if a player's expectations aren't being fulfilled they are going to be dissatisfied with the experience. However, much of the disappointment can be avoided if players are clear about what they can expect from the game right at the start. Universalis offers a game that is unlike almost any other RPG out there. We think it is a damn good game: a lot of fun and a powerful story creating tool kit. However, if a player comes to the table expecting seafood and instead gets served a thick steak, he will likely be disappointed, regardless of how good a steak it was. The Social Contract is the way to make sure everyone knows what's on the menu. Items to discuss in a Social Contract include:

## Outside Distractions:

Some groups have no problems playing a game amidst many distractions. Other groups have very strict bans on things like cell phones, televisions, Monty Python jokes; or discussing sports, a favorite movie, or a new computer game. Some groups forbid food and beverages at the gaming table, and establish set break periods where the game halts at a predetermined time for such activities. One of the first parameters that should be established by any playgroup is its policy on distractions. A rambunctious, talkative group with lots of out of game camaraderie will present a very different play experience than one where such things are banned and total focus on the game is demanded. Players expecting one will be very disappointed if presented with the other.

## Table Talk:

Related to this is the idea of table talk. During a player's turn is it encouraged, permissible, discouraged, or even forbidden for other players to offer suggestions, reminders, or threaten retribution to the player taking his turn? Some groups will find that the story is more collaborative if collaboration is allowed at all times. Players can actually work together to help another player craft his turn in the best way possible. Other groups feel that such efforts stifle individual creativity and lead to bland predictable stories. Still others simply find that it's distracting, promotes too much chaos at the table, or allows powerful personalities to dominate play. Some will permit a suggestion or two if a player seems stumped but discourage it in general. Games will function much more smoothly if a group's attitude towards table talk is identified before hand.

## Game Rule Priorities:

How fast and loose vs. meticulous and detailed does the group as a whole desire to be with regards to game rules? Some groups will fall into the fast and loose category. They may get so absorbed with slinging around cool descriptions and clever plot twists that they forget to keep track of exactly how many Coins they're supposed to have spent. Later, when they realize this, they might be satisfied to

simply say "yeah, that would have been something like 6 Coins or thereabouts". Other groups will want to be far more meticulous in their accounting. They will explicitly cost out every detail and if the player is a Coin short, they'll expect him to cough up another one to make good. Either method can make for an entertaining game, but all players should be on the same page as to what to expect.

### **Pacing:**

Universalis is a game focused on the creative process in which brainstormed ideas serve to shape the game world's reality. The ability to Interrupt another player's turn to add details of your own, is a cornerstone of game play. Some individuals are not as quick as others at this and prefer a more deliberate pace where they have time to carefully think each item out and frame it "just so". Others are brainstorming dynamos spitting out ideas by the bushel. If your group includes a mix of these types, players should discuss in advance how to keep the "rapid fire" players from dominating play and leaving the "deliberate" players behind, and conversely how to keep the "rapid fire" players from getting bored with a more "deliberate" pace.

### **Adherence to Conventions:**

An important item to establish up front is how rigidly you plan on adhering to Game Structure decisions about genre and theme and the like. If the genre is one of Dark Horror, how much "humor" or silliness will be tolerated before the Challenge mechanic is used to drag the story back on course. If the genre is a gritty realistic police drama, how much tolerance will there be for over the top kung fu escapades and open flaunting of authority. Some groups couldn't care less and are willing to follow the story wherever it takes them. Other groups will demand players adhere to the setting and genre conventions as they've been established. Spelling this out up front, will save a lot of headaches and Challenges later on.

### **Level of Simulation:**

Universalis gives players a great deal of power to author and direct the story as they see fit. In this sense a player is much like a screen play writer bound only by his imagination and his budget. However, he is also bound by his ability to "sell" his ideas to the other players. When engaged in a scene, should players attempt to use their authority to ensure that the actions in the scene are "realistic" and reasonable? Is verisimilitude important to the game? Or are players free to be as outrageous and over the top as they desire? This is yet another issue that is almost sure to cause a great deal of conflict within a group if all of the players are not in accord. Many groups will expect the players to be self limiting. That is to say, each player voluntarily limits his own power to alter the world to what makes sense or is reasonable given that world's reality.

It is not expected that players will go down this list item by item and sign a written contract. In fact, if you're part of a well established group that has been playing together for a long time, you were probably able to recognize where your group already fits as you read through each item. Most likely many of the issues above have been tacitly assumed within your group for some time simply as a result of being familiar with each other. You may, however, have noticed an area or two in which there is some friction because players have different priorities. Or if you're part of a new group, you may not have a clear idea of what your fellow players preferences are.

Simply being aware that these differences (and many others) exist and that not everyone in your group will share the same view on them as you do can go a long way towards smoothing tensions. Often a simple discussion about an issue can resolve it before it becomes a major source of friction. These principles can be adopted to any game (or really any social activity at all).

Universalis, however, goes one step further. It allows (and encourages) social contract issues to be introduced as a rule in the game. Items like "no food at the table", or "no chit chat while a player is taking his turn", or "make sure we account for our Coin expenditures exactly" can be proposed as a Tenet of the game. If not Challenged by the other players it is now a rule of the game that the other players are expected to abide by and can be used as part of the Challenge or even Fine mechanic if necessary.

----Ralph Mazza

# More Details on Story Elements

## Genre:

*A category of literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, or content*

Genre is often one of the first choices that will be made in a game of Universalis. Universalis is truly a universal game, games can be about anything. Genre will help to define the style, form, and content of the game world. It will be the first indicator of what is or is not appropriate to create and do in the game. Genre conventions are those aspects of a genre that are recognizable characteristics of that particular genre. They may either be definable or too subtle for definition, but they are what make one genre feel different from another. As an example compare the detectives Sherlock Holmes and Poirot with Rick and AJ Simon and Thomas Magnum. Obviously there is a noticeable difference in feel between the adventures of Holmes and Poirot and those of Simon and Simon and Magnum PI. These differences are in the genre conventions.

At the macro level, genre encompasses major literary divisions of the type of categories you might find in a bookstore. Romance, is separate from fantasy which is separate from westerns which are separate from science fiction. When someone in a game of Universalis declares "tonight we are playing a Murder Mystery", he is setting the genre of the game. Other common genres might include: cyberpunk, horror, anime, spy thriller, kung fu action, Hollywood action, or something else more exotic.

At the sub level, genre can be broken down further. Fantasy, for instance might be more specifically defined as "Swords and Sorcery" (ala Howard and Liebler), "High Fantasy" (ala Tolkein and Jordan), Dark Fantasy (ala Moorcock), or even "Historical Fantasy". Science Fiction might be based on near future hard science, or it might be a sweeping space opera. Westerns might be about cavalry and Indians, or cowboys, or pioneers, or prospectors or gunslingers.

We suggest that when a player first introduces a genre he specify only the macro level genre leaving the sub genre to be specified on a later turn or by another player.

## Theme:

*An implicit or recurrent idea. What a piece of writing or artistic work is about*

Themes are useful tools to ascribe to a game of Universalis. They don't so much determine plot as they suggest what the purpose of the over all plot should be. Themes can generally be summed in just a sentence or two. A game's theme might be about "the struggle against tyranny", "the search for redemption", "vengeance", "vindication", "survival", "the struggle to maintain tradition in the face of change", "the decent of greatness into decadence", "the corrupting influence of power", "the loss of innocence". These are just samples, but hopefully they've sparked some ideas of your own. Players are encouraged to frame scenes and Originate Complications (explained in Chapter 6) which serve to illustrate the story's theme. This will help give focus to the story and help keep it from being simply a collection of events happening to a group of characters.

Universalis is a game about telling stories. Theme can be thought of as the reason you are telling this particular story. Besides the entertainment value, what message might you try to convey, what avenues of the psyche might be explored. What hidden moral might be pursued. What commentary are you making about the nature of life. Plot is a tool through which you will explore theme. Theme is the reason you are taking the journey.

## Premise:

*A proposition antecedently supposed or proved; a basis of argument.  
A proposition stated or assumed as leading to a conclusion*

In his seminal work, *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, Lajos Egri introduced the world of theatre to the idea of premise. Premise is very similar to theme but to Egri it is much more powerful, decisive and less open to misinterpretation. The goal of any good play must be to prove its premise and all aspects of the play must be focused on leading the audience to that conclusion. Offered as examples are premises such as: "great love defies even death", "Blind trust leads to destruction", "Jealousy destroys itself and the object of its love".

To Egri, premise trumps both situation and emotion. "No idea, and no [unusual] situation was ever strong enough to carry you through to its logical conclusion without a clear-cut premise". "No emotion ever made, or ever will make, a good [story] if we do not know what kind of forces set emotion going". Both situation and emotion are necessary but a story only becomes great if these are both focused on proving a premise.

The idea of premise must go through some alterations if it is to be applied to role-playing. In the theatre, the playwright is separate from the audience. The playwright must be convinced of the truth of his premise and must do all in his power to prove that premise to the audience. Role playing games are far more interactive, and in games like *Universalis* the players are both playwright and audience.

The Forge has been the leading proponent of adapting and applying the concept of premise to Narrativist RPGs. The adaptation takes the form of altering the idea of premise as a truth to be proven to one of a truth to be uncovered and discovered through play. In other words, in a role playing game, the premise is not a statement of fact but rather a question or inquiry. The answer to the question is explored through the game and the results of game play.

For role playing purposes then, the above example premises might be restated in the following manner: "Can great love survive in the face of great opposition and even death?"; "Can anyone, even family, ever be trusted completely and without question?"; or "At what point does strong desire stop being a motivator and start being self destructive?" The answers, rather than being decided by the playwright (GM) and proved to the audience (players), are instead unknown until the players decide for themselves based on the results of their role-playing experience what lesson is to be learned.

Narrative Premise is an exceedingly sophisticated role-playing technique. It is not one that will be mastered easily. It is also certainly not required for a role-playing game to be enjoyable. But it is a technique that can turn an enjoyable experience into a truly powerful and moving one. Egri indicates that it is not necessary to establish the premise first, that it is possible to have the sketch of a story in mind, and from that derive a suitable premise. Likewise in *Universalis*, premise may be left until a suitable one shows itself in the story before being introduced as a Game Structure element. For maximum effectiveness, however, if it is to be used at all, it should be introduced early on and all players should endeavor to stay focused on it thereafter.

## **Situation:**

*The relative position or combination of circumstances at a certain moment in time.  
A critical, problematic, or unusual state of affairs.  
A particular or important complex of affairs at a given point in the action of a narrative*

If theme or premise is the driving factor behind the meaning and importance of plot, then situations are the specific facts leading up to it. Situation is what gets the story going. It provides the starting place from which players can begin to narrate. Most episodes of *The Twilight Zone* began with an introduction something like: "Picture this, a small town. A town, like any other town in middle America; and a day like any other day. Until today ♦" These opening remarks defined the situation that was going to be explored in that episode.

Traditionally, situation has been the focus (often the exclusive focus) of RPGs. Many a game campaign begins simply by the GM framing a situation and the players deciding how to react to it.

Similarly, games of Universalis must have a situation. There must be some starting point to focus players' attention and act as a catalyst for the rest of the action. Universalis can also be played exclusively as focused on situation created by one player and responded to by another. Hopefully some of this section will have offered ideas on how to incorporate other story elements into the game as well..

Situations may simply be a jumping off point from which the players begin before taking the story in any direction desired. This is often a fun and enjoyable means of playing. However, situation can also be used to provide an overarching story arc to the campaign. The direction of the entire game might be established by the resolution of a specific initial situation.

## **Setting:**

*the time, place, and circumstances in which something occurs or develops.*

Setting is often closely tied to Genre and Situation. Setting does not refer to a specific location but more to the period, style, and color of the story that will pervade all of the locations. For example the setting might be that the story takes place on a stark, harsh prison planet, or in a fairy tale kingdom amidst the clouds, or in 17th century France, or in Texas right after the fall of the Alamo.

If a player has a specific location in mind that he wants to create during the Game Preparation Phase (see Chapter Two), he can do so, but only after a setting has been accepted.

Note that it is entirely possible for players to use an established and well known setting for their game of Universalis. They may model the setting after a favorite movie, a series of novels, or the setting of another RPG. If this is done, many of the genre convention and mood choices will already be made.

There are three basic ways of using a pre existing setting in Universalis.

The first is the "Inspired by" method. This method most closely resembles a standard game of Universalis in that the game starts with no Components (see Chapter Four) being predefined. Rather the players play as they would any Universalis game but take their cues from the established setting. Locations and characters and organizations and such can be created when needed and loosely based on the inspirational setting.

The second method is "full conversion". In this case a selection of key locations, characters, and other important features of an existing world are taken and defined in terms of Universalis Traits and Facts before game play actually begins. Play begins with a substantial number of Components already in existence and already defined according to their actual capabilities in the converted setting.

The third way is actually highly encouraged, and that is to use a previous session of Universalis as the existing setting. In other words each game can continue to build on the world created and defined before. Players may wish to move to a slightly different geographical location, fast forward to different point in history, or even use the events of the previous game as part of the legends and mythology of the new one. In this way playgroups can write their own trilogies and decologies of stories.

## **Mood:**

*A conscious state of mind or predominant feeling. A distinctive atmosphere or context*

Mood very well may be the most pervasive story element in Universalis. Players who select and agree to a mood (especially if the Social Contract calls for it to be strictly enforced) are influencing virtually every scene and Complication that will take place during the game. This even includes creating the elements of the world itself, as visual imagery and the appearance of those elements goes a long way towards establishing mood.

Mood is often closely tied to genre. In fact, mood may well be part of the conventions of a particular genre. Mood is what sets a police drama like Hill Street Blues apart from a show like CHiPs. Mood is what made Miami Vice a sensation. It is the dark and brooding angst ridden mood of neo-gothism that made Vampire: The Masquerade one of the most widely played RPGs of all time.

Games can be full of in your face attitude, wit, or even silly. Despite similarities in genre, clearly the mood of Rush Hour is much different from that of The Dead Pool. The mood of Star Wars is much different from that of Blade Runner. Mood often evokes a particular emotional response: despair, humor, hardness, grit, hyperactivity, and silliness are just some examples. Stories told with a consistent mood throughout will be much more memorable and less disjointed than those whose mood fluctuates widely. A player expecting a game of serious soul searching will be greatly disappointed by a rampaging farce and vice versa.

## **Realism:**

*Fidelity to nature, fact, and reality and to accurate representation without abstraction*

The level of realism is another facet that players should agree upon. Few factors are as likely to cause disharmony among players than differing priorities regarding realism. Some players get a great amount of enjoyment from establishing the precise differences and effects on game play between a 9mm Beretta and a .45 Automatic. Some desire an exact accounting of the money that characters spend and the items they have on them at the time. Some want to know the acceleration limits of a sports car, and precisely what handling penalty is incurred for a wet road. Some players desire to establish how a suit of plate mail protects differently from a suit a chain mail when faced with a heavy bludgeoning weapon. It may become important to them to see these differences reflected in the actual Events and dice mechanics of the game.

Other players care little for the real world statistics of what, to them, are merely story props. A gun shoots until its dramatically interesting to run out of bullets, nobody dies unless there is a good story reason for them to do so. Travel times are based on the need to arrive in the nick of time not on encumbrance and terrain features. MacGyver really can make a bomb out of bubble gum and a paperclip, but only when it ♦s dramatic to do so. So what if Arnold walks calmly out in front of a dozen trained soldiers who all have automatic weapons and doesn ♦t suffer a scratch ♦hey he ♦s the star right?

The game of Universalis plays most smoothly with the latter sort of attitude towards realism than the former. However, given the level of authority players have over the game direction, it is within their power to ensure the choices and decisions they make adhere to whatever standard of realism they choose. Deliberate use of advantageous and disadvantageous Traits can be made to illustrate the performance differences between a Ferrari and a Corvette, or a grenade and a stick of TNT, or a masonry wall and a steel reinforced concrete barrier. Rules Gimmicks, (which are basically player decided customized house rules) allow for the establishment of effects like fire vs. concussion, impaling vs. slashing, or anything else players can imagine. It should be noted here, that while the core rules of Universalis do permit this sort of realism, they do not offer any details or guidance on how to accomplish it. It is assumed that players who prefer a high level of realism normally play games that provide a high degree of realism and thus already have experience with how things should or shouldn ♦t work in game terms. We leave it to those players to manipulate the rules of Universalis to create the effects they desire.

## **Role:**

*A part played or a character assumed with a socially expected pattern of behavior determined by an individual ♦s status in the story.*

All Components in Universalis have a role. Role is the first Trait that must be defined for any Component. For most Components Role is pretty self explanatory ♦ a gun has a Role of "gun" (or perhaps some specific model of gun). This discussion will concentrate on the roles of characters in Universalis.

All stories involve characters and all characters have a role to play in the story. Role indicates (although it doesn't restrict) much of what the character ♦s purpose in the story is. A role can indicate an occupation like "battle hardened ex-soldier" or simply carry story weight like "scrappy sidekick". Roles can be virtually anything, but every character should have one. Example roles include: wizened old hermit, wise old mentor, hard-boiled hero, wise cracking assistant, or buddy partner. However, Universalis supports a wide range of less clich ♦d roles as well. A character may be the ghost of another character ♦s father, or even a favorite pet. In one of our play test sessions a character was given the role of a sentient starship. Villains, of course, also have roles to play. Even lesser characters have a role to play in the story, even if its only as "Thug # 3"

Role is always the first Trait to be assigned to a character. The reason for this is to define a narrative territory for a character that other players should act within when controlling that character. Since you will be manipulating the game world and story line primarily (although not exclusively) through characters and their Traits, a character ♦s place in that world and story will heavily influence the nature of those manipulations. The type of narrative you as a player will create while controlling the "Lantern jawed hero", will be decidedly different from that which you create while controlling "Joey, the eager boy scout". Roles are crucial to establishing what sort of story involvement the character should have. Players should use these when narrating the story as guidelines for what sort of activities they should be engaging in and how much "camera time" should be focused on each character. Side kicks, may periodically have the story focused on them (as is often done in television) but by and large the primary story should be being told about the protagonist.

If a player has an idea for a specific character at this point it can be Created now, but only after a Role has been established for him.

---Ralph Mazza



# Using Challenges to Regulate the Game

In a game with no Game Master, one might wonder who decides what is appropriate and what isn't? Who decides, amongst many players competing to put forth their own view of how the story should progress, which vision gets realized? Who decides when a player's "creative interpretations" of the rules is spoiling the gaming experience for others? In Universalis that's where the Challenge mechanic comes in.

First it should be noted that the Challenge mechanic goes hand in hand with the Social Contract and the selection of appropriate Story Elements in the Game Preparation Phase. If those things are complete, then most players should already be on the same page about what to expect and what is considered appropriate. If these steps are skipped, then everyone will be running off in their own directions and may not understand or appreciate the directions of others. While this sort of totally free form and chaotic game play can be fun (and can also result in some of the most powerfully creative and bizarre games you can imagine), it too is best established in advance that this is how the group intends to play. Giving some thought to Social Contract issues and complete set of Story Elements will go a long way to avoiding unnecessary Challenges because your players will already have a good idea about what is likely to be Challenged and what isn't.

The importance of the Negotiation phase of a Challenge can not be stressed enough. By far, the majority of Challenges in the game should never make it to the bidding stage. Most Challenges are the result of a player taking a dislike to something another player is doing, or thinking they can do a better job themselves. Often times, the acting player will be willing to make adjustments to what they are doing to enhance the enjoyment of their fellow players. They may actually agree that the other player's idea is a better one than their own and will welcome the suggestion. They may just be willing to compromise for no other reason than the expectation of similar consideration in the future. Sometimes they may even convince the Challenging player to drop the Challenge because their way is better. If any of these are true, no bidding ever needs to occur.

Since Challenges do not require an Interruption of a player's turn, most of them can be quite informal. In fact, many playgroups already engage in some degree of kibitzing and friendly suggestions to other players in all of their games. They may not even realize that this sort of activity is part of a formal Challenge mechanic in Universalis.

Only if absolutely no accord can be reached do you have to resort to bidding, and even then a quick straw poll may be enough to estimate who the likely winner of such bidding would be, causing one side to concede. Using Coins for the bidding is a way of causing you to put your money where your mouth is. If your opinion on a Challenge item isn't strong enough to be worth paying for, it isn't worth delaying the game for either. Allowing all players to participate in the bidding ensures that the preferences of the entire audience are represented.

While the most basic use of the Challenge mechanic is to prevent players from violating the rules or agreed upon Story Elements, it should not be thought of as purely confrontational. In fact, the Challenge is a powerful collaborative tool enabling all players to ring in on how they'd like to see a particular Component or plot point developed. Negotiation backed by bidding is designed to allow the players to achieve consensus even if they don't all agree on every detail.

Fines should not be overlooked as tool either. It is a tool of last resort, but one that fills a very important function in the game. Unlike Challenges it does not employ Coins so there is no bias in favor

of the rich. The Fine mechanic gives every player equal voice as an audience member to vote their displeasure (or lack of displeasure) with a player's behavior.

The actual penalty is a modest one. The primary use of Fines is as a gauge of player sentiment. If a player repeatedly engages in play behavior that other players find dissatisfying, the first step should be Negotiations, moving on to full bidding Challenges if necessary. If neither of these has the desired effect, a Fine, especially one universally levied by all other players, can serve as clear and unmistakable notice that the behavior is not appreciated. Conversely, if there is a behavior that you find intolerable, but when you calls for a Fine the other players do not vote in favor of it, you now clearly realize that your distaste is not shared by the rest of the group and it is a behavior you'll have to live with if you're to continue playing. What the Fine mechanic does is serve as a formal adjustment to a players expectations. A player who expected to play a certain way is told in no uncertain terms that the other players have different expectations. A Fine that is not supported by the other players informs the initiating player that the activity is acceptable to them and that he is the one who must adjust his expectations.

Through the Challenge and Fine mechanic, Social Contract items can be recognized, addressed, and ruled upon during game play until all players are familiar with the expectations of the group.

---Ralph Mazza

# The Purpose of Complications

In our Discussion Forum, Ed Heil asked: "One thing that seems vital that is a little hard to get into is exactly what Complications are for and how they work. They're clearly at or near the heart of the game, but they have no exact parallel in any other RPG"

Complications are indeed a key facet of the game. Here are some of the ways in which we've used them. If you've found some other good uses for them, [let us know](#).

## 1) An idea starter:

Sometimes you have a scene with a lot of potential but you don't have a clear idea what direction to take it, or how best to spice it up. One way of doing this is by Originating a Complication. The act of Drawing upon Traits (and which Traits get Drawn on) can provide a lot of interesting details to the action when it comes time to resolve the Complication. Often whole new branching story ideas can come from how players responded to an otherwise innocuous Complication.

## 2) An alternative to Challenges:

Complications can be used to guide a story another player is telling in a desired direction without resorting to Challenging that player or Interrupting them completely. Rather, a Complication can be used to introduce elements into a scene and force other players to react to those elements.

## 3) To introduce a certain degree of challenge or difficulty:

Sometimes in the course of a narrative a player may be having the hero perform all kinds of high flying actions (or even not so high flying). At some point you may want to interject a very traditional concept of "hey let's make him roll to see if he succeeds at that). This is where the Obstacle Complication comes in. When another player is narrating an Event and you want to interject an element of uncertainty into the outcome you can Originate an Obstacle Challenge. The twist is that the roll doesn't determine success / failure of the Event directly. Rather it determines which player (or combination of players) gets to decide how the Event happens.

## 4) Another means of adding an element of suspense to the game:

Which player wins will often make a big difference in the direction the story goes. That this is determined with a dice mechanic can add an element of unknown and surprise.

## 5) As a way of generating new Coins:

Complications are one of only two ways to earn additional Coins in the game. The interesting detail of how this works is that it encourages you to base Complications off of elements that already exist in the story (which helps maintain consistency). It does this because of the way Complications work. The more dice you roll, the more likely you are to get more Coins out. Also the Winner statistically should average 1.5 times the Coin output of the Loser and the more dice you roll, the more likely you are to win. So obviously, more dice in should lead to more Coins out. There are 2 ways of getting more dice. One way is to buy them at 1 Coin each. However, if you are paying Coins for most of the Dice in your Pool, your net profits will likely be slim (or even a loss if you wind up Losing the roll). So the better way is to get most of your dice from Traits that are already present in the scene. Someone else paid to put those Traits there (or you Introduce a Component that has many useable Traits for just 1 Coin) and you capitalize on their presence.

If you can arrange a situation where you are rolling a lot of dice for which you paid very little: a) you are likely to reap great profits allowing you to pocket those Coins you earn in excess of those you use to bring the Complication to a satisfying resolution, and b) the Complication is likely to be consistent with the story being told because it was built from elements that already exist in the scene.

## 6) And, in point of fact, I find them to just be flat out fun.

---Ralph Mazza

# Traits, Challenges and Enforcing Story Logic

Sometimes a game of Universalis can get somewhat chaotic. Because the story is driven forward by the input of several different people things can from time to time start to look a bit piecemeal. Different players can have different ideas about what the main character is like, or even who is the main character. As a result the story can start to drift to and fro as if buffeted by gale force winds every time a new player takes a turn.

Sometimes this can be a lot of fun. Some of the most entertainingly bizarre games I've played have been when people just cut loose and go where ever the brainstorming madness takes them. However, other times this sort of play is inappropriate and may detract from some players enjoyment of the game. Universalis provides many ways to bring focus and vision to the story, this essay is going to concentrate on one of the more subtle, and I've found, underused methods: Traits.

Every player knows what effect Traits have in Complications. They are a source of free dice to roll. They have a noticeable and measurable impact. But what about outside of Complications? Are they just words on a sheet meant to serve only as a storage place for dice?

In a recent thread on our discussion forum, veteran player Tony Irwin explained how to use Traits as a powerful tool for articulating your vision of a character and how to see that that vision is followed by the other players.

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[equals notations by me to Tony's original post]

Tony Irwin:

I've seen people use characters/components that were central to the story, in ways that were upsetting to others; either because they were using them purely to win coins (and the coins weren't even being used to fund anything) or they were using them with disregard for the story logic that other players took for granted.

What we came up with was that Traits should be viewed not just as "situational modifiers" either giving or removing a dice, but that *clever* selection of Traits can be used to enforce story logic. For example:

I give Frankie the trait "loves Johnnie"

Now I get a die when Frankie is protecting Johnnie or I can probably remove a die from someone if they try to make Frankie attack Johnnie.

But what people forget is that any time someone uses one of these characters in a way that seems to defy that Trait, I can Challenge for it. I just say "Frankie loves Johnnie, so Frankie wouldn't do that". My coins are worth 2 for every 1 of theirs. People forget that I can Challenge the Complication before it ever gets as far as building dice pools.

[Players often forget that all Traits are automatically Facts] You just declare a fact "Frankie loves Johnnie" or "Norgoth feels betrayed by the zombies" or even "Norgoth is slow to anger", and now you have the option to enforce some story logic when people want to introduce Complications [or just narrate something contradictory]

The thing about facts is that they re very obviously control mechanisms for your vision of the story. As soon as you introduce one, everyone (that I play with) starts thinking "How will this affect me and my interests".

I m going to share a really sneaky secret...

Bid ten coins to get to Frame the scene. Use however many coins you need to get some basic stuff in the scene. Then use the rest of those coins to create Facts that complement and supplement each other. No one can Interrupt while you re framing the scene until you ve initiated an Event. Another time to do this is after winning a Complication when you get your uninterrupted opportunity to spend the Coins you won.

Because your Facts supplement each other if someone later says "Here s a coin to get rid of the Frankie loves Johnny fact" then you ve still got 3 other Facts as a basis to challenge them doing that.

e.g.

Frankie loves Johnny

He was her man

She paid 100 hundred dollars for Johnny s new suit of clothes

She loves her man

[Now you ve got a key relationship in the story sewn up tight, and can use the Challenge rule with the double Coin bonus if other players try to violate this relationship]. All that people can do is to Challenge your Facts one by one as you introduce them (if you can even slip the first one by them then you ve pretty much ensured you re in there to stay unless the whole table turns on you), or have a big vote to penalize you if they feel you re "at it" and Fine you coins. (I ve seen that happen).

Yeah people can, and will, still take Control of these characters [and use them in ways you didn t expect] but at least now you can pressure them to make sure that their Complications [and narrations] are appropriate to what you envision for the characters and so aren t disruptive to the game.

Once we discovered how to generate lots of Coins [with big Complications] we were very worried that we d broken the system but soon we discovered ways to balance that (and balance it just by playing the rules as written - no Rules Gimmicks required).

Facts really changed the way I look at Complications. Previously I d be going into a Complication thinking "How many Coins can I win and keep for my little bank". Now I actually think in terms of "Exactly how many Coins do I *need* to win in this in order to get my Facts (and events and all the other stuff) into this game during the resolution".

Same goes for framing scenes. I ve played lots of games where no-one was bothered about who framed the scene. If you didn t have anything you especially wanted do then the default

bid was 0, because we figured "If I need to I can just take Control". Now however, I and a couple of friends have twigged that framing a scene (and spending Coins when resolving a conflict) is actually the most powerful phase of the game. Its important sometimes just to bid high to *stop* one of your buddies getting the chance to do something wicked!

Disclaimer: I know that all sounds terribly competitive as if we re playing for money rather than trying to make a story! But actually all that stuff about using Facts to control the game, and also framing scenes is just a way of clarifying "This is what I want the story to be about, and as an equal partner in this game I m willing to commit myself this much (in Coins) to seeing it go this way". We do create great stories and have a wonderful time doing so!  
Honest!

Tony

---

What Tony had hit upon is a masterful use of Traits in the game. Traits provide the structure to the whole story. Build a network of relationships with your characters. Who hates who and why. Who is loyal, who is subservient. Who leads, who follows. Give the characters a set of personality Traits that establishes behavior parameters. Who is devious, who is honest, who is secretly jealous, who harbors an old resentment, who is gullible, who has trouble controlling their temper, who consults a psychic before making tough decisions.

Go a step further and actually record goals and objectives. What does the character want. What is the character willing or not willing to do to get it e.g. "More than anything Stacy wants money, she s willing to betray her husband, lie to her family, cheat her employer, but she would never do anything to hurt her son" Depending on your play group the above may be anywhere from 2 to 5 distinct Traits. You ve not only solidified your vision of the character for the other players (who most often will be more than happy to work with your directorial cues, but you ve also got a solid foundation for Challenging players who try to take the character somewhere you d rather not go.

Broaden your thinking beyond the characters into the organizations or factions that make up the backdrop of the game. Even locations can have Traits beyond simply the descriptive "dark and spooky". What about a Zen garden that enhances "Tranquility and Calm". A street corner where "anything can be had for a price". A bar that s "prone to violent knifings"

If you find someone doing something with a character or other Component that seems radically different from what you had in mind, take a look at the list of Traits you gave it. Did you provide enough Traits to give the other players a sense of what you d been thinking? Most of us aren t mind readers after all. When another player turns your dynamic femme fatale into a sad subservient doormat check the Traits. Is there anything there that the other player s description is contradicting that you can use to bolster a Challenge? If not, there probably should have been. Fortunately in Universalis its a relatively simple matter to invent a new character to be your heroine and make sure you fill the record sheet with Traits reflecting your vision.

If you haven t spent Coin on it...it isn t true.

----Ralph Mazza

# The Importance of Tenets

I have personally experienced cases where individual players have gone through tenet phases without adding anything substantial to the set of tenets, while other players have added things that they were excited about. In fact, I've been that player once or twice. And I've observed the same phenomenon in all of these cases - the player in question basically drops out of the game. Oh, they may participate nominally. But they don't have the energy that the players who put in "real" tenets do. They'll pass a lot, and they'll tend to only add a little color here, jump in on complications with secondary pools, etc. and never really instigate conflict. They may create characters, but these don't seem to end up going anywhere - even other players don't "get" the point of the characters.

It's not enough simply to agree tacitly to the other players' tenets, either. Or even just modify them via challenge. These indicate a superficial interest in playing what's being thought up, but not the kind of investment that you really want a player to have. RPGs have a sort of "problem" in that the material that's produced is really only engaging if you are invested in that material. Audiences of RPGs (and worse, readers of transcripts of RPG play) note that they find such output to be rather boring. It takes a long time to produce action, and the process is so visible, generally, that it's not at all like watching TV or similar media. The only time these sorts of games are fun is when you're actively participating because you have invested in what's going on.

Universalis has a method to make such an investment explicitly. Instead of the general agreement that you have in most games simply to play the material that's provided, Universalis doesn't provide any material up front that the player might invest in. The players have to produce it themselves. And, again, tacitly accepting other's Tenets is not a sign of investment. It's a sign that the tenets are inoffensive at best. The only way to know that a player is really going to be engaged is if they get that bright look in their eyes as they toss a Coin in and say something like, "But the monkeys are intelligent!" That's the point at which you know that the participant has made the game, in part, theirs. And that they'll have a real personal interest in making it come out in an interesting fashion.

Interestingly, I find that if you skip the tenet phase entirely, this works too. Essentially everyone is agreeing to a big gimmick in which you all are agreeing to walk the tightrope without a net. Just being in on such a bold dare seems to engage people. And what happens then is that people understand that the tenets are really going to be established in the first few turns that each player takes as they happen in play. This dynamic can work well.

The point is that the tenet phase, even if omitted, must be an agreement forged amongst all the players about what will be fun to play. If any individual player is not an active participant in coming up with the totality, they simply won't be as engaged as the players who have invested a bit of their creativity in determining what the game will be about.

So don't let a player fall by the wayside. If you see them floundering during the tenet phase, don't succumb to the temptation to close the phase and just "get on with it." And don't accept just any mailed-in tenets, either. If a player doesn't seem to have an idea, they might be tempted to just toss something out there that comes to mind, but which they aren't really interested in, just to have completed a social obligation to appear to have invested. Make sure

you get that bright-eyed look from them before you head into play. This might only be one tenet if it s important enough. But you ll know it when you see it.

----Mike Holmes



# Telling Straight Stories

A common experience with Universalis is for play to wind up silly, or bizarre, or a strange mishmash of competing genres. This is perfectly normal for initial games. Folks confronting Universalis for the first time often require a bit of a "shake-down cruise" to grow comfortable; comfortable both with the rules and with opening ones own creativity up to the judgment and appreciation of ones peers. It can be a daunting task to realize that you aren't there "to be entertained" but instead to actually participate in the entertainment. Often times the safest play is to retreat into silliness so that any criticism can be shrugged off.

Eventually, however, new players realize that the friends they're playing with (if they're worth playing with at all) aren't there to be critical and judgmental but to enjoy the experience of co-authoring a story. They learn that it's ok to delve into drama and tragedy and try to create stories of poignancy and beauty. And they especially learn that it's ok to fail at creating such stories, because the experience of the shared creative journey is its own reward. That and when you do finally hit on one of those special moments when every one leans back a little stunned and speechless it will be all worthwhile.

But what can you do to help the process along? What advice is there for people who want to tell a "serious" story using Universalis?

**First:** play a couple of games of Uni completely open without any expectation of getting to a story that is even marginally good literature. As noted above it can take a few games for players to get their feet under them, figure out the flexibility of the system, and get comfortable with the level of ownership and responsibility they have. Early games have a tendency towards farce because it's easier to generate low humor than high drama and less embarrassing when one "screws up". Once players get over the fear of "screwing up" I've found them much more prone to generating good meaty stories.

**Second:** pay especial attention to the [Tenets](#) being established. If one wants serious play it's necessary to first identify what specifically makes a story "serious" to you, and then ensure that those things get created as Tenets. Emulating an example from literature is a good basic start. There is nothing wrong with a Tenet like: "This story will be like Wuthering Heights", or "It's set in Dickensonian London".

Even better is to identify what it is about Wuthering Heights or Dickensonian London you find most appealing and make the Tenets about that. The more specific and actionable, the better. Pick your Tenets with an eye towards leading to similar situations in the game.

Something like "All true love affairs must end tragically", "Every character must have a romantic interest in another character as a Trait", "Every character who is married must have a trait that expresses dissatisfaction with their spouse", "Every character must identify another character as their confidant whom they'll tell everything to as a Trait".

Gimmicks are a great way of introducing some specific genre flavor into the game. Imagine a Gimmick where the protagonist's own conscience is created as a separate character. How perfect for a character like Hamlet.

**Third:** Traits, Traits, Traits. Choose Traits that evoke the genre you're trying to achieve. If you're playing in Dickens' London, create Traits that could come right from the pages of a Dickens novel.

Consider:

Flora (1 Coin)

Pick Pocket (1 Coin)

Heart of Gold (1 Coin)

Mother (1 Coin) is dying of Tuberculosis (1 Coin)

But don't limit yourself to just a static list of attributes. What role is Flora meant to play. Sure we know she's a pickpocket, but so what. Traits that express relationships with other characters are especially powerful and especially effective at keeping stories from veering off into the space. When no one has any clear idea of what to do next, people start brainstorming, and raw brainstorming can lead to silliness. Creating a tangled web of relationships with Traits means players will always have a notion of what to do next, simply advance those relationships. This will cut down on those groundless flights of fancy in a hurry.

Consider the effect of adding a Trait like "Has a romantic interest in Flora" to the school teacher. Consider how this will likely play out much differently than adding "Believes the school teacher is sweet on me" as a Trait to Flora. All you have to do is throw Flora's friend Jane (who is "Jealous" and "has a crush on the school teacher") into the mix along with the teacher's wife and peers and every player at the table will be instantly chock full of possibilities for the next scene. Possibilities that are entirely in keeping with the desired genre because the selected Traits are all pointing the way.

And don't stop there. Give some thought beyond characterization to why you, as an author, even want this character in the story to begin with. What is Flora's purpose? Is she there to be the exemplar of innocence in stark contrast with the corruption of the other characters? Is she there to provide light comic relief? Is she there to be the one sympathetic character whose tragic story tugs at the heart strings?

Any of these can make splendid Traits. Not only will they serve as guideposts to the other players as to how Flora should be used but they'll give you the weight of Fact to back up any use that doesn't conform.

Consider the difference between adding "Perpetually sweet and Innocent" and "Her happiness is always fleeting" as Traits. Consider the effect of adding both.

Once players are ready to take their Universalis play beyond superficial pastiches of assorted genre tropes effective use of Tenets and Traits will pave the way for stories of startling power and depth. Not every time, to be sure. It would be unreasonable to expect works the caliber of Bronte or Dickens every time you sit around the table with friends. But I bet you'll wind up with stories of much greater caliber than you imagine.

----Ralph Mazza

# Game Preparation Add-ons

Some optional rules that change the way the Game Preparation Phase is handled.

## **Additional Coin Refreshment Before First Scene**

Submitted by [Roy Penrod](#)

In the core rules, Refreshment occurs at the end of a scene and before the next scene begins. This means that there is no Refreshment before the first scene. Players begin the first scene with whatever Coins they have remaining after the Game Preparation phase (Chapter 2).

With this Gimmick, groups can allow a standard Refresh before the very first scene of a game to give everyone a few more Coins to start actual play with.

### VARIANT

Instead of a standard Refresh, reset each player's Wealth back to its starting value (25 Coins is the default) before the first scene. This will encourage players to really spend Coins to add additional detail to the setting during the Game Preparation Phase since any Coins not spent then are wasted since everyone will be reset back to full.

In the core rules the starting Wealth for each player is set before the Game Preparation phase (Chapter 2). The default is Refreshment occurs

Coins refresh to 25 before the first scene is bid on (applies to the first session only).

*---I really like this one and intend to use it for my own games, Ralph.*

## **Setting Creation Phase**

Submitted by [Mike Holmes](#)

After the normal Game Preparation Phase, but before the first scene is framed, insert a new special Setting Creation Phase. Give each player a separate pool of 25 Coins (or more if you like) just for this phase. During this phase only setting information can be generated. This includes, but is not limited to, declaring Tenets that relate to the setting, Creating Components that exist within the setting, and establishing a variety of Facts related to historical events. Anything is possible really, as long as the player can rationalize it as setting development (and the other players do not challenge). The phase will continue until all players have either spent all of their Coins, or until all players pass (or the phase can be extended at that point with a new gimmick). At which point any unspent coins are returned to the Bank.

### NOTES

Use this Add-on for a game that emphasizes a more developed setting before play begins. This is a more involved version of Roy's Coin refreshing Add-on above.

### OPTIONS

One can also insert separate special phases to address characters, or to develop a detailed situation or premise. Whatever you think needs more attention.

## **Serial Game Structure**

Submitted by [Roy Penrod](#)

Declare that a game is to be part of an ongoing series of sessions. Players are required to leave at least one plot thread dangling to be picked up at the start of the next session.

## NOTES

I use this Rules Gimmick to add a serial structure to a campaign game of Universalis. It's really just a reminder to make sure we leave a plot thread dangling so we have something to look forward to next session.

## Metagame Jobs

Submitted by [Mike Holmes](#)

These Gimmicks can be established at any time, but are least disruptive to institute during the Game Preparation phase. Essentially, a player may be designated with a title and certain responsibilities for which he receives some scheduled remuneration in Coins.

The game pays the player Coins from the Bank to perform certain duties. The payment can be received on a per scene basis; or, for multi-session games, at the beginning or end of each session. It can be on a "per item produced" basis, or any other schedule of payment. The amount and timing should be well designated as well as the nature of the duties. Gimmicks can also be instituted, of course, to terminate any such contract between a player and the game.

Some sample jobs:

- Record keeper - Potentially onerous depending on the speed of play, this player is responsible for taking notes on the game. He records all Components created, all their Traits, and all Facts, and organizes their presentation so that he can recount details when necessary. Having one player do all this (as opposed to each player making his own notes) makes recalling records easier, and frees the other players from note taking leaving them less distracted.
- Librarian - often the same player as the record keeper if there is one, this player is responsible for keeping all notes between sessions of play. If there is no sole record keeper, he collects the notes from each player. The downside to the librarian is that he must be present at every session, or have his archive accessible for play. Else play is very difficult.
- Illustrator - players can sell articles of art created during the game or between sessions to the game on a "freelance" basis. Truly gifted artists might be able to do a running account in which case they could be paid per scene, theoretically.
- Journal Writer - between sessions a player can write the reflections of a character into a fictional journal entry. These can be submitted like art for payment.
- Disc Jockey - a player can be paid to act as DJ for a session, ensuring that a constant supply of appropriate music (or sound effects) is provided. Discuss well with the group what music is appropriate before hiring a DJ, and promptly fire a DJ that gets out of hand.
- Host - consider paying the host of the session a fee to account for the problems associated with having the players over.
- Caterer - similar to the host, payment can be assigned for food brought to share.
- Prop Master - players can be paid for creation of interesting and evocative props.

## Multiple Tenets

Submitted by [Ralph Mazza](#)

Over the course of many games, one of the most frequently forgotten rules is the rule that limits a player to Proposing only one Tenet on their turn. This rule was designed to make sure that all players had an equal opportunity to set the Tenets for the game by limiting each player to just a single idea at a time. As it turns out some ideas require more than 1 Tenet to express properly (especially Story Elements involving adding Traits to Components) and so it's become commonplace in many groups to allow players to introduce multiple Tenets on their turn so long as they're all related to the same basic idea

## Seed Element

Submitted by [Adam Kelly](#)

Discussed in [This Thread](#), this is one of those clever ideas I wish I'd thought of myself. Its ideal to use for an experienced Uni player to use when teaching the game to a new group and makes a fantastic way to give focus to one shot convention play.

The experienced player (or the one hosting the convention game) comes to the table with a single Component already Created. That Component has a largely ambiguous name or role Trait plus 1 other Trait which, while equally ambiguous, serves as a call to action. This Component is then presented at the beginning of the Game Prep phase, introduced as the first Tenet.

In the above thread the Component was named Orion. A perfect choice. It could be a man's name, or a woman's, or the code name of a secret government agency, a constellation, a mythological character, or an entire planet. What exactly it is, is left unsaid it serves as a creative seed for the other players and their efforts to define it is what will give the game focus. This gimmick was used at several different tables and in each Orion was something different. In one it was a ship carrying the last remnants of humanity, in another a teacher in a school beset by zombies (of course, there are always zombies), and in another Orion was a political party seeking equality for wingless faeries.

The second Trait Orion had was the equally effective "needs to be rescued". A specific call to action where the specifics (why, from whom or what) are left open. Other Traits could also be effective such as "On a mission from God", or "seeking Vengeance", or just simply "Searching".

# Game Play Add-ons

Some optional rules that change Turn Order or Game Flow.

## Open Scene Framing

Submitted by [Ralph Mazza](#)

In the Core rules there is only 1 active scene at a time. Other scenes may remain unresolved and waiting for completion, but before players can return to them, the current scene must be formally declared ended by the Framing Player and a new scene started which returns to that previous one. In between, players Bid for Scene to determine who has the privilege of Framing that new scene. Mini scenes allow for small, short, scenes to be inserted into the main scene. This add-on allows several full scenes to be going on simultaneously.

The Bidding for scene procedure was written to keep the flow of the game very structured and progressing in a clearly delineated way. This is especially valuable for introducing new players to the concepts of total player control. The Open Scene Framing Add-on is an advanced technique that does away with all of the above mentioned structure.

When using this Add-on there is no Bidding for Scene Framing. Two new options are added to the player's turn. "Frame New Scene" and "Switch Between Scenes" either of which costs 1 Coin.

To Frame a New Scene a player on his own turn pays the 1 Coin and then proceeds to frame the scene exactly as described in Chapter Five. After he Establishes a Location, Sets the Time, and Introduces Components, he continues with his turn normally.

At any time a player can on his turn pay 1 Coin to switch from the current scene to another of the currently active scenes to continue the action there where it was left off. He, or some other player who Interrupts him, can then pay a Coin to switch back again. The Framing Player for a given scene can at any time on his turn close the scene by paying the 1 Coin to Fade to Black. Once closed the scene can no longer be switched to.

This technique is fairly advanced and demands good organization to keep all of the separate scenes straight. It is not recommended that more than 2 or 3 Scenes be active at any one time.

It is also possible (and in some cases encouraged) to use this Add-on like a Rules Gimmick. In other words use the Core rules for Bidding for Scene as the standard in the game. Then, only on the occasion where rapid fire switching between scenes becomes desirable, propose this rule be adopted. When that sequence of scenes is over, revert back to the standard rules.

## Judgment, Challenge Variant

Submitted by [Kirt Dankmyer](#)

This Add-on replaces the normal Challenge Variant. It offers the opportunity to bring a more GM like influence to the game.

If players disagree about the legality of a move or the interpretation or application of a Gimmick or Fact, then the player who spent Coins before the current player's turn is to be the Judge and decide the question. Disagreement for the purposes of this rule may be created by the insistence of any player. This process is called invoking Judgment.

When Judgment has been invoked, no one may Interrupt or pass the turn without the consent of a majority of the other players.

The Judge's Judgment may be overruled only by a unanimous vote of the other players taken before the next Coin is spent. If a Judge's Judgment is overruled, then a player chosen at random from those

remaining (i.e. not the one of the previous Judges or the player on whom Judgment had been called) becomes the new Judge for the question, and so on. If all Judges are overruled, well, then, the player on whom Judgment was called can continue without further Judgments regarding that action.

New Judges are not bound by the decisions of old Judges. New Judges may, however, settle only those questions on which the players currently disagree and that effect the completion of the turn in which Judgment was invoked. All decisions by Judges shall be in accordance with all the Facts and Gimmicks then in effect; but when Tenets and Facts are silent, inconsistent, or unclear on the point at issue, then the Judge shall consider game-custom and the spirit of the story before applying other standards.

### **Alternate Reality Variant**

Submitted by [Kirt Dankmyer](#)

This variant requires very careful record keeping with regards to scenes. Scenes should be arranged on a chronological number line.

At the end of any scene, you can split off a "mirror scene". This puts a fork in the number line immediately prior to the just finished scene and adds the mirror scene. This mirror scene starts the same way (time, location, and introduced Components) with no additional framing cost. At that point the group plays the same scene again, likely with different events and outcomes.

There are now two alternate realities. The first where the events proceeded according to the original scene, and the second where the events proceeded according to the mirror scene. There can be many branches formed in this way. The same scene can be mirrored multiple times and each branch may then branch out itself. Only the very first scene of the game, the starting point, cannot be forked.

The cost for creating a mirror scene in this way is 1 Coin per fork (including the newly created one) between the mirror scene and the original first scene of the game.

Each Branch needs to be labeled and each Component must be identified with the branch it belongs to. A component is part of each successive branch after it is Created, but if it is altered subsequently, it is only altered for that current branch (and subsequent ones) and so a duplicate Component must be made specific to that branch. Whoever splits off a new branch, should be appointed record keeper for that branch.

### **Friendly Control**

Submitted by [Kirt Dankmyer](#)

Whoever Controls a component can cede Control at any time to another player, at no cost to anyone

Variant: Anyone can take Control of any Component on their turn for no cost. The current owner can Challenge this with the weight of Fact behind him to prevent it.

### **Free Dialog**

Submitted by [Bob McNamee](#)

Whoever Controls a component can cede Control at any time to another player, at no cost to anyone

Variant: Anyone can take Control of any Component on their turn for no cost. The current owner can Challenge this with the weight of Fact behind him to prevent it.

## **Losing Challenge Bids**

Submitted by [Mike Holmes](#)

In the Core rules all Coins bid in a Challenge are considered spent and returned to the Bank regardless of who wins. This rule is in play to counter the puffing strategy common in auction games where a player who doesn't really want to win the bidding bids up the price for another player who does.

However, some groups have found that since you stand to lose both the Challenge and a sizeable number of Coins you may be less likely to back down. This can lead to unnecessary bidding wars once both parties have too much invested to afford to lose. With this Gimmick you allow one party to concede and recover their bid making them more likely to back out rather than fight to the bitter end.

## **Using Challenge Bids**

Submitted by [Ralph Mazza](#)

If the acting player loses a Challenge, this Gimmick allows him to use any Coins that he bid on the Challenge (that would normally be lost to the Bank) to pay for whatever changes the Challenger required. Any surplus Coins are lost to the Bank as normal.

## **Using Cards as Coins**

Submitted by [Jonathan Nichol](#)

[Presented with some modification]

Instead of coins, each player gets a deck of cards from which the face cards have been removed to use as the Bank. Shuffle the deck and whenever the rules call for the player to gain Coins, draw a number of cards from the deck instead. Keep these cards in a face down pile to be your Wealth.

Instead of spending Coins, spend the top card from your Wealth by discarding it next to the Bank. When the Bank is empty reshuffle the discards and start a new Bank.

In a Complication, when Coins are spent to add dice to a pool take the cards from the Wealth pile but leave them face down. When Traits are called on to add dice, take the cards from the Bank and add them to the pool face down. To resolve the Complication each player takes the face down cards that have been added to their pools and counts Aces (one) through 5 as a Success treating the face value exactly as a number rolled on a d10. If Coins earned in the Complication are to be added to a player's Wealth, discard the cards from the pool and draw new face down cards from the Bank accordingly.

*Variant.* Don't remove the face cards but instead create a Gimmick for what they represent when spent. For instance a revealed Jack could mean the person to the right spends the Coin, a Queen, the person to the left, and a King the person across. In a Complication each Jack in the Pool could cancel a Success while each King could count as an extra Success (for purposes of determining the winner but not effecting any Coins earned). A Queen could give you a free Coin but not count as a Success.



# Component Creation Add-ons

Some optional rules that change the way the Components Get Created, including three variants on the oft requested "PC Add-on".

## Greater Control Over Created Components

Submitted by [Bob McNamee](#)

Add a Trait to any Component you Created called "Controlled by \_player name\_" (as in "Controlled by Bob"). This doesn't prevent other players from Controlling Component s that you've Created but it is a Fact that gives your Coins double value to Challenge for Control.

*---I call this the PC-lite rule. It is by far the simplest means of gaining a degree of traditional Player Character like authority over a particular character in the game.*

*---Note the possibility for a "hostile takeover" as other players attempt to remove and replace a "Control" Trait and this attempt is Challenged.*

### OPTIONS

Allow this Add-on to apply only to characters not other types of Components. Allow each player to buy this Trait only once, limiting each player to a single controlled character. Allow this Trait to be applied to a Component even if the purchasing player didn't Create it. Disallow "hostile takeovers" by ruling that Control Traits can never be eliminated or altered.

## Public Domain Trait

Submitted by [Kirt Dankmyer](#)

This add-on is something of the reverse of the Greater Control add-on above. Instead of adding a "Control Trait" that makes it harder for others to take Control of a Component, the player adds a "Public Domain" Trait to the Component.

This Component can now be Taken Over for free, without spending a coin to do so. The Take Over can be Challenged as usual.

*---This gimmick would be useful in a variety of situations such as: Large complex locations like a castle or city that every player wants to be able to add Traits to at any time without having to spend a Coin to Take Control each time, reoccurring villains so that any player can initiate a Complication using that villain without needing to pay to control him.*

*---See also the [Friendly Control](#) Add-on for a similar way of handling this.*

## Royalty Add-on

Submitted by [Ralph Mazza](#)

Must first be playing with Bob's Control Add-on above. This Add-on allows players to take Control of a Controlled Component without fear of Challenge if they first play an additional 1 Coin from Wealth, directly to the player named in the Trait.

*---Royalties were actually a concept from way in the early days of Universalis, whose intention was to motivate players to Create interesting Component, by paying them if they were something other players would want to*

*use. This motivation proved completely unnecessary and so the rule was scrapped; but it fit so nicely with Bob's clever Control rule above that I resurrected the concept just for it.*

## **Player Character Add-on**

Submitted by [Mike Holmes](#)

A player can, once during the game (across all sessions), spend 5 Coins, and permanently Take Over a single character. This character becomes the Player's Character (PC). Add a Trait to the character of "\_Player Name's Character" (as in "Mike's Character").

The PC can only thereafter be Controlled by that player. Further Take Overs of that character are not allowed. The PC can not be altered in any way (such as buying Traits for the character) by any player other than the owner, except through the use of Coins received from a Complication in which the PC was a participant.

This includes being Introduced into scenes. The PC can only be Introduced to a scene with the agreement of the owning player (who still retains Control despite not having Introduced the character). If a player wants to Introduce a PC against its owner's will, he can frame a Mini-Scene in which the PC is involved in a relevant Complication and use Coins won in the Complication to Introduce the PC into the main scene.

The owning player is also solely responsible for all of the character's dialog.

*---This Add-on can really alter the game in subtle, but powerful ways. Shifting the player's emphasis from the story as a whole to a specific character, can lead to player myopia and disinterest in parts of the story not involving the PC. It is suggested that not all players utilize this option at the same time. It is perhaps best used to give the hero of the story to a particular player as a PC, and perhaps the major villain of the story to another player as a PC, but for the rest of the players to remain unattached to specific characters.*

*---See also the [Judgment Challenge Variant](#) Add-on for a way to bring a more GM like influence to the game. Ralph*

## **The PC Endowment Pool**

Submitted by [Mike Holmes](#)

When a player adopts a PC he gets an Endowment of 25 Coins, which are kept in a separate pool. These Endowment Coins can only be used to give Traits to the PC, or to add to Complication Pools in the case of Complications in which the PC is involved. These Coins are never Refreshed. When they are spent they are gone.

### **OPTION**

Set the number of Endowment Coins at a different amount based on the character's importance to the story and the level of realism in the game.

## **PC Plot Protection**

Submitted by [Mike Holmes](#)

With this option it takes double the normal number of Coins to eliminate a PC by reducing Importance.

*---This rule has the interesting effect of causing players who are determined to eliminate a protected character to concentrate first on removing the character's Traits, thereby lowering the PC's Importance before having to pay to reduce it. I recommend considering this sort of protection for major villains or other important Component as well. Ralph*

#### OPTIONS

Allow this Add-on to be purchased individually for any important Component, not just PCs (even in a game that isn't using the PC Add-on). Alternatively players can make it illegal for any player except the owner to reduce a PC's Importance. Thus only the owner can decide if and when it's time for the PC to be eliminated.

### **PC Descriptive Paragraph Add-on**

Submitted by [Ralph Mazza](#)

This is a special method of generating Player Characters which should be used in conjunction with the Endowment Add-on above. Players must write a paragraph (or several) describing who their character is and what he's like. Game balance issues are not important here (they will come into play below) but players should strive to keep their description limited to 100 to 200 words. This will help ensure that the description is tightly worded, and focused on the most essential aspects of the character. Sentences that are merely lists of things the character can do are to be discouraged.

Key elements of a paragraph would be cultural and social background, occupation, personality, important possessions, friends or contacts, hobbies or things the character does exceptionally well. Take this paragraph and use it as a source to draw the character's Traits from. Pay for those Traits (or at least as many as possible) out of the character's Endowment.

*---This Add-on is inspired by several RPGs such as Hero Wars which use just such a descriptive paragraph to create their characters. Ralph.*

### **PC Story Drivers**

Submitted by [Ralph Mazza](#)

This Add-on should be used in conjunction with the Endowment Add-on above.

The Story Driver is some compelling feature about the character's personality or motivations that serves to provide interest. The Story Driver is the reason why the character is part of the story being told. It is the reason the character is a protagonist of the story and is the motivation that drives the character through the story. If the character does not have a Story Driver it probably isn't compelling enough to be a player character and is best left as an NPC.

The Story Driver is that facet of a character that makes him of interest to the audience. It may be tied to the character's role but this is not necessary. It answers the questions: "Why should we care what happens to this character?", "What makes this character suitable as a protagonist?", "What keeps the character moving forward through the story?", and "Why is this character worth telling a story about in the first place?" It may be a quest to complete, a vendetta to pursue, a mystery to solve, a promise to keep, or a destiny to fulfill. It may also simply be an interesting situation that the character is in that requires immediate action to respond to. For supporting characters, it may be largely tangential to the main story line (which should be concerned with the Story Driver of the protagonist) but it should provide the opportunity for subplots, and exciting narrative in its own right.

The Story Driver should not just be a static tag line. It should be an ongoing theme in the character's life which becomes more developed as the story progresses both from the character's perspective and

the audience's. The player should make an effort to work elements of the Story Driver into his narrative where appropriate and keep in the back of his mind the potential for its ultimate resolution or fulfillment, if such is possible.

The Story Driver for a player character can be altered and changed during play as the character evolves and the details of the surrounding world and events get filled in. In this way a character whose Story Driver includes following in the footsteps of his dead and heroic father, can, later in the story, latch on to the idea of making the main villain of the story his father, who is not dead after all.

The elements that make up a Story Driver write-up are not considered Facts for game purposes. They are merely the perceptions of the character whose actual veracity may vary. Elements of the Driver that the player wishes to be irrefutable can be purchased as Facts normally.

Whenever the player manages to focus attention on his Story Driver he can earn Coins from the Bank. For each scene in the game that addresses some aspect of the character's story driver, the owning player may draw 1 Coin from the Bank and add it to the character's Endowment Pool.

Whenever the player manages to actually resolve his Story Driver (if such is possible) the owning player may draw a number of Coins from the Bank equal to the total number of game sessions that character has participated in with that Story Driver in place and add them to the character's Endowment Pool.

*---This Add-on is inspired by features found in many games, such as Sorcerer's Kickers. Ralph*

## **Durable Components**

Submitted by [Bob McNamee](#)

This is an add-on designed to make it more difficult to remove Traits or Eliminate Components from play.

When Components are Created, they can be designated as "Durable". This is a special Trait that costs 5 Coins and cannot be Removed from the Component. For the rest of the game it takes 2 Coins instead of 1 to Remove a Trait of that Component or reduce the Component's Importance. This will make killing Characters, destroying Locations, etc **much** harder. It will tend to skew things toward making existing things gain Importance, since it is cheaper to add a Fact to something than to destroy a Fact from it.

A combat example...

Bob's has character A attack B. Character B is Durable. After resolving the Complication. A side wins with 10 coins, B side gets 3. B is an Importance 6 character. With this Add-on, instead of reducing Importance to 0 and describing the 6 "coin moves" and keeping 4 Coins- killing B like the normal rules, Bob can't kill B (he would need 12 coins to reduce the importance), so he adds 6 Coins worth of Facts (like...Flesh wounds x2, Weak with Blood Loss x2, Broken Nose, No match for Character A) and keeps 4 Coins. These added traits will have the effect of acting against B in other Complications, but they also increase the Importance of character B to 12. These "negative" Facts are also difficult to remove from B. (and perhaps Bob will destroy one or two trait Facts and add a couple wounding traits etc instead of using them all one way)

If you want to make sure that the groups creative work hangs around longer, this might be a good Add-on for you.

*---Mike and Bob worked on this Add-on on our Discussion Forum. I added a couple small tweaks to it before posting it here. Ralph*

## **Enigma Traits**

Submitted by [Christopher Chinn](#)

This rule allows players to conceal the hidden facts about a character or other Component. You can buy Traits for Components that are not known to the other players, although they do have to be written down, and cannot be used for Complications or Challenges until revealed.

You have to pay 2 Coins for an Enigma Trait (essentially 1 Coin for the Trait and 1 for the privilege of keeping it secret). The Trait is written down and not revealed to the other players. At any point the player desires he can reveal the Trait and bring it to bear in a Complication or Challenge or simply refer to it in narrative.

The purpose of an Enigma Trait is to allow a player to secure "first dibs" on an idea but yet still keep it secret to "spring" on the other players at a dramatic moment. Players can always add "surprise" or "plot twist" Traits to Components via the normal rules. But by waiting for the right moment to purchase those Traits other Facts may be purchased by other players in the mean time that invalidate the player's plans.

For instance. Dave might really want to add a Trait to Elton Frakes that he is, in fact, a werewolf. He decides to wait to a suitable moment to buy the Trait and reveal Elton's secret. Before he gets the chance, Ed buys "Immune to Lycanthrope" as a Trait for Elton. Now Dave could Challenge this, but in addition to the expense it may make his announcement anti-climactic. Using the Enigma Trait rule Dave buys the Werewolf Trait for Elton but records it in secret. Now if Ed tries to render Elton "Immune" he will be too late. Dave can now challenge Ed with the weight of the newly revealed Enigma Trait serving as Fact.

These traits work well for mystery stories, noir stories, heroes with undiscovered powers, and soap operas. Memento comes to mind as a movie that would incorporate this very well.

*---This Add-on was first proposed in our Discussion Forum. I tweaked it a bit before posting it here.  
Ralph*

## **Making Protagonists Special**

[These Add-ons](#) suggest a few ways to mechanically make the main characters of your story more involved and influential than the supporting cast.

# Making the Protagonist Special

Sometimes it can be hard to tell who the protagonist of a story is. Sometimes the story gets overcrowded with so many supporting characters that the main plot gets lost.

These Add-ons suggest a few ways to make the Protagonist more special if you find yourself in such a situation. Most are player submitted and represent great examples of how to use Rules Gimmicks to achieve the style of play a group prefers.

## **Protagonist Refresh Boost:**

Submitted by [Ralph Mazza](#)

After any scene in which the identified main character was present (i.e. Introduced), the standard Coin Refresh is 7 Coins instead of the normal 5 (or whatever level you've set your group's Refresh rate to).

Inspired by a game where it was suddenly realized that the main character of the story hadn't been present in the last several scenes; this Add-on provides a mechanical incentive for not forgetting to include the protagonist more frequently.

Additionally the main antagonist could be included in this rule.

## **No New Traits During Complications:**

Submitted by [Alan Barclay](#)

No buying new Traits during a Complication. The ban covers all components, whether they're in play or not. Once the dice are rolled and results tallied, the ban is lifted.

This moderates a tendency for surprise traits to appear when needed. It encourages players to think ahead and add Traits carefully during regular play. Since main characters are the ones players will be spending the most time thinking about and interacting with, they will tend to have the most complete set of Traits, which helps to distinguish them as the protagonist. It also forces players to rely on purchased dice (and creative descriptive justifications for them) during Complications.

*---Alan has noticed that often times during Complications players will add Traits to characters that are amazingly just what the character needed at the time. Mike Holmes points out that this is actually a feature of many movies and TV shows that reveal in the thick of the action some new skill or talent we didn't know the character had. But for some genres this can be inappropriate. Also at times Traits of questionable legitimacy may be purchased just to boost a dice pool. While Challenges are the best way to handle this, if it becomes habitual a Gimmick like this can put an end to it.*

### OPTIONS

As an alternative to a complete ban, I suggested differentiating between set-up scenes and climactic scenes. The Framing Player can buy a Trait of "Climactic Scene" if desired. During such scenes the above ban is enforced. During set-up scenes, Complications can be thought of as a vehicle for illustrating the characters' abilities and Trait purchases during them may still be allowed.

## **Named Character Limit:**

Submitted by [Alan Barclay](#)

No more named characters may be Created.

I bought this gimmick halfway through a game. I thought we had enough major characters and wanted play to focus on them, instead of new, last-minute creations. Limiting the ability to name characters did indeed limit the creation of new major characters.

*---An effective technique in games experiencing a good deal of character bloat. This gimmick forces players to think in terms of using existing characters rather than to keep inventing new ones. Of course, for a newly thought of important character, it is a simple matter to propose another Rules Gimmick which permits an exception be made.*

### **Only 1 Trait per Turn:**

Submitted by [Alan Barclay](#)

No character may gain more than one neutral or advantageous Trait per turn (or even per scene)..

This is intended for introduction after major characters have been introduced, to limit burgeoning casts. The limit makes it difficult for any new characters to achieve the same number of Traits (and hence Importance) as the main character(s) were able to pre-gimmick.

### **No Purchasing the Same Trait Multiple Times:**

Submitted by [Alan Barclay](#)

No component may purchase the same Trait multiple times (e.g. Marksman x3), except to represent numbers.

Instead of Marksman x3, this Gimmick encourages more creative thought like: Marksman, Eagle Eye, Combat Reflexes, or the like. The goal here is 1) for the additional variety of Traits to flesh out main characters in more detail, and 2) to make it more difficult to suddenly invent a minor character who had a high degree of proficiency in just one thing

*---This Gimmick is a direct replacement of a rule from the book which expressly **does** allow for Traits to be purchased multiple times. Which is entirely acceptable for a Gimmick to do.*

### **Protagonists Must be Most Important Character:**

Submitted by [Ralph Mazza](#)

One character is named as the "Main Protagonist" (by buying this as a Trait). No other character in the story can ever have an Importance higher than the "Main Protagonist" except for the "Main Antagonist".

A variant would allow each player to select 1 main character for an ensemble cast. No other character can have an Importance higher than the highest Main Character (or alternatively the lowest Main Character). Again, except for the equivalent antagonists.

# Narration Add-ons

Some optional rules that change how players can narrate the story.

## Plot Pools

Submitted by [Mike Holmes](#)

If you have a particular idea for a subplot or even main plot that you want to ensure has a life of its own, give it a Plot Pool. Depending on how important the plot, give it between ten and fifty Coins from the Bank. Any player may, on their turn, spend up to two of these Coins per scene so long as their spent in a way that relates to developing the action or backstory of the plot with which they are associated.

### OPTION

Adjust the rate of spending, increasing the number of Coins per scene to bring a Plot to the forefront, or reducing the rate to draw its conclusion out.

## Plot Thread

Submitted by [Matthijs Holter](#)

This Add-on is designed to help keep story plot lines tight and focused by offering rewards to other players for picking up a desired thread and following through with it.

The Plot Thread is Created as a Component defined as "an unresolved conflict". It costs one coin to Create, and must be given an appropriate name that summarizes the nature of the conflict. The Creator must identify any number of existing Components that are part of, involved with, or tied to this conflict. Each Component named in the Plot Thread costs an additional coin.

Each time a Plot Thread is introduced into a scene (costing one coin), it gains a point of Weight.

When a Plot Thread is resolved, the player resolving it gets its Weight in coins. Declaring a Thread resolved can be challenged as usual.

### VARIANT

submitted by [Christopher Bradley](#)

Plot Threads cost 1 Coin to Create as above, but no additional Coins have to be spent for identifying involved Components. Plot Threads are not Introduced but instead automatically increase in Weight by 1 each scene. When a player resolves the Conflict they gain its Weight in Coins.

### VARIANT

Submitted by [Ralph Mazza](#)

Plot Threads cost 1 Coin to Create and can be given additional Traits further refining the nature of the conflict exactly as for ordinary Components. These special Components can be Introduced and Drawn Upon to provide dice in Complications related to that conflict. Like any other Component a Plot Thread can be Eliminated by buying off its Importance, or, as it moves towards resolution, individual Traits can be bought off through narration exactly as for damage or injury.



# Complication Add-ons

Some optional rules that change the way the Complications are handled.

## **Dice Can Only be Added to Dice Pools**

Submitted by [Roy Penrod](#)

The core rules allow dice to be added or subtracted from dice pools. This rule prevents dice from being subtracted from a pool. Any event that would logically be justified as subtracting dice from a pool is instead added to an opposing pool..

### NOTES

I use this Rules Gimmick to make sure we never end up with an empty dice pool (no dice to roll).

For example: A named character only has 1 die to contribute to a Complication (e.g. his name). He does, however, have a Trait that can be used against him (e.g. Cowardice). Using the standard rules, the character would end up with an empty dice pool. Using this Rules Gimmick, the character still contributes 1 die to his dice pool while the opposing dice pool is also given 1 die for the character's negative Trait.

# Multiple Targets to a Complication

These Add-ons illustrate several different variations on the standard Dice Pool for Complications which players may find more accurately reflect a given situation.

If there are multiple Targets to a Complication there are several different ways they can be treated. Sometimes the standard system described in the core rules may not necessarily reflect the nature of the Complication as its been defined.

The following choices are available to handle multiple Target Pools differently. Any player can propose one of these choices as for any Rules Gimmick and, if not successfully Challenged, it becomes the way this Complication will be resolved. Players are free (and encouraged) to use these choices as suggestions and come up with their own variations if they desire.

## **Standard Pool:**

This is the system described in the Core Rules, included here for completeness. All of the Complication pools are counted together as a single side. And all of the Target Pools are counted together as a single side for purposes of determining the Winning side.

All of the Pools on the same side are counted together as one, and all Pools on a side Win or Lose accordingly. Each player then spends his own Coins from his Pool himself. All Winning Pools narrate in order from most to least Coins before any of the losing Pools which then narrate in order from most to least Coins. Ties are handled in clockwise order from the Originator.

This method works well in an abstract fashion for most Complications. Combat or other confrontations between a group of protagonists each with their own Pool against a number of opponents rolled in the aggregate is handled particularly well.

## **Independent Target Pools:**

Like the Standard method, all Complication Pools are counted together as a single side. The various Target Pools are not combined together, however, as a single side. Each Target Pool opposes the Complication Side separately.

Each Target Pool rolls one at a time, and all Complication Pools (the same number of dice, with the exception of bought dice that only apply against limited Targets) is re-rolled against each one. There is a separate Winner and Loser determined for each match up and all Free Coins are spent before rolling for the next Target Pool. Essentially, there is a separate Complication for each Target. Target Pools in this method can either all be built first before any are resolved. Or they can be built one at a time in whatever order is appropriate. This depends on what is appropriate for the nature of the Complication.

The multiple Pools can be resolved in any order the players choose (often determined by which character goes first). If disagreements arise, Pools with the most Dice are resolved first, and in the event that this is tied, closest to the left of the Originator goes first.

Targets who roll first can use their bonus Coins to Buy Dice for Pools that haven't rolled yet if it can be justified how such assistance is possible.

This method works well for situations where the characters are confronted with a hazard and each character will make it or not on his own. Scaling a wall is an example of a hazard where each Target's Dice Pool could be built separately, one after another. Surviving a bomb explosion is an example where each Target's Dice Pool should be built at the same time.

Note: This method is essentially the same as originating a series of Standard Complications against each Target separately, except that the Complication Pools only need to be built once.

### **Split Allocation Pool:**

This method is very similar to Independent Target Pools above. However, the Complication Pool is *not* re-rolled for each Target. Instead all of the Pools are rolled at the same time. The Originator then takes the Successes rolled from each of the Complication Pools (from any player) and allocates them against each of the Target Pools in whatever manner he chooses. Each Target Pool will then Win or Lose based on how it compares to the Successes the Originator allocated.

This method is generally much quicker than Independent Pools and gives largely the same type of results (each Target can Win or Lose independently of the others). However, it gives the Originator much more control over *which* Targets Win or Lose which may or may not be an appealing feature to a given play group.

Technically, this method does not have to be limited to 1 Originator vs. Multiple Targets. It could just as easily apply to a single Target faced with multiple opponents run by different players (such as when a hero is confronted with multiple enemies).

*---This method is one of my personal favorites. Ralph.*

### **Individual Pools:**

This method is very similar to Independent Pools except there is a separate Complication Pool facing each Target. All Targets make their own roll opposed by their own Complication Pool. Many times this can be combined with the Split Allocation Pool where some Targets are faced with a separate Complication Pool and some gang up on another Complication Pool.

Resolution order is determined as for Independent Pools and bonus Coins in one Pool can be used to purchase additional dice into another Pool.

This method is suggested only for situations like a climactic combat where each hero is facing off against a separate villain

Note: this method is very similar to running a series of different Standard Complications simultaneously.

### **All or None Pool:**

All Target Pools make their own roll at the same time, and all Complication Pools are treated like a single side. The *worst* Target Pool result is the only one which is compared to the Complication Pool and *all* Target Pools are considered to have Won or Lost based on that worst Pool's result.

Each Pool calculates its bonus Coins based on its own pool using the overall winner or loser status.

This type of Complication is appropriate for situations such as when characters are attempting to hide or sneak or are in disguise as a group and a slip up from any one of them will give them away.

### **Best Efforts Pool:**

This method is essentially the reverse of the All or None Pool. All Target Pools make their own roll at the same time, and all Complication Pools are treated like a single side. The *best* Target Pool result is the only one which is compared to the Complication Pool and *all* Target Pools are considered to have Won or Lost based on that best Pool's result

Each Pool calculates its bonus Coins based on its own pool using the overall winner or loser status.

This type of Complication is appropriate for situations where multiple characters are cooperating, and due to the sheer number of involved Targets the Target pool would be exceptionally large and almost certainly overwhelm the Complication Pool. This method can be an alternative to the Originator having to find extreme ways to enlarge the Complication Pool in order to make it competitive.

## **Nested Complications**

Submitted by [Ralph Mazza](#)

A nested Complication is nothing more than a new Complication that is Originated before an existing Complication has been completely resolved. This sort of Complication can either be internal to the current Complication or external to it.

An internal Nested Complication is one where the source of the new Complication was generated within the current Complication. For an example inspired by Ron Edward's [Sorcerer](#), imagine a Complication which involves a party of sorcerers fighting an enemy deep in an underground stronghold. One of the players seeks to draw upon Traits from a powerful demon that a character is bound to. This demon has not had its Needs met in a while and so is likely to resist its master's commands. Another player begins a new Complication pitting the character against his demon in a battle of will to see if the demon will obey or not.

An external Nested Complication is one where the two Complications are entirely separate and running parallel to each other, but where the outcome of one Complication can influence the outcome of the other. The classic example of this is where one group of characters is responsible for establishing a "diversion" while another group proceeds with the mission. These Complications could be going on separately within the same scene or actually simultaneously in two different scenes.

Both types of Nested Complications are handled the same way. One of the Complications must be resolved first and has the capability to impact the Dice Pools of the other. In the case of multiple Nested Complications going on simultaneously, they all might impact the same primary Complication, or they may all impact the next Complication up daisy-chain style. A word of caution: multiple Nested Complications are an advanced technique that, while they can be extraordinary fun, requires lots of dice, lots of table space, and careful organization. Which Complication is resolved first is up to the player Originating the new Complication. Almost always it will be the new Complication being resolved first.

Each Nested Complication will have its own set of Dice Pools, and are separate Complications for purposes of Drawing upon Traits. Resolving the Nested Complication is handled just as any other. Common uses of the bonus Coins generated by a Nested Complication include: purchasing a new Trait attached to the scene which can then be Drawn upon to provide dice to another Complication; describing Events and Facts related to the Nested Complication that can be used to provide justification for Drawing upon Traits in another Complication that otherwise couldn't be used; to Introduce or Create new Components that can be used in another Complication; or to damage or even eliminate Components that could be useful to another Complication before they're Drawn on.

## **Using d6s Instead of d10s**

submitted by [Jonathan Nichol](#) & [Wilhelm Fitzpatrick](#)

When resolving Complications one normally rolls d10s with 1-5 being successes and the sum of the numbers rolled being the bonus Coins received. In a thread in our [discussion forum](#), Jonathan and Wilhelm described using d6s instead.

Simply treat odd results as successes (which maintains the same 50% chance of success) and add the numbers normally. In this case the numbers 1, 3, and 5 have the exact same average sum as the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 when using d10s.

*As Wilhelm said, "the simple elegance of that approach is astounding"; which leaves me a little embarrassed that I hadn't seen that myself. --- Ralph*

## Extended Complications

submitted by [Christopher Bradley](#)

After dice pools are assembled for a Complication but before the dice are rolled, a player can make the complication "extended." This means that rather than resolving the complication with one roll of the dice, the dice pools are divided and each is rolled separately.

The person who pays to extend the complication gets to decide how many sub-pools the complication will be divided into. The dice in each side's pool are then divided as evenly as possible into that number of sub-pools.

The smallest sub-pools on either side are rolled first. Edge dice are accumulated in the sub-pool that rolled them. The winner narrates the victory as usual. Then proceed to roll and narrate each of the other sub-pool pairs in the same way.

The purpose of this Gimmick is take a complication and convert it into a number of separate stages allowing the full complication to be narrated back and forth in multiple steps rather than resolved all at once. This is especially useful for climactic battle scenes with arch villains and other similar scenes where players might want the action to trade back and forth.

## Using Cards Instead of Dice

submitted by [Jonathan Nichol](#)

Instead of coins, each player gets a deck of cards to use as their "coins". Another deck is used for the Complications placed face down to the side. Shuffle the decks and draw your starting Wealth in Cards into your hand. When you use a coin, play the card of your choice from your hand face-up into a discard pile. When you refresh draw new cards from your own deck. For Complications play cards face down secretly, to be revealed during the resolution. Only cards 1-5 count as successes. When drawing upon existing Traits draw the top card from the Trait Deck and play it to the Complication. Cards are reshuffled only when that deck is exhausted. Be sure to discard cards into their appropriate discard pile.

Complications would be resolved a lot faster since the coin spending and die rolling is combined into one card-playing action. Also, there is a little resource management going on as you play the higher cards for traits and such but save the lower cards for complications.

**Quirk #1:** Drawing from the Bank Deck in Complications won't have the same 50% chance of success. Ignoring the fact that cards mess with probabilities as they become "used" there are 13 different cards in a suit, making a success as defined above 5 out of 13 (somewhat less than 40%) rather than 5 out of 10. You'd need to discard out of play the face cards (or find some cool new Gimmick where they represent something special other than a normal "coin") to keep the odds the same

**Quirk #2:** The current rules reward developing permanent Traits for Components and then reusing those Components throughout the game (so you can keep getting free Dice out of your initial investment). You lose some of this when you go to a hand of Cards that you can choose from. Calling on an existing Trait may give you a free draw from the Deck, but it's a random draw. Inventing a new Trait or environmental feature on the spur of the moment, however, lets you play a card from your hand...where you can select intentionally the card you want to use; guaranteeing success if you have the right cards.

## VARIANT

submitted by [Ralph Mazza](#)

Play as above but keep each player's Wealth in a face down stack in front of them. When ever a "Coin" is spent draw the top card off of the Wealth stack. When additional Wealth is earned add the

new cards to the bottom of the stack. When Bonus Coins are kept following a Complication shuffle the kept cards into the Wealth Stack. As an alternative rule have players discard the kept cards and draw fresh cards from their deck to add to the bottom of the stack to maintain randomness.

# Intersession Add-ons

For games of Universalis that are intended to go for more than a single session, players may want to set up a set of Tenets for continuing play. Below are a set of standard Tenets that can be adopted by the group via social contract before play, or paid for with a single Coin after play has begun. They are very standard and intuitive, and most people playing adopt something very similar even if the specifics are unspoken.

## Standard Intersession Rules

- The first scene framed in the subsequent session is considered concurrent with, or immediately following the end of the last scene of the previous session, unless Coins are spent to set the time differently..
- Scenes that are open at the end of the last session are still considered open, and can be continued as normal.
- All players begin the next session with the same number of Coins that they had at the end of the previous session. at the end of the last session.
- At this point play continues as if there had been no interruption

## Players Present Limit

Submitted by [Mike Holmes](#)

Subsequent sessions can only be played if all players from the first session are present, and wish to play.

## Revisit Game Tenets

Submitted by [Mike Holmes](#)

At the start of the subsequent session, a new Game Preparation phase occurs wherein players can discuss and modify current Tenets. When this is finished begin with a new scene. This gimmick is intended to address any concerns players may have over the direction the story is going, and to make sure everyone is on the same page to start the new session (players satisfied with the current direction of play may just pass in this phase in order to get directly to the first scene).

## Introduce New Players

Submitted by [Mike Holmes](#)

Each new player is introduced to the game by a special Rules Gimmick so that the other players can object to the new player s presence if they so wish. Alternatively, one can have an "open-door" policy, and allow any player to add any other new players that they like.

If new players are allowed, the number of players who are involved in the story can be capped, as can the total allowed to play in a single session. If the latter is selected, and too many players present themselves for play, players should bid Coins in round robin fashion for the right to play. Those who bid lowest cannot play in that session.

If persons who were not players in a prior session are allowed to become players, then a rule for how many Coins they start with needs to be adopted. Often a group will endow new players with whatever the standard starting Wealth is for that play group. Other options include starting them with the same



number of Coins as the player with the most or least Coins; or an average. Any number that seems sensible can be selected. Such a Coin level Gimmick can be declared to be a one-time thing, or a policy for all new players.

(One can also see here the possibility of using similar player-adding gimmicks to allow new players mid session. The author highly recommends this.)

## **Coin Option Gimmicks**

Submitted by [Mike Holmes](#)

Some players may wish to allow for the level of Coins to be adjusted between sessions. This can take many forms:

For example, the end of a session can be treated like the end of a scene, and additional refreshment can occur.

Or, normalization of Coin totals for each player can occur, perhaps resetting the number of Coins to a certain level (perhaps the starting level) at the beginning of each session.. This latter option will have the result of having players spend all their Coins during the course of a session as the "Use 'em or lose 'em" mentality sinks in.

As always, any adjustment of Coin availability will affect the pacing of the game; potentially dramatically. Players can conceive of other methods of moderating the number of Coins available, and should consider the potential effects before putting them into play (or allowing them into play unchallenged).

## **Create Components Between Sessions**

Submitted by [Mike Holmes](#)

Gimmicks can be established to allow players to flex their creative muscles between sessions.

Allow for a limited amount of Coins to be spent between sessions on creating things. Potentially players may be given a pool of Coins for just such a purpose that are used or lost between sessions. The results of such creativity can be presented at the time of the Game Preparation phase at the start of the following session, each player presenting one Component on his turn, at which time they can be challenged.

# Player Driven Metaplot

There are several benefits to a strong, well-detailed metaplot. They provide a number of ready made plot hooks for the GM to build upon and give the players a real sense that the world actually exists. In other words that there are things going on in the background that the characters may or may not be a part of. There are some strong disadvantages to metaplot too. If the source material is too tightly woven to it, then large parts of the game setting may become unusable based on a play groups actions. Even worse is when players become disinterested in major elements of a meta plot. No matter how good the game is, if the players don't buy into the story and become committed to moving it forward play can quickly become lack luster.

Universalis is a great way of providing metaplot to your games while avoiding many of the disadvantages. In between sessions of regular play, players can get together for a quick session of Universalis (often this can be fit in before a session while waiting for late comers, or afterwards when some players have to leave early. It's also very easy to do on-line). In the Universalis game, players will be concerned with crafting the actions of the mover and shakers of the world, playing out what the various factions and power brokers are up to. For instance, in a Vampire campaign where player characters are relatively weak soldiers, Universalis can be used to play out the interactions and plotting of the influential powers. The new happenings and story lines so developed can then be easily brought into the Vampire game as current events going on in the city.

There are two huge advantages to this. First, the players will never outrun or render obsolete a prewritten metaplot. Likewise, GMs won't have to railroad players in order to keep them within the canon material. Instead the metaplot that is created over time using Universalis will already be customized to the needs of the actual campaign being played. Second, players will be much more into the story because it's one which they helped to develop. Whatever aspect of the setting that the players find most compelling is the one most likely to be developed in the Universalis game. Thus, the GM can be assured that when he dangles plot hooks based on that game, his players will eagerly leap at them.

## Scenario Creation

One of Universalis's strengths is the ease at which entire sections of a world can be created on a meaningful level very quickly. Locations, key characters, and the web of connections between them all get created as part of an ordinary Universalis game. One of the things we've been amazed at, is how good some of those Universalis creations would be as a scenario for another game. The places, people and situations created by the game can be easily modified and adapted into an adventure to use in another RPG. At GenCon 2002 we ran several demos. One of those demos would have made a great scenario (with minor modification to adapt to setting specific details) for a game like Blue Planet or The Babylon Project. Another was practically begging to be played in Feng Shui or even Unknown Armies.

## Setting Creation

Beyond just scenarios for other games, Universalis can create entire worlds for other game systems. A big part of the design of Universalis has always been to allow each game session to build upon the setting created in prior sessions, even if the characters and plot are different. Such an ongoing world creation effort can easily provide the background for an entire setting useable with another RPG system like GURPS or FUDGE.

One of our play test groups set out to do just that. They wanted to handcraft their own fantasy setting, so they started with Universalis. The earliest characters they introduced would become the gods of their world. Through play they fashioned a creation story and an entire mythology complete with a war between the gods and gods who were banished or even dead. They moved on history where they fashioned the legends and great historical events of the world complete with mighty heroes and a couple of sagas. When finished they took the whole thing and wrote it up for play with GURPS Fantasy. Benefit: every player had a vested interest in the world that they had helped create and all of them shared knowledge of a common history and mythology that was all the more meaningful to them because they had written it.

"We used Universalis to create a setting and it was splendid. Before the game even started we had this rich, layered, detailed setting. Universalis is a neat, neat game/gaming tool/imagination prod. --- "Paka" aka Judd who used Universalis to design a campaign for [The Riddle of Steel](#)

## LARP Backstory

A LARP session is only as good as the character relationships and plot points which drive it. Coming up with new situations with enough things going on to hook the players and drive interaction forward is a challenging endeavor and can lead to flat game play if not done well. At least one player who organizesLARPs intends to use a game of Universalis to help develop the character map and plot points for an individual run; and also to advance the story arc between runs.

## On-line Play

The format of the Universalis rules makes it ideal for PBEM or chat room play. In fact, our first play tests of the game were exclusively through chat. Its exceptionally good with chat rooms with a dice server. This means that any of the above ideas for using Universalis can be expanded to groups that can't meet face to face. Universalis can also be used to provide some formal structure to persistent free form chat room or forum based role-playing for groups that would like a few more rules to work within. Universalis is so well suited for chat-room play that the rules don't need to be modified at all except that references to "clock-wise" player order should be changed to "alphabetical screen names" or something similar.

## Group Authored Fan-Fic

Universalis could be one of the best "fanfic" games ever. Get a group of players really into Babylon 5, for example, and go to town. ---Lou Goncey

Never having really been involved in the fan-fic community, I have to say, this idea had never occurred to me. But Lou s idea seems like it would work extremely well.

In the essay on Story Elements, the section on [Setting](#) discusses a couple of ways to base a game of Universalis on an established setting. Using one of those methods one could easily base a game on a property and from the write-up of the game session have the foundation for a great piece of fan-fic

---Ralph

# Space Traders

## Early Playtest

Our very first play test of Universalis (using a much older and since highly revised set of rules) was played via Instant Messenger between just Mike and myself. I've adjusted that session a little to be consistent with the final version of the game (to avoid confusion) but the core elements are still relevant.

Mike initiated the game by proposing "sci-fi" as a Story Element. I followed up by making the setting focus on a tramp freighter traveling between the stars. We established that there were two key characters: Ulysses Korosuki *scruffy hyperdrive engineer*, and Maxwell Smith *daring space pilot*.

During the Game Preparation phase we established that in addition to his role as *Hyperdrive Engineer*, Ulysses also had Traits of *International Politics*, and *Advanced Robotics*, which he learned at the *Skorlar Institute*. Max had Traits of both *Lucky* and *Reckless*. Our ship was called the *All's Fair*, with a role of *Medium Cargo Ship*. She had Traits of *Old*, *Heavily Financed*, *Three KM long*, and *Hyper Space capable*.

We also established that Max had been married to Ulysses sister Susan, but she'd left him and the ship. The *Sexy, Android Science Officer* named Shiela had been *programmed with Susan's voice* and Ulysses had refused to change it, making Max very uncomfortable.

We then established the current situation. Our business was transporting cargo between two large interstellar powers: the Terran Unified Polity and an unnamed "Empire". The two powers were engaged in a long cold war with occasional local flare-ups making it difficult to navigate through all of the tariffs, custom requirements, and secured "no fly" zones. As such we'd occasionally supplement our business with more legally-gray activities.

Currently we had just departed Mars Colony after a major refit with a cargo Max picked up for which we were being paid a huge amount relative to the cargo's declared value. Max figured his natural talent and charm had just enabled him to negotiate a good deal. Ulysses was more suspicious. For a theme we selected the entanglements of politics. No matter how hard we'd try to stay out of them, we'd keep getting involved; with especial emphasis on the futility of the conflict in general.

The first scene started with an immediate Complication: alarm klaxons going off in the engine room, and warnings about a pressure build up in the hyperdrive. I was the Originator and Mike, in control of Ulysses, was the target. Mike won the Complication but rather than fix the engines he used his free Coins to Originate a new Complication. He stated that there was nothing wrong with the drive system so there must be some problem external to the ship. He made Max the Target as he was in the cockpit.

I was in control of Max so I drew upon Shiela's Role as a Science Officer for a die and purchased the Trait of "Advanced Sensors X2" for the ship for another 2 dice. Mike purchased facts for the game world that sensors didn't function to the aft where the engines were and used that to add more dice to the Complication. I therefor decided that Max (being reckless) would slew the ship around in "Crazy Ivan / Bootlegger Reverse" fashion and drew dice from Reckless, Lucky, and the Pilot Role.

I won the Complication by a huge margin and used my successes to identify the source of the problem. A small drone ship with TUP customs markings was pursuing us. It had caught us in a Hyper Interferon Beam, trying to force us to drop out of hyperspace.

For this final Complication, Mike took control of Max and Shiela and the Ship and I targeted all of them with the newly created drone ship. Mike bought *Quick Thinking* as a Trait for Ulysses and Created

Rollo the *Ship's Computer* to help him out. Max tried to go for a full burn on the engines at the exact moment that Ulysses modulated the drive's Calax Frequency in the hope of breaking free of the beam.

He lost the Complication, and as a result had to shut down the engines to avoid implosion. The ship dropped out of hyperspace and was face to face with a Terran Unified Polity customs vessel while carrying a suspicious cargo.

We called the game at this point as it had been only an early test, but both of us had been so engaged by the story creation process we knew then that this was a game we wanted to see to completion.

### **Featured Effect, Suspense:**

Traditionally in role-playing, suspense has meant the GM keeping secrets from the players and the players not knowing what the GM was going to spring on them next. It quickly became obvious to us that that paradigm wouldn't work in Universalis. We were afraid that with all players having GM level power there would be no suspense or surprises "If I have total control over everything, how can I ever be surprised?"

The answer surprised us. There was actually a greater degree of suspense in a Universalis game because all of the players have power over the story. Instead of being in a game with 4 players, each of you wondering what nasty surprise the single GM has up his sleeve; in Universalis you're in a game where each of you are wondering what any of the 4 other players might have up their sleeve. With 4 creative minds working on it you never know what to expect.

This is exemplified even in the brief 2 player game example above. The first complication of the scene was originated by me something was wrong in the engine room. What was wrong in the engine room? Not only was Mike not expecting this problem and so it was a surprise to him, I had no predetermined list of "bad effects" and so it was equally suspenseful for me to see what he'd do with it.

Likewise, when I defined the "external problem" as being a TUP customs ship, that was a total surprise to both of us. Here we were on our way from Mars and the next thing we knew we were being pulled over by the federales. That was no preplanned set encounter from a scenario book, that was completely spur of the moment improvisation that had riveted both of our attentions, because neither of us had any idea how it would turn out. What did the patrol ship want? What was our cargo anyway? Who were we supposed to deliver it to? We as players of the game didn't know any more than a movie audience would know about what was about to happen, and that was exciting.

----Ralph Mazza

# Zombie Summer

This game was played with just two players. The genre was to be a high school slasher horror flick, and the action set in an old abandoned mining town a few miles from where the kids lived.

The action started with a car-full of kids arriving at the town in an old convertible owned by Rick. In the car was Bobby, captain of the football team, Rick, a rebel without a clue, Lisa, a cheerleader type, and Wayne, an unpopular kid who Bobby had invited along because he owed Wayne for doing his homework.

The kids had a bottle of booze, and were a little drunk to start off, with the exception of Wayne who kept his wits about him. They got out of the car, and headed into a nearby house, which was in a dilapidated condition. Bobby and Lisa started making out, and Ricky hitting the bottle pretty hard. The kids hear a noise coming from a closet, and, upon investigation, are scared witless by the grizzled old man that lurches out of it at them.

Turns out that it's just old Zeke, a miner who never left the town after it was abandoned. He confronts the characters, telling them to get out of "his" house. Apparently he feels that squatting here makes it his. He also says that they should get out of town. The kids, however, just move to another room, and continue partying.

After a bit, there is more noise out back. Figuring that it's Zeke again, Wayne and Rick decide to check it out. They discover an old shed out back with the door open, and peer inside. They note that there is a shaft leading down into the ground with a ladder protruding from it, and what look to be a pair of human skulls on the ground.

The first complication then occurs. Just as they turn around, a walking corpse, dripping in some black goop attacks them, knocking down Wayne, and taking a big bite out of Rick. Just when it seems that the kids have had it, a blast goes off, taking off the Zombie's head. It's Zeke, with his trusty shotgun, just in time to save the kids.

The boys ask him about the shaft, and he relates that it leads to some of the mineshafts that riddle the town. He tells them yet again that they should leave, "before it's too late."

But do they? Of course not. They go back into the house to tell Bobby and Lisa that they are going to investigate the shaft. Bobby decides to come with, but Lisa doesn't want to go. Rick says he's "not feeling well", and stays behind.

Upon returning to the shed, it would appear that Zeke has gone down the shaft. Wayne and Bobby follow, and investigate the shaft. They go a ways, and hear a shotgun blast ahead of them, and sounds of a fight. They proceed forward and after a bit discover Zeke's body, horribly gnawed and definitely dead. They decide to press on, taking the shotgun with them along with shells they get off Zeke's body.

Meanwhile, back in the house, Lisa is investigating the upstairs, and finds a bureau with a mirror, and a nice old brush inside. She decides to pretty herself up. After a moment, she notes Rick coming up behind her with his hands out. Lisa warns him that she thinks he's cute, but that she can't risk losing Bobby. Just before Rick sinks his teeth into her. As a result of the complication, Rick kills Lisa easily.

Back in the mine, after a bit Wayne and Bobby come across some of the goop on the floor of the mineshaft. They are panicked when it starts to move, and tries to crawl up Bobby's shoes, starting a complication. Bobby lets loose with a shotgun blast that begins a cave-in, in which Wayne barely gets away. Bobby is caught under a rock, on the other side, and Wayne can hear his screams as the goop covers him.

Unable to return to the surface the way he came down, Wayne starts searching about. He quietly finds the source of the zombies after a bit, a huge pool of the black goop filling an entire cavern, with hundreds of bodies floating in it. In the following complication, using his wits, Wayne figures out quickly a way to dispatch the creatures. He uses the mine's still functioning electrical system to electrocute the goop, which bursts into flame. Wayne runs as the mine fills with flames, and barely makes it out of the main entrance alive.

Wayne returns to the house to find his other friends dead and lifeless. With nothing left to do, he takes the keys from Rick's pockets, gets into the convertible, and rides off into the sunset. Presumably a more self-confident individual than before.

### **Featured Effect: Two-Player Play**

No doubt about it, it's a bit harder to play Universalis with only two players. Not so hard as to make it impossible or un-enjoyable, however. I've played with two players on a few occasions, and the sessions go fine. But fewer players means that the creativity is split less ways, and the synergistic effects show up less.

What you have to look out for are the moments where you'll both be out of ideas. As such, it's good to have a source from which to draw. Try playing in some setting that you both know really well. When you feel a slowdown occurring, just look to the setting, and inject some character, creature, place, whatever, from it. If you don't use a preplanned setting, then rely a lot on the clichés of the setting and genre selected. If it's fantasy, for example, have a dragon show up. Out of the blue.

Randomness is OK in Universalis to an extent. When you throw something in, just work out through play the reason for the interjection. You still want to create a story. But don't let the worry of unexplained events slow you down. They will probably get explained later, or perhaps not. Which is not the end of the world. In fact, if you play a multi-session game, those loose plot angles give you something to work into in follow on sessions.

If you just accept that slowdowns in play may happen before hand, and relax about it, that can help get through these slowdowns. Nothing exacerbates a block like this as much as pressuring yourself too hard to come up with something. If you just wing it, and have fun, the pace will be fine; making Universalis perfectly suitable for two players

---Mike Holmes



# Zombie Western

## DemonCon 2002

The game started out innocently enough. I was hankerin' to play a Western, so with the first turn that's the Tenet I proposed. The next player set us in a mining town named Dark Gulch, and the player after that made sure the boom times had already turned bust. That's when it started to get a little weird.

The first characters in the story were the crotchety old prospector Dirty Pete, and the skinny piano player. After that came Ruby the *saloon girl, with a past*. Ruby (plying her trade) had gotten wind of a new, but as yet unclaimed silver strike in one of the abandoned mine shafts. She needed the prospector's help to claim the strike only problem was, the area was crawling with zombies yes zombies.

Fortunately, also in the saloon, was the Reverend Ulysses, a *drunken, ex-minister turned zombie hunter*. Plied with drink and a share of the stake, The Reverend agreed to help clear out the zombies. Unfortunately for them, the prospector was a little drunk himself, and by the time he was done recruiting Ulysses, the whole town had heard of the plan.

Zeke, a *rival zombie hunter* and his *side kick* Ronnie heard about it and decided to collect the bounties on the zombies for himself. Bruce Ashwood, a *local miner, equipped with a steam powered mining pick* named Betty decided to head out first and jump the claim. Meanwhile Sheriff Brody had sent a telegraph to a man known simply as Dirk the *most famous Zombie Hunter in the west*. Unbeknownst to us at the time but to be revealed later was that Dirk and Ruby had been *married* before a *nasty break-up*, and the Sheriff's daughter Sally had a *huge crush* on the mysterious hunter.

Ruby, the prospector, and the Reverend Ulysses went to the town's abandoned church which Ulysses used as his headquarters to collect their gear, but zombies had already infiltrated the town. Alerted by Ulysses' pet dog Ghost (who was quite literally a ghost) the characters managed to blast their way through the zombies without getting their brains eaten.

They traveled to the mine site where a tremendous horde of zombies were mindlessly making their way into the mine shaft, drawn by the sound of mysterious music. The Reverend was preparing to lay a wild west smack down on the undead when Zeke and the Sheriff Brody arrived on the scene. Wanting the zombie bounties all to himself, Zeke had let the Sheriff know that Reverend Ulysses was hunting without a license. Fortunately the Sheriff had a copy of the necessary paperwork (in triplicate) with him which Ulysses dutifully filled out. Unfortunately the license wasn't active until it had been properly filed. Scowling, The Reverend turned to his gas powered camp stove and threw the paperwork in the fire. Watching the smoke rise to the heavens, the Reverend informed all present that he'd filed the paperwork with God and anyone having a problem with that could take it up with him.

At that point a commotion got their attention. Bruce was bailing out of the mine shaft with a mule cart full of ill gotten silver ore. The zombies made short work of the poor mule and Bruce, seeing the fire of the camp stove, made a bee line towards the safety of Reverend Ulysses and his posse with the zombies not far behind. The strange music was growing louder.

As the group prepared to mount a defense, they failed to notice that Bruce had been bitten while in the mine shaft and was *turning into a zombie* himself. Now fully transformed he attacked Ruby with his steam pick. She managed to shoot it out of his hand turns out she was a *crack shot, taught by Dirk* himself.

The Reverend, Sheriff Brody, Zeke, Ronnie, and the old prospector Dirty Pete tried to hold off the zombie hordes, but it was a losing battle and Pete went down. His fall did manage to occupy several zombies who were intent on eating his brains. Several more turned their attention on Ronnie. Seeing the odds, Zeke abandoned his side kick Ronnie to a painful death and while they were gnawing through his skull he high tailed it back to town. Still the music continued.

At that moment Sally showed up with Dirk in tow. She had met her beau at the train station and led him to the mine. Tossing a few sticks of dynamite around sent zombie parts flying, briefly gaining control of the situation. But Ruby was in trouble. Bruce had gained the upper hand and was about to slay the saloon girl, when Dirk ♦ moved by feelings for his old flame, leapt in to rescue her. Ruby was saved, and Bruce put down, but Dirk had been *bitten*. He helped finish off the last of the nearby zombies but when he felt himself transforming he told Ruby she had to kill him.

Ruby was preparing to do so, but Sally leapt in and stopped her, throwing herself over Dirk to protect him. Dirk, now *fully a zombie*, promptly ripped out Sally ♦'s throat before Ruby put him down with a shot that took off half his head.

At this point the strange music had reached a thundering crescendo. Rising out of the mine on a hydraulic lift was a platform containing a steam powered organ. The skinny piano player from the saloon was playing that organ and through its music he was raising and controlling the zombies. As it turns out, he had loved Ruby for years, but she had always scorned him. So he went in quest of dark occult arts that would let him get his revenge.

As a fresh wave of zombies came out of the mine, Ruby and Reverend Ulysses made good their escape. Sheriff Brody, *shattered with grief* over the loss of his beloved Sally went berserk and killed many zombies before he ran out of ammo and was torn apart by the undead.

### **Featured Effect, Story Elements:**

Story Elements are the type of Tenet which governs what a story is going to be about. The rules specify that each player in turn can propose one and only one Tenet at a time. This ensures that all players have input into the type of game being played. However, it can also result in something of a mishmash of different genres and styles as each player puts his own twist on the game. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Some of our best games have involved some wildly disparate Story Elements all being thrown into the same pot and stirred together.

This effect can be seen in this play example as the story moved from being a traditional western set in a small mining town to a "weird" western complete with zombies and occultists. As it turned out this wasn't ♦ a bad direction and the game was quite fun with few survivors. However, there are a few tricks to keeping Universalis games more genre pure if desired.

The most obvious is to be prepared to Challenge players who introduce elements outside of the genre expectations that have been established. Not only can this mechanic serve as a straw poll of other players as to whether they ♦ like or dislike the new direction, but if the new element has never been formally proposed as a Story Element the Challenger can most likely claim the existing Story Elements as Facts with which to oppose the new direction. "This is a ♦ western ♦. There aren't ♦ zombies in westerns"

However, more important is to recognize the importance of the Game Preparation phase outlined in Chapter 2. In our example above I defined the genre as being "western". It did not then get narrowed down to "traditional western". If players are truly concerned about genre purity they should take pains to be very specific up front before the first scene is played about exactly what those genre expectations are.

Also, feel free to make use of negating Story Elements. Knowing the popularity of zombies and "weird" westerns recently, players in this game could have ensured that these things didn't creep into their game by proposing Story Elements such as "No occult" or "No undead gunslingers" and such. In another game we've played that was set in a science fiction universe a player made good use of this technique to declare that there was no virtual reality cyberspace in that setting.

----Ralph Mazza

# Alien Love

## GenCon 2002 Demo

This game was one of the more interesting and challenging to run. Challenging because it didn't have an immediate action oriented premise which makes a demo game a little difficult to keep moving. Interesting because it had a couple of players who were overtly attempting to outdo each other with convoluted plot twists while another couple of players were trying to reign things in.

This was evident right from the pre-game which started out (as all demos I ran at GenCon this year did for some reason) as a Science Fiction game. It was to be a story about a first contact situation where aliens were arriving on Earth for the first time. Then they started twisting it. The aliens were not going to be humanoid, they were going to energy beings who could possess the bodies of humans. But not just any humans, senior citizens. And not just any senior citizens, recently deceased senior citizens. Further the game was to be set in prohibition era Chicago. Finally, the main thrust of the story was that the aliens were in love. One of them was lost on Earth and the other one was searching for him.

The first scene started with a bit of a flash back to the point where the first alien came to Earth. It began with the assassination of mob boss Don Finito by a rival family. The Don was elderly, and recently deceased. Lo and behold, the assassination attempt must have failed because Don Finito was still alive. Of course, that was due to his corpse being possessed by one of the aliens, an alien who very much enjoyed his new role as a crime syndicate king pin.

The second scene took place in a grimy gym where several boxers were training. Big Tony, a manager and fight promoter, called over one of his star boxers, a wiry middle weight by the name of Little Joe. Tony had some bad news. It seems that he'd just gotten word that Joe's mother, who'd been hospitalized for some time, had just passed away at a local hospital. Joe lost no time rushing to the hospital. As he left Tony reminded him that he had a big fight the next day.

At the hospital we have a brief flashback, to a scene where a number of doctors and nurses are desperately trying to save the life of an elderly woman. We know they failed when the EKG machine flat lines, they draw the sheet over her head and solemnly leave the room. We know an alien has entered her body, when the meter begins to beep again and the sheets begin to stir. [Note: we had no idea at the time whether EKG machines were around in the 20s and 30s but it made no difference for our purposes at the time. Groups desiring a more authentic setting may want to look facts like this up in advance. A subsequent web search revealed that the first EKG machine was invented at the University of Iowa in 1920, but used an actual saline bath for conductivity. The wires and electrodes weren't added until 1940 oh well on with the story]

The action then cut back to Little Joe in a heated discussion with a nurse who wouldn't let him past the lobby when suddenly everyone is interrupted by an elderly woman in a hospital gown striding purposefully towards the door shocked doctors in pursuit. Joe joyfully confronts his mother whom he thought was dead but she doesn't recognize him at all, instead she keeps saying that she's looking for someone and has to find him. This alien retained no memories of the host body. As Joe engages the doctors in another heated discussion, his mother slips away unnoticed, disappearing in the night.

The next scene cut ahead a couple of days with a beleaguered and unkempt Little Joe being led to see Don Finito on the Don's patio. The Don, who runs the neighborhood, had had a large amount of money riding on Little Joe and was furious that Joe had never shown up for the big fight. When Joe told the story about his mother who was still missing, the Don ordered his Concigliere, Vincent to find her. Vincent sent two goons, Guido and Vito (inseparable brothers) to get her and bring her back to the Don. During this scene it was also established as another twist that the alien that Joe's mother was looking for was *not* the one who possess Don Finito but rather a third alien we hadn't yet seen.

In the final scene we ran, Guido and Vito indeed found Little Joe's alien possessed mother in an ally. She told them she was looking for someone and asked if they could help her find him. The pair said no, but that she was coming with them to meet Don Finito. That was the wrong answer. Glowing with alien energy, the old woman sent the two bruisers flying across the ally into a wall. At this point in time a car drove up with three more goons, these from the rival family who'd tried to assassinate Don Finito. They'd heard Finito was looking for this woman and figured she must be someone important, so they planned on getting to her first. Glowing even more brightly now she cut the three thugs down with blasts of white light setting their car on fire and causing it to explode.

At this point we called the demo due to time but did a brief post game wrap-up to try to make some sense of the story. What we decided was this: The alien who possessed Don Finito was a criminal among his own people who fled to Earth looking for a place to hide. The mysterious third alien was actually the second to arrive on Earth. He was there to bring the first alien to justice, but things went awry and he disappeared. The alien who'd possessed Little Joe's mother was the life mate of the third alien who'd come to find him after he was written off as lost. Her possession hadn't gone well and she hadn't absorbed the memories of her host and so didn't know how to get along on Earth among humans. We decided that the third alien had run afoul of the U.S. Military in some sort of Roswell-esque incident and was a prisoner of the government who were studying him, perhaps with the idea of using his self sustaining energy form as a source of power. Further we decided that Guido and Vito's description of the incident would tip Don Finito off that another alien was around. An alien he'd now have to kill. Little Joe would find out about the Don's plan and save his mother and somehow come to discover the truth about her. Together with some as yet uncreated girl friend they'd set out in search of the alien's lost love.

#### **Featured Element, Plot Flexibility:**

At times during the actual session, the play of the demo seemed to drag a bit, but this I think was largely because I had gotten used to a much more rapid fire action oriented type of demo and the soap opera like pace of this session threw me for a loop at first. In the end I sold 2 copies based on this demo, so it must have been well received by the players.

What struck me most about the session was how easily the game mechanics adapted to the sometimes bizarre direction the story was going. Even with two players bound and determined to out do each other for the next big plot twist, the Coin mechanics worked powerfully well to limit just how much they could do at a time and allowed the more staid players (including myself) to maintain some sanity in the story line. Despite all of the convolutions, our post game wrap-up demonstrated how easily the session could have been turned into a coherent story if we'd had time to play it out. The elements we introduced in the wrap-up could have been brought out during play and while its likely that a few challenges might have been necessary to keep things from getting too zany or obscure I was really impressed with the tale that we told in a 45 minute session with 4 first time players. We went almost the entire time without a single complication until I finally forced one into the last scene for the sole purpose of demoing how it works. What at the time seemed one of the harder demos to play in retrospect is one of the ones I'm most pleased with.

---Ralph Mazza

# The Psionic Mines

## GenCon 2002 Demo

This demo for potential customers, like many at the con, began with the genre of Science Fiction. Our setting for the game was a mining colony on a distant world. It was to be a gritty realistic setting with no virtual reality cyberspace, or other cyberpunk extremes.

There were, however, psionics. The humans were there to mine psi crystals which were extraordinarily valuable for they allowed people to tap into latent psychic powers. The humans had wrested control of the planet from the native species of alien beings whose psionic powers were so developed that they'd never developed a need for advanced technology themselves. There were two problems, however. One, exposure to that many crystals over time could enhance a man's psychic powers to extraordinary levels while simultaneously driving him insane. Two, the aliens who'd been driven away from the colony site wanted it back, and the psychically deranged human miners were their ticket home.

My instructions to this group of players was the same as I'd used many times. To think in terms of a powerful opening scene for a movie. When a player thought enough background had been developed to give them an idea for one, the game would move to the first scene. Being a demo, we developed the background much more sketchily than I normally do for games meant to be played over several sessions, but this proved to be a perfect amount to promote quick, movie-like, one-shots.

The first scene of the game opened in a deep shaft of the mine. There were several miners in *enviro suits* equipped with *sonicvibe mining tools*. One of them, a man named Kurtz, had been in the mines too long and his *latent psionic ability* had just burst forth. *Wracked with pain* and *Screaming Crazy*, Kurtz lashed out at he stumbled around the mine shaft. A nearby miner died with the tip of Kurtz's vibro tool bursting through his chest.

Against the far wall of the mine shaft, standing on a high platform of scaffolding was Engineer Blackthorn. He was in charge of this mining crew and this wasn't the first time he'd seen a miner go berserk. He was prepared for it and drew forth a heavy gun loaded with powerful tranquilizing darts.

In the Complication that followed, Blackthorn managed to shoot Kurtz with a dart, but it wasn't enough to put the miner down. Enraged, Kurtz ripped apart the metal scaffolding with unleashed telekinetic powers sending Blackthorn plummeting to the floor far below. As Kurtz escaped deeper into the mine shafts we saw Blackthorn's fall slow and stop. The Engineer hovered just off of the ground before landing on his feet. Blackthorn, its revealed, is a *powerful telekinetic* himself.

In the next scene, the Framing Player flashed forward in time several days paying each of the other players 1 Coin to do so. The location was a detention center in an orbiting space station above the planet. Kurtz was imprisoned, ineffectually raging, in an energy field. Blackthorn, revealed as an *undercover psi cop*, was reporting to his superior officer.

We ended the game session with a dialog on the dangerous increase in violent psychic reactions among the miners and what it could possibly mean. All in all it was a powerful opening for a continuing campaign in just a brief 30 minute demo with first time players.

### **Featured Element, Flash Forward:**

The ability to set the time of any scene is one of the most powerful tools in Universalis. For most scenes players will use the default free setting of having the scene occur immediately after or

concurrently with the previous one. But on occasion, a well framed flash back can be key to really opening up depth in the story.

In this demo a first time player demonstrated a skillful use of the more difficult-to-master: flash forward. Thinking like a movie director cutting the scene (or more accurately the movie editor), this player skipped ahead to the important stuff. The second scene could have been a continuation of the first, with a scene of Kurtz running through the mineshafts being hunted by Blackthorn and various security elements complete with lots of violence to innocent miners and equipment and plenty of psionic special effects. But the player intuitively recognized that the story was not about this confrontation between Kurtz and Blackthorn. This was just a taste to cue the audience on what was to come. The real story lay in uncovering the alien plot and dealing with what was likely to be a full psionic war complete with mind controlled deranged miners. There would be plenty of opportunity for high FX scenes of wanton violence in the mines later on.

So even though this was just a brief demo played right in the booth in the exhibitor hall, and we ended the game with the scene in the orbital station, it was obvious that we had the makings of a pretty decent story; complete with a group of players who understood the concept of scene framing and pacing. Even though I needed to end the demo to get back to other things, I was left really wondering what this group would have come up with for a third and fourth scene.

---Ralph Mazza

# The Gangs of New New York

## GenCon 2002 Demo

GenCon 2002 was a blitz of Science Fiction based demos for me and this was no exception. The setting was a gritty, post apocalyptic world with pockets of intense radiation scattered throughout the city. The imagery was very Judge Dredd. The situation was to be one of rival gangs battling for control of the city. In an interesting twist, 2 Rules Gimmicks came up right in the preparation phase. First each player (there were 4 of us) would be responsible for detailing 1 gang during set-up. Second, each gang was to have a leader, and the leaders were to be former friends, who were unable to confront each other directly but only through agents like the gangs they controlled. The sense was that these leaders were somehow larger than life and the gangs themselves were just tools they used to strike at each other. A very cool concept. Unfortunately being a demo it was one we didn't get to explore in detail and only 1 of the 4 leaders even got created.

The last gang to get created wound up being the focal point for the session so I'll detail it first. They were the Post-Messianics. A religious cult who believed the second coming of Christ had already occurred and those who were to be saved in the Rapture had already departed. They believed they were truly living in apocalyptic times and that the people who were left were those that got left behind to suffer. They blamed technology heralding in the end times, destroying peoples faith and opening the door for the antichrist. They were essentially militant, hyper violent Luddites, destroying technology wherever it was found.

Their headquarters was in the middle of a radiation zone. They, having repudiated all science and knowledge, had no concept of this, but knew that in certain areas they got sick (from the radiation). Their headquarters housed a holy idol which protects the cultists from the sickness as long as they are near its vicinity. They believed it to be a divinely powered artifact, but in reality it was a high tech detoxifier and radiation dampening device. In other words technology.

The next most important gang to the session was an Akira-style biker gang of mercenaries and bounty hunters. Part of this gang was a group of Juicer Ninjas, assassin/infiltrators hyped up on reflex stimulants and combat drugs. They were designed as a Master Component with the Traits of: *Stealthed Bikes, Drug Enhanced Reflexes, Laser Edged Weapons, Built in Radio Chips, and Chameleon Suit*. As part of a challenge over how powerful these guys were it was decided that they had *limited irreplaceable numbers (100)*. However, the high tech components that made them up were *recyclable* and if recovered could be implanted in a new ninja.

The first gang created were an organization of serial killers and murderers. They had fully renounced God. Not that they didn't believe in him, their attitude was "screw-him" and they were dedicated to opposing all facets of Christian morality. They had no role in the session we played, but their leader was the *enigmatic, and mysterious, Red Dragon*. He was later revealed to be the *secret leader of the Juicer Ninjas*.

The gang I created was "The Law". A group of heavily armored and equipped, very Judge Dredd-like law enforcement officers who patrolled the twisted streets of the city as best as they are able.

The first scene of the game had the bikers out stirring up trouble with random acts of violence as a distraction while a team of Juicer Ninjas infiltrated the cultists headquarters to steal their holy idol (leaving them at the mercy of the radiation). They had timed the raid perfectly, to a time when virtually all of the cultists were away, and so the HQ was virtually empty. What they did not know (because another player introduced it) was that the reason the cultists were absent is because they were out raiding the various supplies of juicer drugs cached around the city, destroying most of them and replacing select amounts with caustic acid.



They also did not know that the holy idol had been booby trapped. While trying to remove the central icon (a small key component of the device) one of the juicers fell into a pit of fire, where he was vaporized by his own flammable chemicals. The last two juicers used their acrobatic reflexes to leap over the pit and take the icon, but alarms were sounding and both the cultists and the law were on the way.

In the second scene the cultists returned to discover the icon missing. The Law was already on location, and the cultists blamed them for the theft. The Law Troopers were unaware of the cultists closing in as they patrolled the neighborhood in their armored squad car. Their infrared sensors detected the stealthed ninjas leaping from roof top to roof top. With a warrant to kill all juicers on sight the troopers opened fire; one manning a mini gun mounted on the roof and the other with an assault rifle behind an open squad car door. With automatic shells chewing up the roof tops the ninjas resorted to amazing feats of aerobatics to dodge the bullets. Ultimately they were cut down dropping the icon into a dark crevice but not before one of the ninjas managed to radio back the precise location of both the icon and their bodies. Meanwhile the cultists, armed only with knives and pipes had encircled the occupied troopers and proceeded to bludgeon them to death destroying the squad car and all gear. They never knew the ninjas had the icon to begin with and, since they were stealthed, hadn't seen them on the roof; and so fanned out to look for the icon. The only other witness to the location of the icon was a strange feral child, known as Wolf Boy, who hung around the neighborhood and had been hitching a ride on the back of the squad car.

At this point we called the demo. The Ninjas were sending reinforcements to get the icon, the cultists were out in force trying to recover it and The Law had a full assault team on the way as back-up. Ultimately though, we felt it was probably the secretive and, as yet unheard from, Red Scorpion who would probably wind up claiming the prize but to what end.

### **Featured Element, Challenges:**

This demo saw more Challenges than any other I ran at GenCon. This excited me because the players had pretty much figured out how Challenges would work before I'd even fully explained them. That speaks well for the intuitiveness of the mechanic.

The first thing to get Challenged was the Juicer Ninjas who were turning into an incredibly powerful force before anyone else had even begun to define such things. The Challenge involved their strength and if we really wanted to embark in what would amount to a Coin spending arms race between the gangs. In the end, this Challenge never went to bidding. A solution was negotiated whereby there was only a limited number of Ninja, & they were depended upon vulnerable supplies of drugs for much of their abilities. To mitigate these weaknesses somewhat, they were replaceable if the bodies could be recovered to recycle the technology.

The second Challenge involved the Red Scorpion as secret leader of the Ninjas. A player proclaimed the leader of one gang was the real power behind a large segment of another gang, this got Challenged quickly. This Challenge did go to bidding, and the Red Scorpion player won after Coins had been spent all around. The other two of us figured that not only would that be a great plot hook to introduce at some future time, but having a conflict like that could only result in a lot of dead ninjas.

The third Challenge involved me in control of the Law Troopers having just killed the two escaping ninjas. I spent Coins to describe how the mini gun had turned the ninjas to hamburger eliminating any possibility of them being recycled. This Challenge would have gone to bidding, but a straw poll indicated that all other players preferred to see the corpses left intact so they could be the focus of a rescue attempt. Faced with such a coalition, I withdrew my Challenge before wasting Coins on one I couldn't win.

----Ralph Mazza

# The Pregnant Pope

## Thanksgiving 2002 Actual Play

Over the Thanksgiving holiday I had the opportunity to play a game of Universalis with Ron Edwards of [Adept Press](#), Jake Norwood of [Driftwood Publishing](#) and Jake's wife Earta. Unfortunately, the game took place fairly late at night after a very busy day and we were all a little off form, but even so we produced one of the best stories I've had the pleasure to play in.

The game started with the usual Preparation Phase. Earta was to set the tone for the whole game with just two simple Coins.

**Jake:** "This game will involve swords somehow" [yeah, we gave him a bit of ribbing about that one]

**Earta:** "And it will involve the pope." [bomb #1]

**Ron:** "And there will be a heresy trial."

**Me:** And here on my first turn would be the first of several challenges in this game. I had wanted to set the game in the near future involving the successor to our current pope, but everyone else was less than enthused about that. But I was determined to not use a general medieval setting, so instead I went with the New World in the 16th century.

**Jake:** "I'm creating the character of Rodrigo, a Jesuit Priest".

**Earta:** "The pope...is pregnant". [With that second bombshell the fabric of the entire game was shaped. As an interesting rules commentary we ruled that just as "Jack is Jill's brother" gives an automatic corollary Fact of "Jill is Jack's sister" that "the pope is pregnant" gives the automatic corollary of "the pope is a woman".]

The preparation phase continued for a bit and we established a few more features: The actual story would take place in Cartagena. The character of Cardinal Immanuel was Created. Immanuel had been, and Rodrigo was, the pope's lover. And that out of jealousy at being replaced, Immanuel had sent Rodrigo to the new world as a missionary to convert the natives. We also established that the Cardinal was a skilled swordsman who was in possession of an heirloom sword stolen from Rodrigo's family. Jake added an interesting twist in that the entire story would be told from the perspective of the pope's loyal personal bodyguard.

In the first scene Ron created a very cool rules gimmick. In order to meet Jake's Tenet about the bodyguard, Ron ruled that all scenes would open with a narrative by the bodyguard. The "audience" would see a much older bodyguard writing a letter in a small room at a Spanish mission in California in which he was describing the events of the story. This cost him 1 for the gimmick, but it also counted as a flash forward since it established that the bodyguard would definitely have to survive the story, and so he had to pay each of us 1 Coin. The most fascinating thing about this gimmick, is that it wound up being used in two very different ways. First it proved to be a fantastic way to deliver a good bit of important factual exposition quickly without needing an actual scene which would have been rather boring (exactly why this technique is used in movies). But second it became almost like an *Inspectres Confessional*. Not wanting to give too much away about the scene (and thus have to pay for the flash forward) several scenes opened with a vague sort of commentary. Like the cryptic comments of a Confessional then, the players would be motivated to work towards including this element into the scene in some fashion. I'll try to paraphrase these opening narratives as best as I can remember them.

***I write these words by my own hand from the mission at San Pablo Capistrano in Spanish California. They are a true and accurate record of my time as bodyguard to Pope Ignatius III. When we were safely ensconced in our apartments in Cartagena and the pope had removed her outer garments I could see that she was starting to show and would not long be able to conceal her pregnancy. Yes, Pope Ignatius was actually a woman named Anna Marie and she was with child. But I get ahead of myself...***

The first scene opened with the pope and her bodyguard traveling incognito disguised as a merchant and his servant disembarking a ship having managed to slip out of Rome secretly. She had traveled to the new world seeking Rodrigo her lover. When they arrived, they found a city in turmoil with soldiers and civilians rushing around, some panicked and some with purpose. After asking around they learned that a great chief of the native people named Umanhotep was arriving with an armed delegation demanding to speak with the governor. The audience had been granted and people were either fleeing from the savages or crowding in to witness the event. Anna Marie and her bodyguard were swept along with the crowd to the plaza outside the governor's mansion.

It seems Rodrigo fancied himself more of a soldier of God than a diplomat and had begun his conversion of the natives by marching soldiers into nearby villages and forcibly baptizing the children. Umanhotep was demanding that this practice cease. As the governor and Rodrigo addressed the chief from the balcony of the manse, Rodrigo received a small token from a servant which he was told had come from the servant of a merchant in the crowd seeking audience. Rodrigo immediately recognized the token as coming from the pope and completely lost his composure. He abandoned the summit and rushed to meet the merchant and see him safely and secretly ensconced in private apartments in the mansion. The chief left furious and the governor was horrified at the prospect of hordes of screaming savages descending on Cartagena.

***Unbeknownst to us at the time, but soon to shape the destiny of us all, Cardinal Immanuel had also come to Cartagena. Alone in Rome he knew where the pope had gone and had followed us here to ensure his own plans.***

The second scene opened with a silver caravan trudging from the mines through jungle trails to Cartagena to be shipped to Spain. Cardinal Immanuel and two of his special guards had ridden out to the caravan where he had a secret meeting with Chief Umanhotep in the jungle. The Cardinal was prepared to pay the chief in silver if the chief would attack Cartagena and kidnap Rodrigo and the woman Anna Marie. He would arrange things so the warrior could gain entrance to the fort with ease. The Cardinal had two plans. First, he hoped that if he could get Rodrigo out of the way once and for all that he could convince Anna Marie to return to Rome as Pope and return to him as lover and together they would be the most powerful force in Europe. Failing that, however, he could not allow the Pope to be revealed as a woman, for it had been him who had cast the deciding vote for her papacy. He would be ruined. Getting her out of the city, and into a jungle filled with savages should make her more amenable to his plan, or at least more easily disposed of. The chief was to do anything he liked with Rodrigo, but he was not to harm the woman. Umanhotep had other ideas, however. He had a penchant for white women, and any woman that such a powerful man was willing to pay so much silver for had to be something truly special. He intended to kidnap her as planned, but then keep her for himself. Rodrigo he would enjoy killing slow. He and his warriors hated the Jesuit for casting the water spell of his god on their children. Nothing would keep him from getting his vengeance on him.

The scene closed with the two men in agreement and the Cardinal saying "take your payment then". At that, a screaming horde of native warriors burst upon the caravan from out of the jungle and slaughtered the Spanish soldiers guarding it. In resolving the complication it was determined that one soldier survived the encounter and even managed to scar the chief with his sword. It is a mark of our tired condition that this poor soldier was forgotten and we never returned to him.

***Rodrigo's handling of the native savages had been incomprehensible. We should probably have not attempted to contact him at that time, but I had never known him to act so foolishly. When they finally met, my lady would not be pleased. I was beginning to see that coming to Cartagena was going to be an even bigger mistake than I had expected.***

The third scene was back at the pope's apartments where Rodrigo had finally come to meet the merchant who had brought word of his lover. This was handled using the dialog rules. He was stunned to learn that it was not a merchant at all but the pope herself come all the way from Rome to see him. He was even more stunned to learn that she was with child. But what truly sent him over the edge was learning that Anna Marie had decided that she had had enough of being the pope, wanted instead to be a woman and a mother, and expected Rodrigo to leave the church and become her husband..

Meanwhile, the Cardinal had returned to Cartagena and sought audience with the governor. His first act was to demand control of the fort's garrison in order to organize action against the natives. This would enable him to make arrangements that would ensure the success of Umanhotep's attack. His second act was to inform the governor that Rodrigo's actions towards the natives had diminished the sanctity of the sacrament of baptism and defied church doctrine and that he intended to have the Jesuit arrested and charged with heresy. The timid governor, who had visions of half-naked savages swarming the streets of the city was only too happy to have the trouble making Rodrigo removed and acquiesced to both demands. They went in search of the rogue priest.

In the apartment, Anna Marie had grown furious with Rodrigo's less than enthusiastic response. He had no desire to leave the church whatsoever. And that was when the Cardinal, Governor and guards burst in. Rodrigo was

placed under arrest, and when he referred to this woman as the Pope, the governor knew the priest was totally insane. A female pope was too outrageous to even comprehend. The Cardinal, of course, knew exactly who she was. Everything was proceeding according to his plan.

***Rodrigo's trial was a foregone conclusion. No real evidence was presented, no blasphemous activities were exposed, for Rodrigo was nothing if not fanatically devout. But it didn't matter. He had crossed both the church and the state and the governor and Cardinal both wanted him dead, so guilty he would be. My lady perchance may have saved him. She had the vestments and articles of her authority with her and as pope could have demanded his release. But, perhaps in fear that she would be exposed here, far away from her power base; or perhaps to teach the lover who had scorned her a lesson, she did nothing.***

In the fourth scene we used the opening narration to largely skip having an actual trial scene. Rodrigo was escorted off to a cell and Immanuel went to the pope's apartments to outline his plans for them. After a great deal of dialog between the pope and cardinal we learned that while Anna Marie respected and admired the Cardinal, she did truly love Rodrigo. Throughout this, the Cardinal was becoming more and more upset, and when she revealed she was pregnant he became fully enraged. Even though she realized her mistake and tried to pretend it wasn't Rodrigo's baby Immanuel knew it was. He decided then and there to have his way with his former lover one last time before the savages (who even then were infiltrating the fort) came and took her to her fate.

The loyal bodyguard, of course, had other ideas. A complication ensued with me Controlling the dastardly Cardinal and Jake Controlling the bodyguard. We learn that the bodyguard was a veteran of many wars and is something of a romantic. He has a Don Quixote like belief that he is a gallant knight of old serving his noble and gracious queen. We also learn that the Cardinal fights dirty and wields a poisoned dagger in his off hand. I turn the tables on Jake's added "veteran" Trait by using it as justification for the Trait of "Blind in one eye" which I added to the bodyguard to reduce his pool by one. I win the Complication by a large margin but am prohibited from actually killing the bodyguard by Ron's flash forward in the first scene. So the duel is "to the pain". Brought to near paralysis by the poison dagger, the bodyguard is sliced a dozen times by the masterful sword work of the cruel Cardinal. However, during the fighting, Anna Marie slipped away. She has realized how much she loves Rodrigo and has run off to rescue him. Cardinal Immanuel, of course, knows exactly where she went.

During this scene we had another significant Challenge. Earta wanted the Indians to burst in on the duel and attack the Cardinal. I thought the duel with the bodyguard was too important to interrupt, and for the first time in the game I was beginning to have a good idea of where I wanted the story to end up, and it didn't involve the Cardinal being killed just yet. Up until now I had added only bits and pieces to the story allowing the other players to push it along. I had put the pope and her bodyguard in disguise arriving in port, but Earta and Jake had come up with the governor's meeting with the chief and the token. I had set up the silver caravan in the Jungle, but it had been Jake who brought in the Cardinal to plot with the Umanhotep. Jake had run the trial and Ron had made sure that the Cardinal had taken control and confronted the pope. So at this point I had saved up a fairly dominant number of Coins. Negotiation could not bring the Earta's Challenge to an acceptable compromise so I simply told her to spend as many Coins as she wanted and I'd spend 1 more and win. In the end, she saved her Coins and winning the Challenge cost me only 1. This was a perfect example of the balance between story power now vs. story power saved for the future. Earta, Jake, and Ron had assembled a story dramatically different from where I would have taken it, but now I was in the driver's seat bringing it to a close.

***Even though I was not there to see it, it would be a very bloody night***

The fifth scene had us in the prison outside of Rodrigo's cell. Anna Marie had been unable to find the key to set him free and was frantically grasping him through the bars. "Are you looking for this key?" the Cardinal asked as he caught up to her at last, holding Rodrigo's family sword, still covered with the bodyguard's blood. Filled with hate, the Cardinal cast the pope aside and opened the cell, striding in to kill Rodrigo. At that, Earta brought in her Indians. Jake had the debilitated but fanatically loyal bodyguard stagger after his "queen". He managed to kill one Indian before falling unconscious. The dying Indian stumbled down the stairs, falling at the gates of the cell with the bodyguard's sword still in him.

The Indians were there to kidnap Rodrigo and the woman exactly as they had planned. In one of those continuity issues that creep into such stories, I later wondered how they knew where Rodrigo and Anna Marie would be

found. We were too tired at this point in the game to have picked up on the slight plot hole, but had we been more alert it would have been a simple matter to describe how it had all been arranged that Rodrigo would be in this particular cell and the woman here to visit him at this particular time. Earta helped my desired ending by having the Indians nab and make off with Anna Marie. Ron, however, decided that at this point the Cardinal was so full of hate that he had determined to forgo his original plan and kill Rodrigo himself. He thus found himself fighting off 4 Indians to keep them away from Rodrigo. At last he was disarmed and overpowered, but before they killed him, Rodrigo scooped up his family's sword and saved Immanuel. Immanuel then recovered the bodyguard's sword from the body of the first dead Indian and together they drove back the remaining "savages" and went off in pursuit of the captured pope. Immanuel had acquired a desperate desire for Anna Marie in the last scene and couldn't go through with his second plan to just let the Indians dispose of her for him. Since Immanuel and Rodrigo were the only characters still in the scene, a single Coin was enough to change the location and bring the two along in their chase.

After I had ensured that Umanhotep had escaped with his prize, Earta had Rodrigo kill Immanuel, by stabbing him in the back with the sword Immanuel had stolen from him long ago. It was after midnight at this point and this part of the scene fell a little flat. However, I imagine that if it had been earlier it would have included dialog between Rodrigo and Immanuel in which Immanuel, desiring to rescue Anna Marie, would have revealed that he knew exactly where the Indians were going, and in so doing would have revealed that he had been behind the entire attack. When they discovered that Umanhotep had double crossed him and the pope was lost, it would have been then, overcome with grief and rage, that Rodrigo would have struck the Cardinal down. As it was, we had begun to rush the game a bit because we were all well past exhausted.

To start the sixth and final scene I proffered a rules gimmick which altered Ron's initial gimmick such that the narrative by the bodyguard would be at the end of this scene instead of the beginning. I had at this point a clear idea of how I wanted to end the story tragically. It didn't go quite as I had planned, despite my still having the most Coins; but Earta's and Jake's additions would prove to make it much better.

Months had passed, and Rodrigo had finally managed to track down where the savages were. He had tracked them to their new village but was captured at the outskirts. To celebrate the capture of their hated enemy, the Jesuit priest, Umanhotep held a great feast. Rodrigo was to be the main course. Anna Marie had been living as the chief's kept concubine, and she was forced to watch as her lover, and the father of her child was slow roasted on a spit and then devoured by Umanhotep and his warriors. After months of ill treatment, this sent her over the edge.

We then learn that the loyal bodyguard, mostly recovered from his injuries had secretly followed Rodrigo to the village, but had done a better job at remaining unseen. He watched the feast in hiding and that night, when the chief took Anna Marie to his tent he slipped in to rescue her. Anna Marie had concealed a dagger from the feast, and the bodyguard arrived just in time to see her plunge it into Umanhotep in the midst of his passion. She stabbed him over and over, long after he was dead, until the bodyguard moved to stop her. It was then that he saw into her eyes. The months of mistreatment, the horrible death of Rodrigo, the committing of violent murder. It had been too much for her. The queen that he loved and cherished was gone, replaced only with madness. He knew what he had to do. Drawing his knife across her throat, he put her out of her misery. Anna Marie, Pope Ignatius III was dead.

It was then he heard the crying. It was a baby. Umanhotep had intended to kill the white baby when it was born, but instead decided it would provide added leverage and control over his favorite concubine. The bodyguard discovered that baby and took it to raise as his own.

In exhaustion we ended the story there, and I never did give the closing narrative for the scene. If I had, it would have revealed that the letter the bodyguard (who was intentionally never named in the story) was writing years later, was to that boy, who himself had joined the priesthood, explaining to him his true parentage, and why he'd been raised hidden away in a mission in California.

### **Featured Element, Story**

I never cease to be amazed at the quality of the stories that Universalis produces. Despite all the twists and turns, the story had a clear introduction, build-up, climax, and denouement. It was driven on constantly with few

sidetracks towards a distinct ending. However, it did so without the least bit of preparation or railroading. Its hard to imagine the above story being told in a traditional RPG without large parts of it having been plotted in advance by the GM. Its hard to imagine getting from a female pope arriving incognito in Cartagena to dieing at the hands of her own loyal body guard after months of being raped by a savage native chieftain without involving a tremendous amount of railroading or a GM with a near superhuman ability to manage games through Intuitive Continuity. Yet using Universalis we managed to create this story late at night, while exceedingly tired, with hardly any stress or strain besides a few awkward (but very brief) moments where none of us was clear what to do next.

We started the game knowing only that the pope was pregnant, that Rodrigo and Immanuel had been her lovers, that she was traveling incognito to Cartagena, and that at some point there had to be both a sword fight and a heresy trial. Other than that, we knew nothing about where the story was going. We didn't know whether the baby was Rodrigo's or Immanuel's, or even some unknown third party. In fact, we briefly flirted with the idea of the baby being the bodyguard's but quickly nixed it in the interest of time. We didn't know who was going to be on trial for heresy. Early on, the obvious choice seemed to be the pope herself after having been revealed to be a woman. I myself actually toyed with the idea of making the trial be of Umanhotep, in a very different version of the game where he had agreed to be baptized to make peace, and then in anger uttered words that were considered blasphemous. The other players had their own ideas that ensured that the game never got anywhere near those events. We had no idea who would live or who (if anyone) would die (with the exception of the bodyguard who had to live in order to write the letter). In fact, right up to the last scene, Ron and Jake were discussing how they were going to manage to rescue the pope from the Indians.

I managed to convince them that a dark, somewhat twisted ending was best, but even my planned for ending didn't happen the way I had envisioned. I had envisioned the pope never being found, living out her days as concubine to the chief, secretly raising her son to be the instrument of her vengeance in events to be detailed in some as yet unplanned for sequel. Ron, Earta, and Jake were unanimous in their opposition to that ending, although they did go along with ending it tragically. Earta insisted that any ending that didn't involve Anna Marie killing Umanhotep was unsatisfactory to her, and Jake recognized that if the ending of the story was to be recorded as part of the narrative letter, that the bodyguard needed to be brought in as witness to it. He assured me that he had an ending in mind that would satisfy my desire for twisted depravity, and he didn't disappoint. The scene where he described the bodyguard as realizing that the fairy tale was over and where he had him brokenheartedly slit the pope's throat was the climactic highlight of the whole story.

Ron had visibly faded towards the end of the evening (it had been a very long day) but was instrumental early on in the story when we were flailing around not certain where to go next. He made sure, whenever the story started to stall, to throw in a new bang that we had no choice but to address. Ron introduced the concept of bangs in his game Sorcerer and they really are the key to "story now". They are much more than simple hooks. They are situations that are impossible for players to avoid reacting to in some way. Yet they are open ended enough that while they force the players to act, they in no way tell them how to act. It was through how we chose to act regarding the various bangs we threw out that caused the initial story to take shape.

Watching the story unfold was almost like watching a pottery wheel. It started as this misshapen lump of clay and gradually began to look like something, but we didn't know what. Then came the point when it became clear what it was we were making. For me, who spent most of the game clueless about where this thing was going, it came after Ron and Jake's dialog as Cardinal and Pope in scene four. At that point, for the first time, the loose ends made sense to me and I could clearly see where the story needed to go. I also had enough Coins to take it there, but as I described above, even having an overwhelming number of Coins didn't give me carte blanche to control everything.

This is how I've found most games of Universalis to go. The first part of the game involves adding stuff. Throwing in characters and plot elements and different branches and hooks until at some point, for some player at the table, it all clicks. That player then usually begins working to tie everything together and take the story in a specific direction. At this point the other players usually clue in, see where he's going, and begin to help and add their own subtle variations until a definitive ending is reached.

---Ralph Mazza

# Space Pirates

Actual Play 4/5/03

This was a three player game with myself Seth Ben-Ezra of Dark Omen Games and Seth's wife Crystal. Since we only had a couple of hours we skipped through most of the story in the preparation phase and got right to the climax.

This was to be a story about the crew of the space galleon "Empty Bottle". It was a space ship alright, but in a very Spell Jammer or Space 1889 kind of way. The ship was a wooden galleon, sailing between the stars on a sea of ether. The pirates were searching for buried treasure following a map that had been tattooed to the skin of a young girl. The treasure was said to be an Emerald the size of a man's fist.

As they approached the small planet where the treasure was said to be buried they encountered an area of inky blackness. The dark nebulae was the home of a Arwen Demon Queen of Nightmares, a cross between a Cthulhu Old One, a Little Fears Closet Land King, and a Noble from Nobilis.

The nebulae was her domain, and within it, all of your worst fears gained substance. Crystal drew her inspiration directly from one of the islands in the Chronicles of Narnia: Voyage of the Dawn Treader.

Arwen killed the crew and the captain of the ship as they approached her home; but that was not the end of it. Trapped there in the dark, the pirates did not die and the "Empty Bottle" sailed on a ghost ship, crewed by the spirits of the dead sailors. All except the girl, who had hid below decks and was spared.

The ship sailed on, rescuing a woman whose ship had been capsized by one of the frequent electrical storms of neon purple eldritch energy. Unknown to the crew, the woman was actually Arwen in disguise trying to discover why her efforts had not stopped the pirates completely.

When the ship arrived at a small planetoid where the treasure was said to be, they lowered the ship's boats and began to row for shore. The captain made a copy of the map so the girl could be left safe on board with the rescued woman.

Before they reached the planet they were beset by one of the eldritch storms which lashed the boats furiously. Fortunately, having experienced these storms before, the boats had been equipped with lightning rods and they made it to land safely, though not without severe damage to the boats.

To stop them, Arwen teleported to land and summoned a pack of wild dream beasts to attack the crew. Each taking the form of whatever their victim feared most, the crew was hard pressed. Thanks to their electrified cutlasses, space muskets, and a small gatling laser cannon, the beasts were all slain, but their blood had stained the crew red, and as long as it lasted they would be shaken and afraid.

Moving inland they followed the map to a skull shaped mountain where the treasure was said to be. Arwen was desperate now to stop them, for the emerald housed her power. She

returned to the ship, took the girl and teleported to Skull Mountain. There her powers kept the crew cowering and afraid.

The captain, Ivan Blackbeard (who made his crew drink vodka instead of rum) went on alone, following the map to a secret entrance. He knew that obtaining the emerald was the key to finally having the tormented spirits of he and his crew laid to rest and he was determined to get it.

Just inside the entrance he encountered a hallucination of the demon who tried to block his path, but he cut the illusion down with his sword and strode on to the treasure chamber. Taking the gem he returned to his men and led them to the beach.

But nothing happened. Finally the captain realized that it was not enough to have copied the map from the girl. She was the key to the emeralds powers and needed to be present in person...but she had been captured by the demon, who fortunately did not yet know about the girl s destiny.

Just then the Queen appeared, with the girl and another pack of Dream Beasts. They attacked the ill prepared crew just as another eldritch storm struck. At first the pirates managed to fend off the beasts, but when a bolt of purple lighting destroyed the gatling cannon, the crew were overwhelmed, their souls devoured by the beasts.

The captain had engaged Arwen herself and managed to rescue the girl. Only then did the demon queen remember an ancient prophesy about the girl who would be the key to her demise. She lunged for the girl, but it was too late, Ivan s sword pierced her through the heart.

Another flash of lightning struck the sword at that moment and blew the captain backwards. Pulling the blade painfully from her body, the queen swung once, and decapitated the girl.

Greatly weakened Arwen recovered the gem and returned to her lair. Without the girl, the Ivan Blackbeard was doomed to eternity as a wandering spirit unable to find final rest knowing that the souls of his faithful crew, having been devoured by the dream beasts, were spending that eternity in nightmarish torment.

The end.

### **Featured Element, Story and New Players**

It occurred to me as I played this game, how differently the story progresses with players who are veterans of the game vs. new players. Both Seth and Crystal are long time role players, but this was their first time with Universalis.

When the game started, I had wanted a game of pirates: walking the plank, bottles of rum, chests of doubloons on the Spanish Main. Instead the story became a kind of bizarre conglomeration of different ideas. The story itself, wound up pretty cool. One of the strengths of the game, I think is the way it takes a mish mash of ideas and weaves them into a coherent narrative.

But what occurred to me was this. If I d been playing with people who were already fans of the game, I would have taken a much more aggressive role with challenges and well placed complications and a lot of Facts to try and establish more of the game I wanted. In other words, I would have "fought" harder for the story. To put it



another way, I would have made greater use of Negotiation to get the other players on board with my vision, and greater use of Scene Framing to make sure I built in the elements I wanted to see.

But since my purpose in the game was to introduce the rules and make sure the players were enjoying themselves I took a much less up front role. I let most of the mish mash of tenets stand without challenge (I drew the line at making it a "Romance") and the majority of the scenes were framed by the newer players.

This leads, I think, to new players gaining a better understanding of the rules and the power they have at their disposal with their Coins. For me to take charge right off the bat, would limit the new players to being my audience since they would lack the familiarity with the rules to know what they could be doing. The other side to this is a story that tends to resemble a chimera of genre tropes and takes some bizarre twists and turns before finally settling on a direction.

With experienced players I ve found the game to have a greater shared vision, the players tend to have an easier time getting and staying within the same imaginary space.

I d love to read your comments on whether you ve experienced a similar phenomenon on our discussion forum.

---Ralph Mazza

# Hobbits are for Eating

## GenCon 2003 Demo

For this game I got to demo Universalis for John Wick, designer of such games as Legend of the Five Rings, 7th Sea, and Orkworld. As I own and have played the heck out of all of these, this was really quite a thrill. An even greater thrill was when he came back the next day to play in another demo with Mike Holmes, and brought friends with him, including Tom Denmark, artist of Orkworld and designer/artist of Dungeoneer. John commented on Universalis in his [Live Journal](#).

Enough fan boy gushing. John started off the game by announcing that this session was to be a Fantasy story. We later learned that there'd be Orcs and an Orc Cult which worshipped Pain. At this point John saw I was writing Orc with a "C" and immediately implemented a fact that in this game Orc would be spelled with a "K". After laughing about the joke, I immediately was forced to rewrite everything as "Ork".

We then established there were Hobbits. At this point I assigned Hobbits a few Traits including: "Hobbits are for Eating", "1 Hobbit can feed 3 Orks", "Hobbits are Fat and Lazy", and they are "Weakling Cowards".

The Ork Army meanwhile was "Unruly", "a Horde x2", and armed with "Nasty Rusty Swords". John Challenged me on that and wanted to have the Orks armed with spears, but I declared that these weren't no pansy spear wielding Orks and won the Challenge. Nothing quite like sharing Orkworld jokes with the designer of the game. The Ork Leader, "Zrograr" was "Buff x2", and "Clever".

The Hobbit Army was inferior in numbers and armed with "Slings" (of course). They did hold a solid "Ambush position" and had several rapid firing boulder throwing engines.

At this point a unit of elven sharpshooters were added. They were "Hiding in the woods" and "aiming at the Ork Leader, Zrograr". They were led by Elf Leader who "Hates Orks", because his "Lover was Killed by Orks". The Elf Leader was given a name of so many syllables that it was recorded simply as "Really Long Name". He was armed with a "Magic Blood Bow" whose arrows had been "Dipped in the Blood of his Slain Lover".

The battle started off with the elven archers opening fire on Zrograr. With all of Mr. Long Name's Traits added in, Zrograr was in trouble. Until the Enchantress Enscalla revealed herself. She of the "Stunning Green Hair" had "Arcane Powers x3", and an "Aura of Protection on Zrograr". The Ork Leader barely won the Complication. The elven arrows struck Zrograr repeatedly but were mostly thwarted by the arcane shield. Zrograr was left with a "flesh wound" and became "enraged x2". The flare of the magic shield shot back along the path the arrows had come revealing the elves hidden position and deleting their "Hiding in Woods" Trait. Enscalla, however, was put into a magical sleep by her exertions.

At this point the Ork Bugler equipped with a "Ramshorn" sounded the advance against the Elven Position. A "Treacherous" Hobbit Spy named "Bob" had warned Zrograr of the Hobbit Ambush, and so a unit of "Warg Riders" was sent to "Sweep behind the Hobbit Position".

In the ensuing conflict between the Orks and the Elfves, the Elves won. The Elf player used all of his Coins to slay Zrograr and send the Ork army into chaotic "Disarray". But not before

the Loser used his Coins slay all of the elven sharpshooters and cause the Leader to flee. The loser also had the Ork Lieutenant who was "Faithful" take command and erase the "Disarray" Trait.

The second scene was framed into the future, following the abject slaughter of the pathetic hobbits and the feasting on their fat lazy corpses. The location of the scene was a nearby shrine where the Apprentices of the Sorceress Enscalla had taken her sleeping body to revive her. The elf leader, fleeing the recent battle "Filled with Remorse" from his defeat, stumbled upon the shrine and determined to slay the evil Sorceress.

Unfortunately that ended our demo. Jake Norwood needed the table to run a demo of [The Riddle of Steel](#) (one of the all time best Fantasy RPGs) and so we had to call it. The demo was a success, copies were sold, and Jake sold 4 copies to each of his 4 demo participants so I can't hold a grudge for him bumping me. But it would have been fun to find out what happened to the elf with the "Really Long Name".

### **Featured Element, Combat Tactics**

One of our design goals with Universalis was to create a game where the level of gritty detail was completely customizable by play group. For some groups I've played with entire stories were told with characters who were rarely given more than 1 or 2 broad Traits. The above combat could have been narrated completely quickly "And the Hobbits were wiped out and eaten". Instead we took a more detailed approach where some individual units (like Elven sharpshooters and Orkan Warg riders) were independently detailed. Tactics like ambushes, and arrow volleys, and flanking maneuvers, and charges were used to add Traits and dice and flavor to the overall battle scene.

If desired we could have gotten even more detailed. We could have made several units with several Traits each that would have taken many Coins (and several Complication rolls) to defeat. We could have made even more use of descriptive "Tactics" that provided dice to the pools and made rules gimmicks that limited how many such "tactic dice" could be added to a pool based on the quality of the troops and leader. We could have used index cards to represent the units and made rules gimmicks about moving them around the table like a quick and dirty miniatures game with a gimmick that stated that a Complication occurs whenever cards move into "base to base" contact with rules for adding dice for such factors as "frontage" and "flanking attacks" and "unit depth" and such.

In short we could have used written an entire little wargame to play out our Ork and Hobbit encounter, either on the fly, or using a standard set of Add-on rules that we return to for such situations. Instead we chose the middle ground on relying mostly on flavorful descriptions to give our battle character. Regardless of whether we took a simple narration, flavorful description in multiple Complications, or a miniature war game approach the battle would have been played out in Universalis terms, customized to the level of detail the group desires.

---Ralph Mazza

# Space Patrol

## GenCon 2003 Demo

The tenets of this game began with a "Sci Fi" setting in which "Earth is No More" and humanity has been reduced to a "Caravan of Dispossessed Vagabonds". Human tech is "primitive" and the caravan is "being pursued by pirates" who want to harvest human organs. In an interesting twist, one of the players declared that the *pirates* were actually the protagonists of the story, not the humans. This led to some interesting twists as we tried to reach a conclusion where the pirates were more important characters than the humans.

The first scene started with a lone straggling human ship being attacked by a trio of pirate vessels including the "K tara". The K tara was captained by an alien named Jorel who was "Cunning", "Sly", and a "Total Bastard".

As one of the pirate ships docked with the fleeing human vessel and began to board her, a mutiny was taking place on the K tara. The crew of the K tara, feeling that their captain was an "Evil Slave Driver" wanted to leave piracy and join the Space Patrol. They had taken control of much of the ship and had sent a message to the Space Patrol of their intentions. The Space Patrol Cruisers "Steel Claw" and "Jade Falcon" were dispatched to the scene with orders to aid the pirate crew to defect and protect the humans.

There were a few loyalists among the crew and they had notified Jorel of the impending mutiny and so the crew had failed to secure the ship before the Patrol Cruisers arrived. The Steel Claw was captained by one of the few humans to join the Space Patrol, Captain "Red Jenkins". He despised the alien pirates who preyed on humanity and despite his Executive order reminding him of his orders to aid the pirates, he determined to attack and destroy all of them.

Unbenownst to him, however, the captain and crew of the Jade Falcon were on the pirates payroll and so maneuvered to interfere with the attack.

Finally the crew of the K tara overpowered the Jorell and his remaining loyalists taking complete control of the ship. Meanwhile the Steel Claw finally managed to line up an attack run and drive off the third pirate ship.

At that moment an all alert priority one message was received from Space Patrol Command ordering the Steel Claw to terminate its current mission immediately and return to base. Priority One Alerts cannot be refused and Jenkin s XO intimated that he would be forced to relieve him of his command if he disobeyed and continued with his attack. Both the Steel Claw and Jade Falcon left the scene, leaving the humans to fend for themselves. They did manage to defeat the pirate boarding party with heavy casualties.

Meanwhile, the K tara had frozen Jorell in carbonite and dumped him into space. They then headed off to a neutral port to refit their ship and rename it the "Leviathan".

When the Steel Claw and Jade Falcon returned to base, they discovered that the Space Patrol had been disbanded for lack of funding. The captain and crew of the Jade Falcon turned to

piracy while Captain Red Jenkins became the founder of a new independent Space Patrol. The first volunteer members of the new Patrol were the crew of the Leviathan.

### **Featured Element, Giant Complication**

The most amazing thing about this demo was that the entire story above, all of it, was told with a *single* giant Complication. After the tenets were established I won the first scene and opened with the lone straggling human ship. This quickly led to the introduction of the pirates and a Complication between them and the humans. Every other even of the above story, (with the exception of the epilogue regarding the founding of the new Space Patrol and the Leviathan volunteering) was told as part of that Complication. There was no second scene.

Each of the elements -- from the mutiny, to the loyalists, to the arrival of the Patrol ships, to the Jade Falcon being on the take, to Red Jenkins being a human wanting to kill the pirates, to his XO desire to follow orders, to the orders themselves -- were all Components invented and Traits added and justifications for dice purchases prior to the actual roll. When all was said and done there was a three way contest between Jorell and the pirates, the mutinous crew, and the Steel Claw the smallest pool of which was 10 and the largest 18 dice.

Everything after that, from the mutineer victory, to the emergency orders from Space Patrol Command, to the stare down between Jenkins and his XO, to the human victory against the pirate boarders, to the spacing of Jorell was part of the spending of the Coins won in the Complication.

This was something I d never seen before. An entire story from beginning to end narrated within a single Complication and a single set of rolls. It was fascinating to watch as each of the three players maneuvered to try and get the biggest pool and determine how the story would end, while simultaneously trying to figure out how to make the pirates be the protagonists. Ultimately it would be the mutinous crew who became the main characters, but it could just as easily been Jorell, or perhaps even the crew of the Jade Claw. Each of the three of us continuously tried to trump each other with counters and counter counters. I, representing the Space Patrol introduced the Claw. Jorell trumped me by introducing the Falcon and making them support the pirates. The mutineers tried to drag me onto their side with orders from Space Patrol to help the mutineers "defect". I trumped that by making the captain of the Claw a displaced human who would kill all pirates on sight. They countered me by creating Captain Jenkins XO as a by the book officer who insisted on following orders. The mutineers went after Jorell by launching a surprise mutiny. Jorell countered this by Creating a faction of Loyalists who revealed the mutinous plot and so on.

It was truly one of the most impressive displays of Complication cleverness I ve witnessed, and by two first time demo players to boot.

---Ralph Mazza

# The Great GenCon Plot

## GenCon 2003 Demo

The first scene of this demo opened knowing nothing more about the story than it would take place at GenCon2003 on Saturday. It began in the dealer room with an 11 year old boy having just purchased an old boxed Avalon Hill game from Crazy Igers. After the boy leaves, a man in black Vampire costume and sunglasses approaches the booth and surreptitiously inquires of Igor himself for a particular game that was supposed to be held for him. The very same game sold accidentally to the boy not moments before...dun, dun, daaaa

Meanwhile the boy was lost. People kept bumping into him as if he wasn't even there and no one he asked for directions paid any attention to him at all. It was as if he was completely invisible. He clutched his game purchase tighter and began frantically searching for a way out of the hall. But the hall was laid out like a maze and there was no possibility of actually navigating the isles without a map and compass.

The man in black saw the boy and went after him, grabbing for the game. The boy, realizing the man was trying to steal his game, tried to escape but no one could see him struggle. No one that is except Lydia, the blue fairy girl with her chain mail bikini, wings, and large glittery butterfly glasses. You see somehow the boy had been rendered invisible to everyone except those wearing costume eyewear

Lydia got the boy away from the goth wannabe and tried to lead him safely out of the hall, but before she could she was accosted by Sailor Bubba. Sailor Bubba, a large hairy man with a sizeable beer gut straining against his Sailor Moon costume thought Lydia was all that and wanted to "admire her costume up close". Before Lydia could extricate herself from his sweaty clutches the boy had disappeared.

At this point the scene shifts to a dark back room at Jillians where that evil cabal known as the Diana Jones Award Committee were holding a secret meeting. There we see Ron Edwards, part time Sorcerer / full time Cult leader; Matt Forbeck, breeder of his own private army of future game designers; Peter Adkinson, corporate mastermind who single-handedly managed to figure out how to keep overcrowding down at the con by trapping most of the attendees in line outside; and newly initiated member Jordan Weisman, creator of an army of mutant clix that have been sold around the world and are even now waiting to be activated.

They are plotting to take over the world.

Unfortunately for them, the secret plans outlining their nefarious plot have been stolen by agents of the Origins Awards and secretly hidden in an old Avalon Hill game to be picked up by their vampire agent. They had thought this would be a safe hiding place since "no one plays those musty old war game things anymore". They equipped the box with an invisibility device that would activate once the box was sold so that their agent could escape unmolested.

But their efforts were thwarted by a young 11 year old boy who had seen the light. This boy, this miraculous boy, has cast aside collectable cards, over priced and over sized minis, and

rubber clicky things. He has scorned cheap games that come in paper envelopes, and games from foreign lands whose rules have nothing whatsoever to do with the picture on the box. He refuses to have any association with pale poorly dressed people who run around with crossed arms shouting "you can t see me, you can t see me". He has seen the true roots of gaming holiness...hexes and cardboard counters. Perhaps if he can escape the clutches of his pursuers with his prize he will single handedly save gaming and usher in a new generation of real gamers...

But wait, one of the many hooded and deceitful members of the Cult of Ron has reported that the box and boy were last scene with blue-chainmail-fairy-chick and she has been located. Already Diana Jones operatives are moving into position to intercept her.

"Excellent" says Herr Professor Edwards, his fingers steepled and his trademark evil grin upon his face. "Everything is proceeding as **I** have foreseen"

Meanwhile in the elevator lobby of the Westin hotel Lydia waits to return to her room. Suddenly a faint clicking sound is heard. The sound grows louder and more numerous until the air is filled with the sound of a million clicking beetles.

They aren t beetles! Its a horde of mutant clicks. They crawl, walk, and even fly, swarming around Lydia and poking her with their little rubber swords and punching her with their little rubber fists. Lydia tries to defend herself, frantically grabbing them one by one and twisting them till they show triple skulls...but there are far too many points in this army.

Suddenly, a hulking shape looms out of the shadows. Its Sailor Bubba! Trying to work up the courage to ask blue-chainmail-fairy-chick for a date, he arrived just in time. Running at a full sprint (just about the speed of an 80 year old man with a walker) Sailor Bubba heaves his bulk into the air. As a high jump, he might have cleared a two foot bar...but fortunately Clix aren t that tall. With a mighty belly flop...the splat of which reverberates around the lobby, Bubba crushes hundreds of Clix at a time. Rolling about on the floor like some sort of break dancing manatee in a pleated skirt, he demolishes the Clix horde giving Lydia time to make her escape.

What will happen now? Will Lydia save the boy? Will the boy escape to realize his destiny of bringing back true gaming to the masses? Will the corporate shills of the Origins Award Committee succeed in thwarting the plans of their Diana Jones rivals? Will the evil master minds of Diana Jones succeed in taking over the world, unleashing cosmic destruction? Will we ever find out who this Diana Jones person is anyway?

Who knows. Shortly thereafter this demo was shut down by agents of evil and all participants were hauled off to some empty foreclosed Wizards-Attic warehouse where even now they are undergoing unspeakable tortures involving thousands of Break Keys. Only I escaped to bring you this warning.

Be afraid, be very afraid.

**Featured Element, Yeah, this was a real demo:**

No lie.

---Ralph Mazza



# Cattle Country

## GenCon 2004 Demo

Scene: The Texas border under the flag of the Lone Star Republic. Heading towards the endless horizon, a cattle drive moves slowly north.

Eustace Roberts is the head of the Rocking R Cattle Company and he's growing increasingly worried. Bandits have been moving freely across the Rio Grande rustling Texas cattle and taking it back south into Mexico. They've been growing bolder under the leadership of Rodrigo Diaz who's gained quite a cult following among the peasants of northern Mexico as a hero of the people. A hero to the Mexican peasants he may be, but to Roberts he's just a thieving cattle rustler.

Two of Roberts' men are scouting ahead on the trail just after dawn. They've spotted smoke and head towards it.

The smoke is coming from a burning homestead. Two Texans wearing Deputy badges are beating a dark skinned farmer while a third watches the farmer's family who look on helpless.

Buck is a cowboy with years of experience but his soft heart can't let this situation go unaddressed. He knows the sheriff in these parts to be as crooked as they come, though he doesn't know he's been secretly working with the Mexican government as part of a plot to return Texas to Mexico. Buck draws on the deputies demanding to know why they're beating this man.

The first deputy is about to explain that this farmer is actually one of Diaz's men and they're trying to get the location of the bandits' hideout from him before they can hit the nearby cattle drive; but he barely gets out two words before Jenkins, the second cowboy, shoots him dead.

Jenkins is a greenhorn on his first drive with a brand new pistol and trick harness he'd been dying to try out. Unfortunately, trying to impress Buck with his quick draw, he accidentally tripped his hair trigger and shot.

All hell breaks loose. The second deputy goes for his gun and Buck reacts by fanning several rounds. The second deputy goes down. The farmer's wife, leaps in front of her husband to protect him and gets cut down by Buck's remaining shots. Horrified, Buck is unable to react when the third deputy unloads, dropping both him and Jenkins from their saddles.

The farmer, who actually *is* one of Diaz's men, grabs one of the fallen guns and drops the last deputy. Screaming in anguish over his wife's body he unloads the rest of his rounds into Buck and Jenkins before grabbing a horse and riding off to alert Rodrigo...

### **Featured Effect, No Zombies:**

One thing we've noticed is that new players, armed with an unprecedented level of power and an unusual level of responsibility for moving the story forward, tend to take a kitchen sink approach to genre. Most early games wind up being quite a mixture of different genres; and showing up frequently in many different games...zombies. Sometimes robots, aliens, or ninja; but most common of all are zombies.

This tends to tone down dramatically once players get used to the power and responsibility of Universalis play, and also once they become more skilled at using Tenets, Facts, Challenges, and Complications to bring more focus and consistency to their stories.

Having had my fill of zombie westerns, zombies in space, and robotic zombie ninjas I made sure that the first Tenet I made in this very first GenCon 2004 demo was "no zombie weirdness".

---Ralph Mazza

# A New York Mob Story

## GenCon 2004 Demo

For this demo we established that the story would be a conspiracy involving the mayor of New York, the New York Mob, Sicilians, Indonesian Gangsters, and a prominent New York family.

The first scene opens at a wedding reception. Christina Wheatley has just married Joseph Radford. Both the Wheatleys and the Radfords are important players in New York politics and the Mayor is there to woo their support for his upcoming campaign. This campaign looks to be hotly contested as the mayor's primary opponent has been questioning his track record on crime. Those questions are hitting a little too close to home as the mayor has long been in bed with the NY mob.

Now both the mayor and the mob are feeling the pressure. A new syndicate of Indonesian gangsters are pushing into the city using violence and killing sprees to carve themselves out a territory. This is not good either for mayor's election or the NY families. Of course, the mayor is well aware that many of his opponent's campaign contributions can be traced back to Indonesian sources. Not coincidentally, the mayor is introduced to a Sicilian gentleman, a guest of the Radford's. The mayor knows him to be connected. He gets the impression the Radfords know it too.

At the reception the mayor is attempting to win the campaign support of matriarch Julia Wheatley with charm, flattery, and expensive wedding gifts; but Julia is too distracted to notice. She seems nervous, even anxious, and not the sort of nervousness normally associated with the mother of a bride.

The groom, Joseph Radford, seems similarly distracted, although he is not apparently aware of his new mother-in-law's anxiety. He has eyes only for Christina who seems to go out of her way to avoid any contact or intimacy with Joseph.

The second scene opens the next morning in the mayor's office. We see him pacing impatiently in front of his desk talking animatedly on the phone with a man named Tony; who we gather from the conversation must be mobster. We hear the Mayor explain that the bride and groom never made it to their hotel following the reception last night. He suspects they've been kidnapped by the Indonesian gang in order to pressure the Wheatleys and Radfords to withdraw their support from him. Tony knows that the organized crime business his family runs in New York has benefited greatly from having a friend in the mayor's office and knows that the mayor's opponent's tough stance on crime will just be an excuse to break the New York families down enough to let his foreign backers take over. They agree that Tony has to find the socialites and get them back.

The scene shifts to a seedy pub which Tony knows has connections to the Indonesians. He and his muscle are all set to pressure the owner but they don't need to. The owner hands them a letter with instructions and a photograph of Christina holding today's Times. Unnoticed by Tony at the time, but caught by the camera, we can see a crumpled towel in the corner of the picture. The towel has the monogram of the Ritz Carlton hotel.

The scene shifts again to a hotel room at the Ritz Carlton. We see Christina there. She runs into the embrace of a young Indonesian man. We hear her confessing her love to him as sunlight glints off of Joseph Radford's enormous engagement ring.

### **Featured Effect, Guiding Tenets:**

It generally takes some time for players to grasp the nuances of Universalis play. Early on Tenets tend to be very broad genre or flavor statements like "High Fantasy" or "the Occult". This provides a lot of flexibility and a quick and easy springboard to get started with play, but it also typically results in a fairly eclectic mix of characters and events and locations mixing together in the game.

As players get more experienced I've noticed they tend to use Tenets differently, not just to establish broad parameters but also to provide solid elements of plot direction. This tends to provide a more

tightly fitting narrative. It was interesting for me to notice the players in this game grasp that idea almost immediately.

The first Tenets included some pretty broad features like "Modern Day", and "Involves a Conspiracy". But later Tenets added some much more focused story elements like "The Indonesian Gangsters are backing the mayor's campaign opponent" and "The story will feature a wealthy NY family whose support is vital to either candidate in order to win the election"

Tenets like this serve as a great set of marching orders for player's to spin off of. There is still plenty of room for twists and turns (like Christina's Indonesian love interest) but the player's are much more able to stay on track with the added guidance.

---Ralph Mazza

# War in Hell

## GenCon 2004 Demo

There is unrest in heaven. In the midst of this distraction, souls of the dead have been misjudged. The Innocent and the faithful have been sentenced to hell. The Archangel Michael has led an invasion of hell to get them back. His forces have carved out a beach head, a bastion of safety in the heart of the abyss. But the invasion has foundered.

A high level betrayal led to an entire battalion of angels being captured and imprisoned. The unrest in heaven has grown worse and now Michael and his forces are cut off. They have lost contact with heaven. They are isolated. An age of man has passed and they are alone in Hell. The tenuous terms of a ceasefire have allowed the weakened angels to hold on to their beach head, but something major is brewing.

Scene one opens with the camera high above the sphere of Earth. We zoom in closer, through the atmosphere, towards the surface. We hear the buzz of human speech and thoughts. They are full of doubt, questions, and unanswered prayers. We continue down far beneath the surface; down into hell. It is the hell of the Inferno. Erupting volcanoes and rivers of lava light the scene with a red glare. Giant, mile long, segmented, many legged worms burst up through the surface before arcing back down again. Spouts of fire and clouds of smoke fill the air.

In the distance we see an enormous city of brass and bronze climbing from the cracked surface like a many tiered mountain. It is a city of demons and devils. The camera shifts to a much grubbier place. A ramshackle settlement barely more than a camp, fortified with piles of rubble, craters, and the bones of fallen enemies. This is the beach head. The only place in hell where the demons don't hold sway. The angels have dubbed it Purgatory. But for the lost souls gathered here it is the closest to heaven they've been and their last chance for salvation.

In a dark alley of Purgatory we see Michael the Archangel, general of heaven's troops. He is tired and almost broken. He is wingless; his wings having been torn off by a greater fiend in a pointless battle centuries ago. He is meeting with one of his angelic scouts. We see the scout change shape into a form without wings out of respect for his commander. The scout reports that the legions of hell are massing, but not for an attack on Purgatory.

Whatever the unrest is in heaven, it's made the demons bold. They plan to invade the surface and enslave the world of men. Lucifer would never have been so reckless, but the lords of hell overthrew him long ago and now hell is ruled by an oligarchy of loosely aligned and constantly jockeying princes. Someone is looking to claim the throne of hell by winning the throne of earth.

We cut to an enormous edifice of grim stone and heavy iron far beyond Purgatory. We come through many walls, locked doors, and barred gates. It is the Brimstone Prison where the captured angels are held. Deep within a winged angel sits behind a desk doing paperwork. It is Furion the Betrayer, or so he is called by the inmates he oversees in the prison.

Furion made a deal with hell. When his battalion was cut off and surrounded he bargained for their safety. That is why they are here in prison instead of laying slaughtered on the battle field. Hell's price was that he would serve them and that he could never speak of the terms of the contract. Hell is run on contracts, and once signed they cannot be broken. Now Hell can never kill the angels of Brimstone Prison and Furion can never tell them that it was not he who betrayed them but rather he who saved them from certain death. No one is more hated by the angels of Brimstone than Furion whose been assigned as their overseer for the centuries since their capture.

Into Furion's office comes Xanphar the demonic warden of Brimstone Prison. Xanphar has discovered that Furion has been smuggling water to the prisoners above their meager allotment. The angels who curse Furion for allowing them so little water have no idea how much less they were supposed to have. Xanphar accuses Furion of violating his contract and so he is being reassigned.

Furion will be assigned to the front ranks of suicide shock troops when the legion of hell invades the surface. He will fight his own kind, angels who defend the earth, and if he falls, all of the prisoners in Brimstone will be tortured for eternity with the most horrific punishments the torturers of hell can devise.

Before Furion leaves the prison he stops by the cell of Josiah. Josiah has been his comrade and best friend since before the universe was formed. Josiah believes Furion betrayed them. He hates and despises him with unconcealed fury. Furion can not tell him the truth. The best he can do is apologize that they would no longer be receiving the extra water he d been smuggling to them.

Josiah is enraged. He takes up his remaining water ration and hurls it at Furion who can only walk sadly away. Behind him, gaunt angels throw themselves down on their bellies to lick the spilled water off of the steaming stone floor.

In the next scene we see Michael preparing his remaining angelic forces for battle. The invasion preparations have left them with an opportunity to strike at Brimstone Prison and free their comrades.

This is where we had to end the demo

#### **Featured Effect, Group Discussion:**

This demo was run for a group of friends who ve gamed together for some time. It was their habit in their campaigns to stop play from time to time and discuss, out of character, where each of them thought the story needed to go and what they d like to see happen in the future. They did this multiple times during the above session and so fluidly did Universalis accommodate this that to an observer it would have been difficult to tell where the line between actual game play and brainstorming sessions was. It was during one of these sessions that we learned that angels curse by taking the Lord s name in vain. The Commandments of man do not apply to them.

Being a demo we could not play through to the end, but the last of these brainstorming sessions revealed the likely direction for the story. An epic battle for Brimstone Prison would be fought. Furion would be revealed as the source of much of Michael s intelligence and scouting reports on the enemy, and he would have provided information on hell s invasion plans before departing for the front. The prisoners would have been set free and, filled with the repressed passions of the ages, the inspired force of angels would have engaged hell s legions and thwarted the invasion. During this battle, Josiah would have encountered Furion, and not knowing the truth of the betrayal would have cut him down. After the battle, Michael would have revealed Furion s secret and out of shame and regret and love Josiah would have dedicated himself to service in Furion s memory. We didn t know what direction the War in Hell would have gone after that, but we knew that Josiah would be the main protagonist of it.

At one point one of the players stopped and asked me if it was ok that they actually had these out of character discussions about what each of them wanted to get out of play. I just smiled and said "of course".

---Ralph Mazza

# The Rise of Set

## GenCon 2004 Demo

For this demo we established that the story would be a fantasy set in ancient Egypt. The Pharaoh's son has been kidnapped. There is a prophecy about the return of the evil god Set which will be fulfilled if the son is not returned in 10 days. We knew from the beginning, as part of the Tenets, that the villain behind this prophecy would be the Pharaoh's chief advisor, Sekhem. We also knew that one of the advisor's chief servants is having second thoughts about his participation in this plot and has left a map to the son's whereabouts.

The first scene opens in the throne room where the Pharaoh has just given orders to the captain of the guard to find his son. Sekhem assigns his servant to help in the search, and to sabotage it as necessary. But the servant instead warns the guard captain of the advisor's plot. He saw Sekhem reading the rituals to summon Set back to Egypt from an ancient scroll.

The captain reports this to Pharaoh who doesn't believe the ridiculous story and orders the servant thrown in chains. The queen isn't so sure, and orders Sekhem to be brought before her. But Sekhem slips away down a secret passage.

Anuka, a Priestess of Isis, informs the queen of the prophecy and her suspicions of Sekhem's role in it. When Sekhem's servant reveals the location of the secret passage, Pharaoh orders his guards to go down it, and Anuka secretly follows them. The route leads down into catacombs beneath the palace and as the guards follow the servant's map they set off a trap which collapses the passage way. All of the guards but the captain are killed and Anuka must find another way around.

Meanwhile, Sekhem has reached the Pharaoh's son and has taken him to a natural cavern beyond the catacombs. An inky dark river runs through the center of the cavern. There is something stirring beneath the surface. The son is shackled to a post at the river's edge.

Here it is revealed that Set is trapped in this underground river. If one of the royal dynastic bloodline is drown in its waters before the next planetary alignment (in 10 days), the prophecy will be fulfilled and Set will be free to bring a new age of darkness upon the land.

While Sekhem is busy preparing the ritual, Anuka reaches the chamber. She has had a vision from Isis that has led her here and knows what the return of Set means. She cannot allow the Pharaoh's son to be drowned in that river. She also knows she is not powerful enough to defeat Sekhem's sorcery. So before the advisor can stop her she reaches the boy and with her ceremonial dagger slits his throat. Already dead, he cannot fulfill the prophecy.

Set arises from the river in rage. He speaks words of doom and dark magic. The priestess desperately tries to ward off his power with her charms.

At this point, the lost guard captain enters the chamber. The advisor is in the midst of casting a dark spell when the captain strikes him unconscious and throws him into the river. He then tries to take the boy out of the chamber.

Here it is revealed that Sekhem, the Chief Advisor to Pharaoh, is actually of the royal bloodline himself and was seeking to usurp his cousin's throne. As he drowns in the river his own death fulfills the prophecy. Set is unleashed to bring darkness upon the land.

### **Featured Effect, Twists and Turns:**

This demo was characterized by the many twists the story took. From the beginning we knew what the problem was (the son and the prophecy), we knew who the villain was (Sekhem the chief advisor),

and we knew how to start solving the problem (the map to the son's location). All of this was outlined in advance and known to all of the players right from the tenet phase.

Yet it was from there that all of the interesting stuff happened. In traditional play it is common place for the GM to try to keep secrets from the players so they won't figure out the mystery too soon and ruin the story. Here, however, we started already knowing most of the key secrets, and due to the authority given to the individual players to direct events still wound up with plenty of suspense and plot twists.

The Pharaoh sends the guards to find his son. Twist: Sekhem sends his servant to sabotage the guards efforts. Twist: the servant betrays Sekhem to the guards. Twist: the Pharaoh doesn't believe him. Twist: the queen does. Twist: Sekhem escapes down a secret passage. Twist: the servant knows the passage and in fact that's what the map is of. Twist: Sekhem moves the son's location so now the map is useless.

The guards and the priestess set off after Sekhem. Twist: a trap collapses the passage. Twist: a vision allows the priestess to arrive anyway. Twist: Sekhem's already on the verge of fulfilling the prophecy by drowning the boy. Twist: the Priestess kills the boy herself so the prophecy can't be fulfilled.

Most of the guards were killed by the trap in the passage. Twist: the Guard Captain survived and arrives in time to defeat Sekhem. Twist: throwing Sekhem in the river fulfills the prophecy anyway.

The entire demo was an example of playing hot potato with the plot. In appearance it resembles play where a GM has a huge multi-branching storyline and the players choose one branch or another as they move through it. But the big difference is that the branching story line was created in play dynamically in real time. The chosen branches were developed further and the non chosen branches were never developed at all. The process was at once both cooperative and, with this group of players, (which included co-designer Mike Holmes) rife with one-ups-manship as each player strove to be the one to come up with the absolute coolest ending for the story.

---Ralph Mazza

# More Space Pirates

## GenCon 2004 Demo

Space pirates are a popular genre in Universalis and this GenCon was no exception. Our Tenet phase left us with a band of 5 misfit pirates on a faulty broken down ship in pursuit of the biggest score of their lives. A quantum field collapser capable of generating infinite free energy forever. The value of such a device is astronomical and all of the Big Energy companies in the galaxy are desperate to steal or destroy it before it puts them out of business.

The opening scene begins with disabling laser fire from the pirate ship towards their prey. But they are not the only ones after this juicy target. The Galactic Space Police is also present in a large number of one and two man patrol cruisers. But they aren't escorting the energy source, they're attacking it. It seems the GSP has been bought off by Big Energy after all.

Seven of the small patrol craft break off to intercept the pirates. Their targeted laser fire disables the engines and the craft move in, attach to the ship and begin to board. The pirates will make perfect scapegoats for the destruction of the energy source.

On board the pirate ship, Dr. Bob the ship's physician and sometimes mechanic rushes to the engine room to try and bring the engines on line. He is accompanied by a second younger pirate known to the crew only as "Bob's Helper". Bob's Helper doesn't say much but fortunately for the pirates he's a genius mechanic because isn't all that good with a wrench.

In moments Bob's Helper has diagnosed the problem and knows just how to fix it. But he decides not to tell Bob and make Bob figure it out himself, since Bob will just claim credit for it anyway. After some struggle Bob does manage to bring the engines back on-line. Sure enough he rubs it in saying "Stick with me, son, and soon you'll make a half decent assistant. But not yet, no not yet. Now you're just one step away from useless. Hand me that spanner".

As the engine kicks on and brings the ship to hyper acceleration, the police cruisers docked to the hull are all ripped off and destroyed. But unknown to the pirates, 4 of the police officers have managed to board the ship.

The demo ended with the misfit pirates back in pursuit of their prey.

### **Featured Effect, Narrating Complications:**

One of the things new players have to get accustomed to in Universalis is that the Complication roll is not a skill test or a success or failure check. It determines which players get to say how much and in what order about how the situation resolves. The players are constrained to act generally in favor of the side that won or to the detriment of the side that lost but there is no absolute rule regarding failure or success. The players in this demo had no trouble with this concept.

Repairing the engines was the only Complication in the story. All of the laser fire and the police boarding was handled strictly through narration. The Complication was initially between Dr. Bob and the broken engine (backed by the ship's Faulty Trait and dice purchased for laser fire damage). One of the other players invented Bob's Helper. With a little Negotiation it was agreed that "Bob's Helper" was not a Role Trait but actually the character's formal name.

The player rolling for Bob's Helper on behalf of the pirates fixing the engine rolled more dice and got more successes than Bob's player. In fact, without Bob's Helper the Complication would have been won by the broken engine.

Armed with far more free Coins than Bob's player had Bob's Helper set about narrating many things. We learn more about Bob's Helper and his relationship to Bob as illustrated by the narration of their



interaction during the Complication. We learn more about the ship and the pirates and how the engines work. All things that would be considered reasonably related to the task at hand.

But none of which actually involves succeeding at the Complication. In fact, while the player of Bob's Helper narrates that he does know exactly how to fix the engine, he specifically pays Coins for the Fact that he *doesn't* fix it, nor does he tell Bob how.

The big winner of the Complication, spending all of his Coins without ever actually narrating a resolution to the Complication, leaving the resolution wide open for others to narrate. Beautiful.

---Ralph Mazza

# Shrek III

## GenCon 2004 Demo

This demo began with only 4 simple Tenets. The story was to be a sequel to Shrek II. It was to involve Shrek and Fiona's children. There would be a talking crow who got the children in trouble and Shrek and Fiona would be dead. Yes dead. 2 minutes into play and we'd already killed off two animated screen icons beloved by children everywhere.

The first scene opens in the swamp with two ogre children, Brian and Jenny, weeping in front of the gravestones of their parents. It's been exactly 1 year since Shrek and Fiona were betrayed and killed by the dastardly Puss-in-Boots. They've been living with Donkey and his half donkey - half dragon children Benny and June. Donkey and Dragon have gotten divorced although the kids still fly off to see their mother every other weekend and on holidays.

A large black crow named Crackle has become a playmate to the four children. He's something of a trouble maker but the kids trust him as the only adult they know other than Donkey. He swoops in and tells the children not to cry. There may be a chance to get their parents back. He just overheard his old pal Bubo the Owl say something that makes him think they still might be alive. Crackle suggests they go and ask the wicked witch who lives in the Gingerbread House in the middle of the haunted woods. She may be able to look in her crystal ball and help out. Apparently that whole Hansel and Grettle thing was just a big misunderstanding.

In the next scene we see Brian and Jenny riding on their flying donkey playmates Benny and June swoop down into a clearing in the haunted woods, right next to the Gingerbread House. Flying donkeys are awfully convenient.

Bubo the owl is sitting on the roof and challenges the visitors with a "whoooo goes there". When he sees Crackle he calls him various nasty names. Here we have to pause play for a Challenge where we reassert that this is to be a PG movie and replay that part. Crackle swoops down with his claws outstretched. Apparently they aren't such good pals after all. Bubo beats the air with his massive wings, causing a gust of wind that blows Crackle backwards, but not before he snags a key that hangs from a chain around Bubo's neck.

A grandmotherly lady comes from the cottage and calms the birds down. Inside the cottage Brian and Jenny are treated to a bowl of hot porridge while Benny and June wait outside. Bubo, being a psychic owl, has already informed the witch of why the children are there. Here, movie goers would be treated to a montage of images from the first two Shrek movies as the witch summarizes their events. She then informs them that Puss-in-Boots was indeed convicted of the crime of killing Shrek and Fiona and was banished to Never Never Land. She's not sure, however, that he actually did it, nor that the parents were actually killed. Their bodies were never found.

Brian and Jenny resolve to find Puss-in-Boots and try to learn the truth. When they ask the witch how to get to Never Never Land she replies "second star on the right and straight on till morning, of course".

Our next scene involves the four children arriving in Never Never Land. I told you flying donkeys are awfully convenient. Below them is the Hollow Tree where the Lost Boys live. They see Puss is chained up dangling from the tree while Peter Pan and the Lost Boys have him on trial. Puss has been caught stealing food and now Pan is going to pronounce sentence.

Smee is there representing Hook and the Pirates. He is asking Pan to turn the cat over to them. They will feed him to the crocodile and while the croc is distracted finally be able to escape from it for awhile.

Brian and Jenny swoop down proclaiming that they need Puss to tell them about their parents. The Lost Boys aren't all that interested in parents and Pan gravely informs them that they're in the wrong fairy tale. While Jenny keeps Pan distracted, Brian and June fly over to Puss, but they can't release him until Crackle remembers the key he stole from Bubo which unlocks the chains. Puss promises them that he can lead them to their parents.

At that moment the pirates show up in their flying pirate ship. Hook is determined to get Puss by fair means or foul and a great battle between the pirates and the Lost Boys ensues. The pirate ship fires its cannon at the Hollow Tree, but Benny and June (being half dragon) fly around and use their flame breath to melt the cannon balls before they hit.

While Peter and Hook are dueling on the deck of the ship, Tinker Bell sneaks below. The pirate ship can fly because Hook has imprisoned a large number of fairies in great glass lanterns and their trapped magic is what keeps the ship floating. Tinker Bell releases the fairies and causes the ship to crash.

Most of the pirates were trapped under the wreckage of the ship, but Hook was thrown clear.

In the confusion Brian and Jenny escape with Puss on the backs of Benny and June flying up towards the star that will lead them home.

But Smee isn't done. He manages to capture Tinker Bell in a sack, and using her trapped magic to fly, he flies after the children.

Hook sees his cat, the key to being free at last from the crocodile, escaping and begins to think many evil nasty thoughts. Everyone knows that Peter Pan can fly by thinking happy thoughts. We now discover that thinking evil nasty thoughts makes Hook happy. He begins to fly and chases after Smee.

The crocodile has been lurking in the water nearby. He has been enchanted to follow Hook wherever he goes. Since Hook is now flying up towards the stars, the Croc follows after him.

In the chase Brian gets confused and picks the wrong star. The ogre children riding on flying donkeys arrive in the sky above modern day New York. They are followed by Smee with Tinkerbelle, Captain Hook thinking evil happy thoughts, and the ticking Crocodile.

We figure this would make a good pilot movie for a TV series on the Disney Channel. Each week, the children would crash through a different fairy tale until ultimately discovering what happened to Shrek and Fiona.

### **Featured Effect, Universalis and New Role Players:**

This demo was run for a girl who was helping her parents out at a nearby booth and who'd come over to see what was going on at ours. She hadn't really done any role-playing and at first was a little hesitant about how to start. This isn't all that unusual in Universalis where the ability to "create anything" can be somewhat intimidating.

The routine I'd hit upon for running demos at GenCon was to introduce the mindset required for playing the game as imagining that all of the players are screen writers in Hollywood brainstorming up a script for a new movie or TV pilot. This proved effective overall at getting past the traditional GM and Player Characters division of most role-playing games. It also proved effective at getting non role-players to grasp the point of play quickly. Much more so than the typical "it's like playing cops and robbers or cowboys and Indians" text we often see.

In this case in particular it was a particularly effective approach. The player hit on a movie she liked, in this case Shrek, and we were off to the races. After the first couple of rounds around the table she had picked up the basic mechanics and was fully into the game throwing out ideas and plot twists with the best of us. She also quickly got the hang of the Challenge mechanics refusing to back down on

the idea that Shrek and Fiona were dead or that Puss in Boots had killed them and skillfully getting other players to add their Coins to hers to defend it.

Its tempting to think that role-playing requires a higher than usual level of creativity and that non role-players don t role-play because they re not creative enough. But really, role-players hardly have a monopoly on interactive creativity. We just have an unusual way of applying structure and game rules to it. Often its that structure and those game rules that keep non role-players away from role-playing. That and the often unusual cultish culture that surrounds our hobby.

I ve found Universalis to be especially appealing to non role-players because the structure of play is much more in line with what they consider a normal game structure; as opposed to the rather byzantine and somewhat opaque structure that has grown up around traditional RPGs.

---Ralph Mazza

# Guadalupe the Pirate

## GenCon 2004 Demo

Guadalupe Smith is a pirate. He is looking for the Skeleton of Cadavra. He is looking for the Skeleton of Cadavra because Cadavra killed his father. He'd be looking for Cadavra himself, but Cadavra is dead, so Guadalupe Smith has to settle for Cadavra's skeleton.

Captain Blind is also looking for the Skeleton of Cadavra. He is called Captain Blind because he is blind. We know he is blind because he has a pirate eye patch on both eyes. Captain Blind has a seeing eye dog named Dead Dog. The seeing eye dog is named Dead Dog, because it is dead. Captain Blind doesn't know his dog is dead because he's blind and can't see; and because he's really really drunk. Captain Blind has forgotten his dog's real name, but everyone else keeps saying it's a dead dog, so now Captain Blind calls it Dead Dog too..

Captain Blind has a map to the Skeleton of Cadavra. He can't read this map because he's blind. He also can't read this map because it's tattooed on his ass. It was tattooed on his ass in a special code that can only be read by a cross-eyed donkey. Captain Blind was really really *really* drunk that day. Captain Blind would like to call up his friend Guadalupe Smith because Guadalupe owns a cross-eyed donkey. Maybe Guadalupe Smith's cross-eyed donkey can read the map tattooed on his ass, because he's a cross-eyed donkey and the map can only be read by cross-eyed donkeys. Plus it's hard to see because it's on his ass. But that's ok because he can't see it anyway being blind. But he can't reach his friend Guadalupe Smith because his cell phone is broken. So he'll have to sail over to Guadalupe's island.

Guadalupe is alone in his hut by the ocean on a tiny island. Guadalupe has been living alone on this island ever since he lost his marbles many years ago. Guadalupe owns a cross-eyed donkey. He is trying to call up his old friend Captain Blind so he can have his ass read his ass, but he can't get through because Captain Blind's cell phone is broken.

Guadalupe sees Captain Blind sailing his boat over to his island. Captain Blind tries to dock the boat, but he doesn't do a very good job because he's blind; and because he's really drunk. The boat crashes on a reef. Captain Blind wades to shore pulling his dead dog Dead Dog on a leash behind him.

Captain Blind has a new pet parrot. Captain's Blind's new pet parrot is named New Pet Parrot because that's what people call him. Captain Blind's new pet parrot likes to crap on people's heads. Captain Blind's new pet parrot, New Pet Parrot tries to crap on Guadalupe's head. Guadalupe runs around and around but it's no use. New Pet Parrot craps on his head.

Guadalupe sticks his head in the sand to wash off the parrot crap. It would probably be easier for Guadalupe to wash off the parrot crap in the ocean, but Guadalupe lost his marbles many years ago and now only washes using sand.

Fortunately when Guadalupe sticks his head under the sand, he spies his lost marbles. After all these years Guadalupe has his marbles back. *Thanks* New Pet Parrot.

Nearby the cross-eyed donkey starts laughing.

### **Featured Effect, the Bizarre:**

This demo wins the prize for single most bizarre game ever played in by me. It resembled listening to a bunch of really drunk people trying to tell a story, structured like reading a Dick and Jane book.

It made no sense, it didn't need to make any sense. It was just bizarre, almost surreal.

Universalis games sometimes get silly. Often this is because players are nervous at the amount of power they have over the story. They're anxious that they might screw the story up so their first inclination is often to retreat into silly humor. It's ok if your friends laugh at you when you're doing silly humor. It's not okay if they laugh at you when you're trying to be seriously dramatic. So being silly is much safer. Usually this wears off after a couple of games and a little bit of practice. The players realize they aren't going to screw anything up and can actually tell a good story themselves.

Other times the game gets silly simply because it's *time* to be a little silly. Maybe it's late, everyone is tired, but no one wants to break up the session just yet. Maybe everyone just has a case of the giggles.. Whatever the reason, Universalis is a fine game to play when you're just in the mood for something ridiculous. You're not "ruining" a GM's carefully planned scenario by being silly. There is no prep time being squandered. Just pick up some Coins and let the free association start flowing.

It won't be high drama, but it can be strangely cathartic.

---Ralph Mazza

# Zombies in Vegas

## GenCon 2004 Demo

Games of Universalis will often wind up dragging in a fair number of cross genre elements. We've seen zombie westerns, zombies in space, even zombie ninjas (yes, ninja with an "s", its somehow more appropriate that way). This group wasn't messing around. The very first Tenet out of the gate was one word, "Zombies".

The Tenet phase informed us that this game would involve zombies, Las Vegas, a brothel, an ancient curse on the city, a bus load of convicts, and of course...the King.

The first scene begins on a dark highway. The convicts have just taken control of the bus when they stop to pick up a lone hitch hiker in a white sequined jump suit. Its the King. He needs a ride. He suggests stopping off at a great place he knows on the way where the girls are all clean and *real* friendly.

When the bus arrives at the brothel they see a big sign that says "No Elvises allowed". The convicts demand to know why, they're all down with the King.

The madam explains about an ancient curse that lays on the city. Many centuries ago an evil tribal shaman put a curse on a kingdom that used to be located here so that the people's king would turn into a zombie. The curse had laid dormant ever since that ancient kingdom collapsed. But now it has become active and is once again turning the people's king into zombies. There's since been a rash of undead Elvis impersonators plaguing Vegas.

Jack Quick the New York Pimp don't wanna mess with no zombies. He's all for getting back on the bus, leaving off Elvis right here and high tailing it out of the state in a hurry. But the rest of the convicts overrule him. After all, the girls are clean and friendly and Elvis offered to pay for everyone, he really *is* the King.

As the convicts all make their way into the brothel, we see one lone convict still on the bus. Carl the Cannibal locked in a cage. Even his fellow convicts weren't about to let *him* out. Carl coughs up a paper clip, opens the door to his cage and makes his way alone down the dark highway.

Inside the brothel the girls really *are* clean and friendly and soon the convicts have all dispersed to private rooms. Jack the Quick is being hit on by a girl named Cinnamon. But Jack is totally smitten. Its not just about a "Quick" roll any more. This is the girl he's always dreamed of. So while the rest of the convicts are off getting busy, Jack is talking too much, and Cinnamon is getting bored.

Suddenly, Jack sees Elvis down the hall. He is leaving one of the girl's rooms. He is covered in gore and shambling slightly as he crosses the hall and enters another room.

Now we discover that the Elvis hitch hiker really was hit by the curse. It also happens that in the close quarters of the bus ride, all of the other convicts were infected too, and they're all starting to turn into zombies.

The hookers are ready for them. This has happened before and they all have guns and weapons nearby.

Jack screams like a girl.

When Zombie Elvis enters the room across the hall he catches a shot gun blast to the head from the girl inside. The convict in bed with her promptly chews her throat out. There's a huge gun fight. Bullets fly everywhere. The brothel is all shot to hell. Jack screams like a girl.

Cinnamon draws a big ass pistol from her purse and begins blasting away. Blood and gore fly everywhere. Jack screams like a girl.

Jack grabs Cinnamon and knocks the gun away. He s turning into a Zombie too. He gnaws Cinnamon s leg off at the thigh. Cinnamon is loosing buckets of blood but manages to get to her gun and blow Jack s head off.

Jack dies screaming like a girl.

Finally the last of the zombie convicts are put down.

Alone in the night Carl the Cannibal is walking down the dark highway. He starts to shamble.

The end.

**Featured Effect, Big Complications:**

Of course the big fight at the end was one giant complication. The major Components were Zombie Elvis, the Zombie Convicts as a single group Component, Cinnamon the bad ass hooker, and the brothel prostitutes as a single group Component.

Interestingly one player wound up in control of Cinnamon and the Convicts while another wound up in Control of Elvis and the prostitutes. We decided to use a the alternative dice pool method that lets each player keep and roll their own Dice Pool. Thus we wound up with the above 4 main pools plus each of the other players had a small pool of their own.

In the end, the Prostitutes won. Interestingly, the same player who was spending Coins for Cinnamon would later be also spending Coin for the Convicts; and the same player who was spending Coins for the Prostitutes would also be spending Coins for Zombie Elvis.

It appeared like a hugely confusing tangle at first, but by carefully keeping each pool separate, remembering which Components went into which pool, and then narrating each pool one at a time in the proper order, the whole Complication got narrated out quite nicely.

---Ralph Mazza



